



The Power of the Zoom Rectangle

By Jennifer Stofman

I can vividly remember walking into my first program as a new synagogue member when my husband and I were in our twenties, like it was yesterday. I arrived alone, and not-so-patiently waited for his arrival. I felt intimidated as I knew less than a handful of people. I did not know who would be there, as this was a time before smartphones, Facebook check-ins and 24/7 connectivity. I was living my “old school” life. Approaching the welcome table, I noticed a long line. I gave my name, but they couldn’t find it because it was misspelled; this left me in a cold sweat. Eventually, I walked into the social hall looking for a familiar face. Although I was relatively extroverted, I shook inside while looking for a friendly face. Questioning my decision to attend, I seriously contemplated my exit strategy. After all, I was not a “regular,” a big donor, or someone who looked important enough to engage.

Zoom: The Great Equalizer

Looking back, if I could have simply attended this program as a “Zoom rectangle,” I might have actually felt much more at ease. Over the last 100+ days, we have been given a gift; the ability to attend any program or service we desire, in a virtual format that, in gallery view, “equalizes” all attendees. All of our rectangle-sized images on the screen are the same. How many of us have ever attended a synagogue program with greater ease? There is great power in the Zoom rectangle.

Virtual Welcome Mat

At my congregation in southern New Jersey, our Sisterhood has held weekly programs that have been well attended by those who do not usually participate. Virtual programs have created opportunities for seniors who don’t drive at night, single moms with no childcare, and those who feel more comfortable just stopping in to check out what’s going on. Although we are all hungry for human connection and miss our physical gatherings, there are many aspects of attending “as a rectangle” that are empowering and satisfying. Besides the joy and physical comfort of showing up in sweatpants, we all sit in the VIP seats. This means that we all share the same viewpoint and no one has to worry about with whom to sit, or be anxious about who may, or

may not, talk to them. For many, this is liberating, and makes attendance at events easier and less stressful.

Many of us who work inside the synagogue world don't realize how difficult it can be for new people or individuals who haven't attended in a long time to "just come" to our programs. Many program staff and volunteers are discussing what our events will look like post COVID-19. It is important that we consider the "power of the rectangle" as we plan our future events. How can we continue to make people feel as confident in their participation, and attend our events with the same comfort, when in person? What steps will we take to create environments that are stress-free and truly welcoming? What have we learned about our members and potential future members, while sheltered in place? How will we use this knowledge and information as we plan our synagogue program calendars?

Although none of us are sure what synagogue life will look like post-High Holidays 5781, I am certain that our members continue to look for ways to engage that are spiritual, meaningful, and accessible. We have spent the last few months flexing muscles we never knew we had and have experimented in ways some of us never dreamed possible. As we find ways to encourage active and reflective participation, let's continue to hold open the floodgates of innovation as we work to transform our audiences into connected members.

It is said that the rectangle is a trusted shape, representing honesty, solidity, and stability. May we move forward into 5781 as rectangles that embrace all three of these timeless virtues.

Jennifer Stofman is the Director of Synagogue Consulting at [USCJ](#). She has never checked-in anywhere on Facebook.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-power-of-the-zoom-rectangle>