



Space is no Laughing Matter

3 tips from Comedians about how to Shrink and Improve Gathering Spaces

As a Jewish comedian and performer with my group The Bible Players, I've visited over 400 synagogues, summer camps, JCCs, and Jewish Institutions over the last 8 years. More often than not, we arrive before a performance or training, and the space set-up is laughable. Recently we arrived at a space to hear, "We're expecting up to 60 or 70 kids, so I've put out 120 chairs just to be safe." Thankfully, in this case and others we are able to improve the space in 10-15 minutes to create an environment that sets up our shows and workshops for success.

As we see involvement dwindling in synagogues and legacy institutions, perhaps our learnings from comedy performance can offer ways to better use your space to support intimacy and inclusivity. And if you follow this advice, the next time I visit your synagogue ... I won't have to change a thing. So thanks in advance for making my life easier. Here we go:

1. **Shrink your Space (Keep your friends close, and your communities closer)**

Having a packed or overflowing room is what I like to call a 'Happy Problem.' Far too often we have our services, or program, in the largest room that's available so that we won't run out of seating. This is a mistake.

When given the option we all spread out, even though sitting closer together enhances our experience. Comedy clubs know this and seat people in small rooms, very close to each other, packing in as many people as possible. Laughter is contagious and doesn't spread through empty space, it spreads from person to person. The same is true for prayer and singing. When we are singing next to others our experience is so much more powerful.

Priya Parker, noted writer of *The Art of Gathering*, describes that "A space for a gathering works best when it is contained ... so that energy isn't leaking out." Despite this most synagogues have services in massive, and mostly empty, sanctuaries. We have rooms built to seat 500 where we usually seat 50 people. No wonder the energy

and spirit in the room doesn't always feel transcendent. It's leaking. "But Andrew," I hear you saying, "my sanctuary is what it is. What can I do to change that?" I'm glad you asked because I have an answer.

2. Tape is Magic (You can make seats ... Disappear!)

As an improviser my toolbox is mostly in my brain but one physical item I always bring is tape. Because tape is magic. When I see a large sanctuary that seats 500 and I know we're expecting 50-75 for our comedy show, I get out my trusty tape. We tape off all of the side rows and 2/3 of the rows in the back of the middle. People generally respect the tape when they see it, even if they don't understand why it's there. They fill in the area that's not taped off and sit closer together than they usually would. When everyone sits together in the front center people are happier, more engaged, and feel more connected to one another.

And here's the best part. If you fill up the area that you left open and you need more seats ... just remove some of the tape. As easily as you made those seats disappear, you can make them reappear! Tape is truly magical, simple, and easy to add or remove.

If you know that you consistently have too many seats for your community, you can invest in a more permanent (and slightly classier) version of tape. You can add velvet rope dividers to let the community know that certain areas are there only if absolutely necessary. Like a glass case over the fire alarm that says, "Break only in case of double *Bat Mitzvah!*"

3. Chairs are for Adults (and coffee is for closers)

Using Yoga Mats is a great way to make a space that sits dozens of kids closely together for a great experience. A carpeted area can be great or even just the regular old hard floor. Tape can be magic again here where you can use it to tape off a rectangle for seating. Put some chairs around it for adults and voila, an intimate space for a community program.

Andrew Davies is the Co-Founder and Director of [The Bible Players](#), and [CharacTours](#). He lives with his wife Molly Wernick and dog Ducky in Philadelphia. He can be reached at Andrew@TheBiblePlayers.com.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/space-is-no-laughing-matter>