



Synagogue Innovation in the Age of Corona and Beyond

By Rabbi Sid Schwarz

Note: A version of this article appeared in eJP in May 2020, a few months into the pandemic. The article has been revised and expanded, identifying innovations that might affect synagogues long after we return to our routines.

I know that I am not alone in being impressed at how quickly the Jewish community was able to provide program content via the web as much of North America moved to “shelter in place” in March 2020. This was a “disruption” that no one planned for. And yet, true to the theory advanced by many in the entrepreneurial world, even when unplanned, “disruption” does provide an opportunity for institutions to reinvent themselves.

For years I have been working with rabbis and synagogues to re-think how they can create more compelling spiritual communities. In recent years, the main delivery vehicle for that training has been a two-year fellowship for rabbis called the [Clergy Leadership Incubator \(CLI\)](#). CLI uses the discipline of adaptive leadership to equip rabbis with the tools to be change agents in their congregations. Adaptive leadership is, to paraphrase the title of the Ron Heifetz book that launched the field, leadership without easy answers. When situations are complex and desired outcomes are not always clear, leaders need to be nimble, bold and strategic. It would be hard to think of another time when adaptive leadership skills are more necessary than this Age of Corona.

One of the biggest obstacles to changing institutions is that the default posture of virtually all institutions tends to be stasis. Even when the actors in a system claim that they need and want change, there are dozens of ways that systems push back at those who take it upon themselves to introduce innovation. This is especially true in synagogues because those who are most committed to synagogue life highly value the way their particular denominational brand provides continuity with the past. This explains why the conservative impulse in religious institutions is so strong.

At Facebook, a motto was coined to encourage innovative behavior: “move fast, break things.” It has been coined in many entrepreneurial settings to encourage bold, risk taking. For many of the rabbis I work with, such risk-taking is challenging. The leadership of many congregations is made up of people who like the way things are done. Even if they don't like everything, there is a certain comfort to continuity in religious settings. Innovation is definitely the road less taken.

Yet the Covid-19 pandemic is bringing change to our doorsteps. Virtually everything we have done, and the way we have done it, is up for grabs. That includes synagogue life. During the COVID pandemic, rabbis came under enormous pressure to transition their worship services and programming to a medium in which they were less than expert while, at the same time, providing pastoral services to congregants who were anxious about their health, the welfare of loved ones and economic insecurity. Even so, rabbis reported to me that the attendance at their Zoom classes and worship went up between 20-50%! A recent article on *Jewish Insider* reported that attendance at programs in a variety of Jewish organizations had increased dramatically as geography and travel no longer presented any barriers to participation.

Rabbis have become, literally, spiritual first-responders. Jews who are members of congregations are keenly aware of this fact and are deeply appreciative. It is also clear that the fear and social isolation imposed on all of us is making people value spiritual community in a way that has not been typical for most non-Orthodox Jews in the past. Combine these factors with a situation when so much is in flux, we stand at a moment when synagogues are capable of changing the way they have functioned far more dramatically than ever before. Below I will share three broad areas in which I am already seeing some changes becoming manifest. Some of the examples come from rabbis and congregations in the CLI orbit (current Fellows, Mentors and alumni) and some from beyond that universe.

1. Take advantage of content created by others and look for opportunities to collaborate

Many rabbis feel like they have to “prove” the value proposition of their congregations since so many usual activities cannot happen. Many congregations are doing more programming now than pre-Covid! And that is on top of the increase in demand for pastoral attention. While there are legitimate concerns about whether this level is sustainable over the long haul, clergy and lay leaders alike can be rightfully proud of how they delivered during this extraordinary time. It suggests new possibilities post-Covid about what synagogues and other Jewish organizations can deliver.

National organizations like the Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS), the Hadar Institute, *Limmud* North America and others make available high caliber content and the demand is at an all-time high across the board. In April 2020, [Hadar](#) experienced a 102% increase in downloads of their Torah commentaries and a 500% increase in people accessing their Zoom classes over the previous month. [IJS](#) introduced a 30-minute, free daily meditation “sit” every day at 12:30 (ET) that draws 300 or so participants. Over 5000 people have signed up for IJS’ free Covid response offerings. [Limmud North America](#), an umbrella for 18 community-wide Jewish learning festivals, transformed itself overnight into an on-line learning community. Their inaugural eFestival in March 2020 attracted 1200 people and their Global Day of Jewish Learning in November 2020 attracted over 10,000 people. In 2019, *Limmud* attracted 7000 participants at 13 discreet events. In 2020 they doubled that number.

All of these institutions had existing constituencies of course. They are now finding a much larger market. Synagogues should take advantage of the expertise and reach of such national organizations and make them a feature of what is offered to their own members. Synagogue life can be parochial. Why not use this opportunity to make Jews aware of some of the amazing content that is produced by national Jewish organizations?

An extension of this principle is the value of collaboration between synagogues. I have long argued that the business model of synagogues is flawed in that most congregations operate as private clubs exclusively for their dues-paying members. This is a 20th century model that is outdated. The Age of Corona has made it clear that we live in a global system. Just as one example, on many Fridays, I join my daughter for her favorite *Kabbalat Shabbat minyan* in Israel (on Friday morning, of course).

Collaboration with other congregations is a win/win. Rabbis realize that don’t need to do everything and congregants get to experience other rabbis and congregations. Rabbi Arielle Rosenberg ([Shir Tikvah](#), Minneapolis, MN) and Rabbi Monica Gomery ([Kol Tzedek](#), Philadelphia, PA) reached out to a handful of rabbinic colleagues they knew across the country and, each day of *Pesach*, a different rabbi led a 30-minute, creative *Hallel* experience that congregants from all participating congregations could join. None of the participating congregations would have had the critical mass to do a daily *Hallel* but, collaboratively, they averaged 30 participants each day.

One of the most ambitious collaborations that continues to expand is [Jew it at Home](#). It started as a conversation between rabbis at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and neighboring Temple Isaiah. There are now 30 partner organizations, 25 of which are synagogues. Each partner organization is welcome to offer unlimited numbers of

programs on the platform. On Friday night and *shabbat* morning the platform offers an array of different worship experiences from partners. The programming quickly became so rich and robust that there are now channels to organize the offerings. These channels include learning, spirituality, book groups, film clubs, health and wellness, singing and more. There is no cost to log on to any program and members of all partner organizations can access programs any day of the week, from morning till night.

The early response to Jew it at Home has exceeded expectations. Rabbis need to overcome their concern that they will “lose” their members to other congregations. Participants feel Judaically enriched by the array of offerings and there is still the comfort of “coming home” to a program or shabbat experience at one’s own congregation.

2. **Time for Serious Inreach**

There isn’t a congregation in North America that does not have membership that is under-engaged in synagogue programming. But the shelter in place reality that COVID brought about did create a sense of isolation and a deeper need for community than ever before. A congregation’s ability to touch base with its members makes an enormous impact on the sense that the synagogue cares about them. I would encourage congregations to prioritize the members who are not participating in online worship services and classes.

There are many ways to do inreach effectively: a simple check-in to see if members have any needs that can be met by the congregation; an invitation to join some upcoming program; an inquiry about what kind of affinity group might interest them. Of course, any such inquiry requires diligent follow-up. The failure to follow up to an expressed interest will squander any good will that an inreach effort can generate.

The COVID restrictions also created an ideal time to tap into the gifts of members. Synagogues that move away from top-down programming and that allow members to be actively involved in offering content, makes a powerful impact on communal culture. It moves institutions away from being transactional and conveys the message that the community is on a collective journey of Jewish learning and discovery.

For any kind of inreach effort, a script with talking points is very helpful, as is a form to create a feedback loop to the rabbi, staff and lay leadership. The more widely this task can be shared (e.g. Board members, a special task force, etc.) the better. Congregation Bnai Shalom in Westborough, MA put together a most impressive

inreach effort called [CBS Cares](#). Bnai Shalom's rabbi, Rachel Gurevitz, is a wonderful resource if you want some advice on how this kind of initiative can be structured.

Synagogues often deliver their services and programming to a small fraction of their membership. The COVID pandemic provided an ideal time to reach beyond core members and connect with a broader cross-section of congregational households. If the conversations are conducted well and the results are thoughtfully reviewed by leadership, this effort can also open the door to a greater variety of programming than might have been the case previously and a significant uptick of members being engaged.

3. **Slay sacred cows and innovate**

When leaders introduce a “disruption” into an institution, it always involves some risk because it is inevitable that some individuals in the system will find the disruption threatening to a status quo in which many are invested. The Covid 19 crisis was an external, natural disruption. From a synagogue perspective, no one in the system caused it. As a result, there was little resistance to a range of responses that sought to adapt a congregation to the new reality. It provided an opportunity to move synagogues away from practices and modes of operation that might have been dysfunctional and to introduce innovations that, in normal times, would likely have faced opposition. Rabbis were given wide latitude to step into this crisis moment and introduce innovations, often with far less resistance than would have happened in normal times.

I am seeing examples of this phenomenon within our, relatively small, CLI cohort. (I will not mention names so as not to compromise changes and innovations that are still “in process”). One rabbi of a large midwestern Reform congregation inherited a Friday night service from her predecessor, who is still a presence in the community as rabbi emeritus. She never particularly liked the service but it enjoyed a large attendance and changing it would have clearly upset a significant number of the regulars. Since the shelter in place order took effect, she started to lead services from the sanctuary with her husband and it was livestreamed to the congregation. She has some contemporary secular songs on a relevant theme, shortened the service and included her children in the candlelighting and with the ritual blessing of children. The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. The service reflects much more of who she is as a rabbi; rest assured, she will not be going back to the old service.

A second rabbi in our cohort advocated for years to merge several congregational religious schools in his northeastern city. The demographics have long made such a move logical, but institutional jealousies have prevented it. Suddenly, the respective

institutions are coming to the table and a merger is a likely outcome of the COVID-19 crisis. A third rabbi in our cohort felt constrained by a communal culture she inherited that made lay leadership more central to the conduct of worship services than the rabbi. The new reality of Zoom services made her central to planning and leading services. She has been able to put her signature on the services in a way not previously possible. Again, the new worship style will likely outlive the shelter in place constraints.

One innovation shared with me came from Rabbi Aviva Fellman, who adapted a practice that was created by a bereaved widow at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, TX soon after the shelter in place orders took effect. The deceased was a beloved, long-standing member of the congregation and everyone was heartbroken, not just by his passing, but by the fact that there would be no place for an outpouring of love for him and support for his widow. The widow suggested that on the way back from the cemetery, friends could pay respects to her, as the mourner, while in their cars in the congregation's very large parking lot. Rabbi David Stern, Senior Rabbi at Temple Emanu-El described to me the scene after the funeral, with hundreds of cars lined up in two rows, well-spaced, providing a corridor for the mourners to drive through and be greeted and comforted by people standing in front of their vehicles. He called it one of the most moving moments of his rabbinate. You can see a short video of this most creative, invented ritual at Beth Israel in Worcester, MA [here](#). Rabbi Fellman calls it *Hamakom Yenachem*, the words said when attendees at a funeral create two rows for mourners to pass through.

There are many other examples of innovation happening in Jewish spaces well beyond the circle of CLI rabbis that I work with. Rabbi Paul Kipnes, who leads Reform congregation Or Ami in Calabasas, CA, wove a disruptive DNA into the ethos of his congregation well before COVID hit. His professional team and lay leaders re-doubled their efforts to innovate when the pandemic made access to the synagogue building all but impossible. Particularly impressive was how they engaged their youth population. [Mensch-ify](#), Or Ami's biweekly parenting workshop and family program, quickly became a weekly energetic family Jewish touchpoint. Matzo Ball Boot Camp was created to offer active options during spring break. The congregation's teens gathered online regularly, watching Netflix movies together and preparing a teen-led *Shabbat* service. And the preteens played other games online, including exercising together with the local Krav Maga studio.

Equally impressive was the way Or Ami ramped up its social justice commitments. The congregation developed a physically-distanced food drive in its parking lot to support the local food pantry and a local pastor who ministers to the unhoused. Mindful that even the best programs can be overlooked by members if they are not promoted in a lively and engaging way, Or Ami produced a short, [foot tapping video called](#)

[“Walking on Sunshine”](#) to highlight many of the new wrinkles it developed in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many synagogues are also figuring out how to create powerful experiences on Zoom that could never happen in a sanctuary. One example I would hold up is [Raise Your Voice Labs](#) created by Micah Hendler, the founder of the multi-faith [Jerusalem Youth Chorus](#). Micah has worked with many synagogues, offering musical experiences that give worshippers a deep experience of *tefillah*. At one service I “attended” with Micah, he invited people to put into the chat box their personal prayers for healing for themselves and for the world. He then proceeded to sing the *Misheberach* prayer, incorporating many of the personal offerings of the participants, the “content” of the prayer coming from the chat box which Micah extemporaneously incorporated into his prayer. Members of the synagogue talked about that experience for weeks. How often does that happen with what typically happens in a worship service?

Speaking of worship services, one of the biggest changes that has taken place is the shortening of Friday night and *Shabbat* morning services. While the length of services vary based on denomination and local custom, some *Shabbat* morning services can go as long as three hours! Rabbis regularly justify the length of the service, both by arguing that each element is required by tradition (both historical Jewish custom and local practice) and they point to their attendees and say that cutting any part of the service will upset their regulars. With all due respect to those considerations, when most synagogues are only seeing, at best, 10% of their membership on a regular basis, a wholesale re-assessment of synagogue worship is called for. Covid has led some congregations to shave as much as an hour off their worship time, simply from the recognition that people cannot stay on Zoom comfortably for more than 90 minutes. Rabbis would be well served to re-think how to make services more spiritually compelling and user-friendly for their larger community when we can again gather together in real time for communal worship.

One final example. [Rabbi Joshua Lesser](#) of Atlanta, GA set up a Facebook page that is called [“Spiritual and Communal Responses to Covid-19”](#). After six weeks, over 7000 people had signed up, including clergy from every imaginable faith tradition. The FB page has multiple threads, serving a wide variety of needs. But most interesting to me are the creative ideas around life-cycle functions, liturgy and ritual. An occupational hazard of being a spiritual leader is that you quickly get accustomed to doing the same things in the same way, week after week (year after year?).

But if religion is meant to reflect the lives we are actually living, the rituals and customs need to be dynamic and not static. I fully expect that the clergy who are now experimenting with inherited customs to make them more relevant and suitable to the

Age of Corona will find people excited by the way religion can give meaning to their lives.

Looking Ahead

I am aware of some hand-wringing from both rabbis and lay leaders around the country who are concerned that their synagogues cannot compete with the online offerings of the large, wealthy congregations in America's largest markets. It is true. Many Jews can (and do) now "shul-hop" at the drop of a mouse to almost any synagogue in the country. And the talented clergy and compelling programming of places like Central Synagogue (New York), Adas Israel (Washington D.C.), Anshe Emet (Chicago) and Wilshire Boulevard Temple (Los Angeles) are clearly a draw (and at no cost!).

And yet synagogues that have committed the time and energy to build strong bonds of community through relational activities still have something that is even more compelling than the marquis programs of the mega-shuls. They offer a spiritual home for people with clergy and fellow congregants who have been with them in times of joy and times of sorrow, marking the sacred passage of time and transmitting the beauty of our ancient heritage. That experience has no price tag because there are not many places one can go in our overly-commodified society where you can feel spiritually nourished. Synagogues that have not yet figured out how to create such deep, spiritually connected communities will have to learn how to do that, and quickly.

At its best, a disruption destabilizes an institution just enough to create an opening for some needed change. The Age of Corona has created a massive disruption of every institution in the world, synagogues included. Rabbis and congregational lay leaders would be well-served by seeing beyond the crisis mode of the moment so as to think more expansively about how to make synagogues the compelling spiritual communities that they can be, long after the Age of Corona is over.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is a Senior Fellow at Hazon and the author of several books including [Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews can Transform the American Synagogue](#) and [Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future](#). He is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, MD and the director of the [Clergy Leadership Incubator \(CLI\)](#), a two-year fellowship for rabbis on visionary leadership and change management. [Applications](#) are being accepted for the next cohort of CLI until January 29th.

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/synagogue-innovation-in-the-age-of-corona-and-beyond>