



The Value of Virtual

By Aaron Midler

As the Jewish community contemplates how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect the way it congregates in the future, I want to argue for the value of virtual spaces as a continuing part of our communal life. This is a new opening in the Jewish tent – one that my family uses regularly – that I expect many people, including other families and members of vulnerable populations (e.g., the immuno-compromised or the elderly), will want to use in the future, regardless of the pandemic. In short, we should hold onto the value we create during this difficult time, despite our eagerness to see each other in person again.

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in a flowering of Jewish content on the internet that did not exist prior to this moment. In an impressive display of adaptability, Jewish organizations moved much of their programming online. Services, classes, and face-to-face meetings suddenly shifted to Facebook, Zoom, and other platforms. Institutions that would have deliberated (or had already deliberated) for years before ‘going virtual’ made the shift in a matter of weeks.

Ironically, I have felt more connected to my community and more hopeful about my ability to engage Jewishly during this time than before quarantine. As a parent of young children, my Jewish life is now tied intimately to their needs. This means that most of the programs I try to participate in are geared toward toddlers.

Gone are the days of regularly doing any of the following: studying Talmud, improving my Hebrew, working on social justice projects, or hearing a *d'var torah*. Even engagement for the sake of my daughters is dicey: my family does not live close to most of the major centers of Jewish life in our city, and we are not often able to gather our wits, diapers, strollers, toys, and snacks to leave the neighborhood in a timely fashion for programming.

In interviewing millennial Jews about their learning desires and habits for a recent master's project, I heard similar stories: young children are simultaneously a push and a pull with respect to engagement in Jewish life. For those with spiritual needs that need active tending in a community or those who love learning, this life cycle moment in particular can unexpectedly strain one's connection to their Jewishness –

inconvenient, particularly as this is a moment in which we are expected to transmit Judaism to our offspring.

Quarantine has, for me, alleviated some of that strain. I can listen to a *shior* while I do dishes, attend services at my own pace, and make *tot shabbatot* on time, without loading up my children. Our family has participated in more synagogue programming in the last two months than in the six months before quarantine began. We feel more a part of the community than when we could sit in our synagogue's sanctuary.

I draw attention to these benefits because the community is beginning to focus on getting back to some semblance of normal. Virtual spaces should be part of that conversation not just because we do not know what the future will hold (additional or continuing waves of infection, as recent news has shown; other disasters, natural or manmade, etc.), but because maintaining virtual options has value for strengthening our communities that is distinct from the value such options provide during this pandemic. I expect other families have similar stories to my own. I expect that anyone who has had difficulty being a part of a community, due to health, distance, or other concerns, has also benefited from the virtual opportunities now open to us.

I do not believe, as some might, that these virtual opportunities to connect threaten the value proposition of many Jewish organizations today: the promise of joining a fulfilling, purpose-driven community (i.e., the promise of relational Judaism). In my experience, having virtual options strengthened such connections when being in the same physical location was impossible or impractical. Sometimes our insistence on being physically together is an impediment to being 'together.'

The community may well ask, nonetheless, "is it worth our time to invest long term in virtual activities?" Some might argue that investing in virtual options will dilute an organization's ability to invest in the face-to-face, in-person gatherings seen as necessary to create a vibrant communal life. Of course, personal experience tells me the investment is worth it (especially given that the community has already done a lot of heavy lifting to get this far), but I appreciate the necessity of data in making any long-term investment of funds, time, and energy. I am eager to see the data that Jewish institutions have collected on engagement during the pandemic – who is participating, how often, and in what ways – along with data concerning these institutions' spending on virtual capabilities and programming. With that information, we will be in a better position to understand the nature of the value that going virtual brings to our table and how to best implement it consistently and strategically going forward (along with more traditional programming). We may find that the numbers support what intuition suggests.

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