

What it Means in Uncertain Times to Plan for the Future

By Mark Gurvis and Beth Cousens

In just a few weeks, school will start for many Jewish families, and then the High Holidays will be upon us; time is marching on even if it feels we are caught in this very strange and overwhelmingly challenging time. As builders of community and meaning, we must be ready. How can we do that, given all the uncertainty in which we are living?

Scenario planning is a disciplined approach to breaking out of forecasting based on past dynamics or performance. It organizes our uncertainty, designing several potential realities we could be facing. Often, when faced with uncertainty, we start planning by examining an internal set of factors – our resources, our current strategies, our immediate challenges or specific questions. By contrast, the paradigm of scenario planning works from the outside in, starting with the major external forces over which we don't have control, but which will dramatically shape our reality. It then narrows into our individual organizational plans and possibilities. If done well, the scenarios plunge us into consideration of realities that may be uncomfortable or even scary, helping us to plan for possibilities that we may not otherwise see in an uncertain and rapidly changing environment.

Like the [Jewish Funders Network](#), over the past few months, the Jewish Federations of North America has developed a set of plausible futures. We worked with [Matt Ranen](#) to engage stakeholders to build those scenarios. We are happy to share them [here](#).

Looking at both sets of scenarios side-by-side there are significant parallels and differences between the stories the scenarios create. Our scenarios pivot on the axes of the economy and the ability to gather in larger numbers, while the JFN scenarios use as their axes the economy and issues of social justice and equity. Each looks at different questions and is rooted in a different timeline, and each is presented differently, with more or less information, which may influence stakeholders to appreciate one set over another. While each organization stands by its scenarios, we

also believe that any organization will benefit most from the process itself, using either set.

In this process, the creation of the scenarios is an important first step – but only a first step. The real work involves a structured approach to spending time in each scenario, mapping out its implications for your organization or sector (industry). That means customizing them to an organization's core focus, thinking through what your unique assets and capacities are and how they can be best positioned under each scenario. Ideally, this results in a set of strategic choices – some priorities that an organization might pursue under any of the plausible futures, other priorities that become more critical in one or another scenario, and existing priorities that become less important in some or all scenarios. With this work done, organizations have a planning framework that leaders can return to regularly as the real future unfolds, pivoting more quickly when they need.

To accompany the scenarios, we offer a [toolkit](#) for organizational leaders that want to use this resource in their own planning. Next week we will host a [series of workshops](#) for organizational leaders interested in learning more about these resources. Already, thanks to generous support from the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation, we are applying these tools to the work of several national networked organizations that lead and support key sectors of Jewish communal life, including our JCCs, summer camps, day schools, human service agencies and synagogues.

What will tomorrow bring? We can't know for sure. There are no data about the future, only many stories we can tell. But these stories, organized and used strategically, can help us be more prepared as events fall out and we see more clearly where we are headed over time.

To learn more about the toolkit, register for Community Conversations [here](#). For questions about the toolkit or about JFNA's scenarios, please email ScenarioPlanning@JewishTogether.org.

The JFNA scenarios are available [here](#).

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Also see: [How Scenario Planning Can Help Us Prepare for a Post-Covid Jewish Community](#) by Andrés Spokoiny and Deena Fuchs

Mark Gurvis is Executive Vice President and Beth Cousens is Associate Vice President, The Jewish Federations of North America.