



## No! You shouldn't host a virtual gala this year!

By Ben Vorspan

Earlier this year I attended my first synagogue board meeting with a single goal: to kill our monthly print bulletin. After an impassioned 8-minute presentation, I delivered the deathblow: "If we were a brand new synagogue, and we were meeting today to create our first marketing and communications plan, is there any way we'd decide to spend \$30,000 a year on a 20-page, full-color, magazine-style bulletin and mail it to 1,000 families? [No!] So, if it's not right for today's world, why are we doing it? [Um...] Simple: Because it's what we've always done."

I think you'll agree that "because it's what we've always done" should never be **the** reason to do something.

Now, let me ask you a question (yes – you): If you founded your organization this week and you met today to determine your first big fundraiser in a time when you can't eat dinner together and can't dance together, would you decide to hold a virtual dinner-dance? [No.] So, why are you planning a virtual gala? [Um...] Simple: Because it's what you've always done.

*So, if we shouldn't do what we've always done... what should we do instead?*

I'll answer your question with a question that I often ask myself: What would Walt do?

For more than seven decades, Walt Disney Imagineers have been holding "blue sky" meetings at which a small group of Disney employees with different backgrounds and disciplines sequester themselves for several days, charged with the task of creating something completely original. They call it "blue sky" because the sky's the limit – It doesn't matter if the idea costs billions of dollars to build, needs years to develop, uses thousands of acres, or requires technology that doesn't exist yet – the goal is to be creative.

Interestingly enough – many of the ideas aren't used right away. Ideas that are ahead of their time are filed away so that some day in the future, if they decide to replace

The Autopia or build a third theme park in Anaheim, they'll have ideas that are ready to develop.

Often, those that can't be used immediately are delayed by what author Steven Johnson calls the "adjacent possible." To understand this, imagine we're at one end of a building, and an innovation is at the other. From where we stand, we can't get directly there – we can only open the door to a room adjacent to us. Once we move to that room, we can open the next door, and continue until we've finally moved through enough adjacent rooms to create a path to the goal.

For Disney Imagineering to proceed with a blue sky concept, they might need to wait for funding and land to become available, then for intellectual property rights to be secured, and finally for ride system technology to progress to a certain level.

In our comparatively-boring non-Disney world, we might need to work through financial, technological, ritual or psychological adjacent possibles, to name a few. Take, for example, the innovation of live streaming a *Shabbat* service. 30 years ago, it wasn't even a discussion to be had since the technology didn't exist. 20 years ago the technology existed, but who could afford it? 10 years ago, the technology became affordable, which raised the question of whether a Conservative synagogue could halachically stream a service on *Shabbat*. After decades of progressing through the technological, financial and ritual adjacent possibles, nearly every Conservative synagogue has now adopted some form of live streaming.

The next big thing is always on the horizon, and with so much progress constantly being made, so many new technologies at our fingertips, and incredible capacity for creativity – especially in our "new normal" that relies almost exclusively on adopting new ideas – why are so many very smart and capable people writing article after article expounding the virtues of virtual galas???

### **This is the time for blue sky!**

Start with your goals – Do you want to raise money? To build community from afar? To do something that will have a lasting impact on your constituents? To create something they can't wait to share with their friends? Something they might want to do again next year, even after you're able to be together in person?

Now think about the different options – both online and in real life (socially-distanced, of course) – available to you with potential to engage your constituents.

Spend an hour in a Zoom meeting with your gala-replacement taskforce discussing your goals and throwing insane ideas out there (wine always helps). You'll discover dozens of brilliant blue sky ideas, and I promise, with a little Googling you'll figure out a creative way to use available technology to pull at least one of them off this year. You'll also find that the only barrier between you and this spectacular adjacent possible idea is that weakening voice saying, "but, it's not what we've always done!"

### **THIS is the time to try something new!**

Normally, your board is resistant to significant change, and you (the executive director, development director, senior Rabbi) will be hesitant to push for change since there's fear that the new idea won't work. You know that the same old gala, although lacking creativity, and not particularly appealing to the next generation of donors, will bring in a certain amount of money. You also know the clever, innovative new idea might fail.

But! In today's uncharted waters, there are no expectations! We can't gather for dinner and dancing in our social hall, so, whether it's a virtual gala or something completely original, we have no choice but to try something new. The psychological barrier, which can sometimes be the biggest obstacle between you and the adjacent innovation you're trying to reach, is very much relaxed. So, why not go for it?!?

Perhaps my glasses are a little too rose-colored, but the Coronavirus might be the opportunity we've all been waiting for to lead the charge for true innovation! This is our chance to do what Walt would have done – something original and creative! To *not* do what we've always done!

Please! Take this time to guide, nudge or force your organization kicking and screaming through the door to the next adjacent possible! You will never have an opportunity like this again! Be the Imagineer you've always wanted to be! Lean in! Go ahead and make 2020 the year to replace your gala, try something very outside-the-box for the High Holy Days, or, at the very least, finally put an end to your 20-page, magazine style, monthly print newsletter!

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