

Jewish Together

The Jewish Communal Response to COVID-19

JewishTogether.org



The Jewish Federations[®]
OF NORTH AMERICA



Dear Jewish organizational leaders, our *chevre*:

Last winter, as the implications of the global pandemic began to be evident, Jewish Federations of North America turned to other continental network organizations to face the unknown together. The National Pandemic Emergency Coalition has met regularly for sharing, brainstorming and problem solving. This kind of partnership was not unique; it immediately became evident that collaborative planning would characterize this period of Jewish organizational life. Through structured alliances, shared projects and informal relationships, the organized Jewish world is making its way through this crisis together.

Coalition conversations led to this initial documentation and analysis of the Jewish communal response to COVID. One of the Jewish organizational memes of this time is “Our organization’s doors are closed—but we are still open.” Indeed, while countless Jewish buildings shut, the community remained open from the first day, even if most activity moved online. Synagogues gathered members for sacred moments. Therapists offered support and analysis to clients. Schools relocated learning to living rooms. Volunteers brought food to the home-bound—volunteers stood behind PPE, but still, they delivered. Every Jewish organization reinvented their business model overnight. We have experienced tremendous loss, personally and professionally. But as evidenced by the research shared here, the accomplishments and inventions are a stark counterpoint to the pain of this time.

Two truths have emerged through our reinvention. The first is that much of the innovation we have developed will stay with us. We are planning for now and for beyond the months and years during which we may be physically distanced. We are planning for a bright future that we cannot predict but we can design.

The second truth is that we have embodied true characteristics of leadership, moving a community toward a moral vision of a better world. We have engaged in give and take with each other, exposed vulnerabilities to each other and given up power for greater partnership. We have gone above and beyond in order to meet our communal responsibilities. We have become more comfortable with risk and become more able to let go of assumptions that worked only before COVID. And this has happened both within communities and across our larger continental community.

Drawn from interviews with almost 70 Jewish organizational leaders, this study explores the innovation and leadership that characterize this era. True to its substance, the process of writing this piece has been one of collaboration and iteration, with contributions to the report itself from many of those interviewed. Similarly, it’s up to all of us to imagine how we might continue to write our story of this time, how we will uncover and explore all else there is to learn.

Many of us are familiar with the adage from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, “*Kol haolam kulo, gesher tzar meod, v’haikar lo lefached klal,*” or “The entire world is a narrow bridge, and the essential thing is that we are not afraid.” We are on a bridge between two worlds, unsure of the other side and aware that our missteps could yield great suffering. How do we avoid becoming frightened?

By holding hands as we cross this bridge together.

“



This is the moment we were made for.

Cindy Greenberg, CEO, Repair the World

We respond together.

As Purim 2020 ushered in news of a global pandemic, it became increasingly clear that the next weeks would bring the unexpected. Jewish organizational leaders canceled events, closed agency doors and brought travelers home from Israel, taking initial actions to respond to a health crisis beyond our imaginations. We didn't understand what we were facing but we did what seemed to be appropriate to the moment. It's strange to look back on what we couldn't know, on our optimism that this would be over in weeks and at our naivete about what lay ahead.

Now, more than seven months later, we recognize that we remain mired in deep uncertainty. We are not experiencing a time-bound emergency, with expected stages and anticipated outcomes. We are in an ongoing crisis, without mental models for what we are facing, trying to manage "high-stakes, highly uncertain circumstances that go beyond current understanding." The literature tells us what we already feel: that crisis events lack clarity and straightforward solutions. The situation may feel "chaotic and unstructured," the experience "fearful" in its uncertainty.¹

Everyone has an "on this day everything changed" but everyone's day is different.

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Reuben Rotman, President and CEO, Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies

However, the Jewish communal response to COVID-19 has not been marked by chaos, and certainly not by defeat. For sure, all is not thriving: A few agencies have closed forever, and many positions have been eliminated. At the same time, in many places, Jewish communal life has flourished online and, more recently, in-person, looking both similar to life BC ("before COVID") and reflecting our newly constructed and physically-distanced reality. North American Jews have continued to find meaning in their tradition and in each other. The communal infrastructure is supporting many in need, developing new initiatives in response to new challenges. Leadership in crisis is "characterized by rapid innovation, under stress, embedded in fear."² Many struggled initially to find their way and as they did, they quickly found the creative, collaborative and even financial reserves needed to begin a response, engaging in this "rapid innovation," even under stress. In some ways, "this is the moment we were made for." Our success is a testament to our resilience, tenacity and commitment to meeting our missions in extraordinary and innovative ways.

¹Herman B. "Dutch" Leonard, Arnold M. Howitt, and David W. Giles, "Crisis Management for Leaders Coping with COVID-19," John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University: April, 2020.

²Leonard, Howitt, and Giles, "Crisis Management"



We mourn together.

Many of us have been exercising this leadership in the midst of trauma. We have lost loved ones; we have been sick ourselves. A few of us are “long-haulers,” inflicted with COVID-19 for months, with no sense of what recovery looks like. We are living with the upheaval of the secondary circumstances of the pandemic: canceled or dramatically shifted life events, missed time with family, and the loss of critical developmental experiences—Jewish memories—for our children. Many of us are juggling significant at-home burdens: working with continual interruption, home-schooling children who may require more support than we can give and trying simultaneously to meet the needs of family members and our constituents. Professionally, we are carrying the burdens of the systems in which we are embedded. Our work fuels the work of others, such as the Israel tourism industry, food service providers and other vendors, the custodial staff in our buildings and countless others. We mourn the cascading impacts of our closures, the way of living and working interdependently we took for granted. We don’t know when and how this will end, and that matters for our own lives and families as well as for the work and communities we love and believe in. We can’t minimize the extent to which we have led our organizations and their services with great effectiveness despite being under great strain personally.

That moment on March 12th totally sticks with me, and it will forever. That’s the day that education changed ... that is a day that while you can look at it with the negativity of “the world is collapsing,” I saw that as a moment where the creativity, cooperation, collaboration of our teachers just shined bright.

Adam Shapiro, Head of School, Golda Och Academy (West Orange, New Jersey)

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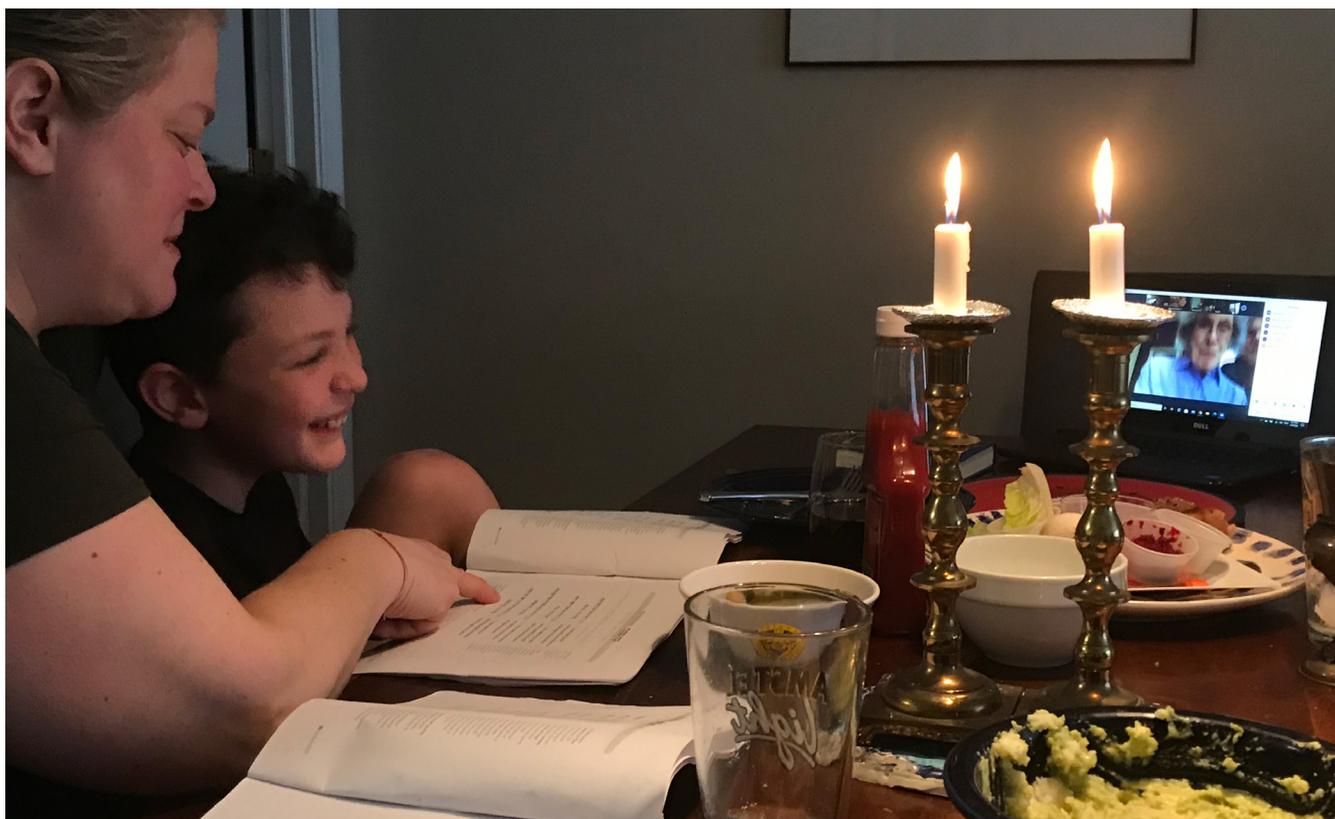




We are Jewish Together.

What has it meant to lead Jewish life through the pandemic? And how did we lean on each other to respond together?

In the coming months and years, these questions will be studied many times over. Still, at the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), working with organizational colleagues in the National Pandemic Emergency Coalition, we sought to start documenting the innovation and the adaptive acts of leadership that have brought us here so that we can, as a community, learn from our work and grow from our experiences. Through interviews with almost 70 Jewish communal CEOs and organizational leaders, clergy and heads of school, we focused on the reinvention involved in the response to COVID and the leadership qualities needed for that reinvention. The report begins by documenting areas of programmatic innovation that have developed in response to COVID: developing new tactics to meet our missions, building at-home activity and identifying the assets of online activity. The report turns to the leadership characteristics that have facilitated this innovation, describing flexibility, action despite fear and resiliency. It describes the tremendous trust that has powered all of this work as organizational leaders find their way through the unknown. In its last section, it notes some challenges that we are beginning to address but that are bigger than our responses so far. Each of these sections offers only highlights of the data collected and the greater stories that exist. It gives testament to the work done, beginning to document what will become the foundation of a new era in Jewish communal life.





We invent; we adapt together.

What is an organizational leader to do when obstacle after obstacle comes between the organization and its mission, and when the strategies and tools on which it has relied historically cannot work in the current environment?

This was the question that Jewish organizations (and the larger world) faced in March, and repeatedly as we learned more about the virus. Organizational leaders have mounted not one strategic response but several, engaging in continual adaptation and reinvention.

As Rabbi David Eliezrie (Chabad) suggests, organizational leaders have had to ask themselves, “How do I adapt in whatever creative way possible to think outside the box to accomplish my goal?” What will help us accomplish our vision and purpose? In the COVID era, iterating has become a critical competency; leaders “always need to be in a learning stance” (Jessica Emerson McCormick, Jewish Emergent Network).³

“ We were asking, “What’s at the heart of why we were doing this thing before, and how do we keep what’s at the heart of it while changing the format?” The point of Shabbat dinner wasn’t about getting people physically in a Hillel building. It was about giving people a weekly moment to pause, be in relationship in community, understand rituals and traditions, meet people where they’re at. So how do we do that in a COVID world?

Mimi Kravetz, Chief Experience Officer, Hillel International

For Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and Jewish day schools, two communal organizations that previously had daily in-person experiences, that adaptation has been weekly and sometimes more; as Gil Perl (Kohélet Yeshiva) described, “One of the really important lessons was learning to pivot, and then learning to pivot again.” As organizations have planned for reopening, operational plans have been written and rewritten with each new public health guideline. Institutions are managing regular communication, personnel, PPE, transportation, technology, budgetary concerns and more all while their primary interest was to best serve their families and communities. There is incredible upheaval and corresponding deep resilience in the ability of organizational leaders to develop, rally around and prepare to execute a plan, only to discover that the plan needs to be adjusted.

³ Those interviewed quoted—perhaps unintentionally, perhaps intentionally—the established principles of “adaptive leadership,” or a set of leadership principles identified as needed while adapting rapidly, which include self-awareness, concern about outcomes (organizational justice), integrity, creativity, iterative learning, honesty and relationship. Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2002).



For all organizations, the core task has been to focus on mission within the limitations that the virus presents. Organizations have focused less on prior activity as a strict rubric and more on designing the right activities dictated by COVID that get them to their goals, lifting the old activity into the new environment in order to best serve their constituents. Jewish day schools recreated their programs essentially overnight, generally closing only for a day or two of teacher preparation (if that) to build curricula for every grade and subject that could be implemented at-home, on-line and in ways that helped parents as much as students. They continued to fulfill their responsibility to children and families, even while their “needs changed, initially week by week. First, it was, how do you go virtual? Then it’s, how do you make Zoom do this? And then it was, how do we support mental health?” Paul Bernstein (Prizmah) observed. “There were a variety of different needs and we had to pivot very rapidly, see the questions coming up, gather the expertise where it existed to answer those questions, and share information in real time.” It’s worth noting that this kind of response was possible, in part, because they started early, learning immediately from the experience of the first three schools in New York that were forced to close in early March, responding to one of the first outbreaks in the United States. When Prizmah held a webinar with the leadership of SAR Academy to share lessons learned from the move to virtual learning less than a week after the first closures, 150 schools joined. School leaders across North America learned together, and worked intensely to be ready to teach virtually, as soon as they closed.

As JCCs closed, many identified the unique role they could play in this situation, as driven by their historic mission and constituent responsibilities. They quickly expanded their social services offered including food preparation and delivery and blood drive centers, and they adapted operations to serve as childcare for essential service workers. For many seniors who once thrived in the social opportunities of a JCC, they now received food delivery at their home and remote check-ins and programming; early childhood students engaged with their teachers and classmates remotely until they were able to meet again in person this summer or fall. Day camps adapted to new regulations so that two-thirds of JCC day camps operated this past summer and were often the first program in their communities to return. JCCs identified their organizational goals and adopted new activities and prioritized core activities in that context.

Moishe House had been planning an in-person summer camp, an immersive experience for adults. They chose instead to riff off of color war, one of the best elements of summer camp, and in just a few weeks they mapped a virtual competition that engaged twenty-somethings in daily activities. Like camp, Expedition Nai Nai Nai daily activities focused on the whole person: Jewish, and also wellness, silly, communal and challenging. Moishe House found ways to bring the best of color war into the initiative, weaving relationship, community, suspense and competition together and giving a lonely population something to look forward to during a long summer.

Through all of this adaptation, what did we learn?



At-home is not complementary but a core strategy, sometimes independent, sometimes combined with online gathering. These adaptations ensured that families could celebrate/mark holidays and graduations, that organizations embraced newly enrolled families, and that professionals and constituents alike felt real love and pride at each occasion. As this era in our lives evolves, observing a typical holiday will shift from taking place in community and at home to taking place primarily at home. Putting resources and activities into people's hands creates accountability, authenticity, connection and gives constituents responsibility. It distributes Judaism and empowers its adherents.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- PJ Library released a comprehensive guide to the High Holidays for parents. Rich with information, discussion prompts and activity suggestions, it sought to expand parents' understanding of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur from only in-synagogue observances to including at-home explorations that are in their hands.
- In Rochester, the Jewish Federation, partner organizations and synagogues created and distributed hundreds of boxes filled with activities for kids and families, meant to fit together with a summer camp curriculum implemented online and through personal counselor relationships.
- Likewise, the staff at Camp Stone packed intricate, activity-filled boxes to mail out to campers and their families, bringing camp to them, and community-based PJ Library professionals also filled families' homes with holiday activities during the High Holidays.
- Jodi Bromberg (18Doors) imagined a future hybrid program where materials would be sent home to be used in an online activity, such as an online Sukkot mixology program paired with a package in the mail containing all the necessary ingredients.
- In Dallas (after the initial emergency passed), the Aaron JCC equipped a mobile trailer to be a program space, able to visit constituents and deliver programs to small groups in the community.
- As the shelter-in-place order progressed through the (Jewish) calendar, Jewish day schools created a mash-up of celebratory materials to send home, along with distanced driveway visits, parades through communities, and online celebrations.

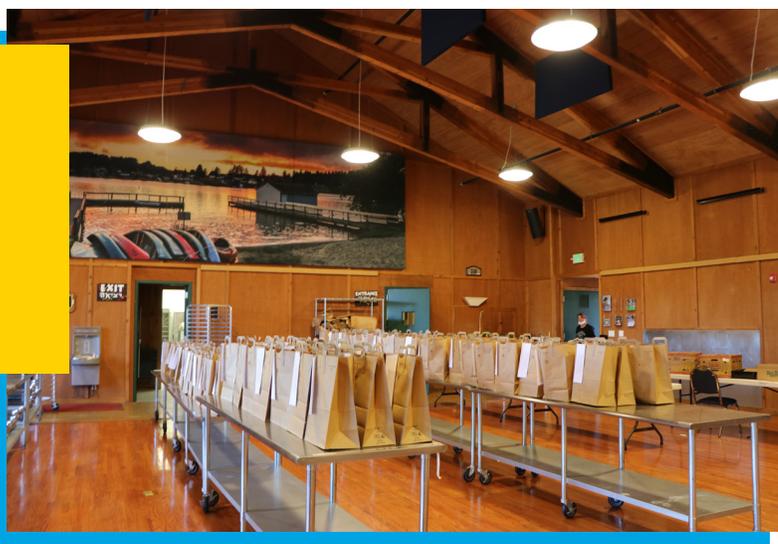
Space is an asset for repurposing. Time and again, organizational leaders broke their assumptions about what their buildings and properties were and did. They found space in new places and saw assets in a new light.

- In Baltimore, the side of the JCC has become a screen for drive-in movies.
- In Charlotte, the JCC parking lot became a site for recreational activity; even after indoor exercise was permitted, members appreciated being outside and the adaptation continued. JCC parking lots have also seen Shabbat and High Holiday prayer services.



- Repair the World began distributing food and supplies from its storefront office: In-person programming was replaced with 500 volunteers coming weekly to sort, pack, and deliver supplies throughout the area.
- Similarly, through its kitchen and overall property, Camp B'nai Brith in Oregon served 40,000 meals to public school students in the area who were otherwise without sources of food this summer (and has continued to serve meals to evacuees displaced by area wildfires).
- JCC Berkshire Hills Camp, Hazon's Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center and other venues used their sites as family camps.
- Some summer camp staff lived onsite (although distant) in order to create more energy that would carry through to their campers online. For Camp Stone, providing staff with the opportunity for a leadership experience was mission critical. Their staff lived together at camp, working to shape what would ultimately be a fully immersive and interactive online two week experience ("Indoor World"), letting Camp Stone maintain the counselor-led creativity that is one of their hallmarks.
- Rabbi Seth Goldstein (Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Olympia, Washington) helped his community to organize small groups for tashlich in parks along the Puget Sound; the rabbi visited each group by boat to sound the shofar.
- In Philadelphia, Judy Groner (Perelman Jewish Day School) reimagined the school's outdoor spaces in order to move both campuses outside, with tents for each cohort, ground pads and lap desks, extended wifi, hotspots and Swivl on iPads to include remote learners in a fully outdoor program. Space once conceived for one purpose and reconceived for another brought an explosion of creativity for Perelman.
- Perelman is unique in moving the entire school outside, but many Jewish day schools have created outdoor spaces and also integrated the outdoors into the curriculum. Students are learning botany and biology, the story of Adam and Eve, Hebrew and math all in one unit, starting with the trees around them.

The mission is what matters and, in that context, assets are reoriented toward the same sacred ends.





Online does not have to be second best. In some cases, programs and meetings have been moved online to great effect. What happens online is similar to what happened in-person but attendance has exploded; this is true for professional development seminars and meetings of professional networks, Jewish learning, Hillel Shabbat programs and services, synagogue Shabbat programs and services, Back to School nights and more. Meeting online has eliminated the need to walk home by oneself at night, find babysitting or fight traffic. Personal relationships are missing some depth but more people are connecting to the opportunity; “perhaps,” Rabbi Asher Sossonko wondered, “when we are challenged most we return to our innermost essence... It pulls us to rekindle our fiery connection with God.” Community and tradition are grounding many of us.

In other cases, the program itself has changed. Meeting on the internet offers rich opportunities to make learning and experiences more intricate, engaging and impactful. For the High Holidays, synagogue leaders layered visual art with images of congregants with words of liturgy. The static (if beautiful) site of a synagogue was overtaken by the dynamic nature of the screen. School curricula were made richer through visits from world-class scientists and artists whose participation would once have been cost-prohibitive but became accessible through a screen. At schools, events that allowed only local families to participate became accessible to family members throughout the world, with grandparents and others joining siddur ceremonies. Hillels experienced the same phenomenon, Zoom squares filled with parents and students together for Friday night gatherings. Northwestern Hillel will continue to use its Friday night cameras even when large gatherings return, intending to attract parents and students abroad and other stakeholders, expanding their Shabbat community.

BBYO, OneTable, Moishe House and Hillel moved immediately to build web platforms that allowed them to recreate their work in the virtual space and seize the opportunities offered by the internet. Through BBYO On Demand, OneTable Live, the Moishe House Living Room and Hillel at Home they redesigned the way that their work happens, blending elevated content from their national organizations with their primary organizational design principles (participant leadership, relationships and a participant-led encounter with Jewish tradition). Maya Zucker, International N'siah (president of BBG), described how powerful Shabbat on the BBYO platform became: “Shabbat was this really special moment that the movement got to feel together. We all sort of acknowledged that we were entering a weird time, and going through it together. ... We had our song leaders leading and doing Shabbat Shira, we were doing Havdallahs, we were doing Kabbalat Shabbat. You would see every generation, you would see parents, you would see advisors, you would see BBYO staff and teens. ... Teens so felt in the community, felt so connected through those moments.” More than that, the initiative served as a leadership project during a time when so much of the teens’ self-led activity was canceled. This gave the teens a differently meaningful project and a role to play in a pandemic response. Maya continued, “We had a big flood of teens who were willing to step up and raise their hand to do the back end, to make sure that Zoom links are in the right places, that we were constantly scheduling events, working with staff to make sure that the content that we were putting out was what teens were interested in ... That in itself was really incredible because the pandemic had taken away loads of in person conventions from teens, and instead of being, ‘Dang, the world sucks right now,’ we said, ‘Okay, but what are we going to do with it?’”



OneTable also leaned into the grassroots nature of their work and the democratic nature of the internet with two projects. The Great Jewish Food Fest, a collaboration of more than 50 community partners, gathered Jewish food opportunities from around the world into one location then shared that URL across the internet, aiming to reach audiences broadly. Herefor.com, supported by the Jewish Community Response and Impact Fund and created in collaboration with more than 40 partners, did the same with the High Holidays, matching interested people with organizational and grassroots observances and celebrations during the months of Elul and Tishre.

All of these platforms demonstrate the power of meeting in a Zoom room not just nationally but internationally, of building true Jewish community across time zones and of the powerful but simple act of aggregating engagement opportunities into one virtual location, all rooted in an organization's culture and in Jewish tradition. It is hard to imagine going back.

“ All the windows in Zoom are square ... It's our responsibility as artists to break the Zoom wall, to break the squares. To figure out how we can interact with each other and have life in this interaction.

Ronit Muszkatblit, Senior Director of Arts + Culture + LABA: A Laboratory for Jewish Culture, 14th St Y

” Our hope was for 35 students to register for online learning. In 12 hours, there were over 125 people registered. We have over 25% of the freshman class doing Jewish learning, all over Zoom.

Donna Schwartz, Executive Director, Hillel at the University of Delaware

JEWSH SUMMER CAMP FOR ADULTS

As Covid-19 disrupted plans for in-person Camp Nai Nai this year, necessity became the mother of invention. We had the chance to once again reimagine Jewish Summer Camp for young adults! We set out to devise how to create real-life Jewish immersive experiences using virtual platforms.

EXPEDITION NAI
Without the limitations of in-person logistics and geography, we were able to extend the reach of Nai to people all over the globe with the world's largest Global Color War! Players signed up in teams of 1-5 people to compete over the course of a month for epic cash prizes. Each week featured a new set of challenges, virtual play-shops and flagpole meetings.

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|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 836 PLAYERS | 324 TEAMS | 29 COUNTRIES | 21 CITIES | 30 AVG. AGE |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|

53% PRACTICED A JEWISH RITUAL IN A NEW WAY

Challenges were designed to make people laugh, learn something new, engage with their Judaism, and feel more connected to one another.

87% LEARNED SOMETHING NEW

Check out the highlight reel from the first Expedition Nai [here!](#)

DIY EXPEDITION NAI TOOLKIT

We created a downloadable DIY Expedition Nai Toolkit to allow anyone, anywhere in the world, to create their own Expedition Nai game for their friends, family, and community. The toolkit is available in English, Russian, and Spanish.

JUBILEATION

"PARTICIPATING IN EXPEDITION NAI HAS BEEN A FUN WAY TO RECONNECT WITH JUDAISM! I'VE REALLY ENJOYED LEARNING MORE ABOUT JEWISH TRADITIONS AND CULTURE AND GETTING A CHANCE TO SPEND TIME WITH JEWISH COMMUNITY VIRTUALLY DURING THE LOCKDOWN!"

- JEWELATION: Counting the Days Celebrating Shabbat Participant

According to the Atlantic 57 Study, "Unlocking the Future of Jewish Engagement," Jewish young adults describe themselves as "intellectually curious," a "lifelong learner," and "funny." While many report feeling nostalgic for certain aspects of their Jewish upbringing, they also report being currently removed from it. Top two reasons - "It is not relevant to my life right now" and "I do not feel that I know enough about being Jewish." We set out to create programs that address these feelings and create a gamified framework for Jewish engagement.

EXPEDITION FOR A CAUSE
AUGUST 2020
Expedition for a Cause is the second iteration of Expedition Nai, now with a focus on **Tikkun Olam**. In this game, Jewish young adults select a charity to play for and are matched with new like-minded friends to work together as a team over the course of one week to perform acts of kindness, learn new skills, discover hidden talents, and connect with their Jewish roots.

EXPEDITION LOVE IN THE SUKKAH
OCTOBER 2020
Designed especially for Jewish young adults who are single, Expedition Love in the Sukkah will be a week-long game taking place during Sukkot, in partnership with ConaCush in a global Facebook group for Jewish singles. This Expedition will harness Sukkot themes such as hospitality, openness, and celebration of harvest, matching individuals to a new partner every day to complete fun assignments and maybe meet their match!

EXPEDITION MAKER
DECEMBER 2020
Presented by Studio Nai, this Reality TV style competition will allow all Jewish young adults with a knack for DIY projects to get involved through an open call for project submissions. The most creative applicants will be selected for the final 'cast' of makers who will be assigned Expedition challenges with Jewish cultural themes and ultimately compete in a live-broadcast Maker Finale.

JUNE 2020 STUDIO NAI METRICS:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| FACEBOOK REACH | 20,788 PEOPLE |
| YOUTUBE VIEWS | 603 |

We launched **Studio Nai** - a new YouTube channel where we release weekly sketch comedy videos designed to make young adults feel connected to the Jewish community, Camp Nai, and each other. By combining Jewish cultural references with the zeitgeist of the day, we hope to attract and engage a new segment of the population that was not previously involved with our in-person programming.

SN STUDIO NAI

Throughout 2020 Camp Nai is evolving and experimenting with new models of engagement and innovative ways to create immersive experiences through virtual tools. We are excited to take the most successful elements of these experimental programs into 2021 even as we bring back in-person gatherings.

MOISE HOUSE Inspiring Jewish Homes



We serve the whole person. Typically, Jewish education and engagement have been seen as activities focused on absorbing Jewish content or developing one's Jewish self or identity as a Jewish family. They have not frequently been seen as activities that are intended deliberately to support the emotional wellbeing or resiliency of individuals and families, even if that support is a byproduct of the work. But COVID has brought out the fundamental truth that we are all integrated people, our socio-emotional needs fed in many ways, including in Jewish institutions and communities and by Jewish learning and engagement. During COVID, this has become acute. The PJ Library response to COVID focused first on adapting their programming to being online. About six weeks into the shelter-in-place orders, PJ Library lead professionals (at the Harold Grinspoon Foundation) called all 200 North American community-based professionals to check in. Local professionals then adopted the practice, calling their constituents to check in. In doing so, PJ Library professionals realized that their audience needed something different: moments of connection, real support and opportunity to share their anxieties and feel less isolation. They turned from online programs to other core strategies, to one-on-one and small group connections, ongoing check-ins and parent education. If their work is focused on Jewish ritual, it now has a new context: the importance of creating grounded moments during a crisis. The strategies are not radically different from pre-COVID, but the frame is expanded or shifted.

Comprehensive check-ins, or personal phone calls to every person associated with the organization, every student, or member, or former member, or person who ever participated, were a commonly used initiative. Staff or volunteers often used a script focused on asking how they person was doing, but asking in enough different ways that they were able to go beyond a standard answer. Michael Simon (Northwestern Hillel) explained that they decided, "Let's break up the list. Every single student on this list is going to be contacted and not just with a like, 'where are you right now?' But with 'Hi, we at Hillel, we love you. We miss you. We want to know where you are. We want to know if you need anything for Passover, and we're just checking in.'" They weren't just doing research on students' whereabouts, though that was a nice side outcome. They were able to really connect with students. Michael continued, "The feedback was uniformly positive. We didn't get the, 'You're creeping us out vibe' that you sometimes get when you reach out. And I think it was because there was a real sense of breakage and disconnection. And we became and we continue to be a familiar face for the campus."

In the case of Jewish day schools, this time has brought out a fundamental truth about Jewish education that was not transparent enough before COVID, that "Jewish day schools are a place that makes the whole child, not just that seek academic achievement," in the words of Paul Bernstein (Prizmah). The online medium can be transactional, but Jewish day schools have refused to sacrifice the kind of teaching and learning that they embody. Chicago Jewish Day School made a commitment immediately to continue their emphasis on "active, experiential learning," even in a challenging environment. "Do everything you can to translate that to Zoom," they suggested to teachers. "Don't all of a sudden become a frontal teacher." With significant commitment from their director of information technology and lead administrators, who immersed themselves in global conversations among teachers about how to translate socio-emotional and activity-based learning to virtual spaces, they were able to keep the ethos of the school, "to take a class that's online and get the kids learning together" (Judy Finkelstein-Taff). This kind of teaching is exactly about nurturing children's confidence and helping them to be resilient, become strong problem solvers and believe in themselves, all important coping skills during and beyond the pandemic.

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We are privileged to be the implementing partner for PJ Library throughout most of the state of Oregon. Many of the communities we oversee are rural and almost all were affected by the historical straight line wind event and wildfires in the fall. Our staff team personally called every one of our PJ Library families to wish them happy holidays and to check in on them, asking, “Does your family need anything? How have you been affected by the fires?” From these calls, we were able to provide information and resources surrounding emergency funding, aid and how to rebuild their families’ PJ Libraries.

Michelle Koplan, Executive Director, B'nai B'rith Camp (Oregon)



If I could pick one of the behaviors to carry on it would be, adapt boldly. That we will be less afraid of risk taking and flopping than we've been in the past. ... The fear of disappointing our lay leaders and not succeeding at the bulk of what we do should go away.

Mark Shapiro, Samson Family Jewish Community Center, Milwaukee

We take risks together.

There is no pandemic playbook. Fundamentally, what characterizes this as a complicated time is how much we don't know: what will work, what will be, what to do. In normal times, we give expected outcomes and outputs to our financial stakeholders and they hold us accountable for them. In this environment, we work with no accountability framework, no sense of what we are to produce, but we still hold ourselves accountable for our mission.

That formula amounts to enormous risk. Every day, we have to move forward. How else can we make an impact if we do not try, despite the potential for failure?

That capacity for taking risks can be broken down into specific leadership characteristics.

Afraid? Jump in anyway. When we take risks in Jewish life (and maybe in non-profit life generally), it can feel as though we're betting the store, that our organization's future funding and survival are predicated on our current success, or even that the Jewish people depend on our survival. COVID has reversed that sense. Now, we try new projects without being afraid that our broader institutions will fail because of one specific programmatic failure. Organization after organization reported moving quickly and steadily—still smartly, still strategically—into projects without having all (or even most) of the answers to unknowns.

Indeed, sometimes during the past six months, that has led to failures. Congregation Or Ami (Calabasas, California) has launched a range of new initiatives over the past months. One of these, a day-long youth event, "flopped." However, there are "no repercussions, no beating ourselves up" according to Rabbi Paul Kipnes. "We learn from it," he says, "and move on." This failure is in the context of categorical successes in other areas, precisely because the congregation is trying many new things. We are all addressing so much, trying to move so quickly, trying to learn and innovate so rapidly, that risking failure is necessary to allow true freedom to experiment.

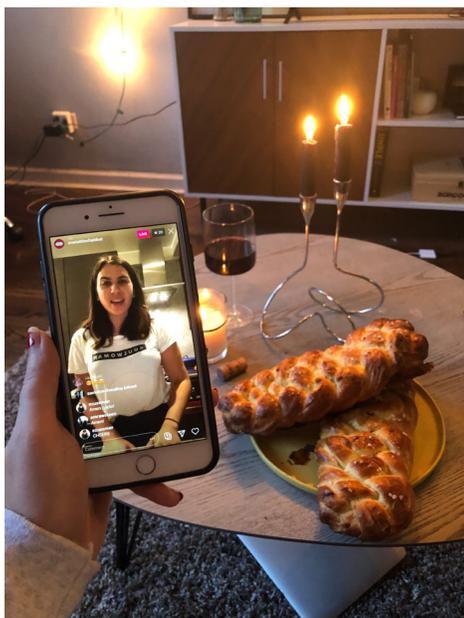
The biggest challenge was just comfort with risk. ... We built the program without ... fully vetted ideas and just had to kind of live with the inherent risk in that. And ... we knew that we had some but not all of the funding and we launched the summer pilot with the faith that if we built something meaningful, if young people showed up, if we could demonstrate that we were meeting pressing needs, the funding would follow.

”



Flexibility allows us to change course when we need to, using what we learn as we experiment. It acknowledges that we don't and can't know what life will look like and we have to find new solutions that work with the assets and opportunities we have now. Schools have been stereotyped as hard-to-change institutions with strong cultures, but several school leaders observed that the pandemic created a moment for them to be "out of the box and creative," moving away from a "this is the way we do things approach." (Helena Levine, Donna Klein Academy) In fact, the circumstances demanded that every school change its systems, from curriculum development to teacher supervision to enrollment, and break with traditions that wouldn't work in the new environment. In the end, innovation hasn't just occurred in several Jewish day schools, but throughout North America. Similarly, human service agencies needed to work overnight to develop new systems to replace the in-person approaches they have historically taken to support the vulnerable. "They needed to purchase HIPAA compliant (web) platforms to be able to continue to provide mental health services, or vocational support services; they needed to rethink how food pantries worked, how their transportation programs worked, how their volunteer and elder care programs worked," explained Reuben Rotman (Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies).

Countless congregations demonstrated significant flexibility in following new responsa during the past few months, creating new ways of worshiping (online) that would previously have seemed anathema, contrary to their commitments to Jewish law or their sense of what prayer should be. Some congregations chose not to broadcast during holidays and on Shabbat, and so other kinds of observances also emerged. Calendars saw online holiday celebrations beginning just after Havdalah. Some communities came together outside, distanced and without singing. Shofars were blown in parking lots, on street corners and in parks. In a radically different example, Jewish Federations have, to date, allocated an additional \$125 million over and above their typical annual grantmaking to address community needs emerging from the pandemic. These funds were amassed through conversations with donors to the annual campaign and other annual funds, and to various endowed funds. Everyone realized that the rainy day is here—flexibility was needed for the greatest impact, and that meant reprioritizing and contributing differently.



Our communities are open to adaptations, to innovations, to considering how to make something relevant. Since it isn't possible to gather in person, they've explored ways to use technology on Shabbat. Even if it isn't something that they've done before, what's most important is that they are a community, and they're looking for ways to make that work now. ”

Tresa Grauer, PhD, Vice President for Thriving Communities, Reconstructing Judaism



Agility and Resiliency If flexibility is about shifting expectations, agility is about shifting strategy, and resiliency is about recovering and reassessing. What happens after a failure? Do organizational leaders dwell on the aftermath or move forward and continue to be inventive? Agility (shifting strategies quickly and without complexity) and resiliency (recovering quickly) demand “a mindset of abundance,” as Rabbi Esther Lederman (Union for Reform Judaism) advises, a sense of possibility and positivity. Ben Cohen, BBYO’s Grand Aleph Godol (president of AZA), shared that he struggled through BBYO’s changes, such as the loss of programs and the loss of staff. He started to ask out loud, “What’s a pandemic? BBYO pushed through world wars, and BBYO pushed through and supported the Civil Rights Movement. What’s a pandemic compared to everything that we’ve pushed through so far?” That has gotten him through the challenges.

“The way OneTable started, it was all about building community and connection. The minimum number of guests at any dinner was five. We changed it to one. And then immediately again, within a week, created a whole new set of resources called **Shabbat Alone Together**, including a solo Shabbat guide. For people who are really by themselves, or feeling by themselves—how can you be alone without being lonely? We’ve had close to 12,000 dinners since March, 1,200 of which have been solo Shabbat dinners.

Aliza Kline, Co-Founder and CEO, OneTable

Determination Even while circumstances shifted around us and personal responsibilities increased, organizational leaders retained an intense sense of focus and mission. “How do you pivot,” Mimi Kravetz (Hillel International) asked “when workload goes up and resources—including staff—go down?” For many, Sunday is now a full workday, and organizational leaders described this period as one of the most (or the most) intense of their professional lives. Leaders across organizations have found the answer in doubling down and digging deep, settling into a firm purpose and being dogged about fulfilling and celebrating their mission. With tenacity and creativity on the part of their distribution team, PJ Library books continue to arrive in homes despite closures of printers in Asia and an “assault on the post office,” (Meredith Lewis). Moreover, the book calendar continues to be planned, with new books in development. Meredith describes, “You’re trying to prevent anything from coming into your house, you wipe down your groceries, but your PJ books can still come in. ... I’m working on a Hanukkah book for 2022 and I’m thinking about, ‘Is it okay to show guests?’ ‘What is it going to be like?’ But I also still have to think about Hanukkah 2022.” In a clear example of the mission feeding motivation, Adam Shapiro (Golda Och Academy) describes a



situation that should be untenable, but the dedication of his faculty and the joy of his students triumph: “I look at my amazing faculty, my dedicated, incredible faculty, who with the exception of a small handful that have significant medical issues came back to teach, wearing their masks, wearing their microphones. I get blown away by that. And the students have these amazing eyes that are just like, ‘Thank you for letting us in, for letting us be here with our friends.’ That’s what drives all of us. That’s what drives me.”

“ Our objective is to rise to the top, to be the best, to do the most that we could. It was exhausting, it was difficult, it wasn’t easy, but we really pushed ourselves and each other because we knew this is what we believed in, and this is what we stood for. ...

Leah Shemtov, Director, Gan Yeladim Early Childhood Center (Stamford, Connecticut)





We trust, together.

Fundamentally, what has allowed organizational leaders to take risks has been trust, at all levels and among all sets of stakeholders. Organizational leaders can move readily, quickly and without fear because their stakeholders have assured them that there will not be repercussions for their actions.

Trust from Financial Supporters and Board Members Board members have been as equally determined as their professional partners. In the interest of more deeply achieving their missions, they gave professional leaders permission to use reserves, to make quick decisions without full input and, generally, to experiment widely. Funders—foundations and individual donors—often offered similar support and even free rein, giving organizations access to funds promised in the future and lifting or shifting established metrics. They sent the message, “We’re in this with you,” often offering increased funds as organizations got their bearings and developed new strategies. In another example of deep trust, across Jewish communal life, members and constituents who are in medical and bio-research fields gave vital guidance to their organizations, helping engender faith in safe operations and creating a new kind of interdependent relationship between volunteers and the organizations.

In the healthiest situations, this trust and faith existed even in contentious conversations about how to proceed when coming out of strict shelter-in-place orders. When disagreements emerged about how and when to reopen buildings and relaunch activities, in organizations with deep trust the board members, funders and stakeholders of the minority opinion deferred to and believed in the ultimate decision. They demonstrated faith in professional leadership. Tremendous freedom to act nimbly, to pivot, came from this.

We haven’t gotten everything right. We’ve made a mistake here or there, but the board trusts us. They are not in the weeds on operational decisions. They recognized that we need to make really quick decisions and they have empowered us to do that without checking in every step of the way.

Zack Bodner, President and CEO, Oshman Family Jewish Community Center (Palo Alto, California)





Trust between Supervisors and Staff Supervisors trusted staff to run with things, to just do, and staff moved forward without asking about things they otherwise might have. In an environment where everyone was at home, sometimes inaccessible and juggling multiple responsibilities, this was imperative to success. Generally, none of these strategies resulted in disaster. Many organizational CEOs noted that they are not the experts on their employees' work. This was the time to give employees freedom, to recognize their expertise and support their decisions. "These aren't fancy ideas," Jerry Rubin (Jewish Vocational Services of Boston) acknowledged, "but they're fundamental truths."

“What does it really mean to get work done? ... How much can we really trust you to be a part of the organization and to move the organization forward? I've found that very, very few people take advantage of the organization. ... You say to people, this is what we need from you. Help us to move it forward. And they give you so much more when you show them the respect and the trust.”

Peter Blair, CEO, Sandra & Leon Levine Jewish Community Center (Charlotte, North Carolina)

Trust across Teams Teams leaned in. Egos were set aside, with projects and tasks creating alliances across organizations and colleagues working together beyond department lines for the good of the people they served. Teams built organizational habits that reflected their cultures: At the Foundation for Jewish Camp, for example, creative online tools dominate their conversations. "We play a lot," Julie Finkelstein said. In Moishe House, the staff celebrated and took advantage of the fact that suddenly, staff in cities around the world were meeting more, with frequent staff meetings and more cross-city projects. Tiffany Harris explained, "We get in little pods during these meetings. You find yourself in a virtual room with someone you might never have the chance to have a discussion with because they're in an office across the globe somewhere, or because they're in a role that just doesn't interface with yours. It's been an incredible opportunity to connect and collaborate across the team in ways that we hadn't before." They are expanding their telecommunication and collaborative project management resources to feed these interdepartmental connections.

Trust across Organizations Organizations that might have seen each other as competitors began to work together, creating real interdependency.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- Teen organizations "took a hit," and came to see that they "have to do this together," as Ian Kandel (BBYO) described, with their collective power focused on how to lift the "full tides of the landscape of Jewish teens."



- Led by Rabbis Evon Yakar and Alan Rabishaw, synagogues in the Lake Tahoe region and Sacramento Valley of California went from having episodic cooperative programming to ongoing collaborations. The two rabbis even co-delivered a sermon during the High Holidays (and interviewed together for this project).
- The seven communities of the Jewish Emergent Network created one worship opportunity for *Simchat Torah* this year. While they had been learning from and with each other about their similar work for years, “they had never done anything like collaborative worship before,” Jessica Emerson McCormick explained (Jewish Emergent Network). She commented, “And that is only possible because of COVID.”
- Bornblum Jewish Community School (Memphis) created a rich educational program online, increasing enrollment and creating demand outside the student population for wider community participation in their offerings.
- Los Angeles synagogues integrated their study programs into one website (“Jew It At Home”), co-listing opportunities as equal and available to any Angelenos as well as anyone around the world.
- Summer brought additional integration: The Jewish Federation, JCC and synagogues in Rochester came together to build and implement an at-home/ online program for children and families, and the eighteen JCCs in the New York City region integrated their camp programs into one unified online opportunity. Alan Scher (14th St Y) observed, “For all of these different JCCs, many of whom in the camping marketplace are competitors, to come together to offer one platform. It’s incredible, and a real testament to ingenuity and collaboration in this moment.” Many of them received only a fraction of their pre-COVID income, but they set aside the revenue opportunity for their vision of greater success, together.

“ This is about the people of Israel and about providing the best quality engagement in Jewish life for all of our communities, not about a bottom line membership concern in a budget.

Rabbi Evon Yakar, North Tahoe Hebrew Congregation and Temple Bat Yam

Cross-organizational connections also grew as organizational leaders sought a supportive context in which to learn. Marisa Kaiser (Temple Sinai) observed, “I’ve been an educator for 20 years and I’ve never seen our networks this active.” WhatsApp groups and Zoom meetings of those doing similar work across communities exploded.

Doron Krakow (JCC Association) argues that this cross-organizational collaboration is at the heart of our past work but also of our future: “Our central focus can’t simply be about enduring the crisis as institutions or organizations. It has to be about how we use this time to come together across our communities and how, as dedicated partners, we can evolve stronger Jewish communities and more vibrant Jewish lives.” This aptly describes the work we have done and is a prescription for the future.

Federation has created a health crisis management team and the JCC participates in it. Anyone who is a partner or associated with the federation in any way. It's been an amazing process. ... It's really brought the community together. We do some work. But at the same time, we laugh and ... we just enjoy one another. But it is a think tank and there is a whole group of people that can give advice. It's allowed us to break down barriers and see that all of us see ourselves as doing this for the greater good.

Artie Allen, CEO, Aaron Family Jewish Community Center (Dallas, Texas)

Trust within National Networks This kind of cross-organizational learning also manifested at the national level, where national headquarters created critical resources and spaces for learning and reflection for their constituencies. Time and again in conversation, organizational leaders emphasized the support they received from their national movement as being pivotal to their success during these months.

Formally, these national organizations built spaces for ongoing networking and camaraderie for cohorts of their own professionals, countless professional cohorts coming together, each national network convening colleagues by role in up to dozens of smaller networks within each movement or system. The national networks continuously surveyed their members, aggregating data about financial health, the impact of the shelter-in-place orders, the status of reopening and other topics; JCC Association, for example, surveyed its organizations monthly, gathering data regarding staffing, finances, donations, membership, programming, participation and more. The meetings and data became central to members' understanding of the context of their own work, critical to their excelling during this time and useful to the evolving work across the Jewish communal networks.

Trust among National Organizations CEOs and other professionals have also been gathering regularly across organizations and movements: almost 40 organizations in an "Israel Travel Alliance," another 20 in an "engagement roundtable," and 40 others focused on mental health and wellness. Organizations meet to share information but, in a significant paradigm shift, they also meet to advance work, taking responsibility for the execution of projects led by an organization that isn't their own. The Israel Travel Alliance has been co-led by three organizations (Birthright Israel, Honeymoon Israel and Momentum) alongside JFNA, and organizations have taken on collaborative work prioritized by the Alliance in order to generate greater engagement in Israel experiences. In another example, leadership across religious movements worked together to consult medical and security experts to provide shared guidance on gathering for synagogue leaders in time for the High Holidays. Repair the World convened 40 organizations to help them launch their service fellowship ("Serve the Moment"), putting the organizations inside of decisions about the initiative that Repair the World would typically make independently. Avodah created a guide to racial justice work for Jewish organizations, recognizing that they had expertise that was relevant at a challenging time. JFNA worked in spring 2020 to help not only Jewish Federations but all Jewish organizations (and, if applicable, their local secular partners) access government small business (PPP) loans, a project that organizational leaders praised repeatedly. In addition, JFNA provided access to low-cost PPE to partner agencies as well as resources for scenario planning. Even as national organizations have gained



strength within their movements, they have also strengthened their position as partners in an interdependent collective. Any organization's success is the community's success and the community benefits from many points of strength.

“ ... The PPE vendors were only working with hospitals, and the access to masks and gloves and Clorox wipes and hand sanitizer ... it was like a black market. We had a serious crisis, because we have isolated, frail older adults who live at home alone, who basically are homebound, who get home care from our agencies. We're sending a home care worker in, the home care worker is vulnerable, the client is vulnerable, nobody has protection, and the same dynamic was happening in Jewish nursing homes and assisted living facilities. We joined together with JFNA and with the Association of Jewish Aging Services, which supports Jewish nursing homes and senior living communities, and with Kahal Abroad, a group that supports college students while on study abroad programs, who were able to engage students as volunteers, we joined together and we developed an effort to source PPE to purchase in large bulk quantities, and to use fraternity brothers around the country from Jewish fraternities to help with delivery. The story was phenomenal; within about four weeks we secured over \$2 million worth of PPE and had it in the hands of the agencies in our network and probably another \$2 million plus to the agencies in the Jewish senior living network. Now the model has morphed even further and it is supporting all Jewish non-profits through the Jewish Together platform.

Reuben Rotman, President and CEO, Network of Jewish Human Service Agencies



Trust across Boundaries Through all of this, new alliances were made, perhaps none more surprising and significant than new collegial connections between longtime Jewish educators and human service practitioners. As COVID changes the way we all live and puts new concerns before us, Jewish educators have realized that they need access to new competencies. Jill Hulnick explained that BBYO trained “every single teen-facing professional” as well as a large cohort of local advisors in mental health first aid this past summer. Susan Wachsstock (The Jewish Education Project) observed, “Jewish educators are on the front line of the mental health and wellness of our children and their families... COVID has highlighted the grey area in terms of children’s development and health between education and social service.” In another example, JCC Association and Institute for Jewish Spirituality have partnered to train a cohort of 25 JCC professionals in Jewish mindfulness and resiliency training, which will enable them each to lead a cohort at their own JCC or camp. This blurring of historic boundaries--educators and clinicians, community organizers and clergy—is leading to a new kind of trust.

Some suggested that this belief in each other had to be present prior to COVID. Constituents needed to trust their organizations in order to turn to them for support. Organizational leaders needed to believe in each other and the potential of their partnership in order to depend on each other during crisis. While COVID was an accelerant for many negative forces in society and in Jewish life, it was also an accelerant for the positive: Those who were inclined to trust, or who once worked together generatively, had something to build on.

“ People trust Honeymoon Israel. It’s an immense responsibility because we know that for many people, we are the first, and possibly only, Jewish organization that they are associated with as a couple. Thank goodness we have had five years to build and support communities across the country, when community is what’s most needed right now.

Rachel Zieleniec, Chief Program Officer, Honeymoon Israel





We face unresolved challenges, together.

Jewish organizations have accomplished a tremendous amount since Purim, but Jewish communal life faces unresolved challenges that must be addressed as we find our way forward..

Equity and Inclusion Early in the crisis, it seemed that Jewish organizations and work dedicated to promoting the meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups--Jews of color, LGBTQ+ Jews and Jews with disabilities—would lose ground during the pandemic. How could this work remain on to-do lists, when everyone was suffering? Dori Frumin Kirshner (Matan) was afraid to approach new donors for support, as much as it was needed during the pandemic. Would they be interested in supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities in Jewish education when there were so many seemingly more pressing needs? Idit Klein (Keshet) reported that a number of organizations canceled Keshet trainings in the spring. The pandemic has not impacted everyone in Jewish community equally; equity issues in Jewish life, as in society more broadly, have been exacerbated during COVID.

But the world exploded in late spring and through the summer as several incidents, some violent, focused global attention on issues of racial injustice. Lindsey Newman (Be'chol Lashon) experienced responding to global protests and Jewish organizations' requests for their expertise as "drinking from a fire hose." Moreover, the shift to online programming has allowed these organizations to reach new audiences. LGBTQ+ teens, especially those whose parents would not have permitted them to attend an in-person Keshet Shabbaton, could join online. Be'chol Lashon could offer monthly online Kabbalat Shabbat services led by Jewish clergy and other spiritual leaders of color, giving them greater visibility than they could have had in person. People who feel uncomfortable entering Jewish institutions could do so more easily, anonymously, online. Idit Klein (Keshet) noted that when engaged in conversation, Jewish organizational leaders were able to prioritize inclusion and equity: "Over time, we saw that these conversations often led Jewish leaders back to a place of seeing that if they were going to lead in a way that aligned with their core values, then of course they needed to relate to LGBTQ equality work as a part of their core work."

Jewish communal efforts regarding inclusion, honoring and supporting difference and reaching out to those marginalized or otherwise suffering, are ongoing. While some children are well served by online learning, others are left out. Matan has created oversold webinars helping educators and policy-makers to learn and develop systems for supporting diverse learning needs. Jewish day schools have prioritized in-person learning (in part) so that students who benefit most from an in-person setting can participate. Still, many Jewish educational programs have not yet had the resources to develop ways of supporting this kind of diversity. Resources that families rely on to help them flourish--daycare, a healthy job market--have shrunk. With the need to create ways to fully welcome and include Jews of color and a profound Jewish communal interest in racial justice and equity, we soberly acknowledge that there is a lot of work ahead. Lindsey Newman suggested, "We want to frame the conversation as, 'We know this will be hard, but we know we can win.'"



Rabbi Esther Lederman (URJ) summarized this moment of inequity, in Jewish life and in America more broadly: “This isn’t just a moment about COVID. ... We’re broken right now, and in some ways COVID just really sort of put a light on all the dark places that were happening in America. ... If institutional survival is all we’re about, and it’s not about creating a whole and just world through those institutions, then I don’t want to just save the institutions. I want to make this world a whole better place for human beings. For Black Lives. For Trans Lives. For all of us. And I think institutions can help that. But only if we put our purpose at the center.” In that frame, growth seems likely.

The need is vast: of looking at and assessing the systems that make up the Jewish communal space, and making sure that those systems and those organizations are reflective of the true diversity that exists, as well as meeting the needs of Jews of color and diverse families.

Lindsey Newman, Director of Community Engagement, Be’chol Lashon

Unrelenting Work Determination contributes to organizational productivity but it also overwhelms. Boundaries are down between organizations, and also between work and home life. Shabbat is too short and without it, many would never take real time off. Mark Shapiro (Samson Family JCC, Milwaukee) noted, “One of the things we were seeing was the mental health challenges of all of our staff who were now never able to get away from work and also never able to get away from their kids and also never able to get away from their house and also never able to get away from being a school teacher. And we were watching as appropriately, people were melting down as they can, and should.” Many of those interviewed mentioned keeping heads above water—but only barely—as they managed their home and work responsibilities, both now expanded. Some interviews were conducted with children on laps the entire time. In addition, remote work has brought new complexities, requiring all kinds of new learning and adaptation. And while many are grateful to still be employed, they are working in organizations that have lost large cohorts of staff. Programs they had worked on diligently were halted or eliminated. In JCCs and some other agencies, the majority of staff have been furloughed or laid off. It is an effort to maintain positivity, to find determination and to focus on the mission.

Organizational leaders recognize these stressors, and many have taken action to address them. At Northwestern Hillel, employees were guaranteed fifteen months of job security to help assuage their (reasonable) feelings of job insecurity and to boost their morale; Executive Director Michael Simon wanted staff to hear the message that they are “critically important.” The Jewish Education Project closed their office for Sukkot, giving staff an extra vacation week, and Jewish Vocational Services of Boston gave staff an extra week off in December, a gift as well as something to look forward to. In March, Cheryl Cook (Avodah) worked immediately with her team to reevaluate the hours they were able realistically to work and set a policy that they could work fewer hours when needed for full pay during the pandemic.



Honeymoon Israel and Repair the World each have looked to research—Honeymoon Israel to the larger nonprofit and business fields, and Repair the World to trauma and resiliency research--to learn concrete practices to support employees right now. To ameliorate the challenge and share more, Leading Edge is creating, curating and sharing research on similar practices from which organizations are benefitting.

Can these kinds of efforts sustain staff through this crisis? What other options are there? Nearly all leaders echoed that the pandemic is the greatest challenge they have faced, during their five, ten, twenty or even forty years of working in the field. When will it end? How will we get to the finish line?

“ We’ve always invested significantly in creating a great place to work. Now more than ever, it really takes extra thought, intention and hard work. It’s at the heart of what we all do—every organization—because we are only as strong and supportive as those who sit around at our internal tables.

Rachel Zieleniec, Chief Program Officer, Honeymoon Israel

Challenged Agency Models While Jewish organizations have had many successes online and with relational engagement and physically-distanced programming, and we have the determination and creativity to adapt, our community infrastructure was not built for a physically-distanced society. Many Jewish organizations rely on program and membership revenue that depends on their physical plants operating at or at close to full capacity. While institutions have reopened, enrollment and engagement are down in some cases by dozens of percentage points. Buildings cannot always accommodate more, or safety dictates smaller audiences or constituents are reluctant to return. Some members and participants are at greater risk in any viral environment and cannot return.

JCCs and camps, two institutions whose financial models are at greatest risk in this environment, have been experimenting and planning extensively. Program models have begun to shift. JCCs have developed ways of facilitating physically-distanced exercise with seniors and packing meals for delivery. Camps are exploring ways of building closed environments where minimal external contact limits risk. Schools are adapting their budgets to offer greater tuition assistance. More programmatic experimentation and structural shifts are needed, for these and other institutions that are also dependent on program, tuition and membership revenue. What are the models that will carry us through the next few years and then into the post-COVID future? What does the transition from now until then look like? How do we care for employees and constituents until then? How do we maintain the levels of service needed? And how do we do this while making safe decisions about opening?

“ Our swim team is returning and that generates revenue. We also have some pool rentals, and that generates additional revenue. Now we’re looking at other opportunities. ... As we generate revenue, we will start bringing back additional staff and expand what we can offer. Right now, the J is functioning on a month to month budget. We’ve determined the maximum deficit that we can generate over the course of the year, as far as what we think we can manage over the long-term. And so we’ll see what happens. Our plan is to stay open. But if the governor were to come along and shut us down again, we wouldn’t be able to continue to pay employees the way we were able to in March, April, May and June.

Steve Albert, Executive Director, Mittleman Jewish Community Center and Portland Jewish Academy (Portland, Oregon)

There are still many older adults who just don’t feel comfortable doing teletherapy, they don’t really feel comfortable doing phone therapy. And those people are just waiting to be able to come into our offices and see people.

Danielle Hartman, President and CEO, Rales Jewish Family Service (Boca Raton, Florida)





We rise together.

In many ways, COVID was an “accelerant,” to quote several organizational leaders: Many and varied phenomena that are part of this time, from class inequity in general society to challenges to the affordability of Jewish life, were already well present in our day to day life and our Jewish communities. These are problems we were struggling with prior to COVID and they are exacerbated now. And with COVID we have more: the mass trauma and fear we are experiencing, the loss we need to process, the challenges in serving the vulnerable during this time.

In response, we will continue to invent and adapt, moving from the initial programmatic innovation and strategic redevelopment into larger questions that stem from this work: If we make opportunities available online, what is the role of local community? If we can meet only in micro-gatherings, a few people at a time (Moishe House is going to start experimenting with camping micro-pods--the Moishe House concept of residency, but translated to COVID), what happens to those not interested in such intensive community? “Who is in community,” Rabbi Lauren Henderson (Congregation Or Hadash, Atlanta) asked, “when geographic boundaries and distance have less of an impact on people’s ability to be part of something?” If counseling services get provided online through a national platform, what does it mean to be a local Jewish family service agency? Prosserman JCC in Toronto has already expanded their “virtual J” beyond Toronto and the Marcus JCC (Atlanta) is creating a book fair accessible by other JCCs; JCCs around the country are connecting their members and constituents to their programs. In this context, new questions about our strategies, structure and impact will emerge.

“ Can we fix High Holy Days? What was broken about the way that we do it? And what was broken about the way we were or were not able to reach the majority of Jews in this country? Can we fix it forever? Or learn how to be in a stance to iterate it forever, because of what we experienced this year? ”

Jessica Emerson McCormick, Director, Jewish Emergent Network

In response to these questions and to our new world, we will reinvent infrastructure, challenging the assumptions on which our institutions were built. In doing so, we will--according to organizational leaders--continue to operate following principles established since the outbreak: We will build into our communal DNA the capacity to reflect, experiment, fail, iterate and look toward the long-term.

Throughout the pandemic, our institutions have supported their constituents online, and where it is safe, some have started to re-open their doors. Despite the circumstances, despite the losses, we have striven to face our challenges from a place of strength, with interdependence, teamwork, creativity, action and growth.



Moving forward, we commit to working together, benefitting from our collective wisdom and innovation.

Together, we rise.

It's painful to see institutions that used to serve certain roles become outdated, or those institutions not survive this financial moment. There is pain there, or a feeling of loss. But I think that we have a model in Jewish experience and history that shows us that that's not the end of the story, that loss is not the end of the story, and that there's something else on the other side of that, that will help us evolve and adapt and transform into something beautiful, something new, something that will help sustain us for the next thousand years. ”

Lindsey Newman, Director of Community Engagement, Be'chol Lashon.





Thank you to the almost 70 people who shared their time and ideas with interviewers Jessica D. Katz and Dr. Daniel Adam Olson. All mistakes are our own.

Ronit Muszkatblit, Senior Director of Arts and Culture and LABA, 14th St Y

Alan Scher, Associate Executive Director, Programs, 14th Street Y

Jodi Bromberg, CEO, 18 Doors

Artie Allen, CEO, Aaron Family Jewish Community Center (Dallas, Texas)

Cheryl Cook, CEO, Avodah

Michelle Koplan, Executive Director, B'nai B'rith Camp (Oregon)

Ben Cohen, Grand Aleph Godol, BBYO

Maya Zucker, Anita M. Perlman International N'siah, BBYO

Ian Kandel, Vice President, Global Movement Strategy, BBYO

Jill Hulnick, Chief Impact Officer, BBYO

Lindsey Newman, Director of Community Engagement, Be'chol Lashon

Adam Weinstein, Executive Director, Berkshire Hills Eisenberg Camp

Elizabeth Sokolsky, Executive Director, Birthright Israel North America

Daniel Weiss, Head of School, Bornblum Jewish Community School

Rabbi Yakov Fleischmann, Director, Camp Stone

Estee Eisenberg Fleischmann, Director, Camp Stone

Judy Finkelstein-Taff, Head of School, Chicago Jewish Day School

Leah Finkelman, Engagement Manager, Teens and Camping, Combined Jewish Philanthropies

Rabbi Paul Kipnes, Rabbi, Congregation Or Ami (Calabasas, California)

Rabbi Lauren Henderson, Rabbi, Congregation Or Hadash (Atlanta, Georgia)

Helena Levine, Head of School, Donna Klein Jewish Academy (Palm Beach County, Florida)

Julie Finkelstein, Director of Leadership Development, Foundation for Jewish Camp

Leah Shemtov, Director, Gan Yeladim Early Childhood Center (Stamford, Connecticut)

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