

How Will Synagogues Reinvent Themselves? (Hint: It Won't Be with Zoom)¹

David Suissa ² • November 4, 2021

There's a difference between a phase and a trend. A phase comes and goes; a trend keeps growing.

This is the vexing and transcendent issue right now in the synagogue world: **Has COVID-19 triggered a phase or accelerated a trend?** We know the many effects of the pandemic, such as reduced attendance in sanctuaries, the exponential growth of online and a general preference for being outdoors. How permanent are those changes and how will they impact the future of synagogues?

Change is uncomfortable, but radical change is disruptive. It shakes you up. The disruption caused by the pandemic has shaken up synagogues. **Among the rabbis and leaders there's a general sense that synagogue life in America has been altered, perhaps permanently.**

The root of this disruption is maddeningly simple: A deadly and contagious virus has made a lot of people afraid of enclosed spaces. Combined with the hassle of wearing a mask while praying and other restrictions, we shouldn't be surprised if synagogue attendance has been in sharp decline. What started with a lockdown of synagogues in mid-2020 evolved into a gradual reopening for the High Holy Days in 2021. But despite the high vaccination rates among Jews, many people are still nervous about attending services.

For a synagogue world that has enshrined the brick-and-mortar model for well over a century, and has built revenue models around people showing up, the reluctance to enter a sanctuary represents a mini-earthquake.

It would be wrong to approach this challenge with the simplistic question: How do we save our Jewish buildings? A more appropriate question might be: **How do we save our Judaism?**

For most Jews, the decision to go to synagogue was never just about prayer. It came with a wonderful package — reconnecting with friends, hanging out at the Kiddush club, schmoozing during communal meals, bringing the kids, arranging and attending

life cycle events, going to High Holy Day services, and so on.

It is all those “extras” that bonded Jews to their congregations and made it easier to renew membership.

Seemingly overnight, COVID fears and restrictions have significantly lowered the perceived value of the synagogue experience. It's true that this trend was prevalent before COVID; much has been written in recent years about the need to revitalize the traditional synagogue model. But the pandemic has dramatically accelerated that trend.

In the non-Orthodox world, where technology is allowed during Shabbat and holidays, the magic of digital has come to the rescue, but as a double-edged sword. The extraordinary convenience of online services has increased virtual attendance, but it has also discouraged in-person attendance. It's hard to compete with the comfort of virtually attending services from your living room, especially when you tell yourself it's the safer route. **How many of these comfortable souls will return to synagogue even after COVID is officially behind us and they no longer need to pray with a mask?**

Much of this is a question of degree. If, for example, a sanctuary that usually has 500 attendees now only has one hundred (with hundreds more online), is that sustainable or even desirable? At what point does reduced attendance, and reduced memberships, become decisive issues that must be addressed? Put more bluntly, **at what point does a sanctuary become too empty, and a building become too big, for the people it is serving?**

In the Modern Orthodox world, because technology is not allowed on Shabbat and holidays, people are returning to sanctuaries, but others have gravitated to “backyard minyans,” which are more casual and intimate. How many of those comfortable souls will return indoors to a traditional membership model?

The Ultra-Orthodox or “black hat” segment is a different story. In that world, prayer inside a synagogue has always been central and immutable, pandemic or no pandemic. But while that segment has avoided disruption to its synagogue model (and lived with the risks and consequences), they represent a small minority.

¹ https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/341982/how-will-synagogues-reinvent-themselves-hint-it-wont-be-with-zoom/

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The vast majority of American synagogues are looking at an uncertain future; full of possibilities, yes, but also full of anxieties. Remarkably, what we took for granted only two years ago — people showing up at synagogues — has turned into a huge challenge.

There's a real risk that the more we live online, the more we will increase our communal isolation, the more we will get comfortable with it.

It would be wrong to approach this challenge with the simplistic question: How do we save our Jewish buildings? A more appropriate question might be: How do we save our Judaism?

First, the good news. We're going through a Golden Age of Jewish learning. Advances in digital technology have opened up an enormous educational vista for anyone with an iPhone. Just as the convenience of online has hampered in-person attendance, it also has led to arguably the greatest surge in Jewish learning in our history.

That can't be discounted. **The prevalence of digital technology**, as high as it is today, **will only grow with time.** But here's the problem: the same convenience that seduces users also seduces leaders. I've spoken to many rabbis who are in awe that they now reach people around the world. When your audience is unlimited around the globe, it's easy to forget your audience down the block.

But down the block is where communities live and breathe. You can reach millions online, but what good is that to the hundreds of families in your area who are still isolated?

It does feel like an impossible conundrum. If people are reluctant to congregate inside enclosed places, and prefer to experience services either on Zoom or outdoors, how can you bring them back to enjoy the delicious fruits of communal gatherings?

The first step is to make people feel safe without nourishing fear and paranoia. It's one thing to set proper COVID guidelines, it's another to go overboard and spook people. People who are fully vaccinated are attending live events all over the place. They can do the same with their synagogues.

We can address the issue of safety without losing sight of the big picture: **The soul of a community is defined by physical attendance.**

To encourage more people to show up, synagogues can also use this inflection point to **increase their value.** One approach is to **turn our houses of prayer into full-time community centers with a broader array of offerings.** In addition to what they usually offer, synagogues can do more to celebrate the whole Jewish buffet, from philosophy and history to poetry, arts, literature, music and film. These items represent different entry points to one's Jewish identity.

Practical programming around issues like health, money, careers and relationships also add value. Special programs can connect younger kids with the wisdom of grandparents. Charity work can be expanded to become more in-person and hands-on.

Prayer services themselves can be revitalized to make them more inspirational. Torah study can also be broadened. I know synagogues that will never teach Heschel, others that will never teach Soloveitchik, still others that will never teach Chassidut or Mizrahi scholarship. The days of narrow learning should be behind us.

In short, **synagogues will improve their odds of bringing back the crowds if they open up to new ideas and new thinking. To save their hardware, they must seek to revitalize their software.**

Of course it's quite possible that no matter what we do, the pandemic will lead to synagogues merging or closing, subleasing their space or reducing their overheads. But that kind of restructuring, however necessary, should not be a substitute for the creativity required to adapt to our new era.

That includes **taking advantage of "the great outdoors,"** which is now part of the new normal. More and more people are getting used to doing things in open air (especially in places like California). Synagogues must find communal activities they can host outdoors and in nature. That also builds community.

You might have noticed that I've refrained from offering any suggestions for online strategies. That's because virtually every synagogue is already doubling and tripling down on virtual technology. They don't need me to tell them about the magic of online. They've done such a good job many of us are nearing Zoom overdose.

Right now, it seems as if many synagogues are caught in a perfect storm: **Safety paranoia has led to online isolation which has led to communal decline.**

That decline includes loss of revenue and memberships. Most people are not willing to pay for anything online, because so much of it is already free. **Entering physical spaces, for obvious reasons, has a much higher perceived value.**

The good news is that what is good for revenue is also good for the soul. Human beings love to congregate. We love to gather with friends. We love the warmth and intimacy of community. We don't just love it, we need it. This need has only been magnified by a stubborn pandemic that has isolated too many people.

When synagogues were in lockdown and physical proximity was not an option, connecting online was a lifesaver. But now that the world is reopening, **we can't allow the virtual space to keep us isolated.**

Synagogues must use digital technology not as a final destination point but as a gateway to bring more people back together— in real physical spaces.

Jewish identity is only strengthened when people meet in person, either at an event, a prayer service or at a Shabbat table. It's crazy that one even needs to mention this. But it's a sign of how far we've gone down the virtual highway that we must remind ourselves that it's really important to meet — in person!

Every part of our lives – from work to play to socializing— is already consumed with virtual connections, and it's only accelerating. Have you seen Mark Zuckerberg's latest brainchild, the METaverse? He wants to create more “human connections” through, of course, “virtual” reality. Zuckerberg doesn't make a penny when people meet in person.

Synagogues can and should become the communal antidote to everything virtual; they should be the source, the last bastion, of real human connections.

The many congregations across America that are seeing attendance dwindle must reinvent themselves without settling for the fool's gold of virtual. The fact that it's become more difficult to fill synagogues is even more reason to rise to the challenge. Synagogues who succeed in this mission must share their success stories with others across the nation. Yes, we're all in this together.

The shared goal must be to secure the Jewish future by reconnecting more Jews to their communities; by enriching our physical spaces with the beauty and depth of our culture and tradition; and by **using the online experience to supplement and promote in-person events, not replace them.**

There's arguably no better in-person event than Judaism's great gift to humanity: The Friday night Shabbat meal. Every synagogue in America should make this communal meal (with no iPhones) the centerpiece of bringing people back to their physical spaces.

Beyond the hard reality that in-person attendance generates more revenue, the higher truth is that **gathering with friends and community brings a lot more joy and meaning to our lives than any experience we can have with Zoom or Facebook Live.**

This is not to diminish the value and power of the digital world. Online learning will continue to thrive, and digital will continue to play a huge role in our lives. Nothing will slow that runaway train. When the former head of Google muses that Siri and Alexa “might become your child's best friend,” you know we're in new territory. That is part of the problem: the virtual universe keeps seducing us

with more and more goodies. It's easy to get lost in it.

For better or worse, we're all creatures of habit. There's a real risk that the more we live online, the more we will increase our communal isolation, the more we will get comfortable with it. That is a line we ought never to cross—the line where we lose our taste for the delicious fruits of communal gatherings.

What kind of Jewish Golden Age will it be if many of us end up living it virtually?

When the Second Temple was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago, our religion went through another earthquake. Our most prized piece of real estate, the place that kept us together and connected to our Creator, went up in flames.

I can only imagine that in the wake of that disaster, it must have been difficult for our ancestors to see any hope. How could they? The concrete core of their tradition was ripped apart.

We overcame that destruction by being creative, resourceful and resilient, and by focusing not on real estate but on soul estate. We carried the holiness and rituals of the Temple with us throughout the Diaspora, in our homes, our Shabbat tables and in our houses of prayer and learning. We survived by staying connected, to our tradition and to one another.

The deadly COVID pandemic has shaken the concrete core of our modern temples. The rise of a miraculous technology that keeps people physically apart has further shaken our human connections.

In the midst of such disruption, it's hard to see the upside. But if our history is any guide, we always figure things out. If we've recovered from our last earthquake, we can recover from this one.

But it won't be by doubling down on virtual technology that keeps us physically isolated. It will be by imagining and creating human spaces as antidotes to virtual living; human spaces where Jews can safely gather to pray and learn Torah and celebrate and dance and flourish together — and even give each other real hugs.

If we give it our best, most creative and resourceful shot, we might even end up with a richer and more inspiring Judaism. And that will be a trend, not a phase.