



Shift Happens – Reframing Organizational Leadership to Survive Coronavirus

By Andrew Keene

Four weeks ago, I was in Tel Aviv for the Jewish Agency Board of Governors. That meeting represented the last major convening of the Jewish world in the pre-Corona era. In the subsequent weeks, every facet of our Jewish and secular world has changed at a pace previously unimaginable. Jewish organizations of every stripe have sprinted to adapt to this changing reality. The role of our institutions' maintenance and IT professionals has transformed overnight from being operationally important to mission-critical. This work should be celebrated. In times of crisis, the Jewish community has always responded profoundly.

But if you're waiting for the "high-sign" or the "green-light" to press the resume button on Jewish life as it was four weeks ago, you're missing the boat. The coronavirus is not a crisis that will be overcome like a natural disaster. The Jewish organizational landscape represented at the Jewish Agency meeting just a few weeks ago will simply not return to what it once was.

The effects of this virus will prove to be existential to organized Jewish life – it will relentlessly permeate through the very foundations of our organizations, calling into question how we deliver our mission, and challenging whether our mission is even relevant at all. Instead of waiting for the "return to normal," we need to lean into this once-in-a-generation opportunity to redefine normal, and young leaders need to be at the forefront of this change (and I don't mean just to explain how Facebook Live works).

There are four shifts happening in the world around us that I believe are especially relevant to this conversation. While many of our legacy Jewish organizations have found ways to avoid fully embracing these shifts, the coronavirus just eroded any remaining shred of insulation. These shifts are second nature for young people which is why we are better equipped to partner in this change process. The bottom line: organizations not prepared to invite a younger generation of leadership into both key lay and professional positions are tempting fate in this new reality. Over the next

month, I'll be diving into more detail on each of these shifts and how we need to reframe our thinking to emerge stronger as a Jewish community.

The most obvious of these shifts is that from "physical" to "virtual." This is not a new phenomenon for the Jewish world, but it has always been treated as an add-on service. Synagogues that have provided a live-stream have done so to augment the physical experience, not replace it. In the last few weeks, our homes have transformed into our own personal houses of worship, and clergy will need to fully embrace the fact that our living rooms can too be as holy as our sanctuaries and chapels. Possibly as result of the pervasive feeling of isolation, many more casually-observant Jews have found deep Jewish connection during this time by tuning into services and learning opportunities found on social media. The barrier to engage new people in Jewish life is at an all-time low, the demand perhaps at an all-time high.

But this shift from physical to virtual will force institutions to wrestle with existential questions. The Jewish people are a people that gather – in synagogues, in camps, at conferences, for lectures, and in *Batei Midrash*. For many organizations, these gatherings serve as a key revenue stream, often a profit center supporting other loss-leaders within the operation. It is most commendable that Jewish organizations are wholesale moving learning and ritual opportunities online, even migrating full conference experiences to Zoom, but this will inevitably shatter previous business models for nearly every type of organization.

As a reminder, this shift is not temporary. Now that anyone can access Jewish content emanating from every corner of the world, it will be nearly impossible to fully revert back to our physical-only pay-to-pray or pay-to-play model. The challenge will be for organizations to reinvent themselves such that virtual can eventually replace part, if not all, of physical-related revenue streams. This will require much deeper coordinated efforts than the Jewish world is accustomed to. Organizations will have to collaborate to optimize offerings, streamline experiences, and partner for impact. There simply is not a viable path for every organization to survive by sustaining the sheer volume of virtual offerings that we have seen in the last few weeks.

Similarly, our current funding and evaluation culture is almost exclusively predicated on Jewish life in the physical realm. We often use the outcomes of physical gatherings to demonstrate success to our funders. We create measurements of success that can only be achieved by offering a seminar or a conference or creating programming in someone's home, a restaurant, or urban space. We take pictures of smiling faces of people in large groups to demonstrate how our work is impacting people and communities. This is largely incompatible with a Jewish life that lives online. The imperative for creating meaningful Jewish engagement and sustaining vibrant Jewish community is no less important than it was last month, but we will need to reset expectations with our funders and partners so that these much larger ambitions can

be achieved virtually. And then we need to deliver on that promise and identify the new metrics to prove success and growth.

The process to get to this new reality will require the inputs and leadership of young people. As digital natives, young people do not have a predisposition to the trope that 'online' and 'community' are paradoxical. Young people intuitively understand how the almost infinite suite of digital tools available to us can fit together to create new and richer online experiences (at some point we will get bored of Zoom). Young people appreciate that despite the noise online, excellence can find a way to the top of people's feeds and minds in a way that more people are drawn in. Lastly, young people understand that a critical key driver of success requires creating a better "experience" not just a better "brand." This is the second major shift that will be covered in next week's article. To be continued...

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