

Lessons from Lockdown: How Jewish Organizations Have Pivoted During the Pandemic and What They'll Carry with Them into the Future

by Logan Bierman, Carrie Seleman, and Erin M. Wilson

Businesses of all kinds were hit hard by the pandemic. Directors and executives have had to learn to adapt quickly or risk shutting their doors permanently. This was an unprecedented process, one of trial and error, and many lessons were learned. We spoke with leaders from five different Jewish organizations - a federation, an advocacy organization, a bar association, a youth organization, and a synagogue - to find out more about their experiences over the last year, exploring how they shifted their programming, what silver linings of the pandemic they'll maintain once we re-enter normalcy, and what they were doing before the pandemic that will stay behind.

Who are you, what organization do you work for, and what's your position?

Rachel: Rachel Rapoport, Jewish United Fund, Director of the JUF Young Families department.

Meredith: Meredith Jacobs, Jewish Women International (JWI), CEO.

Helen: Helen Bloch, immediate Past President of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers.

Daniel: Daniel Warshawsky, United Synagogue Youth, Engagement Director for the three Midwest regions.

R' Gellman: Rabbi Scott Gellman of Temple Sholom of Chicago.

What are the demographics you serve?

Rachel: The JUF Young Families department focuses on families raising Jewish children ages 0-11 years old.

Meredith: We have a number of different audiences:

- Jewish women, young professionals (22-34), who make up our Young Women's Impact Network
- Jewish women over 40, who make up our Women's Impact Network and Women to Watch
- Jewish women in senior positions at Jewish communal organizations, who participate in our Jewish Communal Women's Leadership Project
- Additional cohorts of women and girls (i.e. moms and teens) through our financial literacy offerings
- Students on college campuses (SDT, ZBT, Hillel), who participate in our Change the Culture (healthy relationship and healthy masculinity) and financial literacy workshops
- Men who are staff or who serve as lay leaders in Jewish communal organizations through our Men As Allies program
- Domestic violence advocates, who work directly with survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) through the National Alliance to End Domestic Abuse
- Advocacy staff with faith-based anti-violence organizations through the Interfaith Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence
- Jewish clergy interested in working to end domestic violence through our Clergy Task Force to End Domestic Violence in the Jewish Community

Helen: First and foremost, we serve our members who are either licensed attorneys or law students. We also have Friends of Decalogue, who are non-attorneys who join the Society and receive all the benefits of membership except that they are not eligible to vote or serve on the Board of Managers or our Executive Board. Also, we serve the Jewish community at large and act in partnership with other bar associations and community organizations.

Daniel: I serve Jewish 5th-12th graders across 18 states and Canada, but I function mostly as the primary staff member for the students and families in the Chicago area.

R' Gellman: We serve the Reform Jewish community of Chicago, incredible people of all ages.

What was the primary type of programming you were doing pre-pandemic?

Rachel: We support the PJ Library program, providing monthly Jewish children's book subscriptions to over 9000 children in the Chicago area. In addition to the books, we create programming for families to engage in Jewish life beyond the books and build community. Before the pandemic, this ranged from large holiday celebrations at popular family destinations (Chanukah at the Chicago Children's Museum and Passover at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum) to smaller neighborhood meetup events to celebrate Shabbat to volunteer projects around the community. Our team of Parent Connectors hosted monthly gatherings in neighborhoods across Chicago to connect families and build Jewish community. Additionally, in the last year we introduced a family camp program specifically designed for families with children ages 0-5. Our first camp in partnership with JCC Camp Chi back in October 2019 sold out and was a huge success. Our second weekend in partnership with URJ OSRUI (also sold out) was canceled on March 13th as stay-at-home orders were issued.

Meredith: Prevention workshops to address violence against women and girls; community building and up skill workshops for young professionals to build a pipeline of women's leadership; as well as healthy masculinity and men as allies workshops for fraternity men and men in the Jewish community. Advocacy for legislation that supports survivors, works to end violence against women and girls, pay and workplace equity, addresses gun violence (especially the intersection of gun violence and domestic violence), abortion rights, and access to long-term economic security for women.

Helen: Prior to the pandemic Decalogue carried on as usual. In February we hosted one of our most prominent annual events of the year, our Judicial Reception, and we maintained our customary programming, such as bi-weekly CLEs, monthly socials, and educational programs for the community. Our committees met as usual. In fact, in January we had the inaugural meeting of our newly formed Womxn's Committee. We continued to conduct judicial evaluations as part of the Alliance of Bar Associations for judicial screening of candidates and we remained vigilant against anti-Semitism and hatred of others that seemed to be increasing in the community.

Daniel: Seasonal weekend conventions for teens in September, November, December, February, and April. We also hold day-programs every few months.

R' Gellman: Oh wow, all kinds of programming! Just a few highlights across the demographics:

- Gan Shalom with preschool and child/parent classes
- Beit Sefer Religious School from pre-K through high school
- Adult education classes multiple days a week
- Many affinity groups: Makom 20s/30s, Or Chadash (LGBTQ+Allies), It's Our Turn (50+). All here: <https://www.sholomchicago.org/community-groups>
- Social justice work and advocacy
- And of course, worship: Friday night service, Saturday morning minyan and Torah study, Monday morning minyan services, and multiple worship services during the week for religious school.

When the pandemic hit, what were your greatest challenges?

Rachel: Of course, a big challenge was shifting our offerings beyond events and gatherings - so much of our work was about bringing community together and helping people build relationships; however, the pandemic did not allow for these gatherings. We had to rethink how we bring people together, how we can show community while physically apart. A second challenge was figuring out what families needed - as children were home for school and parents stressed, needs of a family shifted from trying to find a sense of belonging to basic survival needs. We needed to find ways to be supportive of parents and families.

Meredith: Fundraising — not only for our largest, annual fundraiser, Women to Watch, but also with smaller Jewish women’s foundations or other funders, who would have considered funding our work but were pivoting to focus on COVID relief, or who had decided not to consider new grantees.

Helen: Determining quickly how to continue to serve our membership. Luckily, my law practice includes employment and business counseling. So I had to get up to speed quickly to assist my clients on transitioning into pandemic mode. Thus, I was keenly aware of issues that may impact our membership. Immediately I worked with our Foundation President Robert Matanky and our Executive Director to put a list of resources together that could be beneficial to our membership. Our Society and Foundation jointly sent out this list. Keep in mind that when the pandemic hit we were already approaching the end of our bar year. One of the things we did not know was whether our members had the financial resources to maintain their membership. We did not want anyone to drop their membership solely because of a job loss or loss of income. While Decalogue always had an unwritten rule that we will never turn away a qualified member solely for financial reasons, we needed to make this known to our members. We tailored our membership renewal notice to make it clear that folks should rejoin irrespective of financial ability to do so and to contact us privately if they needed to make payment arrangements. Contemporaneously, we turned to programming so that we could continue to offer benefits to our members so that they could see that their membership remained a valuable asset. Well before CLE became mandatory, Decalogue’s signature program had been providing CLEs to our members and the community at large. Quickly, we transitioned CLEs into Zoominars. This was especially important because in-person CLEs that had been scheduled by other organizations were cancelled and many attorneys were approaching the end of their reporting period; therefore, folks really needed the credit hours. On top of simply providing CLEs, we introduced new CLEs that had not been scheduled previously that focused on issues related to the pandemic; in the beginning of the pandemic, we were holding two CLEs a week! For instance, I, along with three of my fellow Decalogue colleagues who practiced in the employment arena, put on a joint CLE on employment issues with an emphasis on the pandemic. Some of our judicial members taught courses tailored to practicing during the pandemic.

Daniel: Finding a way to transition from a fully planned in-person convention to an online format in a matter of weeks. We went into lockdown about two weeks before our final convention of the year was to take place, and had to scramble to find the best online platform with which to conduct the programming. We also had to change some of the programs to fit the new online format. One of the biggest challenges was finding a secure way to conduct online elections for our new student board. Following that convention, we had to figure out how to conduct an entire year’s worth of programming online.

R’ Gellman: Keeping people involved. We live in a world where people pay for services that they can quantify what they receive: i.e. I can pay for Netflix for X amount and know how much I get in return. To quantify the return on investment for a religious institution is silly in normal times, how much more so when you have not seen the building in a full year!

How did you rise to meet those challenges?

Rachel: Our team thrives on creativity; this was an opportunity for us to try new things and change it up. Additionally, it was an opportunity for us to think about how to make deeper connections with families rather than worrying about how many people come to an event. At the start of the pandemic, we immediately had to cancel a much-anticipated family camp weekend that was scheduled for March 13th. Our team quickly pivoted, creating Shabbat kits of materials for these families, and we drove around the city and suburbs hand delivering the bags and invited families to join us for a candle lighting on Facebook Live and Havdalah on Zoom. While we did not know it then, this was the start of our pandemic shift. We hosted additional holiday virtual events for Passover and Yom Ha’atzmaut, as well as an in-person drive-in celebration for Rosh Hashanah, welcoming families to celebrate together. Our most successful program in the last year has been at-home kits, working in partnership with local businesses to create ways in which families can bring Jewish experiences into their home while stuck at home.

After selling out our DIY Bagel kit and a series of Rosh Hashanah-themed kits, this fall we introduced a monthly values-based kit that provides a number of different activities for families to explore a holiday and value theme. We continue to sell out these kits each month. While our families can still not gather, we have found that by providing ways in which families can infuse Jewish activities into their homes we are celebrating our Jewish community and sharing in an experience together, while still apart.

Meredith: We drastically decreased our budget (without letting go any staff — that said, we froze hiring, which is putting a strain on staff), we increased our virtual offerings to build communities, we sought opportunities to partner with other organizations to increase our visibility, we wrote op-eds to increase visibility, we sought out meetings with new funders/donors (virtually), we re-envisioned Women to Watch as a half-day virtual conference (brought in half the normal funds, but engaged a new audience), and we launched a new network for women over 40.

We also saw that the issues that were laid bare by COVID are our issues — the uptick of domestic violence, the devastating financial impact on women. We sought out opportunities to connect our work with what was happening in the world and new found understandings and awareness. As a result, we found more people understanding and connecting with our mission and work.

Helen: See above.

Daniel: My team (and the teens we work with) spent a lot of time researching different options of platforms to use for the upcoming programs. Following the immediate convention, we also created an entirely new online platform specifically for our members to find and access interest-based programs throughout the summer and the year.

R' Gellman: A very quick move to online programming. Our absolute goal has been to continually build community, which is difficult in a big room on Zoom. We do this by working our myriad of affinity groups (listed above) and building on our small groups. We make sure that people have engagement and learning opportunities with smaller groups so that relationships can be built, even on Zoom! Additionally, we have regularly had board members make phone calls to every member of the congregation to check in and just share love. One of the best advantages we have is that we can very easily bring in speakers and special guests. From bigger name speakers like Randi Weingarten and Judith Heumann, to easily bringing in fellow rabbis to guest teach a class, we are taking advantage of availability regardless of location.

What would you have done differently?

Rachel: We had lots of trial and error, many Zoom programs where no one joined or a social media post that falls flat. That said, these trials were all important. These are new and challenging times; we are blessed that we had the freedom to experiment and try new ideas. We were also able to recognize that every families' needs were different now. By trying different types of programming, we were able to meet new needs.

Meredith: I think we did everything we could, and don't believe there is anything I would have done differently. That said, I'm completely burned out. Especially as a new CEO, who started only two months before the pandemic hit; I had to learn the job, while completely pivoting to meet the challenges. Not certain how I should have or, looking forward, even could reduce the amount of time I'm on Zoom any given day or how much work I've personally taken on in attempts to reduce stress on my team, but personally, that's what I wish I had done differently — the pace that I felt (and feel) compelled to work.

Daniel: In an ideal situation, I would have wanted to find a way to make all online programming free for the year. There was already such a barrier for entry based on the fact that it's hard to come into a new group of people, but now that it was online I wish we could have taken down any walls that existed that prevented teens from accessing our programs.

R' Gellman: The only thing I think we would have done differently is to plan further ahead. Of course in March 2020 we had no idea how long this would last. Despite not having a crystal ball, we have rallied quickly to make sure that our programming is top notch.

How did you measure the success of a program before the pandemic? How do you measure it now? How do you plan to measure it after the pandemic?

Rachel: Before the pandemic we talked a lot about numbers. While of course tracking our attendance and interactions is still important, the pandemic has helped us realize the value of connection and sharing our story.

Meredith: Before, we may have been more in the mode of focusing on the financials — what did this program cost and how much did it bring in? Now, we're investing more in engagement. With the low-cost of hosting a Zoom call (granted, there is a lot of staff time that goes into these), we are investing in building a community of future supporters. I have spoken with several other organizations and when I suggest ideas, I still hear, "We need funding to do that." And, while that is very practicable and understandable, I'm taking more risks now and hoping the money will follow. And, I say this as an organization that does not have a safety net. We're not sitting on an endowment fund or investment account that funds our work — we need donations and grants to survive. Perhaps this is why I'm taking on so much of these new ideas — as a way to make it happen without adding to our costs (or actually eating the costs of my additional time).

Daniel: Before the pandemic, we measured success almost solely on numbers -- how many teens came to any program, convention, etc. Now, we have a much more nuanced approach to understanding success. We believe that numbers are important, but what's more important is how teens feel after our events. Even if we have a smaller number of members at programs and conventions, if they leave feeling revitalized and happy, then we've done our jobs well.

R' Gellman: The biggest change is measuring the programs' quality over quantity. If we have a great program for five people who felt spiritually uplifted and connected to their community then we had a very successful program. Before the pandemic, there was more concern about costs. Is it worth it to keep the Temple open, paying for security and maintenance? Now, those concerns are naught.

This takes A LOT more logistics and education work for preparation. Before, if a programming space wasn't set up, anyone could help to arrange chairs. Now, we need to be absolutely sure that it has been advertised in the proper places, the Zoom rooms have been arranged, the technology is set, the tech supports during the program are in place, and the program has been fully thought through. For example, on Sunday mornings we have about 9-12 different Zoom rooms happening at the same time. Keeping track of all those individual room links and making sure they get to the right people and in the right calendars is a task unto itself!

What were you doing before the pandemic that you won't be doing anymore?

Rachel: I am not sure yet - I do think it is going to be a while longer before families want to gather in large groups. We will continue to think smaller about our programs, more neighborhood-based rather than big event spaces.

Meredith: Travel. I was scheduled to be on the road for weeks when the pandemic hit. We have learned how easy it is to schedule a virtual Zoom call rather than take the time and expense to travel for meetings.

Daniel: I was going into work every day. We're fairly certain that our organization is going to close down our office and have us work from home indefinitely.

R' Gellman: We will never have services which are not live-streamed. We know that, regardless of vaccinations, there will always be people who cannot or do not wish to join us in person. The work to make sure that all feel that they are part of the Temple Sholom family and that they are actively community members is crucial.

What did you learn from the pandemic that you'll take with you?

Rachel: Relationships before programs. Values over activities. Creativity, innovation, and trial and error.

Meredith: We'll keep virtual events — it's been an incredible way to build national communities. The blessing of the pandemic is the way it fast-tracked our ability to be "present" nationwide. I believe there is a significantly increased awareness of our organization because of what we've done since March 2020.

Helen: It strengthened the view that when you are given lemons, make lemonade! Many beautiful advances came about due to the pandemic. We have been able to offer speakers from other parts of the country that we never would have considered to speak for our CLE programs.

Daniel: The ability to completely rearrange programming and make a fast pivot to something new. Also, the ability to innovate and create our own markers for success in a space where there is no precedent for how to be successful.

R' Gellman: I have been reminded how important community is for people. We see many of our congregants show up to programming almost every day of the week. I believe we will continue to offer daily online programming so that anyone can join in the community whenever they would like.

What can other Jewish organizations learn from what you've done?

Rachel: Same as above - relationships and values. Additionally, I think our partnerships with small local businesses have been beneficial in this time - 2020 was about working together, let's continue that model.

Meredith: Take advantage of every and all opportunities. Be creative. Understand your mission and know how to communicate it quickly. Take on projects that allow you to reach new audiences while still staying true to your core mission and work.

Helen: One always needs to think outside of the box to continue to serve the mission of the organization.

Daniel: Being flexible and open to change. Many Jewish organizations are incredibly rigid in the ways that they work, and we've learned that in order to be successful we need to be able to pivot quickly and easily change to new environments and situations.

R' Gellman: All organizations can learn that online programming is great, is engaging, and keeps people connected, both to their community and to their clergy.

We would like to thank Rachel Rappaport, Meredith Jacobs, Helen Bloch, Daniel Warshawsky, and Rabbi Scott Gellman for taking the time to share with us their insight and reflections. Although each organization has its own mission, there are lessons learned that can benefit them all. Our hope is that the leaders of various Jewish organizations can utilize this article as a tool to grow and prosper in the wake of the pandemic, and to be an even more successful organization when we are all gathering in person again. The Jewish community is at its strongest when we are all thriving and, by sharing the challenges we've faced and how we've overcome them, we can all not only outlast those challenges, but actually prosper together on the other side.

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