

The Synagogue

ELLIOT J. COSGROVE



DISRUPTIVE innovation,” a term heard more often in business school than in synagogue, has been at the heart of the Jewish project from the beginning.

Soon after establishing the covenant at Sinai, the Children of Israel reconstructed their religious life around a mobile tabernacle that carried their community and its faith through the wilderness. Upon arriving in the Promised Land, our ancestors adopted a centralized sacrificial system of worship, experiencing God’s presence in Jerusalem’s Temple. When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the Pharisees transformed Judaism into a rabbinic religion of worship, study, and mitzvot. Faced with new conditions, our people always find new ways to express our inheritance, integrating new with old.

The arrival of the digital age marks a transformation as momentous as any of these earlier turning points. The internet has fundamentally changed the way we access information: Ask a college student the last time he checked out a book from the library, or a twentysomething whether she has ever used a paper map. More

profoundly, it has changed the way we connect with others. We may be more interconnected than ever before, but our existence has also become atomized as communities and friendships now come by way of clicks and thumb swipes.

The challenges of our present moment are not particular to Jewish institutional life, nor are they only a by-product of the pandemic, although the pandemic has certainly contributed to the difficulties. Bookstores, movie theaters, and houses of worship have all been contending with the disintermediating and disorienting effects of our digital age.

Looking around my synagogue, I see that every aspect of synagogue life has been affected by technology. Our daily, Sabbath, and festival services still engage in-person congregants but now also include online participants from around the globe. Some of our adult-education classes still meet in our classrooms, but some meet online, and some are hybrid. Sermons, lectures, and music are available on our website, as well as on social media and via podcast and our Vimeo channel. The tutoring of b'nai mitzvah students now happens on Zoom as well as in person. We have become an entirely paperless community. A/V professionals are now established members of our team. To say my synagogue “is not my mother’s synagogue” is an understatement. It’s not *my* synagogue of 10 or even five years ago.

In the midst of the changes, I take comfort in the knowledge that we remain committed to our core mission of being a *beit tefillah* (house of prayer), *beit midrash* (house of learning), and *beit kneset* (house of community). But if the riches of our tradition are to be received with a sense of relevance and urgency by new generations, they must be communicated through the same channels as any other content our community members consume.

The discoveries of our moment have revealed hitherto unimagined possibilities. Our podcast lectures are enjoyed by far more people than

would ever hear them in person. Our children learn to decode Hebrew far better online in their homes than in a Hebrew School classroom following a long school day. Our lay leaders are far more willing to volunteer time if not every committee meeting is in-person. Fast-paced and far-reaching in its transformations as the digital age may be, it has also revealed itself to be a moment of great opportunity.

It's important to see, however, that this opportunity is by no means simply about going online along with the rest of our culture—because the digital era has unexpectedly brought the *countercultural* value proposition of synagogue life into full relief. As so much goes online, our present moment reminds us of all that can occur only in person—and that must continue to do so. Online prayer will never match the power of in-person worship. Pastoral care is made sacred not only by physical proximity, but because of relationship capital accumulated over a lifetime of joys and sorrows—something extraordinarily difficult to build across screens. Be it a cantor's concert, a *tikkun olam* project, or a kibbitz at kiddush, there are riches of communal life that are enjoyed most fully in person. Counterintuitive as it may seem, our shift to digital has strengthened our in-person offerings, but only insofar as we have, in the main, answered these questions successfully.



The road ahead holds more questions than answers. “What stays in-person?” “What goes online?” “How can we best create synergies between the two, and build and sustain community together?” “How can the blessings of online Judaism be embraced without cannibalizing in-person communities?” These are not the questions I ever thought I would be asking, but I find them endlessly interesting and an affirmation of the classic task of rabbinic leadership.

Most of all, as a synagogue rabbi serving a financially secure synagogue in an area with the densest concentration of Jews outside Israel, I am well aware of the bubble in which I live. Success in today's environment is expensive—in time, money, and personnel—in ways not available to every synagogue in America. The umbrella arms of American Jewish life—institutional, denominational, and philanthropic—must convene conversations that encourage a creative and collaborative sharing of resources across communities. No longer should we consider Jewish communities to be purely local enterprises. Any vision of the Jewish future must be one in which all ships rise, a dramatic rethinking of our American Jewish landscape.

Disruptive innovation has been at the heart of the Jewish project from our very beginnings—faced with new conditions, we find new ways to express our inheritance, integrating the new with the old. *

