

What a year!!! “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom”

So, here is what we’ve learned from our community and in discussions with presidents of synagogues of similar size:

Yes, while we may want to forget most of this past pandemic year, much of what we experienced together and learned can actually strengthen our Jewish future and synagogue’s role in shaping it.

### **Rediscovering and falling in love again with Judaism.**

Many of us rediscovered Jewish ritual and the beauty of the tradition handed down to us, but neglected too often. During pandemic we’ve read more Jewish books and rediscover through Jewish literature the values and the meaning of Judaism.

**A need for Shabbat.** In normal times, for most of us who work Monday through Friday, the weekend offers a break in routine. But during COVID quarantining when our homes become our offices, and the boundaries between work time and private time was blurry at best, the opportunity to mark the end of one week and the beginning of the next took on added significance. Shabbat offered that opportunity. Many of us became more intentional in observing Shabbat. Many of us tuned in to the amazing Zoom Shabbat services. Some of us actually attended more Shabbat services on Zoom than we would have ever attended before the pandemic. Lighting candles on Friday nights and inviting family and friends to join us over Zoom was more intentional. Some of us became closer with our families and friends as a result.

**We like Convenience.** Tuning in from home required less effort than getting dressed-up to go to Temple. And because online offerings can also be viewed after the fact, many of us were grateful to be able to catch what we would have otherwise missed. So not only were more of us tuning in, but more of us tuned in more often.

**Bringing “shy” newcomers through the Zoom door.** COVID allowed online viewing with lower expectations of involved participation and offered a comfortable, non-threatening way to see what synagogues are all about.

**Synagogue communities are not limited to the neighborhood anymore.** Technology is a two way street. On one hand, internet broadcasting makes it easier for people to tune in; it makes it easier for us to reach out, anywhere. On the other hand, other synagogues might present

competing programs during the same time slot. The question then becomes: What makes us unique and special?

Also, perhaps better resourced congregations should partner with struggling ones for the sharing of worship, educational and other events. Do we need to make Shabbat for ourselves only?

**Online education works.** Virtual classrooms have proven very effective. When we return to in-person childhood, family and adult education, we should perhaps maintain some online learning, remembering that distance learning works for some of us who cannot attend the physical class because we are homebound, or because we live too far away. My wife and I, for instance have enrolled in an online Hebrew class taught by Israeli teachers from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We started this half way through the pandemic, as a personal challenge, as a “why not?” which would not have been possible before COVID, since the offering was initiated because of it. What an opportunity initiated by adversity! Online Jewish education offers an opportunity future generations will expect it.

**Surprisingly meaningful online worship and lifecycle celebrations.** Yes, family rituals without family present will always be bittersweet. But while the pandemic may have prevented or limited physical attendance at lifecycle celebrations, the internet did permit ill and geographically distant relatives who might not have attended under normal circumstances to watch and even to participate in those very special B’nei Mitzvot and other lifecycle events.

**Small groups are even more important.** Most of us have enrolled and attended many Jewish small groups, some at our Temple and some with other Israeli or Jewish groups, which enhanced community among our members. None of that was possible pre-pandemic. And when the groups involved are small enough the experience does allow for close connections.

**We all learned what it’s like to be isolated.** The COVID pandemic served as a reminder of the pain of isolation. And it inspired us to reach out to our homebound members in ways we haven’t before. That’s what caring communities do.

**Home, sweet home.** We want to return to our beloved Temple. As fulfilling as the virtual opportunities have been, nothing replaces being together in those sacred spaces filled with personal memories and meaning. So, while we extend our out-reach and our in-reach through the tools we have created and discovered, we must never fail to recognize the importance of in-person, onsite get-together.

So, yes, what an opportunity this pandemic has been. Because it was so challenging and changing it has accelerated our innovation. Adversity is the mother of innovation. The adversity will pass soon. How can we still stay motivated to innovate?

**Our future is bright:**

We have the most incredible clergy any Congregation could dream of having. We have the Dream Team with our Senior Rabbi Cahana, Senior Cantor Cahana the one and only Rabbi Joseph, and also, Cantor Green.

Our extraordinarily committed and hardworking Executive Director, Josh Kashinsky, makes it easy for all of us. He has developed and is leading his devoted staff who make it all possible.

Our Board of Trustees have never been more dedicated.

I met face to face with some of you, sometimes in your driveway...sometimes in your back yard...with some by phone. I came inspired from all these conversations.

The commonality in our conversations is a deep appreciation for what is important to all of us....here....at this time. We all have a deep appreciation for our ASSETS...which are OUR PEOPLE.

We have wonderful, historical buildings and a beautiful campus, but...have you noticed that we speak very little about all of that now? Why is that?

It is because, at this time, we all focus on what is IMPORTANT. We focus on our PEOPLE.

Let us find the wisdom to take care of each other.

Let us find the wisdom and resources to support our wonderful Clergy in their effort of being creative in keeping all of us standing together.

Let us find the wisdom and the resources to support our Executive Director, Josh Kashinsky, our Education Director, Ben Sandler, and their teams.

Let's support our dedicated, level-headed and thoughtful Board of Trustees and its officers.

Let us find the wisdom and resources to support every single congregant at Beth Israel in Portland.

People are the best part of our lives. Let's continue to reach out and tell them how important they each are to us.

What excites me the most this year is the anticipation of seeing and meeting each other in person again, at The Temple.

Thank you and see you all soon, in person, on campus, whenever practically possible.

Thank you!

Tony Urdes  
President