

From Programs to Platforms

Eight Ways to Capitalize on the Changing Value Offered by Institutions

Lisa Colton, Bill Robinson, and Miriam Brosseau

Glancing through the mission statements of so many Jewish organizations—from synagogues and schools to JCCs and Federations—it appears that we all share the vital goal to “create and support community.” But what exactly is “community,” and what can organizations and professionals actually do to strengthen it?

Martin Buber offers an understanding of community by distinguishing it from collectivity: “Collectivity is not a binding, but a bundling together; individuals packed together, armed and equipped in common, with only as much life from man to man as will inflame the marching step.... Community... is the being no longer side by side but *with* one another of a multitude of persons.... [While] collectivity is based on an organized atrophy of personal existence, community [is based] on its increase and confirmation in life lived toward one another” (Buber, 2002, pp. 31–32).

Businesses and sports teams are examples of collectivities. People come together to pursue goals that are extrinsic to the relationships between themselves. The ways in which I should act in a business or on a sports team toward my fellow members are primarily geared to achieving the goals of making money and/or winning. In contrast, an actual community is driven by a set of core values, which define how members should act. Even if a community needs to make money to survive (as many do), openness, caring, and mutual responsibility (as examples of core values) would drive my behavior toward other community members, over immediate financial goals. As Buber (2002) also writes, “The purpose of community is community.”

FOUR TYPES OF SOCIAL ORDERS

Max Weber (1968), the founder of modern sociology, offers another useful perspective. Weber distinguished between four ideal ways or types of social order in which people come together:

- **Traditional**, where our being together seems normative, as a given
- **Charismatic**, temporary experiences where emotional bounds are at the center
- **Instrumental Rational**, where specific rules and procedures guide how we interact
- **Value Rational**, where shared values and vision guide how we relate to one another

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If we examine Jewish institutional life, we can see all four of these approaches at play, often in combination with one another. Embodying the *traditional* approach, Jews in the South often congregated in their own Jewish versions of country clubs and debutante-style balls. These ethnic enclaves were seen as a given, as a natural aspect of existence in the American South (and elsewhere). They were just the ways things were, given cultural norms at the time.

Many immersive Jewish experiences such as Israel trips and camps, are best described as *charismatic* and emotionally infused. Youth and young adults come together for a liminal experience, in which the traditional norms of their lives are suspended. In these moments, they are more open to experiencing the power of Judaism and the camaraderie of being with other Jews. In Weber's typology, a charismatic social order does not need a charismatic leader; it is defined by the essential quality and nature of relationships among the participants.

Although today's Jewish organizations often combine elements of all four types, they, along with modern society in general, tend to focus on the *instrumental rational* rules and procedures that range from paying a la carte fees for specific programs to annual membership dues to get access to an on-call rabbi, High Holiday seats, and a Bar/Bat Mitzvah (though additional charges may apply). They have increasingly gravitated toward a model of "transactional Judaism," which as Weber points out is a perfectly rational way for an organization to behave. Using Buber's formulation, this transactional Judaism limits us to a collectivity, because what is understood as rational is how our actions are the means to achieve an external end, such as the synagogue bottom line. By reinforcing structures of a collectivity, we build our own communal glass ceiling.

None of these examples—the country club, the Israel trip, or synagogue—are by themselves an actual community, in which values are at the core of decision making and how individuals relate to one another. In community (which is Weber's *value-rational* social order), people are bound together primarily by a *shared sense of mutual responsibility toward one another* (as an intrinsic value)—not because they have to, not only during transitory liminal moments in their life, and not based primarily on a transactional relationship.

Although society is filled with transactional relations, Jews are not seeking more transactional opportunities, and in fact what Judaism has to provide is the respite from a transactional world. Recently, the Jewish Education Project has undertaken research to learn more about the desires, needs, and concerns of families with young children. In the course of several focus groups, families with young children strongly expressed their desire for more than play dates and programmed activities. They wanted actual community where they would feel closeness and commitment to other members. For example, they envied those informal communities where families self-organize to bring food all week long to their friends with newborns. Yet they did not know how to create these kinds of communities intentionally, for themselves.

The challenge for Jewish organizations today is to understand how to guide and support families in creating the experience of actual community (with the understanding that organizations still need to be rationally instrumental and attend to the bottom line). This means shifting our models from designing and offering programs that meet the concrete needs of families to building platforms where families can self-organize to realize their aspirations.¹

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In the past, organizations provided a critical organizing function that individuals alone could rarely achieve. More recently, digital communications and collaborative tools have empowered the masses to create, coordinate, and collaborate in previously unheard of ways. These new tools have empowered the Occupy Wall Street movement and those who have overthrown governments around the world. These tools have also made possible indie minyanim and Moishe Houses, among many other examples in the Jewish world.

Clay Shirky, professor at New York University and author of *Here Comes Everybody* (2009), describes this shift by acknowledging that “organizations no longer have a monopoly on organizing.” In the past, Jewish organizations may have been the coordinators of Jewish community, but that does not necessarily mean that they created the community. In today’s individually empowered world, the traditional role of organizations is becoming obsolete. Thus, to continue to have purpose, value, and viability, organizations must identify and adapt to fill a modern void. They need to move from providing programs to being platforms for communal self-organizing and connectivity.

In the technological world, a platform is the hardware and software that allow applications to run. It provides all the necessary elements to facilitate purposeful and successful human activity. An organization acting as a platform is much the same: It is a structural framework—logistical and technical—built to support a specific purpose. The platform organization, like the technological platform, is incomplete without the human activity, and it is open and flexible, allowing humans to infuse their own creativity and adapt and evolve the platform as needed.

As many organizations have found in the past decade of change, the ability to adapt—culturally, financially, and technically—is essential for survival and growth in today’s rapidly changing landscape. Although often scary and intimidating, this pressure to change is in fact incredibly healthy. It is forcing us to ask deep questions about the legacy and future of Jewish life, identity, knowledge, and community. Through inspiration in some areas and exasperation in others, it is pushing us to clarify where professional expertise and effort can support and catalyze the things we value. Conversely, this pressure to change also indicates where over-functioning professional staff—who take over and do for individuals—may in fact be disempowering individuals, stifling community, and limiting ourselves to a collectivity.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Thus, to help organizations adapt, we present eight guiding principles to enable organizations to shift from program providers to platforms for self-organizing and connectivity based on shared purpose and values.

1. Listen, Trust, and Empower.

When we professionals and institutions take full responsibility for visioning, planning, and bringing to life the assets of the community, we disempower individuals,

¹For those in early childhood, this will be familiar as a switch from teacher-directed learning to a child-centered approach, associated with social constructivism and notably the schools of Reggio Emilia. As always, there is much we can learn from the early years.

sever the ties of the I–Thou relationship, and stunt the shared sense of mutual responsibility toward one another that is the basis for true community. Therefore, professionals and institutions need to empower those within the community to take responsibility, so they can manifest those values and vision through Jewish holiday celebrations, Shabbat observances, and life-cycle rituals, as well as (*chevruta*-style) learning and a deep commitment to one another and the Jewish tradition.

On a practical level, it means that we must carefully listen to hear where the community has shared interests, goals, and energy to invest and then trust in the community members to take leadership. At one congregation, a mother complained to the early childhood director about the lack of an infant play group for kids younger than two and a half. She felt excluded from the community until her child reached this age. The director’s response to her was, “Want to help create one?” With a bit of support and the offer of an open room on Thursday afternoons, together they launched a synagogue-based infant/parent playgroup that has engaged several new families in its first year.

2. Practice *Tzim Tzum* Leadership.

Empowering others means letting go. It will require practicing new forms of collaborative and distributive leadership that may seem strange and awkward at first. Boards, staff, and committees may need to redefine their roles and how they function. Traditional leaders will need to contract—*tzim tzum*—to make room for others to step in and lead in both small and large ways. The transition from hierarchies to flatter leadership means that those in every role need to listen carefully to the needs and interests of the community and be more open in their planning and decision making. The old control-and-command model does not work effectively in this connected age.

It also means that the entire community is responsible for the success of the shared communal mission. Organizations thus need to be more transparent, giving all stakeholders the information and insight to feel shared ownership and mutual responsibility. Future leaders should share this vision, shifting the culture and the actions of the organization over the coming years.

3. Weave Networks.

The specific roles, skills, and uses of staff change in this new paradigm. Rather than doing the work in a fee-for-service model or executing programs and recruiting people to participate, many staff will need to be network weavers, intentionally connecting people to one another where the connection would be valuable to the individuals and to the strengthening of the community (see the article by Fishman in this issue).

In a 2011 issue of the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum, founder of the Kavana Cooperative in Seattle, shared the centrality of network weaving to her work:

Many of Kavana’s most successful programs have community building as a core goal, and use some degree of social engineering as a means to this end. Our home-hospitality Shabbat program, for example, is deceptively simple in that it requires no space, rental (partners host small groups in their own home for Shabbat dinner on designated dates), no programming supplies or food (meals are potluck), and no

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formal curriculum (each host family is encouraged to share how it celebrates Shabbat). But behind the scenes, this is one of the more complex (and administratively labor-intensive) programs that Kavana runs.... As the rabbi of the community, nothing is more gratifying to me than knowing that the matches we make sometimes lead to genuine friendships and a true sense of social connection (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 106–107),

4. Try New Financial Models.

In 2010 Chris Anderson wrote *Free: How Today's Smartest Businesses Profit by Giving Something for Nothing*, describing the economic benefit to customers and businesses as prices fall to zero. Businesses increasingly are finding powerful and viable indirect routes from product to revenue, such as freemiums² and open source software development and customization. These innovative—and profitable—business models were unthinkable just a few years ago, but are making possible new kinds of businesses as well as providing access to a whole new range of consumers.

In many Jewish communal settings, our current financial models reinforce transactional Judaism and function to exclude (either emotionally or functionally) many people from participating in Jewish communal life. Perpetuating these models further denigrates (or limits) the community we are seeking to build. Therefore, we must question assumptions that have driven our business models for decades, seeking efficiencies to reduce costs (less over-functioning, more collaboration), opening the peripheries of our communities to invite in new participants, and exploring new models and sources of revenue.

The JCC of Manhattan has launched the Jewish Journey Project (<http://www.jewishjourneyproject.org>), an educational opportunity that brings together students from nine institutions (seven synagogues and two JCCs) and the expertise of many more local organizations. In Westchester, New York, the Jewish Education Project is piloting a community-wide collaboration of more than a dozen congregations to offer innovative teen learning. These collaborations are providing more flexibility and opportunity, together with great efficiencies, than any one institution could achieve alone.

In the synagogue field, at least two congregations (Temple Israel in Sharon, Massachusetts (<http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/scrapping-synagogue-dues-a-case-study>) and Temple Kol Ami in West Bloomfield, Michigan (<http://www.thejewishnews.com/from-the-heart>) have recently dropped their dues structures completely, opting for a more voluntary and empowering approach. Temple Kol Ami's pledge system is called *t'rumot halev* or "gifts of the heart." "It is about making a pledge from the heart, rather than paying a bill," explained Paul Gross, Kol Ami's first vice president. The name originates from the book of Exodus. "Moshe asked the Israelites to bring *t'rumot* (offerings) to the tabernacle," explained Assistant Rabbi Ariana Jaffe Silverman in an article in the *Detroit Jewish News*. "There was not the same assigned amount for everyone, but they were asked to bring what they could afford and to pay as their hearts moved them. They brought so much that it was too much."

²Freemium is a business model by which a product or service (such as media, games, or web services) is provided free of charge, but users may opt to pay a premium for advanced features, functionality, or access.

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5. Become Agile.

Originally used in the software development field, the quality of being “agile” is becoming a norm across many disciplines, and for good reason. Researching, planning, funding, developing, beta testing, and launching a product take too long. Instead, being in “perpetual beta” mode (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetual_beta) encourages us to develop a product in the open, allowing for constant updates and adjustments in response to feedback and user testing and leading to a more successful (and profitable) product. Publisher and open-source advocate Tim O’Reilly was years ahead of his time when he proclaimed in 2005 that “users must be treated as co-developers” and that we will achieve our goals by “harnessing collective intelligence” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 4).

For the next several years, if not decades, we will see much change. To successfully navigate this change, it is critical that our leaders, institutions, and policies remain nimble and able to adapt to new information, data, and societal shifts. As we have already seen during the last few years of economic strain, the most rigid organizations are at the greatest risk of collapse.

6. Measure What Matters.

In a model in which organizations run programs, we often measure success by the number of *tushes* in the seats. This form of evaluation generally captures our efforts to attract and transact with the greatest number of people, for the success of the program, the organization, and (we like to think) the Jewish people. Yet in the new platform model, what we measure, how we measure, and what we do with the data are entirely different.

In a recent initiative, Sustainable Synagogue Business Models, overseen and funded by UJA-Federation of New York and facilitated by Measuring Success consultants, congregations collected and analyzed data to help synagogue leaders address some of today’s toughest questions: Is our current dues-based funding model financially sustainable? Can we more effectively engender the sacred community we envision? They learned that they were grossly over-investing resources in some areas and under-investing in others. “Our congregation’s leadership engages in ongoing discussions regarding how to best spend our resources to fulfill our mission,” reported participant Rabbi Michael White from Temple Sinai of Roslyn Heights. “I now understand that we have been acting in a bubble, often divorced from the needs, desires, and perspective of our membership” (*Vision and Data*, 2012).

Across the congregations, the top three drivers for overall satisfaction and personal growth of members (in order of relative strength) were (1) vision and values of synagogue that resonate with the members; (2) rabbi’s vision of Jewish life that resonates, and (3) the development of meaningful social connections. As the data show, the foundation of community—meaningful social connections—is a top driver for synagogue membership satisfaction. How that translates programmatically is not straightforward, however. “We had tried social programming in the past but never got the turnout we hoped for, which led us to conclude (wrongly) that people did not want to make social connections through the Religious School,” reported Barri Waltcher, vice president and chair of the Religious School Committee at Temple Shaaray Tefila. “A targeted follow-up survey to probe deeper about social connections . . . led to an ‘aha moment’ when we learned that

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people do want to make social connections; they just do not want us to add new events to their calendars. When we realized that, we took steps to build socializing and community-building into existing events.”

7. Get Out of the Box.

Organizations have invested deeply in (generally nonagile) physical spaces to house their programs. For example, some Hillels have raised millions of dollars to build first-class facilities—complete with gyms, rooftop areas for barbecues and sukkahs, and kosher cafes—yet program professionals are seeing far better results when they take their efforts outside those boundaries. In recent years Hillel has launched the Campus Entrepreneur Initiative and its sister program, the Peer Network Engagement Internship, which have affected student involvement in both Hillel activities and general Jewish life on campus both qualitatively and quantitatively. In these programs, Hillel hires “uninvolved Jewish students to engage...fellow students and advance their Jewish journeys together” (2011 Hillel Annual Report). These students work closely with a Senior Jewish Educator to guide their work, which takes them anywhere from coffee shops to soup kitchens to concerts. Although organizations often speak of “meeting people where they’re at,” too many tend to wait until they come inside their own four walls before enacting that mantra.

Social media, too, challenge the role of physical space. Although there is no substitute for face-to-face encounters, many social technologies offer worthy approximations or at the very least enable us to connect with more people more often in between our in-person connections. Several Reform congregations have begun live-streaming their services (http://blogs.rj.org/blog/2011/10/26/how_we_can_strengthen_the_refo/), opening up the communal prayer experience to those congregants who are unable to attend due to distance, health, or any number of constraints. Some congregations are using social media to augment traditional opportunities; for example, asynchronous, decentralized Torah study throughout the week, such as Rabbi David Levy’s “social sermon” (<http://njewishnews.com/article/metrowest/rabbi-taps-into-social-media-to-write-new-kind-of-sermon>). These models remind that, although technology is a powerful force, it is only with a thoughtful human touch that it truly comes alive to foster community.

8. Articulate an Epic Vision.

Jane McGonigal, game designer and author of *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2011), writes about the importance of having an “epic” element to the games we play, which ultimately comes down to the human search for meaning:

We crave meaning, or the chance to be part of something larger than ourselves. We want to feel curiosity, awe, and wonder about things that unfold on epic scales. And most importantly, we want to belong to and contribute to something that has lasting significance beyond our own lives.

Games, McGonigal argues, provide that epic context, which is part of why they can be so engrossing and fulfilling. But the broader thesis of *Reality Is Broken* is that gaming principles can—and should—be applied to real life to make the world a better place. The epic vision, therefore, is one of the key elements of the

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platform organization. It is that immersive quality that binds the whole operation, providing a sense of meaning and purpose to the people who come in contact with it.

In *Tomorrow's Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life* (2012), Hayim Herring outlines for his readers a fictional synagogue, Temple Torah, that has completely reimagined itself for success in the connected age. One of the first things that Temple Torah sets out to do is revise its ailing vision and mission statements. The redacted version reads as follows:

Temple Torah aspires to become a model of a perfected world. You are invited to participate in the temple on your terms, with others who seek to add meaning to their lives and the greater world by turning this aspiration into reality (Herring, 2012, p. 16).

Turning a temple into a “model of a perfected world” is truly an epic vision. Inviting individuals to contribute to that vision on their own terms makes a compelling call to action for this imagined synagogue-as-platform.

We are living in a very exciting time of change. This is not a time to tinker around the edges, hoping for profound impact. The change we observe today and predict for tomorrow necessitates a bold rethinking of the purpose, structure, and function of our communal organizations. Now is the time to think big, adapt thoughtfully, and design anew.

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