

## **Zoom and The Paradox of Presence: Our Experience at TAA**

Bringing the practice of Relational Judaism to Temple Ahavat

Achim is the core of this strategic plan.

- TAA's new strategic plan

One of the themes of Rosh Hashanah is re-birth. Repeated in the liturgy is the phrase *haYom horat olam*, (often mistranslated "today the world is born") which means: today the world is pregnant with possibilities! And indeed, at this moment: out of the disruption and distancing, out of the losses and disappointments - something powerful, unexpected and positive is being born.

The two primary goals of our synagogue are 1) connecting our members to Jewish learning and practice, and 2) creating a loving dedicated Jewish community where all are welcomed and supported. Our new strategic plan's focus on Relational Judaism (or "Doing Jewish relationally" as I like to think about it) includes these two fundamental goals. Paradoxically, the ability for us to show up and be present in virtual space creates dramatic new possibilities for us to connect to our tradition and each other.

In March, 2020, When the COVID 19 storm hit and knocked us out of the building, virtual gatherings on Zoom felt like a lifeboat that allowed us to stay afloat.

### ***Lifeboat***

I had never used Zoom before and was delighted and relieved to be able to continue with services and Torah study. Like many new zoom users, I found myself exhausted after each session. Once our routine of using zoom stabilized and I became more familiar with the tool, I realized I was so tired because when on zoom, it felt like I was always yelling. I speculate that spontaneously and unconsciously, my brain, seeing small faces on my computer screen, was calculating their physical distance at about 30-50 feet away - hence the feeling I needed to yell. Once I calmed down, I learned that the distance between us was an arm's length or less. Now talking to a group, separated by thousands of miles, I often speak very softly, more softly ironically, than when we are physically gathered. This was the first of several surprising discoveries about our new virtual reality. Zoom was no longer a liferaft, but a bridge back to what we had done before March 2020.

### ***Bridge***

With a few technical bumps, we were able to offer our usual weekly services (rebranded "zervices") and Torah study and also additional offerings from congregants. The initial crisis of disruption had passed. Our virtual "gatherings" felt like a stable bridge that would allow us to stay connected and continue meeting our synagogue goals. But then we began to realize new possibilities.

There is a lot of doing-Jewish, short blessings and rituals, that take less time than making a soft boiled egg. Because they are too short to warrant gathering physically, we never thought to do these rituals as a synagogue community.

## **Snack and a Song vs. A Full Meal and a Recital**

A program or service at TAA needs to be at least an hour long and should be followed with an invitation to socialize. (Think of it as a full meal or recital.) We would never expect folks to drive to and from TAA for a five or ten minute program. And yet, our tradition is full of small discrete observances and rituals - interesting satisfying treats lasting only a few minutes.

Our first experience of new opportunities for Jewish engagement was in the counting of the Omer. The actual ritual and blessing for counting each of the forty-nine days between Passover and Shavuot takes under a minute. Each night of the Omer this past year, we “gathered” together, said hello, checked in briefly, shared a song and then made the blessings to count the Omer. Some came almost every night, some only once or twice. On the last night of the counting everyone was invited to share what this practice had meant for them over the past seven weeks. For many, this was the first time they had known about, or participated in this wonderful Jewish mindfulness practice. For those of us who had a practice of counting the Omer, it was always something that was done individually or with family. None of us had ever counted as a nightly communal ritual. With the Counting of the Omer, the meaning of our virtual gathering changed. Here we were fulfilling TAA’s essential goals: connecting members to Jewish practice and creating a group that was showing up to do Jewish together. We were deepening our relationship to Jewish life and to each other without physical gathering. Counting the Omer was a wonderful engaging program, with lots of room to grow. All agreed that this was something that TAA should do every year.

Once the snack and song option became available we recognized clearly that we are now at the beginning of a profound positive transformation in how we can work toward our essential goals of connecting deeply with Jewish tradition and with each other. We are just beginning to understand the power of virtual tools as a dramatic accompaniment to (soon we hope!) physical gathering. Some initial ideas:

- SCRS Hebrew instruction 10-15 minutes each day 3- 4 days/week.
- Omer Counting between Pesach Shavuot,
- Shofar Sounding and learning in Elul
- Short home rituals shared with community (i.e. Neighborhood Shabbat groups lighting Shabbat candles together, Havdallah)

For these opportunities alone, we need to be mindful of how our virtual gathering will mesh with our in person programming once we are safe to be physically together. We need to figure out how to welcome more members to participate and introduce them to this new way of being together.

I want to share two more observations about this transformation. First, virtual gathering allows people who physically can not be present, to be present: Manchester, Sarasota or Palo Alto it makes no difference. (In fact, it turns out that Lanesville is the most distant land from where it is hardest to connect.) Second, for some, it is easier to show up not only physically but also emotionally in virtual space. Many people are

uncomfortable asking a question or speaking in groups. Many people bring with them into a synagogue some past negative experience, or their expectations of how they are supposed to behave, to dress, or what they are supposed to know about Judaism. This is all very constricting. In virtual gathering a participant can be sitting comfortably on their couch, in slippers or barefoot, sipping from a favorite mug, with the option of turning off the camera anytime. From that familiar safe space, a person may be *more* comfortable asking a question and sharing their ideas and feelings than they would at a gathering inside the synagogue. We are finding in different ways how ironically there can be more presence in virtual space than in physical space.

What it means to show up and be present is transforming before our eyes. We are now experiencing the ways in which our virtual connections can strengthen us as a committed, caring community. I hope you will make an effort to be a part of this transformation.