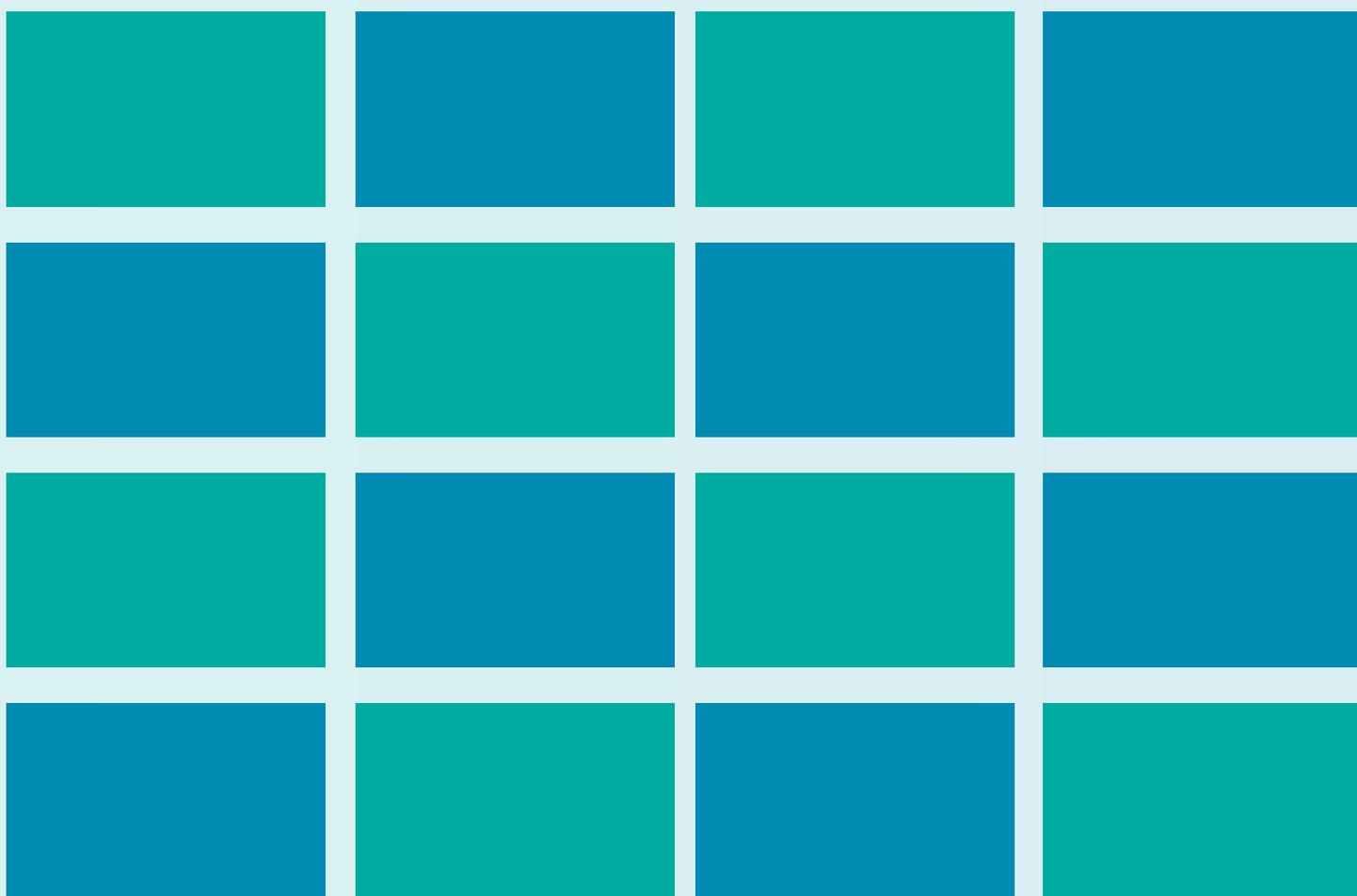
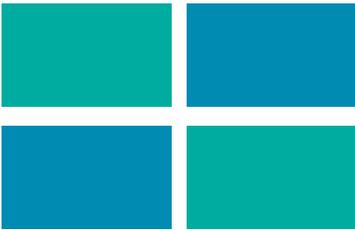


Zooming Toward the Future:

The Challenges, Strategies, and Opportunities of Distance Learning



September 2020



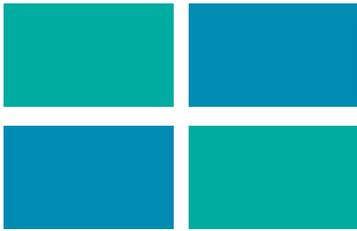
Introduction

"You know when you're on a boat and you're getting seasick, the instruction is to look at the horizon so you can focus on something stable? Well, we lost our horizon."

The uncertainty and instability evoked in this vivid quote captures the reality many Jewish professionals faced as they navigated the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them were the leaders of the 10 Jewish organizations involved in the Jim Joseph Foundation's Professional Development Initiative (PDI). When the pandemic began to spread across the country, many of these organizations were gearing up for their cornerstone programs—in-person, immersive professional development retreats and seminars—in spring and summer 2020. All of these carefully planned, long-awaited events had to be scrapped, as people retreated to their homes for an indefinite period of time. But after an initial period of disbelief and sorrow for the experiences that were lost, leaders quickly realized that they could still find ways to engage, educate, and connect with participants through distance learning. For some who were already using online modalities, this involved adjustments in timing or content to accommodate learners' new realities and needs (e.g., emotional stresses, children at home). Others made significant pivots to reconceptualize and deliver online professional development (and other online learning programs) that they hoped would provide the quality and impact that they and their learners had come to expect.

To help the Foundation and the field better understand how pivoting to distance learning has unfolded for Jewish education and professional development organizations, Rosov Consulting interviewed nine program providers from the Jim Joseph Foundation PDI cohort, along with five other Jim Joseph Foundation grantees that operate in overlapping fields. The interviews explored the initial choices organizations made and how those choices evolved over time. We investigated the challenges that programs faced when moving online, whether and how they were able to address those challenges, the positive "silver linings" of being forced to reimagine how they do their work, and which dimensions might continue once people can gather in person again.* This report synthesizes the key themes we heard in these conversations, categorized into the **challenges** programs have faced in the pivot to distance learning, the **strategies** to overcome them that have proved most effective, and the **opportunities** (both predictable and surprising) that have emerged from the crisis. We conclude by sharing organizational leaders' perspectives on how they envision the "new normal" in a post-COVID world.

* These interviews also gathered data about program outcomes used to develop a survey for program participants, fielded during the second phase of the broader study that Rosov Consulting is conducting for the Jim Joseph Foundation. The final phase of data gathering will involve in-depth interviews with a selection of program participants.



The Challenges of Distance Learning

Loss of in-person connections

Despite the dedication and creativity that organizations invested in moving programs and events online, most program providers could not help but feel the loss of the in-person connections that offer so much meaning and enjoyment. As a number pointed out, while people can connect online via breakout groups and other strategies (which will be explored in the following section), you simply can't replicate the experience of getting to know a new colleague over lunch, reflecting with fellow learners in the hallway after a session, receiving informal mentoring from an instructor, or even connecting with a unique space and setting as part of the learning process. Although cohorts that already had the opportunity to bond in person have found it easier to maintain those connections virtually, forgoing anticipated in-person reunions can feel even more painful because they know what (and who) they are missing. This offers an important reminder that powerful professional development experiences offer both intellectual engagement and emotional nourishment, and both dimensions need attention in our current reality.

"Part of our outcomes and our expectations of success are determined by the connections that participants make with each other. The informal downtime that people have at meals, the experiential side of davening in the same room where they're learning. All of those aspects have been stripped down. So when it's a straight up lecture, then I think the expectations are more or less the same—you have a set of content pieces that you want to get across. In terms of allowing people to connect, I think we've radically reduced our expectations on what we can accomplish on Zoom."

"You can just feel when you're with [the cohort] on screen, feel their need to be physically with each other. They need the return to the in-person in order to really believe that they can be there for each other. This virtual reality that they're all living, it's in every part of their lives. And so they're craving being able to see their [program] 'family.'"

Overcoming "Zoom overload"

Even the most successful and engaging online learning programs must contend with the limitations of the medium. Many of the providers explained that they had adjusted the timing and length of programs because "people just can't spend six hours a day on Zoom." While this shift has opened up opportunities for creativity, it also requires careful planning and the winnowing of programs down to their essence. Providers were also aware that even when people were logged in and "present," their focus and attention may have been lacking. Sometimes this might be the learner's choice; one program leader envisioned participants who say, "Oh, I'm having internet problems, so I'll have to turn off my video.' That usually means they're going to fold the laundry and cook dinner while they listen." Even when learners intend to give their full focus, spending long hours at a computer takes a physical and mental toll that may not even be consciously recognized. In addition, online learning can be just as (or even more) challenging for teachers than for learners. A number of program providers reflected that educators often draw much of their "teaching energy" from the kinds of interactions with learners that are hard to replicate online. As one explained, "When teaching in a physical space, you bring 50% of the room's energy, and people meet you there. But on Zoom, you have to bring 100%."

"The biggest challenge that I feel like I'm facing, and that I'm seeing students face and other facilitators that I mentor, is actually what Zoom does to our bodies. So it's important to name that. This is going to happen. It's normal. You will notice that your head is going to hurt. Your eyes are going to hurt. And instead of feeling deeply energized, you might feel a sense of fatigue that is inexplicable."

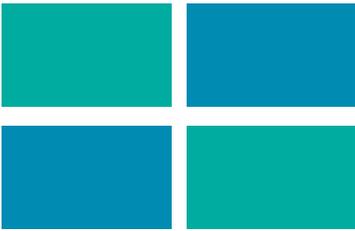
"It's exhausting to teach on Zoom. You're putting out, let's say, three times the energy and getting one-third the feedback. It's very hard to read a room—there is no room! You see the faces that you see, and maybe they're checking email, maybe they're not. You have to compete with so much more as a teacher. So that's a challenge everybody's going through."

"It's like being on a rollercoaster. You climb up to the top and then you're like, oh no, there's a drop. And you drop and your stomach goes up to your throat, and then it levels off. And I think I'm adapting to this new weirdness, and I can do this. And then the bottom falls out again. I think we've had about four rounds of that in the last five months."

"The start was like a fire drill moment where we were just, go, go, go. And then we looked at our three full-time staff who are home with young children and said, now we need to think about what a more thoughtful pace would look like. Just figuring out people's schedules and workloads, because we've significantly ramped up our offerings in a moment that the staff is struggling with the work/life/childcare situation."

The emotional and logistical challenges of COVID-19

Finally, a number of program providers said that the greatest challenge they and their participants are facing is not online learning per se, but the widely experienced challenges created by the pandemic. They can't ignore that Jewish educators and professionals are facing a myriad of stresses—job insecurity, fear of the future, upended routines, balancing work and childcare, and, for some, illness and/or loss of loved ones. As one summed up, **"The biggest challenge for me by far is that the world we're living in keeps changing for the worse."** Even those who feel they can manage the emotional and mental challenges still need to figure out how to adjust to the collapsed boundaries between home and work: **"Everyone is at home with kids and families and animals and distractions. And it's not like working from home. It's being home working, which is completely different."** The only mitigating factor is the knowledge that everyone—from program staff to educators to students and their families—is in the same boat, prompting an understanding and desire to relieve burdens as much as possible.



Strategies to Address Challenges

Creating connections

Even as they recognize that online learning can't provide as much opportunity for interpersonal connection, program providers are still finding creative ways to bring people together and create bonds among them. One organizational leader described re-envisioning a planned immersive retreat as a fellowship for cohorts of eight participants, so that the more intimate context of these smaller learning communities could enable deeper connections. After participants attend text-study sessions with program faculty, a facilitator guides each cohort in discussion and helps participants get to know each other. As this leader noted, this required the organization to think differently not only about how it engages participants, but the kinds of resources and skills it needed to employ to do this effectively: *"That was a staffing model change for us, as typically we don't have a facilitator building those cohorts."* This approach combines two key strategies for encouraging virtual interaction and connection: keeping learning groups small and investing a significant amount of time and energy in group dynamics and cohort building. Another program provider offered details of how her organization used these principles to plan a "virtual retreat" full of bonding opportunities for participants:

"For our three-day immersive starting next week, we built in a few new things. Two weeks before we had an intro session online, just so people could get to know the program. And then a few days before we had cohort-building sessions where we really go deeper and people get to really know each other—why they're taking the course, what are their weaknesses and their strengths, how they hope to grow. And then we're doing things like coffee dates on

Zoom where we do some kind of interactive speed dating. Or we use this tool called Mural, something that's fun and social. All this because we know that people in cohort learning are going to learn best if they have relationships with the other people in the group."

Thinking outside the Zoom box

Program providers and the educators they work with have explored multiple ways to create online experiences that are more than a screen full of talking heads in boxes. Programs have used creative techniques within Zoom, employed other synchronous and asynchronous virtual platforms, and prompted learners to engage with each other and program content while away from their computers entirely. Approaches that have been particularly successful for both engaging and connecting learners include:

Zoom breakout rooms or Zoom links for small-group discussion: *"Breakout rooms can be problematic because the learners don't have control over them. So when we do a lot of group work, we provide Zoom links for the different groups. That's the kind of thing that creates independence on Zoom and a sense of empowerment, because people are feeling disempowered by their lives."*

Zoom functions that allow for rapid and ongoing participant engagement (reactions, polls, chat): *"People are constantly writing in the chat box: What's the one word that this brings up for you? On a scale of 1 to 10, what would you say you know about this topic? Short answers that everyone can see so that helps keep people active. Then at the end of each webinar we'll have people share in the chat what was their takeaway from today."*

The “flipped classroom” model, in which learners consume content on their own time (via video or written sources) and then discuss either synchronously on Zoom or asynchronously through a Google Doc or other collaboration software: “Any content delivery we do by video, and we use pretty much all the online time for interactive stuff, unless we’re bringing in a guest speaker. We have a lot of opportunities for students to engage, where students will read an article and respond to each other’s comments. It’s asynchronous, but it feels synchronous because people are talking to one another.”

Encouraging participants not to mute themselves in Zoom but instead speak spontaneously and even interrupt: “We ask people to come off mute and interrupt the facilitator—what we call uplifting interruption. That actually has transformed the learning because it creates a culture of conversation, as opposed to: I have a thought. Now someone sees I have a thought. They say, okay, unmute. I go to unmute. Now it’s been a minute and a half, and the flow is interrupted. It’s really enabled people to be more engaged and connected in their learning.”

Creative use of webcams, such as focusing not on participants’ faces but on the artwork they are creating: “We had sent supplies for creating visual art. And we said, we want you to turn your camera down to your workspace in front of you, and we’re all going to just see each other creating in this moment. Also they changed their names so no one knew who was on the camera—it was just pointing at their desks and their piece of art. It allowed people to be engaged with each other’s art, like we were in a studio.”

Opportunities to connect with fellow professionals in which the only requirement is that Zoom not be used at all: “[This program] is about giving professionals a platform to engage with each other one-on-one or in small groups around creative explorations of ideas and poetry and images, but not on Zoom. That’s the one rule—it may not be on Zoom. It can be done

asynchronously. It can be done on phone calls on walks, in recordings to each other. We’re seeing a lot of ways people are doing it, but it’s really about using creativity to connect to each other.”

Notably, a number of these strategies represent counterintuitive approaches to teaching and learning: focusing not on the learner’s face but on their artwork; encouraging interruption and spontaneity even while risking cacophony; making rich use of asynchronous tools to build interactivity. While these methods might not work as regular practice, in smaller groups and smaller “doses” the disruption they cause stimulates fresh and unexpected learning.

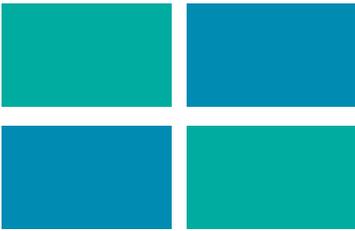
Providing emotional and spiritual support

As described above, program providers are well aware that participants are striving to teach and learn in a context of unique stressors and emotional challenges. Thus, supporting people’s emotional well-being is, for many, of equal priority to providing meaningful intellectual experiences. The goal of helping participants manage through the crisis has shaped the structure and content of some programs. As one program provider explained, “We spent a lot of time thinking as a faculty and staff team about the emotional texture of what was happening. What is my daily experience like emotionally in this moment? And what are some ways that we as a faculty team can take the practice that we know is so powerful, which is learning Torah, and how can we use Torah as real spiritual medicine in this moment?” This organization’s response was to create a daily 30-minute, drop-in “virtual learning space” so that community members would know they had an opportunity for regular connection where they could process the challenges they were experiencing. The organization also thought carefully about which Jewish texts would be meaningful and valuable without being too triggering, deciding, for instance, not to teach a Talmudic text about cities suffering

through plagues and instead choosing one about “how you can claim that God is with you when you don’t feel that it’s true.”

Another organization described a similar challenge of deciding whether or not to address the pandemic directly during a virtual retreat, ultimately letting the participants decide what would help them the most: “We asked the educators if they would like us to address COVID-19. We received a unanimous and clear, no, absolutely not—we’re drowning in COVID-19 and that’s the last thing we want to hear about. They looked at the retreat, even though it was an online virtual retreat, as really an oasis. And we looked at it as a time of replenishing their batteries.” A third organization communicated care and support by sending welcome boxes in advance of an online immersive program so that participants would have something tangible to enjoy before beginning their virtual work together. “We’re sending welcome boxes of curated stuff to help set the tone and care for the people who are going into this immersive. We sent them lots of goodies, even gift cards to buy themselves meals. All of those things made them feel very nurtured.” An organization dedicated to supporting teens through the upheavals of adolescence discovered that this work offered a foundation for addressing the emotional needs of educators and professionals as well:

“We heard from a lot of the educators who joined the webinars that they felt we were breaking down their sense of isolation and that they got, not just skills, but also a sense of being in community and support. I think a really important piece was that we were using the modalities that we do also with teens, including rituals at the beginning and end. So that was both showing them how to do that themselves when they work with teens, but also giving them a kind of spiritual gift. A lot of people really appreciated that because we were treating them not just as educators, but as humans going through the shock and grief of those early days.”



Emerging Opportunities

Expanded reach as barriers to participation shrink

All of the organizations we spoke with have found that moving online has expanded their reach and audience in ways both foreseeable and surprising. Many have seen their now-virtual programs transcend prior geographic boundaries or niche appeal to attract diverse participants from around the world. In some cases, this has resulted from a deliberate choice to open up programs that previously were only for selective cohorts or those who work closely with the organization to wider networks. Other organizations are reaching entirely new populations of learners who now have greater time and/or motivation to participate, such as teachers who previously were tied to classrooms or families looking for new ways to engage Jewishly. In addition, virtual programming has reduced many program costs and participant fees by eliminating the need for travel and lodging. This has helped organizations bring in speakers who might not have appeared in person but are able to join a Zoom call for an hour or two.

"We were surprised by how many people were interested in what we had to offer. We looked at ourselves as a small organization, a niche organization. Then we put things out by webinar, and we didn't do a lot of creative social media advertising. I'm really surprised by how many people signed up from all over the world—twelve different time zones. So that's something for us to think about in terms of just reaching more people."

"We opened up our resources and webinars more widely than just people who are currently running our programs. We shared

them with anyone who was on our mailing list or might have expressed interest at some point. A lot of those people have been coming back in because they've been finding value. I don't think that we originally necessarily anticipated that that would happen, and it's been really exciting."

"In early March when everything was shutting down, we jumped in with a couple of classes for kids, which was an audience that we had never tried to reach before. And because obviously wherever you were living you could attend, we were able to get a nice critical mass that was looking for that kind of thing. We always had some programs for kids, but before coronavirus we would just work with teachers, and that was our access to kids in school. But through this new moment we were able to access kids directly, and that has opened up some broader thinking about who our audience is."

"My joke internally is if [this program] succeeds, I'm not going to ever be able to explain why I need to spend \$40,000 again. We've got an amazing schedule and incredible speakers and people we may not have been able to get if we were in person."

More room for experimentation

While pivoting programming online was a strategy borne of necessity not choice, many organizations have ended up welcoming the opportunity to exercise their creativity and not feel bound by past expectations. Some have experimented with program structures that would have been hard to conduct in person. These have included daily "micro-sessions" for meditation, counting the Omer or learning a mishna, and "drop-in" hours for mentoring or conversation with peers, where there is no pressure

to make appointments because people don't have to leave their homes in order to connect. Having to re-envision multi-day immersive retreats as a series of virtual sessions spread over weeks has also inspired new thinking about how to deliver content and keep participants engaged over time. As one program provider reflected: *"We think as an organization we're innovative and creative, but it's always been within the framework of three seven-hour days. There's a level of fixedness that you don't realize until you subtract the main thing, which is getting together in person."* Another described a sense that people are more open to experimentation and tolerant of "works in progress." This has reduced the pressure on educators to always provide a "finished product," which in turn opens space for participants to be co-creators of their learning experience. Finally, a program provider vividly summed up the emotional reality of navigating an organization through truly unprecedented times.

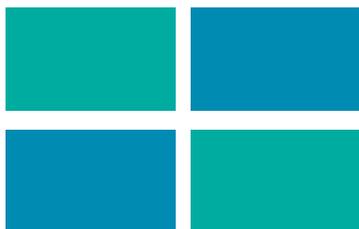
"This is a new world—no one's ever done any of this before. Especially in the Jewish world, you always heard at every board meeting, 'Oh, we tried that in 1952.' Well, no one's ever tried any of this! And that's terrifying and also an amazing opportunity. Nobody's ever done it before. No one's got an advantage on this, there's no rule book. And that's such an interesting moment to be in."

New skills for learners and educators

Finally, another opportunity brought about by the pandemic is the embrace of new technological and pedagogical skills. Program providers have found that as even older learners become increasingly comfortable with Zoom (as one said, "that's how they're seeing their grandchildren now") the options for online learning have been opened up for participants of all ages: "This has pushed them into using technology that they weren't comfortable with before, and that opens up possibilities for us to engage that audience in ways we simply couldn't

have, even if we had been forward thinking, because they weren't ready for it." Educators have had to gain even more comfort and skill with online modalities to be able to teach effectively. A number of organizations have provided professional development to help educators (and their own staff) become more skilled at engaging learners online, including employing many of the creative strategies described earlier. Beyond specific techniques, organizations have helped the educators they work with understand that online education requires a fundamentally different approach: "It's not just, get on Zoom and start teaching; it's about how do we create an experience? So we have design sessions with our faculty where we walk them through each session." As another program provider pointed out, such coaching and professional development is critical to ensure that programs and organizations can survive: "All our ideas are only as good as the people who can actually make them happen on a Zoom call."

"Even with our most accomplished and most experienced faculty, we've been working closely with them to think through design and cohort building. And that's key in terms of setting up expectations. You can't expect that what works in person will work online. You have to reduce the amount of content that you expect to get through. You have to speak for less time. You have to be 20 times more animated in your teaching online than you would be even in person; you have to really bring it. So we're really working with our faculty around that as well."



A Hybrid Future

As the famous quote by author William Gibson proclaims: “The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.” One could say that when it comes to engaging with technology, we have all found ourselves in a suddenly much more evenly distributed world.

Ready or not, Jewish educators and professionals have had to become adept creators and practitioners of online learning in a remarkably short period of time. While everyone yearns for a return to normalcy as soon as possible, the program providers we spoke with were confident that the new normal would look different, and better, than what came before. Most anticipate that their future programming will be a hybrid of in-person and virtual opportunities, and that the investments they are making today to improve and expand their online learning capabilities will strengthen their organizations and the field as a whole. New audiences reached online will now know they can find and participate in learning opportunities around the globe.

One organizational leader shared, “There’s a lot of people who we know are out there that want what we have, but we just didn’t have access to. And now we’re really orienting to serve that constituency, now that we have a much broader range.” Educators will have developed new skills for engaging and connecting learners that, in the words of one, “will make us even better teachers in person, because to do it well online is harder.” And organizations will know that assumptions about what is possible should continue to be questioned and tested. As one program provider reflected, “We’ve realized we can do more than we thought online. I think that we’ve been afraid to go deeper, because it’s hard. It’s not easy to make the connections that are so important to the process. But we’ve learned that we can do more, and we will need to.”

Interview Participants

Ilana Aisen, Executive Director, JPRO Network

Pamela Barkley, Director of Strategic Implementation, Moving Traditions

Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, Founder and Director, Ayeka

Rabbi Benjamin Berger, Vice President of Jewish Education, Hillel International

Susan Bronson, Executive Director, Yiddish Book Center

Rabbi Tamara Cohen, Vice President and Chief of Program Strategy, Moving Traditions

Adina Danzig Epelman, Vice President of Talent Growth and Hillel U, Hillel International

Dalit Horn, Former Vice President, Strategic Partnerships and Impact,
Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

Mark Horowitz, Vice President, JCC Association of North America

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, President and CEO, Hadar Institute

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Dr. Lesley Litman, Director, Executive M.A. Program in Jewish Education, HUC-JIR School of Education

Stephen Markowitz, Senior Director of Research, M²: The Institute for Experiential Jewish Education

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