It's hard to know what the future holds. Now more than ever.

The pandemic is producing major upheaval and we don’t yet know where all the chips are going to fall. We do know, however, that the world will be transformed, and the Jewish community will confront momentous changes.

That's why at Jewish Funders Network we've embarked on a scenarios design process that imagines how the country and the world will look in the next two years. We can't predict, but we can imagine alternative futures that will affect the Jewish community in different ways. We don’t ask if the scenarios are probable, but if they are plausible.

Watch video at vimeo.com/425196372
Scenarios: The World after the Pandemic

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Scenarios are not strategic plans; they are not about the community but rather, about the context in which the community operates. They are mostly about the things we don’t know, which are coming at us from the future.

Scenarios help organizations make sense of their context and identify trends and factors that might affect them in the future. That allows them to “wind-tunnel” their strategies by asking themselves how they’ll fare in each of the alternative futures they may face. What threats and opportunities may present themselves in each scenario? What do we need to do today to prepare? How do we survive, thrive, and be resilient in the future, knowing that the future is uncertain? As in a wind tunnel, one can ask, “How does my airplane fly in different conditions of turbulence?” and “under what conditions will it stall and fall?”

Scenarios don’t try to predict the future, and they are not good or bad. In fact, we avoid the commonly parlance of “best case” or “worst case” scenario, because all scenarios can present opportunities and threats. Scenarios are alternative stories of the future. They are built by imagining how different variables will evolve over time and assigning different outcomes to trends and events that are uncertain. Will the economic recovery be fast or slow? Will there be social unrest? Will families strengthen or weaken? Will travel resume? Will social distancing continue? Will education be mostly virtual? Will there be a religious renaissance? Will civil rights be curtailed? The different answers we imagine for each of these questions – and many more – form the building blocks of our alternative scenarios.
For our scenario process we had help from some of the leading experts in the world, Professor Rafael Ramirez from Oxford University and his team, whose technique has been used by major companies, governments and international organizations.

We convened a group of 15 funders and leaders, representing a cross-section of the community, and we worked through a series of meetings to develop the scenarios. Usually, the scenario work is iterative and takes weeks, even months. Given the urgency, we condensed the process and, of course, we did it by Zoom.

We started by listing and analyzing the uncertainties that we face, and there were, of course, many of them. The picture looked like this:
Then we selected two key dimensions to structure our scenarios: the strength of economic indicators; and the level of cohesiveness and equality in society. We then imagined how these two dimensions can evolve in the next two years.

The combination of these two key variables form the quadrant you see above, which we used to create our four alternative scenarios.
The JFN Scenarios Process

A New Renaissance
The economy has recovered and improved. Society has higher cohesion and less inequality. The world is experiencing a new version of the Roaring 20s.

Haves and Have-Nots
The economy has bounced back, but the recovery has accentuated existing inequalities and created even more fragmentation and social tension. This is a world of gated communities for the rich and civil unrest for the poor.

Back to the 1930s
The economy doesn’t recover. We are in a long depression and, simultaneously, the society is fragmented, even violent. Inequality rises. The economic crisis fuels extremist movements, and society approaches the breaking point.

A Smaller but Tastier Pie
The economy doesn’t recover, but the “smaller pie” is distributed more equitably. The society has learned to exercise solidarity, and a new spirit of cohesion has emerged from the pandemic. We are poorer but seem to be happier.

Each of the scenarios has “early warning signs” (EWS), indicators that one of the scenarios is coming to pass. For example, an early successful vaccine is an indication that “A New Renaissance” has become possible; mass protests and violence in American cities are an EWS of “Back to the 1930s”; the adoption of Universal Health Care could be a harbinger of “A Smaller But Tastier Pie.”
Scenario 1: A New Renaissance

The Roaring 2020s: Economic Recovery, Solidarity and Cultural Renaissance

By 2023, America is experiencing a mini golden age. Not only has the economy bounced back and surpassed pre-Covid levels, but also the polarization and inequalities of the society have diminished markedly. Americans enter this new year with a booming economy and a healthier, more cohesive society than three years earlier. In May 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic, it would have been hard to foresee this situation, but the world got a lucky break.

2020

The Jenner Institute in Oxford (a nonprofit vaccine research facility) starts human trials in its Covid vaccine. Some drug companies, subsidized by governments, take an enormous risk and start producing the vaccine before the tests are finished. The vaccine works, and, thanks to that foresight, vaccinations start in earnest in October.

With the vaccine’s success and smart social distancing protocols, the feared “fall wave” of COVID is minimized. This result ushers in a new era of inter-sector cooperation — specifically among the nonprofit, corporate and governmental sectors.

2021

By March of 2021, air travel is at 65 percent of pre-Covid levels. It takes until December to reach the pre-Covid mark, but that is not only because of the recession, but because the expansion of remote working has made business travel less necessary.

By mid-2021, American optimism returns. The economy is not yet at pre-Covid levels, but people feel that “we vanquished this together.” The pandemic is seen as a great equalizer, and people feel a sense of kinship and common destiny with their fellow Americans. The pandemic also has quieted some of the most furious disagreements in American society. The recognition that 30 percent of health care workers are immigrants tempers hostility toward immigrants. The discussion around “less or more” government is obsolete, as it is now obvious that the private sector and government both need one another. The need for universal health care, adjusted to the particularities of the American capitalist system, is widely recognized and there is little opposition to a Booker-Romney health care bill doing just that.

In September 2021, a bipartisan “rebuild America” program starts to update the country’s aging infrastructure. The program is a big provider of jobs and helps push unemploy-
ment down to 7 percent. People joke that it does not seem to matter who is in the White House, because all major legislation is bipartisan.

The increased national spirit, however, does not result in increased xenophobia. Americans recognize that effective international cooperation conquered the virus, and international organizations regain some of their former luster. Many people had started to move to the suburbs at the height of the pandemic, out of fear of disease and mounting crime, but by the end of 2021, that trend starts to reverse. When urban real estate prices plummet, American cities become younger and “cool.” However, the youth of 2022 is different from that of previous years. Everybody has been forced to confront the possibility of death, and that has made people less frivolous and more intentional. Generation Z leads a cultural and artistic renaissance that deals with transcendental issues and becomes a way of expressing the anxieties and hopes of the time. As David Brooks writes: “After the Black Death came the Renaissance, and after the Spanish flu, we had the Roaring ’20s. Now we have the Great Renewal.” American cities are the center of that renewal.

2022

Attendance at religious services dwindles. On the one hand, the success of science in the fight against Covid creates a backlash against organized religion which is seen (in most cases wrongly) as obscurantist and anti-science; on the other, people now have different ways of expressing their spirituality – mainly through art. In the Pew report of September 2022, the number of “Nones” (people of no religion) has grown to 35 percent of American adults. The fact that people feel a greater sense of kinship with the country as a whole suggests that ethnic, cultural, and religious identities will weaken.

The family unit was strengthened during the pandemic, but it is now weaker than ever. People feel they had been confined enough and now want to be out in the world. Children leave home as soon as they can, and adults go out with friends more than before. New forms of entertainment develop rapidly. During Covid, people developed a new appreciation for senior citizens, but now there is a subtle undercurrent of resentment against the elderly. Young people feel that their hopes and dreams have been sacrificed to save a few octogenarians who, even in normal times, consumed a disproportionate amount of resources and produced little. In sum, solidarity in the general society means weakened solidarity inside the home and the “tribe.”

Artificial intelligence continues to develop rapidly, but remote learning has not replaced traditional schooling. A blended approach follows, which enriches education for everybody. Innovations like project-based learning and hybrid methods are now the norm. The rapid economic recovery has forestalled the collapse of the higher education system, but even so, many young people prefer to attend community colleges and cheaper alternatives that allow more flexibility.

2023

As we enter 2023, the Dow Jones reaches 35,000 points and unemployment is back at 4 percent. Americans feel safer and optimistic. However, some worry how long this can last. Talk of a “bubble burst” and growing debt threatens the confidence. The planet, which has been neglected in favor of a speedy recovery, is taking revenge, and extreme climate events are now the norm. Many start to think, maybe, we are having “too much fun.”
Conspiracies, Xenophobia, and AI: Economic Recovery and Trumpworks 2023

By 2023, the US economy has finally recovered; the stock market and employment have bounced back up. At the same time, the country is more divided than ever, inequality has risen dramatically, and social cohesion has all but disappeared.

How did we get here?

2020

In the fall of 2020, the second wave of the Covid pandemic is under control. An exhausted population accepts severe restrictions of freedoms in order to fight the virus. Populations can now be segmented by risk, and many activities require specific permits based on demographic and age. The elderly remain quarantined until July 2021 so that the economy can reopen. An emergency executive order validated by the Supreme Court allows surveillance and tracking of cell phones, app data and social media posts in order to minimize the Covid spread. In September, the government effectively uses individual Google search history to find and isolate new outbreaks.

Governments around the world have responded to the second wave by closing borders again, and the Trump administration imposes a complete ban on immigration. ICE deports 7 million immigrants, sparking protests in Los Angeles and New York City, but under the new rules of the Covid prevention act, federal forces intervene to quell protests.

Nevertheless, due to the pressure from white affluent populations in Southern states, the economy starts to reopen. The upper classes can afford the protective gear and experimental treatments that by September are becoming available, so the epidemic moves to poorer populations, especially communities of color. The economy reopening generates a burst of activity and a moderate sense of economic optimism, especially among the well-to-do. Government stimulus packages give people some spending money, and sales start to reactivate.

The economic optimism benefits President Trump’s re-election campaign, and he promises to close the country to “external attack” and reactivate the economy. His slogan is, “I made America great once, I can do it again.” At the same time, Covid-19 emboldens voter suppression efforts in many states. Virtually all Southern states, and some swing states like Georgia, Florida and Wisconsin, close polling stations in African-American neighborhoods, arguing that it is unsafe to operate them during the pandemic. The Supreme Court rules that elections arrangements are up to individual states. Trump wins a second term, and the GOP retains the Senate and wins back the House. This GOP, however, is different from the party of Reagan, Bush, McCain, and Romney. In fact, a smear campaign related to a manufactured scandal forces Romney to resign his seat in the Senate.
By 2021, civil unrest has become an intermittent feature of all major American cities; but now the government has ample power to repress mass protests by force if needed. Crime, fear of disease, and unrest spur many people to move to the suburbs, reversing much of the urban resurgence from previous decades. The wealthy increasingly live in gated communities with private security, education, sanitation and health services. Those that do not live in a “private neighborhood” tend to live in racially and socially homogenous neighborhoods, and people drastically reduce interaction with other demographic groups. In some states, communities called “whiteopias” emerge; these towns exist to defend “the values of whiteness.”

The Trump government has resisted calls to expand Medicaid and Medicare during the pandemic, and instead opts to give cash to citizens “so they can make their own choices.” The management of the stimulus package results in a windfall for major corporations. Despite the public resentment that ensues, large companies bounce back and start re-hiring people. Stocks of major companies recover, rallying the markets, but another result of this process is an unprecedented concentration of wealth. Small businesses, from hair salons to neighborhood restaurants, cannot survive the first months of the Covid crisis, and are swallowed by big companies. The salary gap between executives and workers increases dramatically.

By mid-2021, new anti-libel laws gain approval with minor amendments by SCOTUS, significantly muzzling the president’s most vocal critics and forcing much of the opposition media semi-underground. CNN is acquired by one of the “Covid Rich” (those that benefited from government bail-out), and becomes fervently pro-Trump. People fearfully start limiting political posts on social media and try “not to talk politics.” In general, self-censorship is rampant: It is widely seen as un-patriotic to criticize the reconstruction efforts of the government. The Covid vaccine, which starts to become available in March 2021, is given first to the rich, then to health care workers, then to the elderly, and finally to the rest of the population. Glitches in the system delay the rollout, but a significant portion of the population eventually receives the vaccine, although it is an out-of-pocket expense, with neither Medicaid nor Medicare covering the cost.

In the third quarter of 2021, a new tax break passes in Congress, paving the way for greater accumulation of wealth by the highest earners. The markets react favorably and reach pre-Covid levels. Employment rises steadily, and millions of jobs are created. At the same time, to aid job creation, Congress eliminates the federal minimum wage. Despite the fast recovery, trust in institutions is an all-time low. Americans distrust not just institutions, but one another, and being a “prepper” seems cool. Borders are now open for travel, but people are still reluctant to do so. Despite widespread vaccination, people remain fearful and continue to wear masks in public. The Christmas holidays of 2021/2022 sees very little international travel, especially because Green Card holders can now be denied entry as they return to the U.S.
2022

Conspiracy theories about the origin of Covid have gone mainstream, with antisemitism and xenophobia at levels never seen in America. Jews – and other minorities – retreat into their own communities. Communal spaces are “safe havens” where people find warmth and meaning. Many rediscover the joy of community, and, as people seek to find meaning after the pandemic, religious studies soar, including experimental spiritual rituals. We also see a renewal of the arts, despite the covert censorship. With fewer mainstream media options, the educated classes turn instead to reading more literary material, which sees a revival.

The Pew report “on the American family” of June 2022 shows that the rate of divorce is down, adult children are living with their parents longer, and grandparents are increasingly seen as part of the nuclear family. It appears that, after the quarantine, Americans have re-learned the importance of family. Family also becomes a central issue in popular culture and the “happy family” of the 1950s becomes the model to aspire to. Many workers continue to telecommute even after the quarantine. The prevalence of working from home further fuels the exodus to the suburbs; people have more time to spend at home, and childhood and teenage anxiety decrease. Paradoxically, while misogyny is mainstream, at home there is a new spousal equality, as parents share more domestic chores and childcare – something they learned to do during the quarantine.

Schools and universities never go back to “normal.” Online learning continues advancing by leaps and bounds. By 2022, Zoomlearn is the preferred platform for most educational institutions. By the 2022-23 academic year many regard a traditional college experience as an unnecessary luxury, and half of the residential campuses have closed. Outside the Ivy League, online college became the norm, and much more affordable.

A.I. also continues to advance. The ban on immigration deprives many sectors of the economy of badly needed workers, especially in health care. Robots do jobs once filled by immigrants: Machines measure vital signs, drones deliver mail, and Ubers drive themselves. The economy becomes even more efficient, as red tape and legal processes simplify dramatically during the pandemic. A.I. moves into many more areas of the economy. By late 2022, for example, medical prescriptions are submitted via a kiosk, transmitted directly to the pharmacy, and delivered by drone – all without human intervention. Studies deem the quality of diagnoses to be 23 percent superior compared to those made by actual doctors.

The intensive use of A.I. means that privacy has all but disappeared. Employers now check applicants’ medical records before hiring, and it is legal to monitor employees’ activities through cellphone tracking, even outside of work hours. There is some criticism to this phenomenon, but even libertarian Senator Rand Paul admits that “It’s too late now to unscramble those eggs.”

2023

In 2023 the “Trumpworks” plan to renew American infrastructure is launched. Although the project is designed to benefit contractors and companies close to the government, it transforms much of the country’s aging infrastructure. It seems a perfect launchpad for Mike Pence’s presidential campaign, which together with widespread voter suppression and the relatively docile media seems like a walk in the park. Large masses, however, feel neglected and left behind, including the increasingly angry Generation Z that sees its dreams and hopes dashed. Gen Z-ers feel that they are never going to achieve the same standard of living that their parents enjoyed. A new source of unrest, maybe even revolution, is quietly brewing.
Scenario 3: Back to the 1930s

Economic Depression, Violence, Fragmentation, and Family Refuge

By 2023, America is reminiscent of 1930s Europe. A long economic depression takes an enormous toll on the country, and the society fragments and divides.

Many hoped that by the summer of 2020, the virus will be under control and the economy will start its recovery; however, the autumn wave of the virus is even more deadly than the first and lasts through the winter. An antiviral treatment remains elusive, and the vaccine takes longer to develop than expected. All throughout 2021 there are different waves of the pandemic. The recurring waves prevent the economy from recovering, with staggering unemployment continuing through 2021. Roughly one in five Americans is looking for work, and salary levels are plummeting. This cycle continues until the vaccine is finally confirmed and available in 2022.

2020-2021

Before losing his re-election bid, President Trump tries to jumpstart the economy, but that produces staggering amounts of debt, and America’s economy is now structurally weak. The transfer of power to the Biden-Abrams ticket takes place.

In the fall of 2020, we see the beginning of a wave of political violence that will engulf America. Far-right movements refuse to acknowledge the authority of the federal government, while popular discontent with the economic situation gives rise to violent socialist protests, which demand a redistribution of wealth. The government tries to navigate a middle way; while immigration remains closed, universal health care passes. An enacted fiscal reform measure heavily taxes the wealthy, but that fails to curb the growing deficit.

The field of artificial intelligence fares relatively well in the crisis, as more technological tools develop for remote learning, health care, and retail businesses. Throughout 2021, technology companies prevent an even more severe slump of the Dow Jones.

Urban violence and fear of contagion spurs many who have the means to, to move to the suburbs. The rich live in gated communities with private security, education and sanitation services. The urban resurgence of the last two decades is halted and reversed. Remote work becomes the norm, even during waves when the virus is under control, further exacerbating the geographic divide between urban and suburban populations.

After the long months of isolation, many people feel a greater appreciation of family, seeing their homes as refuges from the uncertainty of the outside world. However, the prolonged economic crisis puts families under great stress, and resulting psychological illnesses become more pervasive. In this context, people resort to faith communities for spiritual, social, and even financial support. While the broader society faces dissolution, smaller communities thrive as they become a haven and a refuge in an uncertain world. Many compare the situation to that of the early 1900s, when mutual aid societies mushroomed. More and more people rely on credit unions and cooperatives instead of big banks, which are widely viewed as being predatory and unfair.
Scenario 3: Back to the 1930s

2022

Some communities see their world upended by Covid. In March 2022, the anger that had been simmering in the ultra-Orthodox community explodes, with thousands of young people demanding change from community leaders they believe failed them during the pandemic.

There is also a flood of experimentation in new forms of social organization. Urban communes and agricultural cooperatives emerge. These groups provide both well-being and meaning to growing numbers of Americans.

Travel remains rare, and few Americans can afford it. The new American Airlines, which was nationalized by the government after the collapse of the industry, offers subsidized travel, but there are not many takers.

During the Covid crisis, the education sector transforms. By the 2022 academic year, enrollment in residential colleges has plummeted to 40 percent of the 2019 level. Commuter colleges and online education soar, and 85 percent of students attend state schools.

While everybody suffers in the crisis, the depression disproportionately affects the poor. Despite the new government’s redistributive policies, economic inequality keeps growing as the wealthy can better protect their assets and income.

The midterm elections of 2022 see the rise of both the far left and the far right. “Proud Christian Nation” and “Socialism and Justice” rhetoric monopolizes the debates, which often erupt into arguments and fistfights.

2023

2023 is reminiscent of 1932 Europe. Many see democracy as incapable of solving America’s problems and instead turn to totalitarian options. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, there is a political excitement and “revolutionary energy” not seen since the 1960s. Generation Z, whose dreams were obliterated by the depression, leads the charge in demanding change.

At the same time, moderates are not hopeless. A new centrist party is starting to emerge as an alternative in the 2024 elections. While at first this “third way” fails to excite the masses, more and more people coalesce around its ideas.
Scenario 4: A Smaller but Tastier Pie

Depressed Economy and Stock Markets, Yet Signs of Unity, New Social Norms and Healthier Communities

Vice President Elizabeth Warren is presumptive nominee of the new Democratic Progressive Party for 2024. She enters the primary season unopposed, largely because of the success of the Biden Administration’s passage and implementation of three programs:

• Healthcare for All passed in early 2021 replacing the Affordable Care Act with a single-payer system in each of the 50 states; central to the new system is the development of networked community health centers that are transforming how primary healthcare is delivered and ensuring that all have access to immunizations, testing, and preventative care.
• Revenue from new corporate and carbon taxes as well as luxury and estate taxes has helped extend the payout of unemployment benefits beyond the original 26 weeks that were the norm before the coronavirus.
• The Green New Deal drives new infrastructure investments in public transit, improvement/upgrade of the electrical grid, development of innovative technologies to reduce plastics waste and to create “Relocation Opportunity Zones” to reduce crowding in urban environments. New tax incentives spur increased philanthropy in partnership with government and impact investing in domestic industry.

The enactment of these fundamental shifts in social policy come after significant economic upheaval throughout 2020 and 2021 available in 2022.

Late 2020-2021

Joe Biden and his running mate Elizabeth Warren win the 2020 election in a landslide. Nonetheless, the new administration gets off to a shaky start. Those without access to key social services take to the streets in violent protests in major urban areas, requiring intervention by the National Guard and state militias. Far-right conservative groups and white supremacists also stage increasingly violent demonstrations in the middle of the country as their economic and gun rights concerns mount.

A second major wave of coronavirus in March of 2021 temporarily defuses the unrest by sending everyone back into their homes for two months. Fear of further violence, and a better understanding of how many more deaths occur when responses are not coordinated, informs the government’s response. This time the federal and state governments coordinate on all facets of the response, including declaring emergency response acts. Testing is readily available, and governors take charge of allocating scarce resources. Yet another reappearance of the virus again in early 2022 leads to greater investment in social safety net programs, along with policies discouraging new construction in dense urban areas.
The Democratic Party reorganizes during the midterm elections in 2022, and the Democratic Progressive Party emerges on a platform of equality and traditional “American Values” of justice, compassion, and freedom for all. Only then does the Better Together Society legislation begin to pass with bipartisan support. It portends a new era of smaller, yet sustainable living for all, which recognizes the continued threat of pandemics and the need to re-envision American life.

Urban and suburban planning goes into hyper-drive to decrease population density and pollution, promote responsible and more local food consumption and add more green space and gardens. The High Line in New York and the Salesforce Park in San Francisco become models of how to repurpose and reinvent green spaces in urban environments. Large office buildings are converted to open spaces or repurposed as affordable housing.

The vaccine goes into full-scale production only in mid-2022, and continued shortages due to manufacturing glitches mean that only individuals over age 60 or in certain high-risk professions (teachers, caregivers for the elderly, restaurant workers) have access to the vaccine. Corona outbreaks continue to occur around the world. International travel is constrained, and global trade, particularly manufacturing, remains limited. With international trade and real wages down, there is an unseen benefit: Traditional manufacturing jobs return to the United States.

The slow rollout of a vaccine has meant that social distancing and limited gatherings remain in effect. This creates a new focus on local communities, neighborhoods and reliance on extended family and traditional community organizations – both secular and religious.

Maintaining small gatherings requires that schools, houses of worship, summer camps, and events all be smaller. These limits also necessitate new organizational models of collaboration and cooperation. The Tri-Faith Initiative in Omaha is the example of such models with shared worship and community space as well as just one back office for Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups. Similarly, arts and culture spaces repurpose themselves as venues for online as well as in-person content and talent. In many communities there is a marked increase in volunteerism – greater empathy and communal purpose.

To lower the unemployment rate, many states incentivize young adults to stay in college for an extra year or two, especially if they are willing to pursue degrees in areas where there remain significant shortages – computer and environmental sciences, teaching and mental health. Significant shortages of healthcare workers spur new taxpayer-subsidized incentives to attract people to the field, such as hardship pay, tuition assistance, loan forgiveness and housing. Telemedicine for non-emergency care is now the norm.

Due to the initial unrest following the first wave of the virus, as well as subsequent outbreaks and the absence of a vaccine, many people who are able to do so continue to work remotely. The digital divide that existed pre-Covid remain severe until philanthropists, industry and the government collaborate to make Internet connection accessible to low-income and other underserved communities.

Social distancing, remote work, educational disruptions and a new gig economy generate innovative digital solutions for knowledge gathering/sharing and actual experiences. Not surprisingly, ubiquitous digital and video technology and remote service delivery in turn generate complicated new legal discussions and decisions around privacy, fake news, and online speech. The Supreme Court is set to hear a landmark case about the publishing of Zoom transcripts where the record button was visibly on, but participants were not explicitly notified.

Many professionals who were furloughed during the initial quarantine are not rehired into their prior positions. Instead, they become contract workers, spurring the formation of a Gig Workers Union, which is now the country’s second largest union after the NEA.

The pace of life has slowed down – patterns of consumption and limits on travel keep people close to home and making their own food and clothing. With time to think, purpose and meaning have taken on new levels of importance. The hope now is that the economy will heal, at albeit a lower level of GDP than before the coronavirus hit, but can begin to add new jobs and stability to individual and family life.
Implications of the Scenarios

After designing the scenarios, we asked what their implications are for the Jewish community. How are different sectors of the community affected in each of these alternative futures? What are the challenges and opportunities presented in each alternative future? Which of our basic assumptions become obsolete? How do we need to re-imagine the organizational architecture of the Jewish community to better respond to the new context in each scenario?

- How will human service agencies cope with the double whammy of increased needs and decreased funding in the scenarios in which the economy doesn’t recover?
- How can we do Israel engagement in a world in which travel remains impossible or infrequent?
- How can we benefit from a possible renaissance in arts and culture?
- How can we keep the community safe in the scenarios in which antisemitism increase?
- How can we work with college students when, in most scenarios, there’s a decrease of young people going to campus?
- Will we see more assimilation?
- In what scenarios do young Jews become politically radicalized? How do we change our strategy if that happens?
- In a scenario in which more Jews move to suburbs, what happens to communal real estate assets in cities?
- What happens to our advocacy work? Will we still be focused on Israel, or will we devote more energy to domestic issues that affect our impoverished constituencies?
- What happens to day schools when tuition becomes widely unaffordable? Conversely, if the public school system collapses, can day schools benefit?
- Will the hostility of the general society in some scenarios result in a greater sense of community among Jews?
- Will organized religion – and synagogues – grow or diminish in importance in each of the scenarios?
- What critical skills that we lack today are needed in each of the scenarios?
A New Renaissance: Implications for the Jewish Community

This scenario could have far-ranging implications for the Jewish community. Here are some possibilities:

• The economic crisis is short. Some Jewish organizations don’t survive the crisis, but most manage to bounce back.

• The speedy recovery means that the ecosystem of Jewish innovation comes back stronger. The search for the vaccine was, after all, trial and error, so society gains an appreciation for that daring attitude. Those who take risks in Jewish engagement are lionized.

• Because of the decrease in economic inequality, more people can pay tuitions and membership fees. The influence of major funders decreases, and there’s a movement towards greater democratization of Jewish life. The experiments with online learning, A.I., and other technologies mean that the cost of Jewish education (and doing business in general) decreases, so many organizations can charge lower tuitions or fees, attracting even more people.

• Organizations have the capacity to embark on big projects, but many of those projects are not systemic. An opportunity to “redesign the community system” may be lost.

• Antisemitism decreases both on the left and the right. This is obviously positive, but the community realizes that much of its identity is built around antisemitism – from campus activism to Israel engagement – and without the perception of threat, many organizations lose their raison d’etre. Jews also feel more comfortable participating in secular activities, and the competition secular institutions pose to Jewish organizations increases.

• In an open and welcoming society, it’s seen as “not cool” to close oneself within one community. Programs of bridge building with other groups become more popular.

• Human services agencies in and for the Jewish community struggle, because poverty is seen as a government, rather than a philanthropic, problem, leaving many programs designed for the specific needs of Jews (like support of Holocaust survivors) with less funding.

• As international travel returns to normal and people are eager to experience the freedom to travel, travel-based programs soar. In fact, they become a major venue of communal activity, not only in relation to Israel.

• A.I. tools are redirected, not to allow people to socialize distantly, but to enhance the person-to-person experience.

• Young adult activities that are campus-based suffer as a large number of students study online or attend commuter campuses. Campus organizations like Hillel and Chabad that engage students become less relevant in a “no-campus” era.

• The renaissance of the arts offers a new, partially unexplored avenue for Jews to connect with Judaism. There’s a great opportunity to fund and create programs for Jewish arts at all levels, from amateur to professional.

• Traditional religion suffers, while people do experience with new spiritual ideas such as smaller ‘chavura style’ movements. Jewish spirituality thrives.

• Geographically, Jews experience a contradictory phenomenon: Some have moved to the suburbs, but others, especially the young, move to the cities to enjoy the new cultural renaissance. The result is a need to repurpose Jewish communal infrastructure in both suburbs and cities.

• At the beginning of the crisis, the family was the focal center for many, and family-based communal programs thrived, but as the renaissance takes hold, the family unit weakens and it’s not so cool to do family-based activities once people can finally be outside. Jewish programs that are family-based need to rethink their strategy.
Haves and Have-Not$: Implications for the Jewish Community

This scenario could have far-ranging implications for the Jewish community. Here are some possibilities:

- The economic crisis is short. While some Jewish organizations don’t survive the crisis, most manage to bounce back.
- The resulting economic inequality, however, results in fewer people able to pay tuitions and membership fees; so community revenue models depend more and more on mega funders that control much of the communal agenda.
- There is an increase of antisemitism both in the left and the right, demanding enormous expenditures in security.
- A fragmented society means that communities will need to “fend for themselves”; we could see a re-emergence of Jewish health systems, Jewish defense groups, and “Hatzalah”-style EMT services in many areas. Gated Jewish communities could emerge.
- However, human services agencies in the Jewish community will be hit hard because poverty will not diminish and government subsidies will decrease. Many funders will be asked to contribute to these agencies.
- With international travel decreasing, many Israel engagement activities will be in crisis. With time, Israel travel will resume, but many programs will be prohibitively expensive for some.
- The development of AI will result in a significant increase in the use of technology for Jewish education. In a fragmented and even violent society, distant activities will flourish.
- Young adult activities that are campus-based may suffer as a large number of students study online or attend commuter campuses. Campus organizations like Hillel and Chabad that engage students will become less relevant in a “no-campus” era.
- In this context, where the outside society is seen as repressive and threatening, Jewish spaces may regain their luster.
- Many families will look at the community as a refuge. Parents will want for their children to spend time in the protected space of the JCC. Small suburban synagogues and communities will offer comfort and belonging to many. In that context, larger, less personal synagogues may suffer or need to be reimagined.
- Many may also retreat into religious study, searching for meaning and trying to make sense of a turbulent context.
- As in other times of crisis, Jews may need to experiment with a renewal of Judaism, creating new spiritual movements and re-inventing their tradition.
- The move of Jews to the suburbs may create a disconnection between Jewish infrastructure (buildings, schools, etc.) and the place of residence of those Jews. There’ll be pressure to sell real estate, but in a depression, there’ll be few buyers.
- The family will become the focal center for many, and family-based communal programs will thrive.
- The disparity in economic means will determine that we will have a two-tiered community, one for the wealthy and another for the rest. The spaces for the entire community will be weaker or nonexistent.
Back to the 1930s: Implications for the Jewish Community

This scenario could have far-ranging implications for the Jewish community. Here are some examples:

- The long and persistent economic crisis causes a domino effect of organizational collapse in the Jewish community.
- There is an increase of antisemitism both in the left and the right, demanding enormous expenditures in security.
- A fragmented society means that communities will need to “fend for themselves”; we could see a re-emergence of Jewish health systems, Jewish defense groups, and “Hatzalah” style EMT services in many areas.
- Human services agencies in the Jewish community will be hit by a double whammy – increased demand for services combined with less funding, including less government support.
- With international travel decreasing, many Israel engagement activities will be in crisis.
- There could be, however, an increase in aliyah as Jews seek to escape the double effect of economic crisis and political instability.
- Young adult activities that are campus-based may suffer as a more students study online or attend commuter campuses. Campus organizations like Hillel and Chabad that engage students will become less relevant in a “no-campus” era.
- The ideological upheaval may also be enticing for some Jews. As history demonstrates, revolutionary movements attract a great number of young Jews. The Jewish community will struggle to be as attractive and exciting as those movements.
- Many families, however, will look to the community as a refuge. Parents will want their children to spend time in the protected space of the JCC. Small suburban synagogues and communities will offer comfort and belonging for many. In that context, larger, less personal synagogues may suffer or need to be reimagined.
- Many may also retreat into religious study, searching for meaning and trying to make sense of a turbulent context.
- As in other times of crisis, Jews may need to experiment with a renewal of Judaism, creating new spiritual movements and re-inventing their tradition.
- The move of Jews to the suburbs may create a disconnect between Jewish infrastructure (buildings, schools, etc.) and the place of residence of those Jews. There will be pressure to sell underused real estate, but in a depression, there will be few buyers.
- The family will become the focal center for many, and family-based communal programs will thrive.
- However, the long depression will take its toll on the mental health of families, and the community will need to devote many resources to deal with trauma and family violence.
A Smaller but Tastier Pie: Implications for the Jewish Community

This scenario could have far-ranging implications for the Jewish community. Here are some examples:

- The economic crisis is long and persistent and that causes a domino effect of Jewish institutional collapse.
- Antisemitism decreases on both the left and the right. This is obviously positive, but the community realizes that much of its identity is built around antisemitism – from campus activism to Israel engagement – and without the perception of threat, many organizations lose their “raison d’etre.” Jews also feel more comfortable participating in secular activities in general, and the “competition” among? Jewish organizations increases.
- Because society has a more egalitarian vibe, there’s a push for more democracy in Jewish organizations. The influence of major funders decreases, and membership models grow. However, economically challenging times mean many find it impossible to pay membership fees and tuition.
- There is a movement towards capping the cost of Jewish living, with a push towards communal funds that will allow individual Jews access to basic Jewish experiences (camps, day school, etc.).
- Experiments with online learning, A.I. and other technologies bring down the cost of education (and doing business in general) decreases, enabling Jewish schools to reduce tuition and membership costs and thus attract more people.
- Human services agencies in the Jewish community are hit by a double whammy – as poverty increases, a rising demand for services and a reduction in donations. Government subsidies help, but they are insufficient. The reliance on government subsidies also means that many Jewish-specific programs (such as help for Holocaust survivors) go unfunded.
- With international travel decreasing, many Israel engagement activities are in crisis.
- There could be, however, an increase in aliyah as people seek to escape the double effect of economic crisis and political instability.
- Campus-based young adult activities may suffer as a large number of students shift to online or commuter programs. Campus organizations like Hillel and Chabad that engage students will become less relevant in a “no-campus” era.
- General society feels safe, so Jews, as they always do, flock to progressive causes and movements. It’s hard for the Jewish community to compete with secular movements, especially those empowered by the Green New Deal.
- Many families, however, will look to the community as a refuge. Parents will want their children to spend time in the “protected space” of the JCC. Small suburban synagogues and spiritual communities will offer comfort and belonging to many. In that context, larger, less personal synagogues may suffer.
- Traditional religion suffers, while people experiment with new spiritual ideas such as smaller “chavura-style” movements. Jewish spirituality thrives. As in past times of crisis, Jews may need to experiment with a renewal of Judaism, creating new spiritual movements and re-inventing their tradition.
- Geographically, Jews experience a contradictory phenomenon, some moved to the suburbs, but others, especially the young, move to the cities to enjoy the new cultural renaissance. The result is a need to repurpose Jewish communal assets in both suburbs and cities.
- The family is the focal center for many, and family-based communal programs thrive at the beginning of the crisis, but weaken as the renaissance takes hold and it’s not as cool to do family based activities once it is safer to go outside. Jewish programs that are family based will need to rethink their strategy.
How do we prepare to be resilient and thrive in each scenario? What are the steps that we need to take today to confront the future? What new skills will we need? What new organizational architectures? What new coalitions?

Each of us would love to see the world evolving towards a preferred scenario, but we resisted the temptation of a “good” or “bad” judgement on any, as each scenario presents us with challenges, threats, and opportunities.

To better understand the implications, we asked five different questions:

1. **What assumptions and assets are no longer relevant in this scenario? What will change?**
2. **What opportunities arise for this sector in the new scenario?**
3. **What skills and competencies will be needed?**
4. **Which organizational architecture fares better in this scenario?**
5. **What do we need to do now to start preparing for this scenario?**

The next step in the scenario process is to analyze in depth the implications that each scenario has on a specific community system or area of activity. This step is the bridge between scenario design and strategy. An effective strategy responds to a specific set of circumstances and to a particular reality. When that reality changes – as it does in most scenarios – it’s important to revise the validity of our strategy (wind tunnel), analyze the threats and opportunity that the scenario presents and identify the skills and attitudes that will help us thrive.

In our scenario process we looked at the Jewish community as a whole. Yet, the implications of each scenarios are different if you are, for example, a human services agency, a JCC or a campus Hillel. Therefore, we divided the community into different sectors (Day Schools, Camps, JCCs, Young Adult Programs, etc.)

The next step was a deep dive into the implication of one scenario (“Back to the 1930s”) for one sector (Young Adult Programs). Naturally, the exercise must continue, analyzing the implications of each scenario for each sector.
What are the implications of this scenario for the system of engagement programs for young adults and college students that our community has been building over decades? How do this sector’s organizations fare in this alternative future? What new strategies are needed to succeed in that world?

We provided some tentative answers to these questions. Other observers and practitioners may provide their own or disagree with ours.

What assumptions and assets are no longer relevant in this scenario? What will change?

- Today, an estimated 80 percent of all American Jews go to college and have a campus experience. As a result, our engagement strategy relies heavily on campus organization and activities. In “Back to the ’30s,” the assumption that most Jewish students will go to campus needs to be revised. Due to the long economic slump, many will not be able to afford college and those that can will prefer cheaper options, like commuter schools and community colleges. On top of that, online learning will become standard and most students will learn from home at some point in their studies. The top universities will still have many Jewish students, but on other campuses, organizations like Hillel will find themselves with empty buildings.

- We don’t tend to think of young adults as a population in need, but in “Back to the ’30s” a substantial number of young people will need help for basic needs. Hillels may have fewer participants, but those participants will need more than Shabbat dinner; in fact, they’ll need dinner, period.

- The economic crisis means that more students live with their families, rather than in dorms or with their friends. In fact, there are more multi-generational households than before. The age of economic independence gets pushed further away.

- More and more young people rely on the Jewish community for jobs, internships and employment opportunities.

- Today, despite its recent growth, we assume that antisemitism is a marginal phenomenon. Despite high-profile incidents on some campuses, by and larger Jewish students and young adults don’t feel like targets of bigotry in their daily life. In “Back to the ’30s” this changes, and antisemitism becomes a major concern of Jews and young adults.

- Travel continues to be severely restricted by both the virus and the economic crisis. The assumption that college-age Jews will travel – especially to Israel – is no longer relevant.

- The vast majority of young Jews today are politically aware but not politically active. We don’t assume
that political activism is a serious competition to Jewish engagement. However, in this scenario of political upheaval, we will see two contradictory and simultaneous tendencies. Some young people will consider politics too “dangerous” and eschew them completely; others, maybe the majority, will become politically active and even radicalized.

• In a context of insecurity and upheaval, the Jewish community becomes more insular and protective. That attracts some young people but is a turnoff for many who dislike the parochialism of Jewish life.

• We assume the young to be more secular than their elders; however, in this scenario, religious studies may thrive as they provide a degree of peace and refuge from the outside world.

• The expectation of social mobility is dashed. Most young people in this scenario expect to do worse than their parents, and the value of “hard work” diminishes, because it doesn’t guarantee a better future. That produces a range of consequences; from political radicalization, to stress, to addiction and other self-destructive behavior, to cynicism and nihilism.

• In this scenario, aliyah, now assumed to be marginal behavior, becomes a possibility for many young Jews.

What can we do today? | Deep Dive

What opportunities arise for this communal system in the new scenario?

• This scenario restricts campus activities but allows organizations serving college-age Jews to do more community outreach. In this scenario, the community is the new campus.

• Student organizations can (and need to) partner with other Jewish organizations that expand their reach beyond campus.

• Since fewer people can afford college – and a college diploma doesn’t guarantee a better job – there’s a need and an opportunity to revive a robust network of Jewish vocational and professional schools. Accreditation and skill building can become gateways to Jewish community.

• This scenario could also present an opportunity for the revival of traditional “Jewish universities.” They’ll be havens from antisemitism, and, if they can provide tuition support, they’ll be a magnet for Jewish students.

• In a world in which young people can’t afford to live alone, organizations that provide communal living, like Moishe House, or “urban kibbutzim” offer a desirable alternative to living with families.

• Times of crisis are also times of spiritual quests and search for meaning. A religious revival, as we saw above, presents an opportunity for Jewish engagement. Seminaries may see an increase in enrollment.

• The long economic crisis will make it easier for the community to attract great professional talent, and the professional level of the communal human resources can increase.

• The community can now use “basic needs” as a driver of communal belonging. Young people may join if communities can offer practical solutions to their concrete problems, like finding a job or a place to live, or access to health insurance. There is an opportunity to revive many organizations that Jewish immigrants used in previous centuries.

• In a time of great upheaval, there’s an opportunity for Judaism to provide meaning and comfort. We may see a re-emergence of Jews championing global causes with a distinct Jewish message, like Rabbi A.J. Heschel.

• In parallel, security provides an avenue for engagement. Like in many European countries, the security organizations recruit volunteers and become “in” for young people.

• With online learning, there’s an opportunity to increase the quality and depth of Jewish education. Young people can remotely access the best scholars and teachers in the world, and the quality of Jewish content can increase.

• Global communities can develop online, across borders.

• Since aliyah has become an option for many, it can be an avenue for Jewish engagement.
What skills and competencies will be needed?

• To thrive in these scenarios our community will need to realign its skillset. Professionals and leaders will need to be skilled at pastoral care, as they’ll be required to provide social and emotional supports to constituents.

• In a community with economic challenges, local leaders won’t be able to offer all the programs and services needed. In that sense they’ll need to be more like “curators” guiding people to where the services they need can be found.

• Professionals will need the technical skills to help young people navigate concrete problems – like access to health benefits, legal issues, loan forgiveness, job retraining, etc.

• In a world in which young Jews are pulled between political activism and Jewish practice, communities will need to learn integration skills, to help students do both.

• Communal organizations working with young adults will need to be even more proficient in technology. They will need to be able to use tools, while also ensuring those tools reflect larger values around things like social media, privacy, civility, etc.

• Communities – and young people – will need more security skills.

• In a poorer world, there will be less room for duplication, so leaders will need to know how to cooperate and be synergistic across organizational boundaries.

• As young people in this scenario will be searching for meaning, professionals will need to be conversant in religious and philosophical issues. It won’t be enough to know religious practice, because young people will be asking transcendental and philosophical questions.

Which organizational architecture fares better in this scenario?

• In this scenario, consolidation of organizations becomes necessary. However, centralization will need to be “smart”, considering the diversity of interests of young Jews.

• A “network architecture” works well in this scenario, minimizing costs and maximizing access to services and programs.

• Models of membership will need to be revised, because many Jews won’t be able to afford dues.

• Big funders will gain prominence and influence. That may discourage democratic participation in organizational governance. As a result, organizations will need to create mechanisms of participation, especially for young people, that create a degree of democracy in Jewish organization.

• The role of “front-line” leaders (counselors, young rabbis, etc.) will be crucial, and organizations will need to find ways of providing the autonomy and resources to serve the changing needs of the constituents.
What do we need to do NOW to start preparing for this scenario?

The world in this scenario is different than the one we know. To succeed in this new world, there are actions that funders and communal organizations can take now.

- Provide organizations with support in scenario planning.
- Proactively look for synergies and possibilities for mergers and consolidations, and provide funds and technical support for these processes. This should start with a mapping of all organizations in this space to identify synergies, duplications and gaps.
- Create a “map of need” of young Jews, with the goal of identifying human services needs, such as food insecurity, housing insecurity, psychological and other health risks, etc.
- Learn from models that combine Jewish communal activity with job and career development; for example, the Detroit model of support for young Jewish professionals or the Ariel Job Center in Argentina.
- Create new models of scholarships and tuition support, like city-wide scholarship funds.
- Establish programs for student loan forgiveness.
- Encourage students to borrow from Hebrew Free Loans instead of taking on predatory student debt.
- Make sure that the best talent in the community survives the wave of Covid layoffs.
- Create a database of the best professional resources – educators; counselors; speakers; consultants etc.
- Develop resources to support families.
- Create a skill development program to train communal professionals in the skills that this scenario requires.
- Fund the development of new business models, strategic and business plans for organizations.
- Anticipate the quest for meaning and increase the Jewish literacy of professionals and leaders.
- Beef up security organizations, including those that train young volunteers.
- Train professionals to make the most out of technological tools – beyond the Zoom meeting.
- Start recruiting pro-bono lawyers to assist young Jews in issues of benefit access; loans, tenant rights, etc.
Scenario design is an iterative process. Thus, the process we did at JFN is by no means the end of the road. We envision the following next steps:

- JFN working groups focusing on different funding areas of the community —Human Services, Arts and Culture, Haredim, Summer Camps, etc.—will identity implications, opportunities and threats for their respective sectors.
- JFN will assist funders that seek to deepen these scenarios and apply them to their own work.
- JFN will work with its partners toward convening a broad communal conversation about the post-Covid world.
- Jewish organizations, umbrella bodies or national agencies, can use these scenarios as they craft their strategies for the future. Each organization should ask itself: Am I ready to face any of these scenarios? If not, what do I need to do?

Thinking of future scenarios can be unsettling. It requires open-mindedness and humility, because it demands that we admit that there are many things about the future that we can’t control. We realize that, ultimately, we cannot stop the tsunami of the future, but with the creativity and vision, we can learn how to surf it.