JewishTogether.org

COVID-19 &
ORGANIZED JEWISH LIFE

SCENARIOS ABOUT OUR FUTURE

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v1.0

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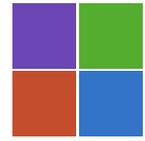
INTRODUCTION

The scenarios in this document were developed by Jewish organizational leaders to understand possible futures and as a planning tool for navigating the massive uncertainty of the coming years. They were developed under the auspices of JewishTogether.org, which is powered by the Jewish Federations of North America, and drew on the help of diverse professionals from various sectors of our Jewish community networks.

> **The scenarios respond to this key question:**
>
> What might the lives of Jewish communal stakeholders look and feel like in the next 24 months?

Exploring the scenarios is only a first step. To help leaders apply the work, we have created a companion toolkit that organizations can use when developing strategies to respond to the scenarios. Using the toolkit, organizational leaders can explore their own critical, strategic thinking related to the scenarios and ask themselves the questions below.

1. Given each individual scenario, what could organized Jewish life look like (or need to look like) in the next 24 months?
2. Given our values and vision for our community and the capabilities and assets at our disposal, what should we be doing over the next 24 months, and how should we be doing it?

For additional information, please email scenarioplanning@JewishTogether.org.

The Jewish Funders Network has also produced a set of planning scenarios that can be found here. There are similarities and differences between theirs and ours. However, the planning exercises shared in the companion toolkit can be used with either set of scenarios. We encourage you to review both, and choose those that you believe will be most useful for engaging in scenario–planning discussions in your organization.

ABOUT SCENARIO PLANNING

Scenarios are stories about the future that help us make better decisions today. These hypotheses about how the conditions around us may change over time allow us to imagine and rehearse different strategies for preparing for the future or, whenever possible, shaping it.

Scenarios are not singular predictions. Rather, they are vehicles to a better understanding and even anticipation of how complex and uncertain factors can play out in very different ways—in this case, how a combination of social, technological, economic, health–related, environmental, and political dynamics might lead to very different conditions under which our members, donors, constituents, and community stakeholders might live.

These scenarios are based not only on what we know to be true today, but also the multiple directions in which current key tensions could resolve and the way surprising new developments could further exacerbate or, perhaps, mitigate the health–related, economic, and other challenges we face. Scenarios capture a range of future possibilities, good and bad, expected and surprising.

Scenarios require us to consider all the plausible worlds we might live in as we develop plans and contingent actions for our work.

PLANNING FOR MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES

Scenarios are not about planning for the perfect, fool-proof strategy. Rather, with scenarios we can determine a portfolio of actions to keep our organization resilient. We live in times of unprecedented change, and scenarios are tools we can use to prepare for pivoting and adapting to multiple unknowns.

The goal of planning strategically using scenarios is to structure complex conversations and agree on assumptions so there is clarity regarding potential risks as well as what needs to be done and why. Decisions for the future will always rely on imperfect information. Using scenarios, we can ask questions such as the examples below.

- How will our constituent needs change under each scenario?
- Which strategy will be most successful?
- What opportunities for partnership does each scenario open?

Part of the planning process includes staying tuned to signals of possible futures and talking regularly with other groups both inside and outside our network.

HOW THESE SCENARIOS WERE CREATED

Scenario design is part science, part art. It is speculative and based on the early signals of change we are seeing today in combination with what we imagine might happen tomorrow.

These scenarios were developed over conversations with more than 500 people, including multiple stakeholder groups and expert sociologists. We started by identifying the critical uncertainties that most impacted organizations, members, donors, and constituents. We then met with smaller groups across the Jewish Federations of North America and the broader Jewish network to better understand key uncertainties and refine possible futures. Along the way, we tested our assumptions to make sure the scenarios told plausible stories about the future.

There is no such thing as a "perfect" set of scenarios. They are not right or wrong. Rather, the criteria for a good set is

- they challenge current assumptions about the future;
- they diverge from one another, telling very different stories for how the future may unfold;
- they are balanced, presenting both positive and negative potential paths, and highlighting the good and bad of a given scenario;
- they are plausible, in that their logic is understandable, so we can see how we might get there, even if it does not seem likely at the moment; and
- they are relevant to our core questions about the lives of Jewish communal stakeholders but are not overly complex (that is, they do not attempt to address every issue we are facing).

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN READING SCENARIOS

While there are hundreds of scenarios we might imagine, most of us can only hold three or four possible futures in our heads at a time. The four scenarios we have chosen paint a range of possibilities while remaining distinct. When reading them, it is important to recognize that:

- reality will not unfold exactly as described in any of them (the actual details may vary);
- we may see elements of the scenarios continue to be in tension with each other;
- communities or regions may variously experience them and their effects or even find themselves in different scenarios, which is particularly true, of course, when it comes to differences between America and Canada;
- every scenario could come to fruition over the next 24 months, and because we may seem to be heading down one path and then quickly shift to another, the objective is to constantly reassess our situation and how we are investing time and resources toward any one future, pivoting, if necessary, as we see how reality unfolds.

SCENARIO FRAMEWORK

The four scenarios start with different assumptions about two critical questions: what are the possibilities for social gathering and will financial stability improve or worsen over the next 24 months? Each scenario describes what is likely to happen in people's lives given these two anchoring questions. All of the scenarios assume that vaccine development is at least 18 – 24 months away.

Maintains or improves

EXILE

Economic transformation for some, few choices for others

MANNA

Public health breakthroughs provide a path to recovery, for now

Financial Stability

Mostly does not return

Civic and Social Gathering

Partly or mostly returns

PLAGUES

Lingering struggle to survive in a highly fractured society

TRIBES

Small, collective risk–taking to navigate an inconsistent world

Worsens

HIGH LEVEL SCENARIO SUMMARY

EXILE

In Exile, a new technological reality enables urban flight and remote living for elites. Some can afford the geographic and digital shifts, while those who cannot are economically and socially left behind.

MANNA

In Manna, health breakthroughs improve day–to–day conditions and people begin to gather again. However, privacy concerns linger, and some jobs never return.

PLAGUES

In Plagues, lockdowns continue and misinformation abounds. Trust and the economy deteriorate as physical gathering remains risky.

TRIBES

In Tribes, people are restless to get back to their lives, so they take necessary risks to gather with those they trust. Different regions and states play by different rules, making it increasingly expensive for organizations to operate safely and efficiently and complicated for them to establish consistent protocols and practices.

The names of these scenarios refer to pieces of the biblical Exodus story.
- "Manna" was food given from heaven to the Israelites while they were on their journey through the desert.
- "Exile" refers to the idea that the Israelites were on the way to but shut out of their promised land, Israel.
- "Plagues" were dispatched by God onto the Egyptians as punishments. There were ten in total, and they came one after another, leading to the destruction of society.
- "Tribes" refers to the factions into which the Israelites divided while in Egypt, for reasons of governance but also with political simplications.
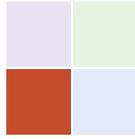
PLAGUES

Lingering struggle to survive in a highly fractured society

This is a world in which…

The response to the health and economic crises becomes further politicized, leading to intentional misinformation and poor coordination in efforts to understand and contain the virus. Continued lockdowns stall reopening efforts. They are met with compliance in some places and resistance in others, while fear and uncertainty increases everywhere. Growing tensions reignite unresolved social issues, including racial injustices and economic disparity. Trust is harder to find, and the perceived risk of physical gatherings remains high, not just for health-related reasons but also due to violence and crime.

Market systems strain to adjust as the economy's ability to function disappears with continued limits on physical gathering domestically and trade disruption globally. Access to food and other basic household needs is intermittent, and income insecurity proliferates as jobs continue to be lost (except among the very wealthy or self-reliant). Personal health is a priority, and individuals do whatever it takes to look out for themselves and their immediate family, including avoiding any gathering deemed nonessential.

Headlines from the Future

- "What's old is new: Organized crime sets sights on food delivery trucks"
- "Amazon launches Homeschooling.com for Prime members"
- "Secret High Holiday services shut down by Health department"

PLAGUES: ADDITIONAL DETAILS
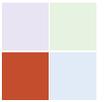
Health, Politics, and Economy

- The virus is poorly contained. Individuals are stressed and spend significant time meeting basic needs.
- Significant misinformation campaigns abound with alternative narratives that go viral. There is substantial political division, and public policy prioritizes the economy.
- There is economic downturn, depression, and potential collapse. Households are in financial distress, even some of those in the upper-middle and upper classes.
- There are perceptions and instances of scarcity as supply chains are challenged, including those that produce food and protective equipment and food. There are random, ad hoc relief measures with little guarantee of ongoing support from government.
- Social competition increases. Basic social services, including health care, require waitlists.

Community and Daily Life

- Traditional school systems are rejected in favor of homeschooling or self-organized co-ops.
- Virtual experiences abound but new technologies, such as virtual reality, are expensive and inaccessible to many.
- Networks are hyper-local. Families move closer together or create pods with neighbors or other trusted social groups to address the lack of childcare and financial resources and because travel is not possible or desirable.
- Anti-Semitism and racism rise considerably as supremacist groups look to blame minorities for social ills; there are higher degrees of physical violence against minority groups.
- Families and individuals have less emotional capacity to engage in Jewish life and do not see its connection to their daily struggles. Ritual, when possible, is done at home and only by the very knowledgeable.
- For most people, travel and movement are considered too risky and very expensive, However, the very wealthy enjoy mobility, even around the world.
- For some, Israel is considered attractive for relocation, and there is a surge in *aliyah.*
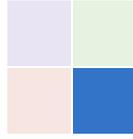
TRIBES

Small, collective risk–taking to navigate an inconsistent world

This is a world in which…

In the face of continued economic decline and social isolation, people are restless and anxious to get back to work and the other important aspects of their lives. Individuals willingly take certain types of risks to gather. Meanwhile, the lack of a coordinated national effort leads to different regions, states, and cities experimenting with different rules for containing virus transmission.

Given a patchwork of safety guidelines, and without clear and consistent legal precedents, organizations are mostly left to their own devices in implementing health and safety measures and assuming liability. Most physical gathering is highly resource intensive and capacity limited. As a result of continued health uncertainty and financial insecurity, people are exclusive and selective in the types of groups and people they spend time (and money) with, and they seek out trusted options that meet their personal standards of care.

Headlines from the Future

- "Superdome given permission to transform into 'outdoor' food court"
- "The hottest job for recent liberal arts students? Private camp counselor"
- "Texas Governor Abbott now promises California–style reopening after multiple abrupt shutdowns"

Health, Politics, and Economy

- Decisions are made regionally, state by state, city by city, and district by district.
- More understanding exists about which conditions lead to higher or lower transmission and how to design and manage spaces for lower risk.
- There is a reliance on behavioral solutions to contain transmission (e.g., masks, spacing, handwashing, and medical or technological solutions).
- Spikes and occasional periods of shelter-in-place orders still occur.
- Selective governors and mayors use shelter-in-place orders and economic policies to make political statements.
- The economy grows very slowly and primarily stays in recession.
- Consumers are cautious with spending.
- Recent college graduates settle for lower paying and often gig or hourly wage work.

Community and Daily Life

- Schools reopen, but nervousness among parents abounds, and those with resources look for smaller, private alternatives.
- Places (including Israel) with more liberal reopening policies (or safe shelter-in-place guidelines) attract new residents.
- Technological innovations are in a cycle of growth and stall as the economy waxes and wanes.
- Small groups of trusted friends meet regularly; individuals do not travel beyond their pods.
- DIY micro-communities grow based on hobbies or tasks, such as joint purchasing.
- Biases against minority groups grow, including anti-Semitism and political rifts.
- Instances of multiple generations living in one home increase.
- Life moves outdoors to reduce virus transmission.
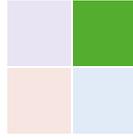
MANNA

Public health breakthroughs provide a path to recovery, for now

This is a world in which…

There is a coordinated, highly technical approach to reopening. Global efforts drive health breakthroughs with a greater understanding of the virus, treatments that reduce effects, and standard containment guidelines. Governments shoulder the costs of testing and tracing services. A new public service corps helps manage the distribution and implementation of public health initiatives. Organizations still make changes to physical spaces, but the bar is lower given the reduced risks to individuals and organizations' ability to leverage the public health system.

At first, people cautiously gather but then gain confidence to broaden their movements. Individuals generally accept the new rules around personal tracking, mandatory quarantining, or shelter in place when necessary. However, for many, choices about where they spend time and with whom have been permanently altered due to recent traumatic experience.

As economic activity recovers, many feel they are on stable ground. However, not everyone is back doing the same job as before, and some jobs do not return at all. Portions of the middle class in every community continue to slide into financial hardship. Even as life seems to be getting back to a semblance of the pre-virus normal, unintended consequences emerge, including rising stigmas against the vulnerable of those who were sick, and debates ramp up over data surveillance and privacy.

Headlines from the Future

- "China, Europe and U.S. science coalition releases COVID symptom treatment protocols"
- "Anti-mask wearing case reaches Supreme Court"
- "Contact-tracing-management track seen as viable college alternative for some high school grads"

MANNA: ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Health, Politics, and Economy

- A second wave of cases drives greater cohesion and willingness to comply and individuals trade privacy and mobility rights for the greater good of public health. Some groups reject the idea of government control but are seen as fringe.
- Government funding is spread wide but thin across industries and organizations. Relief programs grow. Greater emphasis is placed on supporting essential workers, and jobs programs are adopted. Greater public and private partnerships create opportunities for employment.
- Individuals take cautious approaches to spending disposable income on long-term commitments.
- Most people continue living in their pre-virus homes, although a noticeable minority leave urban areas.
- The number of vulnerable people grows, and their mental health and other needs increase due to isolation.

Community and Daily Life

- People regularly make informed trade-offs between gathering socially and increasing their risk of transmission. Mid-sized and small gatherings are common.
- Public schools reopen with new health regulations and families see public schools as viable options.
- Digital experiences are complementary to small, live experiences and are accessible because more families have financial resources.
- Though highly controlled, travel is more open; strict no-fly rules are enforced based on contact tracing and testing data.
- Extremist groups slink back into the shadows as racist and anti-Semitic expressions are viewed as fringe.
- A time of questioning societal assumptions arrives in which people examine past affiliations, how they spent time, and their commitment to a better world.
- Israel feels more distant because of the length of travel and the lack of a need to escape.
- Donors seek opportunities to express gratitude and thanks for better economic and living conditions.
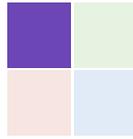
EXILE

Economic transformation for some, fewer choices for others

This is a world in which…

Funding for collaboration, social networking, telehealth, and other relevant technology platforms accelerates, leading to a new digital lifestyle for those who can afford it. New employment opportunities open to those with the required skills and/or education, including otherwise unemployed youth, and this revitalizes key economic and social prospects for a good portion of the middle class, especially the upper-middle class. For those groups, physical distancing becomes much more bearable and in some cases is preferred.

The demand for new ways of living and working remotely is partly driven by the desire of certain families to flee unhealthy environments and is partly due to societal shift from centralized, physical offices to an increasingly distributed (rural and ex-urban) and remote workforce. This not only changes the demographic makeup of many places but also leads to a massive split in the quality of life between different types of workforces and populations (e.g., creative/tech/office workers, shared economy workers, and essential workers). Two-thirds of the population is left behind because they cannot afford the transition to an expensive digital-first lifestyle, lack the training and personal networks needed to participate, or are in the wrong job at the wrong time.

Headlines from the Future

- "She left, he stayed: How some couples are navigating remote opportunities and essential work requirements."
- "Virtual music platform Singalong becomes the latest collaboration unicorn."
- "Jewish groups forced to move off public social media platforms amidst growing online anti-Semitism."
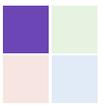
Health, Politics, and Economy

- Virus containment is in flux and reliant on physical distancing.

- Classic left–right tensions initially ease due to overall economic stability, but exacerbate issues of race and class.

- The economy continues to shift from physical commodities to digital; there is more gig work and not necessarily a return of past jobs.

- Those with financial means restructure their lives around digital solutions, and new digital platforms and solutions abound.

Community and Daily Life

- People move permanently and temporarily out of expensive, crowded urban areas; once less–desirable communities now offer a better and more affordable quality of life.
- Online education is preferred, particularly by families with more means.
- Alternative spiritual solutions and communities grow (such as Headspace, virtual congregations, and Peloton as a spiritual space).
- Driven by a growing lower class, racist and anti–Semitic actors mobilize online, including coordinated attacks against Jewish platforms.
- Jewish activity happens primarily online and at home.
- Business connections with Israel strengthen due to the booming technology scene.
- Many consider Israel a viable place to live thanks to telecommuting opportunities.
- Geographic proximity continues to matter less; individuals choose experiences based on factors including perceived quality, trust, time of offering, ease of technology.

KEY DIFFERENCES IN EACH SCENARIO

		PLAGUES	TRIBES	MANNA	EXILE
CONTEXT	Economy	Depression	Recession	Recovering	Partially Recovering
	Virus containment	Poor, marked by continued lockdowns	Incremental, state–by–state, marked by cautious experimentation	Contained, marked by proactive coordination and tracking	Fluctuating; those who are able to escape dense areas do so
	Wealth disparities	Middle class splits further from upper class	Middle class splits up and down, with wide regional differences	Split between permanent and temporary workforces	Split between remote and in–person workforces
	Politics	Highly divisive	Competing for power	Cohesive	Tensions across class lines
DAILY LIFE	Gathering	Limited, with lockdowns	Small and resource intensive	Small and large, with informed trade–offs	Remote and, technologically enabled
	Social structures	Hyper–local	Proximal, trusted	Mix of old and new networks	Interest aligned
	Spending patterns	Down significantly across the board	Highly selective given higher cost of living	Unpredictable, with less commitment	Shifts to digital goods and services
	Household Structures	Multigenerational / extremely tight knit if not related	Multigenerational / communal (roommates, co–ops)	Small units / single adults	Small units / single adults / some multigenerational

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