

Opinion

Relational Engagement During a Pandemic: GatherDC's Heartbeat Model

<https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/relational-engagement-during-a-pandemic-gatherdcs-heartbeat-model/>

May 1, 2020

By Rachel Gildiner

There's so much we can't do right now.

That's one way of looking at things. We're canceling conferences and flights. We're postponing weddings. We aren't even grocery shop the way we used to.

We're doing so much right now.

We're caring for ourselves and others in the face of anxiety and grief. We're working from our bedrooms, children on our laps. We're counting our lucky stars to have those jobs.

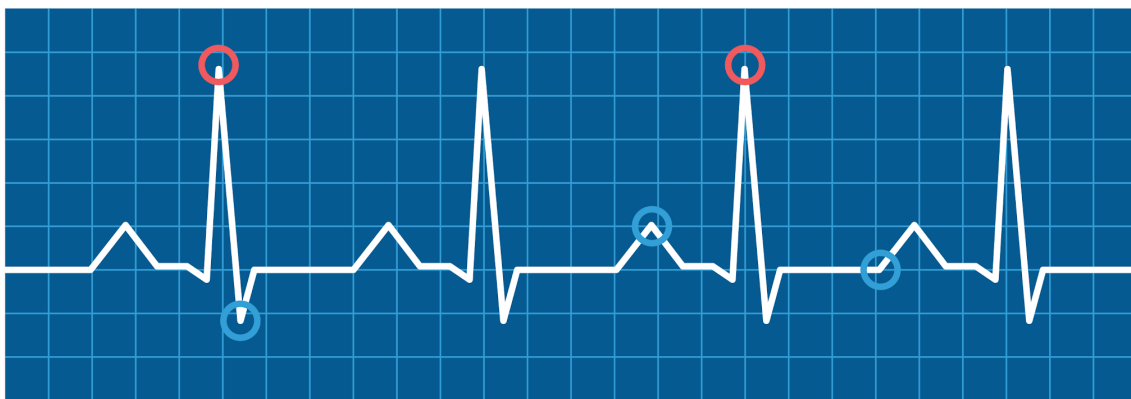
COVID-19 has forced organizations to revisit their mission statements, and GatherDC – which connects young adults to one another, engaging them in DC's Jewish landscape, and facilitating their development of meaningful adult Jewish identities – is no exception. Our mission isn't changing. Our *tools* are; there's no way around that. But over and over, our local work has shown us that relationships are everything. All our events have only succeeded because of our relational approach. Because being in relationship with people happens most deeply and authentically outside of any one program.

This moment in time has opened up the space for us all to do more of it.

These past few years, other cities have invited Gather to come share our relational methodology. Our most common refrain? **“If you want to support 20- and 30-somethings in your city, the solution is not adding another program. It’s spending more time in *relationship* with them.”** To illustrate this, we developed a relational curriculum and teach something we call The Heartbeat Model of Engagement.*

We believe deeply in this model and it has proven successful locally, but there’s no time like the present to put it to the test more broadly. So we’re offering it here and inviting you to try it yourself.

**We developed this framework long before a pandemic began threatening our bodies and communities. The heartbeat obviously has a different connotation now, and we hope readers will forgive the now sensitive metaphor.*



Larger experiences and planned gatherings

These can also be “relationalized” and deepen engagement and belonging



Relational work that happens in between programmatic offerings

Lasts longer—more ongoing and connects larger experiences to one another

When we plan our year, we aim for a healthy mix of planned events (the red “large beats”) and longer intervals of ongoing relational work (“small beats”).

In the past, large beats have been retreats, fellowships, classes, and larger-scale gatherings. Now they look like Zoom conferences, Zoom classes, even Zoom happy hours.

Small beats used to include coffee chats with DC newcomers. Running into someone at Trader Joe’s and enjoying an impromptu catch-up. Reaching out to someone on their birthday or other milestone in their life.

Now they’re all remote. But the small beats still bridge the large ones. **In order to keep Jewish life alive and active for our community members, both small and large beats are equally necessary – and neither should exist without the other.**

Three Tips for This Moment

1) Prioritize the small beats.

Even pre-pandemic, there was often too much focus on the large beats, and not enough on the ongoing relationship building. If the last six weeks have reinforced anything, it’s just how necessary (and nourishing) the small beats can be, from the spontaneous virtual happy hour to the “just checking in” text.

These are the tiny but plentiful threads that will keep our community fabric woven closely together throughout this strange season – and over the course of our lifetimes.

So as you prepare for large beats, *block time on your calendar* before and afterward to connect thoughtfully with individual attendees. And check in on those who don’t show up, too.

And practice the small beats of relational work within your own teams. Build in 15 minutes after every possible meeting. Jot down what you hear. What anxieties are spoken or unspoken? What small wins are people celebrating? What reassurance do they seek? And what might all that mean for the larger beats you're planning?

2) Put relationships at the center of your large beats.

You cannot “just move your existing program online.” (Priya Parker illuminates this in her recent *NYT* op-ed and podcast.) If you do, you risk contributing to overwhelm, as Micol Zimmerman Burkeman wrote for *eJP*.

If you *are* adding something to the calendar, remember that gathering looks different now. Many people are craving connection but are also completely oversaturated. Zoom fatigue is real.

So please, before you plan another webinar, *have a game plan* for the small beats before and after. Infuse your large beats with intentional moments of connectivity and belonging – help people see and be seen, not just by you the program host, but one another as well. If you listen deeply through the small beats, you'll facilitate better experiences that offer people what they truly need.

3) Zoom out! (No pun intended.)

At GatherDC, the Heartbeat Model helps us support people in living whole, healthy Jewish lives. But we can't be everything to everyone, so we plan our experiences with the larger context in mind.

What might that look like for your institution right now? Could you...

- Serve as a connector or concierge, rather than convening a new program? (Here's an example.)
- Cancel or postpone an event?
- Partner with another organization to promote one really powerful program, instead of independently launching more?

This isn't about doing more work. It's about working differently. Let's do more for the people we serve by doing less program planning and more relationship building right now.

Jewish programs are essential. Learning, celebrating, and mourning together is essential.

Yet there's equally important (or even more important) work to be done in the in-between, in those small beats.

Let's find purpose in this time by getting to know the people we serve deeply and authentically. Let's connect them to what exists while also filling the "open" space with meaning. It seems so simple, but – when done with intention – simply being in relationship with our community can transcend any one discrete program.

Please don't hesitate to reach out if you want to learn more about GatherDC's relational methodology and how it can help your community right now: rachelg@gatherdc.org.

Rachel Gildiner is the Executive Director of GatherDC, and is a leading expert in the field of relational engagement education. Through the power of personal connection, GatherDC builds community and helps Jewish 20s & 30s build sustained adult Jewish identities. Before launching GatherDC, Rachel pioneered Hillel International's peer-engagement and education initiatives on college campuses nationwide. <https://gatherdc.org/>