

ONETABLE



May 22, 2020

OneTable was about to embark on a full impact study with Benenson Strategy Group (BSG) when COVID-19 hit. In consultation with the Research Advisory Board, OneTable pivoted to a shorter, faster survey. We wanted to know: How is the OneTable community coping during this crisis? OneTable engaged BSG to field a pulse check survey to our community, and Sacred Design Lab and Designing Empathy to dive deep with journal entries and focus groups for a small sub-group of participants. These two studies were separate, but complementary.

This resulting report is very informative and presents a picture of how challenging the virus has been in the lives of young adults. Nearly two thirds of survey participants (65%) know someone who has contracted or died from the virus.

As can be expected during a crisis, there is an increased awareness of, and positive feelings toward, participants' religious identities. Particularly important is their strong sense of being Jewish, and of incorporating Shabbat into their lives more regularly.

The report also raised some important questions for us: What resilience underlies our community's feelings of luck and gratitude? What else are they grieving? We need to identify these sources of loss to help us understand what more OneTable can offer them.

All of this just underscores to us the value — and implicit message of fostering a Jewish identity — OneTable is bringing to people's lives. We are so thankful that these participants shared with us so generously, and we are eager to share what they've taught us in their own words.

Signed,
Dr. Barbara Schneider, on behalf of the OneTable Research Advisory Board

Rhythm

Relationship

Reckoning

This report illustrates key themes emerging from a three-week research sprint by Sacred Design Lab, Jamie Betesh Carter of Designing Empathy, and OneTable, drawing on journal entries and four focus groups with 34 participants. We interviewed these same participants in the summer of 2019 in research funded by the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

OneTable is a national nonprofit originally designed to grant permission to young adults and lay leaders to create and find weekly Shabbat dinners, building the muscle to design and practice home-based rituals. On March 13, OneTable pivoted in response to COVID-19, now only allowing solo Shabbat dinners, Shabbat events for people who live together, and virtual Shabbat dinners. During the three weeks of fielding this study, OneTable has supported nearly 1,000 Shabbat dinners in those three categories, 70% of which have been either solo or with roommates, the remaining 30% were virtual gatherings over video. This report explores insights and potential opportunities for OneTable and the wider field of communities and Jewish organizations serving young adults.

THERE WAS BEFORE, AND THEN THERE IS NOW.

This is a time of reckoning. Prompted by a global disruption to our daily rhythms and a transformation of existing relationships, COVID-19 has forced us to reflect on how we want to live.

People are struggling. Some have lost loved ones or know friends who have tested positive. Work is uncertain. We're mourning the loss of normalcy. Nearly everyone has someone who they desperately want to hug. **And yet, human resilience is everywhere, as people connect in new ways and remember what matters most.**

THREE KEY THEMES EMERGED FROM OUR RESEARCH.

We've lost a daily **RHYTHM** and are eager to find a new one.

- *Experience: "It's like we have six Tuesdays and Shabbat."*
- *Opportunity: Tools to delineate time and context to create a new rhythm of life.*

Our **RELATIONSHIPS** have transformed and we need new strategies for connection.

- *Experience: "People who are loosely in your circle can be out of sight, out of mind."*
- *Opportunity: Small-scale moments of casual contact to create accidental community.*

We're **RECKONING** with a changed world and don't just want to go back to how it was.

- *Experience: "We are forced to look within, at whatever really matters."*
- *Opportunity: Meaningful pathways to shape the world we want to live in, tomorrow.*

Rhythm

EXPERIENCE:

"IT'S LIKE WE HAVE SIX TUESDAYS AND SHABBAT."

OneTable guests and hosts miss having a rhythm of life. Whether longing for the regularity of a repeated time, like the commute to work, or the predictability of seeing specific people in a specific place, like having lunch with a group of coworkers to moan about the boss, the anchors of time and place have been disrupted. Unexpectedly, we miss the FedEx guy, a chat with a barista, and our workout community.

"It's funny because I don't even know the people there that much, but I miss feeling like I belong to a group."

One day bleeds into another. Work hours drift into the evening and sleep is disrupted. For those living alone, the isolation is especially difficult and anxiety is spiking. Quickly, the same neighborhood walk loses its charm.

As one restaurant worker writes, *"I even miss the awful customers who are mean,"* so desperate are we for the familiarity of experiencing something new every day.

Because so much now happens behind a screen while we're physically in the same spot, we can no longer express different facets of ourselves in different spaces with different people. We feel simultaneously constrained and adrift. We need new markers that help us transition between work, rest, and play.



OPPORTUNITY:

TOOLS TO DELINEATE TIME AND CONTEXT TO CREATE A NEW RHYTHM OF LIFE.

Already, people are finding ways to create or reinterpret existing anchors to give the world a sense of rhythm. Making coffee as a morning ritual to start the day with intention. Counting the Omer. Sleeping in on Saturday mornings. Nightly sit-down dinners with a partner. Sometimes others impose a regular timetable, like a daily 9:15am work check-in call.

Best of all, of course, there is Shabbat. Although celebrating on Zoom is not the same as being together, and it no longer feels like a luxury to come home to after a busy week, it is ***“the way to have a difference in the days which all feel the same.”*** Some have started dressing in Shabbat clothes, which they haven’t done in years. Others are avoiding the news for a day or leaning into tech breaks. And many are cooking more than ever, baking challah and asking family for old recipes.

“Being able to cook has given me positive emotions and feelings.”

“I’ve been cooking Sephardic food with my boyfriend and learning about dishes I didn’t know about before.”

This isn’t only about the extra time on hand and feeling good...but an expression and exploration of their Jewish identity.



HOW MIGHT WE ENCOURAGE AND RESOURCE THIS INSTINCT FOR HOME-BASED RITUAL?

For OneTable:

- So far since sheltering in place, OneTable has launched OneTable Live — a weekly assortment of ritual, cooking lessons, screenings, discussions, and more — to bolster in-home ritual efforts.
- The rhythm of time is innate in the observance of Shabbat. How can OneTable help participants tap into that rhythm the rest of the week?
- Making chicken soup during Passover connected interviewees to the resilience of their ancestors. What stories of courage and creativity could Shabbat foods embody and how can OneTable support this storytelling?

For the field:

- Changing out of sweatpants and into something formal once a week helped people feel more human. What #shabbatselfie fashion trends might emerge?
- Appointment viewing is back. What TV show will we schedule and savor for Saturday evenings? How will we know that this screen time is special?
- Longer stretches of time outdoors are possible during the weekend. Will we see a resurgence in bird watching? Apps in which we race to name plants seen in the wild?

Relationship

EXPERIENCE:

“PEOPLE WHO ARE LOOSELY IN YOUR CIRCLE CAN BE OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND.”

“I’m more connected to my immediate family and old friends than ever.”

“My relationships actually have gotten better during this time.”

OneTablers’ relational worlds have become smaller and deeper. Never before have we spent so much time with, and attention on, our inner circles — parents, partners, housemates, old friends, and pets. Many check-in with grandparents every few days or get together with high school friends for Thursday night Zoom games.

“Limitation breeds creativity. I made a scavenger hunt for my partner’s birthday. Had I not been forced to think outside the box, it would never have emerged.”

People are exploring more creative ways to show love. Downloads of HouseParty and TikTok are through the roof as we find new ways to connect. Reverse-parenting is necessary to ensure older adults take the pandemic seriously. Long-established relationships are deepened with new conversations and activities — especially for those who have quarantined with family.

“It feels like my community has dissolved overnight. Everyone’s retreated into themselves. There’s been a dissolution, but new ones popped up.”

As we focus inward, outer circles of community are crumbling. For those living alone, this makes life particularly difficult.

Our narrower field of vision has made us hypervigilant as we walk through the neighborhood, sometimes with suspicion (Is that jogger wearing a mask?) and sometimes with compassion (Does that neighbor need something?).

All in all, “Being outside feels so good, and so terrifying.”

But each human connection now has to be intentionally scheduled and technologically mediated, which has quickly become fatiguing. The joy of accidental community springing from casual contact is gone. Milestone occasions, when we see large groups of friends, are delayed. Dating is clumsy and on hold. **Such is the sensory deprivation that the number one post-pandemic wish among those surveyed is to give loved ones a hug.**



OPPORTUNITY:

SMALL-SCALE MOMENTS OF CASUAL CONTACT TO CREATE ACCIDENTAL COMMUNITY.

People are looking for fun things to do with close friends and family. Reading Shakespeare plays on Zoom. Rewatching TV shows episode-by-episode together. Experimenting with new recipes and learning how to make a cocktail.

"It's ok to learn and for things not to be perfect."

And to find light connections among a wider circle and strangers, we've joined DJ D-Nice's IG Live dance party, sang Chad Gadya with fifty widespread family members at Passover, and shared a brief check-in at a 30-minute pre-Shabbat community gathering. But it's hard.

HOW MIGHT WE ENRICH DEEP RELATIONSHIPS AND FACILITATE NEW, JOYFUL, CASUAL CONNECTIONS?

For OneTable:

- OneTable's previous in-person open dinners and public events created new relationships and fostered community, but many people have also expressed anxiety around "social safety" — i.e.: meeting people they don't want to spend dinner with in real life. OneTable is investigating ways to strengthen ties between acquaintances over virtual Shabbats without inducing that "new person panic."
- With the goal of helping participants cultivate connections of all kinds, OneTable has co-hosted a speed dating event, as well as many smaller discussion-based Shabbats around particular identities and interests, including: LGBTQ, Deaf/ASL, vegan, crafting.
- Cooking felt good, in part, because it wasn't screen-based. How might OneTable supply Jewish craft supplies or challah ingredients so folks can create together, sharing a multi-sensory experience from a distance?

For the field:

- What will become the dating protocol? Do we need a new guide to #covidflirting?
- It feels safer than ever to participate in Jewish life from the comfort of home. Why not host casual, affinity-based conversation groups for 15 minute bursts inspired by HQ Trivia and chat roulette?
- Tele-therapy is growing quickly. How can one-to-one teaching of ancient practices like song, chant, dance, and text study become mental health tools to calm anxiety?
- Families are spending more time together. Who will create parent/children conversation cards for new topics to discuss with a glass of wine?

Reckoning

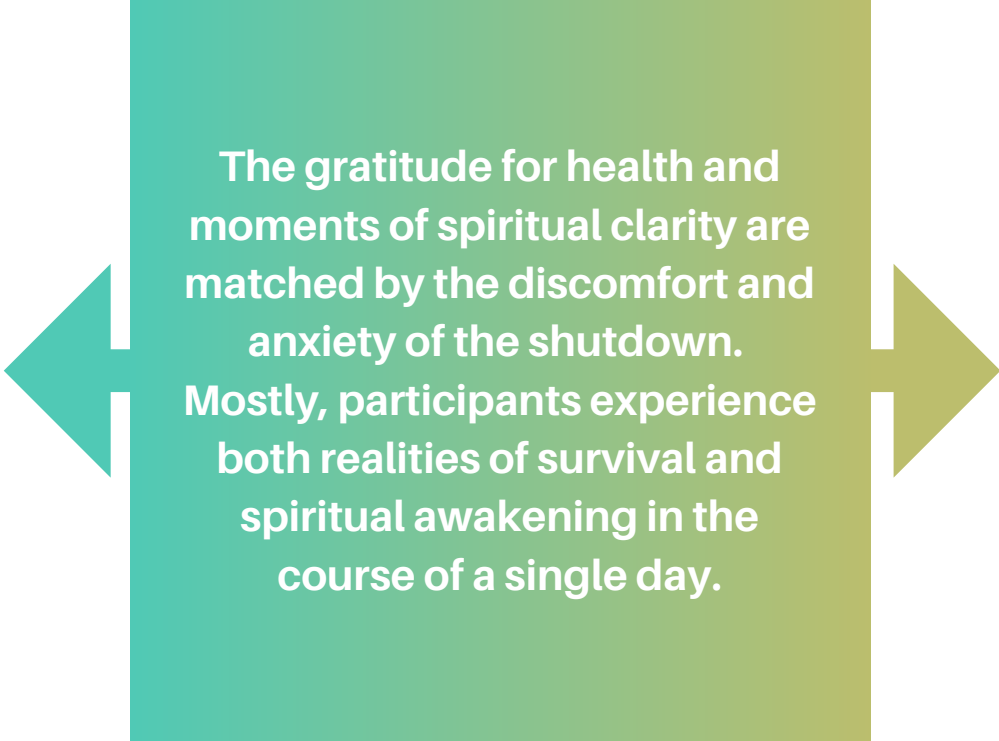
EXPERIENCE:

"WE ARE FORCED TO LOOK WITHIN, AT WHATEVER REALLY MATTERS."

OneTablers are reevaluating what's important in life. Personal ambitions, relationships, and careers are all put in perspective. We're recognizing where we need to change — communicating more effectively, and re-evaluating relationships. Some are changing careers, others starting a course in computer science. Even if they've lost a job, the stigma has softened; there are thirty million others in the same boat. This corona time has cleared away the inessential. More than ever we're conscious of what we're grateful for. Food, shelter, blossoming trees, and WiFi.

"My priorities [have] changed and I'm confident about making important decisions after the quarantine period."

The "heightened level of humanity" shows up everywhere, including in little acts of kindness. But now it's exactly those "small things that matter when BIG world problems seem so overwhelming."



The gratitude for health and moments of spiritual clarity are matched by the discomfort and anxiety of the shutdown. Mostly, participants experience both realities of survival and spiritual awakening in the course of a single day.

Those who are struggling have to focus on making it through day by day. Whether it's new financial worries, or the frustrations of 24/7 cohabitation, life is hard.

"I used to judge my worth by productivity. [Now there's] no way can I tie my worth to some outside thing. It's not how many patients I saw. It's just going day to day doing the best I can."

But also a greater capacity for resilience than expected. For those who have been sick, there's a near-mystical appreciation for the healing power of their bodies, while those who have lived with chronic conditions realize they were more prepared for this than anyone.



OPPORTUNITY:

MEANINGFUL PATHWAYS TO SHAPE THE WORLD WE WANT TO LIVE IN, TOMORROW.

Interviewees don't want things to just go back to how they used to be. The world — and we — should be changed by this. On a personal level, there are new freedoms to be embraced.

***"I haven't put on makeup in the longest time
and I'm really happy about it."***

We're decoupling our productivity from our sense of self worth and mental health is openly discussed more than ever.

As a society, the band-aid has been ripped off the status quo and our imagination for what's possible has massively expanded. There's an opportunity for a strengthened communal mindset embodied by the locally-organized mutual aid societies and demonstrations of gratitude for healthcare workers. Integrity of values and supporting those who are hurting most is vital.

***"I want to see organizations use this as a time to really
be inspired and change things afterwards."***

HOW MIGHT WE DEEPEN THIS EMERGING ORIENTATION TOWARD JUSTICE AND ONE ANOTHER'S WELLBEING?

For OneTable:

- One of Judaism's gifts is its ability to connect everyday life to what matters most. How might OneTable be a resource for people? How can we enable them to make meaning within their new daily reality, from a blessing for putting on a mask, to a morning ritual that honors the choice to stay inside?
- Anticipating future needs, OneTable is also developing rituals for re-entry into the next normal.

For the field:

- As the most motivated start to seek stimulating inputs, who will curate the plethora of content into the definitive offering of ancient wisdom on adulting in the era of coronavirus?
- Times of reckoning are ideal moments for behavior change. How can we use the experience of COVID-19 to support people in shifting actions to better align with their values? Particularly on sustainability and justice issues.
- Workplaces are reckoning with the limits of their culture of hyper-productivity, especially while employees work from home. How might ancient wisdom about human flourishing be brought to bear on reimagining the terms of a "successful" workplace culture?

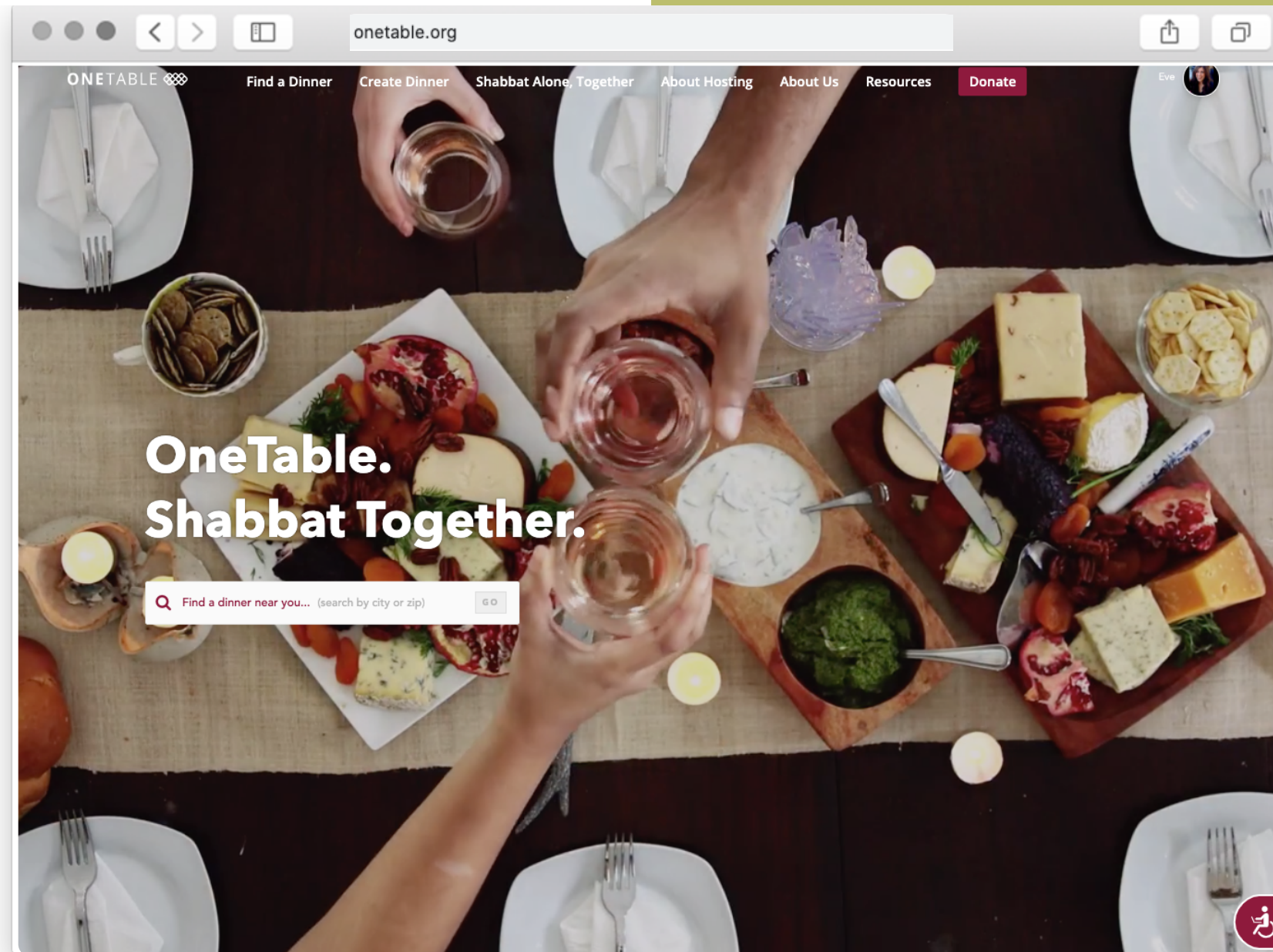


What does this mean?

We don't know what the future holds. Will there be another spike in cases? How will 30+ million newly unemployed Americans recover? In addition to grieving the personal losses we've already suffered, we're grieving in anticipation of the world to come, knowing that things will never be the same again. Community life will be transformed by physical distancing. Even when we do come back together, caution — perhaps suspicion — will dominate. The traditional, physical locations of religious and communal life are breaking down before our eyes: congregations, summer camps, theatres, JCCs. We should prepare ourselves that some institutions will not survive. And nearly all will have to reinvent, finding new ways to share ancient gifts.

This looks bleak. But as one participant explained, in a conversation with her friend:

***"Judaism really rises to the occasion... actually, Judaism was made for these times!
Then I corrected myself. Judaism was made FROM these times."***



It is clearer than ever that the purpose of community organizations is not their own maintenance or survival, but to faithfully steward the wisdom, stories, and practices of our traditions and bring it to bear at moments like these when we need it most. May our ancient wisdom, forged in past times of reckoning, inspire the innate creative spirit of those who are ready to lead us into the future.

METHODOLOGY

In the spring of 2020, Sacred Design Lab and Jamie Betesh Carter ran a three-week research sprint for OneTable. With the goal of learning from OneTable hosts and guests in their 20s and 30s about their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research focused on the changing nature of daily life and impact on relationships and community.

1. A 12-question journaling survey was sent out during the week of April 20th, 2020. 34 OneTablers shared stories about their lives during COVID.
2. Four in-depth focus groups of 4-5 with Jewish young adults were completed in the week of April 27, 2020 exploring similar questions.

Unusually, our research team was amidst the same COVID-19 phenomenon as our interviewees, and so we chose to share these insights in a first-person plural voice.

These findings built off of previous research OneTable began in 2019. We interviewed these same participants (a total of 37 participants) one year prior (in the spring of 2019) as part of research funded by the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah.

Through digital journal entries, and virtual focus groups, we sought to better understand the issues of wellness, belonging, and loneliness on a deeper level, and understand the impact of OneTable and Shabbat dinner on connection, community, and sense of belonging among young adults. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 34 with a mean age of 28. 13 identified as male, 24 as female, and 2 as gender non-binary or transgender. 10 one-time guests, 9 one-time hosts, 9 repeat hosts, and 9 repeat guests.

**Sacred
Design Lab**

designing
empathy
JAMIE BETESH CARTER

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