

It's Raining Lemons! How the COVID-19 Pandemic Reshaped the Association of Jewish Libraries

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In March of 2020, everything changed. The rapid spread of COVID-19 meant that nearly everyone's work, school, and just about everything else moved into the home as people tried to cope with the strange new world in which they suddenly found themselves. As days and weeks turned into months, everyone, including staff of educational institutions—teachers, students, managers, employees, and of course, librarians—struggled to maintain work and personal life at the same time and in the same place.

The Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL), an international organization promoting Jewish literacy and scholarship and supporting Judaica librarians from K–12 schools to research institutions and archives, to community adult education programs,¹ was no different. AJL leadership began discussing the potential impact of coronavirus on its June 2020 conference as early as March 8 of that year. The preliminary program for the 2020 conference had just been sent to members four days earlier. At an emergency meeting on March 17, AJL leadership voted to freeze conference registration and by March 22, it had cancelled the in-person conference. A cancellation announcement was sent out on March 25.

Small organizational changes AJL had been making in the years leading up to the pandemic boosted its ability to withstand many of the difficulties that arose for its peer associations beginning in March of 2020. Chief among these changes were hiring a contract employee and beginning a move to virtual meetings, both for leadership discussions and for the annual AJL conference. Larger changes in the organization over the course of the pandemic, especially in the form of online programming, led to its transformation into a more inclusive and internationally known library association.

AJL has always been a relatively small, volunteer-run organization. While the association had worked previously with an external company to increase its fundraising efforts in support of annual conferences and other member services, 2019 was the first time AJL hired a dedicated staff member—albeit a short-term contract employee—to concentrate on development. As with many positions, the job description included the vague “and other duties as assigned.” With no idea how necessary those other duties would become, AJL hired the nonprofit development consultant Jerry Krautman, who teamed up with the board and council to understand the organization's fundraising needs and begin reaching out to potential donors who might support AJL's mission.

1. “The Association of Jewish Libraries is an international, professional organization that fosters access to information and research in all forms of media relating to all things Jewish. The Association promotes Jewish literacy and scholarship and provides a community for peer support and professional development.” See AJL's mission and goals: <https://jewishlibraries.org/history/>.

A third organizational change in the fall of 2019 was the switch from semiannual meetings of the AJL board and council to monthly meetings. Following a midwinter meeting held online using Zoom, AJL leadership realized that its far-flung volunteers could meet much more easily in this virtual space. Meeting monthly meant that the three- to six-hour board and council meetings could become a thing of the past. A fourth change, also in the fall of 2019, was made by the AJL Conference Committee, which recommended subscribing to the Socio event platform. Using Socio lowered the expense of AJL’s annual meetings by eliminating the ever-growing cost of a printed conference book. Socio incorporated Zoom into its platform almost immediately after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly eased the transition to a virtual conference.

The responses to the conference cancellation were overwhelmingly positive, however, members noted how important this once-a-year meeting was to them. For many members who are the only Judaica librarians (and sometimes the only librarians of any kind) in their institutions, the annual conference provides the support they need to network, collaborate, and gain new skills and ideas for the entire year.

With this feedback in mind, Member Relations Chair Heidi Rabinowitz led the organization in planning a series of virtual “check-ins” for the entire membership. The series began on April 1 and continued through May 5 of 2020. Each of the seven programs focused on the needs of a particular segment of the two AJL divisions: Research Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections (RAS); and Synagogue, School, Center, and Public Libraries (SSCPL). When asked how best to support librarians during those unprecedented times, members were eager to discuss with their peers questions of shutdowns and pressing issues. The success of the Zoom check-ins convinced AJL leadership that an online conference could—and should—take place.

If “oysgezoozt” wasn’t officially a word yet,² “Zoom fatigue” certainly was a common complaint by the summer of 2020. The July conference was extended to a full week to shorten the daily program schedule. Advantages of the virtual conference included a reduced fee of only \$36 for members (saving on hotel and food costs), a decreased time commitment, and an ease of attendance along with the members’ eagerness to connect during an isolating time.

The conference committee had to make changes to the conference program because some presenters were not comfortable giving their proposed talks in a virtual environment. Additionally, the committee wanted to take advantage of the international opportunities of a virtual conference. Newly created sessions for the virtual conference included “International Judaica Collections” (with presenters from Amsterdam, Moscow, England, and Germany), and a panel on best practices for libraries during the pandemic.

2. The Yiddish word “oysgezoozt” is defined as follows: “adj. Worn out, tired from too many Zoom meetings, gatherings.” “Oysgezoozt, entry in Jewish English Lexicon.” Sarah Benor, 2012, “Los Angeles: Jewish Language Project,” <https://jel.jewish-languages.org/words/2186>, accessed March 27, 2022.

The response to the conference was enthusiastic. Nearly three hundred registrants attended the conference. Nearly 100 attendees joined the AJL conference for the first time, and 172 attendees viewed the keynote address. The virtual space accommodated presenters from 13 time zones, which made scheduling a challenge! Even with two concurrent sessions, between 75 and 100 attendees joined each live session. The recording of sessions meant that attendees could attend the programs they missed: the 28 sessions that were uploaded to AJL's YouTube channel from the 2020 conference³ garnered 162 views by conference registrants in the weeks and months following the conference. The online conference also allowed for flexibility; after a request during the conference for a "meet the author" session, the conference coordinators added it to the program, something that would not have been possible at a physical conference, where rooms would have to be booked and equipment ordered, months in advance.

The feedback from conference attendees made it clear that the online event was a success. Other responses surfaced that would affect the future of AJL conferences, even when meeting in-person would be safe again. Critical reviews clarified that AJL had not been reaching a large portion of its constituency—those who had been unable to attend a conference in person because of the expense involved in travel. Joining a conference on a computer, however, was doable. AJL leadership made the decision to alternate between in-person and virtual conferences.

Following the 2020 virtual conference, AJL began organizing a series of roundtables and other online programs. Thirteen events were held in the second half of 2020, nearly 50 during 2021, and 36 prior to the 2022 AJL Conference, presenting topics of interest to members of both AJL divisions. Total programming to date includes 33 events for the RAS division, 34 for the SSCPL division, and the remainder of events (20) applying to both divisions. These events provided new benefits of membership. The roundtables capitalized on the expertise of far-flung members and featured subject matter as wide as funding challenges, archives in synagogue libraries, e-book collections, and recommended reading. Roundtable attendance tended to be on the smaller side (averaging about 30 people) but often yielded vigorous discussion. Multiple series were started, including "DH (digital humanities) Clinic," "Serving Students," and "Books about Books." AJL also offered free, public programs, which attracted hundreds of attendees. Topics included member publications, recommended books in various fields, award-winning titles, a conversation with the candidates for the American Library Association's presidents, and "How to be an Ally to Jewish patrons and Students." The public programs showcased AJL talent and resources, furthering the organization's mission to provide access to information and research and to promote Jewish literacy, while at the same time advertising the organization to potential members. AJL also opened access to its Zoom account for events led by local AJL chapters; The Capital Area and Canada chapters have already hosted a dozen or so events.

Zoom access and familiarity, as well as the flexibility brought on by more regular meetings, allowed for swift actions. During the summer of 2020, RAS members drafted a statement of concern regarding the effect on area studies collections of the cessation of international mail shipments and national lockdowns. Endorsed by AJL and posted online, the statement led to

3. <https://www.youtube.com/user/JewishLibraries>.

closer engagement with other area studies organizations who issued similar statements, such as the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the Middle East Librarians Association, and the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials. AJL then joined a task force to plan more inclusive area studies programming, which resulted in a November 2020 panel featuring Israeli and Jewish studies librarians.

In October 2020, AJL organized a virtual member gala, featuring Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden and CEO of the National Library of Israel, Oren Weinberg. The event was attended by 101 members. The following year, the gala featured a conversation among five members of the Foer family,⁴ an event that attracted about 75 members. Given AJL's widely dispersed membership, the membership gala events will likely continue to be held online.

Before the Zoom era, AJL had struggled to provide opportunities for member interaction beyond Hasafran listserv and the annual conferences. The various AJL social media accounts were mainly used for announcements, such as its awards or upcoming conference information. An attempt to establish a “one book, one community” book discussion via a conference call in 2019 did not work well because the conversation did not flow naturally over the phone. When the pandemic forced members to become adept at videoconferencing and working more in an online environment, AJL had the means and the skills to ramp up programming and help members connect with one another and with the organization year-round. The decision to make its planned 2020 conference a virtual one at a very early stage meant that AJL had to learn quickly and effectively how to operate well in the online environment and to share that knowledge with its members, some of whom had never used Zoom before the conference in June of 2020. AJL now regularly has international attendees at its roundtables, and hosts roundtables geared to particular communities, such as librarians and archivists in Germany and Russia. The growth in online programming has been a win for AJL, a true silver lining of the pandemic.

The major shift to online programming highlighted a significant problem for the organization: The AJL website was quite outdated and needed a complete overhaul. Thanks to a generous donation and the tireless work of Webmaster Sheryl Stahl, Vice President for Membership Sharon Benamou, and Member Relations Chair Heidi Rabinowitz, the organization was able to launch a new, modern website in 2021. Paula Breger, who joined the council as public relations chair, coordinated the significant increase in AJL's communications with members and external parties. With its new online presence (both the website and programming) AJL started to receive requests for partnerships with organizations such as the Jewish Grandparents' Network and with public-facing content producers like My Jewish Learning and *Moment Magazine*. AJL expanded its participation in events like Jewish American Heritage Month. The association's new visibility allowed AJS Liaison Rachel Greenblatt to form closer connections between AJL and the Association for Jewish Studies, including a “virtual exhibit table” at AJS 2020, a session on Judaica

4. Joining the event were Esther Foer, former executive director of Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington DC; Albert Foer, president of the American Antitrust Institute; Franklin Foer, a writer for *The Atlantic* and a former editor at *The New Republic*; Jonathan Safran Foer, author of many works including *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005); Joshua Foer, an author and journalist, and Franklin's daughter Sophia Foer.

librarianship at AJS 2021, and two planned sessions at AJS 2022: one on book history and the other on Judaica librarians.

AJL received funding from the Harris Family Foundation to develop the Judaica Libraries of the World Portal,⁵ which profiles libraries represented by AJL’s membership. Additionally, AJL established its first endowment, which will enable the long-term sustainability of the organization and ensure the future of Judaica librarianship—and librarians.

AJL was already an international organization at the onset of COVID-19. Some of the infrastructure needed to shift to a totally virtual environment was already in place at AJL prior to the pandemic. A paid staff person who could take tasks off the hands of AJL volunteers—many of whom have full-time day jobs in addition to their AJL work—went a long way toward alleviating some of the burden on the organization’s board and council members. Monthly leadership meetings allowed for flexibility and swift decision-making, which led to a smooth transition from a physical to a virtual conference, and eventually to the creation of monthly programming and significant additional member benefits. A completely revamped web presence increased the organization’s visibility, leading to partnerships, funding, and ultimately, to the ability to demonstrate that AJL is “the leading authority on Judaica librarianship.”

5. <https://jewishlibraries.org/jewish-libraries-around-the-world>.