



# **dreams of the jewish future**

**Jewish Community in a Time of  
Creative Con-/Destruction**

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# introduction

This paper is intended to start a conversation. It does not present any answers; rather, it presents several ideas and questions for consideration. The German poet Heinrich von Kleist speaks to the atmosphere and ambition of this work, noting that the best thoughts “can be almost unintelligible as they emerge; what matters most is risky, thrilling conversation as a crucible for discovery.” It is our hope that this paper serves as that crucible for discovery for the reader; that it is received as one may receive an emergent, risky, thrilling creation that is inchoate. We hope that within the Jewish community and beyond it, your voices will be a part of an opening door to a new kind of conversation, the notion that we can hold these ideas, let them simmer, and talk to someone about them.

Specifically, we hope Jewish professionals, philanthropists, volunteers and consultants, who struggle under the demands of day-to-day activities, will read this paper and contemplate the bigger picture of a Jewish future we are creating.

A few definitions up front:

**Foresight thinking** is a tool to strategically imagine what could be in order to expand and reframe the range of possible futures that could be.

**Spiritual inequity mapping** is another useful tool to visually reveal the most promising efforts to date and assess areas most in need of attention—what makes a community healthy, and what are the metrics of spiritual equity—are questions we’d like to discuss. It will take interdisciplinary collaboration and focused effort for Judaism and the Jewish community to remain vibrant and relevant.

# prophets of wonder

**“The future is here;  
it’s just unevenly distributed.”**

William Gibson

Are there prophets in our midst? And if there are, would we know? And if there were, would we even care? Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his work, *Man is Not Alone*, speaks to wonder, writing:

*Wonder is not a state of esthetic enjoyment. Endless wonder is endless tension, a situation in which we are shocked at the inadequacy of our awe, at the weakness of our shock, as well as the state of being asked the ultimate questions.*

*Endless wonder unlocks an innate sense of indebtedness. Within our awe there is no place for self-assertion. Within our awe we only know that all we own we owe. The world consists, not of things, but of tasks. Wonder is the state of our being asked. The ineffable is a question addressed to us.*

*All that is left to us is a choice—to answer or to refuse to answer. (pg. 69)*



In our work as cross-sector Jewish professionals, volunteers and consultants, both at major Jewish foundations and in mid-sized Jewish federations and JCCs, we are continually drawn to question how we use wonder to propel our work forward. How we sit or run from what Heschel describes as this “endless tension.” Put bluntly, do we have the courage to listen?

In so much of traditional Jewish (and secular) nonprofit organizational life, imagination often is seen as secondary or tertiary to the pressing concerns of program delivery, fundraising, and day-to-day activities. (And yet) we submit that imagination is central to the work to be done in all of our organizations.

**“We’re rapidly approaching a world comprised entirely of jail and shopping.”**

Douglas Coupland

We have both been challenged by strict disciplinary thinking in our professional and lay leadership positions. Being told to “stay in our lane” has become accepted as a normative demand. But we live in a multi-disciplinary world that requires inter-disciplinary and anti-disciplinary thinking. There are necessary and essentially overlapping intersections that must occur to effectively draw individuals and organizations out of themselves and into problematizing new realms of thought and action.

For instance, let’s take the notion of Moses as a political leader. Moses, so similar to all of us, is full of human faults including idolatry, impatience, and passivity. Indeed, there were good reasons why he was denied entry to the Promised Land. Perhaps most important, though, Moses was a leader who taught his people to do without him by learning how to lead themselves—he led from behind and provided his people with the opportunity to gain ownership over themselves, their capacities to lead, and their loved ones. We can read the Five Books of Moses as a manifesto for revolutionary and

political change. And it is incredibly salient in our world today and within a culture where we are ambushed every day by examples and stories of people who “lead.”

What does it mean to lead—and how does leadership root itself in a cultural context so striking as America? Moses’ experience reveals the challenges of leadership under a variety of types of rule, from slavery to anarchy before the Golden Calf, to association without authority in the desert, to his ultimate effort to institutionalize hierarchy. What does the story of Moses have to say about the ways in which our culture and “rule” shape the ways in which we lead? Viewing leadership as a function of regime can help us abstract and particularize the ways in which leaderful individuals operate. We must use our imagination to be interdisciplinary in our thinking and shape the ways in which we use Jewish text and thought to approach modern day dilemmas.

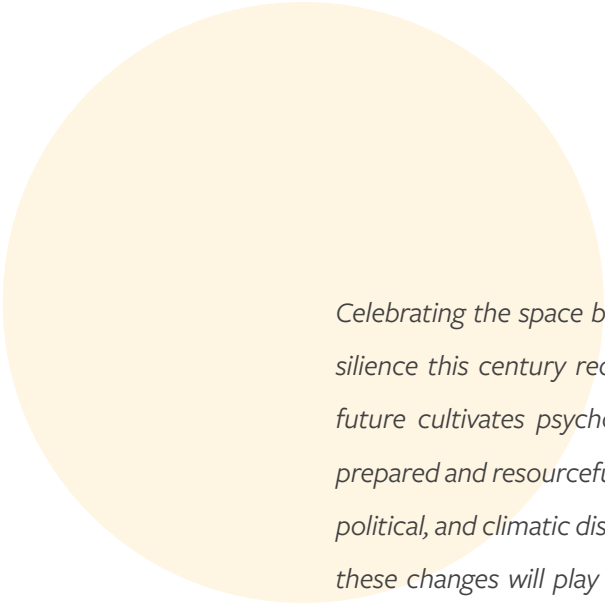
# spiritual equity mapping project

Creating a *Spiritual Equity Mapping Project* will help us imagine the kinds of Jewish futures we want and redress the lack of imaginative thinking that often results in failure to connect with various intended audiences. This *Spiritual Equity Mapping Project* will help forecast various audacious Jewish futures for communities, individuals, organizations, and initiatives to help create and build the Jewish futures that we dare to dream toward.

The idea of a *Spiritual Equity Mapping Project* is the notion that we can bring the praxis of forecasting and scenario planning to build a fuller, more relevant, and creative Jewish present. We define praxis for this paper as an integration of theory and practice that leads to a desired application. The impact would be manifold, including contributing to how one frames their work in the Jewish world, how they approach that work, and how to bring that work to fruition with the potential to spur change in the mRNA of the Jewish sector (or at least parts of it) in how to think generatively about the work to be done and how it connects back to the end user. Angie Thurston, Casper ter Kuile, and the Rev. Sue Phillips have done pioneering work on this very topic, building a topography of “jobs to be done” towards the care of souls.<sup>1</sup> More macroscopically, as Johanna Hoffman writes in her work, *Speculative Futures*:

**“One word: poetry. That’s what  
the world has to offer us.”**

E.O. Wilson



*Celebrating the space between fantasy and reality builds the kind of resilience this century requires. Studies show that actively imagining the future cultivates psychological strength, helping individuals feel more prepared and resourceful during times of drastic change ... Technological, political, and climatic disruption will only accelerate in coming years. How these changes will play out over time defies prediction—there are too many inputs beyond our control. And that’s entirely the point. The future isn’t ours to predict. It’s ours to imagine and create, together.<sup>2</sup>*

Before we get further into the weaving of futures thinking and Jewish communal/spiritual creative con- and destruction, let’s define a few more terms. Foresight or foresight thinking is defined as “a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging changes, analyzing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future.” Foresight is differentiated from forecasting in that foresight does not attempt to offer definitive answers about what will happen in the future. The objective is not to get the future right, per se, but rather to expand and reframe the range of plausible developments that could be taken into consideration. The notion of probabilistic thinking comes into play in this space, as well as spectrum thinking represented in this graphic from the futurist Peter Leyden.<sup>3</sup>



Peter Leyden’s heuristic representing spectrum thinking as a way of conceptualizing probabilities in mapping out potential futures.

<b>mega-challenge</b>	terrorism	→	climate
<b>energy</b>	carbon	→	clean
<b>transportation</b>	internal combustion	→	electric
<b>culture</b>	boomer-centric	→	millennial-centric
<b>politics</b>	conservative	→	progressive
<b>economics</b>	private sector	→	public sector
<b>capitalism</b>	shareholder	→	stakeholder
<b>work</b>	physical	→	virtual
<b>production</b>	industrial	→	biological
<b>geopolitics</b>	middle east	→	asia

It is important to pay attention to tipping points and it is often the case that change happens quickly after seemingly little movement for years if not decades. Futurescaping is the art and science of using foresight methods to strategically imagine what could be. Global businesses have used foresight and futurescaping techniques for years to aid in option setting, decision-making, and organizational planning. However, as noted, these approaches haven’t been as personified in a Jewish spiritual and belonging context.

Further, there has been a lot in the discourse over the last several years about emergence. This term, which is grounded in multi-disciplinary decision sciences theory, perhaps is most broadly known from adrienne marie brown’s bestseller, Emergent Strategy, which essentially describes how to be in a world of flux. One of her many ideas here is that fixed goals are relatively ineffective when it comes to supporting authentic emergence; in fact, a state of fixedness can actually make us woefully inflexible when it comes to tuning ourselves to flow. Moreover, groundbreaking work is being done presently in coming to terms with the connective and anti-disciplinary forces that shape our realities. As James Bridle writes in his work, Ways of Being:

*The closer we examine and the more forcefully we interrogate and attempt to classify the world, the more complex and unclassifiable it becomes.*



*Taxonomy after taxonomy breaks down and falls apart. In part this is a result of our own innate limitations, the possibility of the insuperable problem of our own umwelt and human ways-of-being. But it is also a problem of entanglement: the fact that in the more-than-human world, everything is hitched to everything else, and there are no hierarchies: no 'higher' or 'lower'; none more, or less, evolved. Everything is intelligent. Now what?<sup>24</sup>*

Foresight and futurescaping are tools that help access that imaginative space that yields to flow and to anti-disciplinary thinking. To summarize, it is our supposition that we need fewer logic models and goal setting in the hard absolute and more models of relative emergence. The following Jewish futures paradigm is one such model.

# new jewish futures paradigm

**“The goal of forecasting is not to predict the future, but to tell you what you need to know to take meaningful action in the present.”**

Paul Saffo

The most important skill in the following decade and further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the ability to access imaginative and creative thinking. It is and has always been humanity’s incredible competitive advantage in nature—the development of our frontal lobes beyond that of our ancestor species. Indeed, the human brain is one of, if not, the most complex thing in the known universe. We are at the absolute bleeding edge of creation in the universe as a species; however, that does not necessarily make us wise. Wisdom is knowing what information is significant. Perhaps you’ve noticed that we are up to our eyeballs in data. We live in a data rich world—particularly for those in the West who have access to mainstream information technology tools. Knowledge in most democratic Western environments is plentiful and freely available. The real question is how do we make use of that knowledge? How do we use our innate humanness to imagine what could be?

It is our desire to appreciate and address these questions in all their texture and nuance as we seek to come to terms with the implications of our age, our Jewish spiritual inequities, our collective wandering, and of, what the futurist Paul Saffo describes, as the “Ghost Dance.” What is the Ghost Dance? Saffo defines it as “a painful and contradictory accommodation that at once reaches back to grasp disappearing cultural norms while simultaneously rejecting and embracing disruptive alien novelties.”<sup>5</sup>

Put in context, Saffo writes:

*Our modern Ghost Dance has no outsiders; we wreak the change on ourselves. Our modern wonders overwhelm us not with alien values; but with a vast and unnerving choice of our own creation as we are delivered to a horizon of terrifying freedom. We fear change, but we fear making the wrong choice even more. The temptation is to Ghost Dance the choices away ... The Ghost Dance has often been equated with the death rattle of a culture. But it can also be its rebirth.*<sup>6</sup>

We intend to provide a new paradigm of conceptualizing and mapping the Ghost Dance in the North American Jewish context. We hope this new paradigm is used by philanthropic organizations, Jewish board members and professionals to help guide funding, policy making, Jewish writing and reporting, and programmatic work. Specifically for the philanthropic community, we hope this work will better support efforts to problematize and perceive our Jewish moment, as well as, to identify institutions for targeted investment based on our work.





# constructed / destroyed jewish futures

An emergent visual  
typology of how to  
categorize and  
characterize place-based  
spiritual inequity.

This paradigm is a matrix designed to help individuals and organizations understand how they situate themselves and connect to this project of creative Jewish futures. The matrix is designed as inhabiting four various creative domains: (1) Constructed Past; (2) Constructed Future; (3) Destroyed Past; (4) Destroyed Future. For the benefit of the reader, we have included a representative place that we believe inhabits the beliefs, norms, and mores aligned with the respective creative domain. To be “constructed” in this paradigm is to be engaging in an exercise of collective imaginative remembrance; to be “destroyed” is to be engaging in a collective imaginative rebuilding. Naturally, remembrance and rebuilding are two sides of the same coin of being and becoming—it is not our intention or desire to create an “either/or” dynamic, but rather a typology that helps situate place-based spirituality in all of its complexity. We realize this matrix needs unpacking and layers of understanding and exploration, but for now, we are positing that this matrix is useful for starting a national conversation on communal health, deciding where to invest and build Jewish communal infrastructure, and most simply, perhaps where to live and (how to) build community and spiritual equity.

The full matrix is displayed below, as an example:

<b>Constructed Past</b> <b>Berlin</b>	<b>Constructed Future</b> <b>Tulsa</b>
<b>Destroyed Past</b> <b>Milwaukee</b>	<b>Destroyed Future</b> <b>San Francisco</b>



**“We’re all pilgrims on the same journey—but some pilgrims have better road maps.”**

Nelson DeMille

# jewish spiritual mapping

What is Jewish spiritual mapping? It is a new way of recognizing the spatial mismatch of Jewish spirituality, organizational proficiency, and belonging that occurs across the country. Simply put, Jewish spiritual mapping allows us to visualize the amplitude and magnitude of Jewish spiritual inequity. What is meant by spiritual inequity and why should one care? It is an adaptation of concepts such as wealth inequity or social inequity. Spiritual inequity is the notion of fairness and unfairness along the plane of spiritual offerings—that is, the ways in which Jewish communities across the nation have varying capacities and accessibility to a constellation of Jewish spiritual options, places, people and programs. The very foundations and norms around how we as individuals and communities push on the world, how we decide to show up, are motivated and inspired by this conceptualization of spiritual inequity.

We hear you—perhaps while you are reading you find yourself muttering on the couch, “how does this in the abstract, lead to me receiving (or giving) grant dollars in the real world?” Indeed, a heightened awareness of spiritual inequity might lead to more robust and ready ecosystems for Jewish spiritual expression. Through visualizing the ways in which spiritual inequity manifests, one can be data informed in terms of targeting areas for investment and/or connection. This spiritual map aligns well with what the business and social theorist Scott Galloway has coined as the Great Dispersion.<sup>7</sup> An example of this phenomenon is social media, which itself is a form of dispersion, enabling connection despite physical distance and paywalls. This, in effect, is the dispersion of community having removed “healthy friction” such as truth and editors. The Great Dispersion will have

myriad impacts across society, particularly upon the trillion-dollar markets of health care and education. Perhaps though the market that the Great Dispersion will have the largest impact—both presently and in the future—is the market of human connection and belonging. As funders, stakeholders, policymakers, influencers, and practitioners, we need to confront the force of spiritual inequity that causes us not just to not cross the street but have trouble even recognizing there is a street to cross. Foresight thinking is just one tool that contributes to building a rigorous spiritual map that can be used for targeted belonging investments and addressing the modern-day spiritual Ghost Dance. In addition, our Constructed/Destructed Jewish Futures paradigm serves as a framework for practitioners and communities to begin the mapping process in earnest.

Certainly, there isn't one definitive "right" way to produce a spiritual inequity map. Understanding which stories we are seeking to understand and which questions we are trying to ask are good first steps in developing such a visual. As we look to provide relevant and meaningful tools and frameworks for the field, we are excited about the possibilities inherent in these discussed modalities and welcome conversation and feedback in their refinement.



# conclusion

This paper is entitled **Dreams of the Jewish Future** and, ultimately, it is an act of hope to dream and share those dreams. For dreams can lead us to paths of possibilities. Dreams can lead us to act. In this spirit we wish to share our call to action. We hope that this paper spurs a conversation about “becoming.” We hope the ideas and themes in this paper are discussed seriously and debated. We hope that this paper adds to the field-building of the spiritual belonging arenas in organizational, spiritual, and philanthropic life. Moreover, we hope this paper begins to conceptualize a way of building and shaping metrics of communal spiritual health. These metrics should lead to further paradigms of understanding and funding to these critical issues. We hope to convene a cohort of individuals rooted in place to wrestle with these notions and beyond:

- What makes a community spiritually healthy?
- How does spiritual health manifest itself?
- What are the dimensions and who is interested in confronting these issues deeply?
- Who may be interested and serious about funding these ventures?
- What are the layers of physical infrastructure, interdisciplinary thinking, concentric circles of community, and trans-institutional collaboration to make this visual map a reality?
- What learnings might we glean for the communities we serve and to which we belong?

Lastly, what are ways in which we can further understand, engage with, organize with, and share out the messy and beautiful work of souls who care about walking with us as we all live our questions?



# acknowledgements

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# appendix A

## future visuals to create

Spiritual Inequity Map of United States

Scatterplot of Constructed/Destructed  
Past & Future

## references

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The Deadly Lack of Imagination in the  
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Leyden, Big Think)

Transition Design Institute (Transition Design  
Institute)

Zeitgeist and the Scenes of Imagination  
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## possible communities to map

Atlanta, GA

Berlin, Germany

Brooklyn, NY

Cincinnati, OH

Long Beach, CA

Nashville, TN

Milwaukee, WI

San Francisco, CA

Tulsa, OK

Washington, D.C.

# endnotes

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# about the authors



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is a writer, researcher, systems-thinker and place-based, community and organizational consultant. Jeff has served in a variety of community building and bridging roles at the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, the Jim Joseph Foundation, Fund for Shared Insight, Co-Generate (formerly Encore.org), Oakland Unified Schools in Oakland, California, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. Jeff also participated in the Rockwood Leadership Institute, with American Jewish World Service Global Justice Fellowship and held a Jeremiah Fellowship through Bend the Arc. He received his B.A. degree from Brown University and Master's degree in City Planning with an emphasis on Community and Economic Development from the University of Pennsylvania. He has a Ph.D. ABD in Community Planning from the University of Maryland. He currently serves on the boards of the community development media platform Shelterforce and the Milwaukee-based Jewish social justice organization Tikkun Ha-Ir. Jeff cares deeply about how people, their families and friends, and social and cultural institutions imagine, create and catalyze what it means to belong in this time.



## seth linden

founder and principal of Gather Consulting, is a thought partner, community builder, network weaver and executive coach. Seth is comfortable leading board meetings, facilitating staff retreats, and designing intimate and large community gatherings. He advises philanthropists and nonprofits on board culture, governance, and leadership development; emergent/strategy and business planning; and philanthropic giving. Seth's current research is focused on board governance, educational access, and gender equity in top leadership. Most recently, he was a Program Officer at the Jim Joseph Foundation where he managed a portfolio of grants to Jewish education organizations. Seth is the creator of BoardTalk, a series of workshops for discussing board governance and culture, and forthcoming Board Retreat. He is the Board Chair of Jewish Studio Project, on the Board of Jewish Long Beach, is a 2020 Lead LA Coro Fellow, and co-founder, with Jeff Tiell, of the Community Gathering. He has a BA from Stanford in Human Biology and a Masters in Teaching from Brown. Seth cares deeply about building community as a solution to our societal ills.