
ALONE, LESS LONELY

OneTable
Solo Shabbat Study
February 2021



*“Through Shabbat, I’ve learned new ways to be alone.
I’m now eating without distractions and not rushing to get to the next thing.
I’m being mindful and enjoying what’s in front of me.”*

— 2020 Focus Group Participant

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“Solitude on its own won’t give us knowledge and compassion - it depends how we use that time with ourselves,”

*– Dr. Vivek Murthy,
former Surgeon General, author of "Together"*



A Message from OneTable's President and CEO, Aliza Kline

Nearly one year into this worldwide pandemic people are tired, lonely, and tired of being alone. Every day can feel like “blursday.” I have found myself asking, “how close are we to Shabbat?” countless times.

OneTable was created to foster strong ties among Jewish young adults through the ritual of Shabbat dinner. Until March 2020, we encouraged groups of 8-12 people to gather - even incentivizing invitations to newcomers. If we have learned anything from this pandemic - it's that the power of ritual, especially Shabbat, can be life changing (and affirming). And that Shabbat itself is elastic. OneTable participants have taught us that Shabbat can offer that sense of connection, grounding, and even meaningful ties to the community while being totally alone.

What you will see in this report is stunning, creative and even joyful solo Shabbat celebration. It is also a testament to the beauty of the intentions we create, and the power of the time we spend, with ourselves.

What does this mean for how the community, Jewish and otherwise, serves people who are alone by choice or circumstance? How might we embrace them as a real and substantial part of our diverse community? When we can return to boisterous, crowded gatherings, how will we make space for those looking for quiet reflection and renewal?

Please share your thoughts, experiences and questions in this new conversation.

Gratefully,
Aliza

Young adults are spending more time alone these days, due to stay at home orders and social distancing as a result of the pandemic. The quality of that time depends largely on how it's spent.

Beginning Friday at sundown, Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, comprises 25 hours set apart from the rest of the week, a time to unplug, recharge, and celebrate with ritual, good food, and gratitude.

OneTable is a national nonprofit designed to empower young adults to find and create Friday night Shabbat dinner experiences, and to welcome the weekend with intention. OneTable inspires hosts and guests to encounter ritual, many for the first time, and to explore what Jewish practice can be for them on their own terms, holding tradition in one hand and innovation in the other.

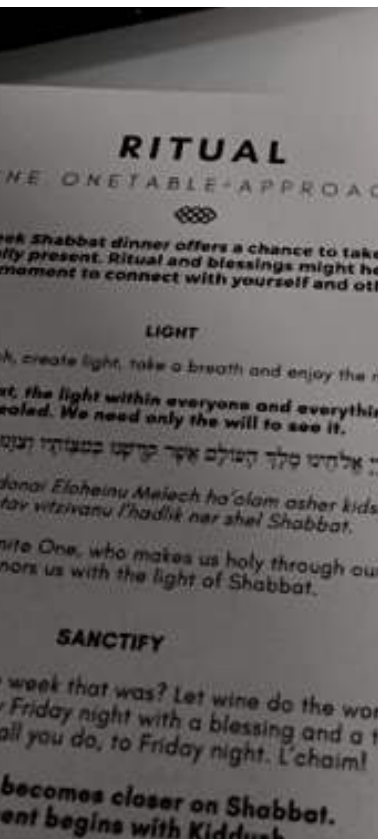
Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, OneTable's primary strategy was to bring people together. We required a minimum of five people at Shabbat dinners and incentivized gatherings among people who shared interests but did not yet know each other.

We saw Shabbat as an antidote to loneliness - and worked to form ties and a sense of belonging among participants.

In mid-March 2020, we recognized that many young adults were quarantining alone, some perhaps immunocompromised, and we wanted to ensure that they could still access resources and a sense of community - so we lowered the minimum number of Shabbat participants to one.

Little did we know that this change would give license to hundreds of young adults seeking quiet, reflective, alone time to mark Shabbat.

This report explores insights and potential opportunities for OneTable, the Jewish young adult sector, and well beyond. The volume of solo Shabbat dinners, over 1,700 from March - December, 2020, was a surprise to us. As a result, we've revisited our core offerings for OneTable participants. Now, we plan on supporting solo practices throughout COVID and after reemergence. You'll see what we've learned, how this knowledge is changing the work we do, and what we can do together as our community recognizes and honors the ways people choose to be alone, together.



METHODOLOGY

Between March and August 2020, 148 individuals posted at least one Solo Shabbat dinner through the OneTable platform. On September 4, 2020, we issued a 13-question free-response survey to learn more about their experience and to recruit participants for focus groups; 66 participants responded (45% response rate).

In October we conducted two focus groups; each with five OneTable Solo Shabbat participants, from diverse geographic areas: New York City, Chicago, Denver, DC, Madison, and Newcastle (Washington State). Two participants identified as male, eight identified as female. Eight were a guest at a OneTable dinner before posting their Solo Shabbat. Three applied to host with OneTable during the pandemic.

RESEARCH TEAM

This report illustrates key themes emerging from research conducted by Jamie Betesh Carter of Designing Empathy and Julia Logan, Director of Field Operations and Research at OneTable.

Having worked with OneTable since its inception, Betesh Carter has helped develop a deeper understanding of its audience by exploring how this generation explores and expresses their multifaceted identities. Her work has informed program and product development, marketing and communications plans for clients such as MTV, Crayola, Birthright Israel, and UJA Federation of New York.

Prior to joining OneTable, Logan worked in higher education and in workforce development, leveraging data to craft the organizational theories of change and establish measurements of success for key performance indicators. At OneTable, Logan ensures that we remain data driven and that we adapt our strategy to reflect changing needs of our target population.

Their work is supported by the interdisciplinary OneTable Research Advisory Board (visit onetable.org/research for more information and current members).

BACKGROUND

Even before we all began sheltering in place, social isolation was an acute issue experienced by young adults and a key factor in the formation and strategy of OneTable; during the pandemic, this issue has become widely recognized as one of the most pressing needs facing this population. In a recently released CDC study of adult mental health during the pandemic, more than 40% of respondents reported at least one adverse mental or behavioral health condition related to the pandemic. Those in the age group now known as “Zoomers” (Gen-Z) seem to be faring worst of all. Almost 63% of 18 to 24-year-olds report having symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder.

Ensuring that the social distancing required by the pandemic NOT result in increased isolation - especially for young adults - is a core responsibility of Jewish organizations serving this population.

There's no doubt that the Jewish community will look and feel different at the end of this period: at OneTable we are also focused on the potential, now - this Friday. We ask, how might Jewish ritual shape the way we experience COVID-19, not just how will COVID-19 change the way we experience Judaism? Might the ritual of Shabbat dinner ultimately lead to greater belonging and less loneliness? And might it alleviate related negative health outcomes, now during trying times and in the future?

¹ <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-unbearable-loneliness-of-the-covid-crisis/>
<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/pdfs/mm6932a1-H.pdf>



NEW NEEDS, NEW SUPPORT

Jewish young adults are looking to Shabbat ritual more than ever before as a way to deal with what they're facing personally and in the world around them. Pre-COVID, all OneTable dinners were in person, averaging 10 people each. At the time of this publication, OneTable offers five distinct ways to utilize its Shabbat dinner platform: 1) solo dinners, 2) events for people who live together, 3) virtual gatherings, 4) outdoor, socially distant dinners, and 5) joining a OneTable Live gathering via Instagram or Zoom hosted by OneTable and its partners.

As a result, young adults posted **95% more dinners** than the previous year (15,000 dinners between March - December 2020; vs. 7,700 during the same period in 2019).

In 2020:

350+

OneTable participants planned solo dinners

1,700+

total solo shabbat dinners — 10% of all dinners in 2020

(39% of Solo hosts hosted once; 44% hosted 2 - 10 times; 11% have hosted 11 - 20 times; 7% hosted more than 20 times)

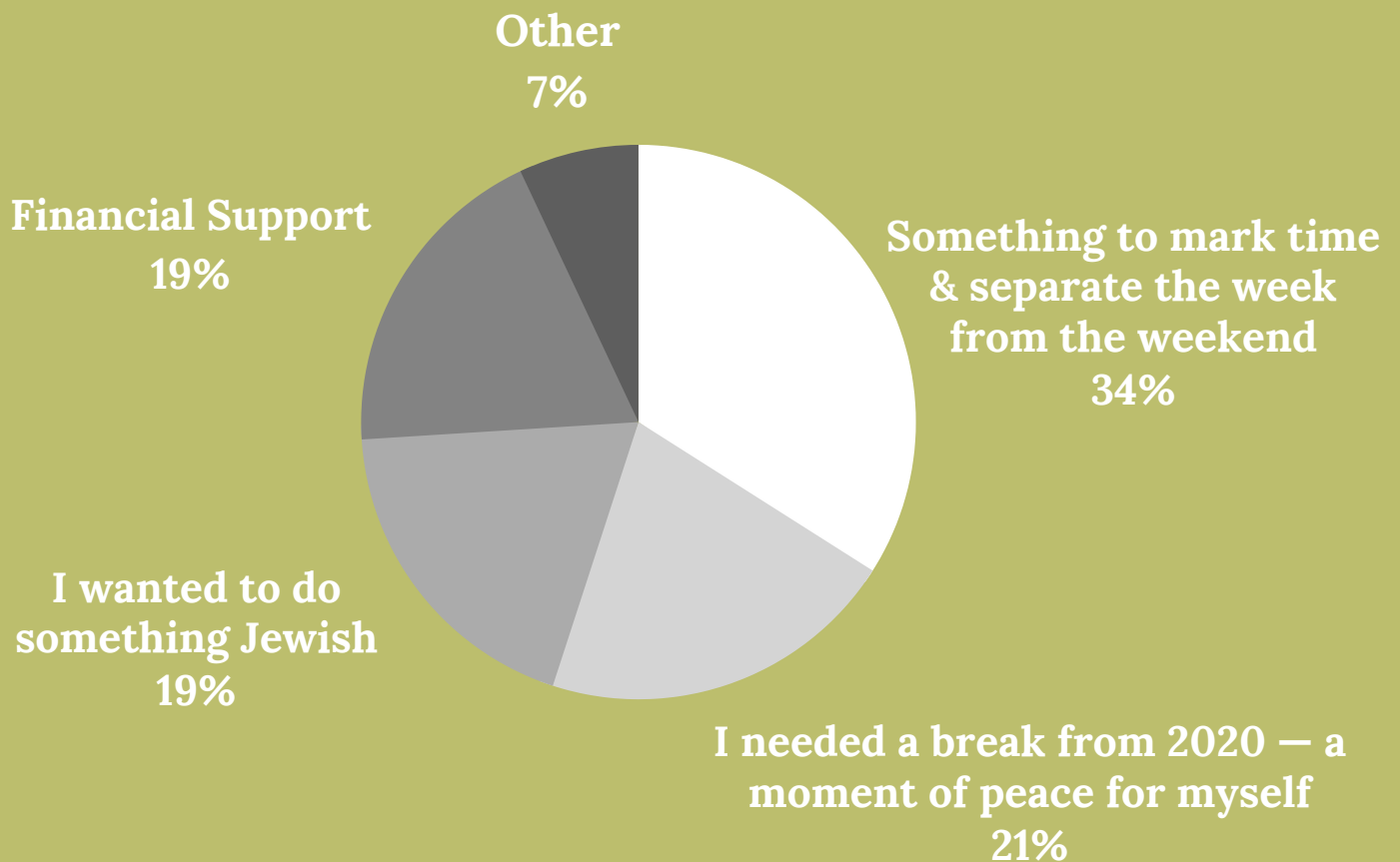
72,000+

online views of Shabbat content — including a Solo Shabbat Guide, celebrity Shabbat cooking videos, and playlists — a 51% increase from 2019 (35,000 views)

FINDINGS

We found that OneTable participants were creating Solo Shabbat dinners for themselves because they wanted to do something to separate the week from the weekend, they needed a moment of peace for themselves, and they wanted to do something Jewish. Note: all quotes are from focus group participants.

This graph charts responses to: What motivated you to host a Solo Shabbat dinner?



62% of the Solo Shabbat participants had participated in OneTable dinners prior to COVID. 38% posted dinners for the first-time during COVID.

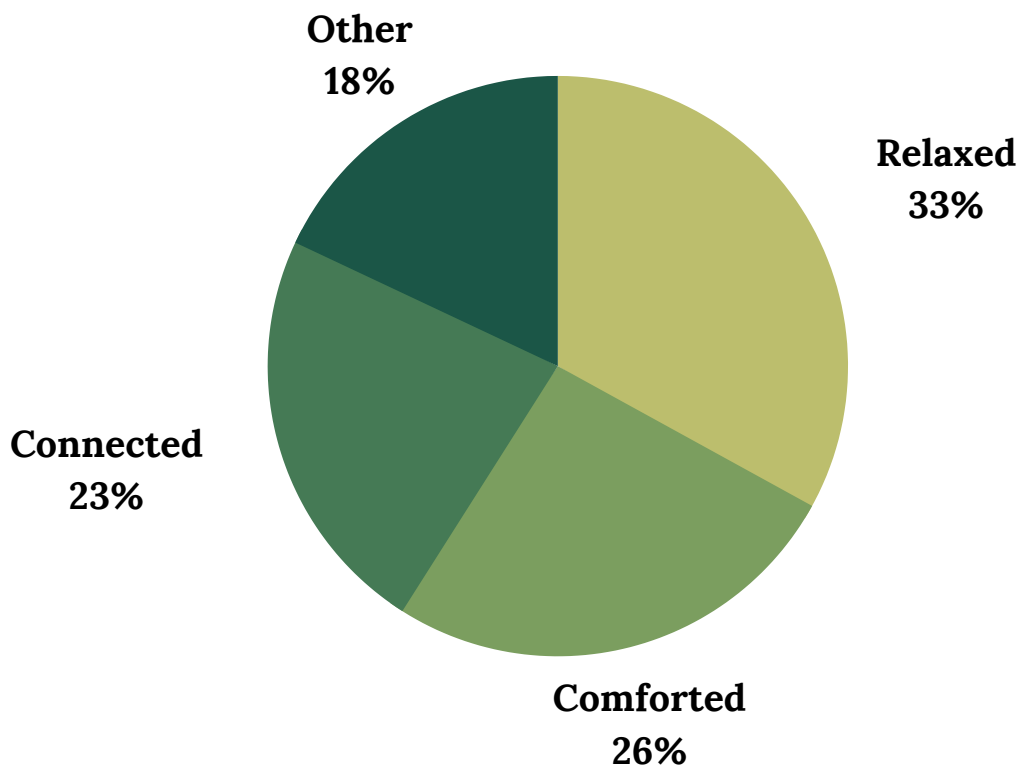
“I used to think of Shabbat as religious, serious, and concrete. But quarantine has helped me go through a lot of personal growth and this is another tradition that I can just have for myself. Regardless of what is happening with other people: friends, coworkers, external factors, I know I have this night of the week for me no matter what the world looks like.”

The Solo Shabbat participants include people who have been active with us since 2016 as well as those who just joined in this pandemic. One participant, who began in 2016, turned to Solo dinners to carve out time for herself to do something different. She found them as a way to separate Friday from the rest of the week. She noted she missed having people over, but found her Solo Shabbat dinner as a way to set different intentions for herself.

Another Solo Shabbat participant, who created his first dinner as a Solo Shabbat, noted that he was making this dinner because he hadn't celebrated Shabbat since his Birthright Israel trip and wanted to be better about keeping Shabbat.

Initially, we anticipated that people would choose solo dinners as a last resort. We were wrong. These young adults sought out alone time, and reported feeling relaxed, comforted, and connected after their solo dinners.

"AFTER YOUR DINNER, HOW DID YOU FEEL?"



Repeatedly, we heard a theme of being alone, but not lonely.

OneTable participants still feel scared and uncertain about COVID-19. They can feel grateful for their health, family, and stability one moment, and fearful for the future the next. While they're finding meaning in the new ways their lives are playing out, they're still completely in the dark about what's to come.

“I spent over two months with my aging parents. That's so amazing, and I'm doing OK. But I'm also scared for winter. I don't know how I'm going to adapt... I'm living between trying to be grateful, but at the same time a little anxious about what's to come.”



People miss connecting in person, and they're waiting for when they can safely gather with friends again. Given how long the pandemic is lasting, they're finding new ways to continue their Shabbat dinner practice. **Spoiler alert, they are not turning to online connections to fill the void of in-person gatherings. In fact, they report feeling overwhelmed by virtual connections.** With no office to leave at the end of the day, there are no boundaries between home and work. Being on multiple hours of Zoom sessions, they're often left feeling burnt out and exhausted. They're looking for ways to decompress and disconnect. And oftentimes, having Shabbat dinner alone helps them do just that.

“I'm experiencing such Zoom fatigue, that virtual Shabbats take more energy. Solo Shabbats bring more peace. Aside from times friends reach out to plan, I enjoy having Fridays for me and knowing it's ahead.”

Days and nights, weeks and weekends bleed together. Setting time aside to have Shabbat dinner helps mark time in a way other rituals (with no time attached) don't.

“At the end of the summer I was really struggling to figure out the flow of time. Weddings and other events were cancelled. Now I can think of things as week to week and not depend on long-term plans. But Friday always feels special.”

Having Shabbat dinner alone during this time feels more intentional, and elevated. This time marked by purpose allows them to recalibrate and feel at peace during an unprecedented time of fear and anxiety.



When it comes to the experience itself, people add different types of rituals into their Shabbat dinners. Challah, candles, and blessings are traditional ways they're marking their events as Shabbat dinners. Additionally, reading, relaxing, and eating at the dining table (rather than the coffee table) is what sets it apart from other weeknight dinners.

People really miss their pre-COVID-19 Shabbat dinner practices. They loved seeing friends in person, and gathering around a dinner table for hours with nowhere to go. But hosting Shabbat dinner for friends could also be stressful. Making Shabbat alone offers a chance to disconnect from the workweek, and connect with themselves in a way their pre-COVID-19 Shabbat dinner experience couldn't.

“Pre-COVID-19 Shabbat was a bit of an investment. If I was coordinating, I was thinking about getting friends together, getting food, picking a time, etc. Now I feel I'm aligning with what Shabbat is meant to be - connecting with myself and the world.”

Participants value the weekly reminders from OneTable to articulate their intention and carve out time for themselves. And while alone, they feel inspired to reach out to others in more creative ways.

“When I'm staying in by myself on a Friday night, I don't always think ‘Oh, it's Shabbat. I need to do something special.’ But when I sign up for a OneTable solo Shabbat I'm more accountable. I went through the blessings and stayed off TV, when normally I wouldn't do that. I tried to disconnect a bit more. I texted people that I hadn't reached out to and said Shabbat Shalom.”



By doing this, participants are learning how to be alone without feeling lonely, and creating a new definition of self care.

“I miss big OneTable dinners where we used to have 20 friends for awesome Shabbat dinners. But to be honest, my priorities have shifted and I'm OK doing things by myself now. Taking care of myself has become so much more important to me in the last seven months. I know that might sound weird to some people, but I've prioritized ‘me time’ now. It's a great thing, and I have really matured in that way.”

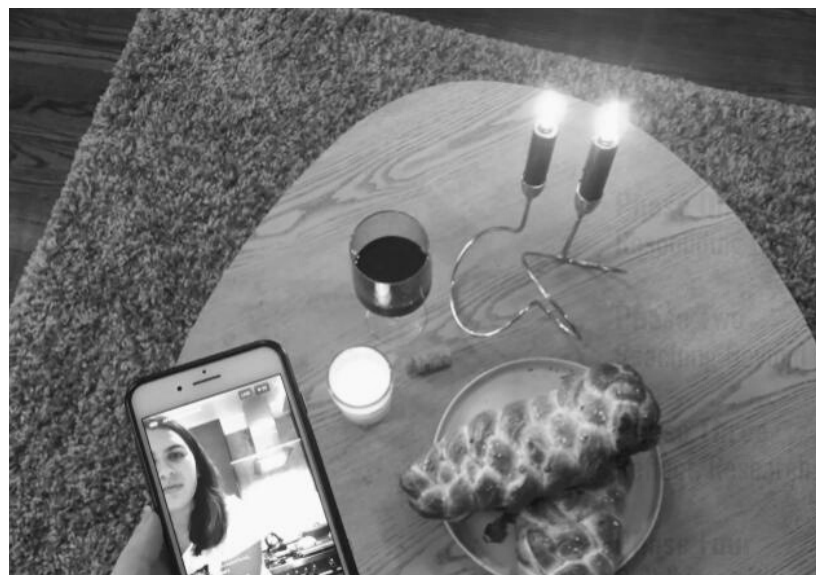
MOVING FORWARD

This research was conducted in fall 2020 with winter looming. Participants spoke about preparing for colder temperatures and less time outside. Some plan to hunker down with a select group of people, some plan to go it alone, and some just don't know what they'll do.

“I’ve formed a pod with five friends who also live alone and are within walking distance. Still trying to understand the boundaries with friends, and I’m not sure how that’ll transition inside.”

Are solo Shabbat dinners here to stay? Most are eagerly awaiting the return of safe gatherings, and admit that nothing replaces the joy of having Shabbat dinner with friends. Some of these participants say they don't think they'll continue their solo Shabbat dinner practice once the world opens back up. But most participants do want to keep their solo practice, at least some of the time. They appreciate the benefits and lessons they've learned about themselves through this practice, and want to continue regardless of what the future holds.

“I’ve been doing solo Shabbat dinners, even after starting to see people in person, and I’d definitely continue to if it’s available. Being able to do Shabbat dinner, to take time to differentiate and be reflective, shouldn’t hinge on having other people to do it with.”



WHAT'S NEXT FOR SOLO SHABBAT HOSTS?

When discussing the future of OneTable solo Shabbat dinners, we asked participants what they would change to make the experience of planning and creating Solo Shabbat dinners better. Some responded they are interested in connecting with other solo Shabbat dinner participants virtually. They'd like to hear from each other about how they're spending their time during their solo Shabbat dinner to gather inspiration for their dinners spent alone.

"I really appreciate step by step processes of having people share their stories - such as 'here's how to spend an hour with yourself.' It could come from other Jewish millennials with different experiences."

When asked for ideas on how to elevate their experiences, participants say they'd appreciate more resources, suggestions about how to plan their dinner, activities to do during, recommended menus, readings, playlists, etc.

"In addition to anti-Racist readings, here's an 'article you can read during your Shabbat.' Sometimes having something to do with direction/structure can be nice when you're alone. Also thinking about how to change up the space you're in - face a different position, etc."

Some participants would appreciate weekly reminders to help them think ahead, and see the opportunity to set intentions for their dinners as an opportunity to dig deeper.

"OneTable serves as a reminder, an intention... You have to write what you're doing at night, that forces us to think about, 'Oh wait, what is this Friday and why is this Friday different from last Friday, and what am I doing?'"

WHAT'S NEXT FOR ONETABLE AND THE WIDER FIELD?

Now's the time to rethink at-home rituals. Using what we've heard from our Solo Shabbat participants, how might we, as a field, find more ways to support emerging Jewish practices?

FOR ONETABLE:

- Creating solo Shabbat WhatsApp groups
- Pointing solo hosts to the [OneTable Solo Shabbat Guide](#). OneTable has created 29 Shabbat guides - resources for hosts and guests to deepen their Shabbat practice based on certain themes, inviting participants to learn more about Shabbat ritual through a new lens.
- Encouraging solo Shabbat hosts to try additional Shabbat guides to go beyond the Solo Shabbat guide.
 - Use the [From Generation to Generation Intergenerational Shabbat Guide](#) with family to share in Shabbat together, virtually.
 - Use one of the Why Be Jewish guides to reflect on your own Jewish identity, asking questions like: why be Jewish in a time of crisis?
 - Use the [Mindfulness Guide](#) to help deepen your Shabbat practice with new teachings, movement, meditations, and ways of looking at Jewish ritual as a gift from our ancestors to pause, reflect, celebrate and nourish yourself and your community each and every week.

FOR THE FIELD:

1. Organizations can provide different themes or discussion questions for the group to consider each week
2. Understanding what other people are doing:
 - Participants want to know how others are making it through. Showcase different participants explaining how they prepare for and observe holidays and rituals.
 - *This is how I prepare my space; this is how I say the candle blessing; this is how I separate work from home*