Renewing Synagogue Life

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Digest, Renewing Synagogue Life

This paper explores recent research and literature on congregational studies as well as the actual practices of synagogues and churches. Specifically, it focuses on what some have called synagogue transformation or synagogue renewal. The introduction discusses the importance and relevance of the topic today.

The second chapter of the thesis, *Where We Stand Now*, overviews current sociological and demographic material about North American Jewry and synagogue affiliation. Such data is meant only to be descriptive, not prescriptive. The usefulness of these numbers is in their ability to inform leaders about the current makeup of American Jewry at large and that portion of them who associate with synagogues. No inference or suggestion is made to answer questions of value with polling data. Still, insofar as synagogues strive to understand and serve the Jewish community, it is vital to survey trends, patterns, and attitudes. This section pays special attention to generational and gender differences.

The third chapter, *Where We Are Headed*, details the mission and vision of the key organizations, congregations and individuals who are involved in synagogue renewal and transformation.

Chapter four, *What Can Be Done: Purpose Driven Action*, I consider to be the heart of the thesis. This section addresses a wide variety of congregation-related topics and issues ranging from the place of the laity in the synagogue, the role of the clergy, the worship service, congregational learning, money, and architecture.

The fifth chapter is a look at a specific congregation, B'nai Jeshurun of Manhattan. This congregation is often touted as a model synagogue, showcasing the possibilities of what synagogue renewal and transformation could look like.

In the conclusion, I provide my own reflections and opinions on the topic. It is my hope that this thesis will showcase ideas that can help synagogues to be strong centers of Jewish life into the twenty first century.

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And finally, I dedicate my thesis to fiancé and soon-to-be wife, Jodi. I met her my first year of rabbinic school, we started dating the following year, and we will be married right before I finish. Her companionship, love, and support have been treasures to me throughout the process.

Contents

Thesis

1. Introduction

The synagogue is at the center of American Judaism. Dr. Isa Aron says of American Jews that the synagogue "is the Jewish organization they are most likely to join, and the one they are most likely to participate in regularly" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 1). In particular, synagogues play the principal role for many American Jews in childhood learning and lifecycle events. Many of today's synagogues function simultaneously as a house of worship, a house of learning, and a house of assembly.

While synagogues play a prominent role in American Jewish life, there is a growing belief that the American synagogue, as it has generally been structured, is not working. Ron Wolfson points out that "there are many people who don't love synagogues, people who are uncomfortable when they walk into a synagogue. Why? Because it is unfamiliar, intimidating, and often unwelcoming—especially for guests, shul-shoppers, and even for members who rarely show up" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 1). Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, one of the major players in synagogue revitalization, writes, "I go so far as to wonder on occasion if there is even a future for the American synagogue, a topic that ought to alarm Jewish leaders in droves, but instead barely piques their interest" (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life

1). Aron, for her part, writes that the synagogue "is also the most likely target of [Jews'] ire and…humor. Nearly everyone has a favorite synagogue story—about a boring service, a callous member of the clergy, an outlandish bar mitzvah, a bitter controversy" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 1).

The perceived problems facing American synagogues are not unique. There have been parts of American Christianity as well that have set out to examine the nature of church life. The church world has devoted considerable research and practice towards reimagining congregational life. The sorts of churches that have been strongly involved with these new trends include, but are not limited to, the popular mega-churches.

The Jewish world has parallels to the Christian world in this regard. Several synagogues and other organizations are turning their focus towards renewing congregational life. B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, the Experiment for Congregational Education, Synagogue 2000/3000, and STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) have all been at the forefront of envisioning what synagogue life could be like. The product of their efforts includes a number of papers, books, and resources on the subject, as well as real-world changes in how some synagogues function. Hoffman's main conclusion is that "significant Jewish existence in North America depends on our ability to sustain Judaism as a religion, rather than a last hurrah of ethnic nostalgia. And the only way to do that is to sustain a synagogue where religion is taken seriously…synagogues must become spiritual and moral centers for the twenty-first

century" (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life 1). Much of the work that is currently being done in synagogue renewal studies is to find the means to make synagogues into such centers.

This thesis sets out to collect and organize the array of research that has gone into reworking congregational life. I will focus on gathering and presenting the research and conclusions, trying to answer the question, "What is the sum of the learning about congregations?" My thesis is that renewing American synagogues can transform the Jewish world. I believe that there is a great deal to learn from the work that has already been done and is continuing to be done. In this work, I will do my best to collect and present this learning.

2. Where We Stand Now: The Present Reality

Contemporary Synagogue Life and Its Challenges

The Makeup of American Synagogues

The focus of synagogue transformation is on the possibilities of where congregations can end up, but a significant amount of effort is also devoted towards understanding where American Jews are right now.[i] No path forward can be devised without a starting point. Or, as Erica Brown puts it, "We can only move people and change the culture of institutions that we understand, and the Jewish community today is extremely complex" (Brown, Inspired Jewish Leadership 44). The numbers show both strengths as well as areas of concern.

While the numbers are helpful, they are also limited. All the numbers in this section are based on national studies, and therefore may not be applicable to any particular community. Furthermore, statistics require interpretation. While we may find many correlations between numbers, causation is much more difficult to ascertain. For example, according Steven Cohen's research, there is a negative correlation between intermarriage and the traditional Judaism. The more traditional one's denominational affiliation, the less likely one is to be intermarried. One interpretation of this trend might be that traditional Jews care more about having a Jewish household than liberal Jews and therefore do not date or marry non-Jews to the same extent as non-traditional Jews. Another interpretation may be that the more liberal the movement, the more likely that movement is to try and make intermarried couples feel welcome in their communities, thereby attracting those Jews who are in interfaith relationships. While the numbers can help us address the question of "*why*?" they are much better at responding to the question of "*who and what*?"

For us, the question is who joins American synagogues? Steven Cohen's 2006 study offers a large amount of insight. He finds that at any given point, 40% of American Jewish adults belong to a congregation, although a significantly larger percentage have been members at one point or another. If one identifies as belonging to any Jewish movement, it increases the likelihood of affiliating with a synagogue. However, how much that likelihood increases depends on the movement with which one affiliates. Cohen reports that "Of all Orthodox Jews, 89% belong to congregations, while 63% of

Conservative Jews and 52% of Reform Jews are synagogue members" (S. M. Cohen, Engaging the Next Generation of American Jews: Distinguishing the In-Married, Inter-Married, and Non-Married).

Reform temples have the largest mean number of members, with Conservative synagogues just a slight be smaller. Orthodox shuls are the smallest, and Reconstructionist congregations fall in the middle. Almost 60% of Conservative congregants are either empty nesters or unmarried and above the age of 45. In Reform congregations, roughly a third are families with children living at home, but Steven Cohen conservatively estimates only about 65% of these families continue their synagogue affiliation after their youngest child celebrates his or her Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Meanwhile, almost a third of all Orthodox Jews are under the age of 35 and more than half are under the age of 44 (S. Cohen, Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why).

Charts Depicting Synagogue Characteristics

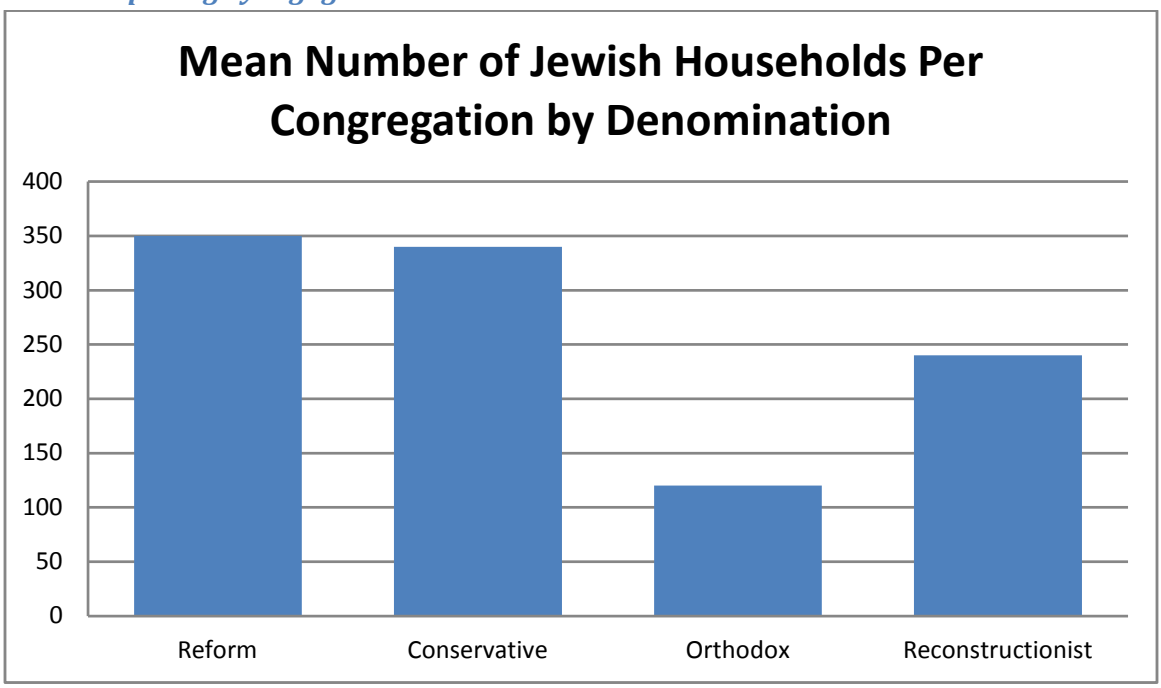

Figure 1 (S. Cohen, Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why)

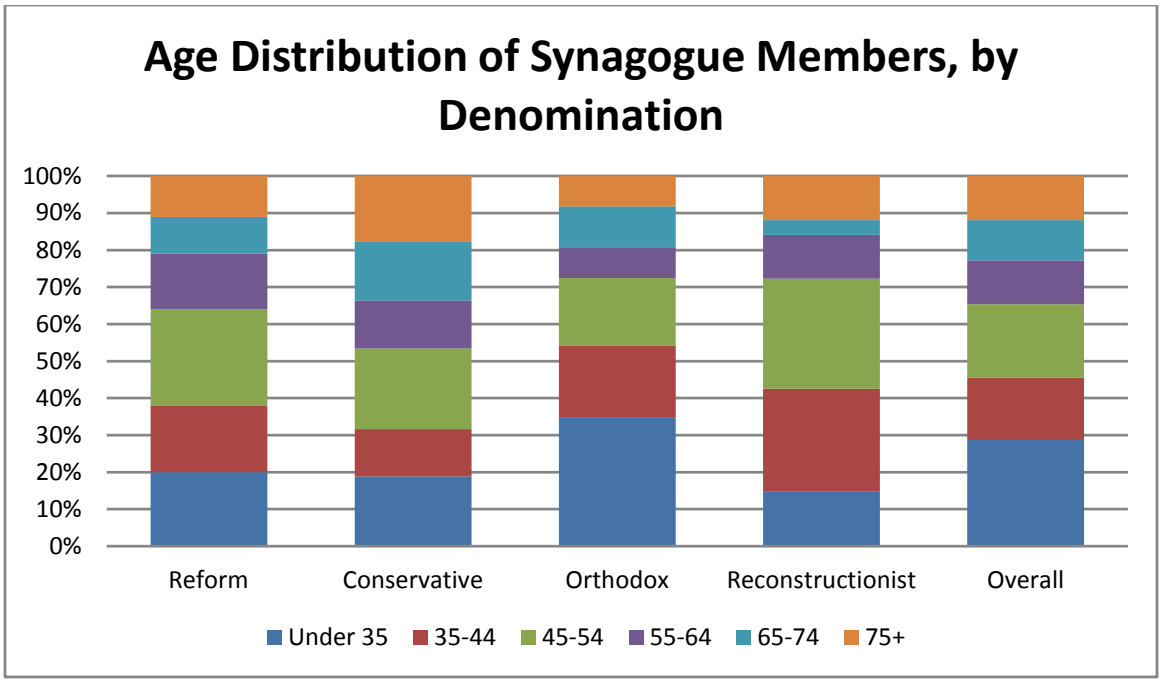

Figure 2 (S. Cohen, Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why)

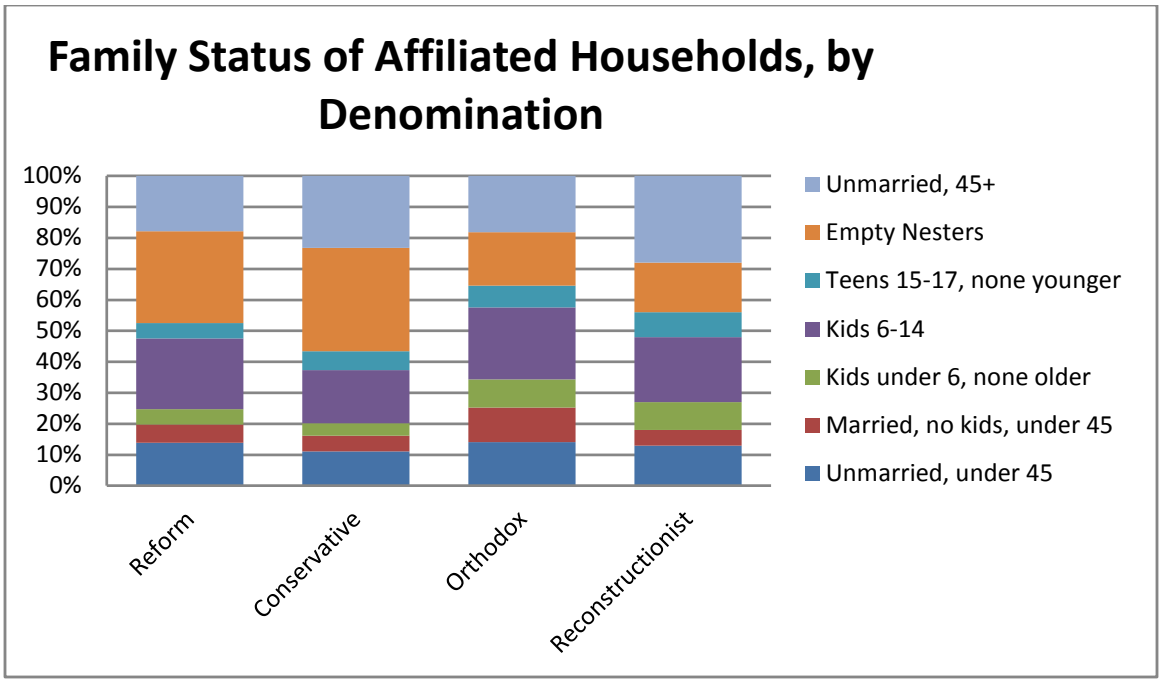

Figure 3 (S. Cohen, Members and Motives: Who Joins American Jewish Congregations and Why)

The Gender Gap[ii]

More women than men are involved in American religious life today, and the American Jewish community is no exception. The typical American Christian church draws a crowd that is 61% female and 39% male. A quarter of all married, Christian women attend church without their husbands (Murrow, Church for Men). Rabbi Stephen S. Pearce, in a Rosh Hashanah sermon published in *Achim Magazine*, notes a similar trend in the Reform Jewish movement:

> Liberal Jews are witnessing these same winds of change that Protestant denominations are experiencing. When I was ordained by the Hebrew Union College, the first woman rabbi was a member of my class. Over the years, the ratio of women-to-men candidates has grown as increasing numbers of women have entered the rabbinate. For many years, we wondered when women rabbinical students would outnumber the men. That tipping point finally

occurred in 2005 when 71% of the newly admitted students were female. In the same year, 66% of the new students at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary were women. The cantorate has already become an almost exclusively female calling. The ratio is not any different in other constituencies of the Reform Movement. For example, in 2005, 88% of the ninth grade teenagers who participated in the Union for Reform Judaism's Young Leadership Camp program were female. The numbers are similar at the URJ summer camps for children where girls vastly outnumber boys (Pearce, Man Enough).

Similarly, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin writes:

> Jewish men seem to be fleeing from synagogue life and leadership. For many years, Jewish education has become increasingly feminized, with fewer and fewer men entering that noble and crucial field. As a predominantly upper-middle-class group, many Jewish men hold high-power jobs that require long hours, commuting, and business travel. Some of the most creative, assertive, and dynamic Jewish men simply don't have the time to bring these qualities to the synagogue community. In many synagogues, festival morning services seem to be attended primarily by Jewish women. The new spirituality has barely touched Jewish men; it is often perceived as being a woman's enterprise. Men of all faiths often associate spirituality with so-called feminine characteristics: inwardness, openness, vulnerability, and nurturing. By contrast, American masculinity connotes independence, industriousness, and competition. Spirituality? Religion? No time, no need, no way.
>
> Men constitute only a tiny percentage of converts to Judaism. In almost twenty years in the rabbinate, I have converted hundreds of women but no more than five men. Every rabbi can testify to the frequent apathy of Jewish men when they join their partners at "Introduction to Judaism" classes as a prelude to conversion. Temple youth groups are increasingly filled with young Jewish

> women craning their necks and wondering, in the words of one Long Island teen, "Where are all the guys?" Jewish adolescent boys report far less of an investment in their Jewish identity than do Jewish girls of the same age (Salkin, searching for my brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World, 7).

Ideas abound for the causes of the gender gap. Rabbi Charles Simon attributes the decline of men in organized Jewish life to "how the Jewish community has educated men over the past forty years" (Simon, Building a Successful Volunteer Culture 150). While the Jewish community focused on programming that educated and empowered women, who previously were denied access, there was an assumption that men's involvement would remain stable. Simon tells of a "Jews and Gender" conference at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1990s that focused exclusively on women, "as if JTS leaders had forgotten that there were two genders" (Simon, Building a Successful Volunteer Culture 152). His strategy is to focus on what men want, which he identifies as camaraderie, networking, an instilled value of volunteerism, or being compelled to change the status quo. Programs that do not speak to these needs will be less successful in both attracting and engaging men (Simon, Building a Successful Volunteer Culture 154). Furthermore, men are task-oriented. "For them, open-ended agendas, or tasks that go with titles—long-term commitments, in other words—are to be avoided. After all, it's difficult enough to be married or in a committed relationship, raise a family, and make a decent living without taking on yet another responsibility that has no clear end date" (Simon, Building a Successful Volunteer Culture 155). Simon observes that men's clubs "rarely lack volunteers to build a sukkah or run a booth at a Purim carnival,"

activities that are task-oriented and terminate at a specific time. However, they "have difficulty finding men who will take on the responsibility of becoming an officer, a position requiring a far greater time commitment, and one that may stretch over years" (Simon, Building a Successful Volunteer Culture 155-156).

An important, but unresolved concern is how to involve men without being unfair to women. Pearce notes:

> The era of the temple brotherhoods and men's club bowling leagues is long gone, but there must be a way to bring men back, not only into the religious landscape but also into family life and civic discourse. It will not be an easy task because it forces reexamination of basic assumptions about feminism, male education, and why contemporary institutions, including synagogues, fail to attract men. Furthermore, it is difficult to address men's issues without making it seem as if women should be sidelined. As my colleague Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, author of *Searching for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World* (1999), notes, "We haven't figured out how to reenfranchise (men) without disenfranchising (women)." If we hope to foster a healthy society, then we need to find a way to invite boys and men back into the mainstream. If men's spiritual needs are being ignored, then we need to find out what they are and what we need to do to meet them. Our national movement is experimenting with male-only worship, in spite of the discomfort male-only ritually-related activities create (Pearce, Man Enough).

Generations

American demographers divide the population by generation. Each generation has general characteristics and tendencies shaped by the culture and dominant events

that occurred during formative years. Understanding these generational differences helps leaders and synagogues to reach their various populations. Dr. Erica Brown writes, “Leaders who understand their followers naturally stand the best chance of motivating them. However, gaining this understanding requires more than simple observation alone. It requires listening and keeping up with the latest research and current events. Most of all, it requires constantly asking: Just who am I leading, and what is the nature of the fluid, dynamic entity that we call community” (Brown, Inspired Jewish Leadership 43). The different generations may be broken down as:

- Traditionalists – Born 1900-1945
- Baby Boomers – Born 1946-1964
- Generation X – Born 1965-1980
- Millenials (Or, Generation Y) —Born 1981-1999 (Brown, Inspired Jewish Leadership 49)

	Traditional Generation	Baby Boomer Generation	Generation X	Generation Y
Values	• Conformity, authority and rules • Logic • Defined sense of right and wrong • Loyalty and respect for authority	• Personal gratification • Equality • Health and wellness • Personal relationships • Seek self-improvement or hobby-related learning opportunities	• Independence • Honesty • Work/life balance • Prefer informality • Family/friend relationships important	• Self-expression • Marketing and branding • Respect must be earned
Attributes	• Disciplined and stable • View an understanding of history as a way to plan for the future • Dislike conflict • Detail oriented	• Optimistic • View the world as theirs • Attention seeking • Spiritual, always seeking to improve understanding of themselves • Relatively self-absorbed • Traditional male/female roles shared • Avoid conflict • Service oriented	• Reliable • Survivors • Skeptical • Always asking "why" to understand the purpose of a decision, plan or process • Technologically savvy	• Adapt rapidly • Crave change and challenge • Create constantly • Exceptionally resilient • Committed and loyal when dedicated to an idea, cause or product • Accept others of diverse backgrounds easily and openly • Global in perspective
Work Style	• Consistency and uniformity • Seek out technological advancements • Past oriented • Command and control leadership style • Prefer hierarchical organizational structures and will continue to view horizontal structure in a hierarchical way • Effort is rewarded at some point	• Seek growth and expansion • Seek immediate rewards • Achievement oriented • "Workaholics"; may have difficulty balancing work and home and little understanding of those who seek work/life balance • Process more important than result • Work ethic = worth ethic • May be perceived as disingenuous—difficulty practicing what they preach	• Work very well independently • Little patience for office politics • Will make every effort to complete a project or task, but will not be taken advantage of • Adaptable • Not intimidated by authority	• Want to know how what they do fits into the big picture, and need to understand how everything fits together • View work as an expression of self • Exceptional multi-taskers • Seek active versus passive involvement • Less likely to seek managerial or team leadership positions • Seek flexibility in work hours, work environment and dress code • Expect corporate social responsibility • Seek work in teams • Seek continuing learning • Expect everything instantly, everything now • Effort can be separated from reward • Seek to balance lifestyle and work, with more focus on lifestyle
Management Techniques	• Demonstrate respect for their experience and knowledge of the past • Reward employees for effort and a job well done in tangible ways—note from manager, nice pen, etc. • Invite older workers to mentor younger workers, especially Gen Y workers; this can lead to a mutually beneficial relationship of helping to understand the big picture and instructing on new technologies • Provide feedback in person not through e-mail or voicemail • Ask questions. Make sure these employees have the training they need and feel comfortable asking questions. Traditional Generation employees not likely to ask for help for fear of appearing incompetent or generating conflict	• Focus on individual contributions that make the organization successful • Identify ways in which the individual is a unique contributor • Express the value the individual provides to the organization • Develop a relationship with the employee and allow opportunities to work in groups to plan projects and processes • Praise publicly and create opportunities for others to praise the individual	• Allow the Gen X employee to work on multiple projects, of their choosing if possible, and prioritize their time • Allow independent work • Confirm that you understand and appreciate life outside of work and help your employee balance work and home • Provide feedback often • Be consistent in administering policies and providing rewards and recognition • Show Gen Xers how they can leverage office politics to obtain their goals	• Invite participation, ideas and independence—micromanaging is not appreciated! • Ask questions. Make sure these employees have the training they need and feel comfortable asking questions. Generation Y employees are less likely to ask for help for fear of appearing incompetent, but they want to do a good job. • Be a mentor—coach new employees on how their creativity and work produces meaningful results to the big picture • Provide immediate feedback • Focus on the individual and their personal lives—this generation wants your interest and approval • Involve these employees in decisions that affect their work and employment to every extent possible

Figure 4 - From ValueOptions www.valueoptions.com/spotlight_YIW/workplace_chart.htm

The above chart is from ValueOptions, the nation's largest independent behavioral healthcare company. It depicts the general qualities and characteristics of each generation. While it is important to adequately understand each generation so as to best serve them and welcome them into the community, particular attention needs be paid to the younger generations, because with the exception of in Orthodox Judaism, they are affiliating at significantly lower rates than the older generations.

The Generation Gap

According to a Synagogue 3000 report, an entire generation of people, those in their twenties and early thirties, has an incredibly low affiliation rate (Belzer and Miller, Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults). Like the gender gap, the generation gap is not limited to the Jewish world. Young adults across the religious landscape of the United States–Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim, as well as Jewish–affiliate at lower levels. However, the study finds that young adults across the religious spectrum who are interested in congregational life and affiliation share similar motivations and that those congregations who are successful in attracting young adults take similar approaches. While these approaches may be similar, however, they are not uniform. What is clear is that "young adults in this study are not participating in congregational life out of a sense of familial or religious obligation. Nor are they focused on transmitting Jewish identities to their children (which few have). Instead, their active involvement is focused on their current realities and interests: what matters to them now. For many, their primary expression of Jewish identity occurs within the

congregational community" (Belzer and Miller, Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults). Furthermore, for young adults, affiliation is a conscious choice that is made continuously, "they decide how often to attend and how much to participate. They choose how much of the belief system to accept and how much ritual to practice" (Belzer and Miller, Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults).

An August 2009 national survey by the Pew Research Center of individuals age 16 and older found that there are perceptions of huge differences between younger and older generations over issues of morality, political views, and religious views. The graph below shows their findings, displayed as percentages of respondents saying if and how much young and older people differ on various issues.

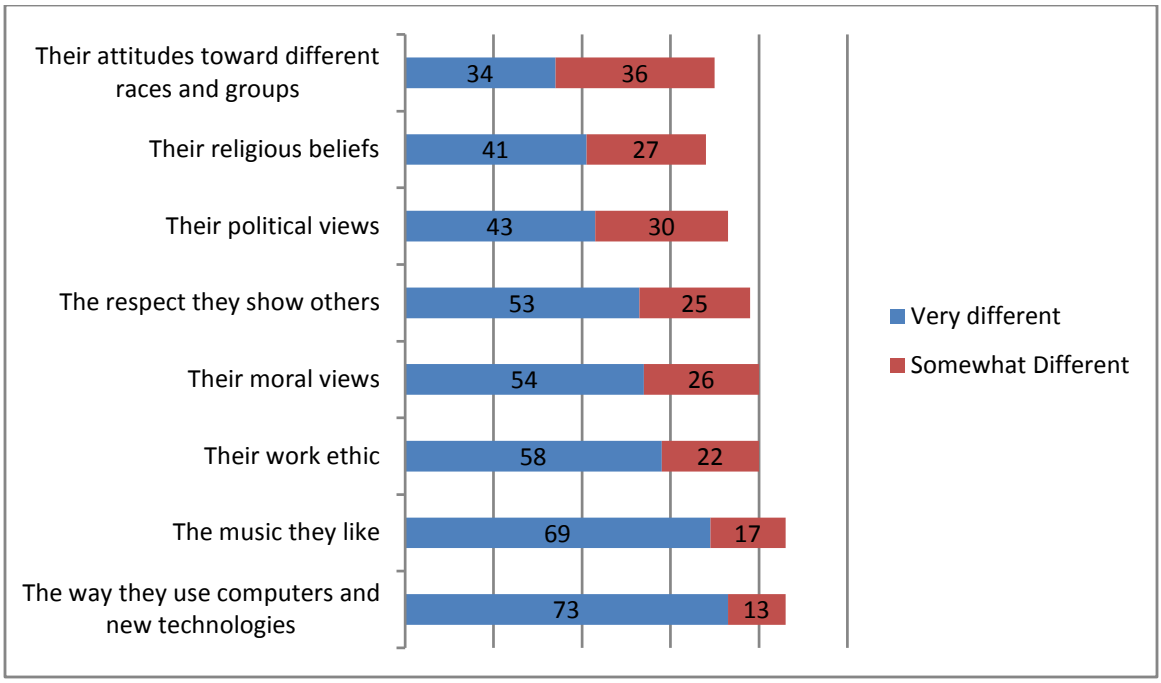

Figure 5 -From Pew Social & Demographic Trends Study (Taylor and Morin, Forty Years After Woodstock, A Gentler Generation Gap)

The report also notes, "79% of the public says there is a generation gap, defined in the question as a 'major difference in the point of view of younger people and older people today.' That's nearly 20 percentage points higher than in 1979 when the same question was asked in a national survey by CBS and *The New York Times*, and it's marginally greater than the 74% of adults who reported a generation gap in a 1969 Gallup survey" (Taylor and Morin, Forty Years After Woodstock, A Gentler Generation Gap). They go on to note that the public believes that there is a larger generation gap today than there was even in the 1960s.

At issue is not just that younger people are in a different place in their lives than older generations, but that their sensibilities are different from earlier generations when

they were the same age. Alternatively put, the older generation was never the age that the younger generation is now, because the younger generation was raised in and is part of a culture that did not exist earlier. Ben Zeidman illustrates this point in a recent sermon delivered at the Hebrew Union College when he states:

> A generation or two ago, people were married and started families at a younger age than they do now. There wasn't as large of a population of Jews out of college and without children, who were looking for meaning in their lives. Today, these younger Jews are struggling to find connection and don't see a place for themselves in our congregations. They are not joining or providing any of a congregation's resources. Reaching out to these non-members and building a community that welcomes them means making changes and choices that are uncomfortable. It means changes and choices that will engage these young people where they already are. It means creating engaging and stimulating programs geared towards a younger crowd. It means spending money on technology. It may even mean changes in a congregation's worship style (Zeidman).

Belzer and Tobin recommend the following suggestions, already practiced by existing congregations of various faiths:

1. To show that young congregants' presence is valued:
    a. Facilitate regular intergenerational communication between congregational members, staff, and leadership.
    b. Regularly and frequently appreciate active young lay leaders.
    c. Underwrite the activities of the group as a way to acknowledge the importance of young congregants' participation.
2. To engender a sense of ownership:
    a. Enable young congregants to create and plan their own events.

    b. Create leadership positions for young congregants both within their peer group and within the larger congregation.
    c. Organize committees that are lay-led by young congregants.
3. Acknowledge that young congregants' interests in religion are multifaceted:
    a. Offer multiple points of entry: social, educational, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and theological.
    b. Create multiple arenas for young congregants to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.
    c. Organize affinity groups so that young congregants can find like-minded peers.
4. To meet young congregants where they are:
    a. Offer learning opportunities directed specifically to young congregants.
    b. Reduce fee structure so that participation is financially viable.
    c. Explore and explain the congregations' theological framework through a learning process that is open to questioning.
5. To produce an affective, or emotional, experience:
    a. Religious leaders should cultivate an atmosphere during services that enables young congregants to be participants instead of audience members.
    b. Leadership should be accessible and charismatic.
    c. Fund a charismatic and young staff person who can cultivate a community of young congregants.
6. To create a balance between the particular and universal:
    a. Focus on the thoughtful transmission of the theology and tradition of the particular congregation, not on theological debates (especially those that disparage other religious traditions or denominations).
    b. Create an atmosphere that is self-consciously open an analytical: acknowledging the existence of individual differences such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation.
    c. Facilitate interfaith and interdenominational exchange (Belzer and Miller).

The Problem Defined

Amongst the leaders of Synagogue 3000, and others like them, there is a sense that synagogues have a largely unrealized potential. All of them express a love for synagogue life, but also show concern that they are failing to inspire that same love in others. Ron Wolfson writes, "There are many people who don't love synagogues, people who are uncomfortable when they walk into a synagogue. Why? Because it is unfamiliar, intimidating, and often unwelcoming—especially for guests, shul-shoppers, and even for members who rarely show up" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 1). Wolfson is not alone. Isa Aron writes of American Jews that the synagogue "is the Jewish organization they are most likely to join, and the one they are most likely to participate in regularly." However, "it is also the most likely target of their ire and their humor. Nearly everyone has a favorite synagogue story—about a boring service, a callous member of the clergy, an outlandish bar mitzvah, a bitter controversy" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 1). Lawrence Hoffman goes a step further when he writes, "I go so far as to wonder on occasion if there is even a future for the American synagogue, a topic that ought to alarm Jewish leaders in droves, but instead barely piques their interest" (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life 1).

The problem is not even that synagogues are dysfunctional. On the contrary, a congregation may be quite functional yet still be inadequate. One article writes that:

> Functional congregations certainly work, and may even function quite well, in providing professionally delivered high-quality services of all kinds. They generally appeal to their congregants as fitting venues for the celebration of a bar or bat mitzvah, for worship services on the High Holidays, and for the availability of the rabbi to attend to weddings, funerals, and hospital visits. But the functional congregation lacks a compelling, widely shared, and deep-seated vision that would make it truly great (Aron, Cohen and Hoffman, Functional and Visionary Congregations, 11).

3. Where We Are Headed: The Vision

This chapter will present an overview of various visions for what synagogues could be like. While visions can vary from person to person or organization to organization, there are shared goals. The first part of this chapter will focus on those shared goals, while the second part of the chapter will focus on one specific model of synagogue transformation.

A common theme is that congregations at their best are vibrant communities. They are places that foster relationships and commonalities, such as a sense of shared purpose and identity, while also being respectful and open places. The very title of Ron Wolfson' book, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community*, speaks to this insight. For Wolfson, a spiritual community is a welcoming one. The ambience is welcoming, the worship is welcoming, and the membership is welcoming (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community).

Isa Aron's work defines the self-renewing congregation more in terms of what it does, rather than what it is. Such a congregation acts intelligently, which is different

from having intellectual individuals involved. The congregation is able to understand its own situation and environment, it is able to consider various possibilities and directions, and it is self-assessing. In addition, it has a vision, and monitors its progress towards that which. She writes that such a congregation has four specific capacities:

- "Thinking back and thinking ahead, being both reflective and proactive.
- Enabling leaders to follow, and followers to lead: practicing collaborative leadership
- Seeing both the forest and the trees: creating community among diverse individuals
- Honoring the past while anticipating the future" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 9-10).

Visionary Congregations

In a previously cited article entitled "Functional and Visionary Congregations" in *The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Isa Aron, Steven Cohen, Lawrence Hoffman, and Ari Kelman outline their understanding of visionary congregations, compared to standard functional congregations. Functional congregations (or *merely* functional), in this model, stand in contrast to visionary ones. The article identifies six features of functional congregations and compares them to six features found in visionary congregations. First, whereas functional congregations provide assorted services to consumer-clients, the visionary congregation provides "sacred experiences." In the functional congregational model, commitment builds around a service-for-fee mentality. Dues are exchanged for access. In the visionary congregational model, commitment is built around sacred purpose, that the congregation is involved in something larger than

itself. In this model, the congregants themselves feel a sense of responsibility, rather than the assumption that obligations are primarily to the congregants. Second, visionary congregations stand apart by promoting a holistic ethos. Dualisms and segmentation are reduced, and integration is enhanced. Religious school, worship, social action, social programming are all seen as "portals of entry into increased congregational engagement" rather than stand-alone experiences. Third, visionary congregations strive for a participatory culture over passivity. Passivity comes out of an over-reliance on highly skilled professionals. One symptom is "the detachment experienced in worship, learning, and other congregational activities." A participatory culture invites the laity to share in the experience and responsibilities of the clergy. Worship, for example, may include more opportunities for the congregation to pray and sing together, rather than long passages read by the rabbi and solos sung by a cantor. Fourth, visionary congregations "are intent and purposeful (and successful) about the delivery of Jewish meaning to their congregants." The idea here is that people are looking to find meaning in their lives, and insofar as the congregation can be a vehicle for that task, it is relevant. Continuing the example of worship and ritual, the visionary congregation does not seek to continue old traditions for their own sake, but rather seeks to provide a service that is meaningful to those who attend and participate. Fifth, visionary congregations are identified as having an "innovative disposition." The authors of the article seem somewhat ambivalent about what this means. On the one hand, they appear to prefer congregations to consistently be evaluating their structure and programs and be unafraid to make changes in order to attract "a more

sophisticated, acculturated, integrated, and modernized younger generation." On the other hand, they also give credence to the arguments "that proposed changes contradict time-honored values of Judaism….minor adjustments, rather than wholesale ransacking of established and well-functioning patterns, can succeed in bridging the apparent gaps between the ways of the past and the tastes of the future." This does tie in to the final characteristic of visionary congregations, which is a reflective leadership. This final value may also shed light on what exactly innovative disposition means. In order to better understand the value as proposed, it is helpful to look at what they consider its opposite, "lack of reflectiveness." This trait comes from a leadership that is "too busy or too defensive to think critically and imaginatively about abiding customs and habits."

Both a reflective leadership and an innovative disposition it seems are not entirely about bringing change, but rather they represent a mindset that focuses on open, honest, and critical review of organizational life and the willingness to make necessary and appropriate adjustments, which may break with past traditions to either a larger or smaller degree.

Functional Congregations	Visionary Congregations
Consumerist Orientation	Sacred Purpose
Segmentation	Holistic Ethos
Passivity	Participatory Culture
Detachment	Meaningful Engagement
Lack of Reflectiveness	Innovative Disposition
Routinization	Reflective Leadership

4. What Can Be Done: Purpose-Driven Action

On Change

Synagogue renewal and transformation projects are all about changing the status quo. Change does not mean just one thing, however. On the one hand, there can be changes that are institutional and affect the community as a whole. For example, worship services can change, in the sense that new melodies may be incorporated or new sermon topics introduced. Alternatively, individuals themselves may change. People whose Judaism was only ancillary to their lives may grow in such a way that their Jewishness becomes the yardstick by which they measure all parts of their lives. This chapter covers both institutional change as well as personal change. While I make this distinction, these are overlapping categories, and as the one changes it is bound to affect the other.[1] When talking about personal change, it is from the context of the changing individual within the larger community. Individual processes that occur outside of the community are not in focus.

Furthermore, there is the realization that change can be inherently difficult and uncomfortable. As one saying puts it, the only people who actually like change are wet babies. Alternatively put, change disrupts stability, and is desirable only when the status quo is even less desirable. While changes can be either good or bad, some have made the case that the status quo is *always* problematic, even if it seems to be working just fine at any given moment. On a personal level, *Pirkei Avot* teaches that everyone should

[1] This sort of thinking is what I take to be at the heart of a systems approach to understanding congregational life. For more on this subject, see *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and*

repent one day before they die, and since no one knows when that day will come, one should always be repenting, or always undergoing some sort of internal change. On a societal level, Jewish sources have long taught of a vision of a world redeemed – a messianic age when swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. The moral imperative to improve and contribute to the well-being of society has long been felt by a great many Jews. These values speak to the need for ongoing change. Erica Brown summarizes it this way when she writes, "We have two Jewish values that hinge on change and commitment: *teshuva*, which is repentance or personal change, and *tikkun olam*, our commitment to the systemic improvement of the global community" (Brown, Inspired Jewish Leadership 160). On a congregational level, the case for change is made by the desire to do better. Any given congregation has to address its own position, but as a whole, the Jewish community faces at the very least changing demographics and an ever-changing dominant (Western popular) culture.[2] One report states that, "In the American context, proponents of innovation have generally argued that failure to change will leave Judaism incapable of attracting a more sophisticated, acculturated, integrated, and modernized younger generation" (Aron, Cohen and Hoffman 21).

Not all change is so drastic as a revolution. Change is sometimes slow in coming, and sometimes quicker. The desirability of a faster or slower rate is debatable as has been discussed by others who write, "Synagogue leaders differ about the pace and

[2] See Section 3, *Where We Stand Now: The Present Reality*

direction of change. In general, Conservative congregations introduced changes very slowly, often mindful of the comfort level of their older congregants" (Aron, Cohen and Hoffman, Functional and Visionary Congregations 21). Some changes that synagogues will be able to implement relatively quickly can have immediate positive effects.[3] Others require long-term planning and implementation.[4] Some caution about being so fixated on the short-term, that no large transformation will be possible, while others warn that focusing only on the long-term will result in endless stagnation. Richard J. Jacobs, rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, speaks to the second concern when he writes that a main principle of his in change is "Ready, fire, aim!" He explains:

> We have all been taught to put these steps in the correct order: Ready, aim, fire. Too often synagogues begin with a comprehensive strategic plan that requires ten years of research and meetings. This thinking demands that we figure our beforehand exactly what steps need to be taken in order to reach the Promised Land. Unfortunately, by the time we finish the strategic study we are almost sure to have missed the moving target. 'Ready, fire, aim' puts us into a culture of experimentation: try it, innovate, learn, refine, and retry (Jacobs, Keeping the Mice in Shul 43).

The Laity

American synagogue structure is by-and-large one of membership, which is primarily defined in financial terms. In exchange for a fee—dues—one belongs to a congregation and can then selectively participate in any number of services offered by

[3] For examples of these changes see Appendix C, "Low Hanging Fruit."
[4] Like transforming into what Isa Aron calls a "Congregation of Learners." For more on this, see "Becoming a Congregation of Learners" in Chapter 5, *What Can Be Done: Purpose-Driven Action*

the congregation. The numbers shown earlier in this thesis suggest that a significant number of people join Reform synagogues in particular when they have young children in order to provide a religious education for them. Conservative estimates are that 35% of these households discontinue their membership after the youngest child has become a bar or bat mitzvah. Put somewhat crassly, a large number of households join temples with the mindset that they are paying a fee for a service—religious instruction for children culminating in the bar or bat mitzvah—and then dropping out after having received that service. Ron Wolfson bluntly addresses this theme by stating:

> The question we usually hear is, How can we keep the kids involved in the synagogue after the Bar or Bat Mitzvah? But I am asking, What can we do during the twelve to fifteen years of membership to ensure that the parents continue their affiliation with the congregation? This will require a complete rethinking of every aspect of what it means to belong to a congregation. To do this thinking, synagogue leaders need to do something quite radical: analyze the entire experience of membership—from shul-shopping to joining a congregation to connecting with each person in a meaningful way—from the point of view of the prospective member, not from the point of view of the synagogue office (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 144).

The issue is not just one of recruiting new members, but improving the quality of relationship and experience for the current membership (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 144).

Seekers

While there are all sorts of unaffiliated Jews, out there, one group in particular to focus on are "seekers." These sorts of folk are looking for spirituality. Despite their searching, however, they are having a hard time finding it in synagogues. An illustration of this comes from the novel, *The Rabbi and the Nun*, by Mordecai Schreiber, an assistant rabbi of a large, suburban synagogue who is dealing with the lack of religiosity and commitment to Judaism in his congregation. One morning, he is asked to visit a young congregant, Sue, who wants to leave home to join a spiritual commune. Her parents do not want her to go, and desperately, they ask the rabbi to talk to their daughter. This is part of their conversation:

> "I'm going to live in a place out in Southern California where there is no electricity, no plumbing, no cars, really God's country, where people say what they think and do what they feel. I'm starting a new life, going back centuries in time. Isn't that what people who started the kibbutz did? They went out into the wilderness and started a new life, a new kind of community."
>
> "You make it sound very inviting, Sue. I'm almost tempted to join you."
>
> She looked at him with eyes wide open with surprise. "You're not serious."
>
> "Why not?"
>
> …"My mother had called you and asked you to come over and see if you could talk me out of going to live on that commune. And here you are, telling me you might want to go there yourself. You know, for a moment you had me believe you really meant it."
>
> "What makes you think I didn't?"
>
> "Well," she turned serious again, "you have a wife and child. You are the assistant rabbi of the biggest temple in the Midwest."

“So?”

“So.”

“Sue, what kind of commune is it?”

“Bahai.”

“You mean the Bahai religion?”

“Yup”

“You didn’t…”

“Yes, I did. I don’t believe in any organized or institutional religion. Bahai is none of this.”

“But why? Why Bahai?”

“Because I love people.”

“What has this got to do with it?”

“Are you familiar with the Bahai religion?”

“Somewhat.”

“Well, the Bahai maintain that all the major religions of the world are valid. That all people are spiritual brothers and sisters. They make no distinction between, say, Jews, Christians and Moslems. They believe in love, harmony, beauty. This is exactly what I believe in.”

“In other words, you accept every belief of every religion in the world.”

“I accept everything that is good and beautiful in any religion. Don’t you?”

‘I guess I do.’

“But you believe Judaism is better than other religions.”

“For me it is.”

“You wouldn’t officiate at my wedding if I married a non-Jew, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t. I believe Jews should marry Jews or we may disappear altogether in a few years.”

So what if we disappear? Haven’t Jews suffered enough already for no other reason except their Jewishness?”

“There is a purpose for the suffering.”

“There is a purpose for the suffering.”

“Like what?”

“To perfect the world in the image of the kingship of God.”

“That sounds to me more like the purpose of the Bahai religion than Judaism. Millions of people believe in Jesus. The Bahai do not necessarily believe that Jesus is the son of God. But they accept him as a great prophet. Now Jews are afraid to even talk about Jesus.”

“I’m not afraid to talk about Jesus.”

“Well, most Jews are. Like my parents, for instance.”

He was wondering if there was any point in pursuing that discussion.

“There is one thing I don’t understand, Sue. Why can’t you be a Jew and still love all people and respect all religions?”

She gave him a slow look, as if unsure whether she should reply.

“I don’t mean to hurt your feelings,” she finally said. “But in what way does Suburban Temple promote love for all people?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Then…why are you working as a rabbi of that temple?”

“Because I’d like to change it.”

She laughed….

As he drove off he felt a tug in his heart. Poor Sue. First it was drugs, free-wheeling friends. Found half-dead in the gutter, sick with hepatitis. Drugs again.

> Now it's this Bahai thing. Love the whole world. Save the whole world. Instant salvation. Shortcuts to heaven. Anything goes…
>
> Yes, but why couldn't he win her back? Why didn't he have anything to offer her? She saw through him, as she saw through Blumenfeld and her own parents and their rich and powerful friends. Change Suburban Temple…Don't waste your breath, rabbi. No one is going to change that illustrious institution (Schreiber 38-41).

This sort of encounter between the rabbi and the seeker shows what some people feel is lacking in many synagogues: religious and spiritual integrity.

Ron Wolfson notices a similar problem. He tells of an encounter where he met one of these Jews who felt her needs met more at a local church, then at synagogue:

> "It was a call from a complete stranger that shook me to my core. On a Saturday, the Los Angeles Times had published an article about our critique of synagogues and the plans for Synagogue 2000. On Monday, a woman called me in the office and caught me by surprise:
>
> 'Dr. Wolfson, you don't know me, but if you want to know where the Jewish seekers are, I can tell you. They are at Agape Church. Have you heard of Agape?'
>
> 'No I can't say that I have.'
>
> 'Well, there are about three hundred of us Jews who have found Agape and it has become our spiritual home. We tried synagogues, but none of them offer what we're looking for.'
>
> 'What might that be?'
>
> 'A place that touches us in the heart, that speaks to the challenges in our lives, that offers us a connection to something higher, that isn't concerned with appearances and materialism, that welcomes everyone. You should see it.'
>
> 'When do you meet?'

'There's a service every Sunday morning. This week is Choir Sunday. There is a seventy-voice volunteer choir and there will be a thousand people.'

'A thousand people! If a thousand people are coming to a religious service, I want to know what's going on.'

And so I arranged to meet this woman, let's call her Karen, in a parking lot near the church. It was a Sunday morning I will not soon forget.

As Karen predicted, there were a thousand people, maybe more, waiting in line to enter a nondescript building located in the middle of an industrial zone south of Culver City on the west side of Los Angeles. The people represented a United Nations of colors, nationalities, and religions. Many appeared to be nicely attired – an upscale crowd.

As we entered what can only be described as a warehouse converted into a church, greeters with name tags welcomed us warmly at the front door. Just past a tiny lobby, we walked into the 'sanctuary,' a large space filled with row upon row of folding chairs. At the front of the room was a low pulpit with no chairs. There was no cross and no altar—only a brightly lit back wall with what appeared to be some sort of symbolic artwork. To the left of the pulpit, the choir was positioned on portable risers. There was ambient music playing while Agape members greeted each other as they found their seats. Karen introduced me to five of her Jewish friends.

The service began with music—spectacular music—sung by the volunteer choir that I later learned was populated by a number of professional singers from the Hollywood area. The pastor, Michael Beckwith, an African American, came from the world of music, a Grammy Award-winning songwriter of rhythm and blues. The songs were about love, peace, and seeking the spirit. People rose from their seats almost immediately after the music began, singing at the top of their lungs, swaying to the beat. One could not help but be swept up in the joy of it all.

Beckwith ascended the pulpit and welcomed everyone. He said a few words about Agape that were clearly intended to put newcomers at ease: 'Whatever God you grew up with—Yahweh, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha—you are welcome here. We all share one God and we are all one people.' Within a matter of minutes, he began to speak about the challenges of living in late-twentieth-century America, about the emptiness of routines, about the importance of finding meaning and community. He spoke personally, relating heart wrenching

> stories of people in the Agape community who had come broken and had found healing. People began to cry, unabashedly, and ushers walked through the aisles offering boxes of tissues. Beckwith spoke for at least half an hour, and he held the crowd in the palm of his hand. At the conclusion of the message, the choir started up again, this time a fifteen minute set of songs that raised the roof. Again, people sang along heartily, raising their hands in praise, dancing in the aisles.
>
> After the service, members met their 'prayer buddies' for private spiritual counseling sessions. Others met in small groups to plan social action activities. Newcomers were invited to learn how to join the church.
>
> I huddled with Karen a few of her Jewish friends. They all told me the same sad story. They had gone to synagogues in Los Angeles and felt unwelcomed and unmoved. They were not looking for intellectualism and they were not interested in studying the Bible. They were mostly twenty-, thirty-, and forty somethings who were seeking spirituality, and they found it in abundance at Agape. There was nothing overtly Christian about the place; the ideology was universalism in the extreme. They raved about the personalized attention offered by the prayer buddy sessions. 'Show me a synagogue where you get that!' one of Karen's friends challenged me'" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 84-86).

Congregations that wish to attract these seekers will have to be what Lawrence Hoffman calls "spiritual and moral centers," not just ethnic ones (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life). Reconstructionist Rabbi Sid Schwartz also draws attention to this:

> "I encounter more and more Jews today who are engaged on a spiritual search. They read books about Jewish mysticism, spirituality and God. They experiment with alternative religious disciplines, from meditation to yoga to a variety of eastern religious ashrams or fellowship houses. Depending on what type of rabbi you ask, such explorations are characterized anywhere from "a useful experience to enhance one's spirituality" to "a dangerous threat to one's Jewish identity." Many rabbis don't know what to make of the phenomenon.

Some of these Jewish seekers find their way to a local synagogue. Most leave, convinced that the religion of their childhood is incapable of meeting their longing for spirituality. Essentially, the problem is a gap between keva and kavanah. Keva represents the inherited liturgical tradition. Each of the movements in American Jewish life have adapted the keva to a certain extent, and those adaptations are generally represented in the official prayer books they publish. Each synagogue works to make their particular keva as familiar and as comfortable to their congregants as possible. While the keva of a Reform temple is significantly different from the keva of an Orthodox synagogue, each carries the same level of sanctity to the constituency of its respective institution…

Today's spiritual seekers come with little knowledge of any keva, but with a soul full of kavanah. In traditional Hebrew usage, kavanah is defined as the deep intention of the prayer. To the contemporary seeker, kavanah is their own intention to connect with something that they may call spirituality, meaning, or transcendence. Conventional idiom calls this God.

The problem is that when the kavanah of the seeker meets up with the keva of the synagogue, the spiritual spark is more likely suffocated than nurtured. Even if the rabbi of a given synagogue is effective in creating a level of kavanah within the keva of their own worship service for their regular worshipers, this language is mostly closed to the uninitiated.

Unless rabbis and synagogues find ways to address the needs of this category of seeker, we will fail to attract some of the most sensitive and thoughtful Jewish souls around today. This is not an easy task. There are tens of thousands of Jews who have been searching for a more compelling mode of Jewish life and practice and who have gained glimpses of what that could look like at selected retreats, conventions, institutes and workshops. They want to find places where they can bring their particular kavanah, reflecting their own life experience, and have that connect to the words of our tradition. Most don't have the learning to do that. And most rabbis don't even have these Jews on their radar screens. This is a generation that is ready to dance in the aisles in joyful worship; most synagogues are still offering us responsive readings! (Schwartz, Reinventing Synagogues and Prayer).

From Community to Core

Rick Warren addresses the subject of the movement of a lay person from someone who shows up one day at church to one who is fully committed in his book *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Although there are some important differences between churches and synagogues, there is also significant overlap. He writes, "Today, most people associate the term *membership* with paying dues, meaningless rituals, silly rules and handshakes, and having your name on some dusty roll" (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 311). If someone says that they are a member of a congregation, it does not always mean that they feel as though they belong to a community. And even when congregations are real communities, new members don't always feel part of that community instantly. They need to be brought in and made to feel welcome. And if members don't feel that they are part of the community, Warren warns that "You'll have just as many people going out the back door of your church as are coming in the front door" (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 310).

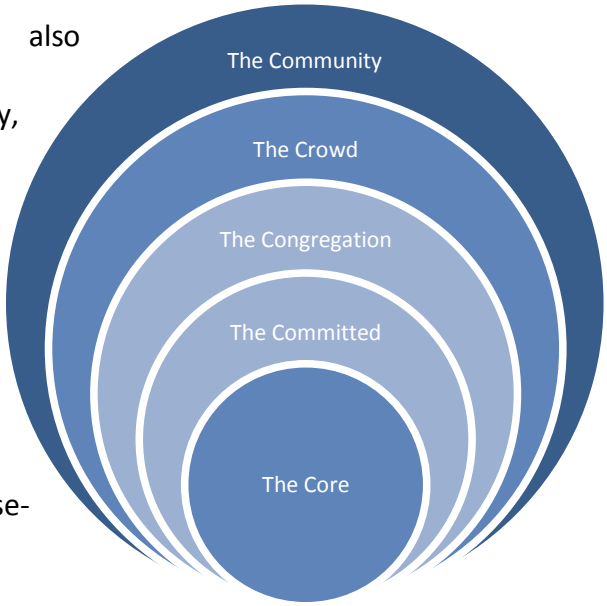

Figure 6 - Based on Rick Warren and Ron Wolfson' Theories of Laity, see *The Purpose Driven Church* and *The Spirituality of Welcoming*

This chapter seeks to provide an overview the experience of the laity with the congregation, emphasizing specific ways and goals to attract more members and to deepen the relationship and commitment of current ones. The model presented

originated with Rick Warren of Saddleback Community Church and modified for Jewish use by Ron Wolfson. It is a system of five concentric circles representing levels of commitment and religious maturity. The goal of the church or synagogue is to help move people inwards. Starting from the outside, and working in:

The Community

This the starting point. They are the general pool of people out there who are unaffiliated and unengaged but have the potential of becoming a part of the synagogue. Wolfson suggests that this group include those "who rarely find themselves in the synagogue, except as guests at an occasional lifecycle celebration," whereas Warren states that for his church, the definition is someone who visits church at least four times in a year (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 146) (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 131).

Non-Jewish Visitors

A very important note is to be welcoming toward non-Jews. A significant number of households that affiliate or would consider affiliating with synagogues include a person who is not Jewish. While it is important to consider proper boundaries, the entire family should be welcomed and embraced. Wolfson also argues that conversion should be encouraged, as well as raising the children of intermarried couples as Jews. He writes, "my own view is that all of the people within the reach of the Jewish community—Jews and non-Jews alike—should hear a call of *aliyah* to Judaism, an invitation to commit to a life of Torah as a joyous and enriching path for one's spiritual

journey" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 178).

The Crowd

They are the people who show up, but are not necessarily committed to the synagogue as a whole. Still, they are coming to services or programs. Warren warns that while it is a big improvement from just being a part of the community, "that it isn't much of a commitment, but at least it's something you can build on" (Warren 132). Wolfson recommends that "when they show up as a guest, the goal is to warmly welcome them, engage them in an uplifting prayer experience, and perhaps even get their names so they may be put on a prospect list" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 146-147).

First Impressions

Mark Waltz, author of *first impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church*, talks about the importance of making an impact on someone the very first time they step into the building. If the goal is to get people to want to be part of an organization, then impress then with it. In order to do this, Waltz says, start with the end experience in mind. What do you want a visitor to experience? He asks, "How do you want your guests to feel? List two or three emotions you'd like your guests to experience—not during the service, but within their first few minutes on your campus…What would I like to hear our guests saying at work on Monday about their

visit to our church" (Waltz, First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church 38)?

Imagine being a guest of a congregation. What is it like to walk into an unfamiliar place? Waltz states that one of the goals for his church was "to encourage interaction that helps people feel as comfortable as they might with their family or friends at the local mall" (Waltz, First Impressions: Creating Wow Experiences in Your Church 40). One way to do that, he says, is to have a place for people to get a soda or coffee as soon as they walk in. While Jewish services typically have an *oneg* reception after services, providing beverages to people as soon they walk in can help people to feel relaxed from the moment they arrive. I witnessed this practice at a Sephardic synagogue in Jerusalem before a *selichot* service. As we entered the building, greeters were passing out cups of tea to anyone who wanted them. The gesture of hospitality helps people to feel at ease.

The Congregation

The congregation refers to the people who officially belong. Wolfson and Warren disagree considerably over who counts in this section. For Wolfson, this group is defined by paying membership dues and using the programs of the synagogue for individual reasons and purposes. He refers to them as "affiliated, but not engaged." He writes, "Most congregations in North America are like this: They may have five hundred membership units representing two thousand adults and children, but see only fifty to two hundred people on a regular basis in the synagogue for Shabbat services" (Wolfson,

The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 147). The problem with this definition is that it comes within a model where there is a progression of commitment. The closer to the center of the system, the more committed. Wolfson suggested that the Crowd, who does not pay dues, but at least shows up, is more committed, calling them "engaged, but unaffiliated." Wolfson, however, is acknowledging a reality of contemporary synagogue life, that many of the members are not overly committed or engaged. But in synagogue renewal, part of the goal is to change the vocabulary and the definition of what it means to belong to a congregation. Warren offers a different viewpoint. He says that they are more than just attendees: they believe in the cause of the church, they have taken an introductory class, and they have signed on to a membership covenant (more on these later). He writes:

> At Saddleback we see no use in having nonresident or inactive members on a roll. As a result, we remove hundreds of names from our membership each year. We are not interested in a large membership, just a legitimate membership of genuinely active and involved people. Currently, our congregation is formed by about five thousand active members...If you have more members on your church roll than you have in attendance you should seriously consider redefining the meaning of membership in your congregation (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 133-134).

The point is this: Congregations should be selective about whom they call a member. This is different from being welcoming. Hopefully every place is welcoming to any single person walking into the building. And certainly synagogues benefit from

engaging as many people as they can. But not all of those people will be members unless they are ready to commit in a real way to the synagogue. And while membership numbers may drop as a result, there is a reasonable expectation that those who are members are committed.

I suspect that the difference between the two definitions of membership speak to a very real difference between Christians and Jews. Christians belong to what David Hartman refers to as a community of value. By and large, being a Christian is a statement of faith. Churches want Christian members, and there is no way to be a Christian without accepting certain beliefs. So asking this of members makes sense for the church. Jews, however, are Jewish regardless of what they do or believe. They do not necessarily comprise a community of value. Since Jews are Jews regardless of their affiliation, we would at least like to have them officially recognize their part in the community by joining a synagogue. It would be great if they commit more, but it is not necessary to remain a Jew. This is illustrated by the joke, "Jews believe in up to, but not more than one God."

New Members

In the Jewish world, Ron Wolfson speaks of the importance of making sure that all people feel welcome. He offers several tips for accomplishing this goal:

- "Take complimentary photos of the individual or family and feature them in the lobby of the congregation. Give a copy to the family as a gift.

- Hold a new members' Shabbat dinner, hosted by the congregation. Ask the new members to offer a few words of testimony about their Jewish journeys at the celebration.
- Offer an *aliyah* to new members during a Shabbat service.
- Have the rabbi host a Rabbi's Chat in her or his home once or twice during the year to which new members are invited.[5]
- Send cards on birthdays and the anniversary of the first year of membership.
- Recognize new members in the bulletin.
- Reserve a prime parking spot for the new member(s) of the month.
- Distribute items with the congregational logo.
- Be sure that someone has responsibility for staying in touch with a new member for an entire year. Do not just greet them and forget them" (Wolfson, The Purpose-Drive Church 179).

When thinking about membership, Rick Warren suggests that congregations ask themselves twelve questions.

1. What does God expect from members of his church?
2. What do we expect from our members right now?
3. What kind of people already make up our congregation?
4. How will that change in the next five to ten years?
5. What do our members value?
6. What are new members' greatest needs?
7. What are our long-term members' greatest needs?
8. How can we make membership more meaningful?
9. How can we insure that members feel loved and cared for?
10. What do we owe our members?
11. What resources or services could we offer our members?
12. How could we add value to what we already offer (Warren 311)?

[5] This parallels Rick Warren's practice of a Pastor's Chat that he would hold once a month for new members and visitors.

Creating community does not rest upon following a formula. In answering the questions above, Warren suggests that specific congregations can begin to understand what they specifically can do towards creating a sense of belonging.

Even as the congregations are asking questions though, so too are those looking to join the congregation, and perhaps even those who already belong. Those questions are:

1. *Do I fit in here?* Can people relate to another? Are there other people in the congregation like me? Warren suggests a creation of affinity groups based on similar ages, interests, problems, or backgrounds so that people feel as though they have a niche.
2. *Does anybody want to know me?* Warren offers the reminder that people are not looking for a friendly church (or synagogue) so much as they are looking for friends. People like individual attention and the opportunities to meet one another.
3. *Am I needed?* Do people feel as though they are valued and able to make a contribution that matters? By creating opportunities inside the congregation for people to make use of their talents and abilities in a positive way, people will feel a greater connection.
4. *What is the advantage of joining?* What's the benefit of joining? The answers should be clear and concise, while recognizing the multitudes of reasons.
5. What is required of members? Being part of a community not only bestows benefits, but also includes responsibilities. Members and potential members ought to know what the expectations are of people in the community (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 312).

Practical suggestions offered by Warren include establishing a required membership class.[6] Saddleback Community Church is very strict about this requirement. Warren writes that, "People who are uninterested or unwilling to learn your church's purposes,

[6] The required membership class at Saddleback Community Church is just four hours long, one day.

strategy, and the meaning of membership are failing to demonstrate the kind of commitment that membership implies. If they don't even care enough to understand the responsibilities of membership, they cannot be expected to fulfill those responsibilities after joining and should not be allowed to join. There are plenty of other congregations they could join that offer a meaningless membership." Their class addresses the questions: What is a church? What are the purposes of the church? What are the benefits of being a member? What are the requirements for membership? What are the responsibilities of membership? What is the vision and strategy of this church? How is the church organized? How can I get involved in ministry? What do I do now that I am a member (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 316-317)?[7] For use in Jewish life, the word "synagogue" can be substituted for "church" and while Jews don't often refer to their service as a "ministry," there are parallels for avenues of Jewish volunteerism.

In addition to a class, Saddleback also asks its members to sign a covenant. This is an idea also used by a number of Jewish congregations involved with Synagogue 3000. The thinking is that members should be committed to the institution and for what it stands. If the synagogue asks for no commitment beyond a financial one, then the synagogue may not expect any commitment beyond that. The specifics of a congregation's covenant can vary based on the purpose and values on the congregation, but common to all of them is asking their membership to sign on to the mission of the

[7] See appendix A for complete outline of the membership class at Saddleback Community Church

synagogue (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church 319-322) (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 174-175).[8]

The Committed

The committed "are those people who for whom Judaism is a serious business" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 147). They regularly attend services, they engage in Jewish study, and they strive to incorporate Judaism into their everyday life.

The Core

These are the leaders of the synagogue. They are the religious schoolteachers, the volunteer musicians, the youth group officers and advisors, board members and officers, and so on. They are totally committed to the institution and to its success. They are the ones who take personal responsibility for ensuring the advancement of the mission and vision of the organization.

> Paradoxically, even as the inner circle seeks, at least in principle, to draw others into the core and its activities, they are also likely to react to the presence of too many outsiders in the synagogue with ambivalence at best, and disdain at worst. Yes, they like a big turnout for services, but they also (at Kehillat Achim) support the smaller alternative services and or (at Central Synagogue) desire a small retreat-style setting or an intensive learners' service that will also 'maker greater demands' on the participants. In a sense, some wish to separate themselves from those who are less engaged and involved to present themselves as a more dedicated class of Conservative Jew (Heilman, Holding Firmly with an Open Hand: Life in Two Conservative Synagogues, 186).

[8] See appendix B for sample membership covenant documents

The Worship Experience

Any serious discussion of worship needs to start by addressing the question of purpose. Why worship? For more traditionally minded Jews, the answer can be very simple. God commands thrice daily prayer, and all adult, male Jews are obligated to fulfill this requirement. Furthermore, it is better to pray in a minyan – a group of ten adult, male Jews – then not, so set times are established for people to come together for communal worship. However, most modern Jews do not think in these terms and so discussing the value of worship for the contemporary individual becomes a central task.

Principles for Worship Services

Music

Ron Wolfson writes, "When I am asked the question 'Is there any one thing that is essential to the creation of a spiritually moving prayer service?' I reply, 'There are *three* things: music, music, music'" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 96). Music can set a mood and evoke feelings and emotions. Songs are able to move both the mind and the heart. A congregation that does not take music seriously is missing a very important element for meaningful worship.

On the Diversity of Jewish Music

There is and has been a vast amount of Jewish sacred music, and one of the most striking features of this collection is its diversity. Jewish sacred music includes

everything from the traditional chanting of psalms, to grand choir and organ arrangements for the High Holidays, to a more folksy, campy type of music often heard with an acoustic guitar and a highly participative teenage congregation. Lewandowski, Bonia Shur, and Debbie Friedman compositions have all found a place in Jewish worship. So how is a congregation to determine which type of music to feature in its worship? Lawrence Hoffman reminds us that not all Jewish sacred music is appropriate for all Jewish services. He writes, "Not only can we not agree on what makes music sacred, but even if we could, it would not follow that all sacred music is good music, and even if that were true, not all sacred (and, therefore, good) music is applicable to worship" (Hoffman, The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only 178).

In the context of a worship service, music is present for the purpose of worship. Music that is best able to evoke a prayerful environment is best suited to the task. The goal of worship as worship is not to display talents, provide a stage to those who wish to entertain but not to move, or to keep alive musical styles that do not resonate with the worshiper. To be sure, what is old is often very moving. There are many classical arrangements and melodies that numerous praying Jews find to be spiritually meaningful. However, tradition, or "that's the way things have always been done" does not deserve priority over the needs of the contemporary congregation. The issue is which is the dog, and which the tail. When worship is the dog that wags the musical tail, all is in order. However, when the service exists for the music, then it is backwards. To this end, the general principle is that sacred music exists to serve worship.

Music and Mood

Worship at its best is evocative, drawing out certain moods and emotions. Cantor Benjie Ellen Schiller teaches that music has the power to convey five major feelings: majestic, meditative, meeting, moving along, and memory (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 102-104). When the setting and the liturgy are in unison, they can bring out these feelings. For example, aligning a majestic setting to the *kedusha*, a prayer about the holiness of God helps to bring out a sense of awe and grandeur. A more meditative melody combined with a somewhat reflective or contemplative prayer such as the *Mi Sheberach* prayer for healing is conducive to bringing out that emotion (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 102-103).

The Sermon

Additionally, "another key component of the synagogue experience is the spiritual message transmitted from the pulpit" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 110). Any given rabbi can preach on just about anything, but Ron Wolfson urges a message that is relevant to people's lives, "In the synagogue of the twenty-first century, the seekers of spiritual wisdom wand to know what Judaism has to say about the challenges of their lives" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 111). The goal is not to raise questions for people. It is just the

opposite, argues Wolfson. He writes, "People seem to be looking for answers to life's challenges. Answers, not questions…We often err on the side of emphasizing the freedom to question in Judaism. Yet, what some people want is a sense of direction, a guide" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 112).

Boredom

Ask any regular service-goer why they attend services and the response may vary considerably. One joke says that some go to talk to God and some go to talk to those who go to talk to God. The rabbi's sermon, the cantor's voice, the congregational singing, the socializing before and after the service, or the desert reception can all be draws for people to attend. People also choose not to attend for the very same reasons: they don't like the rabbi's sermons, the cantor's voice, or the congregation, like the brownies, has too many nuts. Alternatively, it is not that they dislike the congregation so much as there are other things they would rather be doing. For some, Judaism and Jewish practice is boring. Erica Brown writes, "Many believe that boredom is the crisis of our age. It certainly is a largely unspoken secret in the Jewish world that is gingerly being whispered about with increasing frequency. Journalist and newspaper editor Gary Rosenblatt does not mince words, however, when he says, 'The greatest threat to Jewish survival is boredom'" (Brown, Spiritual Boredom 1-2).

Brown shares the story of Sherre Zwelling Hirsch who tells of a childhood experience of his. During services, Hirsch would bring a novel and hide it in his prayer

book. Once, the rabbi noticed what Hirsch was doing and said, "See me at the *Kiddush* after services." He did so, somewhat afraid. The rabbi asked, "Are you bored during services?" Hirsch recalls:

> I paused. Did he really ask me if I was bored? Was he living on another planet? Everyone is bored in services. I wanted to laugh out loud. However, I did not want to get grounded by my parents so I hesitated, 'Do you really want the truth?' He looked me straight in the eye. I whispered, 'Well, rabbi, yes.' Suddenly his face was right in front of mine. I thought, 'I'm in big trouble now.' But then he whispered back: 'So am I.' I could not believe my ears. The great and awesome rabbi just told me that he is bored in services. Before I could digest that, he asked, 'So what are you going to do about it?' I think I have been trying to answer this question ever since (Hirsch).

Using Pop Culture

Sing a new song unto God – Psalm 98

If boredom is a problem, it will help to look at when people are generally *not* bored. While some may argue that synagogues fail miserably when they try solely to be entertainers, looking at where people turn to for entertainment and why will help congregations to assess avenues for engagement.

Tim Stevens, author of *Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture*, makes a strong argument for adapting pop culture to the service of the religious congregation. He makes this argument out of necessity and pragmatism. Pop culture, he writes, is the setting in which most Americans live most of the time. "We live squarely in the middle of a media-driven, entertainment-crazed world. People around

us are not only watching and listening—they are actually shaping their values through the movies, books, songs, and TV shows that fill their world," observes Stevens (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 56). Whatever one thinks of pop culture, it is not going anywhere. Moreover, while there might be a decline in religiosity, people are no less spiritual. In a 2008 Survey on Spirituality by Synagogue 3000, 90% of all American Jews believe either in God or "something like a universal spirit." What's more, 73% of Jews felt uplifted by experiencing some aspect of the natural world, and 74% felt especially uplifted when listening to music. Despite that, only 37% of the Jewish respondents to the survey affiliated with a synagogue (Cohen and Hoffman, S3K Report: How Spiritual are America's Jews?). Bottom line? People are using other avenues, including pop culture to explore their spirituality, regardless of whether or not they attend religious services. The issues that arise in modern cinema, or on television by personalities such as Oprah Winfrey, are deeply spiritual. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, people do not address these spiritual issues in the context of a religious community (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 58). By using pop culture, Stevens suggests, religious leaders can engage their communities on a whole host of issues. He did precisely this with the first *Spider-Man* movie, using it to teach about making good choices, making sacrifices, and living with a purpose (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 124).

Pop culture raises questions that a religious congregation can address. At Granger Community Church, the pastors used Beatles music as a catalyst for a deep discussion about "human longing for love, change, justice, and revolution" (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?). The model used by Tim Stevens at Granger Community Church has three components: Relevant Topic, Cultural Theme, and Biblical Truth[9] (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture? 152). Being relevant is important for obvious reasons. People have real issues going on in their lives, and it is important for the congregation to recognize those issues. The cultural theme is about the medium of communication. Using popular songs or TV shows helps the congregation to speak in the language of the average community member. Granger Community Church used the Beatles to talk about Christmas and *The Office* to have a series on living with integrity. Finally, Stevens says it is crucial to incorporate Biblical Truth, otherwise it is just a show (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 153). While Stevens is speaking of his Christian faith, Jewish tradition has the collected wisdom of generations that can be a source of great insight for contemporary situations. What is more, this is what makes the congregation Jewish. Relevant topics and pop culture are all over society. What Jewish congregations are in a unique position to do is address them through the lens of Torah. Finally, this is how the experience becomes "authentic." Troy Gramling, Lead Pastor of Flamingo Road Church in Miami, Florida writes, "Don't create a series just for

[9] We might substitute the words "Jewish tradition" for Biblical truth.

the sake of pop culture. The culture can tell–they're not stupid. It's never worth it if it seems pop-cool to us, but seems inauthentic them" (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 195). Likewise, Dave Engbrecht, Senior Pastor of Nappanee Missionary Church in Nappanee, Indiana writes, "If people remember the illustration but don't have a clue about the application—I know I've failed miserably" (Stevens, Pop Goes the Church: Should the Church Engage Pop Culture?, 197).

A Congregation of Learners

Synagogues, historically, have not just been *batei tefillah*, houses of prayer, but also *batei midrash*, houses of study. Synagogues that strive to grow Jewishly are fully engaged with Torah. Dr. Isa Aron of the Hebrew Union College writes:

> Jewish learning can be very powerful. When learning is active and engaging, when it is offered in an environment that is welcoming and supportive, it can enrich people's lives and ignite their interest in Judaism. In the context of a synagogue, it can serve as a catalyst for change…Today Jewish learning is more essential than ever. Americans, including Jews, have discovered that excessive personal autonomy results in isolation, and excessive skepticism leads to anomie. They have begun to search for community, for tradition, and for spirituality. Some have found these in Eastern religions and in a variety of cults; many more have found it in small groups that meet regularly for support or self-help. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, forty percent of Americans belong to a group of ten to twenty people that meets for an hour or two on a regular basis in a home, community center, or at a church or synagogue. Interestingly, nearly half of these groups include Bible study in their meetings.

All Jewish learning, whether it is devoted to a study of sacred texts, Jewish thought, or Jewish history, enables learners to connect their personal struggles to larger social and ethical ideals. When a group of learners engages in this type of discussion over an extended period of time, the bonds that form among the participants are strong and durable. Though the participants' original purpose in joining the group may have been intellectual stimulation, the solace they find in the text and the emotional and social connections they form with fellow learners are what keep them coming back.

Learning creates a larger sense of community as well, a community that links Jews through time and space. When one reads parashat hashavuah (the Torah portion of the week) one can imagine Jews all over the world puzzling over the same verses; the commentaries to these verses connect us to the rabbis of third-century Palestine and eleventh-century France, and to the generations of Jews who studied these same verses with the same commentaries" (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 14;24).

Becoming a Congregation of Learners

Hebrew Union College's Experiment in Congregational Education developed an approach to congregational learning, developed in more than twenty congregations over a decade. There are five overlapping phases to the program: readiness, visioning, experimentation, outreach, and exploration. Additionally, there program operates on four principles: change involves more than good programming, the recipients of a change must be actively involved in making it happen, participants in the process should experience a taste of the final product, and that change takes a long time. (Aron,

Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 79-84).

The Four Principles

First, Aron argues that change involves more than good programming. The most important data is not the number of participants, the recruitment of staff, or the how the funds are raised. Rather, the more important questions are "What motivates members to participate? How did these learning activities come to be seen as defining features of the congregation" (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 81). She states that a congregation of learners has an ethos of learning, and that how people receive content depends on large part on the context in which it is delivered (ibid).

Next, the recipients of a change must be actively involved in making it happen. Change cannot be planned and executed on high in an organization based on voluntary association. Peter Senge, writing about change in corporate environments made these observations:

- Organizations are products of the ways that people themselves think and interact.
- To change organizations for the better, you must give people the opportunity to change the ways in which they think and interact.
- This cannot be done through increased training, or through command-and-control management approaches. No one person, including a highly charismatic

teacher or CEO, can train or command other people to alter their attitudes, beliefs, skills, capabilities, perceptions, or level of comfort.

- Instead, the practice of organizational learning involves developing tangible activities…for changing the way people conduct their work. Given the opportunity to take part in these new activities, people will develop an enduring capacity for change (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 81) (Senge, The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations, 33) .

Subsequently, participants in the process should experience a taste of the final product. This value leads to something of a catch-22. Aron writes, "Applying this principle to the process of becoming a congregation of learners means that Jewish learning should be an integral part of the change process itself… The first step toward developing a new mindset is to make learning an integral part of the change process" (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 83). The problem, as Aron sees it, is that by and large the laity will not understand the value of transforming into a congregation of learners without first understanding the transformative experience of Jewish learning. So, in order to morph into a congregation of learners, the first thing that needs to happen is learning.

As a final principle, change takes a long time. While new programs can be implemented relatively quickly, real organizational change takes years. Aron

estimated that the first significant changes occur only after a period of two or three years, and even though it could be five or six years for deeper changes (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 84). Edgar Schein writes:

> You cannot create a new culture. You can immerse yourself in studying a culture (your own or someone else's) until you understand it. Then you can propose new values, introduce new ways of doing things, and articulate new governing ideas. Over time, these actions will set the stage for new behavior. If people who adopt that new behavior feel that it helps them to do better, they may try it again, and after many trials, taking as long as five or ten years, the organizational culture may embody a different set of assumptions and a different way of looking at things, than it did before. Even then, you haven't changed the culture; you've set the stage for the culture to evolve…If all this seems complicated and time consuming, you are perceiving it correctly (Schein 334-335;342).

The Process

Isa Aron's process for change has five steps: readiness, visioning, experimentation, outreach, and exploration. The process' goals are "to actively involve a core group of congregants in a meaningful discussion of Jewish learning, and its role in Jewish life; along the way, to give them a variety of stimulating learning experiences; to engage them long enough so that they will develop a deep commitment to learning; and to accomplish all of this in an institution whose resources are limited, and which is sustained by volunteers" (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 79; 86).

The process described below has been tested in several congregations ranging from 250 member-units all the way up to 3,000 member units, and every size in between. Larger congregations have the benefit of a larger professional staff, often times allowing for one or two members to actively participate in the work. However, the larger congregations also had a tendency for some members to participate only on the periphery, attending less frequently, contributing less, and sometimes going unnoticed. Smaller congregations tended to have less involvement from professional staff, but a stronger volunteer culture (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 91).

Similarly, any given geographic location had both benefits and drawbacks. Urban synagogues had numerous resources on which to draw, such as extensive Judaica libraries and museums, Judaic studies professors, strong Federations or JCCs that may sponsor adult learning opportunities, and the like. However, the numerous opportunities for engagement in these urban centers often compete for the most committed individuals. Synagogues that are more isolated have fewer resources, but can have an easier time building community (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 91).

While synagogue change requires money[10], "developing the ideas, investigating and documenting the need and generating enthusiasm can all be done inexpensively"

[10] See the section *Money*

(Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 91).

Aron identifies five important qualities for a congregation to possess in order to begin the process of transformation into a congregation of learners: a core group with an interest in learning, a critical mass of reflective leaders, a cadre of capable and competent workers, a willingness to share leadership, and a congregation with both a modicum of stability and an openness to change (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 92-95). The initial core group, could be current participants in existing adult-learning programs, either on the synagogue level or elsewhere, independent readers and learners, parents of school-aged children who would like to engage their children about the material that they are learning, Jews-by-choice, or those who have had an adult bar or bat mitzvah. Hopefully, this group will contain both potential leaders or cheerleaders. There is also a need for reflectiveness, so that those involved can think critically about what role learning should play in the congregation, understanding the diverse needs and interests of the broad spectrum of members. The qualities necessary for this are thoughtfulness, self-reflectiveness, and an openness to new ideas. Furthermore, there should be committed participants and volunteers who are able to put in the requisite amount of time and labor. Of course, not all of these qualities and commitments may be found in each person who participates, but they should be present in ample measure when spread over the entire group. Finally, the synagogue itself should be both stable, but open to

change. Synagogues in the midst of financial crises, personnel conflicts, or other deeply urgent matters may not be ready to begin to address a less immediate and less concrete goal (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 92-95).

1. **Stage One: Readiness**

   This phase constitutes preliminary sessions where a taskforce learns about the history of the congregation and begins to articulate and interpret its culture. The taskforce is drawn from active members with a history leadership in the congregation, people who have been less active, but perform well with certain responsibilities, and members with certain talents or abilities, but do not have a history volunteering in the temple. The participants learn about each other, the congregation, and the type of learning currently available. More importantly, though, it gives the participants a sense of what to expect in the next phase.

2. **Stage Two: Visioning**

   The goal of this stage is for the taskforce to articulate a vision of a congregation of learners, although it does not necessarily lead to a finalized vision statement.

3. **Stage Three: Experimentation**

   This stage may overlap with the second stage. In this stage, the taskforce may begin to develop a limited number of easy to implement, yet innovative programs based on the discussions in the previous stage. These programs, which may be understood

as low-hanging fruit, are designed to give everyone involved a taste of what it might be like to be a congregation of learners.

4. Stage Four: Outreach

During this phase, the taskforce formed in stage one works to engage the congregation as a whole. The conduct conversations to promote the idea of becoming a congregation of learners, brainstorm for ideas, and look for feedback on any preliminary vision statement that may have been created. Following the feedback received during this phase, the group narrows its focus to small number of themes (i.e., adult learning, Hebrew, or Shabbat) that may be explored further.

5. Stage Five: Exploration

The final stage has committees exploring the specific themes that the congregation wishes to engage in. For example, if the congregation wishes to pursue learning for adolescents, then a committee might survey adolescents and their parents to better understand their interests and needs. Also, the committee may familiarize itself with adolescent psychology by reading selected articles or inviting guest speakers on the subject, survey other religious institutions that have successful adolescent programs, begin experimenting with programs and monitoring them carefully, devising a long-range plan for improvement, and discussing staffing and fund-raising possibilities (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 87-88).

Aron concludes her overview of this process with a discussion of what comes next. She writes:

What happens after exploration? This too varies from congregation to congregation. Some congregations have created a long-range plan that was submitted to the synagogue's board of directors and then used to solicit the necessary funds. Other congregations phased in the innovations that were suggested as resources (which include volunteer time, staff time, and money) became available. Some congregations have declared an official end to the process, while others continue to find new areas of exploration for the task force. Several congregations have created second-, and even third-generation task forces (Aron, Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life 89).

Clergy

There is no consensus amongst the leaders of synagogue transformation as to the role of clergy in the leadership of a synagogue. One model, supported by Isa Aron, calls for a decentralized, less hierarchal model. In her view, there are serious limitations to top-down leadership. One is that issues in the synagogue become personalized. Because of a charismatic leader's support or opposition to a given issue, it because difficult to simply support or oppose a measure without also supporting or opposing the individual. She quotes Rabbi and Psychotherapist Edwin Friedman who writes, "The emphasis on the personality of the leader tends to personalize issues,…with the result that emotions and issues become harder to separate from one another" (E. Friedman,

Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue 226). Another concern is sustainability. One when leader or a small group of leaders originates and executes ideas and programs, success is contingent on their presence and continued involvement. Aron writes, "A dynamic leader or group can generate a great deal of enthusiasm for a proposed change, but when responsibility for the change rests on the shoulders of a single leader, or even a small group, that enthusiasm is contingent on the leaders' presence and can easily evaporate in their absence" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 85).

Instead of a rabbinic-centered, hierarchal model, Aron suggests are more collaborative approach that is based on "partnership among members of the professional staff, and between lay and professional leaders in general" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 86). She operates under four assumptions: First, organizations are not, and never will be, finished products. They continually face problems and challenges. Second, these problems and challenges may be managed, but are never fully solved. Third, the role of the leader is not to solve problems, but to help others to articulate and define them and to weigh the merits of a range of solutions. Finally, leadership is based on a facilitative skill capable of bringing together broad and diverse constituencies and empowering them identify problems, explore solutions, and reflect on their actions. An additional upside to collaborative leadership models are that they alleviate a fee-for-service mentality and provide the potential for greater personal investment on the part of

members of the congregation (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 86-88).

To guide leaders who would be facilitators in the collaborative leadership model, Aron presents four questions that she asks herself before meetings that she facilitates:

1. *"How shall I set the agenda?* With whom do I need to consult? Should I ask for additional agenda items in advance? At the meeting itself?
2. *How will I give participants appropriate opportunities to voice their opinions?* Meetings that consist of endless discussion quickly become boring and tedious. Nonetheless, participants need to share their opinions, especially since talking things out helps to clarify people's thinking. Is there a brainstorming technique I can use? Would it be appropriate to break people into dyads or triads for a 5- to 7-minute discussion? Could people be asked to write down their ideas on Post-it notes that are displayed on the wall, so everyone will have an opportunity to see them?
3. *How can I encourage good listening? How will I make sure that everyone's opinion is heard with respect?* Can people be given statements to read in advance? Should I take notes on a board or a flip chart to focus people's attention? What kind of gentle, humorous comment can I offer to defuse the negativity of those who sit scowling, whispering, or passing notes while others are speaking?
4. *How can I focus the discussion and keep people from rehashing the same positions?* At what point can I summarize the debate and announce that the floor is open only for ideas that haven't yet come up? How can I curtail the discussion nicely but firmly when people violate this rule?

5. *How should we reach our decision?* Should the decision be made by vote or by consensus? Should people have an opportunity to vote for more than one option by using a multivoting technique, such as giving everyone five stickers to distribute to the options of their choice?" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 96-97).

Just as there are challenges for leaders in Aron's model, so too are there challenges for "followers." For one, many people are used to deferring to rabbis. Being open to challenge rabbis intellectually over ideas is not always natural. Aron writes, "True collaboration requires open debate, which may leave participants feeling unease" (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 98). The benefits of collaboration, however, are that individuals will bring their own expertise and experience to the table. Lawyers and accountants have long provided their knowledge to synagogue boards, but teachers, social workers, and others all have a background that can inform discussion (Aron, The Self Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life 99).

While Aron advocates for a decentralized model of synagogue leadership, others have suggested that the opposite approach is an important part of a successful synagogue. Sidney Schwartz profiled four synagogues that he found to be remarkably successful and noted that in each case they were led by extraordinary rabbis who were there at either the congregations founding, were the first full-time rabbi of the congregation, or took over when the congregation was all but dead anyways. Because

of this, the rabbis were able to pursue their own visions of organizational and congregational life. Schwartz writes:

> When the rabbi is permitted to pursue a particular vision as the spiritual leader of a community, it can powerfully motivate and inspire synagogue members. The people who seek out such congregations will be drawn to the community because that vision pervades the organizational culture and every facet of congregational life. People drawn to such a community become not only loyal followers of the rabbi and his or her vision but advocates and missionaries for that vision as well (S. Schwartz, Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Trasnform the American Synagogue 243).

None of this is to say that lay leadership is not important to Schwartz. Quite the contrary, he claims that "recruiting lay leaders and inviting members to share their particularly gifts with the community" is the most vital role for a rabbi (S. Schwartz, Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue 243).

What Schwartz does advocate for, though, is a rabbinic model that he defines as spiritual leadership. This is not a role performed by most rabbis currently, however. Rather, he writes, "They are hired instead to be religious functionaries, orchestrating religious services, performing life-cycle events, and teaching the tradition. A generation that is starving for spiritual direction will not be drawn to religious functionaries" (Schwartz, Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Trasnform the

American Synagogue 245). Spiritual leadership, however, needs to focus on "helping an individual with a problem, leading a crusade for social justice, or teaching Torah" (Schwartz, Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Trasnform the American Synagogue 245).

Money

Visions require resources to become a reality. Synagogues have financial needs, whether for building or maintaining facilities, hiring staff, running religious schools and other programs, and so on. Reform congregational budgets are typically broken down into the following categories:

1. Worship, including clergy salaries
2. Education, including staff salaries
3. Membership services
4. Building Maintenance
5. Capital repairs and replacements
6. Special programs that serve a limited segment of the membership
7. Movement dues (Schechter, Synagogue Boards: A Sacred Trust, 46-47)

The problem is that when it comes to raising money, synagogues are by nature not designed to draw in revenue. This is based on a sociological model of society that includes three sectors. The first sector is government. To address their financial needs, they levy taxes. The second is businesses, whose purpose is to generate income both for operations as well as profit. The third kind of organizations are that people join by choice and do not have an inbuilt ability to fund themselves—so they may not levy taxes, nor are they designed with purpose of generating revenue. These sectors are

"government, "markets," and "voluntary organization." Religious organizations are the latter. As a result, they need to raise money (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life 70).

In Biblical times, every adult Israelite, rich or poor, paid a half-shekel tax (Exodus 30:12). In modern times too, there are places around the world where Jewish religious institutions receive support from community taxes. The most obvious example is the State of Israel, where the government supports the chief rabbinate and Orthodox Jewish institutions. There are significant negative by-products of funding synagogues this way such as a reduced or eliminated separation of church/synagogue and state and unfriendly competition between various denominations for public funding. In Israel, public funding of synagogues has a social cost. At any rate, such a model is not feasible for American synagogues because of the First Amendment.

Dues

The most common way to fund synagogues in America is through dues, which account for 80% or more of all income for Reform congregations (Schechter, Synagogue Boards: A Sacred Trust, 47). Dues are typically constituted in one of two ways: a flat rate based upon membership in a category (i.e., young, single, family, retired, etc…) or a fair-share model, requesting a percentage of gross household income (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 160). As the most the most popular way of funding synagogues, dues

structures have both advantages and disadvantages. Dues developed out of a past that relied almost exclusively on just a few wealthy patrons to support the institutions of the Jewish community. However, "as synagogues proliferated in America, the idea of one or two wealthy individuals funding a congregation seemed undemocratic and fraught with the potential for conflict between the funders and the clergy or the people themselves who frequented the synagogue" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 159). By having each member pay dues, power is more evenly dispersed and individual congregants feel as though they are making a worthwhile contribution to the maintenance and growth of the congregation. This is wholly consonant with a push for greater democracy and equality by American Jews compared with previous generations (Sarna, American Judaism, 43; 195).

There are several disadvantages to the dues structure, however. For starters, it is a barrier to entry. The simple rules of supply and demand come into play. The higher the cost, the less number of people exist who are willing or able to pay. Dan Schechter writes that, "All congregations want to be known as warm and caring places where no individual or family is denied membership" (Schechter, Synagogue Boards: A Sacred Trust, 47). Despite this, "even if financial assistance is offered, there is the fear that to qualify for aid or exemptions, a prospective member will be taken through a humiliating process by a committee, asked to produce tax returns and otherwise make a case for

dues relief" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 160).

Furthermore, dues can sometimes foster a fee-for-service mentality. This mentality creates, according to Lawrence Hoffman, "an underlying market model of synagogue existence, accompanied by a corporate model of synagogue structure. Programs are the return for dues. Congregants 'shul shop' to get the best bargain; corporate synagogues with CEO rabbis compete for members; boards meet regularly to oversee performance, measuring market share (members added or subtracted) and satisfaction level of current membership (the customer base). A division of labor sometimes reaches the point where the board meets for business but does not attend services" (Hoffman, Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life 35).

Creative Dues Policies

In order to counteract the disadvantages of dues, various congregations have become creative with their policies. Conservative congregation Ohev Shalom of Wallingford, Pennsylvania offers free membership in the first year. The Reform Temple Emanu-El of San Francisco has voluntary dues for the first year of membership, at a rate decided solely by the member. In both instances, the synagogues strive to make the first year of membership meaningful so that the new members will continue on the standard dues structure (Wolfson 161). Other versions of these first-year dues policies are in effect in various congregations. One is that families with children up to third grade may enroll in their children in the religious school for a year before formally

joining the congregation. Others have preschool programs for non-members. In all instances, "the key to these programs is making the first-year experience so wonderful that there is an incentive to continue the membership at regular dues rates. Personal counseling, orientation sessions, and personal invitations from key members of the staff and laity are crucial in translating trial members into regular members" (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 161-162).

Each year, many unaffiliated Jews look for a congregation to attend for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. For some, this has led to a debate over whether or not synagogues should charge for tickets, or even to allow non-members to attend. Each side has its defenders and detractors. This matter over tickets or no tickets was actually the subject of a recent debate in the pages of *Reform Judaism* magazine. Steve Friedman of the Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis, defending the practice of allowing non-members to attend High Holiday without a ticket writes, "we believe, on principle, that services should be open to all" (Friedman and Sukenik, Debatable: Should We Offer Free High Holy Day Tickets to Non-Members?). Maxine Sukenik disagrees. She believes that by even offering tickets at all for High Holy Days discourages membership. By having an all-or-nothing, she argues, people have more of an incentive to join (Friedman and Sukenik, Debatable: Should We Offer Free High Holy Day Tickets to Non-Members?). Unfortunately, neither is able to offer evidence for the success of their approach outside of their own personal experiences. In any event, the real

question is not whether or not to have tickets, but what policy or program will lead towards attracting and retaining members. B'nai Jeshurun devised an alternative response to the reality of High Holy Day only worshippers. They offer what they call a *b'reisheit* membership. They charge a heavily reduced rate and can participate in a number of activities, including new members' orientation and High Holy Days. The rate includes a year's membership, after which time they are asked to pay dues as a full member (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community 161). Similarly, a number of Reconstructionist congregations offer a month-long membership, starting with Rosh Hashanah and encompassing Sukkot as well. During the month of membership, there are numerous program and activities geared towards introducing these individuals or families to congregational life (Wolfson, The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, 161).

The Synagogue Space

In their book This House We Build, Rabbi Terry Bookman and Dr. William Kahn tell of a synagogue they once visited. The very first sign that can be seen when approaching by car is "Do Not Enter." The purpose of the sign is very reasonable, it serves to steer traffic away from the exit to the building. But, they ask, "Is this synagogue sending a subtle message? Is this an open and inviting place, or are they content to be what they are with who they are? …Is this a community anyone can enter" (Bookman and Kahn, This House We Build 37). On the other hand, signs of welcome, a

building that is well taken care of, a library full of books, a sanctuary that is designed to be spiritually evocative, ample and dignified space for volunteers, and the like all send messages about what the congregation values (Bookman and Kahn, This House We Build 98). Thinking about synagogue design then becomes a very important task for congregational leaders and can have an effect on everything from worship to study to socializing. But first, a note of caution. The building is not everything, and it is not even the main thing. Saddleback Church operated without a permanent home for fifteen years and in that time grew its membership significantly. Pastor Rick Warren writes, "I'm often asked, 'How big can a church grow without a building?' The answer is, 'I don't know!' Saddleback met for fifteen years and grew to 10,000 attenders without our own building, so I know it's possible to grow to at least 10,000" (Warren, The Purpose-Driven Church, 46).

One way to think about space is to first determine what the location will be used for. Social gatherings, worship, learning, gatherings and so forth all have different needs. And within those categories, numerous possibilities exist. In worship, for example, a space can evoke a transcendental God with high ceilings, grand, ornate details in the sanctuary, and so forth. Or, a smaller, cozier, more intimate setting lends itself to more imminent notions of God. Lawrence Hoffman suggests that space and activity are linked and can be thought of on a continuum of intimate to public. If the goal is to create a more personal or social worship space, then having the service leader stationed upwards of 12' or more away will hamper that.

Space Type	Range	Distance	Typical Activity
Intimate	Low End	Touching	Lovemaking, wrestling
Intimate	High End	6”-18”	Intimate conversation
Personal	Low End	18”-2 ½’	Spouses or family standing together
Personal	High End	2 ½’-4’	Normal friendly conversation, the way people who are never intimate stand together
Social	Low End	4’-7’	Impersonal business, counseling or therapy session
Social	High End	4’-12’	Formal business with the boss, who sits behind a desk farther away
Public	Low End	12’-25’	Public Address
Public	High End	25’ and up	Public Address

Figure 7 - From Lawrence Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer*, p221

5. B’nai Jeshurun

In this section, I aim to provide an overview of a specific congregation, B’nai Jeshurun in New York City. First, I begin with a disclaimer. I am not now, nor have I ever been a member of B’nai Jeshurun. I claim no first-hand knowledge of the congregation. Rather, the information in this section comes from a two-part study Drs. Ayala Fader, a cultural anthropologist, and Mark Kligman, an ethno-musicologist. The first part of this study is the view from the outside, Fader and Kligman’s scholarly study of the synagogue. The second part is a view from within, commentary by B’nai Jeshuruns rabbis J. Rolando Matalon, Marcelo R. Bronstein, and Felicia L. Sol (Cohen and Hoffman,

Spirituality at B'nai Jeshurun: Reflections of Two Scholars and Three Rabbis). Writing about B'nai Jeshurun is important not because I believe that by copying its programs or service styles is appropriate for all congregations, but because in many ways they are excelling at many of the processes described in this thesis. Drs. Ayala Fader and Mark Kligman write of the congregation:

> Long lines to get into a Friday night Shabbat service; congregants standing up during the service to dance through the aisles; newcomers weeping without understanding the Hebrew liturgy; a cantor who plays the electric keyboard along with drumming rabbis and Middle Eastern musical ensembles; congregants swaying, humming or loudly joining in the singing; liberal Jews who claim that they can "feel God's presence" in the sanctuary. These are all parts of what has made B'nai Jeshurun, a progressive, Conservative-style synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a laboratory for those concerned with dwindling membership at North American synagogues (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance, 2).

The goal is to show what one specific visionary congregation looks like, not to call for its cloning, but to provide an example (not the example). B'nai Jeshurun's rabbis, in their own description of the synagogue write, "We wish we could fill the remainder of this space with a description of the formula we have discovered for creating this kind of spirituality at BJ and then give all those who so admire BJ's success a recipe to follow. But we can't. BJ is not about a formula" (Matalon, Bronstein and Sol, Take BJ from its Rabbis' Point of View 12).

While the synagogue is broadly engaged in many elements of Jewish life and community, the focus of the studies are on spirituality and worship at B'nai Jeshurun. Fader and Kligman describe what being Jewish means at B'nai Jeshurun:

> Spirituality at BJ allows members to create a form of Jewish identity that is about God, but not the supernatural; religious, but not halakhically binding. This Jewish sensibility seeks Jewish authenticity, but rejects the dominant Ashkenazic tradition by looking to other Jewish (and non-Jewish) practices as alternative authenticities. BJ focuses on a sincere intention to experience God by searching simultaneously for a deeper meaning within the self. In moving terms, congregants describe their 'freedom' to choose from among religious practices and express emotions of joy and sadness publicly and without constraint (Fader and Kligman 11).

The rabbis at B'nai Jeshurun describe it in this way:

> Jewish spirituality at BJ is about creating a community in which modern Jews can, through the tradition, reach into their souls emotionally and intellectually to find their unique purpose, and be inspired to live lives that reflect that purpose. It is not a slightly different twist on a therapeutic model for finding happiness. And it is far from the me-centered self-fulfillment of contemporary consumer culture. It is the self-fulfillment that comes from discovering our distinct responsibility in the world, of asking ourselves what God demands of each one of us, personally and as a community.
>
> Some may be disappointed by this conclusion. We hope that you find it liberating. It means that there is no prescribed technique you have to apply if you want to be "like BJ"…What you do need is a passionately held and expressed vision about the meaning of Jewish life and what it means to live as a Jew in this world (Matalon, Bronstein and Sol, Take BJ from its Rabbis' Point of View, 12).

An interesting fact about B'nai Jeshurun is that most of their rabbis and their cantor are all Argentinian. The rabbis have a leadership style that has been called "authoritative" and they have been described as possessing Argentine *machismo*. Aside from their cultural backgrounds and personality, their theology animates their vision and leadership. Jewish Renewal theology, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi and neo-Hasidism all have a strong influence. Rabbis Roly and Marcelo view prayer not so much as an obligation, but an opportunity for spirituality (Fader and Kligman 3). Fader and Kligman identify seven features of worship services there[iii]:

1. "*Prayer is participatory:* 'Ownership of melodies is achieved through congregational singing. [Giving them melodies they can sing] is one of the most important parts of the service (Ari Priven).' Participation is enhanced by the services egalitarianism, which makes it accessible to all worshipers regardless of background.
2. *Prayer Anticipates Novelty:* 'People learn to look for new melodies, prayers and spiritual exercises. People are extremely receptive to a little chaos…to not knowing what will actually happen (Ari Priven).' The clergy discuss major structural changes to the service in advance, but leave some of the specifics to on-the-spot decisions.
3. *The Prayer Aesthetic is Both Fixed and Flexible:* 'To accomplish spontaneity, melodic repetition is improvised as to length, tempo and style. But improvisation is also framed by prayers that are fixed, so as to

balance surprise with predictability. Music shapes the service, it gives it energy and balance…When we do *tefillot* with our eyes closed, there is a feeling of letting go of your own self into that dance, you hear your own music of the *tefillah* (Marcelo Bronstein).'

4. *Prayer is Clergy Driven:* 'While the BJ clergy are open to congregational views, they make all ritual decisions themselves. There is no ritual committee. We are able to make the decisions that move the community in the direction we want (Ari Priven).'
5. *Prayer is a Means of Inner Renewal:* 'BJ encourages an approach to prayer described as going deeper. Experiencing prayer with intensity is fundamental. To go deeper into prayer is to know that you allow yourself to be transformed, that your life changes with a growing awareness and consciousness of the divine(J. Rolando Matalon).'
6. *Prayer is in Hebrew:* BJ rabbis point to other inspirational services (the Carlebach Schul, the Leader Minyan, *Kol Haneshama* and *Yakar* [In Israel]) to demonstrate the importance of Hebrew. Unlike the congregants in these other communities, however, BJ worshipers have limited Hebrew facility. Nevertheless the BJ service is almost entirely Hebrew. Setting the Hebrew bar high motivates congregants to concentrate more on prayer, thereby enhancing their experience of it.
7. Prayer is Personalized: 'Congregants are encouraged to see prayer as authentic only if it is intensely personal. It becomes stale because people

> don't inject their own voice (Felicia Sol).' The clergy model a personalized approach to prayer and congregants are encouraged to follow (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance, 5-6)."

Many of these values overlap and reinforce one another. For example, the importance of using Hebrew almost exclusively in the service ties in to the importance of using prayer as a form of inner-renewal. Fader and Kligman write that prayer "is used in a meditative way to 'let go' of the intellectual aspect of the self and to facilitate the experience of emotions that bring a person closer to God" (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance, 5). Furthermore, many worshipers view their Hebrew prayer, regardless of their own facility with the language, as a sign of Jewish authenticity. Infact, for those who do not understand the Hebrew, that feeling is particularly acute, "It's very inaccessibility allowed congregants to access what one very involved member and a Jewish professional called a 'different me'" (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance,). Another writes, "I don't like to pray in English…I think the Hebrew connects me to the past…It says that this is different. Even if you don't know Hebrew, you know that it is Hebrew, so it's separate and ancient…When I first went to BJ's services, I didn't know a word of Hebrew. The service was ninety percent Hebrew….I was so moved. Everybody has that experience. I don't think that if it were in English, it would be that moving" (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance, 6).

Another important aspect of B'nai Jeshurun is that they do not base Jewish life on an ethnic or cultural basis, but rather on a religious one. Ashkenazi-specific traditions in particular are not considered an integral part of the overall synagogue. If anything, many describe the synagogue as having more of a Latin-American flavor than an Ashkenazi one, mostly because of the heritage of the clergy. The result is that the many describe the synagogue's culture as having a refreshing feel. One congregant writes that it is "Not like your father's Oldsmobile" (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance, 7). Part of the implications is that music departs significantly from Ashkenazi norms. Rather, they intentionally "draw instead on other ethnic Jewish traditions, and non-Jewish meditative traditions also, like Sufism or Native American religions. The preference, however, is for melodies that are Middle Eastern, and occasionally, Klezmer" (Fader and Kligman, The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance 8).

In conclusion, I want to make an observation about B'nai Jeshurun. There is a difference between what animates them and how they express it. The most important of the two is the former. While the Latin American flavor, the dancing, and the music are all important, the rabbis insistent that it is BJ's striving to be a relevant, modern spiritual home for Jews that is most important. They write, "At our peril, we ignore the real issue: the irrelevance and the vacuity of most of Jewish life. Contemporary jews are indeed 'spiritual seekers.' They are seeking places where there is something meaningful going on, where God's Presence can be felt, wher eone can laugh and celebrate for real,

cry real tears, where there is a compelling vision for a just and peaceful world that is inclusive and tolerant. And where each person matters and is called to serve" (Matalon, Bronstein and Sol, Take BJ from its Rabbis' Point of View, 15).

6. Conclusions

The issue on many Jewish institutions' agendas is Jewish survival. How do we ensure the survival of the Jewish people into the future? For some institutions, this has to do with facing outside threats. In the twentieth century, this was certainly a pressing concern. For others, Jewish survival is not about external threats, but internal apathy. How do we motivate the next generation of Jews to care about being Jewish enough to keep the tradition going? At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the United States, Jews face no serious external threats.[11] Jews are free to live anywhere, associate with whomever, marry whomever, pursue any career, and live life anyway they want, with the same rights and freedoms as any American. These days, we are all Jews-by-Choice. For us, the task is to pass Torah and Jewish identity on when the next generation truly does have a choice. The goal and task is to create an engaging, dynamic, compelling, and attractive Jewish community. Naming this task Jewish survival seems to me a misnomer, and setting our sights lower than they should be. Survival is not always a blessing. The goal ought not to be to survive, but to flourish. I see synagogue renewal as nothing less than the potential for a new renaissance in Jewish

[11] Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and others still pose grave threats to the physical safety and security of the State of Israel.

life today, about a Golden Age in American Jewry. Synagogues, as the Jewish institutions that American Jews are the most likely to have contact with, are in a unique position to accept the task of creating and sustaining this sort of flourishing Jewish community today. What it means to flourish may vary from community to community, but it always connotes vibrancy. A flourishing, vibrant community is one that excites, inspires, transforms, attracts willing commitment, engages, and adds blessings and holiness to the lives of its members.

Over the centuries, synagogues have all served similar purposes and functions: being a house of prayer, a house of study, and a house of gathering. These functions are largely the same today. Some synagogues will be centers of social action and social justice, others will be spiritual homes, with moving worship, and there will be places of engaging learning and Torah study too. Likely, many synagogues will have all three qualities and more. All of them can provide caring and holy community. What's different is the cultural settings and the individuals that are served. There is a bit of a tension between holding fast to values and timeless traditions on the one hand, and adapting to meet the ever-changing needs and circumstances of the community. I firmly believe that synagogues need to keep both in mind in order to be successful. Jewish leaders must be mindful of the makeup of their communities, constantly figuring out how best to serve both their congregants as well as unaffiliated Jews in the community. There is no one formula or checklist for achieving this. Nevertheless,

building commitment and community is a sacred task, and we have much work ahead of us.

7. Appendices

Appendix A – Outline of Class 101: Discovering Saddleback Membership

I. Our Salvation
   a. Making sure you are a Christian
   b. The symbols of salvation
      i. Baptism
      ii. Communion

II. Our Statements
   a. Our Purpose Statement: *Why we exist*
   b. Our Vision Statement: *What we intend to do*
   c. Our Faith Statement: *What we believe*
   d. Our Values Statement: *What we practice*

III. Our Strategy
   a. Brief History of Saddleback
   b. Who we are trying to reach (our target)
   c. Our Life Development Process to help you grow
   d. The S.A.D.D.L.E.B.A.C.K. strategy

IV. Our Structure
   a. How our church is organized for growth
   b. Our affiliation
   c. What it means to be a member
   d. What is my next step after joining?

V. The Saddleback Quiz

Appendix B – Membership Covenants

The Saddleback Membership Covenant

Having received Christ as my Lord and Savior and been baptized, and being in agreement with Saddleback's statements, strategy, and structure, I now feel led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the Saddleback church family. In doing so, I commit myself to God and to the other members to do the following:

1. I will protect the unity of my church
   …by acting in love toward other members
   ….by refusing to gossip
   …by following the leaders

"So let us concentrate on the things which make for harmony, and on the growth of our fellowship together" (Rom. 14:19 Phillips).

"Have a sincere love for other believers, love one another earnestly with all your heart" (1 Peter 1:22 Tev).

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs" (Eph. 4:29).

"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:17).

2. I will share the responsibility of my church
   …by praying for its growth
   …by inviting the unchurched to attend
   …by warmly welcoming those who visit

"To the church -- …We always thank God for you and pray for you constantly" (1 Thess. 1:1-2 LB).

"The Master said to the servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes, and urge the people there to come so my house will be full (Luke 14:23 NCV).

"So, warmly welcome each other into the church, just as Christ has warmly welcomed you; then God will be glorified" (Rom. 15:7 LB).

3. I will serve the ministry of my church

...by discovering my gifts and talents
…by being equipped to serve by my pastors
…by developing a servant's heart

"Serve one another with the particular gifts God has given each of you" (1 Peter 4:10 Phillips).

"[God] gave…some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:11-12).

"Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who…[took on] the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:3-4,7).

4. I will support the testimony of my church
   ...by attending faithfully
   …by living a godly life
   …by giving regularly

"Let us not give up meeting together…but let us encourage one another" (Heb 10:25)

"Whatever happens, make sure that your everyday life is worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27 Phillips).

"Each one of you, on the first day of each week, should set aside a specific sum of money in proportion to what you have earned and use it for the offering" (1 Cor. 16:2 LB).

"A tenth of [all your] produce…is the Lord's, and is holy" (Lev. 27:30 NCV).

Valley Beth Shalom

Encino, California

Bra'sheet (In the beginning…): I share the responsibility of creating a community of holiness at Valley Beth Shalom, a community that embraces and embodies the ideals, ethics, faith, and culture of the Jewish people.

Sh'mot (These are the names…) : I will deepen my own Jewish identity and nurture my Jewish soul through *Torah*/Learning, *Avodah*/Worship, *Gemilut Hesed*/Action, and *Havurah/*Fellowship.

Va'yikra (And God called…): I will answer the call to become God's partner in bringing wholeness and holiness to the world. I will answer the call to repair the world's brokenness and heal its suffering.

Bamidbar (In the wilderness…): I will seek *shalom,* the blessings of wholeness, peace, and solidarity in my family, my circle of relations, my community, in my city, and in the world.

Devarim (These are the words…): I share the responsibility of transmitting Judaism to a new generation.

Temple Micah

Washington, D.C.

"Rabbi Simon taught that the world rests on three pillars---Torah, prayer, and good deeds."

This statement represents the values that define Temple Micah. We ask each member to participate actively in the life of our community by supporting these three pillars.

> Torah: I recognize that our community prizes Torah learning as a way to nurture the soul and guide our lives. I will engage in Torah learning through one of Micah's many offerings both to deepen myself and make our community a more learned place.
>
> Prayer: I recognize that through prayer my soul can grow in holiness. I also understand that our community gathers and meets each other at Shabbat worship. This is where we come together and we begin to know each other's faces. I will strive to make community prayer a regular part of my Shabbat.
>
> Good Deeds: At Micah we try and dour part in repairing the world. I understand that it is part of my responsibility to participate as a partner in this work of *tikkun* with my community.

Appendix C – Low Hanging Fruit

Throughout Ron Wolfson's book *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, he has what he calls "Low-Hanging Fruit." These are suggestions for congregations that he believes are rather easy to implement. I have collected these suggestions and present them here, in one space.

A Welcoming Ambience

Successful Greeting[12]

- At Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, congregants volunteer to act as *m'kablei panim* (literally, "greeting faces"), positioned at the main entrance of the sanctuary throughout the services.
- At the library minyan of Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, a designated individual or family stands at the end of the service to invite guests to a Shabbat or Yom Tov lunch.
- In a synagogue in Orlando, Florida, a lamppost with street signs has been erected in the social hall identifying the spot as *kikar shalom*, the "greeting square." Greeters and officers of the synagogue stand near the post immediately after the service, available to greet visitors.
- One of the first Synagogue 2000 pilot sites, Temple Ner Tamid in California, recruited a group of fifty volunteers from the congregation to act as greeters.

[12] Page 67

This “shalom squad” takes up positions in the parking lot, at the front doors of the building, at the doors of the sanctuary, and inside the sanctuary, looking for ways to greet members and guests.

- Realizing that members would be standing in line to go through the security gauntlet installed in the synagogue since 9/11, the Synagogue 2000 team at Temple Israel of Hollywood offered trays of apples and honey to those inconvenienced by the wait. Several of the team brought guitars and led a festive sing-along as well.

Temple Beth Abraham (Reform) of Tarrytown, New York

Temple Beth Abraham’s S2K team embarked on creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Initially we split into two groups. The first group dealt with the physical space. They inspected the lobby area and made some changes. They removed clutter and changed some wall coverings that made the overall appearance more attractive. They also added signs around the building. As you approach the building it was not clear to newcomers and delivery people which of our two entrances to choose, so a big sign was put up that says “*Welcome to Temple Beth Abraham*” and notes *Main Entrance*, with an arrow pointing the way. Upon entering our smallish lobby, there are six doors from which to choose. There were no signs. We installed a sign in the lobby pointing the way to the library, religious school, main offices, and the restrooms.

Welcoming Worship

Can You Hear Me?

When the sanctuary at BJ[13] was renovated, the congregation installed a state-of-the-art surround-sound system, complete with speakers in the middle and rear sections of the lower floor and speakers in the balcony. The clergy report that the sound system vastly improved the level of participation of the congregation, now that they can hear, follow and join the davenning.

Temple Sinai (Reform) of Summit, New Jersey

We created an intergenerational choir. Prior to this effort, only the adult and junior choir existed. This effort brought together congregants of all ages and enriched the experience for the participants and congregation alike. The cantor consulted choir members and invited adults to join junior choir for several performances. The response was very positive.

Harnessing the Spiritual Power of the Pulpit

There is great spiritual power on the bimah. For many, the simple act of walking onto the pulpit is an awe-inspiring experience. Imagine, then, the impact of standing before the Holy Ark during Neilah, the closing service of the Yom Kippur holiday. A number of S2K congregations have adopted this idea: The rabbi invites anyone who wants to

[13] B'nai Jesherun of New York

approach the ark in order to offer private prayers the opportunity to do so during the long Amidah when the Aron haKodesh remains open and the congregation stands. One S2K rabbi told me, "We started this a few years ago, and only a handful of people came up. This last year, we must have had three hundred people—individuals and entire families—stand in front of the ark. Most of them left the bimah in tears, visibly moved by the experience.

Staying on the Same Page

Many guests have a difficult time keeping up with the pace of the worship, particularly in more traditional services. They literally lose their place in the siddur and must wait for the rabbi's next announcement of page numbers or, if brave, ask a neighbor, "What page are we on?" In some Orthodox synagogues, a tall device with mechanical (as opposed to electronic) numbers (think old baseball scoreboards) displays the page number; a lay leader from the congregation changes the number at regular intervals throughout the service. Some S2K congregations have greeters at the door of the sanctuary handing out prayerbooks already opened to the correct page to latecomers. On the opposite end of the spectrum, at Sinai Temple's Friday Night Live, there have been experiments with projecting the words of prayers onto large video screens, freeing the congregation from depending on the book altogether. Rabbi Sharon Brous and her team at IKAR published a spectacular "map" detailing the spiritual journey of the High Holy Days, a step-by-step guide for the worship experience. For Yizkor, IKAR created a

published booklet of personal reflections by congregants about the loved ones who were being remembered.

Hebrew Institute of White Plains (Orthodox) of White Plains, New York

"Shhh." S2K team members collectively agreed to take an unofficial tefillah "vow of silence." All twenty-two members agreed to make every effort not to have conversations during tefillah on Shabbat, and to respectfully let others know that speaking during worship distracts one from the purpose of tefillah and detracts from the sacredness of the space. One of our S2K team members who now sits on the Religious Services committee has helped to create signage for the Days of Awe in the sanctuary reminding people of our objective. Sample signs include, "Praying is hard work. Quiet helps" and "Quiet please, Sacred Space."

Temple Israel (Reform) of Omaha, Nebraska

One of our original S2K pilot sites, Temple Israel is the last of the synagogues in Omaha to "move west" in the city where the Jewish community has migrated. Currently housed in a small 1950s-era building, the congregation recently received a large donated piece of property in this newer Omaha neighborhood. Many of the original S2K team members now serve in leadership roles in the congregation and they are spearheading the exciting effort to plan a twenty-first-century synagogue building and campus. When I asked one of my Omaha cousins how he felt about this change, he was not happy.

"Why do we have to move out there?" he asked. "Besides, when I walk into this building, there are so many memories that well up in me. We'll lose all that."

I replied, "First of all, put yourself in the shoes of the parents of young children in the religious school who complain about the shlep to the old building. Second, figure out what is precious and essential and what is expendable. Perhaps you'll keep key components of the bimah—the ark, the eternal light—and integrate them into the new design; that will give you the visual cues to remind you of the past, yet enable the congregation to build a much more flexible, usable, and attractive space."

My cousin had to agree intellectually; he came to accept that his real issues are coming to grips with the emotions of nostalgia and loss. He has since become a big supporter of the move.

Think about the power of expanding the use of existing space. Rabbi Murray Ezring of Temple Israel in Charlotte, North Carolina, trains fifty members of his congregation to blow the shofar on the High Holy Days. He then positions them strategically throughout the sanctuary. The effect: surround shofar blowing! The congregation is moved to goose bump moments with the thrilling sound.

Congregation Beth Evergreen (Reform) of Evergreen, Colorado

Several S2K congregations undertook building and renovation projects. Here is a report from one successful effort.

Synagogue 2000 greatly influenced the design of our new synagogue. We had engaged an architect who was consulting with an architectural firm that specializes in synagogue design. Soon after our architect presented us with the initial design for our approval, we met with the S2K sacred space maven, Richard Vosko, who was pleased with our design, but made quite a few wonderful suggestions the make the building more spiritually compelling. Some of his suggestions included a shofar-shaped path to enter the main sanctuary/social hall space. Our architect was in attendance at the time of the meeting and was anxious to meet the challenges presented to her. In addition, we toured some of the Denver synagogues, pointing out to each other the elements that we felt contributed to the feeling of inclusiveness and spirituality emphasized by S2K. We are now in the process of building our sacred home and anticipate a place of warmth, togetherness, and deep spirituality.

Larchmont Temple (Reform) of Larchmont, New York

The S2K team decided to offer a wine and cheese Kabbalat Shabbat once a month on Friday night at 7:00. People arrive to find the lobby of the congregation full of beautifully decorated tables laden with trays featuring all sorts of exotic cheeses, along with vegetable crudités, dips, and crackers. Excellent wines from Israel are offered. The gathering is festive and builds a sense of community. The service itself is of the "family" variety, and exactly one hour, filled with singing, a short story from the rabbi, and a prayer for healing.

A cautionary tale. In many Orthodox and some Conservative congregations, a group of men, usually the regulars and machers, will leave the sanctuary during the Torah reading to enjoy a schnapps and a piece of cake in another part of the building. These "Kiddush clubs" are exclusionary, elitist, and disruptive to the sense of community that most congregations hope to establish. I know of one such congregation where the rabbi outlawed the practice, and members resigned over the issue! Here's an idea: At IKAR in Los Angeles, a snack of honey cake and juice was offered to the entire congregation during the long Rosh Hashanah morning service.

Welcoming Members

BMH-BJ Congregation (Orthodox) of Denver, Colorado

Consider this creative idea:

Our S2K team is leading the effort to create a synagogue "facebook," similar to those found on college campuses to help people identify each other. We are inviting every individual and family member to have a photo taken or submitted. Instead of our usual annual directory of names, addresses, and phone numbers, we believe the face book will add to our sense of community.

Hebrew Institute of White Plains (Orthodox) of White Plains, New York

Or this one:

The S2K team spawned the idea of establishing a committee to ensure that new members have meal invitations for their first month of Shabbatot when they join the congregation. Veteran synagogue members inform the committee of their interest and availability for hosting new families for meals, and the committee links veteran and new members.

Temple Beth Abraham (Reform) of Tarrytown, New York

If every congregation did this one act of welcoming, imagine the impact on how people think about synagogues:

Following a suggestion we heard at an S2K conference, we called all of our congregants (approximately 470) on the Monday before the High Holy Days to wish them a Shanah Tovah. Most of our organized contact with our congregants either is purely informative (bulletin) or is in making requests for their time or money. This initiative had no strings attached. Our intent was solely to wish all of our congregants a healthy and sweet new year. We simply have never reached out to the entire congregation in this way before. With only six people, we finished in one and a half hours. It was a relatively easy task and a nice experience for both the callers and the congregants. Our congregants were very surprised to receive such a call. After our good wishes, there was usually a silent pause as though they were waiting for us to ask for something, and when we didn't they relaxed and told us repeatedly how nice it was for us to call them. Everyone seemed very happy and appreciative.

Shaarei Tikvah (Conservative) of Scarsdale, New York

Our most recognized contribution from S2K is the Jewish journey group (JJG) entitled Talking About God. After a four-part lecture series about revelation in Conservative Judaism, the JJG gave us a forum to discuss some ideas from the lectures. Led by team member Alison Kellner, fifteen men and women of varying ages journeyed together. Each one brought his or her personal history and belief system about God. No two of them believed exactly the same thing. The exciting result was that the JJG worked exactly (if not better than!) we were told it would. People talked, discussed, listened, and struggled with ideas of God and bonded to each other in a way they weren't used to doing in other synagogue venues. No one wanted it to end, saying it was something they looked forward to attending.

Appendix D – Tips

In addition to the low hanging fruit presented in the last appendix, Ron Wolfson also presents "tips" on implementing change. These tips are gathered and presented here.

Strategies for Effecting Change

- Recognize the challenge of change
- Understand why you do what you do
- Be aware of how quickly the new becomes traditional
- Tradition and change
- "Don't leave Sadie behind"
- Listen to people and adjust according to their feedback
- Recognize that personal transformation precedes institutional transformation
- Strive for application, not replication
- Raise the bar
- Ask the right questions

- Create a culture of honor, not a culture of blame
- Engage the clergy in the process of change

Seven Tips for Great Greeting

Here are the seven most important tips for greeting another human being:

1. Acknowledge the presence of the other. Don't ignore anyone. Don't make anyone feel that they are less important than the conversation you are having, the task that you are completing, the other people in your life.
2. Approach people with an attitude of welcome. Be enthusiastically friendly. Make the first move. Have your body language match your words: Make eye contact, maintain eye contact, smile, nod, or show empathy in some other way.
3. Greet the other. In the synagogue, offer the appropriate greeting in addition to the usual *Hello, how are you?* Add: *Welcome, Shabbat Shalom*, the appropriate holiday greeting, or *Mazal Tov!* or *Congratulations.* Remember that some people come to the congregation in mourning; greet them with *I'm sorry for your loss.*
4. Offer assistance, guidance or directions. *May I help you? What can I do for you? Let me show you to the child-care room*. Don't point people down a hall laden with a complicated set of directions; offer to take them there.
5. Answer all questions with respect. There is no such thing as a stupid Jewish question. If you don't know the answer, promise to get the answer and follow through.
6. Introduce new people to others. Build community by connecting people who share a life stage, an affinity, or live in the same neighborhood.
7. Thank people for coming. The flip side of greeting is "waving," expressing gratitude to busy people for participating in community.

Phone Etiquette

Answering the Phone

Here is a basic guide to welcoming phone etiquette:

1. Greet the caller. Here the congregation faces choices. *Shalom, Hello,* and so on. Some synagogues will use Hebrew on purpose; others will avoid it.
2. Identify the congregation. "Congregation B'nai Shalom."
3. Identify yourself. "This is Ellen."

4. Offer assistance. "How may I help you?"
5. If the person is not available, ask permission. "I'm sorry, but Rabbi Schwartz is in a meeting at the moment. May I put you through to his assistant?" Or, "May I put you through to his voicemail?" If the caller refuses, take a message and assure the caller that the party will return the call as soon as possible.
6. Thank the caller. "Thank you for calling Congregation B'nai Shalom. Have a great day!"

Voice Mail Etiquette

Many synagogues have adopted an automated telephone answering system, arguing that it saves time and money. If your congregation has such a system, consider carefully how your callers encounter the congregation for the first time. Here are four important tips:

1. Be short. Callers get very frustrated very quickly with long-winded messages. If the member or prospective member is calling to talk to someone, they don't want to hear a long shpiel about what events are happening at the synagogue. If they are calling for basic information, you can direct them to press a key that connects them to the location of the synagogue, upcoming events, and so on.
2. Be direct. If you have an extended message, offer a quick escape hatch to speak to a real person, or an option to skip the message entirely.
3. Be welcoming. It costs nothing to add a warm welcome to the beginning of your message.
4. On-hold music. Play music by the cantor and/or choir or other Jewish music. Be careful using unmonitored radio stations for this purpose.

33 Great Ideas for Welcoming[14]

1. Post directional signs within one mile of the congregation inviting visitors to the site.
2. Make sure that the name (including transliteration) and address of the congregation is clearly visible from the street—from every approach.

[14] Despite the title, there are really only thirty-two great ideas for welcoming. In the book, the number thirteen is skipped.

3. Include a sign of greeting on the marquee or banner. Suggestions include *Welcome, Sinai Temple Welcomes You, Bruchim ha-Ba'im b'Sheim Adonai* (Blessed are Those Who Come in the Name of God).
4. Drape a banner in front of the building during the months preceding the new year with a message like the following: *Beth Shalom Welcomes Your Membership—Open House, Sundays, 12-4 p.m.*
5. Keep visitor parking spaces reserved in the front of the lot.
6. Make sure that the entrance to the building is clearly identified. If the entrance is not through the main doors, there should be a sign clearly indicating how one enters the synagogue. If security requires keeping doors locked, make the procedure for identifying visitors a welcoming one.
7. The lobby should feature a directory of offices, a map of the building (complete with *You Are Here* symbols), clear directions to major locations, couches, and an array of drinks and snacks.
8. During services times, make sure that there are greeters in the lobby who can welcome and sit with a newcomer to explain the service or other programs.
9. Present informational brochures about synagogue programs on a bulletin board. Display uniform information cards in a case similar to those found in lobbies of hotels featuring area attractions.
10. Structure the office so that it has an open window into the lobby area. Make sure a receptionist is available to assist visitors to the building.
11. The synagogue library should be located off the office and should offer resources for learning.
12. Provide directional signs to the main sanctuary, clergy, office, chapel, school, and restrooms that are clearly visible throughout the building. Install maps of the campus at key locations.
13. Hang a bulletin board labeled *Our Community Cares* next to the main office listing the names of upcoming *B'nai Mitzvah*, weddings, anniversaries, *shivah* homes, *Yahrtzeits,* and those in the hospital.
14. Make sure that offices are clearly marked with the names of the occupants, along with a color photograph of the person(s) who works in the space. Office desks and work areas should feature family photos, personal touches, and bowls of candy.
15. Keep restrooms clean, fresh, and furnished with diaper decks in both men's and women's rooms. Hang a tallit rack outside both women's and men's

restrooms. Put out potpourri and amenities such as hand lotion on Shabbat and holidays.

16. Designate a nursing room offering privacy for nursing mothers and a crying room for families with young children.
17. Don't let the coatroom double as a storage area.
18. Provide a greeting area outside the main sanctuary.
19. Check that signs are worded in a welcoming manner.
20. Provide a welcome booklet in each pew with a brief history of the congregation, a description of the sanctuary with explanations of the various symbols, a list of the people on the pulpit and their roles in the service, an outline of the prayer service, and an invitation to consider membership.
21. Offer visitors a postcard that they can use to give feedback.
22. Serve refreshments *before* the service.
23. Invite newcomers to an open house with the clergy.
24. Hand out chocolate Shabbat "kisses" after services.
25. Provide umbrellas and umbrella escorts when it rains.
26. Consider offering valet parking.
27. Offer to sit with guests.
28. Create a concierge desk.
29. Publish a face book of the membership.
30. Recruit volunteers to give everyone in the congregation a call before High Holidays just to say happy new year.
31. Display photos of current members engaged in the work of spiritual community: worship, social justice activities, studying, comforting, and so on.
32. Have a greeter in the religious school carpool line.

Music as a Means for Creating Meaningful Worship

In addition to her role as director of music at S3K, Merri Arian has become a sought-after consultant and S3K lecturer in liturgical arts at the School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College's New York campus, teaching a new generation of Reform clergy how to engage the congregation's voice. She understands the importance of the function of music in prayer. Below, she offers some thoughts on the power of music to transform worship.

For the traditional Jew, prayer is a commandment. One comes to the synagogue to pray because one is commanded to do so. Music can heighten that prayer experience and enhance the text in such ways as to bring deeper meaning to the ancient words. The nusach chanted during the worship service sets the tone of the service, signaling a particular time in the Jewish calendar, connecting the prayer with all the history and meaning of that particular time. Melodies of old connect the person praying to a tradition and a long history—an understanding that the sacred act that he or she is involved in is a link in a long chain. Those melodies intensify the prayer experience as they bring to mind parents and grandparents who came before, uttering these very same words and melodies, hundreds of years before. These melodies serve as touchstones—a guidepost—as one proceeds through the prayer experience.

For the less traditional Jew though, prayer services can be somewhat daunting—the language foreign and difficult to pronounce, and the customs unfamiliar and awkward. Often it is the music that can help ease these people into the prayer experience. After all, music is the universal language, and music can help level the "praying field"!

Beginnings

How can we begin the prayer experience is important. We need to recognize where the congregants are coming from—a missed train, a late babysitter, a hassled week at work,

a week of being indoors with a sick child. They need to be welcomed into the prayer experience. I was reminded recently about how important this Kabbalat Shabbat experience can be. At Congregation Kol Hanishama, a Reform congregation in Jerusalem, Rabbi Levi Kelman takes this warm-up time, this welcoming of the Sahbbat, very seriously. Taking time is important. It needs to be inviting and not intimidating.

We need to be cognizant of who plans our worship services. The Jewish professionals of the congregation plan our worship—those who do this "religion thing" as a profession. Getting into prayer is something that most probably comes easily to them! But not true for the layperson, who needs to be nurtured and guided into the experience. The opening music is our first chance! The music needs to be relatively easy to access and familiar. I do not want the congregant to be focused on an awkward rhythm or difficult melody. I want him or her to be looking inward and focusing on prayer. When carefully planned, the music at the beginning of the service can help the congregant do just that.

Transitions

How one transitions from one part of the service to another greatly affects the prayer experience. The music that one selects during these transitional times needs to support the feeling that one is creating. For example, how one moves in and out of silence is terribly important. There needs to be a sense of quieting down, a slowing of the pace. Silence is not a familiar space for many of us whose lives are usually accompanied by a din of competing calls for our attention. Yet, the silent prayer is often cited as the part

of the service that people most look forward to. When we select music that precedes the silent prayer, we need to help guide people to this special place. Similarly, when we come out of this silence, we want to help people hold on to the calm that they have just experienced, and so we select music that matches that quietude, gradually increasing the dynamics and tempo as we proceed onward through the liturgy.

It was not until the death of my father that I understood the importance of the transition that was needed following the Mourners' Kaddish. In most congregations, the next moment is filled with either announcements or a closing hymn. For the first time, I understood as a mourner how jolting that closing hymn or congregational announcement could be, coming on the heels of that prayer. Attention needs to be given to that transition in such a ways to provide closure for the person saying Kaddish. In some congregations, that transition is accomplished by the rabbi reciting something in English, acknowledging how we as a congregation take the names of all of these people into our hearts. This transition can also be handled musically, with the insertion of an a capella refrain that is appropriately contemplative in nature, possibly using the text of Oseh Shalom. We ask people to open their hearts and be present in prayer, and we need to be sensitive and respectful of their needs and their vulnerabilities.

Enhancing the Text

The music that we use in our worship services need to reflect the texts that they are accompanying. Surely we understand that our liturgical texts are sacred and enduring, yet sometimes we say the words without really thinking about their meaning. Music is

an opportunity to check in on the meaning of the text. When chosen sensitively, music can enhance and sometimes even bring new or deeper meaning to these age-old prayers. Think about that time in our service when we ask God to grant peace to us and our people. Think of all the beautiful melodies that have been written for Sim Shalom, Shalom Rav, and Oseh Shalom, to name just a few prayers. Those melodies that you remember are the ones that truly gave extra meaning to those moments. What about the joy of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea as they spoke those ancient words: *Mi chamocha ba-eylin Adonai?* Again, we can almost hear the joyful, triumphant melodies that have been composed expressly for that moment. And what about all of the new melodies that have been written to support the healing moments that congregations are now creating within their regular worship settings? These melodies capture the urgency of people's prayers for healing for loved ones in a way that the text alone simply cannot do.

Our worship is made ever more meaningful by the inclusion of music that helps guide people into prayer, helps them make transitions within the service, and enhances and deepens the meaning of the text.

Strategies for Welcoming Children

Here are some ideas to consider for welcoming children in services:

- Encourage parents to prepare a "shul bag" to bring to the service. In it should be some reading or picture books, a quiet toy, a favorite stuffed animal, a snack and

a drink (to be eaten in the hallway), extra diapers, fresh wipes, a pretend tallit, and a kippah.

- Create a children's area in the rear of the shul by taking out a few pews and establishing a play space for babies and toddlers while parents and grandparents participate in the service. Proximity to the door allows for a quick getaway.
- Offer children a basket of appropriate Shabbat toys to play with at the entrance of the sanctuary.
- Keep a cart of Jewish children's books for parents to share with children during the service.
- Encourage parents to take the children to babysitting and youth services, clearly sending a message that the main service is geared for adults. The babysitting is first rate, offered in a clean, well-stocked nursery.
- Take a strategy from the megachurchs and establish a family room, sometimes called a crying room, in the congregation: a closed-off space constructed of glass where families can make noise, but still hear the service. At Saddleback, young children are most definitely not encouraged in the main sanctuary. But families can use the four family rooms in the building that receive live televised broadcasts of the service or sit just outside the glass walls of the sanctuary where speakers allow adults to hear the service.

What to Do If Your Synagogue Does Not Match the Community

- Rick Warren warns: "Don't try to be something you are not." On the other hand, if you've done your homework well, you can assess your strengths and experiment with ways to reach the seekers you have targeted.
- Start alternative services. Add another worship service with a different style targeted to a new group. The rapid development of alternative minyanim is an indication of this phenomenon. In recent years, the Reform Movement has seen

the introduction of parallel services, something that has been common in Conservative and Orthodox synagogues.

- Start a satellite congregation. Often, older congregations that have buildings in parts of towns from which the Jewish community has fled establish satellite operations in new neighborhoods. This is an area ripe for development in the Jewish community of the twenty-first century—"synagogue planting." There is precious little funding for this, yet the need to establish smaller, emergent sacred communities, often meeting in homes or even coffee shops and other public areas, is a trend to watch in the coming years. Large synagogues that cede this territory to others do so at their own risk.

Ways to Welcome and Inform Guests

- Use name tags to identify key members of the board, greeters, and membership outreach people.
- Create a place for guests to interact with representatives of the congregation.
- If you have a receiving line at the end of the service, announce that guests should look for the president or other greeters and encourage them to identify themselves.
- Set up an information table to distribute publicity about the congregation, membership, and upcoming events. Be sure a volunteer staffs the table to answer questions.
- Identify a member as a Shabbat host who is willing to invite strangers home for a meal. Rotate the responsibility among members.
- If lunch is served, invite newcomers to sit with members of the congregation at a special table reserved for them.
- Collect business cards, or, if religious practice allows, ask guests to write their names and contact information on a sign-up sheet for follow-up.

- Encourage the regulars to move beyond their cliques and seek out strangers to welcome.
- Have greeters hand out cards that say, “My name is _____. My phone number is _____. Please call me if I can be of service to you. Check out our website: _____. Our synagogue strives to be a sacred community where people care about people.

Guidelines for Reviewing Your Dues Policies

- What do you know about your membership’s demographics? On average, how many new members join the synagogue each year? Who are they? What is their geographic/age/family profile? How many members leave the synagogue each year? Who are they? What are their reasons? Can you discern a pattern that offers insight into how your congregation is doing with regard to membership recruitment and retention?
- What are the values that shape your dues policy? For example, do you believe that everyone should pay a “fair share”?
- Does the dues amount adjust through time? What assumptions guide the adjustments?
- Are your dues “all-inclusive”? If not, what services are offered for extra cost? What is included in the basic dues? What costs extra?
- What is your policy for handling dues adjustments? What must the members do to apply for reduced dues? Who makes the decision?
- Do you have any program that markets an introductory rate for membership? What are the guiding principles and assumptions of the program?
- How are dues collected? How often are members billed for dues? How many reminders do they receive? What happens if the member is in arrears?
- What happens when a member does not renew? Is an exit interview done? What happens with the information that is collected?

Membership Covenants
See Appendix B

Ideas for Recognizing and Celebrating New Members

There are a variety of ways new members can be welcomed into the congregation:

- Take complimentary photos of the individual or family and feature them in the lobby of the congregation. Give a copy to the family as a gift.
- Hold a new members' Shabbat dinner, hosted by the congregation. Ask the new members to offer a few words of testimony about their Jewish journeys at the celebration.
- Offer an aliyah to new members during a Shabbat service.
- Have the rabbi host a Rabbi's Chat in her or his home once or twice during the year to which new members are invited.
- Send cards on birthdays and the anniversary of the first year of membership.
- Recognize new members in the bulletin.
- Reserve a prime parking spot for the new member(s) of the month.
- Distribute items with the congregational logo.
- Be sure that someone has the responsibility for staying in touch with a new member for an entire year. Do not just greet them and then forget them.

Ways of Cultivating Jewish Spiritual Maturity

- Set up one or more classes for congregants whose goal is to strive for spiritual maturity.
- Create pledge cards for people to indicate which new Jewish practice they are committed to adopting in the coming year. The response to these calls for commitment is often unusually positive. Some may be afraid to ask for big commitments, afraid that it will drive people away. The opposite is true: People are inspired to make a great commitment if there is a great purpose behind it.

People respond to a passionate vision of Judaism, not a need the synagogue might have. Focus on the vision of the synagogue, not the needs of the synagogue. Generalities won't inspire commitments. "Be a good Jew" means nothing. Spell out a variety of specific commitments that can lead people to higher spirituality—study, good deeds, tzedakah, celebrations, mitzvoth—and provide ways for people to act on them.

- Emphasize the benefits of commitment to Jewish practice on every occasion. God was the first great practitioner of benefit advertising. God asks Abraham for a huge commitment: "Go, leave your house, and go to a place I will show you." And what's the benefit? "You shall be a blessing and your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky." There are tremendous personal, family, and communal benefits to living a Jewishly committed lifestyle. Shabbat offers rest to the weary and overstressed. Helping others help themselves helps the community.
- Build a positive attitude toward commitment in small steps. Start with people wherever they may be on their spiritual path. Help them take the next small step. Celebrate these small steps, as well as the big ones.

The largest crowd of the year at many synagogues (besides the High Holy Days) is the Shabbat celebrating those members who become adult *B'nai Mitzvah.* These people have committed two years of their lives to learning Hebrew, the prayer service, and how to chant from the Torah and Haftorah. Their participation in the service is one of the most inspiring moments in the synagogue all year. Engage in the core spiritual exercises of Judaism:

- Learning. The Talmud asks, "Which is greater: study or good deeds?" The answer: "Study, for it leads to good deeds." Learning about Judaism goes hand in hand with experiencing Jewish living.

- Mitzvot. Living a Jewish life, celebrating Shabbat and Jewish festivals, observing Jewish practices—this is the fuel for the Jewish journey.
- Prayer. As difficult as accessing Jewish worship may be for some, finding ways to praise and petition God are indispensable for spiritual maturity.
- Community. Establishing relationships with others is the essence of belonging to a synagogue.
- Tzedakah and acts of loving kindness. Judaism views as a spiritual act the giving of one's resources and talents to better the world.

Ways of Fostering Small Groups

- Find out how many people belong to existing small groups.
- Find ways to revitalize these small groups if necessary.
- Organize additional small groups for the congregants to become a part of. These might be multi-session Jewish journey groups, focused on a particular topic or issue. These might also be multi-session workshops or classes, also focused on a particular topic. For classes to function in the same way as small groups, they must be organized and taught so that people can get to know one another and make contacts that might result in lasting connections.

Appendix E – If You Can't Find It, Create It

Similar to the previous appendices, this one presents the ideas of Rabbi Sidney's Schwartz book, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue,* about how to transform an existing congregation or on how to create one.

1. **Create a Mission Statement**

See if a group of members would be interested in thinking through the primary purpose of the synagogue. Remember, a list of programs is not a statement of objectives. First try to articulate the why: Why does our synagogue exist? What are its objectives? What is the purpose of Judaism?

2. Bring Singable Music into the Worship Service

As you sit in a service, take note of how many people are singing how many songs. If most people are sitting passively, listening to a cantor or a choir, you need some serious music therapy.

Talk to your cantor about whether he or she is willing to introduce new melodies that lend themselves to congregational singing. Track down tapes of Jewish music to find suitable melodies. The simpler the song, in terms of words and melody, the better. A niggun requires no words at all and is generally repeated often enough so that even the most musically challenged can join in. Even easier is to encourage the cantor to take a few of the peppier melodies and to sing them with “la la la” a couple of times after the word have been sung. Especially if some people find the Hebrew intimidating, this is an excellent way to draw worshipers into some singing.

See if you can identify one or more members who are musically talented, and see if they can introduce a melody on occasion. If the religious standards permit it, introduce instruments or drums. If not, clapping serves a similar purpose.

3. Create *Havurot*

Any way that you can break down the congregation into smaller, more intimate units will strengthen the bonds of community. The *havurot* might be organized around study, *Shabbat*, social action, holidays, or any other topic. They may be based on geography (who lives near whom) or life stage (singles, young couples, families with small children, and so on). The more Jewish content the better.

What is most important is that members get into each other's homes and get to know one another. If your objective is to strengthen your synagogue, make sure that the *Havurah* is committed to attendance at synagogue wide events on a regular basis; otherwise, it will become an impetus for pulling energy out of the congregation instead of putting energy into it. Ideally, the *Havurah* should, on occasion, sponsor a program for the rest of the congregation.

4. Create Systems for Personal Support

Nothing invalidates the synagogue enterprise more than if a member experiences a life trauma and there is no congregational response. This is the Jewish *mitzvah* of *Gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness. A visit or call from

the rabbi is nice, but it is not enough. *Havurot* are natural response teams during such times because of the familiarity of the members with one another.

Often the biggest barrier to congregations functioning as support networks for each other is the reticence of members to share their pain, sickness, or personal crisis with a wider group of people. The synagogue-community is challenged to come up with ways to overcome this American predilection for privacy. Healing services are one vehicle that gives permission for people to share pain publicly. Committees that respond to sickness or death in the congregation are very important, but the response must go beyond a small group of people.

5. Create a Social Justice Agenda

A minister friend of mine once made a quintessentially Jewish observation when he said, "Sometimes the heaviest burden is having no one to carry." It is easy to get wrapped up in one's own world of professional and personal concerns. A true synagogue-community provides motivation to look around, see the pain and suffering in the world, and begin the work of repair, known in Hebrew as *tikkun olam*.

Many congregations sponsor occasional social action projects. Yet if a congregation were to undertake the mission statement initiative, it is likely that it would find that one of the main purposes of Judaism is to bring aid and

comfort to those less fortunate than oneself. A justice agenda will move a community to the high ground of noble purpose. It will strengthen relationships between people doing important *mitzvah* work with each other. It will also result in attracting Jews to the congregation with deep commitments to working for peace and justice in the world.

6. Experiment with the Prayer Experience

All of the greatest rabbinic teachers who addressed the issue of prayer insisted that it must be a service of the heart and not a rote recitation of the lips. And yet the latter is the form of prayer that is offered in most American synagogues. Since officiation at worship is one of the duties assigned to rabbis, you will need a cooperative rabbinic figure who is open to experimentation with prayer. Explore whether there is an openness to trying different forms of prayer at the main service in your synagogue. If not, see if you can create another setting for this.

Among the ways that Jews are experimenting with prayer today are the writing and sharing of personal prayers; use of alternative liturgies such as Marcia Falk's *Book of Blessings;* use of movement, dance, and yoga as part of a prayer experience; extended periods of silent meditation; breathing exercises; spontaneous prayer elicited from those gathered for worship; and sharing of poetry from other traditions and cultures that parallel themes in the Jewish liturgy. Even if these experiments happen outside of the main service, there will

likely be some constituency drawn to them whenever they are scheduled. There is always the possibility that some of the experiments might recommend themselves for integration into the main service on occasion.

7. Create a Lay-Led Service

Even if you love your rabbi and enjoy the service, good things will happen at a lay-led service that will never happen at the main service. Members will become more proficient at leading the prayers. Members will learn how to read Torah and Haftarah. Members will study the Torah reading of the week to give a talk or lead a discussion. The service does not have to happen weekly. Start modestly. Be consistent in terms of when and where it meets. You will draw a constituency.

Most important, participants will get a feeling of owning their own Judaism in a way that can never happen in a service when professional clergy run the show.

8. Get the Actors at Life-Cycle Events to Speak to the Moment

Part of what contributes to the rote nature of Jewish prayer in American synagogues is that much of the service is so highly scripted. Creating moments when people can give expression to their emotions is one way to heighten the sense of spirituality in a service.

Most synagogues have a heavy schedule of life-cycle functions at their primary services. Most often these are bar and bat mitzvah celebrations, but they might also include baby naming, and *aufrufs* (a wedding couple's honor on the *Shabbat* before their marriage). All too often these occasions are so highly tailored to the celebrants and their guests that regular worshipers might as well leave the sanctuary for a walk around the block. But these are moments pregnant with tremendous emotional power.

Consider the possibilities. A parent shares a short, personal message to a son or daughter who is to become bar or bat mitzvah. A new father or mother says a few words about a deceased relative as their baby is given that relative's name. These give everyone in attendance a palpable sense of the passing of the generations and the timeless emotions related to the creation of legacies for ourselves and our families.

9. Share Personal Stories

Without question, the most spiritual moments that I have ever experienced in a synagogue setting have been when someone shares something about his or her own life journey and connects it to Judaism. I have created a service where there is ample opportunity for such sharing—during Torah dialogue, in talks by members about a given prayer, in a *d'var torah* given by a member. But such opportunities can be created in other settings as well. Congregations committed to orienting new members to their organizational culture and their programs

might host new member coffees that begin with people talking about their spiritual journeys. This exercise shouldn't be restricted to new members. New American Jews must know that their journeys, however far they may have taken them from the Jewish community, are important and are valued. The attitude should *not* be "wherever you have been, we don't care, as long as you are now with us in this synagogue." Rather it should be "your journey represents a struggle that many of us have had around our faith. What can we learn from your journey that will make our synagogue a better community and that will make us better Jews?"

10. Reach Out to New Constituencies

Never let your synagogue be satisfied with its existing constituency. For every person who is a member, at least two are not. And of the actual members on the roster, think of those who never come around. Look around the room the next time you are in the synagogue and ask who is not there. Singles? Older people? Poor Jews? Disabled? Gays? Teenagers? Seekers? For each of these constituencies, there is a strategy for outreach and inclusion. Ask, "How can we reach these people? How might they be made to feel more comfortable here?"

How will you know when you have succeeded? When any Jew, anywhere in the community, can walk into your synagogue and call it home.

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9. Index

[i] While this thesis provides an overview of the current demographics of American synagogues, issues of

[ii] Although this thesis is focusing on the problem of under-affiliation of men, there remains significant gender-specific issues for women. For example, at present, women have yet to attain the highest levels of professional leadership at the Hebrew Union College and Union for Reform Judaism, although a female rabbi heads the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Furthermore, in synagogue settings, while more active than men overall, women are underrepresented in the ranks of leadership (Joseph). Currently,

there are many efforts to address the particular needs of women in Jewish life, such as the recent publication of *The Women's Torah Commentary*.

[iii] The internal quotes in this section are from BJ's rabbis and cantor.