

# REFORM JUDAISM

**STRENGTHENING CONGREGATIONS: A SYMPOSIUM**



*A Special RJ Magazine  
Supplement Featuring:*

**Amy Asin**

**Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman**

**Dr. Rob Weinberg**

**Rabbi Sid Schwarz**

**Rabbi Judy Schindler**

**Rabbi David Fine**

**and Rabbi Sharon Brous**

**STRENGTHENING CONGREGATIONS:  
A Leadership Discussion Guide**

Go to **[Reformjudaismmag.org](http://Reformjudaismmag.org)** to download the discussion guide for this publication, designed to engage professional and lay leaders in conversations on what it takes to run a successful congregation.



# REFORM JUDAISM

## Strengthening Congregations

### Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
by Aron Hirt-Manheimer	
<b>Contributors</b> .....	4
<b>Innovate, Learn, and Innovate Again</b> .....	7
by Amy Asin	
<b>Means, Motive, and Opportunity</b> .....	11
by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman	
<b>Six Faces of Synagogue Success</b> .....	13
by Dr. Rob Weinberg	
<b>From Synagogue Centers to</b> .....	17
<b>Intentional Spiritual Communities</b>	
by Rabbi Sid Schwarz	
<b>Set Your Goal, &amp; Recalculate Often</b> .....	22
by Rabbi Judy Schindler	
<b>How Small Congregations Can Grow</b> .....	26
by Rabbi David Fine	
<b>Back to the Heart of the Matter</b> .....	30
by Rabbi Sharon Brous	

# Introduction

In past eras, belonging to a congregation was a given for most Jews in the United States and Canada. That is no longer the case.

“We live in a post-ethnic era,” writes Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, “where half our congregants will be (or already are) people who were born Jewish and require a reason to belong to a synagogue. In this time of anxious identity, we struggle to navigate the various segments of who we are: American? Canadian? Jew? Woman? Wife? Mother? Professional? Tennis enthusiast? Musician? etc. ”

Rabbi Sharon Brous believes that young unaffiliated Jews do not reject Judaism; they reject “a 20th-century iteration of Jewish religious life that just feels too many layers away from the sacred fire... devoid of life, passion, of spiritual challenge.” She asks, “How can we honor a hunger for connection, for spiritual depth and meaning, and for ritual and community, but free ourselves of the dead rock and ash deposit of 20th-century institutional religious life?”

The importance of connection is also emphasized by Dr. Rob Weinberg, who asserts that successful synagogues link people to each other and what matters in life: “Engagement goes to the heart of what successful congregations strive to achieve, not as an end in itself but as a means to creating relationships.”

“The way to attract Jews back into the bosom of the Jewish community,” writes Rabbi Sid Schwarz, is “to offer them an alternative to the overly secular, overly consumerist, and overly superficial aspects of American society. Judaism needs to declare itself to be radically ‘counter-cultural.’ The ‘program’ is Judaism in all its depth, in all its wisdom, in all its cultural complexity.”

The seven contributors point to key attributes that successful congregations share, among them an overarching vision, a trained and empowered lay leadership, a commitment to serious Judaism, the creation of covenantal relationships, the practice of radical hospitality, and constant adaptation and innovation.

It is not enough, however, to simply articulate or list the ingredients of thriving synagogues. What matters is implementation. To write a mission statement, for example, is a matter of course; much more challenging is to align it with all the congregation's activities, and, beyond that, to constantly assess and change direction when the congregation goes off track. As Rabbi Judy Schindler puts it, "Five years ago, our congregation could have never predicted where we are today. Sometimes planning the fine details of a long distance trip too far in advance will cause us to miss great opportunities. Success requires our constantly recalculating along the way."

"There is no quick fix, silver bullet, one idea, one person (read rabbi) that can take congregations from being good to great," observes Amy Asin. "For congregations that maintain a consistently high success rate (defined as achieving their mission), the work of performing at that level is a constant push to innovate, learn, adjust, and innovate again."

Rabbi David Fine challenges us to rethink the definition of a growing congregation, pointing out that small congregations with declining membership numbers for reasons beyond their control can still grow. "Growth is possible when it is re-imagined beyond numerical growth to include spiritual growth—how congregational relationships deepen connections with Judaism; organic growth—the strength of our relationships; and representational growth—growth in a congregation's ability to carry its understanding of Jewish values into making a larger impact on the world."

It is our hope that the teachings presented here along with the discussion guide will help good congregations become great ones and help all congregational leaders better meet the challenges of the 21st-century synagogue.



Aron Hirt-Manheimer  
Editor

# Contributors



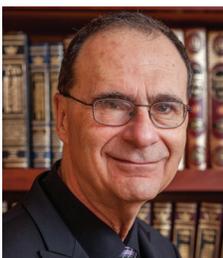
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**RABBI DAVID FINE** currently serves as rabbinic director for the Union for Reform Judaism’s Small Congregations Network. Since joining the URJ staff in 1996, he has served as director of the Union’s Pacific Northwest Region, as a consultant for both new congregations and congregations in transition, and, more recently, as an advisor in the area of congregational mergers/alternatives to mergers. Rabbi Fine was also part of the core team that brought URJ Camp Kalsman to fruition.



**RABBI LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN** has taught classes in liturgy, ritual, spirituality, theology and synagogue leadership at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in New York. A two-time winner of the National Jewish Book Award, he has written, co-authored or edited more than forty books, including *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (Jewish Lights) and *Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary* (Alban Institute). Rabbi Hoffman is co-founder of “Synagogue 2000,” a trans-denominational project to envision the ideal synagogue “as moral and spiritual center” for the 21st century.



**RABBI JUDY SCHINDLER** is senior rabbi of Temple Beth El in Charlotte North Carolina. She serves on the President’s Rabbinic Council of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and on the Clergy Advisory Board of Camp Coleman. Rabbi Schindler is a past co-chair of the Woman’s Rabbinic Network, which is a national organization of Women Reform Rabbis and founding co-chair for the Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health. Her publications include “*The Journey to Judaism: Choosing Judaism, Mitzvot*” in *Mishkan Moed: A Guide to the Jewish Seasons* (CCAR Press) and “Be Present,” in *Text Messages: A Torah Commentary for Teens* (Jewish Lights).



**RABBI SID SCHWARZ** is a senior fellow at Clal, where he leads the Clergy Leadership Incubator, a program that helps rabbis be visionary spiritual leaders. He founded Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland, where he continues to teach and lead services. For 21 years Rabbi Schwarz was the founding president of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. He is the author of *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*; *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* and *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Community*, all published by Jewish Lights.



**DR. ROB WEINBERG** has served since 2001 as national director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), an initiative of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at HUC-JIR/Los Angeles; and, since 2010, as project manager of HUC-JIR’s Jim Joseph Foundation Education Initiative. A leader in the field of synagogue transformation and innovation in congregational education, he is a member of the URJ Faculty and has served on the Campaign for Youth Engagement national strategy team and as change consultant to B’nai Mitzvah Revolution. Among his recent writings is “Worthwhile Change: New Models of Congregational Education” in *eJewish Philanthropy*. He is also a member of Temple Beth Israel in Skokie, Illinois and performs as part of the musical group Kol Sasson.



# Innovate, Learn, *and* Innovate *Again*

AMY ASIN

**T**here is no quick fix, silver bullet, one idea, or one person (read rabbi) that can take congregations from being good to great. For congregations that maintain a consistently high success rate (defined as achieving their mission), the work of performing at that level is a constant push to innovate, learn, adjust, and innovate again.

Leaders of successful congregations will tell you that they have a lot of challenges and are excited about tackling them, because many of the challenges are a result of their having taken some risks and being forced to learn along the way. They have a vision of the future of the congregation and acknowledge that getting there is not an end result; rather, their life's work is a never ending non-linear journey which at its best feels guided by a cloud hovering in the distance, but occasionally feels like wandering in the desert. Finally, they have no misconception about their ability to grow out of challenges. More congregants means more demand for support, programming, and clergy time. You can't grow into being a great congregation; you grow because you *are* a great congregation. ▷

What do they do to get there? Leaders of successful congregations demonstrate five behaviors consistently:

- Focus on the congregation's ultimate goal, not just sustaining the institution
- Move tirelessly towards their vision
- Focus on what matters to congregants—relationship, impact, and meaning
- Measure and reward relationship, impact, and meaning (not just financial and programmatic success)
- Take a long term approach to developing leaders who are energized by the congregation's mission and the plan for achieving it

## Aim for the Ultimate Goal

Successful congregations understand that the ultimate goal of Reform Judaism is to create a world of wholeness, justice, and compassion, and they see that their congregation has a role to play in bringing this about. Because they understand this ultimate goal, their culture is built more around doing good than sustaining the institution. They know that the easiest way to balance a budget is to close their doors! I once attended the annual meeting of a congregation and heard the president and treasurer speak in lavish terms about how well the professionals had cut costs and come in under budget that year. This is an example of cultural reinforcement of a sustain-the-institution attitude. When I pointed out that maybe they could have spent some of those dollars on deepening member engagement (part of their vision), they understood the problem and committed to changing their rhetoric. The following year, while budget reports were still part of their annual meeting presentation, the discussion and praise were all about the work that they were doing in building member *engagement*.

## Be Guided by a Vision

Successful congregations are vision driven and willing to stop doing or change things that don't fit their vision. For example, much of the conversation

about freewill dues (at congregations that have implemented them successfully) is about aligning their financial structure with the congregation's vision and values. The early adopters of freewill dues did so because they didn't want their first conversation about the community to be about money. They saw their traditional dues system as contributing to a sustain-the-institution culture, not the culture aligned with their vision or ultimate goals of creating a more meaningful community or making the world a better place.

Successful congregations avoid a check-the-box mentality. For example, if their vision includes providing opportunities for congregants to repair the world, they don't simply check the box by saying that they have a social action committee. Instead, they look for opportunities in every nook and cranny of the congregation to provide social justice opportunities, even through interactions that start off having nothing to do with social justice. If they say that their vision is to create a welcoming community, having a great *oneg* is not enough; they examine everything they do to make it more hospitable. Sometimes this requires small changes, such as having a rabbi sit on the floor interacting with kids and parents during Tot Shabbat. Sometimes it requires big things, such as completely reimagining the way children engage with the congregation.

Here's my favorite question to ask congregations that are trying to implement a new vision: How will you do Purim or High Holy Days differently because you now want to have "inspiring worship" or "meaningful community" (terms found on almost every congregational vision statement)? In other words, are you willing to examine every single thing you do through the lens of your vision?

Successful synagogues never stop changing as they move towards their vision. They realize that while their mission and their vision may stay the

**Temple Sinai in Toronto** shifted from social events to a *tzedakah* collective run by young adults, with regular cohort meetings that now include Jewish learning, community building, and discussing issues of great concern. As a result, young adults are engaging in meaningful and impactful ways—and their numbers are increasing as well.



same or not change much, everything they do to get there—programming, relationship building, personal interactions, office management, volunteer recruitment and development—will be in constant flux. Every generation of congregants brings new ideas and new challenges; every congregant and staff member bring new talents. Just as we are taught that we never achieve holiness but are constantly in the process of working towards it, successful congregations never reach an end point; they are always in the process of getting better.

## Focus on What Matters

What matters to congregants is having deep and meaningful *relationships*, seeing what they do at the congregation as having an *impact* on their own life and the world around them, and seeing the congregation *as a resource in the search for meaning*—helping them ask and answer the biggest questions they have in their lives and challenging them to ask new ones.

In a panel discussion with Jewishly involved millennials sponsored by the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, Marin, and Sonoma Counties and the Peninsula, one of the young panelists asked the assembled congregational leaders: How many of you think that the *davening* at your congregation is really awesome? Translation: How

many of you find meaning in your worship or find that it has an impact on your life? When only one in four or five of the congregational leaders in the audience raised their hands, the young man countered, “Why would I come to your congregation to participate in worship that even you find uninspiring?” This highlights the need to make everything that we do authentic and look to more than headcounts as measures of success.

For example, even when congregations are focused on social events to build relationships, including Jewish meaning and impact can distinguish them from other social opportunities. Temple Sinai in Toronto shifted from social events (bar nights, baseball games) to a *tzedakah* collective run by young adults, with regular cohort meetings that now include Jewish learning, community building, and discussing issues of great concern. The result is that young adults at the congregation are engaging in meaningful and impactful ways—and the numbers are increasing as well.

Rabbi Corey Helfand of Peninsula Sinai Congregation in Foster City, California, like many rabbis, has congregants approach him after services to tell him how much they liked his sermon. Because Rabbi Helfand is focused in a laser like way on developing relationships rooted in Jewish meaning, he does more than say thank you. He uses these comments as a conversation starter and asks the

congregants what they found meaningful. This often leads to longer conversations and a deeper relationship.

When I speak to congregations about relationship, impact, and meaning as key components of vision, I get a lot of head nodding, but eventually someone asks, “Don’t we first have to be financially sustainable to make sure our programs run?” Vision lies at the intersection of three things: what matters to congregants, what they can do well, and what they can sustain financially. Of these three criteria, many congregations spend all of their time working on, talking about, and rewarding operational effectiveness (programming) and financial sustainability. Successful congregations, however, understand that if they engage congregants in creating the kinds of communities that matter to them—in which they are surrounded with relationship, impact, and meaning—then the financial piece will follow, and the operational piece will become easier to achieve.

## Measuring Success

Successful congregations do not measure their accomplishments in terms of providing enough food at an event or if it came in under budget. Instead, they measure success in terms of relationship, impact, and meaning. They intentionally look for evidence, formal and informal, that these things are happening, including surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations.

Survey questions can get at these ideas and go beyond typical questions about satisfaction. For example, asking congregants if they are growing Jewishly, if they see people they know and can talk to or if they have extended relationships beyond the walls of the congregation, and if they are challenged spiritually or intellectually can give insight into relationship, impact, and meaning.

Congregations can also count differently. Instead of only counting attendance at events, what would it be like if you counted how many of your congregants could assemble a *minyan* of other congregants if needed? Or how many parents of young children know other congregants who could watch their

children in an emergency? Or how many of your teens have a teacher, a clergy person, and a non-parent adult in the congregation who they trust? What if every year on your dues form you also asked congregants to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 the effect the congregation has had in deepening relationships, bringing Jewish meaning to their life, or had an impact on their ability to make the world a better place? The congregation could use this as an annual health benchmark, and it could target congregants who rate these items low for discussions about engagement.

By measuring differently, we change how we view success, we talk about what really matters in congregational life, and we change culture as well.

## Identifying Future Leaders

Successful congregations are constantly working to identify potential future leaders who want to bring their talents to the enterprise, and then to help them understand the congregation’s mission, vision, culture, and challenges. Some congregations launch task forces on particular topics that include new and old leaders together; others build explicit leadership development programs; still others identify the talents of specific congregants and find ways to bring them to life in the congregation. Developing professional leadership—clergy, educators, administrators, or bookkeepers—is equally important. Every congregation should invest in the professional development of its staff, either through supporting their engagement with movement-wide affiliate organizations, e.g. NATE, NATA, ACC, CCAR, or through individual mentoring and on-site development.

The attributes of successful congregations are no more important today than they were five, 10, or 20 years ago. What has changed is that many Jews no longer see belonging to a congregation as an obligation. While their parents automatically joined and were happy to occasionally experience relevant Judaism, this generation demands relevance consistently. Synagogues that can innovate, learn, adjust, and innovate again will best be able to meet this challenge. ☆

# Means, Motive, *and* Opportunity

RABBI LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN

I do not mean to equate the two, but it helps to liken synagogue success to plotting a murder. You need means, motive, and opportunity.

## **Means**

The means—the components that promote success—are the easiest to arrange, because unlike motive and opportunity, they are discrete entities and more readily attainable.

The most important of these components is open-minded, eager, and even urgent rabbinic leadership. When it comes to synagogue transformation, rabbis cannot do it alone, but they can kill it alone—and not through malice aforethought. All they have to do is refuse to give their full support and laypeople (who have jobs to go back to) will tire of the effort.

The second component is visionary lay leadership. Boards need to provide rabbis time to study, read, and think. Meetings should send members home empowered and energized, because they do more than address fiduciary concerns, like balancing the budget; or issues of governance, like establishing committee processes. They also engage in “*generative* conversation” about matters of mission, substance, direction, and the philosophy behind whatever the synagogue is doing. ▷



At great synagogues, members know they matter, communicate and work together, spend time building relationships, and shape a destiny in league with God. Members of Congregation Or Ami, Calabasas, California connect on the beach in observance of *tashlich*.

Other “means” include a unified professional team, an efficient support network, financial sustainability, and a physical space that furthers the synagogue’s mission.

## Motive

Synagogue leaders are always motivated to do something, but that “something” is usually limited to programming without apparent purpose, because there is inadequate generative conversation on mission. This sort of business-as-usual is insufficient nowadays when belonging to a synagogue is neither an unquestioned given, (an act of Jewish civic virtue) nor the obvious ethnic thing to do (a matter simply of “hanging out” over bagels while feeling good about one other). We live in a post-ethnic era, where half our congregants will be (or already are) people who were not born Jewish and require a reason to belong to a synagogue. In this time of anxious identity, we struggle to navigate the various segments of who we are: American? Canadian? Jew? Woman? Wife? Mother? Professional? Tennis enthusiast? Musician? etc.

In a world where time and attention go first to the parts of who we are that we consider central (usually our families and jobs), synagogues compete for the *discretionary* parts of our loyalties and time. To matter enough to warrant people’s genuine engagement, synagogues must offer a transcendent motive; they cannot exist for purely utilitarian ends, lumbering

on with nothing profound to offer. Great synagogues express that transcendent motive unreservedly in everything they say and do.

## Opportunity

The master synagogue (like the master criminal) puts it all together: the carefully constructed set of necessary means, driven by a motive so compelling that it becomes practically an obsession. Each synagogue needs its own “niched way” of framing the universal Jewish claim that we are here to make a better world, enhance individual lives, further the Jewish project, and shape a destiny in league with God.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, opportunities rarely knock; they must be sought out. So opportunity refers to the way a synagogue assembles its means (rabbi, professional staff, board, etc.) into a smoothly functioning system that can manufacture opportunity, even when none seems evident. For this to work, synagogues need to maintain a *culture* that is unshackled by conflict, suspicion, blame, mediocrity, doubt, and a fear of new ideas. Great synagogues promote cultures of honesty, nobility, trust, expectation, and appreciation. Their members know they matter, communicate and work together, spend time building relationships, and share a single compelling vision that is too important to languish. ✧

# *Six Faces of Synagogue Success*

DR. ROB WEINBERG

Today's most successful synagogues share six faces:

## **1. Successful synagogues link people to what matters in life.**

Engagement goes to the heart of what successful congregations strive to achieve, not an end in itself but as a means to creating the relationships that build communities in which Judaism confers meaning to life and opens the door to making a difference in the world. When a congregation creates sacred relationships, fosters Jewish meaning, and helps people make a real impact, people become and remain engaged. When they are so engaged, a self-reinforcing “virtuous cycle” is created in which each investment of mind and heart feels so worthwhile that people seek to engage more often and more deeply.

## **2. Successful congregations are intentional.**

Having a vision statement and/or list of core values is neither new nor sufficient. Successful congregations—whether or not they have statements or lists—*act* with vision, in keeping with their values, consistently and over the long term—not just for a few weeks or months after a statement is written. ▷

A successful synagogue has at its core a clear set of shared values and a vision that communicate what the community aspires to be and for what it stands. By not trying to be all things to all people, it attracts those who want to be part of realizing that vision in their own lives, and who seek like-minded people with whom to form and sustain a community. Being part of a particular congregation means something when that congregation stands for something.

In an intentional congregation that values relationship, governance is not top-down or secretive—it is open and collaborative. Leaders who regard Judaism as a source of meaning in life are guided in their governance and daily management decisions by Jewish values with the understanding that the synagogue is *not* a business. When faced with a challenge, they not only look at best principles and practices of other synagogues or organizations, but also Jewish texts and tradition.

Belonging to a sacred community means treating one another with care and kindness in board meetings, in the religious school, in contract negotiations, and from the *bimah*. A person's status in the congregation is measured on the basis of his or her adherence to those values, not on the size of his/her financial contributions. In successful synagogues, you can sense alignment between intention and action in all aspects of congregational life, decision making, and culture. It's in the air of a successful congregation. You can feel it from the moment you walk in.

### **3. Successful synagogues regard “members” as parties to a covenant (*b'rit*), not as consumers of a set of services.**

The people who are part of successful congregations forge rich and nuanced relationships with one another, with the community (synagogue, local, national, world), with their Judaism, with God, and with Israel. They express and enact these relationships

through learning, service, prayer and contemplation, and deeds of loving kindness. They support one another in times of joy and trial. They feel both needed and served by the community. In the best of circumstances, this reciprocity matures from a simple transactional exchange to a sacred sense of covenantal relationship.

Congregants freely contribute to the ongoing support, maintenance, and financial needs of the congregation not as a prescribed obligation, but because they value the role the synagogue plays in their lives and understand with significant transparency what it takes to create and maintain that kind of consequential community. The congregation thrives because it matters in the lives of its “members,” who view it as a vehicle to find and enact meaning in their lives, and they see themselves intricately engaged in helping to make it thrive.

### **4. Successful congregations build competence and confidence in Jewish practice and synagogue leadership.**

In successful congregations, rather than “doing Jewish” for congregants, the clergy and professionals (if any—many of our smallest congregations are lay led) see their roles as resources, guides, and sources of inspiration. They invite people into the world of Jewish knowledge and practice, helping them find their paths into a Jewish life they create. They strike a delicate and ever-dynamic balance between leading congregants to engage with and fulfill the congregation's Jewish values and vision, while also responding to the needs, preferences, and current realities of the community. And they work to develop, empower, and support lay people to exercise leadership in a wide array of ways—not only in formal roles on a synagogue board or committee but also

Re-imagining Jewish learning, Congregation Beth Am of Los Altos Hills, California decided to phase in a completely new set of educational experiences that emphasize developing deep and lasting friendships, including Camp Beth Am for 5th through 8th graders.



in the day-to-day Jewish life and practice of the congregation. Congregants learn to lead prayer, chant Torah and Haftarah, facilitate text study, write and share a *d'var Torah*, lead *motzi* and *birkat hamazon* at synagogue events. They also learn to visit the sick and homebound, to comfort one another in loss, and to rejoice together in the high points of life.

### **5. In successful synagogues, though congregational life may be centered at the synagogue, it is neither restricted to nor bound by the building.**

Congregations with *chavurot*, small groups who meet in people's homes to learn, socialize, and celebrate Shabbat or Jewish holidays together, get the idea that Jewish living is not confined to the synagogue. Other congregations are learning from Temple Israel of Boston's Riverway Project or North Shore Congregation Israel's Beyond and Back how to reach out to young adults, meeting them "where they are geographically, developmentally, and spiritually," and engaging them in creating experiences that they value.

### **6. Successful synagogues adapt and innovate.**

Both the leaders and the members are eager to try new things, ready to experiment and learn from experience, confident enough to be non-defensive about letting go of past habits, and wise enough to hold onto what's core to who they are. These congregations constantly reflect on what they are doing and achieving, and compare it to their vision and values. They rejoice when something they do is pitch-perfect, and are brutally honest with themselves when they fall short. They are, as negotiation experts William Ury and Roger Fisher would say, soft on the people and hard on the problem. They constantly look both inward and outward to gauge how the world around them is shifting and how well they are fulfilling their sacred task. And they are agile in innovating to meet new realities; they don't hide their heads in the sand. They don't blame or shame. They reflect, learn, and move forward.

For example, I've seen well over 100 congregations work to re-imagine the way Jewish learning happens for their children, families, and—in some cases—adults. The most successful congregations engage in what my colleague Cyd Weissman, director of Innovation

in Congregational Learning at The Jewish Education Project, calls a “spiraling series of innovations in the direction of their vision.” They try something, learn from it, and try something else, all the while building on what they’ve learned about their learners, about Jewish education, about the community in which they live, about what’s working to create the kind of experience and results they are after.

Congregation Beth Am of Los Altos Hills, California, for example, is well-known for its innovative Shabbaton program—a Shabbat Family community that engaged families in learning that looked nothing like your parents’ religious school. Other synagogues have emulated and adapted the program. But after going through a renewed process of re-imagining Jewish learning, Beth Am decided to phase in a completely new set of educational experiences, including Connections

(an experimental program to establish small learning communities where children from babies through 5th graders and parents develop deep and lasting friendships and work with a mentor to experience many opportunities to connect Jewish learning with Jewish living), Camp Beth Am (for 5th through 8th graders), and Avodah! Jewish Service Learning for teens. They weren’t afraid to sunset Shabbaton despite its national reputation.

Successful congregations treat each success as a stepping stone to the next greater success, always mindful of what’s changing around them. They don’t assume yesterday’s answers fit today’s and tomorrow’s questions. They don’t say, “We changed once and now we’re done.” They constantly find new and timely ways to get at what’s essential and timeless. ☆

# From Synagogue Centers to *Intentional* Spiritual *Communities*

RABBI SID SCHWARZ

**I**n my book, *Finding a Spiritual Home*, I profiled four congregations, one from each of the major American Jewish denominations. Each had a track record attracting serious Jewish seekers who tended to avoid conventional synagogues. What emerged from the study were four principles that these congregations seemed to share and which suggested an exciting new paradigm for American synagogues. I've come to call this paradigm "intentional spiritual community," and I have worked with dozens of congregations, helping them move from the older, synagogue-center paradigm, whose appeal is fading, to this newer paradigm. This work in the field has allowed me to fine-tune the four principles, which I believe can help synagogues become better suited to the contemporary realities of society.

## Mission Driven and Program Aligned

Intentional spiritual communities are able to articulate a clear mission, and draw people precisely because of their mission. If one were to poll people who are affiliated with most conventional synagogues, I'd be surprised if 1% had any idea what the mission of their congregation was. The exception might be a congregation such as Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, which has five beautifully carved wood pillars in its foyer, each featuring one of its five core values: spirituality, community, learning, repairing the world, and responsibility for all Jews. But congregations need to do more than just integrate their values into the aesthetics of the building. In successful congregations, the rabbis and staff educate the members about the mission, all programs are aligned with the mission, and the governing body continually re-assesses its budget and program priorities based on how best to advance the mission.

Kavanah Cooperative in Seattle, founded by Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum in 2006, has a clear mission statement followed by eight core values that inform its communal endeavor. Kavanah's programs are open to anyone, but the community encourages those who attend regularly to become a "partner" in the same way that someone might become a partner in a food co-op. Partnership comes with certain obligations to the community. The process involves a meeting with the rabbi during which the new partner clarifies what s/he can bring to the community and the rabbi clarifies that partnership, in turn, entails a level of obligation to the community, including a financial obligation. In these ways Kavanah Cooperative inspires people to enter a covenantal relationship with the community.

While this higher bar of expectation may scare off many Jews who are not prepared to make a deep commitment to a spiritual community, those who

join create a community far more engaged than what one will find in conventional synagogues in which the only expectation is the payment of annual dues. The energy of intentional spiritual communities becomes a magnet for many Jews in search of true community who might otherwise not even consider joining a synagogue.

## Maximalist Judaism

The greatest single mistake made by non-Orthodox Judaism over the last 100 years has been to assume that the way to get Jews into the tent is to offer "Jewish lite." The original assumption that less is more was not without reason. For Jews whose main goal was to acculturate into American society, why make Judaism too demanding? Today, however, as Jews have met with a high degree of social-economic success, "Jewish lite" has lost its appeal.

The way to attract Jews back into the bosom of Jewish community is to offer them an alternative to the overly secular, overly consumerist, and overly superficial aspects of American society. Judaism needs to declare itself to be radically "counter-cultural." The "program" is Judaism in all its depth, in all its wisdom, in all its cultural complexity. There is no more powerful evidence to the truth of this assertion than the strength of Orthodox Judaism in America, a phenomenon that defies all the sociologists' predictions in the middle of the 20th century. Our challenge is to create a form of maximalist Judaism that can be fully inclusive (e.g. gender-sensitive, LGBT-sensitive, and gentile-sensitive). Successful synagogues will be able to compete in that marketplace with high quality and serious explorations of Judaism that offer an approach to life that is far more meaningful than one could hope for by just being part of the general culture.

I offer three examples from the congregation where I served as founding rabbi, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda,



**The Kavanah Cooperative in Seattle inspires people to enter a covenantal relationship with the community. While the higher bar of expectation may scare off many Jews who are not prepared to make a deep commitment to a spiritual community, those who join create a community far more engaged than what one will find in conventional synagogues in which the only expectation is the payment of annual dues.**

Maryland. My successor, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, is a committed and highly regarded Jewish environmentalist who has brought that ethos into the congregation. His initiatives included the creation of a community garden outside the doors to our social hall. For nine months of the year, students from our Torah school use it as a living classroom, dozens of congregants volunteer to dig, plant, weed, and harvest—some even do it instead of coming into services on Shabbat morning (and it’s okay, they can tell the rabbi!). During the warm months, some of the harvest becomes part of our Shabbat *oneg* lunch, and the rest of the harvest, hundreds of pounds, is donated to a local food pantry. All of these activities are fully aligned with the congregation’s mission—a fulfillment of how Jews are meant to steward the earth, sustain the poor, and create ecologically sustainable lifestyles.

Our cantor, and soon to be ordained rabbi, Rachel Hersh, has created an 18-month program of study in Torah, *siddur*, and Jewish expression that

demonstrates how setting a high bar of expectation attracts more, not fewer Jews. Over the past two years, twenty-five participants, ranging from young parents to senior citizens, completed each of the two *yesodot haLimud* (foundations of Jewish learning) courses, each of which “sold out” (there is a tuition fee). Classes meet twice a week and include a Shabbat retreat and several Shabbat dinners. Two final projects are required: a *dvar torah* that is offered to the class and a more creative project in which a piece of Torah or liturgy is expressed as a piece of art, poetry, song, or video. In addition to the classes, *sicha* (conversation) groups of four meet monthly to support individuals through the learning and also to build new friendships, the lifeblood of any healthy spiritual community. The entire congregation benefits from the program, because its graduates are far more proficient in Judaic knowledge and skills, and far more likely to attend services, volunteer, and become leaders in the congregation. ▷

The third example of what serious Judaism might look like is an annual service mission to build houses for people in need. In 2010 I was invited to travel to Haiti to teach a group of Israelis who were there as part of the disaster relief following the devastating earthquake. While there, I met a young, charismatic pastor named Johnny Felix, who founded a church and a school in Leogane, near the epicenter of the earthquake. I was so inspired by what he had done that when I returned to Adat Shalom, I spoke about my experience and proposed that we, as a congregation, adopt Pastor Johnny's school. The project requires that Adat Shalom's families commit \$100/year for five years. Currently more than 100 households, 20% of our membership, are partners. We use the money to underwrite teacher salaries, school computers, and scholarships for students who cannot afford the \$75/year tuition. In addition, we are now planning our third service mission to Haiti, where both teens and adults will build houses and work with the community. Our congregation has been totally galvanized by this tangible expression of our desire to heal one small corner of a broken world. This coming summer, we will add a domestic service mission to our congregational program in the hope that we will inspire even more members to engage in hands-on *tikkun olam* work. If you walk into our lobby you will find pictures of Adat Shalom members on these service missions. I call it "Jews with hammers." It is the way we walk the talk of Judaism.

## Empowered Laity

One of the major differences between conventional synagogues and intentional spiritual communities is the ability of the latter to engage members of the community in leadership roles previously thought to be the exclusive territory of Jewish professionals. The single greatest untapped asset of Jewish communal life is the talent of Jews who, in most

synagogues, are never asked for much of anything but their money.

We live in an age of DIY (do it yourself) Judaism. It is the ethos of an age made possible because of the many resources available on the web. Knowledge and skills that used to be the province of clergy are now easily acquired by lay people. A friend of mine recently told me that two of three Jewish weddings he recently attended were conducted by lay officiants, not rabbis.

The Independent Minyan phenomenon is one outgrowth of the desire of younger Jews to own and shape their own Jewish experiences. In 2000 there were six such groups in the entire country; today there are more than a hundred. Many synagogues have channeled their members' desire to be more "hands-on" by creating alternative *minyanim*, smaller groups that meet and pray within the synagogue, often in a library, classroom, or social hall, concurrently with the main service. Some meet weekly, some bi-monthly, some monthly. Though I know of no good study of the phenomenon, my sense is that such *minyanim* exist at 100-200 congregations around the United States. Having visited quite a few of them, I am struck by how much higher the energy is in those spaces as compared to the energy in the main service. You can even see the difference visually by looking at peoples' eyes and smiles.

Another excellent vehicle for empowering lay people is Synaplex, an innovation introduced by STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), designed to create a series of alternative classes or experiences concurrent with the main Shabbat service. It is an ideal platform to empower laypeople, allowing them to take responsibility for one of these alternatives to the main worship service. Kol Ami (a Reform congregation in White Plains, New York) and Shirat Hayam (Conservative in Swampscott, Massachusetts) have both made extensive use of Synaplex to excite interest and attendance in their respective communities.

## The *Kedusha* Factor—Judaism as a Tool Kit for Human Flourishing

I don't think synagogues fully appreciate the opportunity presented by the current fascination with spirituality today. The interest is not satiated by rabbis invoking the word "God" more often. Successful congregations will help people understand the trajectory of their lives in some transcendent way. They will make it possible for their members to craft lives of sacred purpose.

There is newfound interest in the study of Mussar, a 19th-century Eastern European discipline that combines the study of rabbinic sources with spiritual practices that speak to everyday issues of character—patience, kindness, humility, gratitude, etc. People will seek out communities that make them better human beings. There is no reason why every synagogue should not launch Mussar circles to allow their members to work through the issues in their lives, from helping parents to raising children to managing interpersonal relationships.

Another example: One of the best kept secrets in the Jewish world for the past 25 years has been Jewish Renewal, a movement founded by Reb Zalman Shalomi-Schachter, z"l. I would encourage synagogues to experiment with some of Reb Zalman's inspired work in the field of *davenology*. Reb Zalman had a way of channeling the wisdom of the Jewish tradition and translating it into a contemporary idiom of American culture that was utterly soul-enhancing. One can get a glimpse of how it captures the passions of Jews by attending Romemu, a new congregation in Manhattan founded by one of Reb Zalman's students, Rabbi David Ingber.

Romemu creates a setting in which traditional liturgy blends seamlessly with live music, chanting, singing, dancing, and meditation. People attending feel free to get up and dance when the spirit moves

them. What a refreshing difference from the stiffness of most American synagogues. I recently attended a service where the cantor was leading a particularly upbeat melody. I started to clap. The person in front of me turned around, looked at me with a scowl, and said sternly: "We don't clap here." So much for being "moved by the spirit."

There are a handful of synagogues that have made a conscious effort to bring some of the thirst for spirituality into their spaces. Adas Israel, the flagship Conservative congregation in Washington, DC, has undergone a radical makeover under the leadership of Rabbi Gil Steinlauf. Soon after his arrival, he convinced his leadership to launch a multi-million dollar renovation of the historic building. Central in the new layout is a Jewish Mindfulness Center, which sponsors weekly meditation sessions and yoga classes that one might find at spiritual retreat centers. Even if those programs don't attract the majority of the veteran members, a powerful message is being sent: Judaism can nourish the souls of spiritual seekers. Adas Israel has attracted new members who might never have joined a conventional synagogue, and there is palpable energy and excitement in the community.

I happen to believe that American Jewry's best days are still ahead. The loss of market share by legacy Jewish institutions is taking place at the same time that the Jewish innovation sector is booming. We need to build bridges between these sectors so that cross-fertilization can take place.

Rabbis and lay leaders of conventional synagogues will need to take more risks and welcome innovation from whatever source it comes. Seminaries, national denominations, and Jewish philanthropists need to support and encourage the new models of emerging spiritual communities. The hunger is there. It needs to be fed. ☆

# Set Your Goal, and *Recalculate* Often

RABBI JUDY SCHINDLER

One of the secrets to our success at Temple Beth El in Charlotte, North Carolina is that we engage in continual evaluation. We set our GPS to reaching our goal of creating a vibrant Jewish community in which congregants live according to the teachings and values of Judaism both within the synagogue and in their homes and communities. To set where we hope to go, our leadership team is often recalculating our route, correcting wrong turns as we adjust our offerings to ensure they are relevant, enticing, fulfilling, and providing unique opportunities for creating meaningful connections.

We ask the following questions to help us to evaluate our work:

- Does the program or initiative develop and deepen relationships among participants?
- Does the program nurture a relationship with our congregation?
- Does the program nurture and expand one's Jewish identity?
- Is the program a responsible use of human, environmental, and financial resources?
- Is there the potential for naturally beneficial collaborations among temple committees or with other institutions?

## Leadership

Another secret of our success is close staff and lay leader collaboration to move us toward our goals. Like a dance, sometimes lay leadership takes the lead and sometimes the professional leadership takes the lead as together they carry out and move seamlessly towards a collective and continually re-articulated vision.

To ensure a stream of new leaders, we instituted a yearlong training program (Farber Leadership, funded by a past president) that meets monthly and prepares participants for their journey to leadership, giving them extensive background on the functioning of Temple Beth El as well as the Reform Movement. Each fall, after the staff and lay leadership have submitted the names of those they believe have leadership potential, we invite 20 to 30 people to join the program. The graduates are then matched up with leadership opportunities within the synagogue. In this way, we have been able to recruit a constant stream of strong and knowledgeable volunteers ready to step in and lead.

## Grassroots Organizing

Our social justice work uses the principles of grassroots organizing, which requires lay leaders who have the skills and experience to chair the projects which are aligned with our existing congregational priorities. We also make sure to have the necessary funding to support the projects and honor the disparate views within our diverse community. Our Policy on Social Justice Advocacy states: “Temple Beth El has a responsibility to act as an organization to address issues of importance to our congregation, community, and world. However, in these circumstances, the temple and its leaders and members must be careful to respect the diversity of political and other opinions held within the congregation.” This includes determining whether there is a consensus on an issue, providing information to congregants so they can develop

their own personal opinions, and framing positions that do not reflect specific political ideologies.

## Radical Hospitality

Our congregation extends radical hospitality to Jews of all kinds, including interfaith, LGBT, and interracial individuals and families. This principle has led to our creating multiple entry points to Shabbat, with worship opportunities ranging from traditional to family-oriented to informal. Congregants are also welcome to enter the building on Shabbat for prayer, social connections, or a bite to eat. We offer a “preneg” before our early services on Friday night, as we know people are hungry after work. They might also want a glass of wine, so we introduced a Kiddush Wine Bar, inviting those who regularly partake to bring a bottle or two to restock the bar. Volunteers, staff, or clergy pour the wine and greet the guests with “Shabbat Shalom.” And if family and friends simply want to use Temple Beth El as the meet-up location after work and head out to celebrate Shabbat together without staying for services—we’re happy about that as well.

Recognizing that for some Friday night attendees, food, community, and cultural experiences are a greater draw than Shabbat services, we began offering a monthly Late at Eight experience in which congregants can enjoy desert, coffee, and wine while listening to Jewish music or other forms of entertainment or enlightenment. This past year, we hosted a Jazz Shabbat and learned from a number of visiting scholars. The liturgy is non-traditional and varied, although we always include *Mi Shebeirach* and *Kaddish* for those experiencing brokenness and loss.

Shabbat Dinner Out is an opportunity for congregants to celebrate Shabbat and enjoy a meal together at a local restaurant. Congregant “hosts” welcome diners to their tables. While these dinners are always scheduled to allow participants to attend services if they so choose, the time and locations are

When Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina created the Teen Band, leaders expected a handful of kids who played guitar to show up. Instead they attracted serious music students, many with little interest in youth social events, who have since found a comfortable, rewarding setting in which to share their talents, including playing with the Teen Vocal Ensemble at worship services.



Photo by Emily Mattos, ArtShoesPhoto.com

clearly posted for those who simply want to meet for the meal.

Another option, Shabbat Supper Club, usually draws more than 100 temple members monthly. Unaffiliated young adults and families with young children meet in one another's homes, though some groups choose to go to restaurants or to parks for picnics. Managed by a lay leader and the associate cantor, the supper club is organized on the basis of age, interests, and location.

The Porch offers young adults and families ongoing opportunities to build meaningful community through multiple entry points. It includes a monthly Saturday morning Tot Shabbat service with snacks and crafts and regularly draws more than 80 participants, as well as Shabbat Supper Clubs, Havdallah+ events (Havdallah+Bowling, Havdallah+Picnic, etc.), happy hours, regular Torah study, and annual events such as Southern Fried Chanukah, a southern-themed program where The Porch provides ample fried chicken and participants bring their homemade latkes and accompaniments. Dreidles, kids crafts, and the "Hey! You Get Half 50/50 Raffle" round out the evening.

## For Our Youth

We offer a wide range of activities for youth from kindergarten through high school, including Teen Band, the B'nei Mitzvah *Madrichim* (tutoring) program, the Religious School *Madrichim* program, the JewTUBE Video *Madrichim* program, Israel travel, local interfaith programs, and URJ summer camps, to name a few.

When we created the Teen Band, for example, we expected a handful of kids who played guitar to show up. Instead, we ended up with serious music students who played in their school bands and orchestras. These students, many with little interest in youth social events, have found a comfortable and rewarding setting in which to share their talents, including playing at worship services in our sanctuary.

## For Seniors

Our self-directed programs for seniors, called S.P.I.C.E. (Special Programs of Interest and Concern to Everyone 50+), meets bi-monthly for lectures on a variety of subjects (Judaism, music, politics, current events) and lunch. Since the program began eight years ago, it has expanded to include S.P.I.C.E. Out (trips to museums, culinary schools, NASCAR, and

more), S.P.I.C.E. Social (attending shows and other evening cultural events), S.P.I.C.E. Social Justice (which provides volunteers to serve our congregation's low-income sister school), S.P.I.C.E. Travel (a 2010 trip to Israel and regional travel), and a Senior Sage course that meets monthly for a year. Forty members of the class are now working towards a *Simchat Chochmah*, a Senior Celebration of Wisdom. The S.P.I.C.E. leadership writes annual grant proposals to fund the programs.

## Rethinking Financing

Several years ago, Temple Beth El decided to rethink membership dues, as the one-size-fits-all approach was not succeeding and inconsistent with our philosophy that the synagogue and congregants are engaged in a covenantal relationship. Accordingly, we have since instituted the Sacred Gifts program, in which people give from their hearts, according to the blessings they have received in life and through the synagogue.

The Torah teaches that giving is a sacred act. In ancient times, Jews were asked to come to the Temple and bring their offerings, to give as they themselves had been blessed. They were not to come to Jerusalem empty handed; yet whatever they brought would be accepted as an offering. We wanted that to be our reality, and so we built our Sacred Gifts program on an annual cycle of pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Now we kick off our membership drive with the counting of the *omer*. Each week one of our leaders sends out an *omer* message, tying a theme from the season to a successful aspect of the synagogue that is supported by gifts. From Pesach to Shavuot we ask for pledges, and during Sukkot we hold a

congregation-wide celebration of the fruits of our Sacred Gifts program in the *sukkah* with music and desserts.

For those of limited financial means, we show our gratitude for whatever they are able to give in money, volunteerism, and participation; for our higher level donors and sustainers, we want them to understand that their giving is a great *mitzvah*. We also look at the overall giving pattern of each congregant so we can ask for direct donations to his/her particular areas of enthusiasm. We look at the full picture of each congregant's history of annual giving and make meaningful asks so as to match their purses with their passions. We have found that people will invest their time and/or money if they feel it is being spent in a way that is meaningful to them.

Our goal as a congregation is to reach the Promised Land of a vibrant Jewish community that mourns and celebrates together, cares for one another with compassion, knows one another, learns and lives the teachings of our faith, feels connected to the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and engages in *tikkun olam*. We don't need a precise 40-year map or even a 10-year plan. Five years ago, we could have never predicted where we are today. Sometimes planning the fine details of a long distance trip too far in advance will cause us to miss great opportunities along the way. There are stories of how people following a GPS have driven to wrong places. One Frenchman, closely following the instructions to drive straight ahead, disregarded the "Closed Road" and "Danger" signs and drove straight into a lake.

In short, the key to success is getting a strong lay-professional team to work together, integrating new leaders into that team, having a clear goal of the synagogue and community you want to create, and constantly recalculating along the way as you strive to get there. ☆

# How *Small* Congregations *Can Grow*

RABBI DAVID FINE

**I**n reflecting upon successful small congregations, a variation of George Orwell's words are appropriate: Small congregations are like large congregations, only more so.

Members of small congregations have the same needs and desires of those in larger congregations: to learn, to mingle and commune, to make a difference in the world around them. Their challenge, generally, is being resource poor: fewer numbers to draw on for future leadership, fewer dollars to hire and support staff, sometimes no Jewish communal partners with whom to collaborate.

Despite all this—or even because of it—successful small congregations are vibrant, exciting places. And their most important hallmark is transferable to other congregations, irrespective of size:

Successful congregations are optimistically growth oriented. Optimism regarding growth is more than walking around with a smile; it's the attitude that “my efforts [as a staff or board member or congregant] can make a difference.”

Almost every congregation can be a growing congregation.

How is this possible, you might ask, when, for example, membership is declining rapidly due to forces beyond the congregation's control?

Growth is possible when it is re-imagined beyond numerical growth.

Anglican bishop Reverend Ted Buckle developed a paradigm (later adapted into a Jewish context by Dale Glasser, now senior director, Consulting and Community Development for the Jewish Federations of North America) that defines four types of growth:

- Numerical growth: increases in members, attendance, budget
- Spiritual growth: how congregational relationships deepen connections with Judaism
- Organic growth: how we function as a living, healthy organism; the strength of our relationships; the ways we are with one another in times of joy and celebration, sorrow, and pain
- Representational growth: growth in a congregation's ability to carry its understanding of Jewish values and Jewish community into the larger community and make an impact on the world

These four areas are not mutually exclusive; in fact, congregations need to actively pursue and achieve growth in more than one area to maintain their vitality. And when numerical growth happens, it is often because congregations have been paying close attention to the other three areas.

In short, despite declining membership numbers, small congregations that emphasize their depth and spread the positive often rise to greater heights.

Here are some examples:

### **Newport Havurah– Spiritual Growth**

The Newport Havurah in Newport, Rhode Island (Newport.havurah1@gmail.com) has only 18 households, but its members pride themselves on becoming more knowledgeable Jews within the community they have formed.

The havurah was founded nearly 40 years ago. By the early 1990s, the group's struggle to grow left the members exhausted and demoralized. Current president Howard Newman remembers: "We asked ourselves, 'What if we didn't exist in our current form? What would happen? What things would we actually do?' We smiled when we realized the answer: 'We would abandon this worry and get together on Shabbat.'"

And so they have. These days, recognizing the limits of their energy, they meet every five weeks for Shabbat worship and study, rotating homes and worship leaders. Newman says that "All our gatherings have six components—celebrating, learning Torah, philosophy, music, and really good food." For funerals and other life cycle events requiring a rabbi, the congregation engages Rabbi Andy Klein from Temple HaBonim, a Reform congregation 20 miles away in Barrington, Rhode Island. This arrangement facilitates members' continued growth as Jews. "For years, no one could sing," Newman offers as an example. "One day, Rabbi Jim Apple reminded us that we could learn—and began to teach us. That evolved into 'Lox and Lyrics,' an ongoing program during which we learn parts of the service from each other. Our members become teachers, and one member, an Israeli, has been translating for us. We now know what everything means." A trombone player, Newman also taught himself how to sound the shofar, inspiring other musicians in the havurah to learn and join in.

The Newport Havurah, though small in number, exemplifies how spiritual growth can raise its members to greater heights.

### **Mount Sinai Congregation– Representational Growth**

Mount Sinai Congregation of Wausau, Wisconsin ([mtnsinaiwisconsin.org](http://mtnsinaiwisconsin.org)) just celebrated its 100th year. Like many rural congregations, this community of fewer than 90 households is an island of Judaism. ▷

**The Newport Havurah in Newport, Rhode Island consists of only eighteen households—few enough to fit in its *sukkah*—but that does not stop them from growing in Jewish knowledge within the community they have formed.**



What distinguishes the congregation is how members exude Judaism. They act upon their Jewish values. And their small numbers are no barrier to their impact.

Deeply concerned about poverty, for example, the congregation held a statewide forum on the subject attended by their state senator, all of the state’s assembly representatives, and the alderman who chairs the transit committee. “We haven’t always succeeded,” Rabbi Dan Danson says, “but we’re having some success in getting working and poor people a seat at the table.” The temple is an active member of the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, a statewide Jewish lobbying organization that helped secure passage of a state hate crimes law as well as change laws that allowed the state investment board to purchase Israel Bonds. Spearheaded by Rabbi Danson, the congregation has spoken out in support of limiting the amount of Christian music performed by choirs at public schools during the Christmas season, advocating instead for “balance in every holiday program” so as not to exclude non-Christian students.

Rabbi Danson and Mt. Sinai Congregation also united with St. Ann’s Parish in Wausau to help the people of Westin-Wausau after the village board shut down its bus system, which had served as a sole means of transportation for many poor residents. The two congregations’ door-to-door campaign rallied local citizens to support “direct legislation”—invoking a Wisconsin law which allows citizens to pass their own legislation—to reinstate the village’s transportation system. Then the two religious communities took the village board to court—and won. Buses are now back in operation.

In an area where a Jew might be tempted to be pessimistic, the leadership and membership of Mount Sinai is anything but that. They model Representational Growth—and make a difference.

### **Temple Or Hadash—Organic Growth**

In Fort Collins, Colorado, 48-member Temple Or Hadash ([templeorhadash.org](http://templeorhadash.org)) takes seriously its commitment to consider every member’s perspectives when making decisions that impact the whole

community. Temple members model the ideal in Rabbi Sydney Greenberg's prayer:

*May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all those who hunger for love, all who are lonely for friendship....*

*May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.*

No question, there have been plenty of disagreements at Fort Collins. But because members elevate their relationships with one another as a primary Jewish value, they have grown together in working through their disagreements.

The most recent *machloket* (difference of opinion) concerned whether the congregation was presenting enough programs and activities. Some members advocated for more offerings; others said the congregation was stretched to its limits because

the people running the current programs couldn't possibly take on additional responsibilities.

Keeping to the congregation's guiding principle that each member possesses treasured gifts, temple president Rick Grabish turned to the community for help. The dilemma was discussed at the Sunday Chat, a regular community gathering for learning and discussion.

The solution came from within: More activities, *and* members stepping up to the plate to volunteer and lead them.

The congregation is also upholding relational values in its rabbinic search. A search last year yielded numerous candidates, but none whom the larger community felt were aligned closely enough to be an ideal match. Committed to person-centered, organic growth, the board has decided to delay hiring until the right individual can be found.

Like these small congregations, yours, too, can grow—by setting an attainable bar for success. ☆

# Back to *the Heart of the Matter*

RABBI SHARON BROUS

**Y**ears ago at a conference, I got into an intense conversation about miracles with a young Jew from LA. He was smart, sensitive, and spiritually hungry. So, like a good rabbi, I suggested he come to Shabbat services sometime, and he laughed out loud. “If I want intellectual stimulation,” he said, “I go to a TED conference. Spiritual enlightenment, I have a shaman. Community? Burning Man. I don’t need *shul*.”

The past several years have revealed, both empirically and statistically, that my friend is not anomalous—the established Jewish community has failed to capture the imagination of young Jews. Perhaps the most salient statistic emerging from last year’s Pew Study on the American Jewish community (aside from the 4% of Orthodox Jews with Christmas trees in their homes) was the 22% who consider themselves Jews of no religion. These are people who were raised as Jews and identify as Jews, but when asked their *religion*—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, other, or none—they choose “none.” It’s not just that they’re not synagogue members (if that were the question, the statistics would be significantly higher—estimates are that closer to 75% of American Jews are unaffiliated with a synagogue), it’s that they claim to be disconnected from Judaism as a religion. This is a stunning finding. While for centuries there have been thriving Jewish communities that were de-coupled from Jewish faith assumptions and ritual observance, there is now a widespread population of Jews—nearly one quarter—disavowing connection to the Jewish religion altogether.

I have spent the past decade speaking and learning with thousands of those who would have identified as “Jews of no religion” had they answered the phone when the Pew researchers called. And while I wouldn’t claim that the findings are particularly good news, I do believe that there is a real silver lining, revealed once we ask the “nones” what it is that really repels and compels them. Here’s what I have learned, working with and living among this population of predominantly young, decidedly unaffiliated, religiously disconnected Jews:

I have not yet heard one who rejects the idea of powering down once a week in order to step out of the world as it is and imagine the world as it could be. Not one marginalized or ambivalent Jew I’ve spoken with has resisted the wisdom of changing her rhythm in order to reconnect with her most audacious dreams, realign with her priorities, and spend time with the people she loves most. In other words, I have yet to meet an unaffiliated, disconnected Jew who fundamentally rejects the idea of Shabbat.

I have shared with hundreds of “Jews of no religion” the spiritual practice of waking up each morning with words of gratitude on our lips. Not one has rejected the idea, nor has anyone objected to the idea of offering words of forgiveness just before bed. Many have hungrily embraced, even, the words of *modeh ani* (I am grateful) and the language of *kriat sh’ma al ha-mita* (bedtime sh’ma).

I have *davened* week after week with many so-called Jews of no religion. What I have seen is real prayer, even despite all the ambivalence, cynicism, and doubt. I have seen many come week after week, holding in their hands a book written in a language they can’t read and filled with theological images they find disturbing, and, nevertheless, singing with all their hearts, sometimes crying, sometimes even dancing.

Even those who wish we served bacon maple donuts at *Kiddush* do not reject the idea that when we eat mindfully, we can bring holiness into an otherwise mundane act.

Even non-religious Jews know and understand that ritual can move them to tears, or that it can fill their hearts with wonder, appreciation, and a deep sense of connection. Some even feel, in ritual, the presence of God.

While many explicitly disavow identification with organized religion, I have yet to encounter one who rejects the idea of community, of showing up for one another in times of celebration and grief. Of dancing with one other in moments of joy, of sitting in silence in moments of pain, of saying *amen* when someone else needs to say *Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’mei rabbah*.

I have not yet encountered opposition to the contention that religious environments ought not only nurture the soul, but also awaken in us a sense of connectedness to and responsibility for one another.

I have yet to meet a Jew, no matter how disaffected, disinterested, or disgusted, who rejects the idea that the most routine moments in our lives, from going to the bathroom to eating a snack to drinking a caramel frappuccino, can be elevated if we take a moment to be mindful and express gratitude.

I have yet to meet a secular, disconnected Jew who couldn’t find in Biblical and Talmudic narratives an echo of his own struggles and moral quandaries, insights into living a rich and meaningful life.

But if they are not rejecting the core elements of Jewish religious life—Shabbat, *kashrut*, community, prayer, ritual, gratitude, forgiveness, holiness, God—what then are a quarter to a third of American Jews opposing when they disavow a connection to the Jewish religion? ▷

## The Heart of the Matter

David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, explains better than anyone I know what is broken at the heart of organized religion. Religion, he says, is like an erupting volcano: the lava flowing down the sides of the mountain—fiery, powerful, dangerous, “gushing forth red hot from the depths of mystical consciousness.” But the stream of lava quickly cools off. A couple hundred years pass, and what was once alive is now dead rock, devoid of all traces of life. “Doctrine becomes doctrinaire. Morals become moralistic. Ritual becomes ritualistic... All are layers of ash deposits and volcanic rock that separate us from the fiery magma deep down below” (See *The Mystical Core of Organized Religion* and *Lunch With Bokara*).

The religious system and its institutions began as containers designed to hold the sacred experience, preserve its power, and extend its reverberations. But these containers, because one can touch them and mold them and compulsively ruminate over them, begin to obscure the very core they were designed to preserve. When that happens, rather than give people access to profound spiritual and religious inspiration, the containers themselves become an obstacle to inspiration.

And this seems to be precisely what is happening in American religious life today, thus the unprecedented disaffection, defection, and overriding sense of disinterest among American Jews, especially young ones. But here is the silver lining: they are not rejecting Judaism at all. They don't reject Jewish identity, community, or rituals. They don't reject Jewish ideas. It's not even God that they reject.

What they reject is a 20th-century iteration of Jewish religious life that just feels too many layers away from the sacred fire. It feels devoid of life. Of passion. Of spiritual challenge. Judaism in America too often seems to be more concerned with the container—the formalities, rules, and rites—than the fire—the soul and spirit, the mystical core. The heart of the matter.

Jews often appear to be more concerned with what you wear than where you are. Too often it feels like institutional perpetuation for its own sake.

## The Challenge

The challenge then becomes: How can we honor a hunger for connection, for spiritual depth and meaning, and for ritual and for community, but free ourselves of the dead rock and ash deposit of 20th-century institutional religious life?

Some answers may be found in a notable countertrend in the American Jewish community: a rebooting of established institutions and the creation of newly empowered, inspired communities around the country working toward meaningful, purpose-driven engagement. None of these approaches are revolutionary, but taken together, they may help pave the way for deeper and more meaningful engagement. I do not want to suggest that organizational change is easy, but I have come to understand that we are often working at cross-purposes with ourselves, undermining our long-term goals (helping Jews find relevance and meaning in the Jewish tradition) by holding fast to temporal mechanisms (elements of institutional culture that no longer resonate).

## Discomfort as Spiritual Objective

The first principle of vibrant, vital organizations may be counter-instinctual: Discomfort is essential to growth. Abraham Joshua Heschel argues in *Man's Quest for God*: “Assembled in the synagogue everything is there—the body, the benches, the books. But one thing is absent: soul. It is as if we all suffered from spiritual absenteeism.... In our synagogues, people who are otherwise sensitive, vibrant, arresting, sit there aloof, listless, lazy.”



On the walls of the *davening* space at IKAR, Los Angeles: “In a world of political turmoil, social alienation, technological hyperdrive, environmental devastation, personal upheaval, and really bad traffic—let’s try something a little different. power down. breathe. be present. be grateful. change your rhythm. change the world. *shabbat shalom*, and welcome to IKAR.”

Our prayer services have become so rehearsed, so perfunctory, that they rarely pierce the surface, let alone penetrate the heart. In Heschel’s words, we read the prayer book as if reading paragraphs in *Rogot’s Thesaurus*. “Of course,” he writes, “they are offered plenty of responsive reading, but there is little responsiveness to what they read. No one knows how to shed a tear. No one is ready to invest a sigh. Is there no tear in their souls?”

How do we create, once again, the space for tears in our services? For movement, for openness?

One Friday afternoon last year, I realized that I was bored by our Kabbalat Shabbat services. I checked in with my colleagues, who admitted that they felt similarly fatigued by what had become our routine. We determined that we’d experiment with moving the service into a room one third the size. We took

out all the chairs and posted a couple of signs that read: *Discomfort is Better than Boredom*. An hour later, a few hundred people arrived for services. They were confused, agitated, and uncomfortable. Most refused even to step into the room. The night was a dismal failure. So we did it again. This time everyone came in, but they stood in straight rows, stiff as soldiers. By the third try, people moved. They danced and sang. Many cried. It was a breakthrough moment for our community. Many people subsequently told me they had never *davened* until that service—it was the first time they felt free enough to express what was in their hearts.

We had become so habituated to our limitations—environment, formal rules of a prayer service (“please rise/ please be seated”)—we had forsaken our own spiritual freedom. ▷

Discomfort wakes us up. It takes the community—and the leadership—by surprise. If we are willing to fail publicly, to experiment when there is no reasonable assurance that we'll succeed, we build spiritually vital communities. Sometimes the best moments of our services come when we start on the wrong page or in the wrong key, laugh and adjust or stop in middle of a service that's not working and ask that everyone stand up and move around, come join us in the middle of the room, or talk about what's not working and then start over. We try every Shabbat to take some risk, dive into discomfort, and honor the learning that comes from failure.

## **Don't Sacrifice Depth for Inclusion**

Someone noted in IKAR's early days that our organizing principle was *lower the bar for entry, raise the bar for engagement*. In other words, help people feel seen and welcomed when they walk through the door, but don't mistake access with ease. Too often our communities err in diluting powerful texts, claims, rituals, and ideas from our tradition so as not to leave anyone feeling alienated. Our theory, instead, was that if we speak honestly about the mysterious power of our rituals, if we invite people to challenge themselves with our rituals and traditions, extraordinary and unpredictable outcomes might emerge. At High Holy Days now we have 1,500 Jews—cynical, disaffected, and atheistic—prostrating fully to the ground, weeping, and then rising up with their hands to the heavens, holding the paradox of powerlessness and power.

I have found that when we tell people something is asked of them, they are inspired to learn more—and when we speak in a language of experimentation, there's nothing people won't try. As long as we acknowledge the complexity and foreignness of many of our rituals, people open up. For two years, our adult learning program, called Get Unstuck,

was rooted in the assumption that a person never knows what small practice might change his/her life. Each month we challenged the community to very specific Jewish spiritual or ritual practices, introducing various points of access to the tradition, not through guilt or shame, but inspiration and a spirit of experimentation. We were impressed and moved by their hunger to try to find meaning in very old practices and their willingness to be challenged to try something completely new.

## **Culture Matters. Message Matters.**

Before we founded IKAR, I spent a couple of years working as a rabbi-in-residence at a large, thriving Jewish community high school. One week, an expert on organizational culture and psychology arrived to conduct an evaluation of our school. The school was dedicated to unearthing core Jewish teachings of *hesed* and *tzedakah*, love and justice, and integrating all aspects of school life with those values, from our dress code to our sophisticated interdisciplinary curriculum. I prepared for the meeting alongside my senior colleagues in the administration. We were confident that the expert would note how seamlessly daily life on campus was infused with our core message. When he arrived, we walked him around campus, proudly demonstrating how we used open space to create collaborative work environments, used natural light to reflect the permeability of Jewish life—we were in constant, dynamic conversation with the world around us. He silently observed, taking note of every detail, from the entry gate to the bathroom stalls. Finally, he sat us down and offered his assessment: “I know you think this school is about *Torah*, *avodah* (worship), and *g'milut chasadim* (deeds of loving kindness),” he said. “But I hear three other messages: 1) Everyone wants to kill the Jews [the first thing you see as you approach campus is a high security fence and guards]; 2) We want your money [the one giant banner on the front of the entry gate

reads “Capital Campaign –Help Us Reach 100% Participation”; and 3) You’re already late [a large clock is positioned prominently on the building exterior, looking out over a busy freeway]. You don’t want to be communicating these messages,” he said, “but you are—loud and clear. And let me tell you: Those are hard messages to counteract.”

This began my education in organizational culture. A few years later I flew to Philadelphia to officiate at the wedding of an old friend. The wedding was scheduled to start just after Shabbat ended, so Saturday morning I got up early and went for a long walk, landing at a well-known synagogue just in time for services. Walking in, I was greeted by two large signs posted by the doors: NO CELL-PHONES and NO PAGERS. “*Shabbat shalom* to you too,” I thought.

Since then, I have strongly advocated periodic walks through our own buildings with fresh, critical eyes. What are the unintended messages we’re sending that are repelling rather than attracting people, especially those who may be predisposed to dislike institutional religious environments?

Here’s what we’ve written on the signs outside our *davening* space:

Welcome to IKAR. Our tradition is to POWER DOWN on Shabbat, because sometimes we have to go off the grid to make room for something holy. We invite you to join us (you never know what might happen...)

*(at the bottom of a long staircase on the way in)*

Welcome to IKAR—you’re almost there! We promise to make it worth your while.

*(at the check-in table at High Holy Days, where 2000 people clamor for the attention of four staff members at once)*

*Shana tova.* We’re doing our best to get you inside for your spiritual recharge. Please remember that it’s Yom Kippur out here in the lobby too—and be kind to our staff and one another.

*(on the walls of our davening space)*

IN A WORLD...  
of political turmoil  
social alienation  
technological hyperdrive  
environmental devastation  
personal upheaval  
and really bad traffic—

let’s try something a little different.

power down.  
breathe.  
be present.  
be grateful.

change your rhythm. change the world.  
*shabbat shalom*, and welcome to IKAR.

*(and at the entrance to our standing-only Friday night service)*

Don’t worry—you’re in the right place. We’re just doing things a bit differently tonight.

We’ve found that our spirits are more likely to move if our bodies aren’t crammed into uncomfortable chairs. Or even worse, comfortable chairs.

So come on in and get uncomfortable.

Sing—even off-key.

Even if you don’t know Hebrew.

Stomp. Clap. Shake your moneymaker.

Close your eyes.

Open your heart and your mouth.

Be grateful. Be great.

Even the cool kids are doing it.

*Shabbat shalom*, and welcome to IKAR.

The way that we message who we are and what we’re trying to accomplish shapes people’s experience and opens them up to new possibilities. Culture is too important to be left up to chance. ▷

## Embrace the Contradictions

When I first applied for rabbinic positions after ordination, one search committee head said he thought I wouldn't be happy in his synagogue because I was an activist. Their community, he explained, cared about *Talmud Torah*, the study and teaching of Torah. "If what you care about is social action," he said, "go to the synagogue down the street."

Here's the problem: Our tradition is multifaceted and our people are smart. We don't have to choose between personal meaning and world-on-fire Judaism. Why is it that the communities that stand at the forefront of social change issues—gun violence prevention, marriage equality, and immigration reform—are generally not known for their transformative prayer experiences? Why have we segregated out the parts of the Jewish heart, essentially making people choose between a *Shabbes davening* community or a community of fellow activists? We have to build more holistic and integrated models that honor both theology and practice, the community and the individual, the particular and the universal, *keva* (fixed and established practice) and *kavannah* (creative, imaginative, heartfelt expression). I trust that our hearts are capacious enough to hold these complexities.

## Substance Matters More than Space

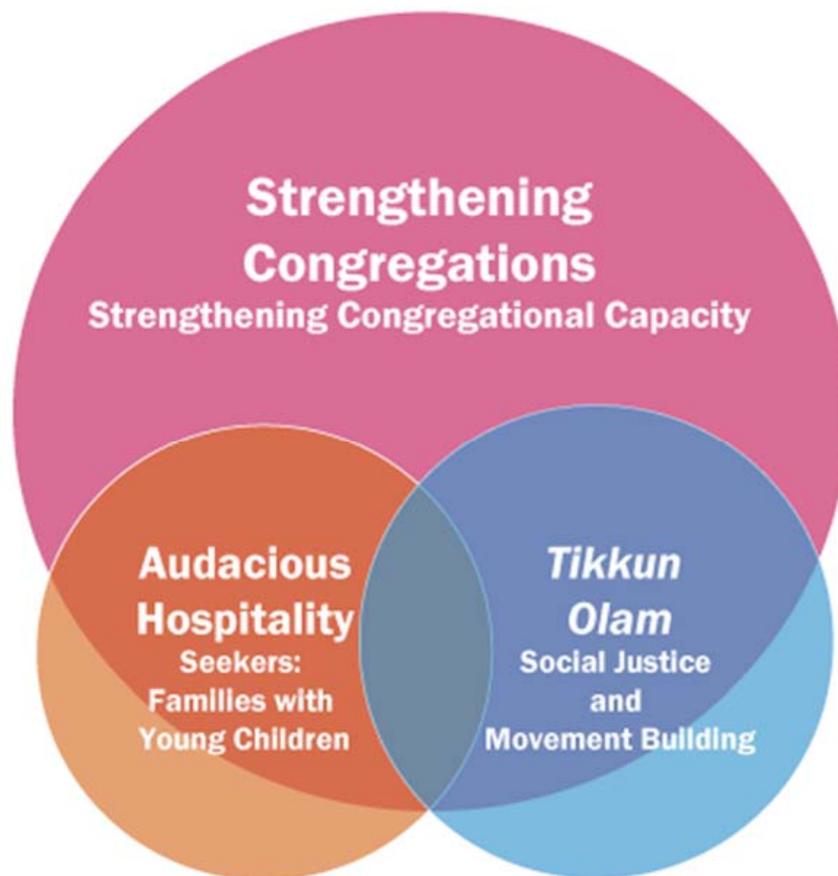
There are about 3,700 synagogues in America, many housed in big, beautiful buildings. But many young Jews have a kind of institutional allergy. Like it or not, they simply will not walk through the doors of the synagogue, which means that the only way to connect with them is to leave the synagogue and seek people out in the environments in which they feel most comfortable—bars, living rooms, cafes, art studios. Over the past 10 years, we've held

house parties nearly every week in people's homes. We cap registration at the number of people who can fit comfortably in the hosts' living room, and choose topics based on what's most interesting or compelling to the host at that time—everything from *Why Do My Friends and I Still Struggle with Body Image—We're Almost 30?* to *How Do I Talk to My Kids About God When I Don't Know If I Believe?* to questions about fertility struggles, finding one's purpose, being lonely. People are much more willing to engage if they don't have to first overcome the environmental obstacle, and much more likely to study traditional texts if they care about the topic. People's guards are down at a friend's house, especially if there's wine and cheese. IKAR also holds monthly "Get In The Know" events in bars, where people write their questions on large Post-it notes on the walls, the rabbis are given an open mic, and we talk for hours about the real issues that are touching real people. We've found that once we have established a relationship in a non-threatening environment, people are much more likely to come to Shabbat services.

I don't know that my friend will ever choose *shul* over his shaman. But I do know that while the demographic freefall is irrefutable, it is not immutable. We are standing at the threshold of a new chapter in American Jewish life. If we listen carefully, we'll hear a distancing from the last century's container—but not the essence of Jewish religious life. We'll hear a hunger for an inclusive, compassionate, and connective Jewish experience, one that is courageous and challenging, imaginative and uninhibited. One that, as Rav Kook taught, strives to make the old new and the new holy. I hope that we'll honor that voice, help reclaim the sacred essence of our tradition, and redefine, as every generation must, what it really means to be a Jew in the world. ✧

# The URJ's 2020 Vision

- ▶ **Strong, Networked Congregations**
- ▶ **A Global Community Committed to *Tikkun Olam***
- ▶ **Audacious Hospitality as an Intrinsic Value**





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