

Learning as a Portal for Synagogue Revitalization by Isa Aron and Rob Weinberg

In discussions of the woes of the American Jewish community, synagogues have been seen as both part of the solution and part of the problem. As gateways through which at least two-thirds of American Jews pass at some point in their lives, synagogues hold enormous potential for linking Jews to their heritage and to one another. Unfortunately, only a fraction of this potential has ever been actualized, for two reasons. First, the participation of many in synagogue life is episodic, rather than continuous. Jewish children typically begin attending synagogue when they enroll in religious school, where they remain through their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and, perhaps, through confirmation at the age of 16 or 17. Relatively few young adults participate in congregational life, but when they marry and have children of their own, many find their way back, if only to enable their own children to have a bar or bat mitzvah. Having reached this milestone, about a third of these families will drop out. More problematic is the fact that even those who remain members on a continuous basis rarely participate fully in a congregation's activities. Most synagogues attract members because of the programs they offer and amenities they provide, such as religious school, High Holiday worship, and rabbinic officiation at various life-cycle events. Members pick and choose from the synagogue's offerings, but few see their congregation as important in their lives or as a locus of community.

To re-capture their traditional place in the hearts and minds of their members, synagogues need to be re-thought and re-configured. They must become places that offer spiritual fulfillment and social support, and a sense of community. Not surprisingly, then, synagogue revitalization has become a hot topic. A 1998 study by the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education identified over 30 projects aimed at ameliorating one or another aspect of synagogue life; one can only imagine how many projects might be found if a similar study were undertaken today. As the directors of one of the oldest of these projects, the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), which was founded a decade ago, and as consultants to a number of projects modeled after the ECE, we have had the privilege of watching over two dozen congregations become renewed and reinvigorated through innovations in learning.

Ideally, the synagogue has a tri-partite function—as *beit tefillah* (a house of prayer), *beit kneset* (a house of meeting), and as *beit midrash* (a house of study). In actuality, however, the last two functions are, in many congregations, only vestigial. While children under the age of thirteen attend religious school on a regular basis, fewer than 10% of adults in most congregations engage in any ongoing form of Jewish study. And while the rhetoric of many synagogues is that they are warm and caring “families,” the reality is that they serve as primary communities for only an “inner circle,” which is perceived by outsiders as impenetrable. The uncomfortable fact is that too many congregations have been reduced to houses of occasional worship, which fill on the High Holidays and on special occasions, and remain relatively empty during the rest of the year.

But change is possible, especially when that change begins with learning. Research on Jewish adult learning has demonstrated, and our first-hand experience confirmed, that many Jewish adults feel uncomfortable, and even intimidated, in synagogues due to their own lack of Judaic knowledge. Despite their many accomplishments in the secular world, congregants often feel woefully uneducated and unprepared to worship; this, in turn, leads them to distance themselves from the synagogue and from their fellow congregants. But underneath this veneer of alienation lies the impulse to search for meaning, to connect with their heritage, and to join a genuine

community. Given engaging opportunities to learn, especially when that learning is linked to family time and community building, these same adults can become enthusiastic participants in synagogue life.

How can this change be accomplished? A decade of experience working directly with congregations has led us to conclude that significant and enduring change must meet two criteria: First, it must focus on the synagogue as a system, rather than on discrete programs within it,

Second, rather than simply accepting the congregation's purported goals as given, and focusing on procedures for meeting these goals, it must also help its leaders re-think, and perhaps revise, these goals.

Discrete Vs. Systemic Change

Most people think about change in rather straightforward terms, assuming that it is as simple as fixing something that is broken or adding a part that is missing. Thus, when they perceive problems in the congregation, their first reaction is to fire the rabbi or educator, or to create a new program. These changes may be beneficial—up to a point: the new staff member may indeed be more competent, and the new program a great success. But, most problems in organizations are more pervasive and more complex, and synagogues are no exceptions. Rarely is a simple, discrete solution sufficient to change the underlying dynamic of an organization. For example, for the past fifteen years, there has been an increased interest in family education, and many communal agencies have sponsored a variety of family education initiatives in synagogues. Unfortunately, most of these projects took a discrete, rather than systemic, view of change, and consisted of either placing a family educator in a synagogue or creating a series of family education programs. In some congregations, these new staff and new programs had a deep impact on parents, children, and the congregation as a whole; in others, they were considered worthwhile but non-essential, and were phased out when the funding ended. In analyzing both the successes and the failures, Susan Shevitz, Lisa Malik, and others point to extent to which the family education staff were able to go beyond one-shot programming and bring a family orientation to the entire synagogue. When family education was seen as a discrete set of "programs," its impact was limited. When, on the other hand, family education led synagogue leaders to think differently about every aspect of congregational life, it served, in Shevitz's terms, as an important "catalyst for change." The larger lesson to be learned from these recent efforts in family education is that discrete changes only work when implemented within a supportive, well-functioning system. Replacing a worn-out light bulb is an effective means of change if and only if the electrical circuits themselves are fully functioning. Similarly, a new textbook can be a worthwhile change if the overall curriculum is sound and the teachers are skilled at its use. But when, as is often the case, the problem is more pervasive, then a more systemic type of change is required.

Revising Procedures vs. Re-thinking Goals

The second dimension of change concerns the degree to which we change our goals, or only our procedures. Do we have a satisfactory vision of congregational life, and simply need to find better means of achieving that vision? Or does our vision need to be revisited, and possibly revised? In congregational education, most of the innovations introduced over the past fifty years have been procedural in nature. They include new curricula, new methods of teaching Hebrew, grade-level family education programs, weekend retreats, and the recruitment and training of avocational teachers. In contrast, a few of the most recent innovations represent a more radical shift and expansion of goals. For example, the introduction of a program like Boston's Meah and the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School into congregations send a strong message that curricularized adult

learning is an important goal for synagogues. Similarly, some congregations have created Shabbat communities, in which parents and children learn Torah and celebrate Shabbat together, as a substitute for children's attending alone on Sundays; in this case, the goal is no longer the education of children, but enabling the entire family to both learn and celebrate Shabbat together. Considering the failure of most congregations to actively involve a large percentage of their members, much less attract unaffiliated Jews who live close by, we believe that synagogue leaders should actively engage in "visioning" exercises, to make sure that the large, important questions get asked. It may seem that the vision of a congregation is obvious — to enable Jews live Jewishly. But once one begins to inquire more deeply (What does Jewish living entail? How aggressive can one be about "enabling?" What about Jews who don't want to live Jewishly, but only to partake of certain, delimited Jewish activities?), one can see that there is much to discuss.

Charting the Dimensions of Change

These two dimensions of change should be thought of as continua, rather than either/or propositions. Some innovations are initially thought of as discrete, but can serve as catalysts for more systemic changes. The recruitment and training of avocational teachers is a case in point. A number of synagogues began recruiting and training avocational teachers simply as a way of alleviating the shortage of teachers in the religious school. They had no intention of introducing any larger change; but, as a significant cadre of congregant teachers came on board, the culture of the religious schools and the congregations' expectations about adult learning began to change. Eventually, the synagogues' vision of the responsibilities of congregants was changed.

Laying out the two continua at right angles creates a matrix on which it is possible to plot, as we have, existing innovations in congregational education, and also proposals for new innovations. The reality is, of course, much more dynamic than can be seen in a two-dimensional representation. As the example of avocational teachers suggests, cumulative discrete changes can have a multiplier effect that leads to systemic change, and, over time, to a change in goals. Our own preference is indicated by the way in which we arranged the two continua, with systemic change at the top, and a change in goals on the right. But it would be a mistake to conclude, from looking at this chart, that one should always aim for changes that lie in this quadrant. A better use of the chart would be simply to raise questions about the nature of the change one is planning, the reason one has chosen to make this type of change, and the possible effects of the change on the entire system.

Building the Capacity to Change

Which leads to the \$64,000 question: What enables a congregation to discern which changes are appropriate, and implement these changes in an effective manner? There are, we believe, four capacities that strengthen a synagogue's ability to transform itself. While one could write an entire book about these capacities (and, in fact, one of us is currently writing such a book), we can only summarize them briefly here. They are:

1. The capacity to be both reflective and proactive. Being proactive is important, because it is easier to deal with an issue before it becomes a crisis; being reflective is even more critical, because the most obvious solution may not be the most effective one. Too often, congregations run on automatic pilot, reproducing the same programs year after year, without any thought as to how they may be out of sync with the needs and interests of congregants; then, when the downward spiral can no longer be ignored, they rush to implement a solution that is hastily cobbled together. Instead, synagogue leaders must make

it a regular habit to pause and reflect, to understand their membership and to examine their vision, so they can make intelligent, informed choices.

2. The development of collaborative leadership. Synagogue life is too complex to be fully understood and managed by a lone individual, no matter how talented. The days in which a single, charismatic rabbi could set the tone for an entire congregation have passed. The Baby Boomers who are assuming leadership positions, and those of succeeding generations who are just joining synagogues, expect to have a voice in substantive decision-making, rather than simply functioning as rubber stamps. Just as in the business world executives are discovering “servant-leadership,” synagogues must learn to nurture collaboration — among members of the professional staff, and between the professional and lay leaders.
3. The ability to create community while welcoming diversity. Even more than spirituality, Jews are searching for community, which is in short supply in contemporary American life. In fact, a common critique of many synagogues is that they appear unwelcoming and impersonal to those outside the inner circle. Yet the days in which a synagogue could function as “one happy family” are over, because the membership of most synagogues is too diverse. The challenge for synagogues is to reach out to a diverse group of congregants, whose differences may be demographic, ideological, political, and/or aesthetic. Forging a community amid diversity requires a concerted effort on the part of both professionals (to create opportunities for more intensive engagement, such as havurot, study circles, and support groups) and congregants (to reach out to newcomers and make them feel welcome).
4. The final capacity, the ability to balance tradition with change, brings us full circle. Though many synagogues seeking to revitalize themselves, many congregants will find the changes that are part of this revitalization unsettling. Congregants go to synagogue to connect with tradition, and may be unable to separate the traditions that are essential to Judaism (such as the liturgy) from the customs that surround and embellish these traditions (such as the melodies to which the liturgy is set). Learning can be a way of “unfreezing” — creating an opening of the mind and heart to new possibilities. Without learning, congregants may cling, unthinkingly, to traditions to which they have grown accustomed, no matter how stale, irrelevant, or even dysfunctional they may have become. Having a firmer grasp of the core values of Judaism, they will be much more open to new ways of expressing these values. A congregation that has honed these four capacities is more than simply revitalized; it has become self-renewing. It is able to scan and interpret its environment in search of potential issues and problems; explore a range of possible new directions; take action; assess the outcome of its actions; and, without missing a beat, begin the cycle anew.

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