

Response and Renaissance
A Vision for Temple's Future
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The Context

American Jews are the most secure, prosperous and accepted minority in Jewish history. And while the blessings of this condition are obvious, particularly in light of our perilous and tragic history, there are costs for such full embrace. Sociologists cite the diminishing of distinct identity and commitment to traditions evident in the fourth-generation after immigration to a society. And while American Jews have resisted some of these pressures toward assimilation, we share much of the distraction, alienation, skewed priorities and radical individualism of the broader society.

Economic decline and its attendant lack of opportunities for the next generation, a cynicism for established, institutional values and goals, suspicion of authority and distrust of the political process, and the atrophying of interpersonal connections and a sense of community emerging from the ubiquity of technology are but some of the larger experiences that answer the question: ***Why is this generation of Jews different from the last?***

One observer characterizes the divergence between this and previous generations of American Jews as a distinction between ***tribal Jews*** (those who view their identity in narrow political and ethnic terms) and ***covenantal Jews*** (those who value spiritual legacy and universal priorities over group solidarity and ethnic loyalty). The approaches and objectives of mainstream Jewish institutions during the 20th century spoke to concerns for continuity and survival, appealing to tribal identity. These approaches increasingly fall upon the deaf ears and dimmed hearts of the millennial generation's more globally concerned and covenantal perspective.

Additionally, many Jews of the baby-boom generation regard their affiliation with the Jewish community as ***episodic***. They join synagogues when their children are young, disconnect when the nest empties, and find their way back as existential struggles with mortality become undeniable. They view the synagogue through the familiar lens of the larger society's consumer-driven/fee-for-service model, a resource accessed periodically but with little ongoing utility or value.

And increasingly, Jews are spurning the “adjectival Judaism” of denominationalism for an affinity for specific communities, their staff, values and the feeling engendered within them. Interests drive potential congregants more than institutions.

The Challenge

While communities vary in their needs and aspirations, we in Seattle exhibit perhaps more of the trends emerging from this context than other regions. Even more concertedly, the dramatic changes that are now acknowledged nationally began in the “spiritual but not religious/**None Zone**” of the Pacific Northwest. And because we have experienced them longer, we have an unprecedented opportunity to explore and address these challenges more fully than communities that have confronted them more recently.

There are as many solutions as there are individuals offering remedy. But many dedicated to assessing and resolving these challenges concur on some significant needs and strategies:

1. Bridging the tribal/covenantal divide, especially amongst young adults and adolescents, demonstrating through an **ethical ethnicity** how timeless and transcendent Jewish values address the most critical and viscerally compelling concerns of our time, and cultivating a sense of Jewish preference and pride that is distinct from a perceived prejudice of self-interest.
2. Fostering a sense of Jewish “authenticity,” through
 - a. Challenging, accessible education borne of empowered congregants charting their own educational course in partnership with expert facilitators, with a new emphasis on personal meaning over continuity and preservation.
 - b. Inspiring worship that binds congregants to God, tradition, the community and the world,
 - c. A courageous, unequivocal and advocated pursuit of social justice and *tikkun olam* that infuses all aspects of synagogue life,
 - d. An embrace of relationship-within-community as the essential goal of the congregation, with a shift from a top-down obsession with member units to an “ownership” ideal inspired by a DIY approach to members engaged in their own Jewish journeys.
 - e. A focus on developing and sustaining programs as a means toward forging community, not an end in itself.
 - f. A focus on development as a means toward realizing articulated vision, rather than an end in itself.
 - g. Facilitating individual journeys toward nurturing a life of meaning and purpose.
3. Collaboration between communal organizations to more effectively and comprehensively serve the diverse needs of the community and leverage resources, particularly with innovative/entrepreneurial efforts.
4. An embrace of creativity, risk-taking and experimentation, with an attendant willingness to fail, toward cultivating new approaches residing outside established boxes and comfort zones.

5. A realization that the status quo is untenable, and that failure to move beyond it will render the synagogue increasingly irrelevant and unattractive to changing demographics.

Looking Ahead

Some specific ways in which our current structure can be augmented and expanded to meet the demands of this dynamic, evolving American Jewish landscape:

Clergy and Education Staff

Evolve a hybrid of current synagogue (generalist) and church (designated portfolio) models, with rabbis who are equipped to serve broader pulpit/pastoral needs, but who are hired with specific skill-sets and passions, including:

Pastoral: Emphasis on serving more concerted interpersonal needs, with a focus on guiding outreach efforts to the infirmed, the elderly and those in need of more intensive contact.

Education: Emphasis on supervising the development of deep, comprehensive, accessible education for all ages, forging partnerships, facilitating input and offering choice to congregants as they craft Jewish journeys of meaning and relevance for themselves and their families.

Engagement: Facilitate and support greater holistic engagement through individual relational meetings, the forging of networks of peer-to-peer bonds, and a discernment of issues/programs/needs emerging from a grassroots understanding of what compels our community.

Pulpit: Out of a thoughtful, studied approach to liturgy, worship styles and music, binding a charismatic pulpit presence to a pedagogic approach that empowers and enlists lay people in the conduct and essence of the worship experience.

Young Adults: A peer who possesses the intimate knowledge and can implement a tailored approach to the dynamically-moving target of appealing to young adults whose significance to the future of the community is in direct proportion to their potential for disconnect.

Note: *While others are better equipped to comment on administrative and facilities staff priorities, it is critical that all staff embrace a consensual vision in a way that marries the tone set from the top with responsiveness to the needs of the community.*

Programmatic Priorities

Again, all programs serve the ultimate goal of forging and fostering community within a specific Jewish context, and should continuously be evaluated for effectiveness in achieving this objective.

Hineynu—We are here

A consolidated approach to our internal and external community-building and service efforts.

Internal:

Caring Community and Sacred Journeys: The development of a network and infrastructure for peer-to-peer inreach to those in crisis and experiencing end of life processes within their families.

GCSC/Hazmanah and Community-Building: Developing a cadre of volunteers for quarterly calls to congregants; build community connection activities and programs; de-silo separate efforts into a more concerted, consolidated approach.

External:

Tikkun olam/The Work of Our Hands: Consolidating and expanding upon existing service efforts, including Mitzvah Day, meals for holidays and Tent City, JFS HHD food drive, Women's Shelter, class-specific Religion School projects, and service trips to areas of crisis sponsored American Jewish World Service or developed in-house.

Tikkun olam/The Power of Our Voice: Work with the larger community (Faith Action Network/Faith and Family Homelessness) to identify critical issues and opportunities for partnership towards educating, inspiring and empowering our community to advocate for justice, equality and support for the most vulnerable.

Tribe and Its Orbit:

Facilitating a self-governed cohort (or multiple cohorts) to engage, empower and inspire young adults, with an emphasis on addressing distinct needs within the 22-35 range, and forging collaborative partnerships with J Connect and other similarly dedicated, entrepreneurial efforts in the community.

Education—V'shinantam I'va'necha/Teach Your Children

The overarching goal is to address the ultimate needs of 21st century Jews: Drawing upon and using our traditions, values and ideals toward crafting more meaningful, fulfilling and responsible lives for themselves and their families.

Kiddush Club: Expanding upon our Seattle effort and exploring an Eastside effort, toward spanning transitions from Tribe to YAM, JRM, and Religion School in a seamless, accessible process.

Religion School: Building on our considered success and growth, with greater emphasis on family education, parental empowerment/partnership, and a curricular/pedagogic focus emerging from Rosenzweig's "New Jewish Learning": Understanding and informing lived experience through the prism of Torah and tradition.

Bnai Mitzvah: Learn from and leverage the insights derived from *hazmanah* to both better integrate the bnai mitzvah ceremony into the broader community and stem attrition between 7th grade and high school.

Livnot: Augment current Chai School with collaborative, communal, service-oriented program in partnership with TBT, Herzl, Beth Shalom, Kol Ha-Neshama and Kavanna.

Birthright/Transition to College: Building on the successes of our *Chai* School, *Hadracha*/Teaching Assistant and TDSY cohorts, anchoring/encouraging continued involvement with a TDHS-centered Birthright Trip in the summer between Senior Year and College.

Adults: Expanding beyond PEP, TNT, Intro to Judaism, Taste of Judaism, Adult Bnai Mitzvah and Adult Hebrew to incorporate the insights and energies of the emerging Adult Education Committee, with a special focus on re-engaging Empty Nesters at the critical period of transition/attrition.

Interfaith: Leveraging existing relationships with Seattle University, St. Mark's, St. James', and MAPS mosque to learn about other faiths, interact with other communities, and share foundational theologies, values and metaphors that will broaden our perspectives on others while deepening an understanding of our own traditions.

Worship: Avodat t'zibur v'halev/The service of the community and the heart

Continue our innovative approach to hybrid worship, leveraging the demands of dual sanctuaries to provide both a more formal and informal style, with a vision toward blending styles within services.

Friday Nights: Expand upon Shabbat Shirah, Keshet, Adult Choir and HHD experiences to incorporate more congregants as *shlichei tzibur*/worship leaders, with special emphasis on cultivating the next generation of song leaders from amongst our school population. Also, designate certain services to be led by key groups, such as TDSY, Adult Bnai Mitzvah graduates, Endless Opportunities, etc. Additionally, consider more opportunities to pray with other faith communities, and to have their leaders and choirs/musicians participate in our service.

Saturday Mornings: Continue to examine the Bnai Mitzvah/alternative minyan dynamic to determine if a combined or separate experience best serves the congregation's needs. Develop an empowered lay leadership of *minyanim* that can conduct Saturday morning and *shiva* worship, perhaps as an outgrowth of a library/learning *minyan* approach.

Technology: After installing the equipment, training staff and ratifying a board-approved policy, secure a well-established and consistent streaming presence of worship services, with marketed opportunities to provide life-cycle connections for out-of-town family.

Visual T'fillah: Build on both the increase in proficiency and acceptance within the congregation, focusing on more investment from laity in creating content. Also, develop effective means of conducting VT in the Bellevue sanctuary, balancing clarity and accessibility with preservation of the aesthetic milieu of the facility.

Development/Stewardship: L'avda u'l'shomra—To Till and To Tend

Again, fund-raising must not be an end in itself, but rather a response to an articulated vision for and demonstrated success in attaining a community bound by meaning, purpose and responsibility.

Telling Our Story: Better craft, hone and share our narrative as ***the*** unique and singular community for conveying Jewish values, ideals and dreams to the next generation.

Annual Campaign: Continue efforts to merge dues and free will contributions into singular, perceived effort.

Estate Planning/Legacy: Continue to cultivate network of givers, secure gifts, and seek possible donors beyond older congregants, perhaps with a special emphasis on Bnai Mitzvah parents who are most intimately engaged in and aware of the life of the Temple community.

Asset Management and Property Monetization: The hope and ideal is to liquidate our current real estate holdings to secure the financial condition of the Temple towards less reliance on dues and more latitude to pursue mission, strategies and tactics on their own merits, unconstrained by monetary valuations. This would also free Temple to pursue membership structures better suited to changing sensibilities.

Membership: Chevruta/Belonging

The recent economic downturn only precipitated and highlighted an emerging trend of resistance to synagogue membership as currently structured. Young families in particular often pay far more than wealthier, established couples with grown children. Yet even those who came of age in the previous era often struggle to justify writing big checks when their children are gone and their participation in the synagogue wanes. But the decrease and discomfort with membership reveals a larger concern regarding the perceived value and purpose of belonging to a synagogue community. The younger generation does not embrace the same assumptions and obligations of their parents and grandparents. And starting with conversations about money before demonstrating the inherent value of the community often alienates and disillusions those most tenuously connected to Judaism. Yet absent any larger windfalls or endowments that might insulate a congregation from reliance on dues, these contributions are necessary to provide competitive, attractive and worthwhile experiences of community. A radically new model for affiliation, membership and payment is warranted and necessary.

Start from the Center: The process of joining should begin with a better expression of the essential vision already shared and understood by current members: a statement of mission, strategies and tactics, the why, what and how of Temple's existence. Thus, the relationship with members is founded upon authenticity and transparency. The goal should be to demonstrate a link between purposeful mission and membership structures. A purpose-driven membership model will inspire greater engagement and affiliation.

New Models:

Mishkan: Each Member a Partner In a *mishkan*, free will, or fair-share revenue model, congregations meet

with each new member family to orient them to the community. Congregants enter into a covenant with the congregation and agree to be a stakeholder — a builder of the community. To build the community, congregants make all types of contributions that are not limited to a financial contribution. They have significant freedom to determine what their financial contribution to the synagogue will be. Annually, congregants and community leaders work together to determine the congregation’s vision of Jewish life and how the community might advance that vision, and the congregant makes a pledge of contributions for the coming year based on a recommended target. Contributions are less assessments “due” the Temple than contributions out of passion and belief.

Journey: Each Participant on His or Her own Path In the journey model of community, communities comprise many separate opportunities in which any individual can choose to engage. Community leaders help those participating in à la carte opportunities grow in their Jewishness by connecting the opportunities in a larger Jewish journey. Communities generate revenue per opportunity, and individuals decide opportunity by opportunity which will fit together to compose their Jewish journeys. Communities do not impose membership in order to participate, and members and nonmembers are treated equally in the community.

Hybrid Model: Incorporates elements of partnership and a la carte to best serve diverse needs.

Regardless of the model chosen, it is necessary to convey how that model is a reflection of Temple’s mission and purpose. Members should fully understand the model, the reason it was chosen and what it stands for in the community. They should be able to answer the question: *What am I investing in and why am I investing in it?* This will require substantive staff training all at levels to turn relational experiences into an obvious sense of belonging.

Facility: Makom—A Place for God and Us

In addition to the inherent and unique challenges of running a two-campus congregation, there are larger issues regarding efficient allocation of resources that should be considered. Practical considerations are augmented by moral concerns deriving from the sustainability movement (which is critical to PacNW Jews) and the need for greater transparency of use toward inclusivity of current and prospective members. Particularly in Seattle, with the adjacent construction of the LEED-exemplary Bullit Foundation structure and preponderance of the young and hyper-idealistic, best use of our buildings can become an extension of our mission and image.

A General Synagogue “Makeover”: Examine our current points of entry to our facilities to determine how they can become more welcoming and accessible to current and prospective congregants (better lighting, more colorful signage, vibrant kiosks, photographs of clergy, better coffee, more “living room” feel in waiting areas). Discern best practices of businesses that specialize in customer service and retention. ***And critically: Find a better balance between security demands, aesthetics and the need for fostering a welcome community that feels less like Fortress TDHS and more like a responsibly-secure public institution.***

Seattle: A post-SAAS future should encompass both an assessment of the northern class building (to sell or refurbish and rent) and a larger analysis of the entire Temple block. Is it better to occupy more classrooms fewer times a week or to use fewer classrooms in multiple sessions? Does the congregation need a large social hall and 1100 seat sanctuary a few times a year or is there another model that reflects new realities? Should the upper parking lot lie fallow or become the foundation for a new center?

Bellevue: Is it necessary to complete the third pod and acquire more parking, or have demographic trends leveled off? Could we collaborate with other east side faith communities to share sacred space in the most maximalist scenarios.

And in the End...

At its core, Reform Judaism (*emphatically without the “ed” suffix*) is not a static designation or condition but reflects the innovation and responsiveness of its founders as much as the dynamic visioning of its contemporary practitioners. Our strength as a movement lies in our hearkening to the spiritual, moral and structural needs of an evolving society. The greatest threats to our continued viability as a movement and a synagogue are haughtiness in past achievements and fearful resistance to change. We owe it to the pioneers of the past, those who sustain us in the present, and those for whom we seek to secure a vibrant future to remain vigilant in our awareness of need, creative in our vision for change, and committed to act in sustaining a vital, thriving and prescient TDHS for generations to come.

Works consulted:

Schwarz, Sidney; Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future; Jewish Lights Publishing

Synergy: Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose; UJA-Federation of New York

Synagogue 3000 Resources