

# **Crossing the Jordan**

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**Extending  
the Vision  
for Temple's  
Future**

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January 2019

**M**ore than five years ago, I shared a rabbinic vision for Temple at a critical moment. *Response and Renaissance* reflected the dramatic changes occurring in American synagogue life and offered some ways to proactively address these new challenges. And while a mere half decade interlude may seem too brief a period for another assessment, the dynamism of the generational shift in the Jewish community and the demands on synagogue resources to respond require ongoing evaluation.

Many of the previous challenges posed and changes suggested remain relevant. Yet new and unique issues have arisen, offering an opportunity for synagogues that aspire to be nimble, visionary, and responsive to balance the call of the contemporary with the spirit of our tradition. *Crossing the Jordan*, the first act of the Israelites as they reached the Promised Land, provides a potent metaphor for today's American Jewish community: Acutely aware of the imperative to innovate for a new generation on the cusp of the uncharted, but deeply rooted in the history and ideals that are the essential source of our credibility, purpose and survival.

## The Current Context

As discussed in my previous statement, the perils and privileges of greater acceptance within this country continue to test the integrity of Jewish identity and continuity as much as they mark the success of our people's first full integration into a larger society.

The seeds of emerging trends from five years ago are more palpable and pronounced. Many of them impact our culture as a whole, with special resonance within the Jewish community:

1. Technology continues to redefine virtually every aspect of our lives: From patterns of work, to the organization of our finances, and the ways in which we gather, socialize and communicate.
2. This greater dependence on technology reshapes our expectations of institutions, evoking a reassessment of leadership structures and the distribution of power, and demanding greater transparency and grassroots decision-making.

Significant shifts from past assumptions continue to require recalibrated responses from synagogues:

1. The focus on communal cohesion as a consensual priority, and the calls for continuity that launched a thousand Federation campaigns, have become eclipsed by pursuits of personal spirituality stemming from the ascendance of the private, sovereign self and the struggle with multiple sources of identity (being merely "Jewish" is no longer an exclusive designation).
  - a. A DIY (Do It Yourself) ethos has permeated Jewish experience, encouraging a "cafeteria" approach to practice and belief, as opposed to an historic, distinct commitment rooted in a cohering tradition.
2. Communal fundraising and allocation has shifted from centralized organizations to private foundations and elite funders, who often exert ideological alignment as a requisite for support.
3. The three pillars of Jewish unity and reaction for the last 70 years—a besieged and burgeoning State of Israel, the enduring memories of the Holocaust, and institutional antisemitism--have become objects of greater division than cohesion. The American Jewish

community, which once prided itself on constructive debate based upon text and tradition, has become infected with the extreme polarization that afflicts the greater culture.

- a. An unprecedented association of party and ideological affiliation with support for Israel exacerbates the growing rift between Israeli and American Jews
  - b. For many Jewish young adults, when faced with the binary and seemingly mutually exclusive choice between a particular pride in Zionism or a universal embrace of human rights for all, especially those perceived as oppressed, they will more often than not choose the latter.
  - c. As the Holocaust recedes from a kind of secular “theology” to another tragic period in Jewish history, its potency as a compelling narrative of Jewish survival and outward message of Jewish vulnerability diminishes.
  - d. The experience of antisemitism for American Jews has morphed from classic institutional discrimination and stereotyping to variants more subtle and more overt. The upsurge in hate speech and crimes over the last few years on the right is as obvious as it is disturbing. Less blatant is the bigotry of the left, often cloaked as anti-Zionism, coupled with an indictment of Jews as a part of the white power structure by former allies amongst communities of color. Jews are seen less and less as a vulnerable minority in need of sensitivity and protection, and more as beneficiaries of unjust privilege. Many progressive/liberal Jews (the majority in America) also struggle with this tension.
4. Some have decried the transition of the American Jewish community into a “post-peoplehood condition,” in which pride in particular identity has given way to a zero-sum conviction toward universal values and global obligations.
    - a. For many, “Golden Rule” Judaism, designated by the catch-all of *Tikkun Olam* commitments to social justice, has become a surrogate for all Jewish experience, resulting in less knowledge of and exposure to the texts, values and rituals that have defined Jewish identity and bound the Jewish community for millennia.

## **New Responses**

1. Perhaps the key challenge is to convey Jewish experience and values in ways that affirm the existing ideals and behavior of those committed to working toward a better world, without pandering to the trends of the moment. The metaphor of a “remix,” a blending of old and new art, informs the fashioning of a hybrid of tradition and the contemporary in practice and thought.
2. Jewish institutions must focus on proactive, engaging and inspiring reasons to be Jewish, and abandon the more impulsive, visceral, yet transitory means of rallying the community around reaction to persecution, threat and marginalization. A dominant reactive approach will assuredly alienate younger Jews who see themselves less as “Jews above all else” and more as global citizens.
3. Leveraging the growing focus on the sovereign self and the desire to craft a tailored set of beliefs and practices, the synagogue possesses ample opportunity to foster greater exposure to ideas and experiences that some might not yet know they want.
4. It is vital to affirm an appreciation of the complementary relationship between the particular

and the universal. A profound regard for the universal values driving our concern for others grows from a foundational pride in one's own particular identity, and that expressed by others.

5. Recognizing that the most impactful and most frequently observed rituals revolve around lifecycle ceremonies and home observance, greater resources should be invested in amplifying these experiences within our synagogue, and empowering families with support that can only be provided by the synagogue.
6. Synagogues need to affirm an "Open Tent" policy of abundant inclusion for anyone who claims Jewish connection, aspires to serious involvement in the community, or is a part of a Jewishly identified family in all of its emerging configurations. This approach will build on the opportunities stemming from the inevitable increase in intermarriage, which is markedly impacting the growing membership in Reform congregations. It also recognizes the conclusions of more recent studies that demonstrate that current children of intermarried couples are more securely identified as Jews than the previous generation.
7. The most pressing priority in reaching both intermarried and endogamous families should be engagement with the community and the tradition, a task for which synagogues are uniquely suited to provide education, communal connections and resources for the home. As one writer observed about Jewish identity, *"Instead of something one is, which doesn't require any thought or effort, it should be something one actively does."*
8. Synagogues must expand their role as places of helping and healing, offering the latest iterations of social justice work and wellness programming. While the broader secular culture provides access to these experiences, to do so within a specifically Jewish context roots good works in Jewish values and practice. And again, it offers an on ramp to a broader Jewish experience than previously considered or appreciated.
9. Demographic and geographic shifts find millennials moving from urban settings as singles to more affordable and livable suburban areas as families. Synagogues that reflect the sensibilities that attracted and engaged them when younger and urban will continue to do so as they age in the suburbs.
10. As a response to a growing backlash against the impact of technology, Judaism is well positioned to provide a counter-cultural antidote to the isolation and disconnect often associated with virtual community and social media. Synagogues that provide a model for a judicious, balanced use of technology will reflect a healthier, more cohering experience that is less a surrogate for community than a complement to it.

## **Some Temple-Specific Responses**

As Temple reaches this critical inflection point in the implementation of its 15-year strategic plan, with a significant focus on facilities expansion, financial development, and deeper engagement, there are some initial considerations to bear in mind that reflect the broader context and responses cited above.

### **1. Facilities:**

- a. New facilities should provide the simple, clean and accessible aesthetic engaging to the coming generation of young families: "Third place" gathering sites, classrooms more conducive to study, social halls that attract celebrations and rentals, and anticipatory flexibility for preschool expansion.

- b. Attention should focus on the ways in which both campuses respond to overlapping and distinct needs. With Temple's unique positioning as a two-campus congregation, special emphasis should manage the transition of millennials from the more expensive Seattle to the more expansive Eastside and beyond.
- c. Entries and exits should be easier to find and utilize, balancing inevitable security needs with a welcoming "feel."
- d. Opulence and grandiosity are out—well lit, well appointed, intimate and multi-functional spaces are in.
- e. Seating should be flexible and comfortable, while easy to move and reset quickly.
- f. Technology should subtly and comprehensively integrate into all spaces in ways that support programs and use rather than becoming the focus of the room.
- g. The current sanctuary in Seattle should be retrofitted to provide greater intimacy and cohesion for its most common use for 500 occupants and below, with an ability to easily access the 1100 seat capacity to support Temple's ongoing role as central community convener.

## **2. Education:**

- a. Building upon the renewed focus on and funding of education over the last 7 years, Temple's leadership must continue to embrace the Religion School, JRM Preschool and Adult Learning as mission-critical staples of Temple's essential purpose as a synagogue and indisputable boons to membership.
- b. It is no longer merely a best practice but an imperative to remain conversant with the latest trends in Jewish education, both involving Judaics, with approaches such as Project-Based Learning, and Hebrew, with more recent recognition of organic language development v.s. elemental decoding. This obviously requires considerable investment in staffing, training, and remuneration to attract the best and the brightest.
- c. It is important to develop a transparent, well-publicized and consensual policy regarding commitment, attendance and involvement in our educational program and its processes. We must balance the need to "take people where they are" in self-selecting to invest in a synagogue community, with the establishment of reasonable standards and expectations that reflect the integrity and significance of our values and one's responsibility to the larger community.
- d. We should focus considerable resources on refining and expanding the user experience with all life cycle events at Temple, with a special emphasis on the lengthier Bnai Mitzvah process, beginning with the first years of schooling through the more intensive preparation within a year of the ceremony.
- e. We should provide easily accessible and uniquely branded resources for home use, linking families back to Temple specifically, and to other families in order to process, support and inspire the forging of personal family practice.
- f. Our Israel education, advocacy and travel experiences must not be one-

dimensional and jingoistic, but rather provide opportunities for full examination and open discussion of the real and enduring challenges of Israel's current situation, yet with an unqualified support for Israel's existence and survival. To effectively engage the next generation of young adults, we must affirm the universal/humanistic values they learned as emerging from Torah, while demonstrating the parallel ability to love and advocate for an imperfect Israel.

### **3. Social Justice and Wellness**

- a. The future of synagogues undoubtedly lies in evolving into centers of gathering and communal connection beyond the narrow confines of worship, study and good works. With its unique and exclusive perch on Capitol Hill, Temple stands to become a de facto Jewish community hub for the urban corridor.
- b. As social justice is a fundament of Reform Judaism and an increasingly central part of Liberal Jewish identity and involvement, it is critical to provide Jewish background, context and purpose for this work, so that "doing good" is also appreciated as "doing Jewish." While the main entre to Jewish life for many is social justice work, doing so within the Temple community provides an opportunity to expand their range of experience into areas of worship and study, which may have seemed beyond their comfort or ability.
- c. The pursuit of wellness, both reactive and prophylactic, is increasingly central to the lives of our members. This is especially true for aging individuals. Again, providing a Jewish context for an experience they are seeking regardless offers opportunities for exposure to expanded Jewish practice and belief.
- d. An encompassing approach to both social justice and wellness is the Capitol Hill Care Center (previously outlined and presented). It would be a kind of experiential clearinghouse for both higher level social service to Capitol Hill and the Central District (for which Temple is uniquely positioned) and a provider of wellness classes and resources. In both its location and deep rootedness in Jewish values and practice, the CHCC will provide a potent complement to the distinct efforts of JFS (with its more elemental/existential services) and the JCC (well-ensconced on Mercer Island at a time of increased traffic and characteristic Seattle preference for geographic provincialism).

## Conclusion

It is an axiom that has become almost as trite as it has been misunderstood: *We Jews are more than merely "a chosen people." We are also a "choosing people."* And the choices before us have never been as expansive or as consequential as those facing us currently. This obviously has transformative implications for synagogues. Those that are flexible, innovative and forward-looking will endure as rightful heirs to a phenomenon spanning more than 2000 years. Those that lack the courage, creativity and urgency required of the moment will suffer the fate of so many institutions whose demise was accelerated by the financial crisis of 2008.

Many have observed that the Reform Movement, with its focus *on Tikkun Olam*, personal meaning, and pursuit of a responsive relevance, is almost exclusively positioned to meet the changing needs of these dynamic times. But this is only half the task. The concomitant need is to root the individual within our current culture in the cohering ideals, practices and community that have historically united us, and globally bind us. The movement's hallmark quest to balance the transcendence of tradition with contemporary sensibilities is as much a reflection of Judaism's authentic evolution as it is an imperative for a viable future.

And Seattle, with its defining characteristics of entrepreneurship, experimentation and the pursuit of "the next thing," is fertile ground for Temple De Hirsch Sinai, a flagship institution of our movement, to renew itself for the next generation and beyond. Our time and place are ideal for the opportunities that lay before us. As a Temple community, the moment is ours, if we have the will and the *koach kadosh*—the holy fortitude—to rise to the challenge, to address the need, and to make real a thriving, vital and compelling Jewish vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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