

# SYNERGY

## UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK AND SYNAGOGUES TOGETHER

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### Discussion Guide for “Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose”

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#### General Reactions

“And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them.” — Exodus 25:8

#### 1. What in “Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose” speaks to us?

- Of the challenges outlined in this paper, which are we facing? How do these challenges manifest themselves in our congregation?
- Which elements of the picture painted in “Connected Congregations” can we relate to? How is our situation different; why are we different? (Are we sure that we are different — or are we reacting out of concern, fear, or lack of reliable information?)
- If we asked similar questions of the average member of our congregation who is not involved in leadership, would his or her answers be different?

#### 2. If we could ask the clergy, staff, or volunteer leaders represented in the paper one more question, what would we ask?

#### Purpose and Vision

“Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: ‘Blessed is the presence of the Lord in His place!’ ” — Ezekiel 3:12

#### 3. How clear and compelling is our community’s sense of purpose or vision?

- What is our vision? Do we have a current mission and vision statement? Does it include our guiding principles? Is it embedded in all

aspects of synagogue life, or does it only reside on our website?

- To what extent, verbally or aesthetically, do our public materials convey our vision? Is the vision as clearly articulated as possible?
- If we don’t have a compelling and current vision, how should we create or adapt one? Who should we involve in that process?
- How do we actively pursue or further this vision? How are we preventing our vision or sense of purpose from advancing?
- Why do people join our congregation? What are they looking for? Do we know what they’re looking for?
- Why don’t people join our congregation? (Do we know why they don’t join?)

#### Relationships

“All real living is meeting.” — *I and Thou* by Martin Buber

#### 4. To what extent are we each in relationship with others throughout our congregation?

- Between our clergy, staff, and volunteer leaders, how many of the congregation’s families and individuals do we know? How many do we not know?
- Do average member families or individuals outside of synagogue leadership feel “known” in the congregation? How do we know this? What about former members — do they feel “known”?
- Can we estimate the percentage of individuals and families who engage in the congregation on a regular basis? How are they engaging? How are we tracking their engagement?

- How, when, and in what circumstances does our leadership interact with congregants?
- About how many congregants do we interact with primarily around finances?
- If we sit with congregants to check in with them about their relationship with our community, how much time do we spend talking about money? How much do we talk about the synagogue's purpose, Jewish life, and their involvement in it? What should the ideal balance be, and what needs to happen in order for that to take place?

## Membership

“And Moses spoke unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: ‘This is the thing which the Lord commanded, saying: Take ye from among you an offering unto the Lord, whosoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it . . .’ ”

— Exodus 35:4–5

### 5. How do we talk about membership in our congregation?

- What does it currently mean to be a member of our community? How might congregants answer this question?
- What do we want it to mean or feel like to be a member of our community?
- Why do we call membership fees “dues” — what is “due” to us?
- How do we currently acknowledge or thank members?
- To what extent should we become “porous” — or be a comfortable communal place for those not formally on our membership roster? What would be the financial obligations of those who are “nonmembers, but friends”?

### 6. What should our membership model be?

- Are we or can we be a *mishkan* community? How many congregants do we estimate are members because they are purchasing a service? What would it take to help them become members of a *mishkan* model: builders or stakeholders?

- What would our *mishkan* community look like? What opportunities can congregants take to contribute toward, lead, and build our community?
- Are we or can we be a journey community? How can we help those connecting for just one opportunity deepen their engagement in Jewish life? What would that staff and volunteer resource model look like?
- What financial support might our current congregants give to our congregation in a different revenue model? How can we learn their opinions and ideas?
- No matter the model, how can we best ensure deeper engagement (which should lead to revenue growth)?

## Sacredness of Money

“One who trusts God is not hampered in his trust by great wealth because he does not rely on it. He sees it as a reserve he has been commanded to make use of under certain specific and temporary circumstances. He does not become arrogant if he remains wealthy, he never reminds anyone he gave money to what he did for him and he never asks compliments for his gratitude. Instead, he thanks his Creator for having made him an agent of God’s kindness.”

— “Introduction to the Fourth Gate,”  
*Duties of the Heart* by Bachya Ibn Pakuda

### 7. How do we talk about money?

- Do we know how it currently feels to receive or pay our community’s invoice for dues? How can we elicit feedback from congregants?
- What is the conversation about money like in our congregation? What kinds of financial interactions do we have with congregants? How would we describe the character of those interactions?
- What Jewish values do we want to reflect in the way we handle money in our congregation?
- How do we feel about our congregation’s financial situation? What ideas or fears about money do we bring to the congregation?

- When have we been at our best in handling the congregational finances consistent with our Jewish values and synagogue vision? What processes need to be transformed in order to get there?

## 8. Are we ready to make a change?

- What do we fear about making a transition?
- What could be some of our roadblocks to change? Can we manage or overcome them?
- When have we been successful in making change? What might we learn from that experience that would help in making this potential change successful?

## 9. What immediate actions can we take?

- Do we want to learn more about the achievements and processes of other congregations? If yes, what do we want to learn?
- How do we want to begin a discussion about these issues in our congregation?
- What immediate changes or actions might we consider? What would we need to have in place to implement them?
- What are more long-term actions to consider? What structures or processes do we need to build in order to consider these long-term actions?

## Activities for Further Action

- **Create a Vision Task Force.** Invite members and participants from various backgrounds and experiences within the community to join the task force. Study the visions of other congregations and how their materials — particularly websites — reflect that vision and sense of purpose. Consider bringing in speakers from vision-driven congregations to hear about how vision is reflected in the community's day-to-day operations. Engage in a process of visioning within the congregation. Begin to plan each congregational activity by measuring it against the congregational vision.
- **Track member engagement.** Put together statistics from the previous three to eight years (since well before the recession, if possible) on membership trends, including total numbers of members paying full membership rates, members paying lowered membership rates, requests about membership, and those exploring the synagogue without yet becoming members (for example, participating in the High Holidays). If possible, put together statistics from the previous three to eight years on engagement: ways in which various families and individuals have engaged and, if possible, numbers of interactions various families have had with the congregation. Identify new benchmarks to follow.
- **Begin developing a strong language for membership.** Include sincere ideas about gratitude and collaboration. Consider studying together to draw values-based language out of Jewish tradition. Begin to publicize what “membership” is and what “dues” are, sharing new or affirmed definitions for these concepts. Conduct phone calls or living-room meetings with congregational members to explain these ideas. Emphasize the ideas from the bimah, in sermons, and in congregational articles. Examine congregational artifacts: change language on the congregation's website; change language on its membership form, making sure the form clearly communicates ideas of what it means to be a member or partner. Consider developing a membership agreement that incorporates what the congregation and members will do to build the community in relationship with one another. Make sure that membership invoices are notices to contribute funds, rather than cold or sterile bills. Frame the conversation in Jewish language that relates to your congregation's purpose.
- **Bring together an Economic Values Task Force.** Begin to identify your community's current ideas about money. Consider reaching out to congregants and participants through small house meetings or larger member meetings. Study together and discuss what the values of the congregation should be. Create and enforce those values through conversation.

- **Look at your budget through a cost-center lens.** Reallocate funds into cost centers that allow everybody to understand what the synagogue's revenue produces or accomplishes. Create ways — through an annual meeting, a sermon, a publication, or the website — for congregants and participants to understand what happens to their money.
- **Create space within as many community events as possible for individuals to get to know one another.** Allot five minutes at the end of services, before dismissing anyone, for informal greetings. Make sure that at all classes and events, participants share their names and something about themselves. Develop artifacts that allow

participants to tell their stories, such as a column in the newsletter or a revised yahrtzeit book with stories of relationships with the deceased. Begin to develop smaller communities out of the larger congregation. Turn existing classes in the school, and even parents of graduating students, into ongoing communities that meet for social and networking reasons. Develop an “in the neighborhood” series of programs, where those who live near one another gather for Shabbat or holiday-related activities. Assign board members and staff as “hospitality ambassadors” to make introductions among members whenever there is a congregational gathering.

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## Resources for Further Exploration

*The Business of the Church: The Uncomfortable Truth that Faithful Ministry Requires Effective Management* by Reverend John W. Wimberley Jr. (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010)

“Case Study: The Networked Nonprofit: A Prequel” by Allison Fine  
(found at [www.darimonline.org/article/case-study-networked-nonprofit-prequel-temple-beth-abraham](http://www.darimonline.org/article/case-study-networked-nonprofit-prequel-temple-beth-abraham))

*Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010)

*Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*, edited by Sid Schwarz (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013)

*The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting With Social Media to Drive Change* by Beth Kanter and Allison Fine (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010)

*Offerings of the Heart: Money and Values in Faith Communities* by Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2005)

*The Purpose Driven Church: Every Church Is Big in God's Eyes* by Rick Warren (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zonderman, 2005)

*Re-envisioning the Synagogue*, edited by Zachary I. Heller (Hollis, New Hampshire: Hollis Publishing, 2005)

*Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community* by Ron Wolfson (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013)

*Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary* by Isa Aron, Steven M. Cohen, Lawrence A. Hoffman, and Ari Y. Kelman (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010)

*Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation Into a Sacred Community* by Ron Wolfson (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006)

*Stepping Forward: Synagogue Visioning and Planning* by Robert Leventhal (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2007)

“Temple Israel of Sharon's Annual Commitment Process: Frequently Asked Questions”  
(found at [www.temple-israel.com/about-us/membership/faq](http://www.temple-israel.com/about-us/membership/faq) or by contacting Temple Israel at 1.781.784.3986)

*Tomorrow's Synagogue Today: Creating Vibrant Centers of Jewish Life* by Rabbi Hayim Herring (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2012)

*Vision and Data: Essential Building Blocks for Synagogue Change*, published by UJA-Federation of New York  
(found at [www.ujafedny.org/vision-and-data](http://www.ujafedny.org/vision-and-data))



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