

Carving a New Future

In a mountain village in Europe many centuries ago, there was a nobleman who was concerned about the legacy he would leave to the people of his town. The man spent a great deal of time contemplating his dilemma, and at last, decided to build a synagogue. In the course of his planning, he decided that no one would see the plans for the building until it was finished. The construction took quite a long time – much longer than he anticipated.

But at long last, the project was completed. The townspeople were excited and curious about what they would find upon entering their new synagogue.

When the people came for the first time they marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world. The wood beams along the ceiling, the large south facing windows; it was all so incredible.

Then, noticing a seemingly obvious flaw in the design, one of the townspeople asked, "Where are the lamps? What will provide the lighting?"

The proud nobleman pointed to brackets, which were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. But, each time you are not here," he said, "a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God's house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light."¹

Talk about Jewish guilt! This guy laid it on strong. I hope you know this will never be my message to you. But...it can't hurt to attend *shul* every once in a while, and especially this masterpiece.

All kidding aside, the real takeaway from this story is what I want to talk about today. Congregation Beth Israel is a place for everyone. Ideally, there is a place, or "bracket" for every type of Jewish expression. There is one for serious study, one for worship, one for cultural events, one for tikkun olam, one for socializing, one for anything you can think of. No matter where you are on your Jewish journey, whether individually, or as part of a family, there is an outlet at Beth Israel, or through Beth Israel, which will connect you to whatever it is that interests you. And when we engage in all of these activities, our congregation shines bright. Numbers certainly don't correspond to success, but when our home is bustling, there's nothing like it.

¹ Based on a story told by Rabbi Jake Jackofsky, retold by Seymour Rossell, The Essential Jewish Stories, Ktav 2011

This, of course, is the ideal Jewish community, where there is meaningful engagement for everyone.

Beth Israel already might be this place for some of you, but I imagine that for most of us it is not. We succeed in some areas and fall short in others. As a growing community with a very small staff that relies heavily on volunteers, it is a challenge to do everything at the levels we'd like. But we do a pretty good job.

That is why today I'd like to begin the conversation with you about imagining the ideal Beth Israel. We are sitting in our new home. Take a look around. The possibilities for filling this space with meaningful Jewish engagement are limitless. Let's think about what we ought to be doing extremely well. What are our most important shared values?

I am reminded of Rabbi Rick Jacobs' visit to our community in July. For those who didn't meet him, he is the current president of the Reform movement. Part of his job is visiting as many of the 900 URJ synagogues around our country as his schedule permits. In his address to us from the bima, Rabbi Jacobs spoke about two congregations that he's visited which excel in outreach and social action, respectively. They are now exemplars to the rest of the movement. And I thought to myself, wouldn't it be incredible if other congregations called *us* to figure out how we are so successful at, (fill in the blank). Should we not strive to be an exemplar of Jewish living as well? Which bar do we want to set for our fellow congregations?

As we prepare to transition to our new building within the year, it seems like just the perfect time to forge a new path for ourselves. To look at who we are and what we do and determine if we want to make any improvements or larger scale cultural shifts. As Hillel said, (*im lo ackshav, imatai?*) "If not now, when?"

Today and throughout the High Holy Days we will all have the opportunity to give our input in this process. Each of our voices will be heard, equally—members and Beth Israel friends alike. Creating community takes buy-in from everyone and that's why it's important we all participate. While the Board makes educated and informed decisions on our behalf, there are times when the rest of us need to participate in forging our future.

According to a 2014 Reform Judaism Magazine special issue, titled, “Strengthening Congregations: A Symposium”² successful synagogues share 6 faces. I’d like to share this list with you.

1. Successful synagogues link people to what matters in life.
2. Successful congregations are intentional.
3. Successful synagogues regard “members” as parties to a covenant (*b’rit*), not as consumers of a set of services.
4. Successful congregations build competence and confidence in Jewish practice and synagogue leadership.
5. In successful synagogues, though congregational life may be centered at the synagogue, it is neither restricted to nor bound by the building.
6. Successful synagogues adapt and innovate.

What I found insightful was the explanation for the second “face,” “Successful congregations are intentional.”

The author writes: A successful synagogue has at its core a clear set of shared values and a vision that communicates 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 other words, being an intentional synagogue means that everything we do is driven by our shared values and vision. And our shared values define who we are and what is most meaningful to us as a community.

What kind of community do we aspire to be? This is the questions I’d like us all to think about.

You may have noticed several buckets in the foyer with various words or phrases on them. And you may have wondered what you are doing with 3 raffle tickets. Each bucket has a different value or outlet of Jewish expression that we try to provide to our community. Your job is to take your tickets and put them in the buckets that you think Beth Israel should focus most heavily on. Which areas should drive what we do. What should we excel at? Where should we focus our resources the most. Which areas of syna-

² Dr. Weinberg currently serves as National Director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE) for the URJ. Since 2001 he has directed the ECE in working to strengthen synagogues as critical centers of Jewish life in North America. He is a leader in the field of synagogue transformation and innovation. Dr. Weinberg holds a PhD in Organization Behavior from Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management where he has also taught. But most importantly, he is a product of the Reform movement and understands the many challenges synagogues face.

gogue life do we want to show off to the rest of the 900 congregations around the country?

Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, one of my hometown shuls, did an exercise like this at the High Holy Days a couple years ago. They asked people to choose the three values that should inspire everything they do as a synagogue. And it helped guide their strategic plan as I hope our activity assists our thinking about the future too.

What I like about this activity is that its open and collaborative and intentional. Surveys are pretty self-selecting and having a face-to-face conversation with everyone who is part of the Beth Israel family, while preferable, is, practically speaking, very challenging. Your participation today and over the course of the High Holy Days will help us become the dynamic synagogue we all wish it to be.

The following are the different buckets that you can put one, two, or all your tickets in:

Talmud Torah: Adult Education. Think of scholars-in-residence, speaker series, a diverse array of courses, text based classes, and Hebrew. Imagine a community of engaged learners.

Avodah: Worship and spirituality. Think of catering to all our demographics. Being innovative, creative and respecting tradition. Investing in new machzors, contemplating visual tefillah, holding multiple minyons for our diverse community. What about having spirituality or mindfulness retreats. Discussions on theology and liturgy workshops.

Tikkun Olam: Social action and social justice. Imagine a community at the forefront of advocacy for a whole host of issues. Sending congregants to lobby in Olympia and DC. Organizing major projects such as resettling refugees, or rebuilding communities after natural disasters. Heeding the prophetic voice to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and take care of the widow and orphan. Imagine not a Mitzvah Day, but a Mitzvah Year.

Tarbut Yehudit: Jewish cultural events. Imagine a Bellingham Jewish film festival, food festival, Jewish author series, Jewish concerts, Jewish art exhibits, Israeli folk dancing classes. While faith is central to Judaism, for many, the entry point to Jewish life and the synagogue is through less religious avenues.

Audacious Hospitality: Outreach to the greater community. Using creative marketing to engage with as many people as possible. Expanding our reach. Don't think proselytizing, think showing off the beauty of our tradition to people who are on the fringe. (And there are many.) It's about welcoming people to join us. How many of you are here because of Anne Brown and others like her who encouraged you to participate?

Israel Engagement: This includes education, speakers, experiences abroad, training for college students to combat campus anti-semitism. Whether a supporter of AIPAC or

J-Street, this community would be engaged, focused on creating a love of our Jewish homeland in spite of its deeply complicated relationship to American Jews.

Youth Engagement: Encouraging participation in NFTY, our Youth group, supporting teen trips to Jewish LA, New York or the L'taken Social Justice seminar in DC. Imagine efforts that focus on post *b'nei mitzvah* retention. This is about engaging our future leaders at just the time when so many leave Jewish life.

Senior Engagement: With the rise of Baby Boomers reaching more mature ages, we could be a leader in programming and support for this demographic. We should think about being proactive in dealing with the issues of aging. Imagine Jewish approaches to health and wellness, care-giving workshops, senior leadership training and senior participation with our youth.

Music Enrichment: Enhancing the role of music (vocal and instrumental) in all aspects of synagogue life. Engaging the community by providing opportunities for member participation in concerts, workshops and other learning experiences with contemporary Jewish musicians. We could promote sacred and secular musical enrichment through musical Shabbatot, High Holy Day choral singing, concerts, Open Mics and other events.

Interfaith work: Within our community such as being more inclusive by offering classes and support groups to non-Jewish partners. Or, doing interfaith work in our greater community. Collaborating more with other houses of worship for service projects and socializing.

Social Services: What if we had spaces for community counseling, grief support, substance abuse support, a soup kitchen. What would it look like if hundreds of needy people were fed for Thanksgiving right here?

Other: Write in something I may have left off.

There is no correct vote. But it is important to vote. It is important to know what you believe is paramount to what we do as a Jewish community.

As you look around this incredible space today, think about our potential. Think about our purpose and our objective as a hub of Jewish expression in Bellingham. It's specifically at this time that we should be dreaming big. This is such a special and exciting time for us. Right now, we can choose the path we intend to follow and make plans for pursuing it.

This space is large enough for everyone to hang a lamp, to be engaged. But Beth Israel should also be a place that you feel proud to be a part of. I know that I am proud to be your rabbi and imagining what we can do together in the years ahead is exhilarating.

We can still have that *haimish* quality to us, but this doesn't mean we can't also be cutting edge and progressive.

Let's take this High Holy Day season to dream and to envision those dreams becoming our reality.

Shanah Tovah. May this New Year be one of engagement, meaningful change and most of all, shalom.