

Temple Beth Ami
Vision 2020 Affiliation Research Team
August 20, 2018

Report (version 2) respectfully submitted by the Affiliation Research Team

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Key Activities Completed:

1. Initial Team meetings to plan scope and align on research activities
2. Small team planning to draft interview questionnaire
3. Bibliographic research
4. Organizational and individual interviews

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. **Successful congregations are values-driven, and laser focused on building and sustaining relationships**
 - a. “Membership” is a transactional concept – you buy into it. (e.g. Netflix, Gyms, Costco)
 - i. If you don’t “use it” enough, can seem more cost prohibitive/less valuable
 - b. Synagogues are covenantal communities, not transactional. Need to identify and guide to the mission.
 - c. Successful synagogues focus on building relationships at every level, and make it clear that membership is not “fee-for-service” (or “pay to play”). (See Ha’aretz article.) They:
 - i. Redefine what success looks like - maybe it is not “how many people attend” but is “are we creating meaningful experiences, are we deepening relationships”. Could every member of the synagogue have a relationship with a member of the synagogue leadership team? How can each person contribute beyond money?
 1. Are our clergy spread too thin to spend the amount of time required to build real relationships with members and non-members?
 2. Can we build a cadre of volunteers to initiate and institute programs that begin to enhance relationships with prospective and current members as soon as possible?
 - ii. Engage with new members immediately and consistently to drive retention – invitations to dinner, events. i.e. Don’t wait for people to get involved, involve them and keep involving them; have a group responsible for owning these actions. (membership team/committee, volunteer engagement/development)
 - d. People want to feel wanted, welcomed and supported. TBA has been more business minded and has not done our best at creating a welcoming atmosphere
 - i. We are a program driven synagogue, but focus needs to shift to building community and relationships. Making connections is just as important as anything else we do.
 - ii. Need to consider the viewpoint of someone walking into the temple at different life stages – what do they want/need? What makes them want to stay? Focus on individuals and building a community of individual positive experiences
 - iii. Prioritize where money is spent – more programming is not always the answer

- e. One consideration for “membership” is whether a different term is more appropriate - partner, supporter, teammate, friend (rather than member). “Our relationships are more complex because we are in a sacred community” (paraphrased from Amy Asin)
 - i. Perception at TBA is member vs. non-members are “categorized”; non-members do not feel as welcome or included as they are classified differently
 - ii. Many nursery school and Machane families currently do not feel connected to the temple beyond that interaction
- 2. Successful congregations are sensitive to financial concerns of current and potential members**
- a. Dues are a major barrier to affiliation.
 - b. At TBA, the need for non-members to pay all religious school tuition and fees up front can be a deterrent
 - c. Many nursery school families see the need to pay membership dues on top of nursery school tuition as unfair or unmanageable
 - d. Synagogue dues are high, and potential/current members look at the cost against the value they feel they receive. Many families don’t take full advantage of synagogue services. Strong relationships help improve the value measure.
 - i. Need to focus on connections/creating relationships that make people prioritize temple membership as something they want to spend their money on.
 - ii. The experience must be valuable enough to become the choice.
 - e. The dues reduction process can be invasive, and people may feel embarrassed. Some potential/current members leave rather than request help.
 - f. Synagogues are looking for other ways to structure dues. Even with standard models, successful synagogues look to take away the stigma and build trust around membership financials.
 - i. E.g. Temple Israel in Michigan – asks for 1% of income, all on the honor system. Rodef in VA asks for 2% plus 10-year building fund.
 - ii. Churches have an entirely different model - voluntary giving. The amount raised per capita tends to be similar but is less evenly distributed per member. (some give much more, some give much less.)
- 3. Successful congregations EXPERIMENT, target the demographic end ranges, offer a variety of activities**
- a. Empty nesters may have more funds/flexibility – synagogues that engage parents early retain them after the bar mitzvah/high school cycle ends
 - b. Millennials are not necessarily joining standard religious orgs. Wide range of organizations successfully engaging millennials, helping them make connections, contribute, and feel well (SoulCycle, the Dinner Party, USDAC, Camp Grounded)
 - i. Not sure what will happen as millennials’ kids move toward bar/bat mitzvah age – may see more affiliation, but they have many more options. Even bar mitzvah in Israel is more all-encompassing and no longer requires temple resources

- c. What's working at other organizations/what can we do better
 - i. pop up Shabbat- communal, musical, periodic
 - ii. the Neighborhood Halaqa (in DC)
 - iii. organizations that provide opportunities for community, social transformation, personal transformation, accountability, purpose finding, and creativity
 - iv. Chabad – shared responsibility; everyone has a role/everyone works towards same goals; feels smaller; more opportunities for interaction/participation; market themselves to both the Jewish community and to the larger community as a whole
 - d. Successful congregations and organizations offer multiple engagement points for young families, not just nursery school
 - e. Successful congregations take ownership of the relationship process by incorporating it into the culture, understanding that people are more likely to remain involved if other people they know and like are there
 - i. Buddy system to pair people with similar backgrounds/life events
 - ii. More member/parental involvement (tours for prospective families, grade level parent volunteers for social events, etc.)
 - iii. Name tags/facilitation of introductions at events
 - iv. Opportunities for small group interaction (Shabbat in the Hood, coffee clubs, etc.)
 - v. Hospital visits, acknowledgement of important life cycle events like marriages/births with personal engagement, ie, bringing challah to the home for Shabbat
 - f. Successful congregations experiment constantly – from trying out different types of events to trying different methods of running meetings.
 - g. Communications are important: Congregations are using modern digital tools to develop clear and engaging communications and marketing. The bulletin-style listing of every activity drowns out the key messages. Building interest requires attention to brand and communications.
4. **Successful congregations look outside the synagogue walls to offer community, and partner with other organizations to expand religious and communal opportunities**
- a. Synagogues are finding ways to bring events to the community and broadening the concept of religious life.
 - b. Synagogues are making programs accessible to a wider range of the Jewish community. They are looking at the long game – not asking folks to join, but building relationships that strengthen the community and could lead to membership down the line.
 - c. Strong areas of interest for DC: Education, social justice, politics, social/connection
 - d. Partnerships with other orgs have become more critical – partnerships enable synagogues to tie into particular interests or demographics, build critical mass around a particular topic (e.g. professional social justice org), and engage with new energy.

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Sources:

Research Sources

1. How we gather <http://howwegather.org/>
2. Ha'aretz article on membership dues: <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-membership-is-stopping-jews-from-paying-synagogue-dues-1.5387705>
3. Eight principles that drive strong congregations: <http://www.cliforum.org/2016/03/eight-principles-that-drive-strong-congregations/>
4. Various Synagogue websites (Temple Beth El, Florida; Temple Rodef Shalom, VA)
5. 2017 Greater Washington Jewish Community Demographic Study
6. Churches versus Synagogues: Voluntary Donations versus Dues: <http://freakonomics.com/2010/10/19/churches-versus-synagogues-voluntary-donations-versus-dues/> (and source articles: https://forward.com/news/131095/synagogue-dues-dont-raise-more-money-than-church-g/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=Emailmarketingsoftware&utm_content=70952873&utm_campaign=September172010&utm_term=ReadMore)
7. Pew Charitable Trusts Jewish affiliation report from 2013 (minimally included) <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

Organizational Interviews:

1. Temple Israel (Michigan), Rabbi Jen Lader

Individual Interviews:

1. Rabbi Pokras
2. Cantor Eschler
3. Rabbi Weiss, Kim Roberts, Paula Sayag (together)