

RE: TBA 2020: Spirituality Through a Jewish Lens / Spirituality and Engagement Committee Report & Recommendations

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Congregants who participated in Vision 2020's Listening Campaign offered valid and heartfelt suggestions about how TBA can address the issue of Spirituality in the congregation. Our assumption is that spirituality is a strategic topic because our congregants have stated explicitly that they wish to perpetuate Judaism. The question is, how does affiliation with a temple accomplish this general goal?

A synagogue is a safe place for building and stewarding a sacred community, a spiritual and moral center in the context of 21st century problems and challenges – a place where Jewish learning transpires in the context of living a life of integrity and connectivity. Affiliation provides a safe congregational space, leadership and inspirational programming to enable each of us to find our own spiritual self. The focus of our committee's research was to explore the kinds of inspiration and leadership that enables congregants who seek it, to find their individual version of spirituality through engagement in our congregation.

The focus of our committee's research has been on inspiration and leadership that enables congregants who seek it to find their individual version of spirituality through congregational participation.

Spirituality can also be defined as the desired effect of being at one with something beyond ourselves, i.e., community, humankind, a transcendent God.

Key questions underpinning our discussions included:

- What wisdom is there in Judaism that can give meaning to my life? As seekers define it, spirituality offers a framework for discovering what wisdom Judaism holds for understanding themselves and their lives, enabling them to experience their deepest feelings and emotions.
- What wisdom is there in Judaism that can give meaning to those who don't believe in God?
- What makes our programming choices Jewish? What would happen if we could clarify and illuminate the connections between Jewish wisdom and culture to our spiritual, educational and social action activities?
- In what ways might we broaden our spiritual engagement options to potentially attract and engage Jews who seek alternative means to find meaningful connections?

We conducted external and internal interviews to find out what the critical aspects of spirituality are for people who affiliate and what those aspects look like at TBA today:

- The primary incentive for the interviewee to attend services or programs is **the presence of a charismatic, energized, warm, welcoming, spirited rabbi or pastor** (these are the adjectives used by interviewees).
 - Members report that Beth Ami has warm and engaging spiritual leaders who reach out to congregants.
 - Beth Ami “buzzes” with spiritual energy during activities when large numbers of members are present and engaged

- Interviewees look to their congregational leaders as sources of inspiration who **demonstrate the relationship of religious literature to daily life.**
 - At Beth Ami, Rabbi Pokras has shared aspects of his personal life story and has engaged a leader to draw members of the community to sessions regarding family issues
 - It is not clear how well-demonstrated are the Jewish religious and cultural connections and incentives presented to Beth Ami congregants as inspiration for their activities.
 - Sermons and teachings are delivered at Friday night services for the general congregation, but at Shabbat morning services only bar/bat mitzvah families and their guests are present. So, whatever is read or discussed on Shabbat morning does not reach the general congregation.
 - Torah is read only on Shabbat morning and is limited to few Torah portions. Only bar/bat mitzvah families attend
 - References to Torah and Jewish cultural teachings are often cited by clergy in *Chadashot* articles which may be a source of inspiration for some congregants who seek this.

- **Music is a basis for inspiration.** It raises our spirits and makes us feel at one with our community. Individuals with greater Jewish and Hebrew education had a greater understanding of what they were singing, but all enjoyed the beauty of the music. Music and the opportunity to join in singing are key in attracting congregants to congregational buildings.
 - Music and singing are paramount spiritual incentives at Beth Ami. Services and events are energized by the warmth and the talent of our religious leaders.
 - Congregants attend Friday night services in large numbers. They know the music and enjoy the experience. The “sweetness” of the onegs, the opportunities for gathering while in high spirits are also spiritual experiences for our congregants.

- **Social activism** is a major source of gratification to those who engage in it and a source of pride in their own synagogue or church for serving the community. People feel enriched by good works.
 - **Most interviewees cited social activism as a serious source of pride and inspiration**
 - Beth Ami is a model for social action and an inspiration to its congregants as well as to the community around us.
 - The great number of congregants who are engaged in immigration services, hunger relief, education for the socially marginalized and other efforts is evidence of Beth Ami’s power as a spiritual resource for its congregants.

- **Study and learning were noted as significant sources of spiritual inspiration.**
 - The 40 or so congregants who regularly attend Rabbi Pokras’s Shabbat morning Torah study testify to the spiritual inspiration they receive from engagement in Torah study.
 - Beth Ami engages with other congregations to offer opportunities for study of Jewish sources, some taught by our own rabbis.
 - Conservative and Reconstructionist congregations we interviewed indicate greater engagement with Jewish scripture, culture, history, Torah study as sources of their spirituality than does Beth Ami and it is not clear if there is demand for such intellectual engagement as a spiritual resource at Beth Ami.

- **Jewish Spirituality Centers** are using an “east meets west” type of approach to mindfulness, meditation and other means to reflect and engage in non-traditional spiritual practices.

Jewish Spirituality Centers are places of experimentation and creativity with the common thread of shared practice: meditation, music, the study of Jewish mysticism, artistic expression and others that connect mind, body, and spirit. Jewish Spirituality Centers help people who want to opt for these kinds of experiences to cultivate their inner lives and their connections to God, while building a community of fellow travelers on the spiritual path. Jewish Spirituality Centers helps temples meet a growing desire for Jews to explore alternative paths within Judaism. They offer alternative opportunities for spiritual growth that are both accessible and deep and which include meditation, music and practices that connect mind and body. They are places to openly approach the multiple dimensions of Jewish tradition and to explore alternative practices for transformative Jewish learning. Jewish Spirituality Centers are helping synagogues meet the needs of Jews in their communities who consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious. The intention is to provide a space where wisdom is cultivated, and individuals can learn techniques for contemplative Jewish practice and study.

Recommendations for Temple Beth Ami

Across the five aspects of spirituality, we see TBA's most direct opportunity to strengthen the linkages between spirituality, affiliation and engagement is in aspect number two: making the connections between our programs and services with Jewish text / heritage / culture much more explicit. This is prioritized as our first recommendation.

1. Determine what is "Jewish" about TBA's spirituality.

In this report, we present a strategic framework for tightening the spiritual link between our Jewish heritage/ culture and our temple activities. We believe that a more explicit understanding of the Jewish reasons for our programs and their potential long-term impact will motivate generational affiliation and deeper engagement.

Specifically, we recommend the following framework for program rationale that can hone our Jewish lens:

- 1) Logic: Be mindful of how activities, services, projects, etc. serve to keep Judaism alive and keep us together as a people
- 2) Emotion: Be mindful of how we meet our needs for emotional/spiritual satisfaction through music, words (sermons, poetry, etc.); prayer and experiences
- 3) Ethics: Be mindful of the Jewish basis for performing our activities of Tikkun Olam, making a positive difference in the world, as practiced throughout Jewish history.

This framework can be used to:

- Link each activity, program, planning session to Jewish culture by citing a Jewish textual or historic reason for doing what we're doing, when at all possible.
 - Raise emotions through Jewish music, mindfulness, etc.
 - Take a moment to cite a Jewish dictate regarding Tikkun Olam that reminds us what the Jewish reason is for undertaking the efforts that make us feel proud and fulfilled as Jews as we teach English as a second language, collect food for the hungry or organize political campaigns that will bring viable leaders to our community.
2. Consider the further exploration and potential development of our own Jewish Spirituality Center, to broaden options for our members and to attract Jews who seek spiritual, not necessarily religious, engagement.

The following recommendations are more general continuous improvement ideas:

3. Intensify the excellent musical, social action and other programs that bring congregants together to serve, to play and to get to know one another better as a community.
4. Explore programs to identify and reach out to individuals who may not feel engaged, i.e., new members, seniors, singles, gays.
5. Explore if, or how, religious sources (Torah Tanakh, philosophy, history, etc.) are introduced into programming and if they provide sources of spiritual inspiration to congregants.
6. Offer more experiential programs, such as a shuk, Vashti's banquet, a Tu B'Shvat seder, Torah stories, the "Great Challah Bake" to engage congregants on a spiritual level through such activities.