

# REFORM JUDAISM

TEMPLE BOARD OR COMMITTEE DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR  
RJ MAGAZINE'S STRENGTHENING CONGREGATIONS SYMPOSIUM





# Discussion Guide for RJ Magazine's Strengthening Congregations Symposium



## Using This Guide for Temple Boards or Committees

Here are four different ways for congregational leaders to use this guide. Each assumes meeting times of about one hour. These are only guidelines. Tailor these suggestions to your particular needs.

### 1. Single session study, general

Choose one or two articles that resonate the most with you; for example, one from Rabbi Schindler or Rabbi Brous and one from one of the congregational thought leaders/consultants. Have participants read the articles prior to the meeting using the General Study Questions (below). Then use the study questions for each particular essay to guide your conversation. Conclude by reflecting on what you are already doing and what would have to change to be a successful congregation according to these authors.

### 2. Single session study, theme based

Choose the articles that include a topic that you want your group to discuss. For example, Rabbi Schindler, Dr. Rob Weinberg, and Amy Asin each talk about measurement. Have participants read the articles prior to the meeting, focusing on how the authors each treat the topic. In the meeting, ask them to compare and contrast the three authors' views. Then ask how what the authors are proposing agrees with or disagrees with how you do things today. Finally, discuss what would have to change in order to move to this new way of doing things, and create a set of next steps.

### 3. Multi-session study

#### **Session 1: Your Own View.**

Write an outline for your own essay about what it takes to be a successful congregation. This can even be done prior to reading the booklet. At the meeting, participants can break into groups of three or four and share their ideas with each other. Debrief by asking what were the commonalities among the members of the sub-group and what were the differences. Save notes from the debrief.

#### **Session 2-8: The Authors' Views**

You can do up to seven sessions, one for each author, or focus on a subset of the authors over a shorter number of sessions. In either case, work through one essay per board or committee meeting. Participants should read the essay prior to the meeting using the General Study Questions. Then use the study questions for each particular essay to guide the discussion each week. At the end of each discussion, reflection on what you want to bring forward from the discussion of that author's work.

#### **Session 9: Bringing Together the Authors' and Your Views**

Bring out your notes from each author and from your session 1 discussion. See what the common themes are and agree on what you think is a successful congregation. Reflect on how your opinions may have shifted from the time you first wrote your essay outlines in session 1.

#### **Session 10: Moving from Study to Action**

Reflect on the conclusions from the previous session about what it takes to be a successful congregation. First, list some of the things that you are already doing that fit with your new definition. Next, list what would have to change in your congregation to be more successful. Some of the needs may be concrete, others may be less obvious. One productive discussion is to

uncover the assumptions that limit your thinking today which you may want to change. For details on how to conduct this exercise, see *The Self-Renewing Congregation*, Isa Aron, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002, pp.50-52

### 4. Board or Task Force Retreat

For pre-work, assign two tasks. First, *prior to reading the articles*, have each person jot down what they think it takes to be a successful congregation. The next task is for them to each read one article. Assign the seven essays to board members in such a way so that each essay will be read by 2-3 participants prior to the meeting. Have them use the General Study Questions as a guide.

Start the retreat by having participants share their thoughts with a partner about what it takes to be a successful congregation.

Next, have each essay group get together and compare their answers to the General Study Questions for the essay that they read, finding commonalities and working out differences.

Next, pair groups and have each one share with the other the answers to the following questions: What did we find in the article that we would like to bring to our congregation immediately? What did we find in the article that was interesting but requires some discussion? What did we find in the article that just isn't for us? You can then pair each group with a new partner group and repeat as many times as desired.

Finally, bring the entire group back together and list out the items that can be brought to the congregation immediately and those that need further discussion. Assign pairs of people to take responsibility for each of the follow up items.

## Study Questions for Discussion

### Writing Your Own Essay

One way to approach the essays is to start by writing your own essay about what it takes to be a strong and successful congregation today. Use the following questions as your guide.

1. In what ways is your congregation successful today? In what ways would you like it to be more successful?
2. How do you know if you're successful? What evidence of success do you currently see or would you like to see?
3. What are the pillars, values, structures, or activities in your congregation that have enabled your success?

### General Study Questions (can be used with any of the individual essays for reflection)

1. What is the vision of the congregation that this author puts forth? How is this similar to or different from your vision, the traditional vision of the congregation, the congregation of your childhood (if you belonged to one), and what can you learn from all this?
2. How is success defined by the author?
3. What are the key requirements for success that the author puts forth?
4. Divide the key requirements into four categories:
  - a. Those key requirements that you've already been working on. In what ways does the author provide new insight that might be helpful for you?
  - b. Those key requirements that are new but which seem most likely to be possible in your congregation
  - c. Those key requirements that are interesting but require more discussion before agreeing that they could work for you
  - d. Those key requirements that are not for your congregation

## Study Questions for Individual Essays

The following questions offer an opportunity for guided discussion of an individual essay. Choose from among these questions to guide the discussion at your congregation.

### Amy Asin

1. Asin discusses the importance of vision alignment and the sometime need to adapt new methods, to stop programs, and to change focus in order to pursue a vision wholly and completely. In your congregation, what propels you toward your vision and what pulls you away from it? What should you be saying no to? What adaptations could you be making?
2. Asin suggests that a strong vision, real vision alignment, influence every aspect of the congregation's life. For example, a genuine vision of "inspiring worship" influences Purim, and the High Holy days, and Tot Shabbat. How would your vision influence these seemingly standard and unchangeable moments in your congregation's—and congregants'—lives? How could these experiences be reshaped to reflect and advance your vision?
3. Asin emphasizes reflective practice. In her words: "Just as we are taught that we never achieve holiness but are constantly in the process of working towards it, successful congregations never reach an end point; they are always in the process of getting better." What structures are in place in your congregation to help you reflect on your work, your progress and attentiveness toward your vision, and your influence on congregants' lives?
4. Three concepts play an important role in Asin's essay: relationship, impact, and meaning. How do you define these three concepts in your work? When have you seen them in play with congregants? What do they look like in action with congregants?

5. Asin talks about the importance of measuring the right things, suggesting that synagogue leaders frequently evaluate success based on the feeling in the room, dollars spent, or numbers of participants rather than the influence of the program on participants. How do you measure your influence and your other successes? What are your goals and what are your indicators for determining whether you have reached them?

## **Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman**

1. Hoffman begins his essay with a definition of leadership. What does leadership mean to you, your congregation's leaders?
    - Hoffman offers descriptors of needed leadership: open-minded, eager, urgent, visionary, thoughtful, inspiring. What would you add to this list?
    - When can you and others offer this type of leadership, and what gets in the way?
  2. What is the relationship between programming, mission, and purpose? Does this idea—"that 'something' is usually limited to programming without apparent purpose"—resonate with you?
  3. Synagogue calendars are often quite full. What is the role of this programming? What is the role of your programs? Go through your own program roster. How does each program advance your mission and influence your congregants?
2. In his discussion of empowering congregants, Weinberg suggests that "successful congregations build competence and confidence." How can your programs and projects help congregants to develop their Jewish skills and capacities? What would be the benefit of doing this?
  3. Weinberg notes that successful congregations get out of the building. How do you use non-building space? If you stay in your building, what could you gain from moving outside of your walls? What is preventing you from doing this?
  4. Weinberg states, "A successful synagogue has at its core a clear set of shared values and a vision that communicate 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." What does your congregation stand for now? In what ways do you communicate this and set up boundaries about what can and cannot happen? What can you learn from the boundaries that you already have about the risk of standing for something? What additional values would you like to stand for and how could you begin to bring them into reality? Just as important, what are you doing that is inconsistent with the values that you have and what would happen if you stopped doing those things?

## **Dr. Rob Weinberg**

1. Weinberg discusses interacting with congregants as partners, not as customers; How do your membership practices interact with congregants as consumers, and how do they treat congregants as holy partners? What would you have to change about the congregation to interact with congregants more as holy partners and less as consumers?

## **Rabbi Sid Schwarz**

1. Schwarz suggests that Jewish institutions be counter-cultural, pushing against a variety of forces in American life today. How does your congregation's leadership push back? When is Judaism counter-cultural in your community, and when do you go with the flow? Why are the examples that Schwarz offers "maximalist"? What

is maximalist about the Judaism that they offer?  
How might they differ from other similar work in Jewish life?

2. Schwarz discusses the importance of empowering congregants, but he is not explicit about why this is important (other than that American Jews are already doing it themselves!). Why, in your opinion, does sharing leadership matter? What does it mean to help Jews learn to be Jewish for themselves?
3. Discuss Schwarz's comments about spirituality and God-talk. Where do you see these trends manifesting in your congregation and larger community? Is this work part of your congregation's vision and mission? Should it be?

## **Rabbi Judy Schindler**

1. In the evaluation questions she offers, Schindler outlines the markers her congregation uses to judge a program's appropriateness for the congregation. That is, the congregation seeks to facilitate programs when they "develop and deepen relationships," or "nurture and expand... Jewish identity," or create "beneficial collaborations" among partners. What are your own synagogue's similarly continually relevant ("evergreen") markers for evaluating program relevance? These may be a combination of:
    - Programmatic goals related to the experience that you hope participants have or the influence of the program on participants.
    - Programmatic goals related to the ways that you hope participants interact with the congregation or the clergy.
    - Opportunities that the program might engender for the congregation related to, for example, new congregants, donors, or partner institutions.
  2. Temple Beth-El facilitates its own leadership development initiative rather than rely on a community leadership development initiative, and while the project requires resources, the synagogue is able to design its own project for its own purposes and to enroll a sizable number of participants rather than only a few (as it might in a community-led project). What leadership training needs does your congregation have? Basic training? Training on technical skills like congregational finances or greeting new members? Helping new leaders understand the direction of the congregation and how they can contribute their already existing skills? What resources exist in your community, at the URJ, in your congregation to help develop new leaders in the way you need them developed?
  3. On Friday nights, Beth-El becomes a platform of sorts for Shabbat experiences. It does not expect all congregants to find in-building prayer on Shabbat meaningful. How does your synagogue currently serve as a foundation for multiple opportunities? How could it?
  4. Schindler discusses the mini-communities that have been shaped within Beth-El, including those for congregants over 50 and for families with young children. What are the sub-communities that could be formed within your congregation? How could they be brought together? What would they add to their participants' lives, and what would they add to the congregation as a whole?
- The extent to which the program is in line with the congregation's culture or personality.
  - The extent to which the program uses the congregation's resources realistically and responsibly.

## Rabbi David Fine

1. Fine suggests that synagogue excellence depends on an expansive definition of growth, and he offers four types of relevant growth: numerical, spiritual, organic, and representational.
  - Do these types of growth resonate with you?
  - What would you add to his definition of growth?
  - Rate your congregation on how well it encourages each kind of growth. Where can you make the most meaningful progress in achieving growth?
2. Fine offers rich portraits of these kinds of growth as they occur in smaller congregations. How can larger congregations reach similar heights, in similarly maximal ways?

## Rabbi Sharon Brous

1. Brous frames her essay with a discussion of “Jews of no religion,” documented by the Pew study (“A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” 2013) as a significant population in American Jewish life. How should or can synagogues best relate to this population?
  - What are your congregation’s outreach goals to better engage your current congregants, help them have a deeper Jewish experience, and to attract new congregants?
  - Brous portrays Jews of no religion as being compelled by Jewish liturgy, ritual, and blessings, even while they are confused or even put off by aspects of Jewish tradition or the Jewish story. To what extent does this description capture the non-engaged Jews whom you meet? How else would you describe this population, the unaffiliated and, more specifically, Jews of no religion?
2. Brous makes bold statements about the relationship between organized religion (synagogues) and religion itself, suggesting that

this “20th century iteration of Jewish religious life... feels too many layers away from the sacred fire.” In your estimation, is she right? In your congregation or community, when do you get close to that fire and when do you get too far away?

- She suggests (earlier), “...These containers [the synagogue], because one can touch them and mold them and compulsively ruminate over them, begin to obscure the very core they were designed to preserve.” Do you agree, why or why not?
  - Brous suggests that some synagogue leaders are holding onto “temporal mechanisms,” or “elements of institutional culture that no longer resonate” with many American Jews, and that these elements are preventing potential congregants’ participation in synagogue life. Can you recognize such temporal mechanisms in your congregation? Do you think they get in some people’s way— who and when?
3. Brous shares that in her congregation they shook up their *kabbalat shabbat* service because she felt bored. It took several attempts for the change to be effective, but, she reports, it succeeded in bringing the spiritual experience to a new level for the worshipers. Does this story resonate? What role does discomfort play in your congregation, and, specifically, in prayer? What role might it play?
  4. Brous discusses the need to take risks and to experiment, particularly in worship. What risk is your congregation taking in worship? What risks have you considered but decided against or not yet tried? What would it take to embark on change?
  5. Brous walks readers through the physical space of Ikar. What is the experience of walking through your congregation’s physical space? What do visitors learn implicitly by walking through your congregation? ☆







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