

Keeping the Mice in Shul: Principles for Synagogue Transformation

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Recently a visitor came up to me after services and insisted on telling me an old joke: “A church and a synagogue are next to each other. One day the priest tells the rabbi, ‘We’re having a terrible problem with mice in the church. We’ve tried everything but we can’t seem to get rid of the little vermin.’ The priest then asks the rabbi, ‘I heard you don’t have a problem with mice. Could you tell me how you do it?’ The rabbi answers: ‘Well, it’s really rather easy. We *bar mitzvah* the mice. After they become *bar mitzvah*, they leave the synagogue and never come back.” The joke makes many people laugh; it makes others of us cry, and a few just don’t get it, at least not anymore.

Rather than laugh or cry at this tired joke, many congregations, including ours, have been busy transforming into Jewish communities of depth and engagement. Since the early 1990s, The Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), Synagogue 2000/3000 (S2K/S3K), and Synagogue Transformation and Renewal (STAR) have worked hard changing synagogues for the better. Some insist that the era of synagogue transformation is over, but I hope they are wrong. Synagogue transformation is so much more than attending a URJ biennial workshop or probing the subject at a day-long board retreat, catalyzing as those may be. At Westchester Reform Temple (WRT) we have spent the last fourteen years working with ECE and S2K/S3K to retool our congregation to better meet the challenges of Jewish life. The gurus of synagogue transformation, Isa Aron, Sara Lee, Larry Hoffman, and Ron Wolfson, have provoked us to think differently about every aspect of temple life and have inspired many improvements and changes. Only now are we finally getting to the

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deeper, systemic change following years of harvesting the proverbial “low-hanging fruit.” It’s not that we were a dysfunctional synagogue. Quite the contrary. But even with our strengths, the challenges of real Jewish engagement were eluding too many of our members.

The following are principles that have guided our work at WRT over these past fourteen years. I share them with the hope that they may prove helpful to others at various stages of synagogue growth and change.

1. Tell the truth

This is a deceptively simple practice. When Ed Koch was mayor of New York, he asked everyone he met, “How am I doing?” The response depended upon whom he asked. And how are we doing? Reform Judaism is the largest movement in American Jewish life. We have hundreds of well-run, active synagogues; we have lots of bright and talented rabbis, cantors, and educators; but we don’t have to look too closely to see that most of our temple religious schools produce graduates who are functionally illiterate in Judaism. How many of our adult education programs offer more than introductory surveys of Judaism? How many of our boards of trustees spend inordinate amounts of time debating whether or not to fix the roof or the heating system rather than figure out new ways to animate the synagogue with Judaism? Synagogue change stops the moment we stop telling the truth about our institutions.

2. First things first

Synagogue change can’t tackle areas of congregational life randomly; the sequence matters. For WRT that meant beginning with learning programs and not worship or sacred community. Religious school was failing not because we had a bad one, but rather because the model of supplementary schools is broken. The synagogue school too often resembles a Jewish children’s gas station with parents dropping their kids off to be picked up two hours later with the expectation that they will be filled with Jewish knowledge and commitment. This model is deeply flawed. Few people argued that religious school was so meaningful that it ought not to be changed. There is much less resistance to changing something that most people agree is not functioning well. With worship, many congregants are strongly attached to the status quo, however unin-

spiring it may be to the next generation. If we had begun with our synagogue transformation by taking on worship change, I doubt we would have gotten very far. Other synagogue cultures might require that the transformation work begin with social action or with sacred community. Knowing where to begin is an exercise in knowing the culture of the congregation. There are so many things that need to change, but “first things first.”

3. Never say “*dayeinu*” (“It would have been enough”)

Quitting too soon is the most common mistake of all synagogue change initiatives. **If only** we can increase participation in adult learning, *dayeinu*. **If only** we retain more *b’nei mitzvah* students for continuing Jewish learning, *dayeinu*. Synagogue professionals are usually too busy to sustain long-term change initiatives. So we call it quits prematurely. Twelve years ago, we piloted a new model called Sharing Shabbat, which requires families to come weekly for Shabbat worship, study, and community. For us the *dayeinu* moment might have been when twenty-five percent of families in our religious school chose to make that commitment. But instead of quitting while we were ahead, we pushed further by applying what we learned from our pilot to all of our religious school learning. Had we stopped earlier it **would not** have been enough.

4. “Ready, fire, aim!”

The fourth principle is counterintuitive, yet it is the key: “Ready, fire, aim!” We have all been taught to put these steps in the correct order: Ready, aim, fire. Too often synagogues begin with a comprehensive strategic plan that requires ten years of research and meetings. This thinking demands that we figure out beforehand exactly what steps need to be taken in order to reach the Promised Land. Unfortunately, by the time we finish the strategic study we are almost sure to have missed the moving target. “Ready, fire, aim” puts us into a culture of experimentation: try it, innovate, learn, refine, and retry. For us, we have convinced our community that only through experimentation will we one day get it right.

A number of years ago, we experimented by having two different Friday night services each week. The early service was shorter with participatory music, contemporary liturgy, and a brief *d’var Torah*. The later service had the feel of classical Reform Judaism, with the

choice of majestic music, more formal liturgical choreography, and a traditional sermon. When we announced this experiment (after a year and a half of study by our worship task force), we didn't declare, "Here's the new Torah from Sinai." Instead, we told our community that we were going to try some new approaches, but that there would be plenty of opportunity for congregational feedback and refinement. The push back was reduced because we didn't present the initiative as a *fait accompli*. "Ready, fire, aim" has served us well.

5. Be bold without bulldozing

This is easier said than done. Seventeen years ago my wife and I bought an old house and, as we were fixing it up, the previous owners showed up and walked through. They couldn't believe how we were "ruining" what they thought was a gorgeous house. I like to describe effective synagogue transformation as renovating our congregation's life while the long-time members continue living happily in our midst. Throughout our efforts at synagogue change, we have tried to imagine "previous owners" watching every change without blocking all creative efforts. Long-time members were specifically invited to be part of our reimagining work groups with the belief that diverse views are essential to success. We've learned that you can't legislate what matters. You can plant seeds and use more carrots than sticks to point the way ahead. We have found that over time folks buy into bold changes if they are not bulldozed into accepting them.

6. Raising the bar won't drive people away

The sixth principle flows directly from the fifth. It's a limiting assumption of synagogue life that raising the bar will drive people away, whether the bar is learning, observance, commitment to *tikkun olam*, or sense of responsibility to the community. Yes, our board of trustees worries about the same things that many other boards worry about and that is "Will we get new members if we keep raising the bar?" Among our 850 religious school students, we no longer have parents just dropping off their little ones to get filled with Jewish studies. New-member families are now expected to come in for study, prayer, and acts of *tikkun olam*. With this expectation, will the folks continue to join? So far we have found that raising the bar has not turned people away. Less isn't always more; in

fact, most often less is less when it comes to congregational norms. The key is how the bar is raised.

Transformation takes a lot of time, whereas changes occur quickly. We are only now getting to the proverbial “high-hanging fruit” of synagogue change, the deeper cultural change. We are in the midst of building a new campus because our practice of Judaism has changed. Now we need our spiritual home to reflect those changes. Our Jewish learning no longer fits into religious school classrooms but rather requires a new *beit midrash* with multiple seminar rooms along with large spaces for informal Jewish learning for our students of all ages. And with new modalities of worship, we no longer fit into our post-WWII sanctuary.

A few years back, a woman who had been an active lay leader wanted to meet to talk about worship at the temple. I knew she was from a classical Reform background, so I was nervous about the meeting because I knew she wasn’t fulfilled with our ritual experiments. “I hate all the worship changes,” she told me. “But I came to Sharing Shabbat with my grandson, and now I get what is going on. I don’t love it. It’s not for me, but I saw the light in my grandson’s eyes, and now I won’t stand in the way as I had before.” She understood what was behind the changes. This was one of the best moments of my rabbinate. She confirmed that we were on the right road to our Jewish future.

A Word on Partnerships for Transformation

There is no single blueprint for synagogue change, but the transformation projects and the growing body of research have been invaluable to our modest efforts. Our task forces and board have studied Lawrence Hoffman’s *ReThinking Synagogues*, Ron Wolfson’s *The Spirituality of Welcome*, and Isa Aron’s *The Self-Renewing Congregation* to name just a few of the recent books that provide new thinking to inspire innovative practice in leading the congregations of the twenty-first century.

Synagogue change has been aided by visionary funders who have understood the necessity and value of providing grants to bold experiments in doing synagogue differently. I remember when we received a UJA-Federation of New York grant to redesign our high school education program. Some must have questioned giving a grant to a congregation in Scarsdale. Such grants can be crucial not because our communities are impoverished but rather because the

endorsement of respected funders can convince lay leaders and members to value the initiative even more.

None of us can transform synagogues without partners. ECE, S3K, STAR, Just Congregations, The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, and local federations have expertise, change strategies, mentoring, and financial support to help retool our congregations for the twenty-first century.

Whenever a congregation undertakes a journey of change, there is always much more that can be done to get closer to that elusive Promised Land. It is my prayer that the transformation projects will find new ways to catalyze more thoughtful experimentation in the core areas of synagogue life. We are presently rethinking what our professional team portfolios should be in light of past changes and a future vision. There is still a great need for wise consultants to help birth these changes. The Jewish community has had a very short attention span when it comes to sustaining change in synagogues, but our children and grandchildren deserve better than what we have been able to do to date. The journey of change in synagogues from good to great is surely filled with peaks and valleys. But as we know from the end of Deuteronomy, we are forever “on the way.”

I conclude with a quote from Charles Darwin, the man who spent his life trying to understand the nature of change. “It is not the strongest of the species that survives nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.” *Kein y’hi ratzon* for all of our synagogues.

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