

This is an excerpt from *The Self Renewing Congregation:  
Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life*

© 2002 by Isa Aron (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), \$19.95 + \$3.75 s/h.

Order by mail or call 800-962-4544 or on-line at [www.jewishlights.com](http://www.jewishlights.com).

Permission granted by Jewish Lights Publishing, P.O. Box 237, Woodstock, VT 05091.

# 1

## **The Self-Renewing Congregation**

The synagogue is the institution American Jews love to hate. It is the Jewish organization they are most likely to join, and the one they are most likely to participate in regularly. It is also the most likely target of their ire and their humor. Nearly everyone has a favorite synagogue story—about a boring service, a callous member of the clergy, an outlandish bar mitzvah, a bitter controversy. An old joke tells of the Jewish Robinson Crusoe who builds two congregations on his deserted island: the one he attends, and the one he would never set foot in.

Beyond the jokes and critiques lies an undeniable truth: if there is one place that will preserve the Jewishness of the American Jew, that place is the synagogue. At any given time, forty percent of American Jews belong to a congregation; it is estimated that eighty percent have been members of a congregation at some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Whereas early attempts to address the “continuity crisis” focused on day schools and informal Jewish institutions, communal leaders and philanthropists eventually came to the realization that they could not bypass the synagogue. While day schools, summer camps, trips to Israel, and institutes for adult learning are

all important vehicles for living a vibrant Jewish life, if one wants to reach the largest proportion of Jews, one must work with congregations.

The recent interest in synagogue “transformation” is a result of the acknowledgment, on one hand, of the enormous potential of synagogues, and the realization, on the other hand, that many have fallen short of their potential. Proponents of synagogue transformation have tried to identify exemplary congregations, analyze what makes them so effective, and teach other congregations how to operate in similar ways. It goes without saying that each “expert” has brought his or her own perspective to this task. Thus, there has been a healthy disagreement about which synagogues really *are* successful, which factors are key to their success, and how one might go about teaching these lessons to other congregations.

This book, and indeed the entire Synagogue 2000 Revitalizing Congregational Life Series, responds to the Jewish community’s growing interest in, and accumulating knowledge about, synagogue transformation. The first volume in this series, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*,<sup>2</sup> focused on learning as a vehicle for synagogue renewal; future volumes will deal with other aspects of congregational life, such as worship, healing, and social justice.

This volume is different from others in the series in that it focuses on the *ways synagogues operate*, rather than the *content of their operations*. A noteworthy congregation may be distinguished by its mode of worship, its innovative approach to study, its caring atmosphere, and so on. But over and above these content areas, a truly excellent congregation is one that does things in a thoughtful and deliberate manner, and that approaches all its activities with a reflective and experimental attitude. Excellence, I will argue, resides not only in program but also in process: the way in which a synagogue deals daily with both opportunities and challenges.

## **A Simple Mission but a Complicated Reality**

The mission of the synagogue can be stated very simply: to help Jews connect with the Jewish Tradition and live by its precepts. But beneath this apparent simplicity lies a host of complex questions:

- Who interprets the Jewish Tradition? What happens when different members of a congregation have different interpretations? And who should have the authority to decide the synagogue's policies? For example, may men and women sit together at worship services? May women be called to the Torah? May women serve as rabbis and cantors? Should the liturgy be changed to include references to women in the tradition? Should the liturgy incorporate gender-inclusive language? The controversies over the role of gender in the synagogue are but a subset of the many conflicts faced by congregations as they try to reconcile the Tradition with contemporary norms and practices.
- What is the appropriate balance between helping Jews connect to the Tradition in the first place, and enhancing their Jewish practice once they become connected? How much energy should be spent on "outreach" as opposed to "in-reach?" Should worship services be oriented toward newcomers or regulars? What is the appropriate balance between single-session programs and long-term classes, and between programs for beginners and those for more advanced learners? Which activities should be oriented to targeted populations, and which should aim to bring the entire congregation together?
- Should congregations set standards for their members? For example, should children preparing to celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah be required to demonstrate their mastery of certain knowledge and skills? Should they be expected to attend services regularly or work for the betterment of the community? Should they be required to continue their studies after the celebration takes place? And what of adults? Other than paying dues, should they be required to engage in any core Jewish activities?

These are just a small sample of the issues with which synagogues must grapple regularly, whatever their size, location, or denominational affiliation. These questions are not easily answered, and one cannot expect that an answer that is satisfactory at one time will remain satisfactory in the future. While much has been written about the substantive issues themselves (such as the role of women in Judaism) and the various programmatic strategies they suggest (such as different ways of doing outreach), relatively little has been written about *how* these issues should be discussed and decided, and *how* the strategies should be chosen. In some congregations these issues are avoided altogether; at others they simmer just below the surface and can erupt at any point. Occasionally the issues become so divisive that they lead to the firing of a staff member, the resignation of a lay leader, or a split in the congregation itself.

Still other congregations have more productive ways of dealing with these issues, discussing them openly before they erupt, and soliciting diverse opinions so that everyone feels heard. These synagogues appear to be ahead of the curve. They spot trends early and take the time to analyze them carefully. A collective spirit of experimentation leads them to take risks, and these experiments are routinely monitored, evaluated, improved, and, when necessary, discarded. In short, these congregations have a kind of wisdom that enables them to spend their energy on essential, significant matters rather than unnecessary infighting.

What is wisdom, when applied to a congregation? And how is it acquired? As will be discussed below, the social sciences have much to teach us about organizational effectiveness, especially as applied to congregations. But the Jewish Tradition, too, has something to teach. As is appropriate, this book looks to Jewish texts to glean insight from them. These texts were written thousands of years ago in contexts vastly different from our own; they rarely speak directly to the issues faced by synagogues today. Yet, they contain some important, timeless truths about the human condition and about what is important in Jewish life. We begin, then, with what the Bible and some of its contemporary commentators can teach us about wisdom.

## **A Midrash on Attaining Wisdom**

Think about the moment in which, according to the Torah, humanity first attained wisdom: the fateful moment in which Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

We all learned the story as children: God created Adam and Eve, and placed them, along with the newly created plants and animals, in the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, all their needs were taken care of: “The Lord God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9). Adam and Eve were free to do as they wished, to eat of every growing plant, and to rule every living thing. Only one fruit was forbidden to them: the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Sure enough, in the very next chapter, at the serpent’s suggestion, they violated the one commandment they were given. Eating of this forbidden fruit gave Adam and Eve a new awareness: “Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked” (3:7). It also led to their banishment from the Garden.

Centuries of commentary have been devoted to this pivotal act, which changed the course of human history as it is understood by both Jews and Christians. Why did Eve succumb to the serpent’s goading? Why did Adam acquiesce to Eve’s suggestion that he too should have a taste? What kind of new perception did Adam and Eve gain? And was this new insight worth the loss of their heretofore idyllic existence? Generally speaking, the story of Adam and Eve’s “fall” is viewed as a great tragedy, the irrevocable loss of the perfect world that could have been theirs in perpetuity.

But a few commentators, including some classical Jewish mystics and some contemporary psychologists, look at this story differently. Summarizing this different line of interpretation, Noam Zion and Jo Milgrom write:

[T]he so-called Original Sin was absolutely necessary, and even gave birth to the advancement of humanity, not its decline. . . . Despite the pain of growing up, humans earned greater

knowledge, greater self-understanding and greater responsibility due to eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. There is no sense in returning to the innocence and childlikeness of the Garden of Eden. Far better is a world which cultivates an appreciation of the dangers as well as the possibilities inherent in a world full of people who know good and evil.<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner takes this idea even further, seeing Adam's and Eve's act as a necessary stage in human development, a rite of passage deliberately devised by God:

Adam and Eve are duped, not by the snake, but by God. They were lovingly tricked into committing the primal act of disobedience that alone could ensure their separation from God, their individuation, and their expulsion from (childhood's) garden.<sup>4</sup>

In this view God wanted, and perhaps even *needed*, Adam and Eve to violate the prohibition, for only through this transgression would they gain wisdom and autonomy. As Kushner points out, the day Adam and Eve left the Garden was the day they became fully human.

Perhaps, this *midrash* suggests, we are mistaken when we bemoan the human condition, wishing we didn't have to struggle to survive. Instead, we should appreciate our situation, knowing that when we struggle with adversity we are fulfilling our potential as thoughtful, knowing human beings.

While this perspective may seem pollyanish when applied to individuals facing catastrophes such as illness, war, and natural disasters that seem beyond their control, it makes a good deal of sense when applied to organizations. An organization that pretends it is living in an ideal world, or that longs for a "return" to such a world, is living in the false, preconscious innocence of the Garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve, such an organization must eat from the Tree of Knowledge so that it may see things as they really are.

In the words of Michael Fullan:

It seems perverse to say that problems are our friends, but we cannot develop effective responses to complex situations unless we actively seek and confront the real problems which are in fact difficult to solve. Problems are our friends because it is only through immersing ourselves in problems that we can come up with creative solutions. Problems are the route to deeper change and deeper satisfaction. In this sense effective organizations “embrace problems” rather than avoid them.<sup>5</sup>

Imagine the typical “preconscious” synagogue. When it was first created, it may, in fact, have lived in a pristine state, much like Adam and Eve in the Garden. Its members may have formed a closely knit family, sharing common values and common assumptions about being Jewish. There may have been personality conflicts, and disagreements may have arisen from time to time. But the congregation’s mission was clear, as were the lines of responsibility. The rabbi and the cantor led services, the lay leaders provided the financial support, and the membership attended faithfully.

It’s not very likely that any congregation has ever lived such an idyllic Eden-like existence. But this illusion of stability and predictability is hard to shake. Some congregations long for a return to this mythical era; others operate on automatic pilot, as though, somehow, they are still living in the Garden. They proceed as though their mission is clear and unambiguous, never fully considering that “the way we’ve always done things” may need to change. Though they may tinker a bit around the edges, they rarely acknowledge that some essential and central issues need to be addressed. They are able, somehow, to overlook the fact that their membership has changed and that the environment has also changed. People live busier lives, farther apart from one another, and community is hard to find. Anti-Semitism (or the Holocaust, or the State of Israel) no longer serves as the unifying force that it once did. Inter-marriage is more prevalent, and with it a host of new challenges. The timeless traditions of the synagogue seem further and further removed from the realities and aspirations of its

members. Too many synagogues, unfortunately, have yet to confront these developments head on and to grapple with them.

If it took eating from the forbidden fruit and exile from the Garden of Eden for people to be fully human, what is the parallel act that will shake congregations from their complacency? How can synagogues become aware of their own “nakedness” and begin thinking about how to perfect themselves? No act of God will save our congregations. We must, on our own, acquire the wisdom that is the organizational equivalent of the knowledge and awareness attained by Adam and Eve. We must become self-renewing congregations.

## **What Is the Self-Renewing Congregation?**

Social scientists have always been fascinated by the way in which the behaviors of an individual are affected by those of a larger group. While most early studies focused on peer pressure and mob psychology, a different line of inquiry began with the sociologist Kurt Lewin, who studied organizations and theorized about the factors that enable them to adapt and change. This interest intensified in the 1970s as the field of organizational development was born. Researchers watched intently as the fortunes of different institutions rose and fell, and attempted to discern the factors that contributed to their success and failure. Which corporations were able to adapt to changing economic conditions? Which schools learned to serve new, more diverse student populations and to embrace new approaches to teaching and learning? What enabled some institutions to embrace new technologies and to become technological innovators themselves? What led some to rethink their personnel policies and empower their workers?

As research into these questions began to accumulate, answers began to emerge. Some organizations, it seems, act more “intelligently” than others. They are open to new ideas, flexible in their outlook, thoughtful in their policies, and therefore better able to adapt to their changing envi-

ronments. The wisdom of these organizations is different from, and not entirely dependent upon, the intelligence of the individuals within them. Smart, capable people working in isolation, or competing with one another, do not add up to a smart organization. The effectiveness of an organization is dependent on the synergy between its members.

Moreover, the “intelligence” of an organization is not a permanent characteristic. An organization that demonstrates its acumen, flexibility, and resilience in one era may, as many did, lose these capacities a few years later. Thus, rather than using an adjective to describe what such an organization *is*, it seems more appropriate to use an adverb, which would emphasize what it *does*: It scans and interprets its environment in search of potential issues and problems, explores a range of possible new directions, takes action, assesses the outcome of its actions, and, without missing a beat, begins the cycle anew. This organization not only articulates its vision but also monitors its progress toward that vision, and it is on the lookout for ways in which the vision is incomplete and in need of revision. In the words of Peter Senge, an organizational development consultant, this organization “is continually expanding its capacity to create its future.”<sup>6</sup> Senge and others have used the term “learning organization” to characterize institutions that engage in this continuous cycle of action and reflection. Some who have applied the concept of the learning organization to congregations have used the term “learning congregation.”<sup>7</sup> By contrast, I have chosen the term “self-renewing” to emphasize the reflexive and cyclical nature of this activity, the fact that much of the learning is internal, and that the learning is incomplete without concomitant action.

Four capacities<sup>8</sup> are the cornerstones to congregational self-renewal. These are collective capacities, over and above the individual abilities of congregants and staff. Each capacity enables the congregation to do the seemingly paradoxical—to hold fast to both ends of an apparent dilemma. They are:

- Thinking back and thinking ahead: being both reflective and proactive

- Enabling leaders to follow, and followers to lead: practicing collaborative leadership
- Seeing both the forest and the trees: creating community among diverse individuals
- Honoring the past while anticipating the future: balancing tradition and change

Each of these dual capacities is discussed in a separate chapter of the book (chapters 3 through 6). In each case I explain why both of these seemingly opposite capacities are critical for synagogues to cultivate. Drawing on organizational theory and research from the worlds of business, education, and government and on selected Jewish texts, I explore what each capacity entails. Drawing on sociological studies of religious organizations and on my own decade-long experience working with synagogues, I offer examples of the problems that arise when these capacities are absent and the benefits that accrue when they are present. Developing these capacities, and balancing one against the other, is no easy matter, and each chapter includes exercises designed to help a synagogue committee or task force understand and practice the capacity in question. It also includes text study guides that can serve as springboards for discussion. Finally, each chapter includes a real-life case study of a synagogue's efforts to develop the capacity in question.

Framing these four chapters are an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter. Chapter 2 reviews the recent history of American synagogues and explains why, at this juncture, it is critical that they develop the capacity to become self-renewing. At the end of the book, chapter 7 deals with two kinds of synergy—between the four capacities discussed in this book, and between the congregation as a whole and the individuals within it.

