



Congregations: What is Required Now

By Rabbi Aaron Bisno

Here's a proposal: Jewish congregations in (your city here) can no longer afford the polite fiction that they are so distinct one from another that all could not benefit from joining forces. This is true with regards to nearly every program and every service each congregation undertakes as they compete with one another for a shrinking pool of interested participants.

Indeed, all of a city's non-Orthodox congregations and *minyanim* share too much in common for us to posture about how distinct we each are; and we stand to achieve even more in partnership as we move ahead for any of us to remain committed to anything even resembling the go-it-alone mindset of yesteryear. This is especially true with regards to collaborative strategic thinking and speaks directly to our ability to communally navigate rabbinic succession planning. And this is to say nothing of the willingness (or lack thereof) of our wider community to continue tolerating, let alone supporting, so many duplicative efforts and expenditures.

This is not a *cri de coeur* for collaboration; nor is it a manifesto for merger. In this moment, such bromides are, respectively, either too simplistic or too blunt an instrument. And anyway, there is no one-size-fits-all cookie-cutter solution to our challenges.

Rather, mine is a plea for our each and every liberal Jewish congregation in this country (its lay leaders, professional staffs, senior-, associate- and interim rabbis) to recognize for their members what is staring us all in the face:

The plans congregations made prior to March 2020 – for everything from membership engagement, retention, budgets, development, staffing and rabbinic succession planning... All of it is so much of yesteryear and must be re-examined and rethought.

And then, having determined that all of our best-laid pre-pandemic plans must be re-done, we must reach out to our friends and neighbors and together re-organize and re-prioritize for our shared challenges in new and bold ways.

I know this isn't what was written in the congregational transitions playbook. Such an approach has not been the counsel of national Jewish organizations (congregational and rabbinic) over recent decades. Indeed, quite the opposite; denominational movements always encouraged each and every congregation to "be best." So it is that generations of rabbis and Jewish professionals have relied on a recognized set of steps for a changing of the guard. But in this moment, everything is altogether different and we dare not fail to step up to the challenge of replacing the tried & true with a new & courageous approach.

I first called for a [courageous conversation](#) about our then-present reality in the Spring of 2011. Nearly a decade later, once more do I renew my call for the liberal Jewish community's congregational volunteer, professional and rabbinic leadership boldly abandoning what Sigmund Freud referred to as "the narcissism of our small differences" and together thinking and planning and together moving forward in wholly new ways.

Moreover, I urge the lay and rabbinic leaders in every North American Jewish community with multiple congregations to engage one another in similarly courageous conversations to those now under way among the presidents and professionals, respectively, in my home town of Pittsburgh.

Warning: "Thinking differently" is more difficult than it at first appears.

Thinking in new ways is hard because we find safety in the familiar and we are protective of what we know. Over millennia (and in each of our own lifetimes, to be sure) this penchant for the predictable has caused us to grow adept at creating and recognizing patterns that help us map our thinking.

Changing our thinking is, therefore, a challenge, because our relationship to our maps are embedded far below the surface level. And significantly, within these schemas, we have embedded assumptions and narratives upon which we rely to know both where and who we are.

How then can we move past the maps that took us this far and the patterns in which we have invested so much? And even more, how does an entire Jewish community pivot to achieve new outcomes?

There are three immediate actions we must take if our congregational communities are to overcome our own biases and blind spots and become both that which we desperately require now and, even more significantly, that which we hope to be able to bequeath to future generations.

First, we must rigorously diagnose our circumstance; we must challenge our essential assumptions – most especially strategic plans set in place in 2019 and earlier, as well as our most basic ideas about who we are and who we are not.

Perhaps, most painful of all, we must be willing to completely reconsider how we will best realize long-cherished, universally-desired outcomes.

In the words of William F. Buckley, “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. The next best thing is to take stock of reality.”

Easier said than done, of course. Change itself is never easy and thinking our way into new ways of accomplishing a goal is even harder. This is especially true when a congregation’s identity is too closely tied to a given individual, a beloved building, or the notion that their expression of Judaism is unique.

Therefore, second, we must ask better questions – of ourselves and of one another. And we must demand of our leaders, both locally and nationally, that they explore innovative thinking and expose our people to all the options available, including those which already reside in the buildings down the block and around the corner, and yet are not known within our respective board rooms, as they might never otherwise show up on a SWOT analysis.

The world is not as it was in 2019 (and for the last 100 years). Therefore, to proceed with plans and time-tables made in our respective rabbinic offices and board rooms in “days long ago” is short-sighted, ill-fated and at cross-purposes with what is in the best interests of both individual congregations and our entire Jewish community as a whole.

Everything (in every sector of our economy and country) is different today than when first our plans were set in motion – let no one give you to believe otherwise – and so, too, must our response to this new reality be different than we had imagined it would be only 5, 6 months ago.

Thus, we must stop looking at the reality we face through the same lens we were using pre-pandemic. We are in an altogether new place today than at the beginning of this calendar year and this reality demands us courageously being willing to challenge & to reimagine all we thought we knew for certain.

As Albert Einstein taught: "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

Further, if Einstein was correct and the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result, we would be crazy to double down on what got us here.

So, ask not: "What keeps you up at night?" Ask rather: "What gets you out of bed in the morning?" Or, paraphrasing the words of the late Robert Kennedy, "Ask not, 'why?;' dream and ask, 'why not?'"

Third and finally, rather than thinking only of oneself or one's congregation, we must work tirelessly for shared outcomes and the greatest common good.

Why? Because no one congregation can solve its own challenges if it goes about that work solo; it is simply folly to believe otherwise.

Or, in the prescient words of Peter Drucker, "If you're trying to save your own job (rabbinic position or congregation), you're probably solving the wrong problem."

Thus, in a spirit of *Clal Yisrael* (true community), before we begin to ask of ourselves and one another our new and better questions, let us stipulate that, it shall only be in our working in partnership with one another (as opposed to continuing to work in opposition) that our Jewish communities thrive (let alone survive).

Ten years ago Rodef Shalom, the congregation I've served for sixteen years, first adopted a strategic plan that anticipated the synergies and new combined models of Jewish community that would be required going forward. And we have enjoyed consistent and modest successes in these efforts; but much more is possible and far more is required.

Today, Rodef Shalom's lay leadership and I continue to believe that it will be in our congregations coming together – in the board room, on the pulpit, in the pews and in

the lives of our people – that we shall truly accomplish all we are capable of realizing on behalf of our entire liberal Jewish community.

My hope is that the Jewish leaders reading this article do not miss this once-in-a-century opportunity to realize our collective future by courageously seizing this singular moment and, therein, laying the groundwork that will strengthen our entire congregational landscape for our determining to put the principle of addressing the wider Jewish community's present needs and the next generation's future hope ahead of our own personal preferences.

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