

# SYNAGOGUES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

RABBI LAWRENCE A HOFFMAN

# 1. RETHINKING SYNAGOGUES: WHAT SYNAGOGUES ARE; NOT WHAT THEY DO

“If people feel they share values with a company, they will stay loyal to the brand” (Howard Schultz).

“I was one of the founders; I proudly paid my dues for almost 40 years. Truth be told, I still had money to go on paying, but then I realized that the synagogue no longer stood for anything unique, the way it had. It had become like every other synagogue, and since I wasn't using it anyway all the time, the way I used to, I quit. But it wasn't the money really, even though I said it was. I just didn't care all that much if it stayed around any longer” (Anonymous Synagogue Member).

Evidence is very high that great numbers of people see no ultimate value in synagogues; and without an ultimate shared value, they have no loyalty beyond the services the synagogue offers (school, youth group, HHD services, etc).

## Result:

- Limited liability community,
- Revolving door membership,
- Constant frenetic activity to convince people of synagogue's value → Frequent Flyer Synagogue

## LESSON:

*It's not about what a synagogue does; they all pretty do much the same thing.*

*Nor is it even about how well they do it (although they have to do it well).*

*It's about what a synagogue is.*

*Synagogues need to rethink what a synagogue is.*



## 2. IT'S A GREAT TIME TO RUN A SYNAGOGUE: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

### 1. Broad Trends: Societal Changes

a. Life after 50

b. Ethnicity to Purpose: peoplehood with purpose

c. Economies: industrial (classical Reform) to service (suburban Reform) to experience (Intentional Reform)

## 2. IT'S A GREAT TIME TO RUN A SYNAGOGUE: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

### 1. Broad Trends: Societal Changes

- d. Jewish civic virtue to limited liability community
- e. Religious Middle Ages; secular modernity?
- f. “Spiritual but not religious”
- g. Identity: New Question, not “if” but “How much?” and “In what ways?”

So: *What is the shape of the synagogue to come?*

## 2. IT'S A GREAT TIME TO RUN A SYNAGOGUE: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

### 2. Change of board perspective

- a. Board functions: fiduciary, governance/  
operative, generative
- b. From “how to what” to “why”; need to be  
“why”-driven
- c. Additive to Transformative

*So: How up to date is your own board?*

## 2. IT'S A GREAT TIME TO RUN A SYNAGOGUE: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?

### 3. Culture, Program, and System

*Culture*: the **WHO** of institutional life; the institutional soul; our values;

*Program*: the **WHAT** we do;

*System*: the **HOW** we operate



## 2. IT'S A GREAT TIME TO RUN A SYNAGOGUE: ARE WE HAVING FUN YET?


### 3. Culture, Program, and System

Standard strategic planning ignores the **WHO**. It jumps to the **WHAT** and **HOW**.

- Inventory of strengths and weaknesses
- Improve weaknesses; build on strengths
- Prioritize goals
- Determine necessary support network: assign authority and responsibility
- Set financial plan to accomplish the above

*So: Do you know your own culture?  
How would you describe it?*

### 3. THE SYNAGOGUE FACE

- Who we think we are
  - Our culture: Who we really are
  - Our branding: Who we say we are  
So ... who others think we are
  - Our system: How we operate, support and run ourselves.
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## 4. TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: SUMMARY OF PROCESS

Conversations and Survey with a Buzz!!

Necessary Staff? and Resources System

→ *Sh'ma* → *V'ahavta* → implementation →  
Allocation of Resources

Program and System

## 4. TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: SUMMARY OF PROCESS

All of which is supported by work with congregation

- Ongoing conversations: elicit information, but also prepare the BUZZ: sermons, messaging
- Engage congregation and community along the way
- Final feedback celebration

## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### 1. Sh'ma Statement: “Who we are” or, better, “Who we want to be”

- A “one liner” that is *memorable; aspirational and inspirational*
- A lean-in line; a “gulp” sentence; apt to elicit questions (= the *v'ahavta* addendum)
- A shorthand but stirring call to move ahead toward a goal worth attaining.

## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### 1. Sh'ma Statement: “Who we are” or, better: “Who we want to be”

- Defines a “niche” for the synagogue, not be something everyone is saying; the “something more” that recommends *this* synagogue over others.
- Something the clergy, especially, can stand behind; something to get them up in the morning; what they carry into the pulpit every Shabbat.
- What the board, committees, leadership, and staff keep before them always, as a reminder of the direction that should guide their every effort; their touchstone to measure success.

## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### 2. *V'ahavta* elaboration: “How we show it”, or, better: “How we *would* show it”

- Upon hearing the *Sh'ma*, we are intrigued enough to ask, “Yes, but what does it mean?” *V'ahavta* answers that question by delineating the consequences of what the *Sh'ma* implies.
- What did not make it into the *Sh'ma* goes here.
- The content is midway between the intriguing but vague *Sh'ma* and the detailed specifics of programmatic application

## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### 3. Implementation of V'ahavta:

“How we live it, or, better:

“How specifically we would be different *if we really lived up to it.*”

- Programs (school, worship, men's club, sisterhood, preschool, etc.)
- Constituencies



## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### 3. Implementation of V'ahavta:

“How we live it, or, better:


“How specifically we would be different *if we really lived up to it.*”

#### System

- Physical plant (what we look like: inviting? Somber? Closed shop? Formidable?); and location
- Communications: internal and external
- Board culture

## 5. THREE STAGES IN SHORT

### System

- Organization: who does what and how?
  - Flow of concentric circles (professionals, loyalists or regulars, nodals or movers, and marginals)
  - Bridges to relationship (greeters, membership professional)
  - Morale
  - Fiscal realities
  - Maximization of assets
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# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Characteristics of a Sh'ma Statement

1. “Gulp!” It is *compelling*; what you are afraid to say because you are not sure you even believe it (but you would like to).
2. It is *spiritual*


# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Characteristics of a Sh'ma Statement

3. It is three lines at most: *memorable, repeatable, “align”able* (an “on message” message).
  4. It is *inspirational and aspirational*.
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# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Characteristics of a Sh'ma Statement

5. It is *authentic* to “our best selves”: the way we were, modified by the way we want to be.
  6. It is believable: consistent with who we have been; and something we can say *concisely, proudly honestly*.
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# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Common Errors

1. **The Consensus Trap: Consensus erodes boldness; be bold!**

e.g. Consensus: "We are a warm and welcoming community"

Boldness: ???

# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Common Errors

2. The “Look-Deeper” Challenge: What you get should be more than what you see

“Warm and welcoming community”: But what is behind, beneath, and below that – How can we go deeper than that?

# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Common Errors

### 3. Anticipate Tomorrow

“Warm and welcoming” is the response to yesterday’s realization that synagogues can be cold and distant. What is tomorrow’s challenge?



# APPENDIX A: THE SH'MA STATEMENT IN DETAIL

## Common Errors

4. Don't just get the word out; get the message through: to...

- \* **Ourselves** (are we, ourselves, passionate about it?)
- \* **Our constituency** (are we passionate enough to want to make them passionate about it?)
- \* **A chosen "market" of outside listeners** (who are we targeting as our listeners outside the Temple community?)

# SH'MA GROUP WORKSHEET

Note: Avoid the Program Trap:

Focus on who we are, not what we do.

e.g. **What we do:** hold interfaith conversations with the churches

**Who we are:** a partnering voice of conscience for a troubled time

# WHO ARE WE?

1. **Who we once were** (Why did it matter? And to whom?)
2. **At our best, we are** (add a set of adjectives):
3. **Who we are now?** (Does it still matter? To whom?)

In becoming who we are,

- a. what has happened round about us (the megatrends)?
- b. What did or didn't we do to keep up?

4. **Who we want to become**

A function of WHAT the trends are, WHO we are at our best, and WHY it matters (to whom)

# APPENDIX B: ORGANIZING V'AHAVTA

## *Our Legacy*

Sum up the past. What do we bring happily into the present as a legacy that should define what we stand for. But also, how does that legacy reach into the future? No one joins the past.

# APPENDIX B: ORGANIZING V'AHAVTA

## *Our Community*

Who are we as a community? What sort of people come here? How do we live with one another? What guides our relationships?



# APPENDIX B: ORGANIZING V'AHAVTA

## *Our Passions*

What do we do here, not a laundry list of what everyone expects anyway, but what uniquely does one find here in terms of what we are passionate about doing?



# APPENDIX B: ORGANIZING V'AHAVTA

## *Our Commitment*

**What matters to us more than anything? What are we ultimately committed to do and to be?**



## APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

*My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips  
from speaking guile.*

*Open my heart to your Torah, that my soul may  
follow your commandments.*



# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Sh'tikah*: Silence

*All my life I have been raised among sages, and I have found nothing better for a person than silence (Pirkei Avot 1:17).*

**In order to listen, first keep silent: watch, listen, reflect, and understand.**

# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Dibbur: Speech*

*Speak as if God were listening to everything you say (Martin Buber).*

**Speak carefully, so as not to hurt others either in words or in tone.**

# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Savlanut: Patience*

*Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch would restrain his anger until he had examined the codes to learn whether anger was permissible. How much anger could he feel after spending time searching the authorities in the Shulchan Arukh?*

The Hebrew word for patience comes from a root meaning, “to bear or carry a heavy load.” While listening, try to feel the load of the people you are hearing.

## APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

### *Machloket l'shem Shamayim: “Debates for the sake of heaven”*

*Rabbi Chalafta taught: “When two or more discuss words of Torah, God’s presence rests among them.”*

All discussion should be for the higher purposes of God; not rooted in individual gain. Sometimes, it is better to lose an argument than to win it. What matters is arguing as if God is present for the debate, and then doing the right thing in the end.

# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Elu V'elu: Both are the words of the living God*

*In debates between Hillel and Shammai a heavenly voice proclaimed that since some decision had ultimately to be made, the opinion of Hillel would generally prevail. But, nonetheless: “Elu V’elu divrei Elohim chayim – Both Hillel and Shammai teach the words of the living God.”*

**Look for truths even where you disagree; the losing side in a “debate for the sake of heaven” also deserves honor.**

# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Derech Eretz: Decency*

*Hillel used to say: “In a place where human decency is lacking, practice decency yourself.”*

Respect and human decency are signs of good character. Inappropriate outbursts by others should not prompt more of the same in us.

# APPENDIX C: VALUES FOR CONDUCTING MEETINGS

## *Dayyenu: It is Enough*

*“There is a time to keep silent and a time to speak” (Eccl.3:7)*

**Be sure to speak the truth as you see it; but when you have had your say, say nothing more. Move on internally**



# Rethinking Synagogues

Rabbi Lawrence A Hoffman

