

to discuss the summer, and to ready themselves to return to a full schedule in fall. Each year, an annual theme is announced at the dinner, such as the Year of Education, the Year of Social Action, or the Year of Sacred Moments. Each committee decides on ways to integrate its work into the major theme of the year. During the Year of Education, the library planned a series of book displays. The worship committee incorporated educational information in the weekly *Shabbat* newsletter. The communications committee focused on raising the educational value of the congregational bulletin by adding educational features.

- Chairs of each of the programmatic committees of the congregation meet with the rabbi and the educator three to four times a year. It is an opportunity for the lay and professional leaders of the congregation to share and to learn what is happening in each arena of congregational life, to reflect on how they are fulfilling their responsibilities, and to become reinvigorated. The meeting is also a forum for addressing challenges and seeking solutions.

When an educator and a rabbi see that they are partners in the same endeavor and when they are able to share a common vision not only for the religious school but also

for the congregation as a whole, then both the educator and the rabbi are fulfilled in their roles within the congregation. This situation comes about through mutual trust and respect and an openness to learning from one another. It comes about when the rabbi and educator are willing to discuss frustrations, failures, and problems as well as successes. It comes about when the rabbi and educator can deal with issues with flexibility, humor, enthusiasm, and willingness to share responsibilities.

After writing this paper together, we sat down and I, the educator, said to the rabbi, “Why do you think it really works here?” He thought for a minute and then said, “Because neither one of us cares who gets the credit or the attention for a particular program. We work as a team.” Perhaps that is the whole article in a nutshell.

Rabbi Kudan has been the rabbi of the Am Shalom in Glencoe for 30 years and will retire in June. Sharon Morton has worked successfully with him for 26 years. A new rabbi has been chosen for the congregation. Both Sharon and Rabbi Kudan believe that the search committee has exercised great wisdom in choosing the new rabbi. And everyone looks forward to the coming years with hope, anticipation, and excitement.

A Systems Approach to School and Synagogue Change: The Case of Beth Am Israel

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In recent years, Jewish supplemental schools have begun reimagining themselves not only as transmitters of Jewish knowledge, but as builders of Jewish identity. However, despite efforts to reform supplemental education through family education, revised textbooks, and innovative curricula, such initiatives have not sufficiently transformed supplemental schools into effective instruments for the construction of Jewish identity.

Efforts to reform supplemental schools through programmatic change have overlapped with the current trans-denominational movement for synagogue change. Jewish educational leaders, including Jonathan Woocher and Isa Aron, have challenged the Jewish community to look at the issues of supplemental education and synagogue change in tandem. Congregations and their schools are

being asked to re-envision themselves holistically, focusing on systemic transformation rather than “additive change” such as new and innovative programs. Synagogues and their schools are seeking ways to operate as an integrated whole, creating communities which focus on imparting Jewish knowledge in a way which strengthens their members’ core sense of Jewish identity.

Congregation Beth Am Israel, a Conservative synagogue in suburban Philadelphia, is one congregation laboring toward the intersection of school and synagogue change. Over the past decade, Beth Am Israel has begun to think of itself as an integrated community in which the synagogue and supplemental school are interrelated and interdependent. As a result, the congregation has become a community of shared practice, celebration, and

learning, rather than a synagogue with a school as an adjunct component. Change at Beth Am Israel has been transformative, rather than merely additive, because it has been guided by a systems framework.

DEFINING A SYSTEMS FRAMEWORK

The use of systems analysis has permeated almost every academic discipline in the past 50 years (Palmer, 1998). The word system comes from the Greek verb *sunistanai*, meaning “to cause to stand together.” Peter Senge describes a systems approach “as a discipline for seeing wholes” and “a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots’” (1990, p. 69). A systems approach promotes a comprehensive view in which a set of elements functions as a dynamic whole to achieve a given purpose. A systems framework, then, is a perspective that focuses on identifying and managing all of the factors impacting the achievement of a desired goal.

TOWARD THE CREATION OF AN INTEGRATED SYSTEM

Ten years ago, Beth Am Israel effectively functioned as a provider of Jewish services and programming for diverse constituencies. It defined its mission as “allocat[ing] resources to: worship; adult and child education, including a religious school; opportunities for involvement with Israel; social action in the Jewish community and the community at large; and social, musical, artistic and inter-generational activities.” This programmatic “smorgasbord” approach often promoted a sense of sub-communities pursuing distinctive agendas, with relatively little communication or effort at integration.

While this approach often produced strong and popular programming, over time its limitations emerged. Programs sometimes exacerbated conflicts between constituencies or undermined significant shared goals. For example, it became clear that scheduling religious school and family education on Sunday mornings conflicted with the objective of fostering a strong *Shabbat* morning worship community in a few ways; while an extensive family education program Sunday mornings strengthened parental involvement in children’s learning, it also reinforced the disincentive for families to attend services on *Shabbat*. Although many families with preschoolers

adopted the practice of attending “Tot *Shabbat*” morning services, they stopped participating regularly on *Shabbat* once their children were old enough to attend supplemental school on Sunday mornings.

Beth Am’s staff realized that by independently pursuing different programs, the congregation and the school were operating a self-defeating system. This insight was a first step to working within a systems approach, in which the synagogue and school recognize themselves not as separate entities, but rather as instruments to achieve a common goal. Instead of seeking to improve an inherently flawed model, the staff determined to try a new, more systemic approach.

THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFYING A COMMON GOAL

The congregation’s rabbi, educational director, and lay leaders began by involving the community in clarifying its shared goals. The staff engaged congregants and committees in reflective exercises to identify common core values. Like many synagogues, Beth Am went through a lengthy process of developing and articulating a vision statement. As part of the process, staff and lay leaders shared research on alternative models of synagogues and schools with the education committee and the synagogue board. One result was a shared commitment to the ideal of all elements of the synagogue community striving to work together in an integrative fashion.

The visioning process produced a statement identifying several important shared goals: 1) the expectation of member engagement; 2) a focus on building a community that lives according to the rhythm of Jewish time and is marked by commitment to Jewish learning and practice; and 3) the identification of *Shabbat* as the primary time for building community. Beth Am articulated its goal as becoming a “*Shabbat*-centered community” anchored by the sacred time, activities, and language of *Shabbat*.

PROCESS TO REDESIGN: ALL PARTS WORKING TOWARD A COMMON GOAL

Within a systems framework, once a goal is determined, it is necessary to examine each component of the system in reference to the goal. After identifying the ways in

which each part contributes to or undermines the goal, the next step is redesigning each element of the system to align with its goals.

In the case of Beth Am Israel, it would have been easy to simply conclude that the Sunday school and its family education program undermined the goal of fostering *Shabbat* community, and that the solution was to move them to *Shabbat*. Such a conclusion, however, would have been inadequate and simplistic. The congregation understood its goal as applying to the entire community, not simply to the school or the existing *Shabbat* morning community. In order to achieve the goal of creating a *Shabbat*-centered community, all parts of the synagogue needed to engage in a process of reflection, experimentation, and alignment. As a result, the goal became the central focus for redesigning scheduling, curriculum, programming, staff development, and synagogue governance, for adults and children alike: in other words, systemic change.

TIME CHANGE SUPPORTS COMMON GOAL

Shabbat became the primary time for integrating the various components of Beth Am Israel's synagogue system. Realigning the synagogue's calendar with its goals brought adult, child, and family learning and celebration together at a common time. Integrating the synagogue's gatherings and programs brought diverse constituencies—day school families, “empty-nesters,” and religious school families—together in time and in purpose, creating a new shared center.

Beth Am's staff and lay leadership developed a pilot program in which families with school-aged children could elect to educate their children on *Shabbat* morning, rather than on Sunday. Parents who selected this option (termed *Beit Midrash*) understood that they themselves were expected to participate regularly in the *Shabbat* morning community through study and worship. Today, more than six years after its inception, more than half of Beth Am Israel's families with school-aged children select the *Beit Midrash* option. (Third through sixth graders also attend on Thursday afternoon. The *Beit Sefer* program, for families who do not choose *Beit Midrash*, includes adult and family learning in addition to children's attendance at *Beit Sefer* on Sunday and Thursday.)

On a typical *Shabbat*, more than 120 *Beit Midrash* children and their parents gather with other congregants of all ages for coffee, croissants, and conversation, followed by a morning of shared learning, worship, and socializing. From 9–10 am, *Beit Midrash* children are in their classrooms, teens are acting as *madrichim* (teaching aides), and adults are learning in other classrooms. As many as five or six adult education classes, including study of the weekly *Torah* portion with commentaries, are offered simultaneously. These classes bring together congregants of all ages with diverse interests, including *Beit Midrash* parents, day school parents, and teenagers. The Learning Council, a lay committee, organizes offerings, recruits congregants to teach individual sessions or mini-series, and coordinates the adult learning schedule with the children's.

Afterward, adults assemble in the sanctuary to continue the worship service, while students gather for age-appropriate *minyanim*. Often, parents and other adults visit students in their classrooms, and parents join their children in family education or *minyan*. At the end of services, adults and children gather for *kiddush* or a luncheon.

Organizing the congregation's life around the structured time of *Shabbat* creates opportunities for the repeated encounters needed to nurture relationships across diverse constituencies.

CURRICULUM CHANGE SUPPORTS COMMON GOAL

Beth Am Israel's curriculum for both adults and children has been re-aligned with the *shul's* goals to build skills and understanding, enabling meaningful participation in a *Shabbat*-centered community, in which learning and living *Shabbat* permeate and enrich daily living during the rest of the week. The community cultivates a common language around *Torah*, prayer and *mitzvot* for all ages which is affectionately known within the congregation as *Beth Ameese* — a shared communal vocabulary. Each year, the Learning Council determines a theme that runs through the educational programming for adults and children alike. There is a conscious effort to link and coordinate the content and process of adult and children's learning.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTS COMMON GOAL

Because teachers play a key role in the synagogue's system, their needs have been part of the realignment focus. Teachers are now integrated into the community through regular connections with congregants and parents on *Shabbat* morning. They begin the year by attending a *Shabbaton* retreat where they build a sense of *kehilah* and support among themselves. Additionally, teachers learn together on *Shabbat* several times each month, while younger students attend *minyanim* with their parents and older students join the larger congregation in services. Teachers are immersed in the language and values of the community so they can reinforce them along with parents.

ARCHITECTURE SUPPORTS COMMON GOAL

By a fortunate coincidence, the synagogue is designed so that the sanctuary is the center of the building and the classrooms line its edges. There is no separate educational wing. In the coming year, Beth Am Israel will break ground for a new facility that will replicate this design that integrates the congregation's learning and worship functions and connects children and adults. The architecture expresses the concept that the congregation's center is *Shabbat* and that the learning components represent gateways by which diverse groups find a way to that shared center.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE SUPPORTS COMMON GOAL

The realigning process has led to a new governance structure which allows for integrated planning. The rabbi, educational director, and lay leadership collaborate closely to coordinate programs, schedules and curriculum. Two newly formed committees nurture the change process. The Learning Council oversees learning for adults to ensure that there are links with learning for children, while a Developing Community Committee creates programs and policies to maximize congregants' engagement and sense of belonging.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is an important aspect of a systems approach because it can keep the decision-makers focused on the power of a change to further organizational goals, rather than simply allowing them to react to feedback on whether participants enjoyed a particular program. For Beth Am Israel, the relevant question for evaluation is whether a change fosters a *Shabbat*-centered community. A mark of the success of the Beit Midrash experiment, for example, was a survey in which families who participated in the program identified its most important aspect as the sense of belonging to a community.

CONCLUSION

While many challenges remain for Beth Am Israel, the insights gained from its small-scale experiments have resulted in a broader, systemic perspective. The congregation now strives to design its governance structure, curriculum, scheduling, staff development, and even its architecture so as to achieve a common goal. Lay and professional leadership share a vocabulary and perspective on institutional change that reflects an understanding that the congregation is a living organism that is strengthened when it operates as an integrated whole. Based upon Beth Am Israel's experience, a systems approach is a promising tool for congregations seeking to move beyond disjointed efforts at change and pursue a more integrated model of Jewish religious community.

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Beth Israel Synagogue is a historic former Jewish synagogue building at 238 Columbia Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Built in 1901, it was the first and principal synagogue to serve the East Cambridge area, and is a fine local example of Romanesque architecture. Now converted into residential condominiums, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.