

# SYNERGY



UJA - FEDERATION OF NEW YORK AND SYNAGOGUES TOGETHER

## Sustaining Vibrant Congregations

By Sacha Litman

Particularly in these challenging economic times, leaders of many New York synagogues ask themselves: Is our current business model financially sustainable? Is it possible to maintain and even grow our *kehillah*, rather than lose members, to create the sacred community we envision? Can our board develop and implement purposeful strategies for change toward sustainability and growth based on common knowledge rather than individual guesswork?

Measuring Success recently completed an initial pilot of a promising new project: Sustainable Synagogue Business Models, a vision- and data-driven approach to synagogue decision making for community building and financial sustainability, funded by SYNERGY: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together. Using an approach that has already helped Jewish community centers, day schools, federations, camps, and Hillels to create plans for stable growth and an increased responsiveness to members' needs, the project enabled

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SACHA LITMAN



CYD B. WEISSMAN

## Whole-Person Learning and Assessment: A Worthy Destination and a Way to Correct Course

By Cyd B. Weissman

Pioneering congregations in New York, known as the Coalition of Innovating Congregations, are significantly altering the direction of Jewish education. They no longer are heading for seventh-grade bar and bat mitzvahs, although it remains a stop. And they no longer are heading toward empty promises — like learners will “learn Jewish values, pray in Hebrew, celebrate holidays, love Israel, know Torah, practice mitzvot, and be lifelong learners” as a result of attending religious school classes two to six hours a week. Rather than heading toward a way station

or along a route unlikely to reach its destination, these Jewish educational leaders have set a new course supported by LOMED: Learner Outcomes and Measurement for Effective Educational Design. These congregations are headed toward focused priority goals.

A few worthy, reasonable, long-term outcomes for learners — priority goals derived from the vision of these congregations — equips them with a “north star” for making decisions. Replacing an unruly list of disparate outcomes, coalition congregations focus on long-term

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DRU GREENWOOD

## From the Director...

### Shalom, friends:

Is the current dues-based business model at synagogues sustainable over the long term? And even if it is, does it align with the vision of sacred community we seek, or does it undermine that vision? Assuming we can design a better model, how might a healthy, established congregation move in that direction? These are the challenging questions posed a year and a half ago by Michael White, rabbi of Sinai Temple of Roslyn Heights and chair of the Long Island SYNERGY Rabbinic Advisory Council's committee charged with exploring alternative synagogue business models.

Finding wide resonance with these questions among synagogue leaders throughout Long Island, Westchester, and New York City, particularly in light of current daunting economic challenges, UJA-Federation's SYNERGY leaders contracted with Measuring Success to test a new approach.

Sacha Litman's lead article gives a taste of the new tools developed and the process of discovery, realignment, and change that six New York synagogues have begun. You will find reflections of their leaders throughout, and I want to acknowledge them here: Community Synagogue of Rye, Huntington Jewish Center, The Jewish Center, Kane Street Synagogue, Temple Shaaray Tefila in Manhattan, and Westchester Jewish Center. Urban and suburban, varied sizes and movements — what they most have in common are lay, clergy, and professional leaders committed to work courageously and persistently toward a sustainable, vision-aligned congregation.

This same commitment is reflected too in the work of 23 synagogues in the Coalition of Innovating Congregations, described here by Cyd Weissman. Drawing on the experience of the ReImagine project's past six years in New York, these congregations are motivated by their vision of transformative Jewish education.

What both projects share is a renewed attention to meaningful assessment, to gathering data that can be used both to see with clarity and objectivity the current state of the congregation in particular areas of focus, and to set benchmarks against which to measure strategies for realignment of action in service of vision — as Rabbi Weintraub teaches us, something like the *t'shuvah* project in which each of us is engaged these days.

Do take a minute to review some of the programs coming up this fall in which your synagogue can take part — the Shabbat of Wholeness, Holiness, and Wellness, with its focus on mental health, and Jewish Social Action Month — all of *Cheshvan*. Check out too the programs for you as synagogue leaders. Learning from the pilot congregations, we have designed several options for reviewing the foundational tools for gathering data for synagogues, which are intended to be of immediate use to all. As always, watch your SYNERGY e-mails or visit SYNERGY online for updated information.

May you, your loved ones, and the *kehillot* you lead be blessed with courage, insight, and renewal to life and peace in the year ahead.

*L'shanah tovah tikatevu,*

Dru Greenwood  
Director of SYNERGY:  
UJA-Federation of New York and  
Synagogues Together

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priority outcomes, such as learners will be on a journey “of helping mend the world” or “applying Torah to daily life.” The assumption behind priority goals is that learners who deeply experience and reflect on a

meaningful Jewish journey in their youth will be prepared as adults to construct their own life journeys rooted in Judaism.

Teachers and educational leaders who are redesigning congregational education to reach priority goals must

make informed decisions. Random anecdotes about students aren’t enough. Checklists on how well a child reads a Hebrew prayer are also insufficient. To know how, when, and where learning needs to take place, coalition congregations are pioneering a new framework for assessment.

## LOMED: Learner Outcomes and Measurement for Effective Educational Design

In Hebrew, *lomed* means “learn.” In New York, LOMED creates powerful Jewish learning in congregations that moves to life!

**To create powerful learning, 23 leading congregational teams grapple with four essential questions about learning and measurement:**

1. What are our long- and short-term goals for learners?
2. How do we build 21st-century models of congregational learning that include the family, the community, and real-life experience?
3. How can we measure the growth of learners over time to inform continued innovation?
4. How do we continue to build ongoing teacher education about measurement and powerful learning so congregational learning moves to life?

These congregations, known as the Coalition of Innovating Congregations, lead the nation in creating powerful Jewish learning inspired by compelling visions of education.

Their bold visions imagine a Jewish education for children and families that nurture the whole of a person — knowledge, beliefs and values, action, and a sense of a belonging. A Jewish education for meaningful and purposeful life journeys.

LOMED is funded by UJA-Federation of New York and supported by BJENY-SAJES, the Hebrew Union College (HUC) and Jewish Theological Seminary’s Leadership Institute for Congregational School Educators, and the Experiment in Congregational Education of HUC’s Rhea Hirsch School of Education.

## Whole-Person Learning and Assessment

The whole-person framework, adapted from research in university education and day schools, creates learning and assessment about what a child knows (head), what a child puts into action (hand), what a child believes and values (heart), and where a child belongs (feet). The whole of a person, not just the head or the heart, needs to be nurtured to enable a Jewish child to grow into an engaged Jewish adult.

“We were very good at teaching and assessing skills and knowledge,” says Nancy Parkes, educational director of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, New York. “Whole-person learning expands our reach.” Through LOMED, Temple Israel Center (TIC) identified a priority goal for children to apply Torah to daily life. Knowing Torah is not the same as living Torah; so in a first-year pilot, leading teachers at TIC identified outcomes for kindergarteners’ knowledge, actions, beliefs and values, and sense of belonging. Then, to gather the data on whole-person growth, TIC enlisted parents as assessors. Parents learned how to document the children’s Jewish experiences over a year. Children were given teddy

Business Models help leaders focus their limited resources on those hypotheses that *are* supported by the data, instead of chasing after those that are not. Once unsupported assumptions are laid to rest, the leadership is able to dig deeper into understanding the true landscape of their membership and devise strategies that respond to a closer picture of congregants and the vision of the congregation.

## How Enthusiastic are Congregants About Their Synagogue?

The survey included a question proven across multiple sectors and industries (nonprofit and for profit) to be the best predictor of future growth and retention: How likely are you to recommend our organization to a friend? On a five-point scale, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, an aggregate 45 percent of pilot synagogue respondents strongly agreed. This figure, known as the promoter score, aligns closely with data collected by Measuring Success and others in Jewish Community Centers, another set of membership organizations. At the other end of the spectrum, about one out of every 10 synagogue respondents was a “detractor,” meaning they answered in the lowest three points of the scale. Perhaps not surprisingly, this figure aligns closely with the actual attrition rate for members and program participants in the pilot synagogues, and thus represents those who are likely to leave the synagogue.

Most important, overall synagogue promoter scores fall in a wide range from one synagogue to the next, and can be influenced by initiating intentional strategies for change. Within the pilot group of just six synagogues, the promoter scores between synagogues had a range of more than 30 percentage points. Measuring Success has worked with many organizations, including day schools, that were able to increase their promoter score, meaning they increased their ability to grow, by 10 percentage points in one year by focusing on strategies to strengthen their assets and mitigate their weaknesses.

## What Makes a “Promoter”?

In order to plan for growth and vibrancy, leaders of participating synagogues needed insight into what drives the promoter score both throughout the synagogue and within discrete segments of the congregation, so they could begin investing their energies in areas with the greatest potential impact. Measuring Success analysis of all 2,000 survey responses indicated the top five factors driving the likelihood to promote a synagogue, in order of importance, were:

1. Vision and values are compelling
2. Feel welcomed by clergy
3. Rabbis’ vision of Jewish life resonates
4. Meaningful social connections
5. Feel welcomed by lay leadership (one-third the effect of welcoming clergy)

Let’s look a bit more closely at the number-one driver, the factor most closely associated with synagogue promoters. When congregants and community members feel compelled by the synagogue’s vision and values, they are most likely to highly recommend their synagogue to a friend. So if synagogue leaders want to keep active congregants and attract new ones, articulating and giving life to a compelling vision and values is not just nice to have, it’s “need to have”.

Furthermore, we found a measurable difference across all synagogues between how members felt about the vision and values expressed by the rabbi — the number-three driver of the promoter score — and the vision and values they attributed to the synagogue as an institution. This clear congregant perception of imbalance, sometimes quite pronounced in one direction or the other, gave leaders the opportunity to strategize to strengthen a key area of relative weakness as well as build on an area of relative strength.

## Is Price Causing Synagogue Membership to Drop?

Another hypothesis we heard frequently was that membership fees, averaging around \$2,000 per family, are just too expensive in these current times, when Jews are increasingly reluctant to become members.

Due to the sensitive nature of this issue, Measuring Success approached it in the survey using a variety of price-sensitivity questions and

calculations. A clear trend emerged: respondents at nearly all income levels did not have an issue with the price of synagogue membership in itself; the problem was with the lack of *perceived value* they felt they got for their membership dollars.

Let's try to understand "value for the dollar" using an example with which we are all familiar: dining in restaurants. Most of us would be happy to pay \$40 a person for a dinner in a fine restaurant because it delivers a great experience on multiple levels. But charge \$40 or even \$20 a person for mediocre food with a cafeteria-style atmosphere, and few if any would choose to eat there. Applied to synagogues, if a member regularly attends Shabbat services, takes advantage of adult education classes, uses pastoral services, and has a close circle of friends at the synagogue, \$2,000 seems like a great price. But if a synagogue member attends only on High Holidays, \$2,000 seems exorbitant, and even \$1,000 seems unjustified.

The data revealed that nearly 50 percent of synagogue members do not feel they get a good value for their membership dollars, responding in the lowest three points on the scale. Thus, except for the promoters of the synagogue (those who would "strongly recommend"), nearly everyone else did not feel that the synagogue provided them with a good value for their money.

If synagogues cut their membership fees further, will it generate lower attrition in membership? The data suggest this is unlikely. So how can

synagogues make families feel they are getting more value for the same dollars? A simple answer is to get them more engaged in synagogue life — the more activities a family participates in, the more value they see. But not everyone will be heavily involved at every point in his or her lifetime.

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*To have data is absolutely indispensable to assist in understanding the synagogue's strengths and weaknesses, and identifying the beliefs and attitudes of its members.*

— Rabbi Moishe Steigmann  
Westchester Jewish Center

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Interestingly, our data showed that the strongest driver of value for the dollar is the degree to which respondents feel the synagogue is transparent with how it manages its budget. For example, in most synagogues, a portion of empty nesters' membership fees go to subsidize religious school for younger families. If subsidizing religious school is a core value of the synagogue, then that must be regularly taught and communicated. Younger families should appreciate that they are being subsidized, and recognize that if they leave the synagogue after b'nai mitzvah, the financial model does not work. And if empty nesters understand that they are subsidizing religious-school families, just as the prior generation did for them, then they can feel good about their contribution. Pooling money is critical to building a community. But if we treat the synagogue budget

as a black box, then the congregants will not understand the values of the synagogue or see value for their membership dollars, and they will disconnect.

## Synagogues and Early-Childhood Centers

As expected, each of the six synagogues in the initial group had a unique profile. However, those with an early-childhood center all carried, to a greater or lesser extent, the dual assumptions that the center provided an entry into the synagogue for early engagement of young families, and that the center was an income generator for the congregation — a win-win scenario. A closer analysis using the survey, financial, and people-flow tools both revealed the limits of these assumptions and pointed to ways the limits might be mitigated to align the early-childhood center more closely with the larger purposes of the synagogue.

Assigning commensurate synagogue overhead costs to the early-childhood center — space, maintenance, time of the clergy, and administrative services — showed that most centers actually run at a significant deficit. Why is this important? If a synagogue perceives its early-childhood program as a cash cow, it may disproportionately invest limited resources in early childhood at the expense of other programs. It may seem unwise to ask the early-childhood center to create a greater connection between its families and the synagogue community if it appears to be doing so much financially for the synagogue. But if

*The more one elaborates and the more detailed the confession, the more he is praised.*

— Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance*

At the top of my computer screen, as at the top of yours, sits the minimize button. I love it. All kinds of matters — from sermons and board minutes to the BP oil spill and the peace process — all miniaturized with a click. They're still there, but for now they are out of mind.

Around Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, however, we stop minimizing. All the affairs of our lives are up for review. But where to begin? How to apportion our time, love, money, and creative talents?

We find guidance in the laws of *t'shuvah*. "For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for sins committed against another, Yom Kippur does not atone, until one appeases one's fellow" (*Mishnah Yoma* 8:9). The *halachah* further states that even if the aggrieved has forgiven without an apology, the offender must still offer one. Moreover, "the more one elaborates and the more detailed the confession, the more he is praised" (Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* 1:1). Transformation and growth are in the honesty of the encounter.

This is hard to do person to person. But when we serve communities, when we lead whole congregations, the task of evaluating relationships seems impossible. Take a shul — 500 households, 880 adults, 714 preschool or school-age children, 8 weekly services, 34 discrete programs, from Hebrew school and social action to Mommy and Me and *chevre kadisha*. How can we learn about each individual's experience? Who feels honored? Who feels slighted? Who is bored? Who is pleased?

For the past year, Kane Street Synagogue, along with five others in the Sustainable Synagogue Business Models project, has participated in a self-study. Through a detailed survey returned by 69 percent of our members, we collected and interpreted thousands of data to understand our members' hopes for and experiences in the community, and to help us evaluate our services, set priorities, and build more reality-based and sustainable models for our future.

What we discovered was transformative. Hypotheses that many leaders held deeply — from members' experiences of Shabbat services to local real-estate trends — were disproved. Collecting and analyzing this information was painstaking, but our leaders now know in elaborate detail how our congregants experience the community. Maimonides was right: the more detailed the confession, the more he is praised. We enter 5771 not just with a finer understanding of our members, but with new confidence to renew our journey as a sacred community.

*Samuel Weintraub is rabbi of Kane Street Synagogue in Brooklyn.*

## Sign On for SYNERGY Updates

SYNERGY e-mails for presidents, rabbis, and executive directors of synagogues in New York, Westchester, and Long Island provide timely information about grant opportunities, conferences designed for synagogue leaders, and a variety of community resources that benefit synagogues.

If you are not receiving SYNERGY e-mails and would like to do so, please forward your name, position, synagogue name and address, and e-mail address to Sarah Ecton at [ectons@ujafedny.org](mailto:ectons@ujafedny.org). Stay in touch!

## Upcoming Opportunities for Synagogue Leaders

### Social Media Boot Camp Webinar Series

Clergy, staff, and lay leaders of New York, Westchester, and Long Island congregations will learn from experts at Darim Online in a six-part SYNERGY webinar series devoted to new communications and community-building strategies. Learn more and register at <http://bit.ly/nywebinars>.

### The Foundations of Social Media *Thursday, October 7, 2010* 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

### Facebook Strategies for Synagogues *Thursday, November 18, 2010* 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 noon

### Twitter Strategies for Synagogues *Thursday, January 13, 2011* 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.

### Leadership in the Digital Age *Thursday, February 17, 2011* 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.

### Foursquare and Gowalla: Geolocation Services *Thursday, March 24, 2011* 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.

### Social Media & Staffing Policies *Thursday, May 12, 2011* 1:00 – 2:00 p.m.

### Jewish Social Action Month *Cheshvan 5771* *Saturday, October 9 –* *Sunday, November 7, 2010*

Since 2005, Jewish Social Action Month (JSAM) has been transforming *Cheshvan* from a “no holiday” month into a worldwide celebration of Jewish social action. Here in New York, activity has grown with each year. UJA-Federation’s Commission on the Jewish People is proud to provide grants to dozens of community service projects led by synagogues, human-service agencies, day schools, and community centers that enable New York Jews from different backgrounds to bridge their differences, come together to learn the Jewish roots of social action, and volunteer in myriad ways to make a difference. Learn more at [www.ujafedny.org/jewishpeoplehood/](http://www.ujafedny.org/jewishpeoplehood/) about current JSAM projects and unique *Cheshvan* volunteer opportunities.

### How to Run an Effective Meeting *Thursday, October 14, 2010*

This Wiener Educational Center seminar — co-sponsored by the Metropolitan Association for Synagogue Executives — offers practical tips for planning and facilitating effective and engaging meetings in your congregation, and is open to executive directors, clergy, and other leaders and professionals who are responsible for planning and facilitating meetings. Learn more about this and other Wiener Educational Center professional

development programs at [www.wienercenter.org](http://www.wienercenter.org).

### Shabbat of Wholeness, Holiness, and Wellness: Responding to Mental-Health Needs in Our Communities *Friday, October 15 –* *Sunday, October 17, 2010*

Join congregations across the metropolitan area to foster hopefulness and connection, while diminishing despair and isolation for those struggling with mental-health challenges. Held just after Mental Health Awareness Week, this is a communitywide opportunity for New York synagogues to draw on resources from Jewish tradition, the services of human-service agencies, and the knowledge and care of congregants to become a powerful source of hope and help. This special UJA-Federation Caring Commission initiative is co-sponsored by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation of Metropolitan New York, the New York Board of Rabbis, the Orthodox Union, the Union for Reform Judaism, and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

Learn more about resources for the Shabbat and year-round participation at [www.ujafedny.org/shabbat-of-wholeness](http://www.ujafedny.org/shabbat-of-wholeness). To be sure your synagogue is listed as a participating congregation, contact Diane Scherer at [schererd@ujafedny.org](mailto:schererd@ujafedny.org) or 1.212.836.1604, or Rabbi Edythe Mencher at [ehmencher@gmail.com](mailto:ehmencher@gmail.com) or 1.914.834.4595.



[www.ujafedny.org](http://www.ujafedny.org)

Caring for those in need, rescuing those in harm's way, and renewing and strengthening the Jewish people in New York, in Israel, and around the world.

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