

IN DIALOGUE WITH OUR FUTURE



A Strategic Plan for
TEMPLE ISRAEL
Westport, Connecticut

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SPECIAL THANKS

In addition to the committee members, others in our congregation volunteered their time and effort to host and facilitate focus groups, deliberate in the workshops and prepare this document for publication.

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BUILDING OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

Temple Israel is a strong and vibrant Reform Jewish congregation. We can point confidently to more than sixty years of stability and success, prudent financial management, and over 800 member families whose voices fill our building with their energy, curiosity and prayer.

Like other Reform synagogues, we are also a congregation in a changing world. Its trends will reshape the nature and needs of our evolving membership. They will also call on us to look anew at how well we are meeting those needs as well as how we will support the transition and development that are natural parts of every healthy organization.

With those considerations in mind, Temple Israel has spent the past year developing a Strategic Plan. Clergy, lay leadership, staff and hundreds of congregants have taken part in a variety of ways. This document is the direct result of their many contributions. It comprises three main elements:

- **The first part looks at how we developed the plan and what we learned from our research into Temple history, the trends and demographics that will affect us, and the feedback we received from the focus groups.**
- **In the second section, we address four key areas of interest identified by the groups, our shared goals for each, and the principles that will guide us as we pursue them.**
- **Finally, we review three strategic areas in which action will be needed to support our goals as well as the next steps we envision to put our plan into action.**

From the outset, our aim has been to ensure that this plan truly responds to the experience, needs and aspirations of the congregation. To do that, we have tried to bring as many of us as possible into dialogue with one another and with our future. The need for all our participation is even greater now than when we began. As we move forward, every one of us has a share in making a difference. We hope you find much to agree with in the pages that follow and much to look forward to working on together.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Our process

Our work began last fall with input from URJ advisors and with the formation of a Strategic Planning Committee. In October, led by our URJ consultant, the committee spent a full day discussing the task before us and preparing to initiate a round of focus groups with the Temple community.

Every Temple household was contacted by post and email and invited to participate in the focus groups. Over the first four months of 2011, nearly 250 congregants, clergy, lay leaders and staff joined one of our sessions and spoke candidly about their needs, grievances, desires and dreams. Results from every focus group were categorized and reported. Individual comments and suggestions were captured anonymously and saved for future reference.

We also used this time to research the history of our Temple and the trends we anticipate.

Throughout, we provided updates on our progress to the Board and, in reports in The Chronicle, to the congregation as a whole.

By June, results from the focus groups were compiled and evaluated. Four

areas of importance and concern to the congregation emerged. The Strategic Planning Committee met and divided into four workshops, each dedicated to one area. Other clergy, staff, board members, committee chairs and congregants joined them. Together, they began the work of turning what was heard in the focus groups into the principles and goals that can guide us going forward.

Members of a Steering Committee then met several times over the summer to assemble the information we gathered and compose the draft. As we neared completion, a series of meetings was held with the staff, the Strategic Planning Committee and the Board to seek their advice, feedback and support. Now we turn it over to you.

For those of you who are interested in greater detail about our research and the focus group results, a more detailed version of the plan will be available from our website.

For downloading, please set your browser to:
strategicplan.tiwestport.org

Nearly 250 congregants, clergy, lay leaders and staff spoke candidly about their needs, grievances, desires and dreams



Our research

DEMOGRAPHICS AND TRENDS

We collected information on local and national trends in both the Jewish and secular communities. That information generally indicates that the rapid growth our Temple Israel experienced in the 1990s can be expected to continue to level off or decline, and that our congregation will see a gradual shift towards a proportionally older population. Some highlights of our findings include:

- Between 2004 and 2007 we added 194 new members; between 2007 and 2010 we added 98, a reduction of 50%.
- Religious School enrollment has declined. For the 2001-2002 school year, enrollment was 691. It has fallen each year since, and was 480 for the 2010-2011 school year. Moreover, both Weston and Westport expect total school enrollment to decline by approximately 5% in the first half of this decade. In addition, the make-up of our congregation is similarly changing: in 2007, 42% of our households had children in the ECC or Religious School; in 2010, 36% did.
- For many years, we were the only synagogue in town; now Jewish families in our communities can choose from multiple congregations, also suggesting slower growth in our membership.

In addition, URJ research suggests that Jews are less inclined than in previous decades to affiliate with synagogues or form lasting connections when they do affiliate. In line with other, national trends in Reform Judaism, we can expect to see increasing numbers of families in which one spouse was not born Jewish, as well as families with single parents. Understanding these and other important trends will enable us to rethink the way we serve the evolving needs of our membership.

TEMPLE HISTORY

We also reviewed the history of the congregation. Temple Israel was founded 63 years ago and has undergone numerous changes during its history.

- Our worship has become more inclusive of Hebrew and of singing, moving away from Classical Reform elements. Similar trends are reflected in our movement's prayer books.
- We have moved from a model of social action that emphasized congregational preaching and individual action, to one that involved congregational organizing for specific projects, to a more modest involvement.
- As we have grown, we have lost some sense of cohesiveness and community.
- Our Religious School has become more rigorous and professional in its curriculum. We have added more requirements for B'nai Mitzvah preparation. We also offer a greater variety of options for post-B'nai Mitzvah involvement.
- Our Adult Education program has moved from a smaller number of programs (with an emphasis on multi-week "mini-courses") to a larger number of stand-alone sessions.
- We have consistently resisted formal, general or endowment fundraising choosing instead to rely on dues and school fees for the bulk of our revenue.

As we plan for our future, we need to consider carefully the traditions, values, and trends that make this congregation what it is... reassessing valuable practices from our past while finding opportunity for change in others.

We need to consider the traditions, values, and trends that make this congregation what it is

FOCUS GROUPS

We conducted 21 focus groups, which included nearly 250 congregants and staff. No element in the development of the strategic plan was more important. A wide range of topics was discussed in the groups yielding rich data, which is laid out in the detailed document. There was great diversity of opinion with many reasons given for why we joined Temple Israel, why we remain members, and what matters to us. There was also a broad range of opinion about specific things we should or could be doing as a Temple. Nevertheless, there was also widespread agreement that we are all deeply committed to and concerned about four key themes that cut across all the groups and almost all respondents.

The next section of this document identifies and develops these themes, as well as the principles and goals that will guide us, as we respond to what was learned in the focus groups.

Again, more detailed background on the findings from all our research, particularly the focus group results, can be found online at strategicplan.tiwestport.org

OUR SHARED VISION

The Focus Groups generated enormous amounts of information. Hundreds of data points and thousands of individual comments were captured, categorized and counted. The range of thinking was quite wide and, predictably, significant numbers of us often held exactly opposite opinions on how to approach the same issue. Even so, a clear, shared vision emerged of the kind of Temple we value and want for our families and ourselves. Along with it, consensus also formed on four areas where we should focus our efforts. They were:

1. FINDING AND MAKING CONNECTIONS
2. INSPIRING RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE
3. RAISING THE NEXT GENERATION
4. BUILDING COMMUNITY

Together, these form the heart of the strategic plan.

Each area has two components directly inspired by focus group feedback. The first consists of the enduring values and principles that should guide us as we make choices about our future. The second component envisions near and mid-to-long-term goals for positive change.

Our goals will be the aspirational signposts that guide us as we develop specific timing and steps of the action plans. Some actions can be taken quickly. Action plans for other, near-term goals will be tackled first and readied for quick implementation or for funding as part of the next budget review and development process, which begins in February. Plans for mid-to-long-term goals will be prepared over the coming year with implementation taking place over the next three years or longer. As we move forward, we will continue to adjust and improve the focus of our goals, while remaining true to the original aim and intent of each.

Most important, our shared goals are our shared responsibility. Clergy, staff, lay leadership and individual congregants: each of us has a role to play, but all of us have a stake not only in the outcome but also in supporting one another.

1. FINDING & MAKING CONNECTIONS

A yearning to forge deeper connections to clergy, to other congregants and to a more spiritually fulfilling Jewish life was the most consistently heard request from focus group participants. This part of our plan addresses this deeply felt need.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

What We Should Do

- Provide a place and create opportunities to come together in order to express and find connections through Jewish communal and spiritual life
- Actively reach out to one another and invite participation
- Understand and address members' changing needs as individuals and as a group

What We Should Expect

- To feel welcomed, recognized and valued every time we walk into our Temple
- To embrace behaviors that create a warm and supportive social environment for one another
- To easily meet and mix with one another in many Temple settings
- To know that our opinions are sought and respected

What Values Should Guide Us

- An uncompromising commitment to excellence in programming
- Structured and unstructured social opportunities
- Spiritual as well as social connection to congregational life
- Visible and active leadership and clergy

GOALS TO GUIDE OUR ACTION PLANS

Near-term

- Update and improve communication to members to encourage participation and interaction
- Create opportunities that bring us together in new ways and build unstructured social time into our worship and programs

Mid- and long-term

- Increase engagement through more participation and volunteerism
- Prioritize and allocate staff time to support a stronger focus on building connections
- Enhance staff support for programming and communications
- Make creating connections a part of every committee's charge
- Hold ongoing focus groups at appropriate intervals

We should actively reach out to one another and invite participation



2. INSPIRING RITUAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Bringing new levels of energy, participation, relevance and spiritual fulfillment to our worship are everyone's responsibility. This section of the plan considers the actions and environment that can further our efforts.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

What We Should Do

- Provide an authentic, Reform Jewish service and shared, communal worship
- Empower our congregation with the tools we need to take part in Jewish religious life at home and in the Sanctuary
- Use music to foster spiritual and interpersonal connection
- Offer alternative worship based on what the congregation needs
- Respond to the needs of our interfaith families and their non-Jewish members
- Use the worship experience as an opportunity for moral teaching

What We Should Expect

- Joy and a welcoming community of worshippers
- Liturgical music that inspires us and invites participation in the right balance
- To be knowledgeable about our worship and comfortable with ritual
- To learn about Judaism, about ourselves, and about a Jewish perspective on the issues that concern us

What Values Should Guide Us

- We will be and worship as a Reform congregation
- We will provide all appropriate religious services throughout the Jewish calendar
- We will strive for the right balance of music and spoken prayer
- We will use one of the approved prayer books of our movement
- Our worship will ennoble our congregants

We should empower our congregation with the tools we need to take part in Jewish religious life at home and in the Sanctuary



GOALS TO GUIDE OUR ACTION PLANS

Near-term

- Communicate and educate effectively about ritual and Reform Jewish worship
- Evaluate the role of music in our services
- Integrate social opportunities into occasions for worship
- Increase leadership and staff attendance
- Initiate structured conversations with congregants about Jewish spirituality and what it means to them

Mid- and long-term

- Evaluate High Holy Day Services, including alternate worship opportunities
- Rethink the role of the ritual committee
- Develop substantive, Reform responses to address the desire for spirituality
- Reexamine the configuration and use of the sanctuary

Our worship will ennoble our congregants

3. RAISING THE NEXT GENERATION

Focus group participants told us that educating, mentoring and engaging our children at all stages of their passage to adulthood are vitally important to every member. This section considers how we can better envision our efforts as part of a continuum, partner with our education professionals, and more closely integrate programs to nurture and prepare our children for adulthood.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

What We Should Do

- Provide a quality, Reform Jewish education
- Offer relevant, fun and stimulating programs, from ECC to post-b'nai mitzvah, that build Jewish identity and connections to Temple life through the college years
- Develop engaged Temple parents and social connections among families
- Continually evaluate our programs at every level and explore new developments

What We Should Expect

- Educational professionals and programming responsive to the individual needs of our children
- Sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds, religious traditions and circumstances of our families
- An integrated continuum of formal and informal learning designed to keep children interested and connected to The Temple and to one another
- A generation well-prepared for young adulthood as confident Reform Jews

What Values Should Guide Us

- Upholding and teaching Reform Jewish values, such as *mitzvot* and *tikkun olam*
- Preserving high standards of quality education
- Encouraging a life-long commitment to Jewish learning
- Integrating our programming and youth outreach all the way through college
- Consideration of the needs of every child; a welcoming environment for every family

We will build lifelong commitments to Jewish learning

GOALS TO GUIDE OUR ACTION PLANS

Near-term

- Expand structured opportunities across all our programs for families to connect to one another and to multiple aspects of Temple life
- Communicate more effectively about ECC and Religious School activities and opportunities for parental involvement
- Explore new ways to build ongoing and substantive, formal and informal clergy and staff interaction with Youth programs as well as with the ECC and Religious School
- Review b'nai mitzvah preparation and requirements in order to provide opportunities for other, informal learning to generate interest in confirmation and youth programming

Mid- and long-term

- Address the goal of increasing participation in post B'nai Mitzvah learning and youth programming
- Deepen integration of youth programming with the religious school and vice versa
- Improve the use of technology through all our educational programs
- Work with other area congregations to explore the development of a corps of professional, religious school teachers
- Promote the building of Jewish identity through youth activities outside the Temple as well, such as Jewish camping and travel to Israel



4. BUILDING COMMUNITY

Building community is the fundamental work of Temple life and the goal to which all others contribute. It is also the area in which the responsibilities of being a member of Temple Israel come into play. This part of the plan focuses on the beliefs, behaviors and actions that make us more than a group of people who happen to belong to the same synagogue and reminds us of our obligations to one another and to the congregation as a whole.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

What We Should Do

- Connect and engage with congregants throughout every stage of membership
- Provide a comprehensive and integrated new member process
- Continually look for and address gaps in how we serve and reach out to different groups among our congregants such as interfaith families, empty nesters, single parent families, older members and others
- Define, communicate and model value-driven Jewish behavior, with lay leaders and clergy setting the tone and example
- Practice *tikkun olam* through social action in the larger communities of which our Temple community is a part

What We Should Expect

- Congregants who make a difference to our congregation and to our community by showing up and supporting one another at services, events, and in support of the religious school and our youth.
- Excellence in every aspect of Temple life, from programming and ritual to education and day-to-

day interaction

- Engaged leadership, clergy and staff that will do all they can to help each member lead a meaningful Jewish life as part of our congregation

What Values Should Guide Us

- Treating every member like a new member, with all that can possibly imply
- Celebrating congregants and the congregation
- Being a community in service to the Jewish community
- Guiding our decisions and behaviors by Reform Jewish values
- Addressing the many aspects and obligations of Judaism throughout the life cycles of our congregants

GOALS TO GUIDE OUR ACTION PLANS

Near-term

- Expand and reenergize new member outreach and integration
- Explore opportunities with clergy and staff for enriching and promoting connections with congregants and with one another
- Develop more targeted communications to individuals and groups about opportunities and activities at the Temple

Mid- and long-term

- Apply best practices from new member programs to membership engagement programs and initiatives across all aspects of the congregation
- Re-conceive the role of the membership committee and how it can partner with other committees in member outreach and community building
- Define what it means to be a “member of Temple Israel” both in the broadest sense as well as at different stages of the life cycle
- Identify and cultivate the skills and behaviors our goals for community building will require from lay leadership, clergy, and staff
- Institute a series of outreach programs to younger unaffiliated Reform Jews in our community
- Make our efforts sustainable and transferrable to new generations of leadership

We will practice tikkun olam through social action



SUPPORTING OUR VISION

Key Initiatives

Our goals represent the things we want to do, and they are ambitious. In order to meet them, there are initiatives we must undertake to build a foundation that can support and sustain our efforts. We have identified three fundamental areas where initiatives and actions will be needed as we move forward.

COMMUNICATING WITH ONE ANOTHER

Improving how we communicate as a congregation and how we use technology to support our communications were discussed in nearly every focus group. They will play a role in nearly every thing we want to accomplish. Issues that call for fast action as well as long-term planning will be considered. We will begin by looking at key areas:

- Auditing our existing efforts to identify unmet needs,
- Updating our website,
- Integrating social media
- Providing additional support for communication
- Updating our communication design and visual presentation

As we move forward, our goal will be to communicate more effectively, not simply to communicate more.

REVITALIZING OUR SYNAGOGUE

Much will also depend on how effectively we work and how well we support one another. Several components will need to be addressed. For example:

- Strengthening the bonds between the staff and the congregation, and between lay leadership and the staff: this will enable us to provide services more smoothly as well as promoting the connections that congregants have asked for
- Evaluating the composition and functioning of our board and committees, as well as how we cultivate volunteers and develop new leadership
- Identifying the skills and resources our strategic objectives require, and working with staff to organize around and support our goals
- Planning for and supporting transitions in lay and professional leadership that are a natural part of every organization
- Using our building in new and creative ways

Our ability to pursue our dreams will depend on how well we match our resources to our goals and priorities



RENEWING OUR RESOURCES

When all is said and done, our ability to meet our needs and pursue our dreams will depend on how well we match our resources to our goals and priorities.

Our financial situation has benefitted in the past from continuous growth in our membership. As we look forward, however, our numbers are expected to level off or slightly decline. At the same time, we have used savings and reserves to fill the gap between revenues and expenses for the past three years. In order to fund our current programs, as well as to support new initiatives our plan envisions, we will have to reevaluate our financial framework. A number of factors will come into play:

- How we generate revenue from dues, tuition, and other fees
- What role fundraising can play in helping us to meet the needs expressed by congregants
- Ensuring that the investments we make in people, programs, and facilities are the right ones for our needs and in alignment with our goals

The full Strategic Plan includes greater detail on all the areas discussed in the summary and provides the true blueprint for building the action plans that will guide our success in the coming years. Please read the Strategic Plan in its entirety to see where we are going as a Congregation.

Next Steps

Beginning right after the High Holy Days, we will start developing a series of action plans addressing people, process, resources and timing for pursuing the shared goals of our Strategic Plan. We'll also begin working on the three, Temple-wide initiatives that will support our work.

A workgroup will be appointed to develop a plan for each of the four areas identified by the focus groups. Each workgroup will be co-chaired by one person from our staff and one board member, and each group will comprise staff, lay leaders, committee members and other congregants. As they move from plan to implementation, we expect the groups to continue to reach out to the congregation, especially to those who participated in the focus groups.

The action plans will be completed in two phases. Near-term goals will be addressed first. Workgroups will be asked to prepare those plans in time for the Spring 2012 budget review and development process. Workgroups will also be encouraged to identify immediate steps that can begin making a difference right away. Plans for mid- to long-term priorities will be developed over the next year.

Once complete, plans will be shared with the congregation. And every plan should also include clear expectations against which our progress can be measured.

CONTINUING THE DIALOGUE

Dialogue is how we learn and grow, whether as individuals or institutions. We open ourselves to new possibilities by listening to one another, by questioning our own ideas and by grappling with new ones. Our Rabbis have kept Judaism alive and vibrant through two, turbulent millennia by carrying on just such a dialogue across their many generations. Reform Judaism is an integral part of that legacy.

From its beginning, Reform Judaism has conducted a probing, passionate conversation with our traditions and our society. It is in the same spirit of dialogue that the Strategic Planning Committee has approached its work. Throughout the process, we have sought fresh perspectives on the values and strengths that have sustained Temple Israel for sixty years. We have engaged with the world around us and with the trends continually reshaping Reform Judaism. And mainly, through our many focus groups, we have invited open and often impassioned dialogue with one another.

Those conversations constitute the single most important component of all our work. Not only have they shaped the planning process and its outcomes; they have also brought an energy and candor to our congregation that have been as healthy as they have sometimes been challenging. If there is one finding on which all of us can agree, it is that those conversations must keep going.

This Strategic Plan is best seen as part of that ongoing dialogue. It is the first half of a two-phase effort that will now continue with the writing of our Action Plans. As we move forward, let us also commit to continuing the larger dialogue we have begun.

