



Beth Jacob Community Conversations: Executive Summary

Facilitated by Barb Curchack:

Data Team: Arielle Ehrlich, Jonathan Ehrlich, Matthew Leichter, Brian, Millberg, Laura Millberg, and Lydia Schultz, Lead Writer

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As co-chairs of the 2024 Beth Jacob Community Conversation Project, we are so pleased to share with you this analysis and report of these efforts. The thank you's for this project are extensive. It literally could not have been completed without the participation of the congregation in the conversations and the follow-up feedback forums.

First, we want to express our appreciation to the committee who agreed to help shape, plan, and execute the conversations. They helped line up hosts, facilitators, and notetakers; they assisted with developing the communications to the congregations; and they helped to ensure that we considered past conversations. The members of the committee are: Jonathan Ehrlich, Laurie Fink, Ryan Lohr, Brian Milberg, Susie Minsberg, Nina Samuels, Ben Silbergliitt, Aaron Silver, and Erin Webb.

We also want to acknowledge the hosts, facilitators, and notetakers. The hosts opened up their homes – sometimes multiple times—and made people feel welcome. The notetakers carefully recorded what was said while honoring anonymity, and the facilitators made the magic happen! We heard so many times how much people enjoyed the conversations and getting to connect and sometimes reconnect with each other. We have noticed a positive difference in the way congregants interact with each other since the start of the conversations. We acknowledge that some people were unable to attend a conversation, due to scheduling conflicts. We look forward to their ongoing participation as we move forward.

Hosts (in order of session): Jessica Nordell & Andrew Cholakian; Sharon Press & Barry Kantrowitz; Wendy Schwartz; Barbie Levine & Sara Lynn Newberger; Susan & Neil Moses-Zirkes; Kate Cavett; Susie & Mickey Minsberg; Nina Samuels & Earl Schwartz; Amalia & Drake Prohofsky; Brian & Laura Milberg; Geoff Marshall & Laurie Radovsky; Erin Webb; Keven & Frances Fischer; Gordon & Carol Altshuler; Amy and Dan Rogovin; Laurie & Joel Goldsmith; Leslie Morris; Steve Ukes; Orit Ackerman; Holly Brod Farber & Stephanie Levine

Facilitators: EB Barnard, Joanathan Ehrlich, Mike Keller, Laurie Fink, Laura Honan, Barbie Levine, Sharon Press, Amalia Prohofsky, Kate Sandweiss, Ben Silbergliitt, and Rosanne Zaidenweber,

Notetakers: Arielle Ehrlich, Mari Forbush, Miriam Krause, Barry Kantrowitz, Mike Keller, Brian Millberg, Mira Miller, Leslie Morris, Sharon Press, Laurie Radovsky, and Lydia Schultz

We also want to acknowledge with appreciation Rabbi David Teutsch, who consulted with us on how to set up the conversations and conducted the training for the facilitators and notetakers; Rabbi Tamar, who inspired us to take on this task and supported us in the undertaking; and Sonya Rapport for working with us to get communications out to the community in a timely and efficient manner.

This project is a testament to the incredible community we are lucky to be a part of here at Beth Jacob. Our last thank you goes to Barb Curchack and the amazing data team: Arielle Ehrlich, Jonathan Ehrlich, Matthew Leichter, Brian Millberg, Laura Millberg and Lydia Schultz (who also

took on the role of lead writer). We are so fortunate to have the expertise and commitment within our community to complete this type of analysis.

The next step is implementation. We remain committed to working with the Board to see that all of the contributions made by everyone who participated in any way are recognized by action.

This report comes to you shortly after the High Holidays, a time when we took stock of ourselves and considered what steps we might take to do better in the coming year. We have just begun the month of Cheshvan, a month with no holidays. This month gives us time, without the interruption of special days, to begin to work on those things we learned, planned, prayed for and hoped for during the High Holidays. This report gives us the opportunity to do that as a community: to reflect on where we are and to assess what steps we can take to be the best version of Beth Jacob that we can be.

Wishing you and our community a Shanah Tovah (a good year)!

Sharon Press, Leslie Morris and Sara Lynn Newberger

Executive Summary

In late 2023 and early 2024, volunteer note takers and facilitators held 19 community conversations with approximately 160 congregants. The sponsors of the community conversations project sought the following:

1. To learn themes, the big picture, of how the shul understands itself, encapsulating the range of what was expressed, including those who do not feel included in our community.
2. To identify and share actionable information and recommendations, including low hanging fruit
3. To create a way to be transparent with the community with the results and recommendations of the community conversation project,

The data team adapted Participatory Action Research methods to identify themes and recommendations. They held two live feedback forums, one of which was recorded for later viewing for those who could not attend. During the forums, the data team learned which themes resonated, which could be clarified, which might be missing, and which potential recommendations made the most sense. Ninety community members responded to the Community Conversation Feedback Form. Overall, congregants found the themes clear, and over half of the congregants resonated with each theme.

Based on the preliminary themes and community feedback, the team identified seven themes. A brief description of each follows, with the full report providing more depth, context, and quotes.

1. **Welcoming: Inclusion and Accessibility:** Congregants aspire to be welcoming and inclusive, where we are egalitarian, warm, haimish, and it “feels like family.” They feel that their aspirations have, at times, fallen short, sharing stories of feeling on the outside, whether due to not being Jewish, having less knowledge of Hebrew, living far away from synagogue, not being asked to participate, or having families without children or spouses. Separate from welcoming, congregants showed commitment to providing an environment accessible for those with medical conditions and disabilities.
2. **Education: We thrive on education across the lifespan:** Congregants see Beth Jacob’s leadership in youth education as a way to reinvigorate the congregation, build new membership, and increase engagement. They see adult education as a basic community need that can occur in person, on Zoom, and with other organizations. They recognize the need for resources and staff to build our education programming, and they want the topics to be engaging to the community.
3. **Creating and Finding our Community: We want to connect more, both in and out of services:** Congregants want more ways to connect and build relationships, mostly in shared values in observance. They are also interested in connecting in strongly Jewish ways not tied to observance (e.g., Israeli Dance), and they want to connect around hobbies and with the larger Jewish community. They are particularly interested in the revitalization of our commitment to social action.
4. **How We Do Prayer and Services:** The Beth Jacob community appreciated that we offer a variety of egalitarian, participatory, lay-led services (e.g., morning minyan, Shabbat, holidays). They expressed hope for more regular Kabbalat Shabbat (Friday night) services, and some wondered if there could be a learners’ minyan for people to better

understand the composition of services. People wished for greater spirit (ruach), prayerful energy (kavanah), possibly leading to greater musicality. Congregants also expressed concern for how to better include those who are less Hebrew literate and for non-Jewish family members. Many wanted to have the synagogue offer classes to expand the pool of service leaders and Torah readers. The feedback forums revealed that some congregants question whether we need to continue to be Conservative while others feel firmly grounded in the Conservative tradition. By becoming clear about where and how we align with the Conservative movement, we get clearer about the choices we make related to all of the themes.

5. Stability and Growth: Congregants wanted stability or growth in:

- Financial Sustainability: Congregants expressed concern over whether the synagogue can afford to do the programming it wants, hire the staff it needs, keep lay leaders/volunteers from burning out, and have resources to build community and take care of our building and grounds. Solving this issue was a primary focus expressed by congregants.
- Membership: Congregants want a “thriving community” with “diverse members.” Many see having a larger paying membership as key to financial stability. They worry that they are seeing fewer congregants during Shabbat services.
- A Healthy Volunteer Pool So We Don’t Burn Out: Congregants feel more dependent on a volunteer pool perceived to be “thin” and declining, leading to burnout. They are concerned that volunteers can not meet the synagogue’s needs, and they want to figure out how to revitalize our volunteer pool. Suggestions included bringing back “opt-out” practices, and inviting people personally to participate.
- Lay-Leaders: Congregants love that we have lay leaders and hope to make them stronger through leadership development opportunities for board members and committee chairs. The most important leadership skill mentioned was the ability to facilitate discussion of difficult topics.
- Personnel: Congregants are craving stability in personnel so that we can have consistency within the office staff without causing them to burn out. There was strong spontaneous support for Rabbi Tamar to be our next leader, with positive comments also towards Rabbi Justin and Sonya.
- Building and Grounds, including Space Utilization, Kitchen, and Security: Congregants want to improve the physical appearance, comfort, and accessibility of our synagogue so it is more desirable to be together. To grow our sense of community, congregants crave a Kiddush that fosters spending time together. While not discussed often, when security was discussed, there were strong feelings and concerns that our current security operations drain our resources and reduce our inclusivity.
- Transparent Communication: Congregants seek consistent, transparent communication about events, processes, policies, and finances. They want responses to emails. As one member said, we want “explanations and not rumors.” They want follow-through related to the community conversations.

6. Difficult Conversations: Israel, COVID Policy, Feeling Excluded, and Talking About

Money: Multiple critical, complicated, complex subjects arose during the community conversations: Israel, our COVID Policy, feeling excluded, and talking about shul finances. Thus, the data team expanded the theme to focus on increasing our ability to have difficult conversations, both with other congregants and with synagogue staff.

7. **It's up to all of us to move forward in this difficult, beloved work.** Congregants love Beth Jacob. It is family. They recognize that if they want Beth Jacob stronger and more vibrant, they must step up and work toward that goal. They want to be a part of the solution. Sometimes they might not know how to ask how to help. Some might be looking towards going back to an idealized past as a solution, with more congregants recognizing the need to let go of the past in order to move forward. And volunteerism and a "can do" attitude is core to this theme.

After the feedback sessions, recommendations were tallied based on frequency of endorsement and conceptual overlap, thus explaining what congregants prioritized. The most frequent recommendations were related to:

- **Personnel stability**, especially keeping the rabbis currently affiliated with the congregation. Keeping Beth Jacob's acting senior rabbi was the most frequent recommendation on the entire list.
- **Inclusion and retention of our members**. To improve the new member experience, congregants recommended new member orientation, matching new / prospective members with an established household, welcoming new members after services, and creating memberships for teenagers and college students. To retain members, congregants recommended more social events that don't necessarily meet at shul, exit interviews for people who resign or leave, check ins for congregants whose attendance drops off, and formalizing how we notice when people are no longer attending services.
- **Increased transparency**. Congregants asked for increased transparency on the shul's formal and informal governance structure and committee structure. They asked for open communication about how people are asked to join the Board of Trustees, and more transparency from the Board and committees in the form of minutes and bylaws and less formal updates.
- **Education**. Congregants wanted to help each other build Hebrew skill, specifically through learner's minyans. Congregants also wanted to build their own skills in having difficult conversations and accepting the diverse views of all congregants.
- **Building a Sustainable Financial Model**. Congregants wondered if there were ways to build a more sustainable financial model, be it through revision of our current process or exploring grant opportunities.

The data team encourages the project organizers and synagogue leaders to review all of the recommendations (presented in order of decreasing frequency), decide how they will follow up on these recommendations, and decide how they will keep the community aware of how they are following up. Directions for how to identify low-hanging fruit are presented in the analysis of recommendations on page 26.

Beth Jacob is not committed to adopt any of the recommendations made by congregants during the feedback sessions. Congregants expect future surveys and opportunities to provide feedback, and they seek transparent communication as to how the results of the community conversations have been and will be used.