RECONSTRUCTING JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Self-Paced Online Learning Guide

ReconstructingJudaism.org/Community-Panel
SESSION 1
The Need for Progressive Jewish Communities to Reconstruct Themselves in This Era

Key ideas for discussion:

1. In the 20th century, the synagogue was the main “retail outlet” for Jewish communal life. In the 21st, there’s an innovation explosion, creating many different kinds of “retail outlets.” There are “rising modalities of Jewish identity and community,” especially among Millennials.

2. Younger Jews tend to be looking for two things from their religious communities: personal human flourishing and taking part in effecting social transformation.

3. Six sectors are currently changing the face of Jewish identity:
   a. Social justice
   b. Spiritual practice
   c. Jewish learning
   d. Eco-sustainability / food justice
   e. Arts and culture
   f. New models of spiritual community

4. Synagogues need to rethink their program mix. Tweaking Shabbat won’t cut it.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz, Ph.D.
Rabbi Sid Schwarz is the project director of the Kenissa: Communities of Meaning Network. He is a rabbi, educator and social entrepreneur who has successfully founded and led several Jewish organizations and national projects. He is also the director of the Clergy Leadership Incubator (CLI) a two year fellowship for rabbis on visionary leadership and change management. As the founder/president of PANIM: The Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values for 21 years, Rabbi Schwarz pioneered a methodology that integrated Jewish learning, Jewish values and social responsibility. Using his experience as the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Md., he has played a leadership role in the synagogue transformation movement for close to 20 years. He is currently a Senior Fellow at Hazon and he blogs regularly at RabbiSid.org.

Connected Resources

Kenissa: Communities of Meaning Network: Kenissa.org
How We Gather: HowWeGather.org
Jewish Megatrends - Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future by Rabbi Sid Schwarz, Ph.D.
American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us by Robert D. Putnam
SESSION 2

Redeveloping Congregational Identity So That Being Part of the Congregation Makes Meaning

Key ideas for discussion:

1. SAJ’s renewed vision stands on five pillars:
   a. Talmud Torah – Lifelong Learning
   b. Tzedek – Social Justice
   c. Kehillah - Community
   d. Tarbut – Arts and Culture
   e. Ruchaniyut – Spirituality

2. New identity and outward facing online presence. See their “Connect” webpage: http://saj.nyc/connect/

3. Decided not to measure success by numbers attending services. Built up different kinds of programming to create many avenues of entry and participation.

4. Took into account the synagogue’s local context in light of other Jewish and meaning-making opportunities available to the people they’d like to attract. Built on aspects of their history and long-standing values that are unique, natural to their organization, and appealing to the needs and wants of contemporary potential members.

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Hermann’s rabbinate has been driven by a desire to create inclusive Jewish communities of meaning, where a sense of belonging and community commitment is palpable. Before coming to SAJ in New York City, Rabbi Grabelle Hermann was the founder of Kol Tzedek, an inclusive, dynamic and growing synagogue in West Philadelphia. She was also a founding clergy member of POWER, Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower and Rebuild. She became the rabbi of SAJ in 2015.

Connected Resources

SAJ: SAJ.nyc
Rabbi Lauren on Medium: https://medium.com/@rabbilauren/latest
Rabbis without Borders: RabbisWithoutBorders.org

ReconstructingJudaism.org/Community-Panel
SESSION 3
The Need to Reconstruct Judaism Itself

Key ideas for discussion:

“My focus is on reconstructing the nature of Judaism itself.”

Rabbinic Judaism’s basic paradigm is a world divided into categories of opposites. That won’t work in this century. This era demands a radical reconstruction of Judaism.

“If the Torah of Sinai was understood by the rabbis as focused on distinction and separation, then we need a new Torah that suggests how we are to live in a world that seeks wholeness instead of division. We live in a world that strives to be more inclusive, rather than seeing boundaries as essential. Distinction too often leads to a sense that one group is better than another. Instead, we want to embrace diversity, and move to a paradigm of a spectrum, whether in regard to sexuality or gender, or more simply, one’s identity.”

Big question: Is it time to replace prayer, or replace the traditional prayer service?

“The purpose of Judaism isn’t Judaism.”

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

Raised in an Orthodox Jewish household, Rabbi Michael Strassfeld was profoundly influenced by the burgeoning Jewish anti-establishment movement in the Boston area in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was active in the anti-poverty movement, anti-Vietnam War movement, and the fight for freedom for Soviet Jews. He was a co-founder of the first countercultural Havurah, Havurat Shalom, which is still an affiliated Reconstructionist community outside Boston. A pioneer in do-it-yourself Judaism, he is the co-author of the renowned book, The Jewish Catalog, a DIY manual on how to live and practice Judaism. Second only to the Hebrew Bible, it is the top selling Jewish book of the 20th century. Currently he is Rabbi Emeritus at SAJ, and he has a forthcoming book on reinventing Judaism for the 21st century.

Connected Resources

The First Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit: Amazon.com/First-Jewish-Catalog-Do-Yourself/dp/0827600429

The University of Pennsylvania has a special collection of Rabbi Strassfeld’s papers, which include many artifacts from the Jewish countercultural movements of the 1960s-70s. You can browse some of the collection online at: PennRare.wordpress.com/2017/01/11/the-jewish-counterculture-in-the-michael-strassfeld-papers
SESSION 4
The Need for Progressive Judaism

Key ideas for discussion:
Rabbi Shira Stutman makes the case for revisiting the idea of Judaism as a religion (as opposed to a civilization). At Sixth & I, there’s a strong focus on teaching people “hard skills” – the skills involved in participating and leading Jewish ritual, so they can actually practice the religion.

“Fee for service” makes some people uncomfortable, but in American culture it is an essential way that people express what they value. There’s no membership at Sixth & I – it has gone against the grain of conventional wisdom and designed itself as a place that is almost entirely fee-for-service.

“Our competition is not the synagogue down the street. Our competition is Soul Cycle. Our competition is going for a walk. Our competition is yoga...We are a proselytizing congregation.” Our young people want meaning and personal human flourishing.

Some of the most interesting work happening Jewishly today is happening outside the denominational structure. 100 years from now we won’t have denominationalism that looks how it looks now. “The world is not living in denominations. Our young people do not care. They want meaning. They want to feel of value. They want to feel welcomed in, no matter who their partners are, no matter how they identify about Israel, no matter how they identify about Judaism. They don’t care what the denomination is.”

Rabbi Shira Stutman
Rabbi Shira Stutman is Senior Rabbi at Sixth & I in Washington, D.C. Her focus is to make Jewish meaning and build Jewish community for young professionals. She practices what she calls “radical welcoming” and draws on her extensive experiences as a community organizer, Jewish educator, and Jewish program designer. Rabbi Stutman also works with interfaith couples, and she serves as the scholar-in-residence for the National Women’s Philanthropy program at the Jewish Federations of North America. Her favorite t-shirt reads: “This is what a real rabbi looks like.”

Connected Resources
Sixth & I: SixthAndI.org
Example of program series on Israel issues: “The Hardest Conversation”: SixthAndI.org/event/the-hardest-conversation-1
New Jewish Spaces Podcast: ReconstructingJudaism.org/podcast/episode-1
Imagine there’s a very wealthy person who tells you that they will give you an unlimited amount of money, to set up a shop in any place you want, to create a Judaism that will attract all the Jews who won’t walk into a synagogue. What does that look like?

Would you like to say more about your thinking on the importance of prayer?

Quote for Discussion: “I think that people are profoundly lonely and sad and joyous, and that the full catastrophe of life lends us to singing. And the way that Jews sing is in prayer. And I do think that some Jews care about every single word that they’re singing, but many of them don’t. And so, when you give them music that runs through their bones and makes them cry and makes them dance, they’re going to want to be a part of it. Because we are stuck in this life that is supposed to be X and ends up being X–minus or X–plus, and then we’re in it – and it’s not easy. And so prayer is something that can transport us to a different place, a more joyous place, or a place where we can just be sad as crap. And that’s how human beings have always talked to themselves in their best ways, and to this thing that we may or may not call God.” – Rabbi Shira Stutman
3. ISRAEL AND OUR COMMUNITIES

How do we talk about Israel and Palestine in our congregations when the issues can be very divisive?

Quote for Discussion: “We have a saying at Sixth & I – ‘the Torah can take it.’” Trusting that we can handle the hard conversations. We try to do Israel/Palestine programming with as much intellectual honesty as possible. Sixth & I Program: “The Hardest Conversation” – a six week program based on a dual-narrative model: SixthAndI.org/event/the-hardest-conversation-1

4. WHAT DOES SHABBAT MORNING LOOK LIKE POST-PRAYER?

Based on the work you’re doing, what would a Shabbat morning service look like at your dream synagogue in which we’ve moved on from the traditional prayers?

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld: each service would have an overriding theme, and everything that’s said or sung will relate to that theme. The service would be 90 minutes – half study/discussion, half prayer/spirituality. “I’ve been doing such a service now for 3 years once a month, and as an alternative at high holy days.” The service doesn’t use the prayerbook, though it draws on pieces of the liturgy. It’s intended to speak to people’s needs and interests.

5. RITUAL AND CREATIVITY IN RECONSTRUCTIONIST JEWISH LIFE

Would you share about a time when you were able to take a ritual and work it to help someone have a moment of real discovery about the value of Judaism in their life?

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann: Mikveh deserves new creative exploration. It’s a beautiful ritual, and for many congregational contexts. Conversion, divorce, cancer, etc. We can reconstruct and utilize this gorgeous ritual.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld: the person who came to ask if she could come to his synagogue to say mourner’s kaddish for relatives who treat her badly and were still alive. He created a ritual that responded to her needs – and he advises that this is part of the nature of the work. With Jewish ritual, there’s improving and there’s creating. “We’re very much in a place where we need to create.”