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PANIM EL PANIM: FACE TO FACE—A GUIDE FOR CONGREGATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION

We assume that you are reading this text because you want to know what your congregants think about your synagogue's Shabbat worship services. There may be many different reasons why you're looking for this feedback. Perhaps attendance at services is low on a regular basis and you want to know why more congregants aren't participating. Perhaps you are considering making some changes to the worship schedule and want to know how that will impact the spectrum of your congregants. Perhaps you have received some requests to add greater variety to the worship music but you are not sure what people feel is missing. Whatever the original reason for eliciting comments from the community was, this is a wonderful opportunity to bring more congregants into a meaningful conversation about worship. Thoughtful and deliberate planning can help you impart greater knowledge about worship and create deeper understanding among congregants about their spiritual needs.

So what's the best way to gather the information you're looking for? Conducting a survey is a typical first reaction of many lay leaders and clergy as they attempt to better understand their worshipers' needs, interests and concerns and as they strive to be inclusive by involving as many congregants as possible in this endeavor. "Aha!" they say to themselves. "By using a survey, we can ask people questions about worship, and based on their responses, we'll know what to do to counter their reasons for not attending services!"

THE CHALLENGES OF WORSHIP SURVEYS

Here's what often happens when congregations send out a survey:

- Opinions come back evenly divided on particular issues, such as "Should we provide baby-sitting at Erev Shabbat services?" In the absence of a clear consensus, leaders don't feel justified in making changes or incurring additional expenses; or
- Opinions vary or show no clear and strong preferences. The question "What time should we begin Erev Shabbat services?" often results in some respondents wanting to begin at 5:30 P.M., others at 6:00 P.M., still others at 7:30 P.M. and so on. Those who sent out the survey are left wondering how to interpret the responses; or
- A majority of respondents *do* reply similarly to a question such as "Would you like to have more guest speakers at Erev Shabbat services?" In the face of what seems to be an unequivocal desire for something, a committee works hard to arrange a special event—and the resulting attendance is not much better than at any other service; or
- Rarely is a good cross-representation of congregational opinion obtained. Often people who complete surveys are those with an "ax to grind" or individuals who are particularly upset by a certain aspect of worship. All too frequently surveys lend themselves to impulsive, impassioned "of-the-moment" responses; or

- When a synagogue sends out a survey, it may be raising expectations that can't possibly be fulfilled. If congregants do take the time to respond, they may (understandably) expect that their suggestions will be implemented. If this doesn't happen, they may feel that they haven't been heard or be angry that their time has been wasted; or
- A survey may inadvertently relay the message that the leadership of the congregation doesn't have time for or isn't interested in listening to its members personally; or
- A survey may also convey the message that people don't really need to know anything about worship in order to help shape worship. In fact, creating meaningful worship requires knowledge of Jewish liturgy; of a community's norms, history and culture; and of what Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman calls "the art of public prayer."

THE BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUPS

A series of small meetings or focus groups in which congregants can discuss worship matters is likely to yield deeper and more comprehensive information regarding members' thoughts and feelings about worship than a survey will. If focus groups are skillfully facilitated, they can help congregants articulate what it is that they need in order to feel spiritually satisfied and can provide insight and assistance to those who are responsible for designing communal worship that is meaningful and satisfying. Focus groups also allow the participants to hear and reflect on the feelings of others, to appreciate the diversity of views that exist within their community and to clarify their own expectations and aspirations for worship. In addition, focus groups can encourage and support the process, perhaps initiated by the Worship/Ritual Committee, of professional and laypeople working together in partnership.

GETTING FOCUS GROUPS STARTED

A focus group meeting is a gathering of not more than twelve people, held in someone's home or in the synagogue, that allows the participants to express their feelings about worship comfortably and share them openly with others. In order to elicit the broadest participation possible, hosts or group facilitators should invite congregants personally. If the meetings are to take place in people's homes, then the guest lists should be planned so that members are invited to homes in which they will feel comfortable. It is preferable that the guests at each meeting be representative of the entire membership—young families, retirees, youth, singles, etc.—so that different points of view are expressed. Structuring meetings in this way can produce a valuable bonus: Individuals who may ordinarily not have the opportunity to meet will connect. These new bonds will strengthen the sense of community within the congregation. If the meetings are to take place in the synagogue, schedule them at a time when congregants are normally there, for example, when parents drop their children off for nursery school or when senior citizens are engaged in activities that interest them. Doing this will facilitate the broadest participation possible, although it will also limit the contact between various congregant groups.

It is very important to clarify how the views and opinions that are voiced in focus groups will be used and who will ultimately make worship-related decisions. Will the ideas expressed by the groups be considered advisory in nature? Will they be binding? Who will make the final decisions? The clergy? The Board? The Worship/Ritual Committee? The synagogue membership?

Explaining the process by which decisions will eventually be made reduces the possibility of misunderstanding, disappointment or anger later on.

In most congregations, the Worship/Ritual Committee is responsible for worship-related matters. The facilitator of a worship focus group might be a member of the Worship/Ritual Committee, the rabbi or cantor, a Board member or a layperson with a particular expertise in leading groups. If the facilitator is not a Worship/Ritual Committee member, then at least one member of that committee should be present at each focus group meeting.

The role of the facilitator is critical to the success of the focus group. The facilitator is responsible for insuring that participants get heard and for monitoring group process. Ideally, this person is trained in the fine art of facilitating meetings. This "art" includes knowing how to manage time; being sensitive to and encouraging participants who may be hesitant to speak; being capable of controlling group "monopolizers"; and possessing the ability to create a nonjudgmental, open and accepting group environment. Many people have these skills. You might look for someone with a background in social work, psychology, organizational behavior/development or teaching.

A BLUEPRINT FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Think of a focus group as a meal that consists of different dishes to be selected from a menu. You will create this "meal" based on a number of factors, such as the amount of time available; the expertise and experience of the facilitator; and the needs and interests of the group. Following are nine different "dishes" or aspects of a focus group meeting. First read the information carefully, noting the items that might be relevant to your congregation. Then go back and construct the program, utilizing the suggestions that will best serve your temple's needs.

1. Premeeting Preparation: Setting the Table

a. Establish the date and time of your meeting with all the relevant congregational professionals. Don't forget to check the master congregational schedule! Advertise the focus group meeting in your bulletin and via a phone chain, a letter and email.

b. In planning the session's length, allow for approximately two hours.

c. Consider the arrangement of your meeting space. A good room setup for such a meeting consists of chairs arranged around tables that are put together in an open square or simply chairs arranged in circles. Have paper, pens, flip charts, markers, tape, name tags, etc., available.

d. Sharing food is a great way to break down barriers among meeting participants and to create a sense of community. Depending on the time of day, consider providing beverages and light snacks. Give the participants time to eat and schmooze before beginning the meeting. Recite the *Motzi* together before starting to eat.

e. Establish roles. You will need a facilitator. You may also wish to appoint two people to function as a timekeeper and a notetaker.

2. Introduction and Opening Ritual or Prayer

a. Beginning the meeting with a brief ritual or a prayer elevates what is about to take place to a higher level. It signifies that this gathering is not like other conventional gatherings, such as PTA or work meetings, and it frames the ensuing discussion within a Jewish context so that participants are instilled with the awareness that this meeting serves a sacred purpose.

Ideas for an opening include:

- A one-minute *d'var Torah*
- A song
- Reading a poem or a piece of prose that is linked thematically to the purpose of the meeting. Suggested sources are Debbie Perlman's *Flames to Heaven: New Psalms for Healing and Praise* (Wilmette, IL: RadPublishers, 1998); Ruth Brin's *Harvest: Collected Poems and Prayers* (Consortium Book Sales & Dist., second revised edition, 1999); and Rabbi Chaim Stern's *Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of the Torah from Literature, Philosophy, and Religious Thought* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998).

b. You might continue with the following: "When we look at the communal prayer life of our congregation, we see much that is successful and fulfilling. But we also see problems, reflected in the emptiness of our sanctuaries and in the disengagement of some of our members from the worship experience. However, we believe that our congregants want worship that will uplift and engage them, motivate them to be better people, connect them to a community of other seekers and help them find their place in this world. We've chosen to meet together in this way because we believe that through focus groups, we can best understand the worship needs of our community. This is just a first step."

3. Check In

When the focus group participants gather, some or many of them may not know each other. In order to facilitate a sense of community, begin the meeting by having the participants introduce themselves. "Break the ice" by asking everyone to respond *briefly* to a question. The questions can be lighthearted or serious: It's important to consider how well the participants know each other, if at all. Ask one question or combine two of them, depending on the size and needs of your group and the allotted time. Questions can include the following:

a. How long have you been a member of the congregation?

b. In what ways have you been involved in the synagogue up to now?

c. What is something surprising that we might learn about you?

d. What is one aspect of your experience in this congregation that you find fulfilling?

e. What do you hope to accomplish in this meeting?

f. What are your fears or concerns regarding this meeting?

4. Study a Text about Worship Together

Select one of the Study Texts with accompanying questions that are found in the Appendix to this section (see page 61). The texts are titled The Search for Spirituality at the Turn of the Millennium and How Worship Impacts Our Lives.

5. Introduce the Facilitators

a. The *discussion leader* insures that everyone is heard and keeps the group on track.

b. The *notetaker* records ideas on a flip chart and after the meeting transcribes them for future reference.

c. The *timekeeper* watches the time to insure that the group completes its task and apprises the participants of the remaining time.

6. Establish the Ground Rules for the Discussion

The following are suggested guidelines for focus group discussion:

a. All ideas are valid.

b. There should be no judging of ideas as "good" or "bad."

c. "Piggybacking" off someone else's idea is fine.

d. The more ideas, the better.

e. Hear people out: Wait for them to finish before jumping in.

7. The Discussion Itself

The focus group process provides an opportunity to move beyond simple "yes" or "no," "like" or "dislike" answers. The facilitator should present a series of questions about worship and then actively encourage the participants to think more deeply about the implications of their views, to critically examine their positions and to challenge commonly held assumptions. All of this needs to be done in an atmosphere of mutual respect, courtesy and civility. If your congregation is implementing the focus groups for the purpose of addressing a particular worship issue or need, the facilitator should develop questions that pertain directly to the subject under consideration. When the purpose of the focus groups is to look at worship more broadly and generally, the facilitator can pose some or all of the following questions:

a. When have you found yourself inspired, enriched or nurtured by worship?

b. Were there times when your worship experiences left you disappointed, confused, uninspired or lonely?

c. What makes it difficult for you to attend worship services more often than you do?

d. When you do attend services, do you feel welcome?

e. When (if at all) during worship do you experience moments of peace or reflection or feel inspired or emotionally touched?

f. How do different styles of liturgical music and/or the use of musical instruments impact your worship experience?

g. How does the interaction between the worship leaders and the congregation affect your experience of the service?

h. How does the physical layout of the worship space (the size and shape of the room, the height of the bimah, the arrangement and type of seating, etc.) impact your worship experience?

i. Do you feel that this congregation's worshiping community is *your* community? If so, why? If not, why not?

8. Reflection and Conclusion

a. Summarize briefly the topics that were addressed and the range of views that were expressed in the focus group meeting.

b. Invite the participants to offer a few last words or final thoughts.

c. Establish the next steps to be taken in this process. Will there be a follow-up meeting, a written report or a review of the findings by the Board? Make sure that the participants know how their views will be assimilated and what they can expect to take place in the coming weeks and months (see below).

d. Thank them for participating.

e. Close the meeting with a very brief ritual. Sing a *niggun* (wordless melody), read a poem or offer a prayer. Help the participants to transition from this experience back to their everyday lives.

9. After the Focus Group and Beyond: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

a. Send a brief but personal handwritten note of thanks to those who attended the focus group meeting.

b. Summarize the findings of the focus group in writing. Present them to the relevant synagogue group, such as the Ritual Committee or Board of Trustees.

c. If changes are going to be made as a result of the meeting(s) of the focus group, send this information to every household.

d. Publish the findings in the synagogue bulletin.

e. Let the congregants know what the next steps will be. If certain matters will be referred to committees, tell the congregation which committees will be handling which issues. Give an approximate time frame in which decisions will be made.

f. When changes are going to be implemented, explain via a letter and the bulletin when and how those changes will occur.

WITH THANKS

Some of the ideas presented in this Blueprint for Focus Groups were adapted from the following publications by the Union for Reform Judaism Ida and Howard Wilkoff Department of Synagogue Management. You can find out more about the work of this department at **www.urj.org/synmgmt**.

- ***Cultivating the Future: Long-Range Planning for Congregations***, a project of the Union for Reform Judaism Ida and Howard Wilkoff Department of Synagogue Management, 2006
- ***Hear, O Israel: Creating Meaningful Congregational Mission Statements***, a project of the Union for Reform Judaism Ida and Howard Wilkoff Department of Synagogue Management, 2007

APPENDIX

THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITY AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

We begin with two texts from two different books about modern-day Jewish spiritual quests. One excerpt offers the reader a glimpse into the author's renewed appreciation of worship, and the other chronicles the author's moment of awakening. We hope that the texts and the questions that follow will lead you to a discussion about your own such moments of awakening or renewal of faith.

Study Texts

1. I tried the Shabbat service at Chochmat Halev, a center for Jewish meditation and learning whose name means "wisdom of the heart." I knew I'd have to peel off my shoes, sit cross-legged on the floor, meditate on command. By the end, I'd probably have to hold hands with strangers.

   The place was packed. A boisterous crowd spilled out the door. Mounds of worn shoes blocked the entrance. Coats were mashed into all kinds of places. Inside, congregants covered the floor, sitting, squatting, and kneeling knee to knee.

   I arrived just in time for the guided meditation and sat near the back. A woman in white tapped lightly on a drum and told a story about the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism. Periodically, she'd pause and ask us to check in with our bodies: We'd concentrate on our breath, our posture, the way our weight shifted lower as our bodies relaxed. The room itself seemed to settle after awhile. The people around me began to sway, almost imperceptibly.

   Then the prayers—songs, really—began. The energy in the room shifted. I've seen this phenomenon before. People seem to come into a service as individuals. They're separate, distracted, disconnected even, from the people around them. Then a choreography begins. The rabbi, or the cantor, or the layperson leading the service motions to the congregation. Folks lean over, pull out their prayer books, flip to the proper page almost in unison. They stand up, clear their throats. They open their mouths and sing.

   During the songs, a change happens. These individuals become something more. They become part of a whole, a community. They become part of a heritage, a civilization. They're connected by voice, by sound, by melody. Sometimes they become part of each other, part of whatever they call God.

   Lisa Schiffman, *generation j*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999, pp. 94–95

2. On March 24, 1996, which was 5 Nisan 5756, my father died. In the year that followed, I said the prayer known as the Mourner's *Kaddish* three times daily—during the morning service, the afternoon service, and the evening service—in a synagogue in Washington and, when I was away from home, in synagogues elsewhere. It was my duty to say it, for reasons that will become clear in this book.

   I was struck almost immediately by the poverty of my knowledge about the ritual that I was performing with such unexpected fidelity. And it was not long before I understood that I

would not succeed in insulating the rest of my existence from the impact of this obscure and arduous practice. The symbols were seeping into everything. A season of sorrow became a season of soul renovation, for which I was not at all prepared.

Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, p. vii

Questions

1. What was powerful about worship for Schiffman?
2. Have you had a life experience that caused you to reevaluate your own connection to God and to Judaism?
3. Do you see any similarities between your worship experiences and those of the two authors?

HOW WORSHIP IMPACTS OUR LIVES

The texts below address the following issues: How does participation in worship impact our individual lives, and how would the participation in communal worship by a large number of your congregants impact the life of your synagogue? Once again, the texts and questions are aimed at encouraging you to share your worship experiences.

Study Texts

1. To attain a degree of spiritual security, one cannot rely upon one's own resources. One needs an atmosphere in which the concern for the spirit is shared by a community. We are in need of students and scholars, masters and specialists. But we need also the company of witnesses, of human beings who are engaged in worship, who for a moment sense the truth that life is meaningless without an attachment to God…

   Pondering his religious existence, a Jew will realize that some of the greatest spiritual events happen in moments of prayer. Worship is the source of religious experience, of religious insight, and religiously some of us live by what happens to us in the hours we spend in the synagogue. These hours have been in the past the wellsprings of insight, the wellsprings of faith. Are these wellsprings still open in our time?

   Abraham J. Heschel, "The Vocation of the Cantor"

2. Jews need one another, and therefore congregations, to do *primary religious acts* that they should not, and probably cannot, do alone. Doing primary religious acts is the only way we have of growing as Jews. Consequently, it is also the only justification for the existence of a congregation. Everything else congregations do, Jews can always do cheaper, easier, and better somewhere else.

   There are three ancient kinds of primary Jewish acts: holy study, communal prayer, and good deeds, or in the classical language of *Pirkei Avot*: Torah, *avodah*, and *g'milut chasadim*. This is not a capricious categorization. Prayer is emotional: song, candles, dance, meditation, and silence. A matter of the heart. Study is intellectual: reading, questioning, discussion, rigorous

logic, and argument. A matter of the head. And good deeds are public acts: helping, repairing, marching, fighting, and doing. Matters of the hand. Only rare individuals are able to do all three with equal fervor and skill. And so our membership in a congregation and association with a broad spectrum of Jews will compensate for our personal deficiencies.

Lawrence Kushner,
"The Tent-Peg Business: Some Truths About Congregations"

3. "Ritual communication is not about the communication of information," Mr. Seale [an associate professor of liturgy at the University of Notre Dame] has written, "but about the rehearsal of meaning, bonding people together in a common stance toward life." Ritual speech does not send new messages back and forth between believers and God, he points out: "It enacts relationships."

Peter Steinfels, "Catholics Still Seek the Poetry of the Mass,"
The New York Times, December 11, 1988

Questions

1. The Heschel excerpt asks, "Are these wellsprings still open in our time?" How would you answer that question?
2. What impact does worship have on your life?
3. What impact does worship have on your congregation?