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■ WRITING A WORSHIP VISION STATEMENT FOR YOUR CONGREGATION: FROM DISCUSSIONS AND DATA TO DOCUMENT

GOALS

To help committee members

- Assess the interests, hopes and priorities that have emerged from committee and congregational learning sessions and discussions.
- Make the transition from study, reflection and gathering information to formulating a mission statement that expresses a future vision.

ADVANCE READING

- All pertinent notes from the Worship/Ritual Committee's study of Let Us Learn in Order to Do and the congregation's discussions based on *Panim el Panim: Face to Face*
- *Hear, O Israel: Creating Meaningful Congregational Mission Statements*, a publication of the Union's Department of Synagogue Management, available on the web at www.urj.org/synmgmt/publications

INTRODUCTION

For many members of Worship/Ritual Committees, learning to engage meaningfully and honestly in the study of Jewish liturgy, theology and prayer is a great challenge. Composing a statement that expresses the insights, questions and hopes that emerged from this process and ensuring that the statement is meaningful, succinct, hopeful and realistic can indeed be difficult. But conveying this vision for worship is the culmination of this phase of your committee's work, as you integrate your congregation's aspirations for worship into a statement for the board and prayer leaders to consider and implement.

The document that you compose should inform your congregational leaders about your community's relationship to worship both as it currently exists and as it could be. The language that you use should give a vivid sense of the directions that worship should take in your community without dictating a prescription or formula. It will be the responsibility of the board and prayer leaders to receive your recommendations, to consider them as part of the life of your congregation and to strategize ways to implement these initiatives. Because communication and the centrality of worship in synagogue life are core values of this entire process, lay and professional leaders should consult with the Worship/Ritual Committee and other congregational members throughout these next steps.

The exercises below have been designed to help your Worship/Ritual Committee make a transition from study and data collection. This next step requires bringing together everything you have learned about congregants' relationship to and hopes for worship.

ACTIVITY

Many shuls, many approaches. The adage "Where there are two Jews, there surely are three opinions (at least!)" extends to synagogue life as well. As you read the four approaches to starting the writing process, below, you'll probably recognize that one or two of them simply feel right. If

other members of your committee share that sense, your Worship/Ritual Committee should choose one of them as your starting point. These four options are a sampling, meant to be some suggestions. If your committee develops a different approach, please share it with us!

Engage the Analyst's Mind: Mining the Data

After the ongoing study and discussion sessions involving your committee and members of your entire congregation have occurred, you should have extensive notes. Your committee could view these as a “core text” for your vision statement. Like any complex set of documents, this data can be read both qualitatively and quantitatively: Are there motifs that jump out as you reread these materials? What repetitions can you identify: key words, concepts, hot-button issues, interests, hopes? Were issues or themes that you anticipated never mentioned? Were there minor ones that your group expected to be major, or were people uncomfortable even raising them at all? This analysis should help you to identify priorities and provide structure for your vision.

Imagine Your Congregational Ideal

Based on your committee and congregational study and group discussions, you probably have many visions of how an “ideal” worship experience would be characterized. Divide your Worship/Ritual Committee into groups of three (four at most) and give each group fifteen to twenty minutes to articulate an ideal vision of worship in your congregation, based on the group’s understanding of the input that it has received. Tell the groups to be as creative and accurate as they can be, keeping in mind that they won’t capture every aspect of the community’s aspirations and that they will be presenting this information to the other groups. The presentations could take any form (e.g., a flowchart, a poem, a letter from a visitor, a drawing, etc.). Tell the groups to consider the following: How do these interpretations capture your congregation’s values, hopes and aspirations? How do they compare with your community’s current approach to worship? Let these presentations of an “ideal” worship experience inspire your worship vision statement and help you understand your community’s priorities.

Start with the Congregational Mission Statement

If your synagogue already has a congregational mission statement, you have probably used it as a point of reference in your committee and community study process. At this stage in your visioning process, returning to that document could offer perspective on the ideas that have emerged. How does this worship information you have gathered relate to the existing congregational mission statement? Does it represent organic change? Does it challenge previous ideas? Does it read like a commentary on the existing text? Does it complement past practices? This analysis should be a helpful catalyst as your committee begins the writing process.

Tap a Wordsmith for a First Draft

Writing alone can be a difficult task. Writing “by committee” is seldom easier. If your committee includes someone who is comfortable writing and is an effective writer, you may wish to start this process by asking that individual to compose a first draft (with the understanding that this initial draft will likely be tugged and tweaked extensively in the next round). If there are two strong writers in the group, they might pair up for this first version. However, more than two people makes a mini-committee, which isn’t advisable.

Any of the above activities could serve as a catalyst for your committee to review, organize and prioritize the material that you have gathered for your vision of worship. Be prepared to work

through multiple drafts of your statement. Legend has it that Eleanor Roosevelt once opened a correspondence with the apology, “I didn’t have time to write a brief letter.” This wry wisdom deserves your attention as you compose your statement. Set aside sufficient time to allow for the cycles of composition that this statement merits as you write, mull, share, edit, discuss, add, delete, redo and ultimately create a version that rings true and clear.

Even after you have shared your mission statement for congregational worship with the board and prayer leaders, the process of expressing your vision and values should continue. You may receive the document back with questions and comments for your committee to consider, requiring an expansion of the process of writing and revision that you had undergone initially.

Once the statement is complete, it should be shared with your entire community to update them on the progress of this work (perhaps on your website, in your bulletin, in a special mailing, in a worship study group, etc.). The ultimate goal is to have your mission statement help your congregation develop a common vocabulary for talking about worship as you continue to learn about and experiment with your communal worship.