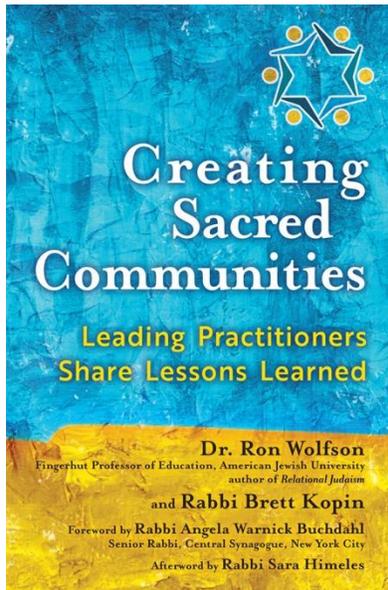




CREATING SACRED COMMUNITIES: LEADING PRACTITIONERS SHARE LESSONS LEARNED

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First meeting: My Role as Synagogue Board Member

- I. *Hevrotah check-in activity (break into groups of 2-3):*

Discuss: who or what encouraged me to join the synagogue board? What motivates/inspires me to continue serving on the board?

- II. *Come back together as a group and read the following text by Norm Levine, former president of Valley Beth Shalom in Los Angeles.*

“I concluded for myself that I had three roles as a member of the board and then as the president of the congregation.

Number one: provide the resources— human and economic and emotional—to enable the clergy to do their job. Sometimes that puts you at odds with the clergy. Sometimes the rabbi comes to you with an idea and you say, “Rabbi, that’s a great idea, but you can’t do it—we can’t afford it.” Or sometimes you say, “That’s a great idea, but you can’t do it *now*. We’ve got to find a way to

afford it.” My number one job was to do what I could to make sure the resources were there so that the clergy could do *their* job, which is different from *my* job.

Number two: protect and defend the rabbi. Being a pulpit rabbi today is a tougher job than it used to be because we’re so divided politically. It’s so difficult to not offend somebody at every moment in time. I don’t think when I was growing up that was such an issue. Jews thought more alike about Israel and about American politics. But now, we’re very much divided. But I really thought it was my role to protect the rabbis in any way I could, so that they could do what they wanted to do. I had a two-year job. So, if you don’t like me, don’t worry, there’ll be somebody after me, and you can deal with them. But in a stable congregation, the rabbi will be there long after I’m president.

Number three: the third role came as a surprise to me. Nobody cares about talking to Norm, but everybody wants to talk to the president of the shul. If forming a relationship between the synagogue and the members is important, which of course it is, then I found I had a role to play. I didn’t understand that before I took the job. I never knew the presidents of the synagogue as a kid. I never knew presidents of a synagogue my first twenty years as a member of Valley Beth Shalom. I quickly learned that people like to be acknowledged by the leadership of the shul, especially if the leadership is human, not arrogant, and does a good job. I tried to be the third or fourth person to arrive at the synagogue every Shabbat morning. I’d stand outside the back door of the sanctuary for the first hour of the service and just greet people, just shake their hands, welcome them, and talk to them. Then, I would just walk around the sanctuary, shaking people’s hands. And people seemed to like that. It connected them to the leadership and to the synagogue. Because it was acknowledgment of something, of relationship. I enjoyed it; it was fun. And I think it made a difference for people...It was valuable. It says to a member that the leadership of the synagogue cares about them and that they have value. So those were my three roles as president as I saw it.”

– Norm Levine, pp. 167-168

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways do you agree with Norm’s three roles? How would you add to or modify these three in crafting your own?
2. What are you currently doing as synagogue leadership to welcome and engage your members and visitors? Are there areas for growth, and if so, what are some ideas that you have?

Second meeting: Our Roles as the Synagogue Board

- I. *Hevrutah check-in activity (break into groups of 2-3)*

Discuss: What elements of leadership have I noticed in other organizations that I want to bring into our own?

- II. *There are two separate texts provided below from Creating Sacred Communities. You may choose to discuss one or both, depending on time. The first text addresses how to engage volunteers and integrate multiple identities as a community. The second text addresses some of the elements of a positive team dynamic.*

Text #1: From Melissa Balaban, founding president and CEO of IKAR in Los Angeles.

I think a lot of synagogues operate under the premise that when they need somebody to work on a project, they just throw it out there: “Who wants to do this?” And the task feels like a bummer. What [Rabbi Laura Geller] did was different. She said to me, “I see you. I see your gifts and it would be so much fun.” That was such a powerful lesson for me about how to engage people in doing the work of building community because I would never have volunteered to do it; it wouldn’t even have been on my radar. She singled me out and saw that it was really something I could do. And I owe her now for everything.

Later, I had taken a job at USC as the assistant dean of the law school and was serving on the board of the Progressive Jewish Alliance where Daniel Sokatch was executive director. I had young kids, and we couldn’t find a shul that worked for us. Nothing enticed my husband, a sort of curmudgeonly New Yorker, atheist non-joiner, but my kids were approaching the age where they should start studying. And so, Daniel said, “You should meet my friend Sharon Brous.”

So, we had this meeting, and Sharon articulated this vision that was so moving; she understood the hunger we had for something deeply spiritual—this idea that there are so many parts of your Jewish and human self and you often compartmentalize them in ways that make no sense, particularly in a Jewish context. She described going to different fancy shuls that were talking with her about doing something different. One said, “We’re a davening shul.” Another said, “We’re a social justice shul.” And that just didn’t make sense to her. How can

you go to shul every week, as a *shomer* [observant of] Shabbat and *shomer* kashrut Jew and not understand your responsibility in the world? At the same time, how can you be a Jew engaged in social justice and not get that your texts and traditions inform that work? This was a revelation for me because I had seen it in pieces, but I had not seen it come together in one vision.

- Melissa Balaban pp. 116-117

Discussion Questions:

1. How can we best recruit volunteers within our larger synagogue community?
2. What kind of synagogue are we, and in what ways can we integrate our multiple identities?

Text #2: From Janice Kamenir-Reznik, co-founder of Jewish World Watch.

Nothing happens magically or without hard work. You have to be able to collaborate with people. In order to do that successfully, you need to realize that you do not have a corner on every good idea. Exercise humility, but always plow forward to build your base. Sometimes you compromise; sometimes your idea is the best idea. You just work really, really hard and gather good, like-minded people, never being discouraged by the nay-sayers; always embracing the yea-sayers. Eventually, we built a great board for Jewish World Watch; but it doesn't end there. Bringing in new blood all the time is critical and challenging.

- Janice Kamenir-Reznik pp. 72

Discussion Questions:

1. What are our strengths in working together as a board? In what areas can we grow together as a board?
2. Janice says, "Bringing in new blood all the time is critical and challenging." How are we doing in terms of bringing new people into our conversations and into synagogue leadership?