



Forsaking the Status Quo in Scarsdale

How we transformed Westchester Reform Temple.

BY RICHARD JACOBS

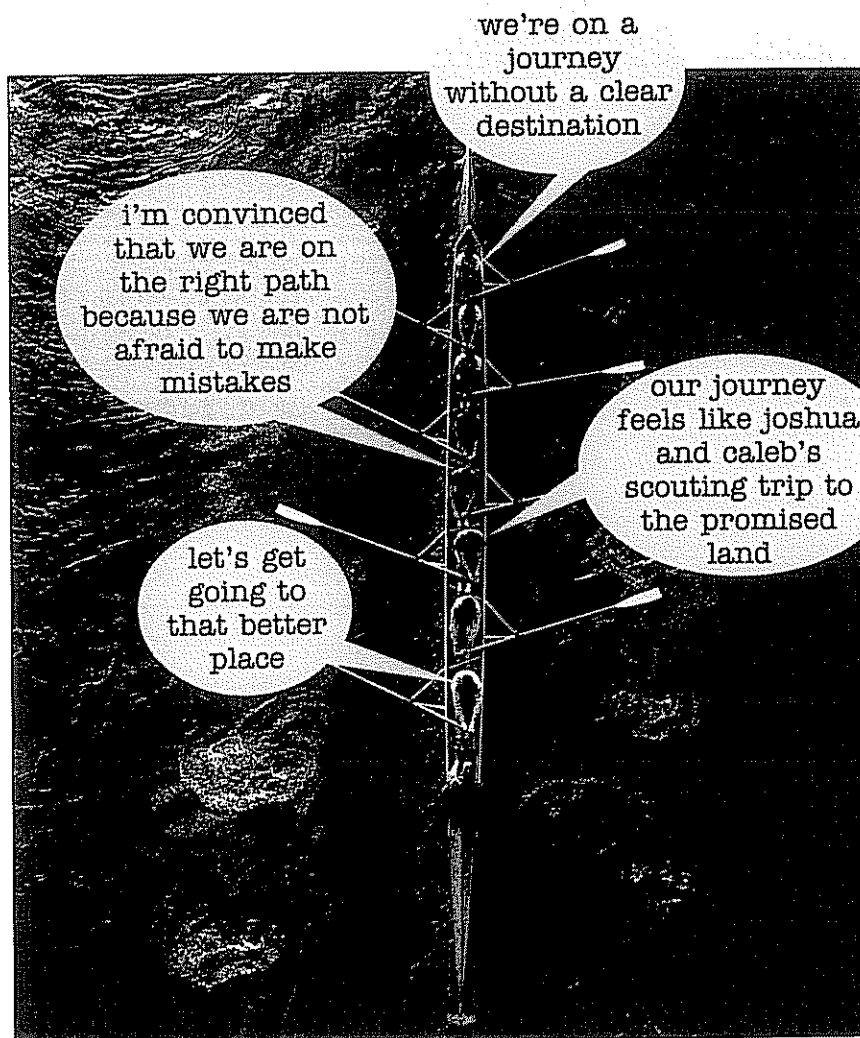
To tell you the truth, the Judaism I had experienced as a youth growing up in a large suburban Reform synagogue seemed shallow and uninspiring. The dreary services lacked passion and relevance. Our religious education was woefully inadequate. So when I was ordained eighteen years ago at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, I didn't want to be a congregational rabbi. How, in good conscience, could I take a leadership role in an institution in which I had so little faith?

But as fate would have it, I am today the rabbi of a large suburban Reform congregation. No, I have not sold out. I have come to believe that it is possible and necessary to transform our synagogues.

When I first became the spiritual leader of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, NY, I thought naively that if I could just articulate a compelling vision of what our congregation could become, the members would dutifully roll up their sleeves and off we'd go. We did make some modest changes in our religious school and in our worship, but the status quo still reigned supreme.

One day, while I pondered why my approach wasn't working, Sara Lee, the director of HUC-JIR's Rhea Hirsch School of Education in Los Angeles,

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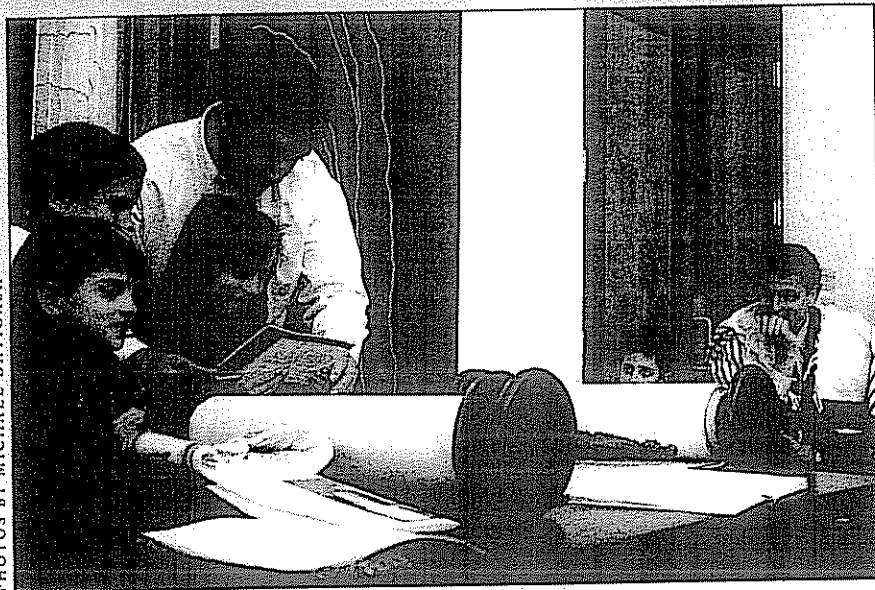
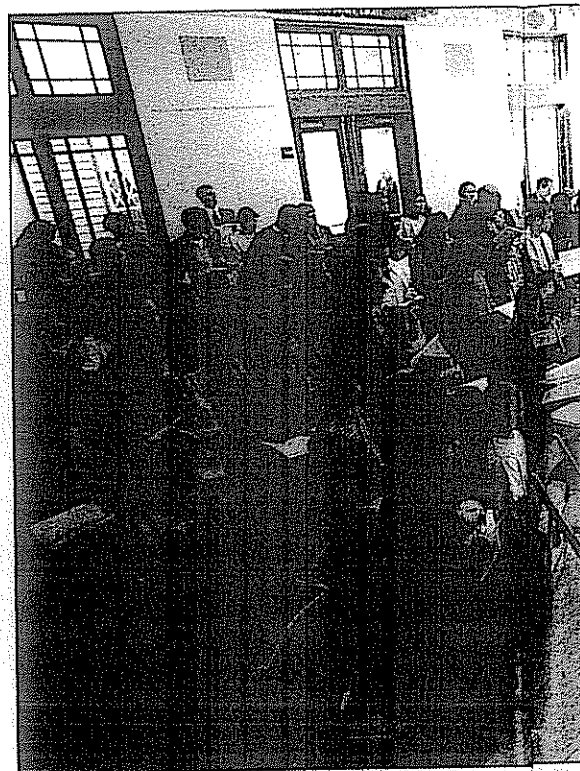


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phoned to invite our temple to be part of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), a project devoted to transforming synagogues into communities of lifelong learners. At first, our leader-

ship was hesitant to enter the project, fearing that the hidden agenda was to remake us in someone else's image. But after months of serious discussion and assurances from the Rhea Hirsch School

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that it would simply give us tools and guidance, our board agreed to sign on. We took this step not because our educational programs were failing, but because we were convinced that the dominant model of supplementary Jewish education—in which the synagogue is viewed by parents as a place to drop off kids to somehow become Jewish—was not working and in dire need of change.

As one of six original ECE congregations (the others were Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA; Congregation Emanu-El, San Diego, CA; Congregation Shaare Emeth, St. Louis, MO; Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, CA; and The Temple, Atlanta, GA), we were assigned an adviser who helped us through the process. We participated in several retreats with leadership teams from the other ECE synagogues led by

the Rhea Hirsch faculty and five advisers. If any of us thought the retreats would be a shopping trip for new programmatic ideas, we were wrong. The ECE staff encouraged us to spend the first year developing a bold educational vision that would be the basis of deep, systemic change. The visioning work frustrated some members of our task force, who wanted to solve problems and implement changes, not discuss the

congregation



many limiting assumptions that inhibit real transformation.

A few months into the process, we invited forty congregants to join an ECE task force that would work for a year to study and reflect on what our temple might be at its very best. Each meeting consisted of innovative text study and experiential learning, including experiments with new rituals. Through the ECE retreats, we were introduced to the

best practices of other synagogues—including innovative models of family and classroom education. In addition, our task force visited dynamic congregations, Jewish museums, Hillel foundations, and summer camps.

At the same time, a group of trustees set out to create a congregational mission statement. They determined five pillars of our temple's sacred work:

- *Talmud Torah*: lifelong and life-

enhancing Jewish learning;

- *Avodah*: personal and communal religious practices, including worship, that fill our lives with spiritual depth;

- *Chavurah*: a welcoming, inclusive, and sacred community that embraces each of us with support, care, and wisdom;

- *Tikkun Olam*: ongoing involvement in bringing healing and justice to the brokenness in our world;

- *Klal Yisrael*: strengthening our

bonds to Israel and the Jewish people in all lands and building commonality among the various streams of Judaism.

After a year, the ECE task force shared its initial educational vision with the congregation in a series of "community conversations." Almost half of our 1,000 families joined in serious dialogue about the future educational direction of our synagogue. The process led to some major changes, including a new initiative called "Sharing Shabbat," an alternative path for families with children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Almost one-third of our eligible religious school families now choose to come every Shabbat morning, joining in a spirited, participatory congregational service that engages worshipers of all ages. Each week in the hour-long service, a different family takes responsibility for leading the Torah service. After the *oneg*, the children go to classrooms with teachers while the adults study the portion of the week with our cantor, Angela Warnick Buchdal, or with Rabbi Aaron Panken, a member of the congregation. Since our weekly gatherings of study and prayer began four years ago, this community has shared the joy of welcoming newborn children and the pain of mourning the passing of loved ones. Every week the children see that serious Jewish learning and heartfelt worship are the province of all Jews, children and adults alike.

To date, no b'nai mitzvah have been celebrated during Sharing Shabbat's worship service, but we are considering that option. We offer two other Shabbat morning worship options: the Torah Study Library Minyan and the main sanctuary service during which b'nai mitzvah are celebrated.

As we began to expand and deepen our learning options, we discovered that not only did we need more space, we needed a different kind of space—not just a new wing to our school, sanctuary, or social hall, but smaller, more intimate spaces for study groups, alternative services, and spiritual support groups. Fortunately, we were able to purchase, renovate, and enlarge an old house that stood adjacent to the temple. To ensure that the interior of our new

Center for Jewish Life (CJL) evoked a sense of Jewish spirituality, we worked with the architect and two Jewish artists, Laurie Gross and Penny Sobel. Using light as a theme, CJL feels like a retreat center on the grounds of our temple. People who attend baby namings, healing services, Shabbat dinners, and other events in our new space attest to feeling a special sense of warmth and intimacy.

In another ECE-inspired initiative, we created a new youth program that integrates formal and informal Jewish education. Recent studies of identity formation convinced us that informal Jewish experiences such as camping, youth groups, and trips to Israel powerfully connect young Jews to Judaism by creating communities in which Jewish values and teachings are not only taught but lived. All of our formal and informal educational programs are now under the direction of our new "youth rabbi," Laurie Katz Braun, who nurtures the educational, spiritual, social, and emotional needs of our teens. Like many congregations, we used to have only two separate tracks: youth group and confirmation. Now there are four additional gateways through which teens can continue Jewish learning and living: Teen Theater, Teen Healing Services, regular Shabbat dinners for teens, and informal Torah study in the Teen Chavurah. In facilitating all of these programs, our youth rabbi gets to know each of our young people, while providing Jewish spiritual direction in a multitude of settings.

In addition to educational changes, we are also re-envisioning governance. Out of our ECE task force we created a more permanent Education Council, which brings together everyone involved in learning for regular planning, coordination, and rethinking the temple's educational programs. At one of our Ed Council meetings, we reflected on the temple's monthly calendar of events and noticed how weeknights were dominated by committee meetings; in other words, "business" meetings were conflicting with scheduled programs and thereby excluding committee members. To remedy this situation, we moved most of our committee meetings to Tuesday nights, freeing up

Mondays for the arts, Wednesdays for adult learning, and Thursdays for healing services and spiritual support groups. With this change, we realigned our activity calendar to reflect the temple's core values and mission.

After four years of ECE-guided change, we felt ready to begin transforming perhaps the most delicate area of synagogue life: worship. Committed to the principle that learning informs every aspect of our practice, we created a working group of thirty people to study the prayer curriculum of Synagogue 2000. By design, our working group evolved into a spiritual community, sharing our spiritual journeys through guided reflections; engaging in serious study of Jewish prayer; and experimenting with different modalities of prayer, from meditation to *davening* to classical Reform worship. This process has led to many changes in the temple's approach to worship, including the creation of two distinct weekly Erev Shabbat services to meet the needs of our diverse membership. For Kabbalat Shabbat (6:15–7:15) we offer a mostly musical service—usually voice and guitar—with opportunities for silent reflection, providing worshipers with an intimate, highly participatory, and shorter prayer experience. Rather than concluding with an *oneg*, we encourage congregants to follow the service with a Shabbat dinner at the temple or at home. Our late Shabbat service, which begins in our main sanctuary at 8:15, offers melodies and customs that are cherished by many of our longtime congregants: majestic musical pieces sung by the cantor and the quartet, usually with organ or sometimes piano accompaniment; a Torah service and sermon; and a concluding *oneg*.

The early and late services both begin with everyone gathering around a Shabbat table for the opening *nigunim* (traditional melodies), candle lighting, Kiddush, and greeting. After having drawn together as a community, we then move to the sanctuary. Our temple is blessed to have three full-time and two part-time clergy. We all take turns leading the early and late services,

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though none of us leads more than one service each Friday evening.

The double Friday night services might turn out to have been a bad idea, or they may continue to grow in popularity. We won't know unless we are willing to experiment and then honestly assess our successes and failures. I am convinced that we are on the right path because we are not afraid to make mistakes as we slowly transform our synagogue. Our members have learned to trust the process that leads to changes, and they know that their input will be welcomed as we continue to evolve.

Transforming a synagogue is somewhat like having new owners renovate a home while the previous inhabitants are still inside. At Westchester Reform Temple, we were careful not to make longtime members feel like strangers in their own spiritual home. Each task force and working group has included veteran members who were often skeptical if not resistant to the change

process. The involvement of "nay-sayers" is more than a matter of expedience; it is an essential part of the ethical decision making we learned from our beloved rabbi emeritus, Jack Stern, Jr.

We discovered early on that synagogues cannot be transformed unless there is a dynamic partnership between professional and lay leadership. If we let our rabbis, cantors, and educators take charge of all matters concerning ritual and learning, we do our congregants a disservice, for, ultimately, no one can do the spiritual work for another. For synagogue transformation to succeed, temple professionals need to empower congregants to value their own spiritual resources.

Are we finished transforming Westchester Reform Temple? Certainly not, but we have learned much from the work we've done so far. The ECE and Synagogue 2000 projects have taught us how to re-envision what we do and given us tools to get there step by step. Grants from the Continuity Commission of New York's UJA-Federation and the Covenant Foundation have given us crit-

ical financial support to pilot our new youth and Sharing Shabbat programs.

Like lifelong Jewish learning and spiritual growth, transformation is a process that never ends. It has taken years to earn enough confidence and trust from our congregation to tackle the hardest challenges of synagogue life—the proverbial "high-hanging fruit."

Our congregational journey feels like Joshua and Caleb's brief scouting trip to the promised land. When they returned to the Israelites camped in the wilderness, they showed the whole community some of the fruits they had acquired on the trip: "We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and cities are fortified and very large" (Numbers 13: 27–28). Even with the serious obstacles, Caleb and Joshua were ready to journey toward the land flowing with milk and honey. The modest fruits of our efforts propel us to echo Caleb's rallying cry in Numbers 13:30: "Aloh na'aleh—Let's get going to that better place." □

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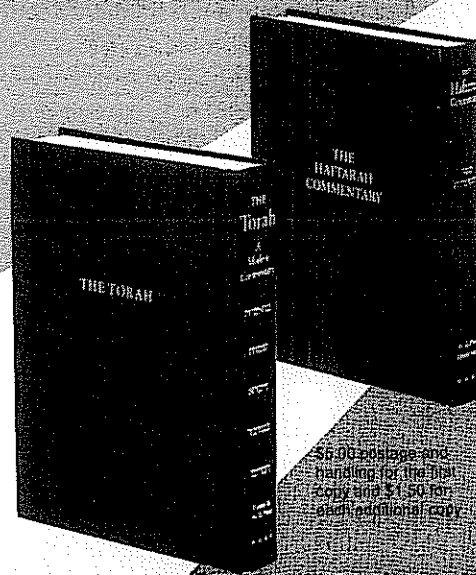
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