

The Self-Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life

Isa Aron

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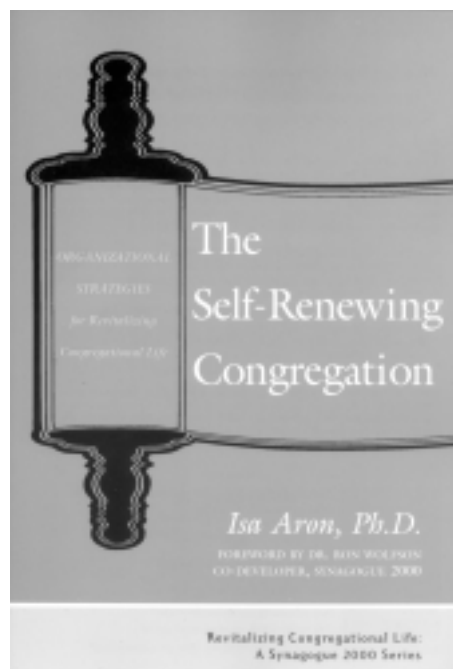
The synagogue is the institution American Jews love to hate. It is the Jewish organization they are most likely to join, and the one they are most likely to participate in on a regular basis. It is also the most likely target of their ire and their humor. Nearly everyone has a favorite synagogue story – about a boring service, a callous member of the clergy, an outlandish *bar mitzvah*, a bitter controversy. An old joke tells of the Jewish Robinson Crusoe who builds two congregations on his deserted island – the one he attends, and the one he would never set foot in.

Beyond the jokes and critiques lies an undeniable truth: if there is one place that will preserve the Jewishness of the American Jew, that place is the synagogue. At any given

time, 40% of American Jews belong to a congregation; it is estimated that 80% have been members of some congregation at some point in their lives. If one wants to reach the largest proportion of Jews, one must work with congregations.

The recent interest in synagogue “transformation” is a result of the acknowledgment, on the one hand, of the enormous potential of synagogues, and the realization, on the other hand, that many have fallen short of their potential.

The growing body of research on congregational life (both Jewish and Christian) teaches us that some congregations act more “intelligently” than others. They are open to new ideas, flexible in their outlook,



thoughtful in their policies, and, therefore, better able to adapt to their changing environments.

Organizational consultant Peter Senge coined the term “learning organization” to characterize institutions that engage in a continuous cycle of action and reflection. Some who have applied the concept of the learning organization to congregations have used the term “learning congregation.”¹ In contrast, I have chosen the term “self-renewing,” to emphasize the reflexive and cyclical nature of this activity, the fact that much of the learning is internal, and that the learning is incomplete without concomitant action.

Four capacities are the cornerstones to congregational self-renewal. These are collective capacities, over and above the individual abilities of congregants and staff. Each capacity enables the congregation to do the seemingly paradoxical – to hold fast to both ends of an apparent dilemma. They are:

- Thinking back and thinking ahead: being both reflective and proactive
- Enabling leaders to follow, and followers to lead: practicing collaborative leadership
- Seeing both the forest and the trees: creating community among diverse individuals
- Honoring the past while anticipating the future: balancing tradition and change.

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Isa Aron is Professor of Jewish Education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, HUC-JIR/Los Angeles, where she teaches courses in teaching, philosophy of education, and organizational change. She was the Founding Director of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), a project of the RHSOE, now in its twelfth year. She continues to serve as the Senior Consultant to that project, which works with congregations throughout the United States, helping them become self-renewing congregations of learners.

Dr. Aron holds a Ph.D. in philosophy of education from the University of Chicago, and has published widely in journals, such as *The American Journal of Education*, *Religious Education*, and *Jewish Education*. She is the Senior Editor of *A Congregation of Learners*, published by the UAHC Press, and the author of *Becoming a Congregation of Learners* and *The Self-Renewing Congregation*, both published by Jewish Lights Publishing. She is married to the photographer, Bill Aron; they have two young adult sons.

Dr. Isa Aron discusses her new book in an online video conversation with Dr. Robert Weinberg, Director, Experiment in Congregational Education, at www.eceonline.org – click on the picture of the book cover!

with the belief that each person should act now according to messianic ideals rather than wait for the coming of the messiah.

Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, and Rabbi Maya Leibovich ed., *Barukh She'asani Isha?* [Blessed for Creating Me a Woman?] (Yediot Acharonot Publishers). An exploration by prominent scholars and lecturers in Judaic studies of various aspects of Jewish Womanhood throughout the ages.

Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, and Rabbi Maya Leibovich ed., *Milchemet Gog Umagog* [The War Before the Messianic Era] (Yediot Acharonot Publishers). Analysis by prominent Israeli scholars of Apocalyptic Messianic beliefs from biblical times until recent Zionist ideology with reflections on "the final war between Good and Evil."

Dr. Ellis Rivkin, *The Unity Principal: The Shaping of Jewish History* (Behrman House). An exploration of how monotheism has enabled Jews throughout history to adapt themselves, their communities, and their vision of the Covenant, whenever they were confronted by new circumstances or historical forces, to ensure Jewish survival and vitality.

Jean Bloch Rosensaft, ed., *Thirty Pieces / Thirty Years: Sculpture by Ann Sperry* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York). An exhibition catalogue with essays by **Laura Kruger**, **Dr. Norman J. Cohen**, and **Pepe Karmel**.

Dr. Gary P. Zola, ed., and **Dr. Fred Krome**, managing ed., *The American Jewish Archives Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives). Highlights from this volume include articles on American Jewish philanthropist Felix Warburg's attitude toward the Palestinian Arabs in the aftermath of the 1929 riots; the Independent Order of True Sisters, a 19th century American Jewish women's organization; and the edited and annotated collection of letters from Rebecca Aaronson Brickner to her husband Rabbi Barnett Brickner written from Palestine in the early 1930s.

Biblical Ambiguities

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The idioms to be considered are most often very simple, as far as syntax is concerned. Many are predicate nominatives or nominative phrases with a simple verb, for example: *God said, God is King, God is a rock, God is an army, God is creator*. Despite syntactic simplicity, some idioms involve more abstract concepts, such as when God *regrets* that he had made humans on earth (Gen 6:6)³ or when God reflects (via Jeremiah) that it was he who (physically) *smote* the children of Judah because of their religious waywardness (Jer 2:30), or when God *commands* laws (e.g., Exod 21-24), or when God *declares* (via the prophet) that he never *demand*ed sacrifice (Isa 1:12-14; Jer 7:21-22; Amos 5:21-23).⁴ Just how we categorize and then interpret these phrases – and the many hundreds of others that are spoken by or about God in the Tanakh – will determine how we write the history of Israelite God-belief. (pages 1-2)

One generation's solutions to the unknown become another generation's source of uncertainty, just as one generation's literalisms become another's metaphors. The tolerance for uncertainty constantly shifts with an era's preferences. There is no progression from concrete to abstract, literal to metaphorical, plurality of meaning to singularity of meaning. All of these are natural by-products of the human struggle to make sense. When researching the development of a given religion, we can distinguish the mystic from the straightforward pietist just as much on the basis of their semantic theory as by the outward structures of their beliefs and practices. These theories may never be articulated, but they are always operative. Thus, as we seek to decipher the distinct approaches to meaning that are at the foundations of religious texts and practices, we need to be forever cognizant not only of how ideologies understand the creation of meaning, but also, how they cope with the inevitable ambiguities. (page 199)

³ See Fretheim 1984 on God's change of mind.

⁴ There is much scholarly literature on the question of whether these phrases are to be taken as literal statements or hyperbolic ones. See, for instance, Kaiser 1983, 24-33.

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Each of these dual capacities is discussed in a separate chapter of the book. In each case, I explain why both of these seemingly opposite capacities are critical for synagogues to cultivate. Drawing on organizational theory and research from the worlds of business, education, and government, and on selected Jewish texts, I explore what each capacity entails. Drawing on sociological studies of religious organizations, and on my own decade-long experience working with synagogues, I offer examples of the problems which arise when these capacities are absent and the benefits that accrue when they are present. Developing these capacities, and balancing one against the other, is no easy matter, and each chapter includes exercises designed to help a synagogue committee or task force understand and practice the capacity in question. It also includes text study guides that can serve as spring-boards for discussion. Finally, each chapter includes a real-life case study of a synagogue's efforts to develop the capacity in question.

Framing these four chapters, which form the core of this book, are introductory and concluding chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the recent history of American synagogues, and explains why, at this juncture, it is critical that they develop the capacity to become self-renewing. At the end of the book, chapter 7 deals with two kinds of synergy – between the four capacities discussed in this book, and between the congregation as a whole and the individuals within it.

¹see, for example, Thomas Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).