

Strategic Plan

2008-2018

“In 1951, Rabbi Harry Sky led the congregation in its new synagogue on Middle Street. Although the community may not have known if it was Conservative or Reform or Orthodox, there was a Hebrew School, a new B’Nai Brith, and an active Hadassah and Sisterhood with many communal and fundraising activities. On December 15, 1954, Rabbi Joseph Herbst led a Golden Jubilee Service to celebrate Temple Ahavat Achim’s fiftieth year. Mrs. Arthur Jacobson played Wagner’s *Tannhauser* March on the organ. The Gloucester community was represented by Mayor Benjamin Smith and by representatives from the Cape Ann Council of Churches and the Cape Ann Ministers Association. Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Massachusetts Governor Christian Herter sent congratulatory messages. The Jewish community was an established and respected institution in Gloucester.”

--- *“The Jewish Community of Cape Ann: An Oral History”*

INTRODUCTION

On the night of December 14, 2007, flames burst through the roof of a large apartment building on Middle Street in Gloucester, Mass. Embers blew onto the synagogue next door and our historic building burned to the ground. Now, some six months later, we stand on the cusp of rebirth.

On the day of the fire, we held a Shabbat morning service at the local Unitarian church. The next day, as the ruins of our home still smoldered, we got to work. Teams were organized to lease temporary space, deal with financial issues, and cope with countless, unexpected details. Donations large and small poured in from all over the world. We never missed a service, a day of Hebrew school, or a neighborhood Shabbat dinner.

At the same time, the temple's leadership looked past the immediate crisis and focused on the future. In February 2008, Co-Presidents Carole Sharoff and Lou Goldish appointed a strategic planning team to identify the congregation's core values and to assist in planning a new facility to support those values. We studied demographic data and best practices at successful small synagogues. A large majority of the congregation participated in focus groups and e-mail surveys. As one congregant put it on a survey, "We can think out of the box since our 'box' burned down."

Before the fire, a process of change had already begun. We were already making major improvements in key areas of Temple life: the religious school, Shabbat services, marketing, financial reporting, and in other areas. Our beloved spiritual leader of nearly 40 years, Rabbi Myron Geller, retired in 2006 and we welcomed the energy and vision of a new rabbi, Samuel Barth. But our honest assessment today shows we face many challenges. For example, people under 35 demand a different relationship with their religious institutions than their parents have. We struggle to balance rising costs with the need to keep membership affordable.

This report offers a roadmap to address these challenges. It was born of sorrow but is presented to you with optimism. The seven men who incorporated the first formal Jewish community on Cape in 1904 and the 50 families who bought the Middle Street building in 1951 could not have foreseen our current circumstances. But they faced their own enormous challenges courageously, as we must face ours. We follow in their footsteps with faith, humility, and an unshakeable determination to succeed.

Respectfully submitted,

Temple Ahavat Achim Strategic Planning Committee

Rabbi Samuel Barth, Steven Cohen, Phil Cutter, Alan Feldman, Meredith A. Fine (chair), Wendy Frontiero, Michael Goldstein, Lou Goldish, Owen Kantor, Martin Kaplan, Suzyn Ornstein, Carole Sharoff, Cheryl Shnider, and Robert Visnick

OUR MISSION

We serve the Jewish community of Cape Ann and beyond by providing a range of sacred experiences: hospitality, friendship, and community among a diverse membership; a variety of opportunities for prayer and the study of Torah; and the promotion of social justice.

OUR VISION

We are continually seeking innovative ways to create a place of profound spiritual engagement for individuals and families; a place where each of us has a voice in decisions; and a place where all will find a caring extended family to carry us through life's journey.

WHO WE ARE

A JEWISH COMMUNITY: We are participants in a meaningful, joyful, authentic ritual life. We are guided by the traditions and values of the Conservative Movement. At the same time, we are the home of all of Cape Ann's Jews and therefore, we honor and celebrate a range of sacred Jewish practices. We nurture and encourage all who wish to infuse their lives with Jewish learning, prayer, and worthy deeds.

A COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS: We are egalitarian, with both genders participating equally in all aspects of worship and leadership. We embrace our diversity, including the shomer Shabbat and the non-observant; Ashkenazim and Sephardim; converts and kohanim; married and single; straight and gay; intermarried and interracial. We are enriched by the experience of young and old learning and praying together.

A COMMUNITY FOR LEARNING: We are actively engaged in deepening our knowledge of Jewish life and in the constant evolution of Jewish practice. We are committed to supporting our young people's full participation in the Jewish community.

A COMMUNITY FOR HEALING THE WORLD (TIKKUN OLAM): We are intertwined with the fabric of Cape Ann and the North Shore of Massachusetts. We advocate Jewish values and social justice within our community, around our country, and around the world. We hold our Israeli brothers and sisters in our hearts, while recognizing the diversity of opinion surrounding Middle Eastern politics.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: CREATE A FACILITY IN DOWNTOWN GLOUCESTER THAT WILL SERVE AS THE CORNERSTONE OF JEWISH LIFE IN THE CAPE ANN AREA.

Why This Objective Is Important

A new, permanent home is required to replace our historic building. More than 80% of the congregation favors rebuilding in downtown Gloucester. The new facility should reflect both the congregation's current needs and its aspirations.

Achieving This Objective

The new temple should reflect the mission and values of Temple Ahavat Achim by:

- ▶ Featuring adaptable interior spaces and multifunctional rooms that can accommodate moderate growth and unknown future needs;
- ▶ Creating spaces for prayer and learning that honor the congregation's history and the diversity of its membership;
- ▶ Offering comfortable places for socializing;
- ▶ Providing kitchen and other facilities that support the observance of *kashrut* following the guidance of the rabbi;
- ▶ Ensuring complete accessibility for people with physical and other disabilities;
- ▶ Providing working space for temple staff and volunteers that is pleasant, appropriate, and efficient;
- ▶ Utilizing green design with energy efficient and environmentally sensitive materials, systems, and construction methods.

Measuring Success

- Meeting the above criteria.
- Silver or higher certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: ENHANCE THE SENSE OF PROFOUND JEWISH SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE PROVIDED BY THE TEMPLE AHAVAT ACHIM COMMUNITY.

Why This Objective Is Important

Religious experience and exploration is at the core of our mission and must be a core element of our community's life.

Achieving This Objective

- ▶ Temple Ahavat Achim, led by the Rabbi and the Committee on Religious Life, should present a broad range of Jewish study and prayer opportunities to meet the varied needs of a diverse congregation.
- ▶ Children and adults should actively participate in and lead our services. The current effort to broaden participation in Shabbat, daily, and holiday services should continue.
- ▶ The Rabbi and the Committee on Religious Life should continue to explore the role of music in our ritual life, guided by input from congregants and emerging best practices, with the goals of satisfying those who prefer a traditional service, appealing to those who enjoy learning new music, and attracting new members.

Measuring Success

- Over the next three years, 20% higher attendance at services.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: OFFER MANY AND DIVERSE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN TO LEARN ABOUT JEWISH SACRED TEXT, HISTORY, RITUAL, AND CULTURE, AND TO PUT JEWISH VALUES INTO ACTION.

Why This Objective Is Important

A Jewish community is glued together by its shared heritage. Educating adults and children about our past and present, and putting that learning into practice, helps shape a bright future.

Achieving This Objective

- ▶ The Board of Directors should continually seek to improve the religious school and to assure that high-quality educational programs are provided for all the generations of our congregation.
- ▶ Temple Ahavat Achim should better utilize the talents and knowledge of congregants by encouraging them to develop small study groups and offer programs in their areas of interest. For example, Sisterhood/Hadassah should continue offering programs relating to issues faced by contemporary women.
- ▶ The Social Action Committee should continue its valuable work with the Essex County Community Organization, Save Darfur, and the Gloucester Food Pantry. In addition, the committee should increase the number of community service projects it sponsors.
- ▶ Jewish-themed art should be integrated into Temple life through concerts, exhibits, seminars, and classes.
- ▶ Congregants should be encouraged to put their Jewish values into action by participating in programs on the North Shore and in Greater Boston.

Measuring Success

- Increase the number of members participating in Temple-sponsored educational and cultural programs by 20% over three years.
- Increase the number of students from kindergarten through grade 7 attending our religious school to approximately 50 by 2018.
- A majority of members participate in at least one social action event per year.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4: ATTRACT NEW MEMBERS AND RETAIN CURRENT MEMBERS.

Why This Objective Is Important

Members consistently express delight in the sense of community and intimacy that characterize Temple Ahavat Achim. At the same time, our services, school, programs, and administrative operation would benefit from a somewhat larger membership base.

Achieving This Objective

- ▶ Temple Ahavat Achim should target 5% annual net growth in member households over the next 10 years to reach a stable level of approximately 300 households. Demographic trends and projections for Cape Ann indicate this level should be achievable and sustainable with aggressive marketing and fulfillment of our other strategic objectives.
- ▶ Recruitment efforts should target young families with children, unaffiliated Jews, and interfaith couples and families from throughout the Cape Ann area, with a focus on the Jewish population centers of Gloucester and Ipswich.
- ▶ While Temple Ahavat Achim members are generally warm and welcoming individually, outreach and welcoming activities should be formalized to ensure a consistent atmosphere. The Membership Committee should develop an orientation program for new members and retention programs for existing members. Membership brochures and applications should always be available at Temple-sponsored events.
- ▶ In addition to being a destination for area Jews, Temple Ahavat Achim should bring programs into the communities we serve. For example, the Neighborhood Shabbat program should continue to be actively supported by the temple's leadership.
- ▶ The Temple's Web site should be continually updated and improved.
- ▶ The Executive Committee should survey congregants' satisfaction at least once a year to identify issues and opportunities that might affect recruitment and retention.

Measuring Success

- Approximately 300 member households in 2018.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5: OPERATE A MODEL SMALL SYNAGOGUE, WHOSE FINANCIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS REFLECT THE HIGHEST STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE AND COMMITMENT TO JEWISH VALUES.

Why This Objective Is Important

In order to achieve our vision and continually fulfill our mission, our financial and administrative functions must efficiently support all Temple activities.

Achieving This Objective

- ▶ The Finance Committee should establish a rigorous and comprehensive financial planning process, including a plan for fully funding the endowment at the earliest possible date.
- ▶ The community should finance the new facility without incurring long-term debt.
- ▶ The Executive Committee should review the Temple's dues system and recommend improvements to the Board of Directors. The review should include an examination of how the existing system affects growth and member satisfaction, and benchmark comparable temples with growing memberships.
- ▶ The Executive Committee should design and implement a leadership development program for board members, committee chairs, and other interested volunteers that includes training, mentoring, and succession planning.
- ▶ The Executive Committee should establish administrative policies and procedures, a personnel handbook, and a program of staff training and development, with reference to best practices at other small synagogues.
- ▶ The Executive Committee should review the temple's bylaws and suggest revisions to the Board of Directors. The relationship of non-Jewish family members with the synagogue and policies related to the cemetery should be clarified in a way that is inclusive and welcoming within the overall guidelines of the Conservative Movement.

Measuring Success

- The synagogue lives within its means without incurring long-term debt.
- Interest from the endowment funds 30% of the temple's operating budget by 2018.
- New temple directors and officers are identified and trained at least a year before taking office.
- Other small synagogues regularly seek advice and guidance from our leaders.

HOW WE WROTE THIS PLAN

This strategic plan was developed over four months. A sense of urgency propelled us forward because a strategic plan is an essential part of the rebuilding process. Despite the pressures of time and money, however, the Executive Committee insisted that we put quality ahead of speed.

In **PHASE 1**, our committee of 15 split into two subcommittees, one to study demographic trends for Cape Ann and its environs, and the other to study best practices at successful small synagogues. This phase of our work lasted the entire four months, as we continually discovered new material to read and discuss. We learned there are approximately 1,400 Jewish families in the area, primarily in Gloucester, Ipswich, and Danvers. We also learned that many forward-looking American synagogues are redefining themselves to appeal to new generations, unaffiliated Jews, and interfaith families.

Research showed that people born between 1977 and 1994 – the so-called Gen Y-- consider themselves deeply spiritual but often are uninterested in affiliating with institutions or paying mandatory dues. They prefer small, self-governed groups – such as a Jewish book group meeting in someone's home -- to large, formal events. They are interested in high-quality programming on social justice, Jewish culture, and Jewish history. They want their rituals to include music.

We also learned that a majority of interfaith couples in Greater Boston are raising their children in the Jewish faith. These couples worry about the reception they will receive from their local synagogue. In general, we learned that people today are starved for time but also starved for meaning in their lives.

During **PHASE 2**, we solicited opinions from our members. The committee sponsored 10 focus groups in March at which members envisioned what Temple Ahavat Achim would look like in its ideal form. An e-mail survey was sent out in January, before the committee was even formed, followed by a second e-mail survey in April.

In **PHASE 3**, we matched the congregation's values and aspirations with its resources and current best-practices research. Using the SWOT method of analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, the committee developed a mission statement, a vision statement, and achievable objectives during April and May.

The committee's recommendation was reviewed by the Executive Committee on June 8, 2008, and presented to the board of directors on June 10, 2008.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message, Nancy DeMott, Tim Shapiro and Brent Bill, The Alban Institute, 2007

The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community, Dr. Ron Wolfson, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006

The Jewish Community of Cape Ann: An Oral History, Sarah V. Dunlap with Zelda Kaplan, Jean Baer O’Gorman and Janet Schlein, Thomson-Shore, 1998

Large Group Interventions: Engaging the Whole System for Rapid Change, Barbara Benedict Bunker and Billie T. Alban, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997

Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations & Communities, Marvin Weisbrod & Sandra Janoff, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1995

ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006

Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue, Sidney Schwarz, Jossey-Bass, 2000

Hear, O Israel: Creating Meaningful Congregational Mission Statements, Union for Reform Judaism, 2000

Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants: Preliminary Findings from the 2007 National Spiritual Communities Study, Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer, and Michelle Shain, The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute and Mechon Hadar

Cultivating the Future: Long-range Planning for Congregations, Union for Reform Judaism, 2006

Members: Why do they join? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? Union for Reform Judaism, 2007

U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008.

Interview with Arlene Botnick, Solel Congregation, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, March 24, 2008

Interview with Jackie Gothard, Beth Israel Synagogue, New Orleans, Louisiana, February 2008

Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com)

Jewish Journal of the North Shore

Metropolitan Area Planning Commission (www.mapc.org)

Robert I. Lappin Foundation

Synagogue 3000 (www.synagogue3000.org)

Project STAR (Synagogue: Transformation and Renewal) (www.starsynagogue.org)

THANK YOU

We were ably assisted in this endeavor by James Dowd, Lakshmi Sirois, Claudia Schweitzer, Mitch Cohen, Amy Farber, and Paul Korn. We are grateful for the strong support we received from the Executive Committee and Board of Directors of Temple Ahavat Achim. But our success would have been impossible without William Fonvielle, an internationally recognized expert on strategic planning who is married to a Temple member. His wisdom, patience, and devotion are deeply appreciated. We are forever in his debt.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Irma Cohen, Phil Cutter, Amy Farber, Neil Glickstein, Josh Horwitz, Loie Levine, Owen Kantor, Marty Kaplan, Jean O'Gorman, Dan Ottenheimer, Gretchen Putnam, Richard Quateman, Faith Rossi, Natalie Simon, Larry Swartz, Susan Thomases, Robert Visnick

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Carole Sharoff, co-president, Lou Goldish, co-president, Marilyn Kramer, treasurer, Rabbi Samuel Barth, Ruth Budelmann, Phil Cutter, Meredith A. Fine, Miriam Weinstein

Lo alekha hamelakhah ligomor ... velo ata ben chorin lehibatel mimenu

The work is not for you to complete – but neither may you choose to absent yourself.

(Pirkei Avot)