“And if I am for myself alone, what am I?”

—Hillel
Editor’s Message

Susan Zemsky, Executive Director
Temple Shalom, Chevy Chase, MD

As administrators and executive directors, we are often asked to balance our administrative leadership with our Jewish knowledge and culture. While we may not be asked often to lead in formal matters of religion, our voices and our presence inspire and influence our congregations’ religious practice and experience. We aspire to lead like our sages—with wisdom and humility, with honor and with temperance.

In this and the next two issues of our NATA Journal, we turn to our ancient sources by looking to Rabbi Hillel for the inspiration to guide us. Hillel famously taught all of Torah on one foot, by saying, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself.” Hillel was one of our most important sages and his words still offer us inspiration today in our own lives and professions.

For the next three issues, the editors of the NATA Journal have chosen as our guiding frame the following Hillel quote:

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am for myself alone, what am I?
And if not now, when?”

Our inaugural issue of this series focuses on the second line of this quote (marked in bold above). In our roles as executive directors and administrators, we epitomize this part of the Hillel quote. By definition, we are not “for ourselves alone.” Collaboration is our watchword and in this issue we explore that aspect of our role: we learn about transitions through the words of an Interim Executive Director, we explore the nature of partnership in congregational leadership through an expansion of the model of the three-legged stool, we read about collegial collaboration through a unique congregational partnership, we receive an invitation into “The Tent” where we can put congregational leadership through an expansion of the model of the three-legged stool, we read about collegial transitions through the words of an Interim Executive Director, we explore the nature of partnership in ourselves alone.” Collaboration is our watchword and in this issue we explore that aspect of our role: we learn about transitions through the words of an Interim Executive Director, we explore the nature of partnership in congregational leadership through an expansion of the model of the three-legged stool, we read about collegial collaboration through a unique congregational partnership, we receive an invitation into “The Tent” where we can put collaboration into practice, and we learn about where we are headed with our own organization’s strategic plans.

Just as you will learn in this issue, we all work best when we work with others. How fortunate I have been to have contributors of the highest caliber and an editorial team that cannot be thanked enough for their time and attention to this edition (and their commitment to the next two issues). In addition, I would like to acknowledge and thank all the previous NATA Journal editors who set a platform of excellence we aspire to match. Finally, I would like to thank the leaders of Temple Shalom of Chevy Chase for allowing me the honor of editing this journal and participating in NATA at this level.

Shalom,
Susan Zemsky

—Susan Zemsky has over 25 years of experience in Jewish congregational and communal leadership in the metropolitan Washington, DC area. She is currently in her 15th year serving as Executive Director of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, Maryland.
President’s Message

Janice Rosenblatt, FTA, Executive Director
Temple Beth Ami, Rockville, MD

Dear Colleagues,

This issue of the NATA Journal is the first in a trilogy of Journals informed by the famous Hillel quote: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

The focus on “And if I am for myself, what am I?” leads directly to the theme of collaboration – working together to strengthen each other, our congregations and our Movement.

I believe that for our congregations, as well as the Movement, collaboration is the future. Our future as a profession, indeed all Jewish professionals, may depend on our ability to collaborate both inside and outside our walls. We need to form collaborations with our congregants to help them feel valued, connected and supported. We need to collaborate with our lay leaders and staff to work with relentless commitment to build better institutions, inside and beyond the walls, for tomorrow’s Jews. We need to work together to bring every Jew in our geographic area the opportunity to engage with the best teachers, clergy and resources. And, we need to collaborate with unaffiliated Jews to find ways to build Jewish connections.

The Reform Jewish Think Tank recognized the role of collaboration by stating that, “Organizational collaboration trumps competition and acts of consolidation override the expansion of services.”

We need to continue to enhance our collaboration with our professional partners at NATE, PEP-RJ, ECE-RJ, the ACC and the CCAR, holding face to face discussions on our common grounds, needs and challenges. NATA and NAASE are working to share our common knowledge, resources and concerns, which will result in our first ever totally collaborative conference in Nashville in early 2017.

Thank you to our Editor and the Editorial Board for selecting this important topic to launch the NATA Journal trilogy.

—Janice Rosenblatt has been in the profession, at Temple Beth Ami, for 24 years. Her background and previous work experience was in marketing/advertising, both in Boston and in DC. Janice served as President of the Temple several years prior to becoming its first executive director.

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Get to Know Michael Liepman

By Michael Liepman, Executive Director
NATA, El Cerrito, CA

Michael Liepman was named NATA’s first Executive Director and took office in April 2015. Here, he shares his thoughts and ideas about his role as a leader of NATA.

What kind of leader are you? In what kind of circumstances do you do your best work?

In his book Primal Leadership, Daniel Goleman describes six different styles of leadership: Visionary, Coaching, Affiliative, Democratic, Pacesetting, and Commanding. The most effective leaders can shift from any of these styles, given different circumstances that they encounter.

Affiliative is my dominant style. I emphasize the importance of team work and I believe in connecting people to each other. I also try to be visionary. What a great time to reimagine and look to visioning the future as we are embarking on a strategic planning process! I also embrace coaching as an important leadership style. As a team builder, it is my role to develop all NATA members, taking on my experience to help be a mentor and to help individual performance, particularly with developing the “soft skills” to become successful as an executive director.

“What leadership is less about your needs, and more about the needs of the people.”

I firmly believe in the following adapted from The Wall Street Journal Guide to Management, by Alan Murray: “Leadership is less about your needs, and more about the needs of the people and the organization you are leading. Leadership styles are not something to be tried on like so many suits, to see which fits. Rather, they should be adapted to the particular demands of the situation, the particular requirements of the people involved and the particular challenges facing the organization.”

What do you see as NATA’s most significant challenge for the next 12 – 24 months?

We must stay relevant, flexible and adaptive to our members’ needs. We must also retain the active partnership with the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) and its affiliates. We must continue to find collaboration with our counterparts in other organizations. We must find all possible ways to offer relationships and educational opportunities to our NATA members.

What excites you most about joining NATA as our first Executive Director?

Being the “first” at anything has its challenges but more importantly there are rewards, most significantly helping to guide the organization in a new direction. I’m excited about the timing of our strategic planning process and that I can help contribute to the future of NATA. My previous work with NATA has been one of my most enjoyable professionally related activities. I have always felt that I am part of something important, that I’m interacting with people who are like-minded and whom I respect and like a great deal.

How will your personal leadership style guide your early decision making? How will your personal leadership style inform how you tackle the work?

First, I will take the time to listen, learn and speak to our members during these first three months. It’s only after I build the knowledge that I’ll be able to move forward with all the work we’d like to accomplish together. As an affiliative leader, I will look to my
colleagues to help me with my work. I cannot be successful in a vacuum. I need to be collaborative in all aspects of my work.

How do you see defining your role as a leader in an organization of leaders?

My over-reaching goal is for all of us to be successful. As a coach, I will draw on everyone’s knowledge and skills to build a stronger organization. I will help to create an organizational culture that honors participation and partnership, build on our past and help create a future that balances tradition with innovation.

How do you define collaboration? What do you like best about collaborating? Like least?

Barbara Gray, in her 1989 book, Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems, describes collaboration as, “...a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible.”

In Collaborative Leadership, David Chrislip and Carl Larson define collaboration as, “...a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results.”

I am reminded of the mission statement of the collaborative taskforce with NATA and NAASE: “The benefits of joining together and collaborating whenever possible far outweigh any possible differences we might have.”

I have always enjoyed collaborating as a means to help us understand, manage and thrive on change. I enjoyed the conversations we had about ways to work together more effectively. What I enjoyed the most, is building relationships and gaining a greater understanding of each other and a much closer connection as we started to build for our future.

Collaboration requires a great deal of patience. Ease of collaboration correlates with trust. The more trusting a relationship is, the easier it is to collaborate and make decisions together. Change is difficult and it takes time.

Let me close by inviting everyone to personally give me feedback, ideas, suggestions, or if you just want to chat, email me at mliepman@natanet.org. Thank you.

—Prior to Michael working as NATA’s first Executive Director, beginning in April, 2015, Michael was an Executive Director for over 21 years in California congregations; most recently at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette, and prior to that Congregation Beth El in Berkeley, and Kol Shofar in Tiburon. Prior to his synagogue work, Michael worked in the Hospitality industry. Michael has a B.S. in Business Administration from U.C. Berkeley.
Where does the executive director get authority to make decisions and take action? To what extent is the executive director a leader of the congregation? What is the scope of the executive director’s power to act? What if these are the wrong questions? What if the most important question is how does an executive director best serve his or her community?

Synagogues have multiple leaders for different aspects of congregational life – the senior rabbi, board chair and executive director serve their congregation and lead it. Rabbis sometimes refer to themselves as the CEOs and are often described as the visionary leaders of the congregation and board chairs have fiduciary duties and legal obligations. What about executive directors? They serve the community in many ways including focusing on administration, facilities, events, finances, membership, fundraising, strategic plans, staff and lay leadership. Depending on the synagogue, executive directors often report to the board chair, but sometimes to the senior rabbi.

If the synagogue is healthy, the three positions work together. It is often, however, complicated to articulate where the balance of power lies and where ultimate authority rests, even when areas of serving and leading are clearly delineated and complement each other. Being an executive director requires the ability to live with ambiguity about the lines of authoritative power, decision making and organizational place. At times, executive directors are frontal leaders and at times they are in the back and in the shadows. They lead and they serve.

As part of the NATA certification process, I wrote, “Positive Ambiguities in Synagogue Management – Senior Rabbis and Executive Directors” (2006). (See the NATA website.) In the paper, I compared the synagogue governance/management model to that of an orchestra, hospital or theatre in which one of the professional leaders is the vision setter and the other runs the business. Usually in these organizations both the business and the vision leaders report to the board and have to negotiate a dual-headed institution. Their success, as with synagogue leadership, depends heavily on their relationships, and their ability to live with ambiguity and changing lines of command and authority depending on the substantive issue at hand.

As I noted then, and it is still true now, these issues are not discussed in Jewish management literature, which mostly focuses on the relationship between the senior rabbi and the lay leadership and congregation. The presumption is that the senior rabbi is the leader of the synagogue team and has ultimate power to act, working with the lay leadership. There is no discussion of the executive director’s role and how the executive director works with the senior rabbi and president to strengthen the congregation. Christian management literature suggests an answer – worry less about where the power rests, and more about how to make sure the congregation, lay leadership and staff are well served. The executive director has an important and key role in making sure that happens.
In the church model, the business manager/administrative pastor (i.e., their executive director) usually reports to the senior minister and is described as leading from behind as the second in command. This leadership concept, based on a service model of leadership, was articulated famously in Robert K. Greenleaf’s essay, “The Servant as Leader” (1970). Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson, Christian leaders, teachers and consultants, applied the servant leadership model to administrative managers who they describe as second chair leaders. Their treatise relies heavily on the Christian model of obedience and servant leadership. This “second chair” analysis has been further discussed in a number of Christian-based reference books in which the second chair position is being held by a key leader with organizational perspective and significant expertise. (See Leading from the Second Chair, Jossey Bass (2005).) At the same time, the business manager is subordinate to the top leader, needs to find fulfillment as a second leader, and enthusiastically dream about the future and its possibilities. See The NATA Journal 2009 (Leadership) which describes both the servant leadership model and the second chair model in detail. See also The Case for Servant Leadership, by Kent M. Keith, Terrace Press (2012); Success for the Second in Command, by Billy Hornsby, Creation House (2005); and Second in Command, by Dutch Sheets and Chris Jackson, Destiny Press (2005).

The story of Moses provides an interesting conceptual framework for applying the idea of servant leadership to the role of the executive director. Moses, as the executive director, implements God’s plan to free the Israelites. In his effort to serve the people, he needs Aaron to speak on his and God’s behalf. In the end, it is Aaron who becomes the priest and Moses who is called on to manage the administrative and organizational issues that continue to plague the Israelites including having to set up a court system and apportion land among the tribes. Finally the Israelites, without Moses, enter the Promised Land. Like Moses, executive directors’ success is often based on making the organizational parts work, on getting others to take action because of a vision which is not originally theirs, on building relationships with the congregation and other leaders, on showing patience and working through problems, and on being willing to stay behind and not be the public voice. Confusing? Absolutely. But, executive directors who focus on serving their congregation well may find that there is a great sense of accomplishment and fulfillment from seeing what is possible, without becoming overly focused on the questions of their organizational authority and power.

—Livia Thompson has served Central Synagogue as its Senior Director since February, 1993. Prior to that, she worked at the Anti-Defamation League and the Lawyers Alliance for New York, and before that she worked in the private sector as an attorney. Livia has a BA and a JD from Columbia University.
Synagogues in Transition: Executive Leadership for the Interim

By Esther Herst, FTA
Temple Shaaray Tefila, New York, NY

Reform Judaism in the 21st Century is undergoing dramatic demographic changes, and consequently much of the way synagogues are currently structured may no longer be effective. Within these developments, the roles of synagogue professionals are evolving, and temple executive directors are no exception.

Directors have always been “service providers.” We have focused on identifying the needs of congregants, lay leaders, clergy and staff and determining how to meet those needs. In today’s synagogues, we must also serve as futurists, envisioning the changes and evolutions of the coming years and assisting members as they adjust to new trends and developments in Reform Judaism.

One of those trends has been significant turnover in our profession. Fewer of our colleagues are spending ten or more years as directors at a single temple. Colleagues are leaving the profession for a wide range of reasons, and even as the position of synagogue director has gained wider respect and recognition, our temples are finding it more difficult to fill openings.

In line with developments in the corporate and general non-profit sectors, synagogues are beginning to understand the value of hiring an interim executive director when undergoing internal leadership transitions. The concept of interim leadership is not new to the synagogue world. The CCAR has a well-established program for training and placing interim rabbis. NATA and the URJ have not replicated that approach to develop a cohort of synagogue executive directors who understand the unique role played by an interim director, yet our congregations would benefit greatly from such a resource. Any time that a synagogue has an urgent need for experienced executive support, an interim leader can be the most effective option.

Interim executives as they currently serve the corporate and non-profit world bear little resemblance to the “place-holder” role that many envision. A skilled interim leader certainly handles the ongoing work of managing the institution, but a professional interim leader is able to carry an organization through a transitional period, offering expert observation, mentoring, systems analysis, and board and staff development. An interim executive sees his/her responsibility as that of a guide towards the next stage in the organization's life, helping to bring the goals, vision, and practices of the organization into alignment. An interim director, like an interim rabbi, brings a new set of eyes to the community and, through them, leads the congregation to greater self-awareness.

Professional interims are neither interested in nor willing to take the permanent job. Instead, they seek to prepare the institution to welcome and successfully integrate the newly hired executive director.

An interim synagogue executive director would reasonably have several key attributes, including past experience as a temple director or director of non-profit organizations. The unique structure of a faith-based institution with the singular leadership role of the rabbi demands a skill set and prior knowledge. Familiarity in working with a board of trustees, senior and middle management staff, and a membership base will enable the interim to quickly adapt and understand the specific issues that a particular congregation faces. A good interim director will have strong listening skills and deep empathy for the community facing a challenging transition. Finally, the Interim Director will know “best practices” to recommend to the synagogue leadership and staff as ways to enhance their effectiveness.

I came to my role of interim executive director by accident rather than plan. I left my permanent post as executive director of a synagogue in Seattle after four years because I needed a medical leave. Once I was fully recovered, I was asked by a retired colleague if I would be interested in serving as interim director for a congregation in Brooklyn, NY that had been unable to replace their retiring executive. With advice from other
NYC colleagues, I successfully interviewed (phone and Skype) with the president, senior rabbi, and executive committee. Thus began an adventure and a new niche career that has challenged me, effectively improved my own skills, and given me the opportunity to contribute my abilities to further build and serve Judaism in, now, four different congregations.

Over my placements I have learned exactly what I need to pack, what kitchenware, linens, appliances, and household accessories I need to live simply but comfortably. In each location except my current Manhattan placement, I have been accompanied by Hopethedog who by now is highly skilled at sitting through finance committee meetings, finding the staff people who will give her treats, and settling in to new environments with a minimum of angst. My husband has remained at our home in Seattle, though he has visited each site and been greeted with love and appreciation by temple members. Having the support of one’s partner is critical to the success of these ventures.

Living arrangements aside (it is the job of the synagogue to find me a suitable apartment and, if needed, rent a car), as the interim executive director I assume all of the responsibilities of the position, financial, personnel, and facilities management, and administrative support for the board and volunteer leadership. I begin my stay with a several weeks-long listening/observation period to ascertain the issues that will require most of my attention. These may range from mentorship of current employees to revising job descriptions; from reconfiguring the budget and the chart of accounts to spearheading a development plan; and from leading the congregation through High Holy Days to planning a leadership building strategy.

My final task as interim executive director is two-fold. I offer guidance and direction in the synagogue’s search for a permanent director, and I remain in place for two weeks to hand over the reins of authority to the new Director. And in the last week of my placement, I share a detailed oral and written review of what I observed at the congregation, including strengths and areas that could be improved, with the rabbis, the new executive director and the executive committee. This “white paper” can serve as a roadmap and a basis for continuing growth and excellence in the synagogue.

At all times, I clearly state, “This is your congregation, not mine. I will make all sorts of suggestions and recommendations for changes and may even implement some of them, but ultimately, I will leave. What I say may upset or anger you since part of my role is to “speak truth to power” (albeit with discretion and diplomacy). In fact, it is up to you, the people who stay, to make the tough decisions about spending, fundraising, hiring, building, programming and leading the temple membership into the future.”

In the end, I learn more than I teach, as each community opens its arms and welcomes me. I have made new friends, experienced a vast array of worship approaches, and investigated new cities and towns. I am no longer a stranger in a strange land but rather a visitor from afar who becomes a valued member of the family. The congregations I have served all have wonderful, talented and dedicated new directors – women I am honored to call friends and colleagues. The clergy and board leadership remain important influences in my life, as I believe I am in theirs.

For synagogues in transition, hiring a professional interim director is likely to be an expensive choice, in terms of dollars spent, but it can be far more worthwhile as a planning and development tool than making a hasty permanent hire or trying to “make-do” with volunteers and current staff. As the profession of interim executive director becomes more prevalent in the non-profit world, synagogues undergoing changes in their senior leadership would be well-served to consider this option, and NATA and the URJ could provide meaningful support by encouraging this approach.

—Esther Herst, FTA, served 13 years as Executive Director of Temple B’nai Torah in Bellevue, WA and four years as Director of Temple Beth Am in Seattle, WA. She has been the Interim Executive Director at the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue, NY, NY; Temple Chai, Long Grove, IL; Temple Emanuel of the South Hills, Pittsburgh, PA; and currently Temple Shaaray Tefila, NY, NY.
Servant Leadership

Ari Weinzweig, Co-Founding Partner
Zingerman’s, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Excerpts from an article originally written for Specialty Food Magazine, July/August 2000, adapted with permission. ZingTrain is an outgrowth from the wildly successful Zingerman’s Deli, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, when the founders decided to share what they’ve learned about successful management.

Like so many folks in management roles, I knew a lot about what I thought poor management was. So when I got into management, much of my motivation stemmed from frustration (partly justified, partly not) with those who were managing me. I could do it better.

But I didn’t quite understand that I needed a vision for my leadership. It’s a personal question, one to which there’s no simple right or wrong answer. Ultimately, what’s most important is that we have an answer to a seemingly simple question, “What kind of leader do I want to be?”

By working with my partners and others in our organization, we’ve built this into what we believe is a teachable, effective approach. The first part of our vision is what we refer to as “Servant Leadership.” The concept is based on a book of the same title, written by Robert Greenleaf.

An Introduction to Servant Leadership

The basic belief of Servant Leadership is that, we, as leaders, are here – first and foremost – to serve our organizations. This may sound obvious, or even inevitable, but in our experience, it’s neither. In more traditional organizations, the service ethic flows in the opposite direction; that is, the organization is set up to serve its leaders, not the other way around.

To paraphrase John Kennedy’s famous speech from the 1960s, Servant Leadership says, “Ask not what your organization can do for you. Ask what you can do for your organization.”

To live Servant Leadership effectively, we start with the view that we are going to treat our staff as our “customers.” As CEO of Zingerman’s, my “biggest” customers are the managing partners of each of our businesses, and the central administrative staff, all of whom report to me. In turn, each partner’s primary customers would be the managers who report to them in their businesses. The managers are the front line staff that report to them. In each case the idea is to that the leader is giving great service to his or her staff, in order to keep the service energy in the organization flowing out, toward the front-line hourly staff. Why? Because the front-line staff are nearly always the people who are dealing with paying customers and/or making the products we sell. And we want to make sure their energy is freed to give the best possible service to customers coming in the front door, over the phone or via email. Why? Because, quite simply; the better the service we give to those front-line customers, the better the organization is going to perform.
The Paradoxes of Servant Leadership

Servant Leadership creates a number of management paradoxes, which we must acknowledge to use it effectively. One is that the higher up you move in the organization, the greater your obligation to serve. The more you advance, the “higher” you get promoted, the harder you’ll probably have to work and the more you have to give of yourself. Success in this sense makes our work more challenging, not easier. The challenge is that this runs completely counter to the traditional American image that we’re going to get promoted so we can do less.

Similarly, Servant Leadership creates paradox because it says that, although we hire, pay, promote, and have formal authority over our staff, we will treat them as customers. Finally, there is paradox at play here because, at times, what you or I want for ourselves will conflict with what is best for the organization as a whole. Certainly, our ideal is that each of us is able to fulfill all of our personal goals and meet all of our needs, while simultaneously leading the organization to greatness. But things don’t always work that way. Sometimes we, as servant leaders, must choose to give up something we want for ourselves in the short term in order to provide more for others around us.

How do we deal with these paradoxes? Learning to become a great manager is a lot like learning to become a great taster. We have to practice; we have to compare notes and realities with others that have more experience. Over time, we build our sense of what’s right and of how to balance these paradoxes in our work.

Why Bother?

You might wonder, “Wouldn’t it be easier to do this the old way?” Or maybe you’re thinking, “It’s crazy to give employees service when we’re paying them to perform.” Why after all, would you want to work hard to get promoted so that then you could have the chance to work harder? Why would it be worth dealing with the added burden, complexity, and paradox that Servant Leadership requires? These are fair questions. Each of us has to answer these questions for his or her self. But, at Zingerman’s, we stick with Servant Leadership because:

a) It’s the right thing to do. Ultimately, it is what we give, not what we get, that defines us as leaders and establishes the legacy that we leave behind in our organizations and our lives. Our most rewarding work has been when we’ve created a successful Zingerman’s experience for staff members who were able to grow and contribute way beyond what anyone had originally expected.

b) It gives us the chance to help others grow and succeed. When they decide to come to work, staff members choose to follow us, allowing us the opportunity to succeed as an organization in ways we couldn’t without them. In return, we are responsible for providing an environment to the staff in which they can fulfill their dreams and live up to their potential as participating members of the company.

c) It begets better service to customers. The service our staff gives to our customers will never be better than the service we give to the staff. We, the leaders, not the staff, are the ones who will either lead or, alternatively, hold back the organization’s service quality.

d) It creates a more appealing workplace. From a strategic perspective, providing great service to our staff can only help to make Zingerman’s a better and more appealing place to work. And since we are competing with hundreds of other companies to attract the most creative, hardest-working, food-loving staff we can find, this offers us a huge strategic edge.

e) Service sets the tone for our organization. As leaders, we set the example for everyone in our organization. If a leader sends a message that “I come first,” then it’s inevitable that the same “me first” approach will be the attitude that will prevail throughout the organization. In Sacred Hoops, (then-) Bulls basketball coach Phil Jackson wrote that, “...creating a successful team ... is essentially a spiritual act. It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.” This is the sort of synergy we work to create through Servant Leadership.

f) It helps you move toward what you want for yourself. Learning to become an effective Servant Leader has made my work more rewarding and enjoyable. It helps us make a difference in the lives of our staff. That’s a rare and valuable opportunity.

—Ari Weinzweig is the co-founding partner of Zingerman’s Community of Businesses in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He can be reached directly at ari@zingermans.com. For more on Zingerman’s approaches to sustainable leadership and organizational development, see www.Zingtrain.com.
Collegial Collaboration: 
How the Westchester Synagogue Executive Directors Roundtable Makes a Difference

Barbara Merson, Executive Director
Temple, Shaaray Tefila, Bedford Corners, NY

It has been a terrible winter in Westchester County, New York this year. Roads have been impassable and parking lots have been impossible with huge mounds of snow everywhere. Programs had to be cancelled, rescheduled, and cancelled again. All in all, this was a winter that would lead most executive directors to stay inside in our heated (we hope) buildings and deal with the next crisis. But although it was nasty out there, the executive directors of Westchester had a secret weapon to help beat the cold – we had the warmth, comfort and support of our Westchester Synagogue Executive Directors Roundtable.

The Roundtable was started many years ago by the Westchester Jewish Council (WJC-The Jewish Community Relations Council for Westchester), an organization whose mission is to connect Westchester’s Jewish communities and strengthen relationships among Jewish organizations. According to WJC Executive Director Elliot Forchheimer, WJC recognized early that there are three types of synagogue leadership: spiritual, lay, and executive and created roundtables for each as a way for local colleagues and volunteers to work on local issues. "Roundtables are about relationships," says Forchheimer. "We share interactively to make sure that we learn from everyone’s experiences. We don’t replace national organizations, we supplement them."

According to organizational theorist Etienne Wenger, groups of people will collaborate effectively if they “share a concern or passion for what they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” This describes the Westchester Synagogue Executive Directors Roundtable perfectly. The participants care about Jewish life in Westchester, their synagogues, and each other. In spite of the horrible weather this year, the group met regularly and meetings were well attended as always, a testament to the value in which the group is held. The Roundtable provides a safe space for the executive directors, a place where they can have honest dialogues about pressing issues and know that the information will be used for the good of all. This is particularly remarkable as Westchester is dense with synagogues and it would be easy to view the other executive directors as competitors rather than colleagues. It is also remarkable in that the group is interdenominational, with active participants from Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and non-denominational synagogues. While each synagogue has different practices, the common bonds of geography and position over-ride sectarian concerns.

So what do we talk about and how are our meetings structured? First, while the meetings are under the auspices of the WJC, they are chaired and organized by the executive directors. The chair is rotated every two years, with the new chairs being nominated by all those who have previously served. The agendas are set based on the interests of the participants. Sometimes this is determined by a survey; sometimes suggestions come in by e-mail prior to the meetings. Over the past few years, the group has realized that our most valuable discussions come from within the group. For this reason, outside speakers are kept to minimum unless a topic is requested with which the group has no expertise, for example, recent not-for-profit legislation. One of our most interesting discussions this year focused on one our colleague’s involvement in his synagogue’s movement to voluntary dues. Of course, this is a topic of great interest to all of us and we had read some of the many articles on the subject. However, it is very different when a colleague that you know well gives you the insider picture of both the joys and challenges of the process.

In addition to conveying information through conversation, the group has also been proactive in gathering helpful information. There is a Roundtable-sponsored Google doc to collect Westchester financial information for all synagogues in one place. The only rule is that in order to have access to the group’s information, each executive director must submit his/her own data.
We also recently did our own local area compensation survey for all synagogue positions as we have found that:

1) Executive directors are usually expected to provide this information to their lay leadership and;

2) National surveys are less than helpful if one is located in the New York metropolitan area.

Again, the ground rule is that participation is necessary in order to have access, and of course the information is anonymous and shared carefully.

Another aspect of the Roundtable that all of the executive directors greatly appreciate is the connections to other Westchester organizations. Because the WJC is connected to all of the local organizations, a seat at the Roundtable provides instant entry to the organized Jewish community of Westchester. Like many synagogue executive directors nationwide, many of us are new to the synagogue world and sometimes new to the Westchester area as well when we begin our jobs. The Roundtable provides the area contacts that help us do our own jobs better and also be resources to our congregations. Participation in the Roundtable also enables executive directors to publicize events broadly in the region either through our connections to each other or through the WJC Westchester community calendar. In addition, a representative of Synergy, UJA-Federation of New York that focuses on working with synagogues is a welcomed guest of the Roundtable and also provides valuable research and connections to the greater Jewish community.

There are many examples of how the Roundtable helps the Westchester executive directors bond, but perhaps the most significant is how we welcome new executive directors and recognize our colleagues who are retiring or in need of comfort. Although it was eight years ago, I remember my first months in the job very well. They were a blur of faces and names and buildings, some welcoming, some not. I also remember how good it felt to come to my first Roundtable meeting and meet people who immediately understood my confusion and offered (without any request) to help. Under the WJC’s guidance, the Roundtable provides an important respite from the constant demands of our jobs and a place where everyone feels welcomed and valued.

In addition to welcoming new colleagues, we also honor those who are retiring. We recognize them with a presentation and short remarks, and give them a chance to talk about the highlights and challenges of their tenure, sharing their wisdom and accomplishments. While they are all honored by their synagogues as well, the appreciation of colleagues is very meaningful for all involved.

In Pirkei Avot (1:6) we are asked to, “Choose for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and view every person in a favorable light.” This is the essence of the Westchester Synagogue Executive Directors Roundtable. We become each other’s teachers and friends and create an atmosphere in which everyone is seen in a favorable light. It is a true example of collegial collaboration, and we hope it will be around for many years to come.

—Barbara Merson has over 20 years of experience as a leader of Jewish communal organizations. She has served as Executive Director of Temple Shaaray Tefila of Northern Westchester New York since 2008. Barbara has an MBA in Finance, an MA in Religious Education, and is currently a PhD candidate in a joint program of Lesley University and Hebrew College.
“And if I am for myself alone…”

The directive, seemingly clear, does not need to be written in any job description, employment contract or bylaw document. Simply put, the temple comes first; the job is your top priority. The executive director or administrator is the chief administrative professional of the temple, and as such, their time needs to be sharply focused on the day-to-day operations of the temple. Time is short, the task is great, and their time at work needs to be spent on temple related issues in order to succeed.

Perhaps though, the directive is not so clear, as there is so much to be gained from connecting with others, learning from others and teaching others. Some may view such networking efforts as wasted, distracted time, as this is time that is not being focused on primary tasks. It is remarkable though how quickly and how effectively an investment of time focused on issues outside of your congregation can turn around and benefit your congregation.

The Tent, the communication and collaboration platform for leaders of the Reform Movement provides a way to connect with lay and professional colleagues locally and throughout North America. Put down your board minutes. Your monthly financials can wait a day or two. Those membership applications will still be on your desk this afternoon. Join us in The Tent, because there are lots of ways to use The Tent to strengthen your congregation, and to empower lay and professional leaders with information and expertise.

Connect with Your Congregation

In The Tent, you can create a space just for your congregation. In our primary Tent network at www.yammer.com/thetent, experiment by hovering your mouse over the “+” sign next to the words Groups in the upper left hand corner of the screen, and create a group for your staff, or for your board. This will be a private space just for leaders in your congregation, and in this group you can communicate, discuss key issues and share vital resources.

If you want to do more, the URJ can create an entire, private network just for your congregation. This becomes a space that you control where you can have private and public groups for your board, your staff and even members of your congregation. Groups for chavurot? Groups for religious school parents? New members? The possibilities are endless.
Connect with your Colleagues

Join your NATA colleagues in our robust, busy NATA network at www.yammer.com/nata-net. Post a question and get answers and expertise from NATA colleagues at congregations large and small. Share resources and build a library of information that will serve NATA members for years to come.

Connect with the Movement

For years, members of NATA talked with each other on the NATA-NET listserv. In fact, I proudly served as the chair of the listserv not too long ago, and people loved reading those emails every day. The listserv was immediate, it was easy and it was convenient. But, the listserv was also limited in scope and capability. We could only talk to ourselves, we could not easily find information in the archives, and it was very difficult to share resources.

But now, we can more effectively communicate amongst ourselves as an organization in the NATA-NET network in The Tent, and we can learn from lay and professional colleagues from throughout the Movement in The Tent at www.yammer.com/thetent. Every day, we can review conversations happening in The Tent in all areas of congregational life. We can teach, and we can learn. We can share expertise, and we can collect expertise. We can create a sense of community online, and build a new network of friends, mentors and fellow seekers.

There is so much talent and expertise in our Reform Movement, and The Tent has proven to be a wonderful way to bring our community of passion and shared concern together. We can’t all go to Biennial every two years, and we may have issues that carry a sense of urgency and need to be resolved in a timely fashion. The Tent becomes a way to make our large Reform movement feel a little smaller, a little more intimate.

Take The Time

Ok...look back down at your desk. There are lots of papers there, and the emails continue to fly in. But, you have just spent time in The Tent, and you learned that there is a small congregation in Arizona that is doing exciting new things with Chavurot. You were able to share a sample budget with a temple president in Long Island which is going to help her as their new fiscal year begins. You participated in a conversation about how to welcome non-Jewish members into your community. In just a few moments, you traveled coast to coast, and you visited several congregations of different sizes.

All executive directors and administrators must use their time wisely. Time is your most valuable commodity, and it is that value that makes your networking time that much more important. By connecting with leaders in our temple, in our community and in our Movement, we can enhance our work, help our congregations and be more successful in our role as a leader in our sacred communities.

—Larry Glickman, FTA, is the Director of Network Engagement and Collaboration for the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). Prior to joining the URJ, Larry served as the Executive Director for over ten years at three synagogues in the Chicago metropolitan area. Larry proudly served as a trustee, and then an officer, of the NATA board for four years overseeing communication and education initiatives.
The Who, What, Why, When, and How of NATA’s Strategic Planning Initiative

Marc Jacobson, Executive Director
The Temple, Atlanta, GA

Who
After consultation with the NATA Board and fellow officers, President Janice Rosenblatt appointed Livia Thompson and Mark Jacobson co-chairs of NATA’s Strategic Planning Initiative. Members of the Strategic Planning Team are Drew Barkley, Ellen Franklin, Sarah Gotlieb, Rachel Gross, Alan Halpern, Terry Krauss, Brian Rissinger, Robin Rubin, and Amy Schwach. Former NATA colleague, Deborah Naish, has been engaged on a consulting basis to facilitate the process and assist in framing outcomes.

What
Strategic Planning outcomes will not be presented in a multi-page document to be put on a shelf. Rather, the Strategic Planning process will affirm NATA’s mission, values, and priorities in a format that can be relevant and fluid in a fast-changing synagogue landscape.

Why
NATA’s previous Strategic Plan was completed in 2011 to create visions and goals that would direct activities and the resources of our organization through 2014. The rapid major changes taking place in contemporary Judaism and the Union for Reform Judaism seem to be of a continuing and sometimes hard to define nature now more so than ever, with no end in sight. NATA’s mission, values, and priorities will need to be framed in such a manner that will serve its members given this new environment. The traditional skill sets (soft and hard) of those in synagogue management leadership positions may or may not still be valid along with a realization that new skills may be needed in the future. The plan hopes to suggest a structure for NATA to be in a position to identify and provide the resources necessary to support our work.

When
The initial Strategic Planning meeting was held at our New Orleans conference in November 2014. The team has met via conference calls and in person at the NATA mid-year board meeting held in Philadelphia in March 2015. The team will be represented at the NATA officers meeting in early July to provide progress updates and seek further officer input. The team will continue to meet during the summer and fall leading up to the NATA Conference meetings in Orlando in October/November 2015.

How
The NATA Strategic Planning Team seeks input from as many NATA members as possible. Strategic Plan Team members have had over 30 personal interviews with NATA members. The NATA Board went through focus group exercises at the mid-year board meeting. Focus groups have also been held in the Philadelphia, New York/New Jersey areas, and Atlanta. Additional focus group sessions are planned during the summer and fall prior to the annual conference. One of the early agreed upon values is to make NATA an even more warm, engaged, and relational organization. The inclusive and interactive process in developing this Strategic Initiative is an attempt to manifest this value.

Conclusion
The NATA Strategic Planning team is excited about the work already accomplished and looks forward to setting a milepost in our strategic journey at the Orlando NATA Conference. Stay tuned...

—Mark Jacobson has served as Executive Director of The Temple in Atlanta, Georgia since 1977. He is a graduate of Tufts University and earned his MBA from Georgia State University.
Who When

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How What

The NATA Strategic Planning Team seeks input from as many NATA groups as possible. Strategic Planning outcomes will not be presented in a preconceived notion of synagogues but rather in a flexible format that allows for the feedback of the NATA membership. Focus and fluid in a fast-changing synagogue landscape. Groups have also been held in the Philadelphia, New York/New Jersey areas, and Atlanta. Additional focus group sessions are planned during the summer and fall prior to the annual conference. One of the early agreed upon values is to make NATA an even more warm, engaged, and relational organization. The inclusive and interactive process in developing this Strategic Initiative is an attempt to manifest this value.

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Conclusion

The NATA Strategic Planning team is excited about the conference in Orlando. Stay tuned…

—Mark Jacobson has served as Executive Director of The Temple in Atlanta, Georgia since 1977. He is a graduate of Tufts University and earned his MBA from Georgia State University.
“And if I am for myself alone, what am I?”
—Hillel

NATA members participate in social action projects during recent NATA Conferences
NATA’s Mission

The National Association for Temple Administration (NATA) is an active professional network committed to Judaic principles of ethics and integrity.

NATA’s mission is to support its members by:

- providing education and training activities and standards
- providing its members and their congregations with access to NATA resources
- advocating for the profession of Temple Administration
- serving as a resource to the Union for Reform Judaism

NATA Placement

If your congregation is looking to hire an Executive Director or top level Administrator, NATA Placement is there to help. With direct access to hundreds of NATA members, your opening will be viewed by highly qualified and experienced candidates.

NATA Placement posts job listings on the NATA website and alerts the membership whenever there is a new posting. While we don’t match congregations with job candidates, we can give advice regarding how a congregation can benefit from having a top level professional on staff and we can offer sample job descriptions along with a recent salary and benefit survey. The how-to manual, “A Guide for Congregations Going into Placement for a New Executive Director” is available on our website.

For more information, please visit www.natanet.org and click on the top link “For Congregations.” We’re happy to help out with any questions you may have.

Beth Silver
NATA Placement Chair

Michael Liepman
NATA Executive Director

National Association for Temple Administration

NATA Officers

Janice Rosenblatt, FTA | President
Ellen Franklin, FTA | Vice President
Jane Sable-Friedman, FTA | Vice President
Abigail Spiegel | Vice President
Gennifer Kelly | Treasurer
Michael Kancher | Assistant Treasurer
Brian Rissinger | Administrative Secretary
Livia Thompson, FTA | Immediate Past President
Bekki Harris Kaplan | Parliamentarian
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Robert Hersh

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Rabbi Rick Jacobs | URJ President
Stephen M. Sacks | URJ Chairman of the Board
Barbara Saidel | URJ Chief Operating Officer
73rd URJ North American Biennial

November 4 – 8 2015
Marriott World Center
Orlando, Florida

New This Year!

Wednesday through mid-day Friday programming will be tailored to congregational leadership (lay, professional, clergy, and up-and-coming leaders), featuring learning sessions, networking opportunities, and plenaries, bookended by worship and evening entertainment. Four intensive “tracks” will focus on strengthening congregations, audacious hospitality, tikkun olam, and torah l’ishma (Jewish learning).

Friday evening through Sunday will be the best Shabbaton in the world – complete with spirited worship, Shabbat meals, learning, and a variety of unique activities from which to choose.

Delegation Incentive Program – Register a delegation from your congregation to receive registration discounts and much more.

Camp at Biennial – Bring the kids with you to Orlando and experience the magic of URJ summer camp at Biennial.

http://urj.org/biennial