

**The Denver Synagogue  
Congregational Meeting Minutes  
December 18, 2013**

Congregants were made aware that they are encouraged to use the index cards in their packets to write questions for submission to the moderator. The meeting was delayed because, due to large attendance, the meeting was moved from Fisher Hall to the Main Sanctuary.

**Meeting called to order:** 7:25 p.m.

**Greeting and Introduction of Facilitator:**

Michael Engelberg welcomed the attendees. Don Jacobson was introduced as the meeting facilitator. Attendees were asked to address their questions respectfully and courteously.

**Review of Meeting Objectives and Guidelines:**

Don Jacobson reviewed the rules and behaviors expected at the meeting, particularly with regards to questions. Questions are limited to 30 seconds, discussion comments are limited to 2 minutes. The goal of the meeting is to formulate a way of moving forward. Topics that will not be discussed include issues surrounding performance issues for the Rabbi and the litigation that is currently in place between the Rabbi and Michael Freiheiter. Michael Engelberg reviewed the agenda for the evening.

**Status Report to the Congregation (Michael Engelberg):**

**Staff:** The process involved in the hiring and reasons for firing the Executive Director (Moishe Spingarn) was reviewed and Aaron Linkow was introduced as the Interim ED until December 31. The change in the preschool directorship was also discussed. The issue that immediately resulted in the firing of Mindy Hecht was related to a special needs child, however specific details were not provided. Preschool families appear to be happy with the new directors.

**Membership:** Has declined in the last year, both due to death and to families leaving the shul. Reasons for leaving, if available, were provided.

**Preschool:** Records were updated and there are currently 125 students. More classes can be added and we hope to attract over 40 more students in January.

**Finances:** The financial position is not good. There was a deficit of over \$200K last year and revenues are down this year. We have had help from Mount Nebo but have taken \$100K from the endowment account to cover operations. We anticipate a deficit of over \$200K for the fiscal year. We are exploring new fundraising opportunities, in

addition to the Annual Dinner. The Board is looking into options for retiring the debt. Facility rental fees will be increased next year.

A description of the basic events surrounding the issues between Michael Freiheiter and the Rabbi was provided, however this subject was not open for discussion.

**Introduction by Shaul Gabbay regarding reason for calling the meeting:**

Shaul revealed that the by-laws allow for calling a congregational meeting. He reviewed the Proposal that was included in the attendees' packets. The bottom line is that the ad hoc group feels that the synagogue is in crisis and problems with staff turnover, programming, and membership needs to be addressed.

**Members Questions and Answers:**

- **Membership statistics, number of members who have reduced dues:** Around 500 members, about 50% on fee reduction, most of the rest are on single or family level. Very few patrons.
- **Procedure for replacing Executive Director:** A search committee is being formed. Anticipate that the search will be started immediately and candidates will be vetted. Candidates from the search last year will be revisited.
- **Organizational structure of the synagogue:** Clergy report to the President. ED oversees the staff. Issues area brought to the Board for discussion.
- **Level of involvement of OU:** The OU is the umbrella group and we are affiliated with them. The OU does not determine the shul's governance and affiliation is voluntary. The Rabbi briefly discussed the non-egalitarian nature of the shul, although men and women sit together. This has been a problem for attracting new people.
- **Preschool Directorship:** A search is being conducted for a professional director and the Search/Personnel Committee seeks to have a permanent director in place for the next school year.
- **Facebook posting regarding assistant rabbi:** This was not an authorized posting and there is no assistant rabbi who has been hired.
- **Youth:** There are 10 B'nei Mitzvah registered, confirmation has 8 registered. We do not currently have a youth director. A father expressed his disappointment that despite his several requests there was no rabbinic involvement with his son during the many months of his Bar Mitzvah preparation.
- **Financial question regarding loans and line of credit:** We have \$1.6M total in debt, including the building loan and the line of credit. Interest rates are 4.2-5%. Pay \$120K in interest and principal annually.
- **Outreach and volunteer involvement:** The Rabbi thanked attendees for participating in this meeting. He described Be There, the Young Professional group that meets quarterly. This has increased the shul's recognition in the

young adult community. There was a question regarding whether there has been a demonstrable benefit to the shul from outreach, beside PR. Michael Miller described the current and ad hoc committees. He strongly encouraged congregants to volunteer for committee service and a sheet is available in the packets. The Cantor felt that some of the committees are dysfunctional and do not meet regularly enough. There was some discussion regarding transparency of communication with regards to the committees, particularly when a program or committee is canceled. The Rabbi discussed the turnover in Program Directors and that there was nobody to oversee with regards to programming. A number of questions were raised regarding committees. A list should be provided on the website. There was a comment regarding the difference between the roles of the Board, the clergy and the staff, and the volunteers and there is lack of clarity in these roles, particularly as regards to programming.

- **Sunburst:** The program was discussed in some detail. Several members complained that the program was abruptly terminated and should have been continued. It was funded initially by the Rose Foundation and directed by the Cantor. There was a very active programming committee who submitted a proposal to the Board for funding a Program Director. The Board stated it did not have a role in disbanding the Sunburst Committee, but acknowledged that it made the decision not to renew the contract for the Program Director. Members pointed out the disbanding of the committee was primarily due to the lack of a Program Director and failure to continue the Sunburst program. A question was asked of the Board regarding the termination of the Program Director, which was rephrased to ask what processes must be put in place to get accountability in programming and what must be done to get a successful program put back in place. Michael Miller discussed that the primary problem was that there was no plan in place to continue programming when Elaine Lichterman's contract was not continued. There was a comment that the Board needs to be more effective and has to have a sense of urgency about the programming. There was a question regarding follow-up with Sunburst attendees and recruitment for membership.
- **Board Vacancies:** Michael invited people to indicate interest if they are willing to serve on the Board. A Board Meeting will hopefully be held within the next 10 days. A question was raised regarding the requirements for a Board member, which includes being a member in good standing. There have been openings on the Board and concern was raised regarding why these vacancies were not filled.
- **Programming:** This is crucial for the lifeblood of the shul. An attendee suggested that Program Director is more important than an Executive Director.
- **Policy vs. Practices:** There appears to be a gap between what the policies are and what actually takes place. Processes and accountability are not clear. It is important for people to be able to contact the Board. There was a request to set up an email address for contacting the Board. Clear policies should be made available to the congregants.

- **Membership:** There was a question regarding plans for increasing membership. The Membership Committee is responsible for improving benefits for the existing membership. Recruitment of new members is more the purview of the clergy. A comment was made regarding the responsibility of the congregation for improving the atmosphere in the synagogue as well. The Rabbi thanked attendees for their input, even when it is difficult to hear. He brought up the possibility of changing the direction of the shul to a more egalitarian and modern model in order to recruit more members and improve the finances of the shul. Our offerings must be relevant to the constituency we wish to recruit.
- **Kitchens:** A Member noted the unavailability of kitchens on Sunday for Women's League baking is a concern as it has disenfranchised many of our members. This comment was provided to the secretary following the meeting.
- **Branding:** A Member suggested we drop the brand "The Denver Synagogue" as it was a premature statement since this shul does not have the respect or buy-in of the community in Denver. This comment was provided to the secretary following the meeting.
- There was a concern raised that there is lack of leadership by the President of the Board and the Board is negligent and that the Board should be reviewed as to its performance. There was a request that the Board present a plan to the membership within a month.
- A comment was made regarding the need to provide positive press to the media outlet.
- There is a lack in process and communication that leads to a feeling of disrespect for the congregants. There is band-aid leadership. We need to address the issues of a changing and aging community. Programming should be engaging and relevant.
- **Moving Forward:** Michael Engelberg was asked to describe the process moving forward. He said there will be a Board Meeting called shortly. The discussion points raised will be addressed and a report will be provided to the congregation. Another congregational meeting will be called in approximately 30 days for a follow-up. He invited attendees with concerns to send them by email to him.

#### **Strategic Planning and Proposal Discussion:**

Mark Zalkin asked the attendees to read the proposal and provide input regarding strategic planning for the future. No specific discussions were held regarding the proposal.

Meeting adjourned: 9:22 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Jonscher  
Secretary