



Shared Leadership in Synagogue Life
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A community should not be led by one person only.
Moses himself confessed his inability to lead single-handed. (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:10)

Introduction

A synagogue in the 21st century – especially a synagogue the size of Temple Beth Am – is a complex organization, requiring nimble and broad-based leadership. It is impossible to imagine any one individual who has the requisite spiritual, pastoral, educational, programmatic, administrative, planning, and financial skills to meet the needs of the congregation. For this reason, we propose a collaborative executive team to lead Temple Beth Am forward – in order to fulfill our mission of guiding our members to deepen their relationships to Judaism and each other – and to aspire toward achieving our vision of inspiring lives and healing the world.

In order for this to occur, the Senior Rabbi and the Executive Director must have a clear and trusting relationship. Although the Temple Beth Am Senior Rabbi and Executive Director have had shared leadership for many years (at least on paper), that relationship has not been clearly defined. At times, the lack of clarity has led to misunderstandings about who was responsible for which decisions and how decisions were made. We believe that by increasing transparency and being intentional about the leadership model we use and how we implement the model, we can more effectively lead Temple Beth Am toward a bold, meaningful, and sustainable future.

Currently, both the Senior Rabbi and Executive Director have a strong interest in and deeply value collaborative leadership. This shared commitment, along with the recent adoption of the Strategic Plan, provided fertile ground to rethink what leadership could look like at Temple Beth Am. Over several months, the Senior Rabbi and Executive Director – with guidance from an outside consultant – identified the principles of collaborative leadership, explored its foundation in Jewish values, and described its practice at Temple Beth Am.

This document is a culmination of that effort. Its purposes are to:

- share our thinking about collaborative leadership with the clergy, staff, Board, lay leaders, and congregants of Temple Beth Am
- clarify and define the collaborative work relationship, roles, and responsibilities of the Senior Rabbi and the Executive Director of Temple Beth Am

- provide transparency to the Beth Am community about who is responsible for which decisions
- offer these ideas to other Reform synagogue leaders and perhaps serve as a model for other synagogues

In this document, you will see how Jewish values undergird this approach, the connection of shared leadership to the newly approved Strategic Plan, and basic components of the model.

What is collaborative leadership and why do we have it?

Collaborative Leadership Theory was developed by David Chrislip and Carl Larson through their research on civic leadership and collaboration in the 1980s and early '90s. In their book, *Collaborative Leadership* (1994), they 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.

Temple Beth Am has shared leadership built into its structure and processes. The Board of Directors chosen from the congregation acts with shared leadership. Its decision-making processes are collective, not individual; that is, no single Board member has decision-making authority by themselves. The Senior Rabbi and Executive Director both report to the Board. In addition, though the Senior Rabbi and Executive Director have their own job descriptions and sets of responsibilities, the realities of synagogue life make collaboration an essential component of leadership. In addition, the Senior Rabbi and Executive Director aspire to be models of collaboration for the staff. Staff members, in turn, are role models for the shared work collaboration among congregants. The synagogue as a whole thrives and fulfills its expression of Jewish values when these complex relationships rest on respectful collaboration.

One of the most important requirements for successful collaborative leadership is defining clear guidelines about who is responsible for what. However, even with clarity about who gets to decide what, there will be some areas of shared-decision making. In those situations, it is important to discuss how the decision will ultimately be made and implemented. One tool that we have found to be helpful in those situations is RACI. This acronym stands for Responsible (who owns the problem), Accountable (who must approve the work before it is implemented), Consulted (who has the information or capability to do the work), Informed (who needs to know about the decision). Working through this process helps minimize any gaps or overlaps in the project. However, the two leaders may find it beneficial to consult with each other even when the decision falls squarely in one person's domain. This is because one person can help the other see new perspectives that might otherwise be missed and thus lead to a better decision for the whole organization. And that is one of the most remarkable aspects of shared leadership: we are much more likely to unlock a groundswell of productivity, intelligence, and inspiration for everyone involved.

Is there any precedent in Jewish tradition for collaborative leadership?

There are plenty of teachings that advance the concept of collaborative leadership within the Jewish tradition. In fact, many Jewish texts are suspicious of the ability of any one individual to lead a community. We are taught “If you hold a sapling in your hand and are told that the Messiah is about to arrive, first plant the sapling and then go out to receive the Messiah.” (*Avot d’rabbi Natan* 31) In other words, we need to recognize that no one person can single-handedly save the world; every person has a leadership role in making the world a better place for the next generation.

In addition, the Hebrew Bible establishes that there is a need for three kinds of leaders to ensure the health and welfare of any community: Priest, King, Prophet. The priest is the ritual and legal leader, ensuring the sacredness of the community; the king is the administrative and military leader, ensuring the healthy functioning of the community; and the prophet is the conscience to both, challenging the other leaders to always live by the community’s highest values of justice and truth and compassion. There is an assumption inherent in this model that each individual has insight and wisdom that enhances the leadership of the others and that – together – they best serve the community.

Finally, we can also see an emphasis on collaboration in the shared approach to learning in Judaism. In the wider secular world, students study on their own, in isolation. Jews, on the other hand, have traditionally studied in *hevruta*, or pairs, because Jewish learning is an active process – the wisdom is drawn out of the discussion between the two partners, highlighted by questions and alternative considerations. In addition, the actual texts that we study – Mishnah, Gemara, biblical commentary – are all multi-vocal, including minority voices and opinions. At the center of Jewish learning is a recognition of the limitations of the human mind, and that no one individual has access to ultimate wisdom.

Perhaps Judaism’s emphasis on collaboration is best expressed in Kohelet (also known as Ecclesiastes): “Two are better off than one, because they derive greater benefit from their efforts. And if either should fall, the other will lift them up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to lift them up” (*Kohelet* 4:9-10).

Collaborative leadership and Temple Beth Am’s Values:

The leadership team for Temple Beth Am must embody the vision, mission, and values of the congregation. We explored the values of our synagogue in the context of our collaborative leadership model. We believe that we demonstrate leadership not just by what we do but also by how we do it. Therefore, below we explore these organizational values within the framework of a collaborative partnership. We are committed to revisiting these values on a regular basis.

Inclusion: We count on the diversity and balance of our perspectives to enhance the leadership of Temple Beth Am. We also value the perspectives of others by including Board, lay leaders, and staff in decision-making, where appropriate.

Inspiration: We recognize the blessing of being in leadership roles with each other, and commit to fostering a sense of gratitude for our professional partnership. We will help each other do our jobs better and hope to inspire others by our partnership.

Purpose: We both have a sacred, shared commitment to Temple Beth Am's mission. Therefore, we are dedicated to deepening our members' relationships to Judaism and each other, and we value the complementary and distinct roles we each play toward fulfilling that mission.

Engagement: We treat each other with kindness and respect as we strive to deepen our relationships to each other, our congregants, and staff members. We commit to continuing our understanding of Jewish values, Jewish traditions, and the best of organizational management theory.

Curiosity: We give and receive constructive feedback openly and honestly with the goal of truly understanding the other. We actively embrace forgiveness when we have made a mistake. We encourage the staff to remain curious as we reflect on synagogue activities and envision areas of improvement for the congregation.

Responsibility: We make agreements and hold each other accountable to them and feel responsible to and for one another. One of those agreements is to work collaboratively and to check in with each other regarding our professional relationship and its impact on the synagogue.

Connection to the Strategic Plan

In November 2017, the Temple Beth Am Board of Directors approved the Strategic Plan to guide the focus of the congregation over the next three years. This plan envisions a congregation that embraces connection and works explicitly to build a strong, meaningful, and engaged Jewish community. We will prioritize relationships and shared Jewish values as our foundation. We strive to be a congregation where everyone feels a sense of ownership and responsibility for each other, and our community members feel empowered to contribute their ideas, energy, and resources to achieve our collective vision.

Temple Beth Am will align our operations with the vision and mission of the plan. This means creating innovative ways of doing things that promote new forms of collaboration. The structure of the plan intentionally organizes goals and strategies thematically rather than departmentally. We believe that successful implementation of this plan requires collaborative leadership. The Senior Rabbi and the Executive Director must model the type of collaboration they would like to see among departments. We are committed to working together to ensure collaboration at all levels of the organization.

The Shared Leadership Model in Practice

The very nature of collaborative leadership rests on the values described earlier in this document.

Those values result in a profound appreciation for the relationship between the two leaders. In a practical everyday sense this means a seamless sharing of ideas, actions, questions, and conclusions in a way that keeps each appropriately informed and included in the work of the other. Only with this pragmatic sensibility can the simple yet complex vision of collaborative responsibilities and authority work to provide leadership to Temple Beth Am. Below is a diagram designed to illustrate how we translate this model into the everyday operations of our synagogue.

SHARED LEADERSHIP MODEL



Conclusion

Temple Beth Am is uniquely poised to be a vital and relevant center for Jewish living, despite the challenges to organized religion that have emerged in these first decades of the 21st century. Synagogues must adapt with the changing times, which in turn requires a new kind of leadership. We believe a shared leadership model reflects the values and ethos of this historical moment, and

we are excited to embark on this journey of true shared leadership together. As with the Strategic Plan, some things will change and others will stay the same. We will take risks, communicate honestly, and support each other and our community. In this way, we believe we will facilitate engaging the souls, hearts, and minds of every member of the Temple Beth Am community, empowering us to work together to inspire lives and heal the world.