

SAJ VISION STATEMENT

For 2016-2021

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann, September 2016

Affirmed by the SAJ Board of Directors, September 13, 2016

Introduction

As many know, I spent much of this past year observing, learning, and listening to assess where we at SAJ are today and to envision where we might go in the future. What follows is the vision and direction I believe SAJ should pursue for the next five years, based on my knowledge of our strengths, passions, and capabilities. While I present the overarching vision, with the input of SAJ leadership, the entire congregation will be engaged through the vision process – some as participants in new initiatives, others as shapers of individual aspects of the vision, and others through the planning and operational work that will ensure we have the human and financial resources in place to succeed. Through such a process, I hope that the vision will energize the congregation and grow it in depth and breadth.

The SAJ is a synagogue with a rich, close to 100 year history. As the congregation founded by Mordecai Kaplan, it has a distinguished place in Jewish American history. And as the home of the first bat mitzvah, SAJ has contributed to the transformation and reconstruction of Judaism. For many decades after Kaplan's service, SAJ was a hub of intellectual activity on the Upper West Side, attracting many who wanted to think and wrestle with Judaism as the core constituency. Over the past twenty years, the congregation continued its intellectual and traditional core, blended with a deep spirituality and accessibility that has attracted a diverse base of members.

The congregation prides itself on bridging the gap between Judaism and “the outside world” and SAJ congregants are eager to think about what Judaism has to say about the world in which we live and the issues we face today. SAJ has many other assets and strengths. Among these are a hard-working and excellent professional team, a strong sense of community, a focus on Shabbat as sacred time for the whole congregation, a pride in its history, a down-to-earth, unassuming character, beautiful music, congregants who are willing to share their wisdom and talent, and deeply committed lay leaders. In considering where we are going, I am building off these strengths with the hopes of helping us move toward our full potential.

As we vision, it is important to acknowledge a broader context. We are living in a time that some claim is “post-denominational” as younger Jews reject the labels and perceived limitations of the mainstream “movements.” While some say denominations have gone “out of style,” I believe being Reconstructionist – and the birthplace of the movement – is an asset to the SAJ. Reconstructionism in itself is to many an

alternative from the other perceived to be large and impersonal denominations. And the ideas associated with Reconstructionism including no litmus test on faith and belief, an approach that encourages questioning, and an inclusivity that has become characteristic of the movement are ones that may attract those looking for something unique and different.

Others bemoan the fate of synagogues writ-large. Due to increased secularization and assimilation, alongside a democratization of communal life and Jewish learning, rates of affiliation are down overall; the idea of a person or family as a “lifelong synagogue member” is no longer a given. At the same time, I stand firm in my belief that synagogues fulfill a unique place in the landscape of Jewish life, as the only “institution” that can meet the spiritual, educational, social, and pastoral needs of individuals in one place. Synagogues are a place in which friendships can be formed – and in SAJ’s case, one of the few places in society where true intergenerational relationships can be fostered. In the way we come together to hold death and celebrate life, in the way we inspire others to meaningful spiritual practices and beyond, synagogues have the power to be truly transformative spaces. Given the threats to community and the persistence of isolation in society, I believe that synagogues are in fact deeply needed—perhaps more than ever. What I learn from the data and the trends is that we need to proactively shape our congregation in that can truly be transformative to those who become a part of it. Further, I believe we can no longer take for granted that people will “come to us,” but instead be clear that we have something special and unique to offer, something that would benefit those who participate and be prepared to share that with others.

What will make SAJ transformative for those who walk through its doors and choose to participate? What will be those core values and ideas that animate us and make us an exciting and relevant institution? These are the questions I am attempting to answer in this vision statement, divided into five areas of congregational life. My vision is:

- that SAJ will become a center of Jewish learning for all ages, stages of one’s Jewish and life journey, and be available to a broad spectrum of people
- for SAJ to expand its thriving, palpable sense of community, so that every aspect and each program of our synagogue becomes an opportunity to forge impactful connections
- that SAJ will stand for a wrestling with justice and give people to opportunity to act in small and large ways toward repair of the world

- that SAJ will be a synagogue where the arts and Jewish culture are both appreciated and produced, so as to enrich members' Jewish identities and promote new and emerging Jewish art forms for the broader community
- that SAJ's religious/spiritual life will be one of joyful celebration and potential transformation for those who participate

Talmud Torah- Jewish Learning

“Studying Torah in its various guises is not simply a matter of learning the whats and hows of being Jewish. Studying is the essence of being a Jew. It defines who one is. Hence Jewish learning is not the instrumental gaining of skills, knowledge, and competencies. It is the religious act par excellence. And religious education is not only a preparation for what will come later; it is *being a Jew*, realizing one's Jewishness, in the very act of studying.”

--Barry Holtz, from “How Adults Learn”¹

My vision is that SAJ will become a center for Jewish learning, especially from a Reconstructionist perspective, from “aleph to tav” and from cradle to grave. Access to this learning should go beyond the walls of the SAJ and the Upper West Side. As we build this, SAJ will become and will, in time, be known in the broader Jewish community as a congregation of *m'lamdim batorah* and *m'vakshim batorah*-- students of torah and seekers of torah and wisdom.

This vision builds on the history and heart of SAJ, which prides itself on a passion for learning and intellectual inquiry. Yet, who makes up the Jewish community in New York today and the SAJ community in particular is very different in 2016 than it has been in earlier iterations of the SAJ. This is what I mean in saying from “aleph to tav”; our learning community needs to reflect the variety of interests, skills and backgrounds present and potentially present at the SAJ, and with classes taught at a range of depths. Some people seek knowledge on how to create Jewish home rituals for their families. Some want to engage with texts in their or with reference to the original. Some want to learn to gain knowledge of traditions and holidays. Others want to gain skills in language or service participation. Some want a simple understanding of the traditions of their Jewish spouse and family. Some want to learn in ways that promote their personal, spiritual growth. Some want to learn to deepen their relationship to and understanding of Torah. Some are parents who want to think about parenting issues from a Jewish perspective and some are parents who just want to engage with Judaism

¹ Dr. Barry Holtz is a professor of Jewish education at the Jewish Theological Seminary and has spoken at the SAJ in years past.

for the first time in many years. And so on. In order to create a culture in which all these kinds of people and people at every stage of life can come and learn, we are going to need to think about a full and diverse learning offering. Choice is key in reaching many different kinds of people -- choices of time of day, choices of topics, choices of format and number of weeks. In order to create a true culture that promotes ongoing learning, not simply taking a "class," we will also need mechanisms to acknowledge and celebrate the various groups of learners in public ways.

From "cradle to grave" indicates a re-orientation from the approach of "children's learning" and "adult learning" to lifelong learning. As such, learning begins with the very young and it is incumbent upon us to build programs that support learning and celebration for Jewish families from a few months old and beyond. In this vein, I believe that SAJ should begin exploring the possibility of creating a Jewish pre-school program. There are many benefits to SAJ having its own pre-school program, most importantly, it would give SAJ yet an opportunity create a coherent philosophy of joyful, engaged childhood education informed by Reconstructionist philosophy. Having a pre-school would also benefit our inreach and outreach efforts. I suggest we engage in a feasibility study to determine the right path for SAJ.

As we move to grade school, the majority of SAJ's learners, I believe it is vital that we view our program as a holistic one from grades KG-12. We must move away from the Jewish community's problematic habit of orienting and organizing our religious school primarily around the bar or bat mitzvah of each individual child. There should be "no end date" to Jewish learning at the SAJ, even if individual children and families decide to discontinue after their b'nai mitzvah.

We must re-orient how we see the learning for school-aged children. Many traditional Hebrew schools fall into the trap of wanting to fill a short period of time each week with as much knowledge and information as possible. While there is of course some importance to the transmission of information, we should think less about "giving" our children knowledge and more about building lifelong Jewish learners. We want our children to know that being Jewish means to question, to think critically, and to work to transform the world in which they live. Direct engagement with Jewish texts that invite those conversations is critical as well as hands-on experience that create memories and identity. Knowing the value of living Judaism for our children, it is also important that we continue building our relationship with Camp JRF, a place where Reconstructionist Jewish community thrives.

In terms of a broader audience, in the 21st century, we need to think about the potential impact of our learning in terms that are bigger than who walks into our building or attends our classes. If we believe we have something meaningful to share, then we

should seek ways to bring it to a larger “audience” by utilizing digital platforms (i.e. podcasts, online learning, youtube videos). As the starting place of Reconstructionist Judaism, it would be exciting to think of SAJ as a source of knowledge and wisdom that can reach a very broad audience interested in hearing a lived, Reconstructionist vision of torah and the world.

Kehilah: Community

“*Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh LaZeh*” - All of Israel is connected to/responsible for one another. --Talmud Shevuot 39a

My vision is that for SAJ to have a thriving, palpable sense of community, one that extends from the most regular “shul goer” to those who attends SAJ events from time to time to the very old to the very young and in-between. Further, SAJ should reach beyond the traditional limitations of synagogue populations to welcome in any who might wish to be part of a progressive, exciting Reconstructionist congregation.

Thankfully, SAJ has a strong sense of *kehilah*/community among its members, especially those who are most involved, which has been expressed to me many times by members in the SAJ house-meetings. Over the last few years, SAJ has made an effort to build intergenerational relationships within the congregation. At the same time, I heard from people and observed that this feeling of community and connectedness did not always extend beyond those most involved in synagogue life, and a few families reported not knowing anyone else in the congregation years after joining and their child being in the religious school. This is of course bound to happen in communities where only some choose to be part of the weekly Shabbat prayer service. At the same time, I believe our vision of community needs to grow to include people at varying levels of engagement; it also needs to begin the moment people make contact with SAJ and continue through the end of life.

As we consider our community’s future, it is vital that we think broadly about who can and should be part of the SAJ community we are building. Often, synagogues think about their population in two ways: families and elders. Yet, especially in NYC, there are many people who might seek out a Jewish community if they felt there was a place for them, including 20s/30s, the growing 40s and single population, 50s and 60s who never had children or who have grown children, and so on. These are groups that may be especially in search of community, and I believe that both through the language we use and the programming choices we create and facilitate, we can welcome people in all life stages into our congregation. Further, I believe the more SAJ can celebrate the diversity within our congregation and celebrate the potential diversity of those who might seek to join, the more we will grow our congregation and help people know that all kinds

of people, all kinds of families, are welcome to participate. And, our geographic diversity, with members from every borough and neighborhood, reminds us that we are not just an “Upper West Side” synagogue – and have the potential to draw from and build community all over the city.

To fulfill the vision of a relational Jewish community, we will need to create structures for welcoming new individuals and families into the SAJ community, including ones that help people connect with people who share common interests. We will also need to build more avenues for people to connect with one another outside of the context of weekly Shabbat morning services. This past year, I observed that there is a real hunger for members to spend time together, socialize, and enjoy each other’s company. I was overwhelmed by the response to some of the programming we organized, which had a great impact on participants. We have already begun to address this desire, through the formation of the **Community Life Committee**, the members of which are supplementing SAJ’s calendar with programming intended to build relationships.

SAJ has in the past benefited from the formation of *havurot*, small group gatherings of subgroups of the congregation typically in each other’s homes, and I believe we should explore how havurot could serve to strengthen our community in its next iteration. This supports important Jewish values as well- *hachnasat orchim*, the welcoming of guests and the home as the “mikdash me’at,” the miniature sanctuary, a holy space for spiritual life. Some may desire to gather with people of the same life stage, who understand what each other is going through or based on geographical commonalities. Others may seek to talk to others struggling with similar issues, i.e. Interfaith families. Some may want to continue the intergenerational connections we have been building. Over the next period of time, SAJ should include members in conversations about their hopes and needs to determine how to form havurot that have the potential to bond people together and keep them connected to the SAJ.

Another “location” of potential community is our congregational school, which in my mind, should not be viewed simply as a “school” but as a community within our larger SAJ community. Thus, as we vision the school, we should consider the mechanisms by which we become a school-community that puts relationships between children and among families at the center of what we do.

Lastly, but perhaps most important to the vision of kehillah is making *hesed* (lovingkindness, caring) synonymous with the SAJ. This work of becoming a caring community needs also to be from “cradle to grave.” My first year of the SAJ, many people remarked about the way that SAJ “showed up” for them at times of crisis. After a loss, there would be donations, calls, an overwhelming number of shiva visitors, and they were so grateful for the SAJ community. And yet, a few others remarked that when

they had a loss “no one did anything” or when one had a new baby a few years back, they did not receive any calls or wishes from SAJ leadership. This presents an important challenge for us – to make congregational support available to all those who would benefit from it and at all the stages of life. We have begun this work by launching a new SAJ Caring Committee, which met for the first time in June 2016. From my experience at my previous congregation, I know that the activities needed to support others are not necessarily ones we are trained to do or ones we automatically think to do and others don’t feel comfortable asking for support– thus, I believe that to make this successful, it will take a lot of intention, education, and individual outreach. As I mentioned, we will need to think about birth to death. In the future, I would love to see SAJ expand on our vision of caring and compassion by training our own members to serve on a non-Orthodox *Hevra Kadisha*², burial society, so we can be there for each other even in the ultimate transition.

From birth to death, from services to school to learning to holiday celebration, each moment presents itself with an opportunity to grow our sense of connectedness and community.

Tzedek-- Social Justice

“Wisdom without action is like a tree without fruit.” --Joseph Kimhi, Shekel HaKodesh 12C

I believe it is vital for the future of SAJ that over the next five years, we move social justice to become one of the pillars of the SAJ community. As such, we should become a place where SAJ members of all ages act in the world in small and large ways out of their Jewish commitments.

In order to do so, we will need to articulate the connections between Judaism and social justice. From culling the sources of Judaism to seeking historical models of the way Jews have engaged their broader society to make change, it is important that we articulate *tzedek* as a Jewish value and *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) as Jewish pursuit. This is true for our children and for adults of all ages as well as well. Given the amount of difficult and complex issues in the world, Judaism’s voice is needed now more than ever.

I believe we will be most effective as a congregation if we work on particular issues in a focused and sustained way. These issues should be determined with input from the community and leadership and should connect us to larger city-wide campaigns in

² <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hevra-kaddisha-or-burial-society/>

which SAJ members can be part of making a concrete difference on an issue. For each issue, we would create a “working group” that would do research and education, find partner groups and advocates working on those issues, and organize the larger congregational community to take specific actions in support of this work. This way, a congregation is able to go very deep with an issue and participate in the process of change over a long-period. SOJAC’s work on Syrian Refugees and its partnership with HIAS and other congregations is an example of this direction.

This social justice model involves some congregants “taking the lead,” but that group should also be responsible for engaging the congregation. I understand that engaging the congregation in bigger actions is going to be challenging, especially at the beginning, and we will need to build up a new culture of social justice at SAJ over time. I truly believe that one of the powerful aspects of being part of a faith community is the opportunity to act together to make more of a difference than we could individually, and I believe it is important we strive and work towards greater congregational engagement.

To be effective in our work to change the world, we will need interfaith partners to work with and forge pathways together. When I arrived at SAJ, I was not made aware of any significant, ongoing relationship with a religious group in the Upper West Side. I understand, because New York congregations reflect the busy, more isolated culture of the city. Especially for that reason, I believe it is vital that we establish meaningful and long-lasting relationships with other houses of faith. There are many reasons: first, to build bridges and relationships across “divides” of faith traditions. Second, to build solidarity and cultivate allies who can be there for us as a Jewish community if/when we need it and in the web of mutuality, that we can be allies to other communities in their time of need. This is especially important and timely. Third, these relationships are helpful so that we can come together to work on issues of common concern. And most importantly, it is the right thing to do. Being a liberal Jew in the 21st century means being fully integrated with our neighbors of all faiths. As Reconstructionists who believe we should be both proudly Jewish and proudly American, let’s make sure our congregational life reflects this new inter-faith reality.

Tarbut - Arts & Culture

“A civilization cannot endure on a high plane without the preservation and cultivation of its arts.” -- Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*³

One of the most salient teachings of Mordecai Kaplan is the notion that Judaism is an evolving, religious civilization, with language, folkways, land, arts, and culture. Seeing

³ Kaplan, Mordecai, *Judaism as a Civilization*, page 203

Judaism as a civilization enables us to see and experience the many ways in which Jewish life expresses itself. This Reconstructionist approach to Judaism also challenges the traditional constructs of synagogue life, which tend to focus primarily on ritual/prayer or education/text.

As the congregation founded by Kaplan, we are uniquely placed to live out the vision of civilizational Judaism by adding, in particular, arts and culture as an area of focus and congregational identity. SAJ already does this well, and I would like to see us invest resources to take our arts programming to the next level, one that will enrich members' Jewish identities and will serve to promote new and emerging Jewish art forms.

This can manifest by incorporating arts and culture as part of our educational offerings, programs related to Israel, and social activities—ultimately, we should strive to embed a Jewish connection to the arts in all areas of our congregational life. Another aspect of the vision will be dedicating special time for the arts as a congregation. Work on this has already begun as this year we are introducing what we hope will become an annual program: the SAJ Arts Festival, which will highlight the art, music, and writing of a diverse group of members.

We should also explore the connection between art and spirituality/religious life. One dream idea would be to have an “Artist in Residence” that would work with all cohort of the community to engage in text exploration through the arts. Dreaming more broadly, we should strive to make SAJ a place that could host and promote concerts, plays, and the like in the spirit of growing a Judaism that is integrated with and fully embraces the arts.

Ruchaniyut- Spiritual Life

“Praying allows us to center our focus, to look inward, to be elevated beyond our individual concerns...the answer to our prayers comes not from a supernatural God but from our own transformed hearts.” – Rabbi Jacob Staub, How Reconstructionists Pray

My vision is that SAJ's religious/spiritual life will be one of joyful celebration and potential transformation for those who participate. It will be one that feels both deeply tied to tradition, yet open to innovation and transformation. With the participation and engagement of the members, we should cultivate a culture of openness and experimentation that can help us engage new and varied ways to connect to a broad base of our members and to speak to the spiritual needs of those who may come through our doors.

As we talk about our congregation's spiritual life, it is important we recognize there are many challenges associated with building a community of *davenners* (people who pray). Prayer is difficult for many people. Many did not grow up going to services on a regular basis, and don't feel a spiritual need to "pray to a God." Many (or most!) do not believe the words in the prayerbook literally and do not feel they can reconstruct the imagery in a satisfactory way. Many people who I spoke to this past year articulated that they don't feel comfortable in services because they don't know the words and don't know the service itself. Many parents in particular told me they really liked the services but felt that this time was his own two hours alone all week and sought to take a walk, get a cup of coffee.

Of course, we know that we cannot solve all the challenges to prayer at the SAJ! But we can address some of them in a way that encourages people to utilize SAJ as a place for receiving spiritual nourishment. We need to treat each service as having the potential to transform us and our thoughts and build in moments that invite that opportunity. If we can translate prayer in a way that truly benefits those who participate, I believe we will attract even more people to our services.

And, I think it is important, especially as a Reconstructionist congregation, for us to realize that there are multiple modalities of spiritual expression – as many other congregations do. Further, as a Reconstructionist congregation, who wants to both appreciate tradition and be open to innovation, I would like to see a culture of openness to experimentation at SAJ. We can and should think about the best ways to animate our liturgy and our prayer experience – and we cannot know what's right for our community without experimenting with different possibilities.

And, as Reconstructionists, it is incumbent upon us to mine our tradition for its treasures and reconstruct them for our time. I would love to encourage use of traditional prayers in home life and to reconstruct ancient rituals for our contemporary lives. Most important of all of those is Shabbat. Celebrating Shabbat together, we feel that deep sense of connection to each other and to something beyond us. SAJ's bringing together of the entire community on Shabbat is a beautiful place from which to grow our spiritual life.

Conclusion

Over the next five years, I hope to lead the SAJ to be a place where *talmud torah*, *kehillah*, *tzedek*, *tarbut*, and *ruchaniyut* come alive and inspire all who participate. We do this not simply to grow SAJ spiritually and organizationally-- though we hope that will be a by-product-- we do this because this is how we will make Judaism relevant and applicable to our lives in the 21st century. We do this because of the impact it will have on all who participate, from our youngest children to our oldest members, who as a

result of being a part of SAJ will be better thinkers, more caring and attentive community members, and inspired citizens. I think especially about our children who will grow up seeing Judaism as a place to care and be cared about and who will experience a Judaism that is thoughtful, challenging, creative, and joyful.

The needs of those in our community, and the desires of those seeking such connections, are diverse and great. If we are to fulfill the goal of being a place for religious grounding, connections, spiritual awareness, and if we want to remain relevant in a time when synagogues are threatened by the forces in the world, then we need to be thoughtful and deliberate about how we will address these needs and grow a passionate, engaged congregation.

In order to meet the goals set out in this document, we will need the participation of our leadership and members. We will need commitment, hard-work, and an investment of material and spiritual resources. We will need to do some internal inquiry, including an assessment of our current resources including physical space and staffing. We will need to more specifically articulate who we are, what makes us special and unique and communicate that effectively in the world. It will take a dedicated group of people to work towards translating this vision into real plans and actions.

This vision plan is to guide us for the next five years, which would be 2021, exactly one year shy of SAJ's 100th anniversary. How exciting to imagine that at that time, we might realize so many of the ideas that Kaplan spoke about from our very own sanctuary! I look forward to partnering with the community to ensure a bright future for the SAJ.