

# A THEORY OF CHANGE: ENVISIONING A NEW 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY CONSERVATIVE SYNAGOGUE COMMUNITY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### A VISION FOR VITALITY

Beth David B'nai Israel Beth Am is balancing the needs of an aging membership with the spiritual, educational and communal demands of a rapidly changing world. The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic further impacted affiliation and participation rates, while traditional financial models and practices of past decades have failed to yield the same response and interests. As a result, the congregation has seen a drop in new members and a steady attrition of [former] members, regardless of age and stage of life. A lack of steady young adult engagement that is essential for a congregation's longevity adds urgency to this trend.

Since its founding, the congregation has enjoyed significant growth and expansion. However, the current model of a universal and centralized community outpost that serves multiple needs and is fueled by formal membership and affiliation has more recently lost its allure. The past two decades reflect a shift in values and lifestyle choices, favoring niche experiences and appealing to personal motivations that are more particular and customizable in nature. Despite the deep sentiment and legacy that has connected so many members to the congregation in the past, dwindling membership and active participation rates indicate that younger generations require a different value proposition to stay connected today. Lastly, an overarching sentiment expressed by a dedicated older core of synagogue members is that newer generations must come to appreciate the benefits and affinity to the synagogue as it is. As a result, Beth David has arrived at the crossroads of innovation and preservation.

**Data collected from the synagogue community suggests a unique opportunity to consider a merger and organizational reimagination to create a larger and more robustly resourced community. Such a merger would enable a combined effort to deliver maximum impact and reverse the trends of decline.**

In an extensive community consultation process that engaged people from multiple ages and stages of life connected in some way to Beth David, three compelling trends emerged that could pave the way to a persuasive new synagogue community, model and experience:

1. **Jewish learning and family celebration of Jewish holidays**

Joining forces with a mission-aligned congregation to leverage resources can reverse attrition and membership trends by focusing on programmatic and engagement touchpoints as an effective gateway to celebrating Jewish life through the synagogue.

2. **A geographical opportunity**

According to residential patterns, the current geographic footprint of Beth David's membership spans the GTA, especially up and down Bathurst Street, which paves the way for integrated, accessible and niche programming.

3. **A multigenerational desire to introduce new, different and profoundly inclusive strategies to synagogue life and services.**

The wide range of respondents from every age and stage - including "regulars", leaders and legacy members - shared their hopes, needs and personal standards for a synagogue model. A consistent message emerged indicating a desire for multiplicity in services and experiences. This way, seniors, adults and youth, who each have different preferences and expectations of a synagogue service can come together in a shared community space, and still find a more particular experience that appeals to their personal needs.

## **A FRESH START**

Blending with another synagogue community into a newly formed institution will enable Beth David to leverage the best of its resources and continue to Jewishly enrich the lives of its members. **The synagogue has already engaged in past mergers as reflected in the synagogue's name. A newly formed community calls for a new name, signifying a fresh start with a collection of people who share a common interest and commitment to a particular style of 21st century Judaism. This name should be one that honours the past and promotes excitement about the present and the future.**

Beth David can catalyze this new community and envision themselves as a flourishing, inclusive, multigenerational community from across the GTA that provides accessible and personally resonant Jewish experiences framed by tradition and modernity. This new entity can be designed to provide space for members who love their current synagogue as it is, as well as for those who are seeking something different. A new synagogue community can be informed by a network model, moving the community's apparent association with the synagogue beyond a building and a membership status to a series of relationships and experiences with Jewish life. The network model features multiple variations of services, thereby increasing accessibility with multiple locations, multiple entry points to Judaism and multiple ways to connect and engage.

This long-term vision for a new 21st century Conservative synagogue community offers a thriving and essential institution in the Toronto Jewish community and beyond. The ultimate result would be a more diversified synagogue experience with many types of activities taking place in different locations, engaging multiple groups of different ages and stages Jewish experiences through a Conservative Judaism lens. Focusing on breadth, depth and sustainability, this new vision for a combined synagogue community, engaged in a network of Jewish touchpoints can ensure that current and future members will feel a strong sense of pride, belonging and tradition.