



General Board Meeting - November 21, 2021

Present:

Barbara Abramson (1)	Susan Falcon (2)	Avi Paradise (1)
Brad Bailey (2*)	Lew Gantwerk (2)	Fredi Perlmutter (1)
Alexandra Bar-Cohen (2)	Linda Grenis (2)	Lauren Neufeld (1)
Joel Berger	Samantha Hirschberg (1)	Naomi Richman-Neumann (2)
Randy Brett (2)	Edye Kamenir (2)	Adam Scheer (2)
Gabrielle Cayton-Hodges (2)	Judy Kutin (1)	Sarah Schwarz (1)
Abbye Cornfield (1)	N. Lewis (2)	Jesse Treu (1)
Dane Dickler (2)	Jenny Ludmer (1)	Claude Winn (1)
Josh Eisenberg (2*)	Moshe Margolin (1)	
Martin Ettenberg (2*)	Rabbi Andrea Merow	
	Dana Molina (1)	

Guest: Dr. Audra Kaplan

Note: Numbers shown in parentheses are the number of votes each member has according to TJC By-Laws. Executive Committee Members have 2 votes, as well as Committee Chairs who do not have a Co-Chair or whose Co-Chair is not present (indicated by 2*). All Committee Co-Chairs whose Co-Chair is present have one vote each. Number subject to change based on attendance status of Committee Co-Chairs. The President has adopted the practice of not voting, except in the event of a tie.

Minutes:

1. The meeting was called to order at 7:00PM and was held via video conference.
2. **President's Welcome** - Alexandra Bar-Cohen invited Claude Winn to introduce our guest who will deliver tonight's D'var Torah.
3. The **D'var Torah** Guest Speaker was introduced by Claude Winn, who shared her personal story about finding a camp for her child with autism. It was a wonderful feeling to see all of the faces in that wonderful Jewish community that was so inclusive of her and her family. She wants to make sure that everyone who comes in contact with our community can have that same feeling of belonging. Dr. Audra Kaplan is the chief program officer for Keshet, national recognized program for disability inclusion. Dr. Kaplan spoke about how the synagogue can be a protective home for children with disabilities and their families - particularly for children with neurological challenges. When families are embraced, they feel accepted, and the community overall becomes a more accepting and loving space. There is a high incidence of people with disabilities, including psychological disorders, and that number will only increase over time. She outlined three forms of inclusion: the first form of inclusion is physical; the second is functional, and the third is social inclusion. She invites us to think of all facets of inclusion to make sure that everyone is included, and if not, why not. We should be motivated to make positive change, not only because it's a mitzvah, but because it's the right thing to do.

Alexandra thanked Dr. Kaplan for helping us take the first step of making a positive impact in this area.

4. **Approval of Minutes**

- The minutes of the October 21, 2021, Board Meeting were circulated prior to the meeting for review and were approved as circulated as part of the consent agenda.
- See www.thejewishcenter.org/Resources/Board-Minutes.aspx.

5. **Finance Report - Dane Dickler**

- Dane provided an update on revenue. In terms of dues collection, an additional \$50K has been collected since the last report, which is well over budget. (\$670K total vs. \$580K budget). The Annual Fund is currently at \$130K, which is a solid amount at this point in the year, but still below the \$250K goal. The new Senior Dues arrangement has netted approx \$45K in additional dues. More information will be provided by Susan Falcon when she reports back to the Board on the overall dues initiative.
- The Bimah project yielded a \$50K overage. There are about \$30K of outstanding bills to pay, which will leave approximately \$20K left over in the restricted fund that can be used for another disability associated project. Randy Brett qualified that there may be up to \$30K additional to spend when all of the final bills are paid for the project.
- Operating expenses are currently tracking under budget by \$40K.
- Membership came down from 509 to 501, because some people were billed for membership but never sent back their package, and therefore by default decided not to renew. Remaining above 500 membership units was our post-pandemic goal, and we are at that number right now.
 - Jesse Treu asked what we know about the members who have left with regard to reasons. Naomi Richman-Neumann answered that some members passed away, while others moved out of the area, and others were local, but decided not to renew. The Membership Team followed up to ascertain reasons for leaving. Alexandra commended the Membership Committee for their follow-up efforts.
- In addition, ten new students joined the Religious School, and they are happy to report that most children are physically back in school for Religious School classes.
- Dane also spoke of the desire to attract a new tenant for the school building. There are some leads that will be pursued.
- Lauren Neufeld asked about school enrollment numbers and how they compare to pre-pandemic enrollment levels. Dane said that we were just under 200 students pre-pandemic. Gabrielle Cayton-Hodges added said that we are probably higher than we might have been, given the fact that we were losing about 20-25 students a year since the pre-school closed.
- Joel Berger said that we are still \$90K short of budget on the Annual Fund. The most recent total is \$161K right after the latest e-mail request, which netted about \$6500 in incremental donations not currently reflected in the monthly financial dashboard. Alexandra thanked the Board for 100% Board participation in the Annual Fund this year. We have another push for donations planned for Giving Tuesday.

6. Solar Energy for TJC - Martin Ettenberg (House Committee Co-Chair)

- Martin gave a detailed presentation regarding the prospect of installing solar panels at TJC. Key salient points include:
 - TJC spends ~\$26.5K/year on power, representing ~180 kwh/year
 - Costs are increasing ~3.2% a year
 - The roofs on the main building and the school building were replaced in 2018 with a 20 year lifespan, implying that solar panels could be installed without great concern for the integrity of or access to the roof if repairs were needed
- Several proposals spanning a number of different scenarios have been proposed, but TJC doesn't have enough roof space for 100% offset of costs; however, there is an option to add panels in the parking lots.
- Solar was a difficult option to consider in the past, because TJC is a non-profit. Now, however, there are new methods available for non-profit organizations to avail themselves of the tax benefits that solar energy can provide.
- There are three basic ways to go about considering solar panels for TJC:
 - 1) Power Purchase Agreement - In this arrangement, TJC doesn't own the panels. A company installs the panels for free. Then TJC purchases power back at a very cheap rate (~10-20% of what we pay right now). Many synagogues have taken this approach. However, it is possible to realize greater savings through investment options.
 - 2) TJC purchases the system - TJC owns the system, but we don't get the initial tax incentives, which leads to highest upfront costs. However, TJC would get all of the solar renewable energy credits, which have value.
 - 3) Hybrid Plan - TJC does not own the system for the first 5 years, balancing out the upfront costs, but we do not benefit from the tax incentive.
- Three proposals have been received so far:
 - 1) Exact Solar - \$225K upfront cost; 78% power usage offset; generates \$310K over 25 years of SRECS; TJC owns the system, but does not collect \$66K in tax benefits; we tried to set up a hybrid arrangement with them for 6 months, but hasn't worked out; includes 20 year warranty
 - 2) Green Power Energy - \$313K upfront cost
 - 3) National Energy Partners - \$193K (includes school roof); \$342K system cost with 2 options to buy; TJC receives free power - nearly 100% offset in first year; two options: pay \$142K upfront, own the system after 5 years, or pay over time.All the details of the proposals were provided in the presentation.
- Barbara Abramson asked how many panels can TJC fit? Martin answered roughly 300 panels depending on the vendor and the size of the panels available.
- Jesse Treu said that it's a really interesting idea and terrific that we're looking into it. From his calculations, the project would pay for itself for about 11 years, but the reason to do it is that it would provide long term benefit, and that it's the right thing to do for the planet. Martin clarified that it would be more like 7 years for the payoff.
- Edye Kamenir asked if there is any benefit to waiting to pursue this project or to not owning the panels, since purchasing changing technology could lock us into something that could be obsolete or less efficient sooner rather than later. Martin said there really isn't an advantage to waiting for better technology, as the upgrade options are limited. (It's not like getting a new iPhone). The solar panel businesses want to keep them in place as long as possible to make it cost effective for them, so there wouldn't be a trade-up situation.

- Barbara asked about the responsibility and cost of insuring the system. Does it cost more to insure the system as it ages? Martin answered that insuring the system would be focused on insuring against disaster, so aging is less of a concern from an insurance standpoint.
- Judy Kutin asked what happens to solar panels after 20 years? Do they go in a landfill? Martin said he's not sure, but they are mostly silicon, so much of the material could conceivably be recycled and re-melted. Judy asked if anyone on the Board has solar panels and if it's as cost effective as it sounds? Alexandra said that several people in the congregation approached the Board about exploring this as an option for TJC. Also, a large portion of the panels is glass, so that is recyclable. Barbara added that there is a great deal of information on the internet about the opportunities and challenges of recycling solar panels at this point.
- Jenny Ludmer asked about PPAs (Power Purchase Agreements) and if that was an option. Martin said that PPAs are easy to get, but he didn't think they were advantageous to the synagogue in the long term. If we get squeamish and can't raise the money for upfront costs, we can do that. Jenny said that the solar company would own the system and take care of maintenance, but we would get the reduction in energy costs in a PPA arrangement.
- Naomi Richman-Neumann shared the idea of pulling money from reserves to invest in this initiative without trying to raise the full amount of money required for upfront investment.
- Moshe Margolin said that he has had solar panels for 2 years, and he has realized significant savings on electricity. His gas bill is still the same, but it makes a huge difference on electricity.
- Alexandra thanked Martin for bringing this proposal to the Board.

7. Underwriting the Religious School - Alexandra Bar-Cohen

- Alexandra introduced the discussion by acknowledging the "sticker shock" families with children have when they consider joining a synagogue when faced with the prospect of paying full Household dues, the capital assessment, and Religious School tuition often for multiple children. In recognition of the financial burden families bear, last year we allowed families to take a one year moratorium on the capital assessment portion of their dues. But there is a sense that that action alone is not enough to attract new families and to sufficiently reduce the financial burden to membership for this cohort so critical to TJC's future. A strength that was identified in our Board Retreat earlier this year was our Religious School, so we need to consider what else we might be able to do to help underwrite the cost. She shared the idea that perhaps each year we could have a spring fundraiser to pay it forward to the next generation of Jewish learners to reduce or eliminate the cost of Religious School. Alexandra then invited people to share their thoughts.
- Moshe Margolin likes the idea of investing to develop our future. But as a Board member, he would like to see some concrete policies and numbers. What is the goal and how many families will it impact and/or attract?
- Lew Gantwerk said the details of such an approach would require further development, but the idea is a terrific one to pursue. If the cost is prohibitive to families, it would seem that finding ways to offset that cost would be a central way to communicate that families are welcome here.
- Jesse Treu loves the idea and sees it as a creative approach for solving the larger membership issue. The idea should be evaluated in the context of other fundraising needs. If we do something like this, we should pay attention to how to use it as a form of fair share

dues. As it currently stands, the membership dues underwrite the school already, so it should be designed so that the members you're making it easier for now are "locked in" to stay a while. He also suggested a needs assessment exercise.

- Edye Kamenir raised the point about how to separate the people who need financial support from people who don't. She said that paying for one's own children's education is often not a barrier for parents, but the idea of paying dues for a synagogue they don't use or paying the capital assessment, which they may not understand what it's being used for, are sticking points that may make sense to address.
- Adam Scheer shared his experience as a past financial secretary that the full bill causes sticker shock, but many people don't want to ask for money. He asked the Board to consider whether there are things we can do that we are not currently doing to lower our own costs so that we don't need to ask for as much money to run the school or the synagogue? Or could we look into organizations that can help lower our costs or provide grants?
- Gabrielle Cayton-Hodges said that most new families are exploratory members, so they aren't paying dues in that first year, but they are paying Religious School tuition. She said that she used to be of the mindset Edye shared, but she changed her mind, because she thinks paying dues (rather than tuition) could help build the sense of community. Edye acknowledged that that was a helpful perspective to share, especially when we often lament the "two shuls" syndrome (Sanctuary or Religious School with little overlap).
- Abbye Cornfield shared that the sticker shock is real. It's not that people can't afford it, but it's not something they had budgeted for. In addition, without the preschool, how can we think of creative ways to attract new families? She shared that B'nai Tikveh in North Brunswick had a \$18 or \$36 dues drive to attract young families.
- Dana Molina said that she would suggest focusing on ways to reduce the dues portion rather than reducing tuition for the Religious School.
- Susan Falcon said that she loves the idea of putting education front and center and making it the center post of the TJC offering. We have an aging congregation, so we have to add new members who are in earlier life stages to sustain the congregation in the future. But it's not realistic to fund everything through donations. So we really have to think about how to fund this in a realistic and sustainable way. Or we need to really focus our efforts on increased development overall. But consistency and sustainability of funding would be essential for this type of need, which is not easy to do through traditional fundraising.
- Naomi Richman-Neumann agreed with Susan's points. She believes that we need to look at the holistic financial commitment of our members to TJC. If you own a home, you pay property taxes, and most of that allocation here in NJ funds public schools, regardless of the number of children you have. It's not structured as a user fee due to the value society places on education. Education as such should be the communal responsibility of everybody, rather than a user fee that people with children pay. Reframing the issue in that way might help.
- Avi Paradise asked if there might be another way to fund such an initiative besides fundraising? What is the cost per student for the school? We know we need to attract young families. Perhaps we could come up with a way that would allow cost-sharing (for instance, allowing people to join TJC in pods while providing an incentive to recruit others). Dane Dickler said the cost per student is \$1700. It would go down per student if we attracted more students due to the high fixed costs of the Religious School that can be spread across more students. Jesse did some rough math and shared that if we increased dues by 20% for all, we could eliminate Religious School tuition.

- Judy Kutin added to chat the suggestion of a co-op model.

8. Kiddush Luncheons - Alexandra Bar-Cohen

- Boxed lunches and servers at a buffet were suggested as safer ways to serve food when we are able to resume Kiddush Luncheons. Requiring servers would increase costs by about \$1000 per luncheon, which could be cost prohibitive. At the next Safety & Security Committee meeting, we are asking the Committee to consider family-style dining or disposable glove use at distanced buffet tables.
- We are also trying to work through the responsibility of b'nai mitzvah families to sponsor the Kiddush Lunch. Before COVID, families had to fund 80 people plus their guests for Kiddush Lunch on the day of their child's simcha . December 4, the bar mitzvah of Education Director Sharon Diamondstein's son Eric, will be our first Kiddush Luncheon since the start of the pandemic. Given our slowly rising attendance numbers, we are considering requiring families to fund 40 congregational lunches instead of 80.

9. Mid-Year Congregational Meeting - Alexandra Bar-Cohen

- December 12 is the date of the Mid-Year Congregational Meeting.
- Progress has been made on the Rabbi Adam Feldman z"l memorial efforts. A tree has been planted in Fairview Farms in his honor. There will be an event on May 19, 2022, for L'ag B'Omer to dedicate the tree and memorialize him.
- The meeting will also have an aspect to memorialize Rabbi Adam Feldman z"l. The students who became b'nai mitzvah since his passing will receive tallit tzitzit sets honoring him featuring the special purple thread that comes from snails that make that specific purple dye - a story he shared with many of us over the years. The memorial tzitzit will also be available for purchase.

10. Membership Engagement - Alexandra Bar-Cohen

- We as a community need to rebuild the muscles for attending services and events in person. Those muscles have atrophied during the pandemic. We realize that Zoom and Livestream are here to stay, but those forms of community can't replace that personal connection that can only happen in person. Alexandra invited Board members to provide suggestions on how to get people to come back into the building.
- She kicked off the suggestions with an idea to build on the success of the summertime "Cocktails in the Courtyard" and bringing the spirit of those events indoors to "Cocktails in the Corridor." Perhaps we could recruit people to be the hosts and invite friends. We have set aside two dates for "Cocktails in the Corridor" so far - 12/10 and 12/24. If there are people willing to host, please let Alexandra know.
- Moshe Margolin suggests having hybrid Adult Education and Arts & Culture activities. Some lecturers being considered are in NY, so they could conceivably come in person. But he would never be in favor of 'in person only' events, because too many people prefer virtual for the sake of convenience.
- Judy Kutin suggested via chat to serve food to attract people back into the building.

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- Avi Paradise offered up an idea to invite people to bring their own fire pits and sit outside to eat, drink, and sing. Alexandra said that TJC actually has a fire pit - it just needs to be assembled.
- Randy Brett said that we could invite Committee meetings back to the building in person, since they are smaller groups.
- Lew Gantwerk invited a re-framing of how we can use the telephone calls to the congregants. Each Board member could have 10-15 families to call multiple times throughout the year to develop and nurture relationships over time, letting them know what's going on at TJC, and asking them to join us at activities. Attracting people back after this hiatus requires more than just planning an event and hoping people come. We have a mechanism in these phone calls that we can re-purpose to spur more participation.
- Abbye Cornfield shared an overview of the sponsor program for new members in which sponsored new members get invited by sponsors to attend three events with them throughout the year. Another idea is to invite people to have an aliyot or other honor for their birthdays or other simchat.
- Claude Winn brought up the idea to group people by interests to foster connections, much like the affinity groups we had explored last spring (e.g. Hiking Club).
- Naomi Richman-Neumann offered the idea in chat of assigning call lists by geography to achieve a "neighbors calling neighbors" effect to build an even greater connection.

11. Good and Welfare

- Naomi Richman-Neumann detailed for the Board an upcoming new members event before the Menorah Lighting next week, and she invited everyone to come.
- Rabbi Merow shared her wonderful experience at Shabbat last week of the Shabbat Experience students visiting the sanctuary, the aufruf that took place, and people lingering to talk afterwards, making it feel more like a pre-pandemic Shabbat.
- Joel provided a summary of all of the upcoming Chanukah plans, which will go out in e-mail tomorrow
- Rabbi Merow asked people to join her for the Thanksgiving Ecumenical Service at University Chapel at 11am on Thursday in honor of Rabbi Adam Feldman z"l.

Adjournment

8.1 The meeting went into Executive Session at 8:44PM in a motion made by Lew Gantwerk and seconded by Moshe Margolin.

8.2 The meeting was adjourned at 9:08PM.

Minutes recorded by Edye Kamenir