

Listening Sessions Summary

Introduction

Working in partnership, the Rabbinic Process Team (RPT) and the Strategic Planning Team (SPT) came together in early 2021 to map out a community engagement strategy related to the upcoming rabbi transition and to gather useful feedback for the SPT's current and future work.¹ The first part of this effort took place at the end of February with two Community Conversation kick-offs. At these sessions, the RPT introduced the timeline and process for bringing a new rabbi to our community and gave partners the opportunity to speak to their own experiences at CBH and what this transition would mean to them personally. From the [data](#) collected at these Community Conversations, 6 themes were identified by the RPT as being paramount to the CBH community:

- Being Welcoming & Inclusive
- Spiritual Diversity
- Investing in Connections
- Programs, Events & Resources
- Our Youth & Our Future
- Social Justice & Social Action

On March 17 and 21, 2021, the Congregation Bet Haverim Strategic Planning Team held Listening Sessions to dig deeper into these themes. A diverse group of approximately 115 CBH partners participated in these small group conversations, led by 12 facilitators.

What follows are high-level takeaways from the various conversations. This summary contains qualitative interpretations and is intended to support both the Rabbinic Process Team's (RPT) work as well as the Strategic Planning Team's research. Please note that the Listening Sessions yielded data rich in content; diverse viewpoints were shared and discussed. While these conversations were grounded in the context of the themes identified by the RPT, we focused on gaining new information from the Listening Sessions in order to both shed more light on the idea of welcoming a new rabbi to CBH, as well as understanding personal experiences and how they shape our community. Since this summary cannot capture the nuance and complexities

¹ To prepare for the significant transition in the Rabbinic leadership of our synagogue, the board has appointed a Rabbinic Process Team (RPT) co-chaired by Barry Klein and Orit Kalman. Other members are Bonnie Berman, Steven Folb, Jodi Liederman, Marjory Kaplan and Meryl Rappaport. The team's scope of work includes: developing a process for hiring our new Rabbi, ensuring that it will be carefully planned, implemented and guided by our Jewish principles, researching and exploring resources that URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) and CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) provide to member congregations for a Rabbinic search, organize and implementing ways for our Partners to provide input and recommending objectives and resources for future Search committee and Transition/Welcome committee.

In 2020, Congregation Bet Haverim embarked on a Strategic Planning process to develop initiatives that will inform our community's development over the next several years and beyond. The purpose of this effort is to make our values and goals explicit and to articulate strategies for achieving them. The Strategic Planning Team is developing a framework that will allow for discretion in implementation, reflect our ideals, and be responsive to changes in our environment. Most critically, the initiatives described therein will provide context for our current and future decisions: how we will spend our resources, which capabilities we endeavor to develop, and how we will adapt to unforeseeable circumstances.

expressed by each individual, our goal was to focus on priorities that were repeated in more than one instance.

High-Level Takeaways

Heterogeneity

The CBH partnership is arguably more diverse than that of other Reform Congregations in larger cities given that we are the only synagogue in three counties. Many partners acknowledged the heterogeneous nature of our congregation, and a number of people surmised that a successful rabbi will see this diversity as a strength (a “feature instead of a bug”). Some felt we could and should be doing a better job at espousing “radical hospitality” and making all feel comfortable.

Examples of our heterogeneity include:

- diversity in ritual practice
- Jewish identity (Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Conservative, no label, spiritual but not religious, traditional, etc.)
- LGBTQIA+ identity
- increasing numbers of Black, brown, biracial, and/or multiracial families
- ethnicity (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi) and nationality (American, Israeli, and others)
- age & life stage
- marital status
- family makeup (no children, young kids, teens, adult children)
- family identity (wholly Jewish families, interfaith families, families with converted members, families with unconverted members who still want to partner with their families on a Jewish journey, etc.)
- political issues:
 - diversity of opinion on Israel (and all the nuance therein)
 - social justice as a main motivator vs. as a secondary concern
 - some think we should allow internal “free speech” and others wish to draw certain lines over which we won’t cross as a synagogue

Silos

Multiple groups noted that the congregation seems “siloes” or segmented. This issue is likely linked to the heterogeneity described above, but it’s also a function of programming. While it is understood that there can be a benefit to affinity groups and cohorts of like-interested individuals, feedback shows that there is a feeling that CBH partners tend to get enmeshed within these groups, thereby limiting their interest and ability to branch out beyond them. Contributors to these feelings may include programming that appeals to one interest group but not another. Moreover, we rarely see a true cross section of the partnership actively interacting among one another; those of us who do interact across group identities (particularly age and political bent) tend to be people who serve on committees and in leadership positions. When an event does draw a

multigenerational crowd (like Israel Independence Day), one can still observe very little social mixing of existing affinity groups.

Regardless of the cause, there were strong desires expressed for a more interconnected community with real, authentic opportunities for relationship-building across generations and social groups. Hence, we are looking for a creative rabbi who can support us in “de-siloing” our congregation.

Fresh Start

Most people acknowledged the generally positive and effective way Rabbi Greg has handled this difficult job. On the whole, partners seem incredibly grateful for all that he has offered to the CBH community over the years. He is respected and appreciated. At the same time, most groups either stated or implied a feeling of optimism when envisioning a fresh start.

Rabbi Search:

The following is a list of words/phrases and characteristics that were mentioned repeatedly during the Listening Sessions:

- mensch (know people’s names, reach out, exude warmth, be equipped to handle traumatic life events)
- listener
- communicator
- inward facing (tending to CBH congregants)
- outward facing (“face of the Jewish community” to the larger regional area)
- musical
- inspiring (able to foster leadership from within and encourage others to lead)
- youth-oriented (able to engage young people in respectful and meaningful ways)
- scholar (able to fulfill people’s intellectual needs)
- relevant (able to fulfill people’s spiritual needs)
- a part-time rabbi (and then allocating financial resources to other paid professionals to supplement the work of the rabbi)
- co-rabbis with different skill sets (perhaps one more outward facing and one more inward facing, or one who is more of a scholar and one who is more of a clergyperson)
- different Jewish denominations beyond Reform (Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal)
- a specifically female rabbi (multiple instances of this desire)
- a rabbi as community leader in Davis community
- a rabbi who is comfortable with fundraising (and other practicalities beyond the pulpit)

Additional Notes & Open Questions

In addition to what has been shared above, there were a few notes and questions that stood out. While they are not tied to a specific RPT theme, they came up enough that we believe it is essential to consider them as we move forward and outline our strategic priorities.

- What “makes” the synagogue? Is it the person in the rabbi’s role? Lay leaders and volunteers? Congregants? Or is it the campus as a designated physical space?
- Words that are subjective get used as if there is one clear definition. Examples include:
 - “Engagement” — Does that mean showing up at events? Does it mean showing up at specific events (e.g., services)? Does it mean paying partner dues (financial)? Does it mean volunteering? And do people want to feel more engaged themselves or do they want others to be more engaged?
 - “Welcoming” — Different people feel welcomed in different ways. One person’s welcome (lots of people coming up to them, name tags, being called up for an aliyah) could be another person’s nightmare.
 - “Core values” — Some wish to shift our thinking away from “making everyone happy” to actually taking a moral stand on political issues, while others say we should be a home for all Jews of any belief (a notion that may preclude taking moral stands as an organization).
 - “Goals” — Is the goal quantity (number of partners) or quality of engagement? Do we want more breadth (increased participation) or greater depth (deeper involvement)?
- Several groups talked about opportunities around the way in which we communicate at CBH.
 - There are a lot of emails that go out and it can be easy to miss updates and important information. Some people simply don’t read the “E-tone” so it’s hard to reach them that way.
 - We also heard that the website is difficult to navigate (perhaps because of the relatively new website that doesn’t function exactly the way the previous one did).
 - Many people were really excited about the format of the Community Conversations and Listening Sessions. It seemed to create a feeling of connection and a sense of deeper investment. Several people asked that we do this annually, or at least somewhat regularly.

Next Steps

The Strategic Planning Team will next take a deeper dive into the Listening Sessions notes in order to extract key themes for the nascent Strategic Planning Process. We will use these themes as catalysts for making CBH’s organizational goals explicit and to articulate strategies for achieving them.