

Want Your Congregation to Be Relevant and Effective? Start With Why

By Amy Asin, 1/17/2017 |        



Today, more than ever, congregations that wish to remain relevant and effective centers of Jewish living must articulate their “why” – the reason they exist and the reason people should invest time and energy in them. Unlike in past generations, when regular deliveries of congregants and funding driven by a sense of obligation were the norm, congregations today need to express in their why exactly what the community has set out to achieve – and what that means for congregants and prospective congregants.

When congregations lose track of their why (often incorporated in a mission statement), they tend to focus only on surviving. Perhaps worst of all, they frequently use membership and money – metrics focused on survival – as the sole measure of success. Revisiting and reassessing their why gives congregations an opportunity to use it as a measure of success and to make membership compelling to congregants and potential congregants.



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As part of the [URJ Scheidt Seminar for Congregational Presidents and Presidents-Elect](#), we have been studying mission statements for several years; a clear majority fall into one of two categories.

1. Congregations that “exist for the sake of existing” often have mission statements that indicate that they “serve the Jews of the Springfield Valley – in this case, a hypothetical place – offering them a place to practice Judaism and be in Jewish community.”
2. Congregations that “exist to provide programming” often have mission statements that indicate that they “serve members by offering religious education, worship, community, and social justice opportunities.”

Unfortunately, in today’s world, neither type of statement is sufficient.

Let’s return to the hypothetical Springfield Valley to see why.

As the region’s Jews age and fade from active communal involvement, many in the up-and-coming generation question why Springfield needs a congregation at all. In today’s pluralistic, universalistic world, unlike those in the generations that preceded them, they are less likely to value communal life built on a particularistic base nor are they as likely to believe that Jewish education is necessary to be a good person. Congregations whose why focuses on providing Jewish community, programming, and education, therefore, will not resonate with these individuals or families.

Congregational life needs a new why, and it is up to synagogue leaders to adjust and refocus their communities’ existing why so congregations grow and thrive.



Indeed, new mission statements – inspired by the formula offered by [Simon Sinek in his TED Talk](#) – are starting to appear. Because their words – and the actions that follow – start with why, they resonate with today’s Jews, compelling them to become part of the Jewish community. When taken seriously, such mission statements have tremendous power to transform Jewish life. And they are deeply rooted in our tradition.

Imagine, for example, the potential in your community if prospective congregants heard words and saw supporting actions like these offered by the hypothetical Congregation Beit Torah in Springfield:

“ Congregation Beit Torah offers a community in which to aspire to *tikkun ha-nefesh* (repair of the self) and *tikkun ha-olam* (repair of the world).

In the rapidly changing, dizzying world here in the Springfield Valley, sometimes it’s hard to find an anchor or know where to invest ourselves. At Congregation Beit Torah, we seek to help you find meaning in this world so you can be the best version of yourself possible, using the wisdom of our past to help you make sense of your present and prepare you and your family for the future. We offer you a place to bring your mourning and pain, and a community in which to celebrate your greatest joys. We work with you to find a meaningful role in the ongoing project to repair the world, ensuring that more people can live lives of wholeness, justice, and compassion. How do we do this? We help you find *your* place – the part of Jewish life that resonates most for you. We believe that Torah, *avodah* (prayer), and *g’milut chasadim* (deeds of lovingkindness) offer effective pathways to the solace and support you seek for yourself and the agency you hope to have to make the world a better place. Please join us on this journey, enriching our lives as we seek to enrich yours.

By starting with a why that truly matters to congregants and prospective congregants, and is deeply rooted in our heritage as Reform Jews, today’s congregations – whether the hypothetical Congregation Beit Torah or your own synagogue community – can put themselves on a path to strength and success.

"Start with Why" is the [first of eight principles](#) congregations are encouraged to adopt to remain relevant, effective, and thriving – now and for future generations.



URJ's Ultimate Goal: More people live lives filled with wholeness, justice, and compassion

Our Theory: We will bring about more wholeness, justice, and compassion if more people are connected to a Reform Jewish community and those communities are connected in a network that strengthens them and gives them access to resources that they could not have on their own.

Because: In those communities there is deeper Jewish learning (worship), inspiration (worship), and action (social justice), and support (community) to make each person better, and the world a better place.

The old reasons for children's education/congregations:

1940's and before: Because we have to stick together and this is what we do

1950's-1980's: Because we need a posthumous victory

Next: To stamp us with an identity – bar or bat mitzvah

Newer: To have Jewish friends and Jewish values

The educators' perspective:

- Build connection to people, place and Judaism
- Build competence and confidence
- Contribute to Jewish lives
- Empower learners to contribute to Jewish community

To parents – an educational why for now???: the likelihood that your children will grow up experiencing wholeness, compassion, and justice, and contributing to a world where those exist to a greater degree, and that you also have that for yourself is increased by being part of a Jewish community. And our education programs prepare you for, induct you into, and envelop you in such a community. (Professor Larry Hoffman: Jewish education is the process of entering into a 5,000 year old conversation)

The why for the congregation, the education programs, and the participants need to be at least in conversation with each other if not closely aligned.

