

QUOTABLE The Blogs

“Every Yom Kippur, congregations all over the world read the Book of Jonah, as set out for us in the Babylonian Talmud. Most people believe this *haftarah* is chosen because it models complete repentance: From the king to each individual, by decree, everyone fasted and turned from evil ways....

Yet, the book is named for Jonah, the only prophet to be chosen to warn a people outside of Israel of their impending destruction by God for their evil ways. Jonah decides not to accept what he believes is an impossible mission. Eventually, he realizes that it is futile to run and impossible to hide. Ultimately, he fulfills God’s mission to warn the people of Nineveh. But, once his job is done, Jonah is still a very unhappy prophet.

I believe that we read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon to remind us that *sometimes we are Jonah*. We have times when the responsibility of the world is thrust upon our shoulders and we have times when we feel very much alone....

The biblical text tells us that Jonah was in the whale (literally, *dag gadol*, “a big fish”) for three days (Jonah 2:1).... Jonah wasn’t doing “nothing” for three days and three nights. I believe he was reflecting and examining his thoughts and actions. With time to think, Jonah was forced to confront his fears, his loneliness, his mistakes, and his God. We are Jonah, doing exactly the same thing for our sacred Days of Awe....

Yom Kippur is the day for At-One-Ment, to be with yourself emotionally and spiritually. It is a time to confront fears and failures, pain and loneliness. Jonah had to realize that he was not being sent to Nineveh alone, without God. And we are not being sent into a new year alone.”

—Rabbi Amy R. Perlin, on rj.org

ACTION A Vision for Your Synagogue

➔ Proverbs 29:18 teaches us that “When there is no vision, the people perish.” Life coach Anthony Robbins counsels that “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” How can congregations steer clear of these pitfalls, moving forward in concert with their members’ needs and aspirations? One effective way is through strategic visioning.



STUDENTS AT THE THRIVING EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING CENTER WHICH TEMPLE BRITH ACHIM, KING OF PRUSSIA, PA ESTABLISHED AFTER ENGAGING IN VISIONING.

of our congregation—hearing about different facets of temple life that they might not have paid attention to before nor realized were important to other people: things like our Saturday morning service and Torah study group, our classes on understanding the prayer book, and our social events focused around one constituency like our Early Childhood Center families. They’re grateful that somebody asked them what

What, you may ask, is visioning? Judith Erger (photo #1), the Union for Reform Judaism’s governance, leadership development, and architecture specialist, defines it as “a creative process of thinking large, defining what is unique and beloved about the synagogue, and articulating core Jewish values and hopes. Visionary leaders think beyond the present realities to dream in color about a different or brighter future for the congregation.”

The visioning process itself can become a means of community building and bonding, form touchstones for congregational decision making, and offer individual members new entrees into active synagogue life.

Consider these examples:

- In Westport, Connecticut, the entire membership of Temple Israel (tiwestport.org) is being tapped to engage in a strategic planning process “to understand who we are as a congregation, who we want to be...and to transform ourselves into a visionary congregation that is better prepared to meet the needs of 21st century American Reform Jews,” says temple president Diana Muller (photo #2). “Some 275 people are participating in focus groups and feeling a renewed energy for being part

they want from their synagogue, and they are learning from each others’ stories.” Socializing time has been built into every focus group, enabling members to catch up on one another’s lives. Muller says that the process is “translating into a renewed ‘investment’ in what it means to be a member of our congregation. Attendance is up at nearly every Shabbat service and event. We’ve reinforced this positive energy by making immediate, small, noncontroversial, but significant changes, such as including an educational piece at our worship services that will be mailed to the membership later on so people can learn on their own time; and adding a social component to every congregational program so that members and clergy can connect informally. Calls and letters thanking us are coming in! The real strategic plan will take longer to develop, but these changes symbolize how serious we are to build a new culture.”

- At Beth Haverim Shir Shalom in Mahwah, New Jersey (bethhaverim.org), a 2004 mission statement, which grew out of the congregation’s visioning process, is often revisited when decisions need to be made, such as at budget time and with regard to leadership. Rabbi Joel Mosbacher (photo #3) calls it “a