

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism - Hayom
Strategic Planning Commission

VeAsu Li Mikdash* :
A Strategic Plan for the
New United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

Prepared by

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* "And let them make Me a sanctuary..." (Exodus 25:8)

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Transmittal Letter

Dear Friends,

We are pleased to submit the enclosed strategic plan for consideration and adoption by the Board of Directors of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and for consideration by the members of Hayom. The Plan was approved unanimously by the USCJ-Hayom Planning Commission at its final meeting on March 4th.

A draft of this document was created as a result of extensive deliberations of the USCJ-Hayom Strategic Planning Commission and was supported by research, analysis, and consultations by the UAI team led by Dr. Jacob Ukeles and Prof. Steven M. Cohen. The draft has been refined and revised in light of extensive input from stakeholders over the last month -- more than 500 emails and nearly 1,000 face-to-face contacts in meetings, online Webinars and focus groups. Through this process many voices were heard. Of course, this is a consensus document deliberated on by a commission, thus all suggestions for change in language or content were subject to discussion and review and not all were eventually adopted and passed by the group.

Some participants in this review process suggested that the new language of "kehilla" is confusing or opaque. Of course, most members of the USCJ will continue to refer to themselves as congregations or synagogues. The Plan recognizes this, but it is important that we constantly remind ourselves of what synagogues are – that is, Jewish sacred communities, and that we welcome less formal Jewish sacred communities such as chavurot or minyanim as well as the more established form of sacred community – the synagogue.

As described in the document, we, the Commission, feel that Conservative Judaism in North America is at a crossroads. We must focus serious effort on strengthening and transforming the synagogue, which is the primary institution of our communal Jewish life.

We should be clear that this is a strategic plan for a new USCJ. It is not a plan for Conservative Judaism or the other leading organizations and bodies identified with Conservative Judaism. At the same time, we believe it is impossible to separate the future of USCJ from the future of Conservative Judaism. To be successful, USCJ needs to forge a powerful strategic alliance with the other leading centers of Conservative Judaism in North America.

Please keep in mind that the purpose of this plan is to create a framework for a new USCJ. While it proposes an overall strategy and direction, it is not meant to provide the specifics. A document like this sets goals and describes parameters within which an organization should function. We envision an aggressive implementation process, starting immediately as soon as the plan is approved and lasting from two to three years.

We close by thanking all the members of the Commission and the consultants for their extraordinary dedication and commitment to this process. We began many months ago with a goal in mind but no sense of the path we would take to reach it. As the process evolved the group found the means to grow together to articulate what you have before you. We also want to thank everyone who made the effort to engage in the review of the draft plan. The input we received was extremely valuable in creating the best possible plan for USCJ.

Dr. Jacob Finkelstein

Rabbi Ed Feinstein

Co-Chairs, USCJ-Hayom Strategic Planning Committee

Executive Summary

Note: Readers are advised to read either the executive summary or the strategic plan. The executive summary includes a summary of the introduction to the plan, the USCJ vision and mission statement, and a list of the 20 recommendations in the plan.

The Case for a New United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

Two critical considerations undergird the case for a new USCJ: the necessity of a vital Conservative Judaism in North America and the importance of having Conservative congregations that are both inspiring and well-functioning.

Conservative Judaism

For nearly a century, United Synagogue has been one of the organizations leading Conservative Judaism. Conservative Judaism is the essential anchor of the vital religious center of North American Jewry. In the coming years, this vital religious center can become stronger and more vibrant, serving as the fulcrum of Jewish life in North America. Alternatively, it can decline and fade away, with its people shifting to the left or to the right in an increasingly bifurcated North American Jewish world.

Conservative Judaism faces a number of well-documented challenges that must be overcome. These include an aging constituency, long-term decline in numbers of self-identified Conservative Jews, and decrease in denominational identification by some talented and innovative young Jewish leaders.

Conservative Congregations

Congregations remain the single most important institutional focus of Jewish life in North America. Even with declining membership, more Jews in North America belong to congregations than to any other form of Jewish institution or organization.

A strong and vibrant religious center for North American Jewry requires strong and vibrant Conservative congregations. Conservative congregations have to overcome financial stress, declining and aging membership, a narrow leadership base, weak denominational commitment, and a loss of meaning for many younger people.

The USCJ can and must play a pivotal role in realizing the potential of Conservative congregations and overcoming these challenges.

There has been growing ambivalence about continued membership in USCJ in congregations of every size and in every region. At a time when they are cutting their own congregational budgets and clergy's salaries, few leaders express enthusiasm for paying dues to an organization that they feel is not delivering.

The USCJ recognizes its responsibility to transform itself into a true partner for all Conservative congregations, as they strive to be exciting and compelling places of meaning and purpose for North American Jews, invigorating the appeal of Conservative Judaism to the younger generation, and articulating a clear and compelling message.

This is the moment of truth for USCJ. In many ways this plan is about seizing the moment.

The Vision

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism is a community of kehillot -- sacred communities -- committed to a dynamic Judaism that is learned and passionate, authentic and pluralistic, joyful and accessible, egalitarian or traditional.

Our kehillot create the conditions for a powerful and vibrant Jewish life, empowering Jews in North America to seek the presence of God, to seek meaning and purpose in Torah and mitzvot, to fully engage with Israel, and to be inspired by Judaism to improve the world and the Jewish people.

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism creates the spiritual, intellectual and managerial network that enables each of our kehillot to fulfill its sacred mission and connects all our kehillot with a common sense of community, shared mission and purpose. Together with other centers of energy identified with Conservative Judaism, we articulate and disseminate our approach to Judaism.

The Mission

- To transform and strengthen our kehillot in their effort to:
 - inspire meaningful prayer
 - sustain a culture of lifelong Jewish learning
 - nurture religious and spiritual growth
 - promote excellence in kehilla leadership
- To ensure educational excellence true to the vision of Conservative Judaism for children and adults in our kehillot
- To engage the next generation of kehilla leadership.
- To encourage and build new kehillot.

The Language of “Kehilla”

The change in language from “synagogue” or “congregation” to “kehilla” is more than semantic. It reflects two concepts: First, it focuses on the *raison d’être* of a congregation or synagogue, i.e., that it is a sacred community. Second, it signals a welcome to those kehillot that are not formal synagogues – such as chavurot and independent minyanim.

North America: Challenge and Opportunity

It is recognized explicitly that USCJ brings together Jews from two different countries in North America -- Canada and the United States. They have different histories, cultures and systems of government. USCJ will reflect these differences in its governance, operations, communications and publicity.

Recommendations

This plan includes four strategies to create the new United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism:

- **Focus on core functions**
- **Build new models of membership, participation, leadership and governance**
- **Create an effective and integrated regional presence**
- **Expand and redeploy financial resources**

1.0 United Synagogue should concentrate its energy -- programs, staff and resources -- on performing three functions:

- **Strengthening and transforming existing kehillot**
- **Creating and supporting an integrated, collaborative educational system for children in kehillot**
- **Seeding and nurturing new kehillot and engaging the next generation of kehilla leadership.**

2.0 The USCJ should embark on a significant effort to help kehillot, sacred communities, reinvent themselves for the 21st century. USCJ's first priority is to partner with kehillot in their striving for excellence, encouraging them to challenge themselves in a continuous process of self-improvement. The goal of this effort is to build community -- to cultivate effective change-oriented leadership and to provide engaging prayer, adult learning, adult spiritual development and meaningful programs. USCJ will provide kehillot with programmatic and managerial resources to help expand membership, increase participation, create a welcoming environment, cut costs, increase revenue and operate efficiently.

3.0 USCJ should lead a collaborative effort to create a unified vision for Jewish education and to build an integrated system of experiential and formal education from preschool through high school. The effort should be undertaken in partnership with other institutions and organizations committed to Conservative Judaism. The goal is to provide young people, from birth through adolescence, with the opportunity to develop the motivation and capacity to lead committed Jewish lives.

4.0 USCJ should seed and nurture new kehillot and engage the next generation of kehilla leadership.

USCJ has an extraordinary opportunity to extend the reach of the core ideas of Conservative Judaism to new geographic areas, and to partner with those in the next generation who share the vision. The landscape of North American Jewry is constantly shifting, and USCJ needs to be in the forefront with efforts to create new places of sacred purpose and compelling meaning.

5.0 USCJ should undertake a serious review of all current continental and district programs to see which should be continued, which need to be restructured to be mission-congruent, and which need to be eliminated. Existing services and programs that do not directly support a core function should be restructured so that they do support a core function, should be phased out, or should be transferred to another auspice. In particular, continent-wide freestanding USCJ programs should be integrated into kehilla strengthening and transformation, even if this means a loss of USCJ program identity.

6.0 USCJ should appoint an independent blue-ribbon commission to undertake a complete strategic review of the Fuchsberg Center in Israel, including its relationship to USCJ, Masorti and Masorti Olami.

7.0 USCJ needs a new name that aligns with the new vision and mission and that reflects the new focus on kehillot. Along with the change in vision, mission, and strategic priorities, a name change is imperative to signal the new day that is envisioned for the organization and its important role in support of Conservative Judaism. It is recommended that a committee be formed to tap branding expertise to develop the new name.

8.0 The members of USCJ should be kehillot, i.e., sacred communities. All self-defined kehillot should be eligible for membership, provided that they:

- Explicitly endorse the vision of Judaism expressed in USCJ's vision statement.**
- Emphasize prayer, learning and religious and spiritual growth**

- **Accept the standards of rabbinic practice of the Rabbinical Assembly.**

- 9.0** Everyone performing a relevant leadership role should be invited to participate in USCJ's activities, to represent their kehillot, and to take leadership roles in USCJ. This category includes lay leaders (including leaders of men's clubs and sisterhoods), rabbis, cantors, experiential and formal educators, and administrators.
- 10.0** USCJ's leaders should be philanthropic investors, thought leaders, or organizational leaders, each of whom would be expected to share USCJ's vision of Judaism.
- 11.0** USCJ's governance should include the General Assembly, the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee.
- 12.0** USCJ needs to be a single organization with a clear and consistent continent-wide identity. It should create an effective balance between the district perspective – which reflects important cultural differences among different regions of North America - and the continental perspective.
- 13.0** District field professionals should be connectors and relationship builders. The lead district professional should be a “district relationship manager” The core competence of field professionals is in networking -- connecting kehillot to each other, connecting kehillot to local resources, and connecting kehillot to USCJ's continental headquarters. Their goal is to help kehillot in their search for excellence, and they will be equipped with the models and tools identified or developed by USCJ.
- 14.0** Each district should have a District Council, consisting of a representative of each kehilla in the geographic area, plus the kehilla representative in the continental General Assembly. The Council's responsibilities should mirror that of the continental General Assembly on the district level.
- 15.0** Each district should have a district budget, which will be developed by the District Council and the district relationship manager. This budget is to fund those program activities that are specific to the district, using resources allocated from the overall USCJ budget and including funds local donors have designated for use in that district.
- 16.0** USCJ should focus revenue expansion on financial resource development (FRD). The key to expanding FRD is developing a board

that includes significant philanthropic leadership. A second major priority should be cultivating and engaging prospective major philanthropic investors, including both foundations and individuals.

- 17.0 USCJ should change its dues formula and reduce synagogue dues as soon as possible. USCJ should commit to not increasing dues for the next three years, and should reduce dues as philanthropic resources expand.**
- 18.0 USCJ should explore the possibility of developing profit centers, focusing on products and services above and beyond the membership package.**
- 19.0 USCJ should reallocate resources to core programs.**
- 20.0 USCJ should invest in improving financial management.**