

The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism  
Committee on Congregational Standards  
*in cooperation with*  
The Rabbinical Assembly

# PUTTING THE PARTNERSHIP UNDER THE MICROSCOPE:

*The Process of Review & Assessment of a  
Congregation's Professionals and Leadership*

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UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM COMMITTEE ON  
CONGREGATIONAL STANDARDS  
*in cooperation with the*  
RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY

REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF  
CONGREGATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF LEADERSHIP

The Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism jointly believe that one of the most important responsibilities of a Board of Directors or Trustees is to continually and methodically assess the progress and quality of the synagogue it leads. This process inevitably includes an appraisal of the goals and achievements of those who serve in leadership positions of the congregation as well as all of the important stakeholders who contribute to its mission. The assessment process, properly conducted should strengthen the congregation. The mutual examination of the synagogue's goals and the extent to which they are being achieved by both the rabbinical and lay leadership leads to a realization of what has been accomplished as well as what new goals and directions need to be set to better serve the congregation.

The underlining principle of mutual assessment is the assumption that there is a sacred partnership between the Rabbi and the lay leadership to create a stable and vibrant synagogue. A *midrash* taken from *Numbers Rabbah* dramatically makes this point.

"He buildeth firmly His upper chambers in the heaven, after He hath set up His cluster on earth" (Amos 9:6) The verse may be explained by the parable of a palace built on pontoons. As long as the pontoons are joined together, the palace on them stands firm. Likewise-if one dare speak thus-His throne stands firm above when Israel are joined in one cluster [below]."

-*Numbers Rabbah* 15:18

In the original, the palace is the seat of the divine and the pontoons the people of Israel. Using this analogy, the palace is now the synagogue; situated on top of a set of pontoons-one representing the lay leadership and the other the Rabbi. A stable synagogue must be under girded by both sets of pontoons-strong lay leadership and a strong rabbinate. All parties must be working in consort or the palace will be lopsided. The foundation of the palace is flexible, adjustable and can react quickly to situational changes. The clergy and the board must make adjustments to the current situation and to each other. The purpose of the model is not just utilitarian or mundane but to create a process an environment, and a synagogue where God's Divine presence win delight to dwell.

\* This document was written by representatives of USCJ Committee on Standards and the Rabbinical Assembly. As such, it was written specifically focusing of the rabbi. However, the basic process can and should be used with other synagogue professionals. Instruments specifically designed for the other professionals will be developed within the next 18 months. In the meantime synagogues are urged to modify the present procedure and instruments in assessing other professionals.

## A RELIGIOUS PARTNERSHIP

The Rabbinical Assembly and the USCJ holds that Congregational Review/Assessment is good for all. We have a similar vision of how a congregation functions. *It is a partnership of laity and staff.* The success of the congregation depends upon this partnership. The board is the executive authority and the rabbi is the religious authority. What we really have is a religious partnership. Because we have a religious partnership, the rabbinic review cannot stand alone. Both partners, the Rabbi and the Board need and benefit from a comprehensive ongoing regular assessment.

The key question is, "How is the synagogue progressing?" This involves an understanding of the function and role of the rabbi, cantor, educational director and executive director and other key staff individuals, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the lay structures which work to enhance and support the efforts of the professional staff. Therefore, professional assessments should be done in the context of congregational assessments.

Focusing on the Rabbinic Assessment should be a helpful, systemic tool that strengthens the, rabbi-congregation relationship. It is a critical and useful tool because it makes the professional accountable to the synagogue or other religious institution for his or her actions. Open, direct and honest discussions between the rabbi and lay leaders that go to the heart of their relationship and to the congregational system itself are challenging but indispensable for a healthy relationship. In addition, a systemic synagogue assessment should examine how the leaders, board, officers, committees and other staff are interacting and together fulfilling the objectives of the congregation. Volunteers must be accountable for responsibilities, which they accept. It is important for the success of any institution that volunteers understand what is expected of them: their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the review of the congregation as a whole and the rabbi is a continual process, which occurs in a coordinated planned fashion, Feedback processes and action plans based upon the information yielded by the assessment are integral facets of the effort.

## RABBINIC ASSESSMENT

The most immediate purpose of a rabbinic assessment should be to strengthen the work of the rabbi. A review is not a means to discipline a professional who needs improvement or change. A review should focus more on strengths and successes than on shortcomings and disappointments. The assessment is not a technique to fulfill a synagogue by-law obligation or to assign blame. The purpose of a professional review is for improvement and growth. An assessment is an occasion for self-reflection and guided conversation directed toward helping the individual to enhance his or her professional performance. If the relationship is already in difficulty, it is certainly not the time to do a professional review. A review should not be tied to a new contract or compensation review. On these occasions the power differential is too great and it blocks honest reflection on the part of the professional. If compensation is on the line, the rabbi will be more defensive than candid. If an assessment is done objectively, the professional should feel better about his / her work and the congregation should feel better about their rabbi's effort and achievement. Unfortunately, thus far "evaluation" in the synagogue and Jewish organizational world has a negative reputation. When a rabbi hears the words "congregational personnel survey" or "evaluation," the notion often stirs up great uneasiness and discomfort. Rabbis and other synagogue professionals often fear that reviews will descend into painful critiques of their leadership and may be used to orchestrate their departure. Indeed, many clergy have

been wounded by careless comments or by the sheer magnitude of negative feedback. These fears are regrettably too often founded in reality. There are many cases when an evaluation has been used as a weapon against the rabbi. See *Appendix D* for a short essay to guide the synagogue committees on how to avoid the most detrimental traps in a rabbinic review.

Even though we recommend that the evaluation occur in the context of reviewing the whole congregation, we recognize that many times only the professional staff person is reviewed. All too often this evaluation is used as a weapon against the person. Awareness of the limitations and possible minefields in any evaluation process may help us to consider carefully when and how to engage in such reflection.

Vulnerability is a primary reason for the professional's unhappiness with a review, and this contributes to the stress and anxiety that permeates most personnel review processes. The ability to manage and learn from sensitive and often difficult conversations is a sign of a healthy relationship between a rabbi and a congregation and its leaders. A well-done review of the rabbinic professional provides a continuous loop in which successes are celebrated, mistakes identified, progress noted, priorities reviewed and problems resolved, enabling the rabbi to grow and develop. Again, the rabbis of the Conservative movement expect an annual review and see it as a professional responsibility. At the same time it is expected that they be respected for their work and honored for their unique role in the spiritual life of the congregation.

Here is a brief summary of some guiding principles for a rabbinic assessment:

#### **Guiding Principles for Assessment**

1. Initiate and define assessment as a function of clergy leadership and set an agenda for your own learning.
2. The assessment process must be jointly "owned" by the congregation and the clergy leader(s). State clearly the **purpose** of the review.
3. Remember the review is learning. Determine what you and others hope will be learned from the process.
4. Determine what is and is not to be reviewed. **Identify** information to be gathered and how it will be used. Be **sensitive** to the need for appropriate confidentiality.
5. Assessment is an essential element in congregational transformation. Make use of the data gathered to **reflect** on ways to advance the mission.
6. Normalize review as a function of leadership. **Organize** to create pathways for learning. **Contextualize the assessment** to the clergy's vision and mission of the congregation.
7. Be alert for how the results of the review suggest new norms for clergy leadership and congregational life. Affirm and **celebrate** accomplishments.
8. Expect assessment to introduce possible **change**. Discuss openly how change will be considered and how decisions will be made about proposed changes.
9. Explore how you will **connect** the review process to both the personal and corporate faith experience.
10. Consider using an outside resource person to **facilitate** the process, especially if assessment is new territory for the congregation or rabbi.

Quoted from *A Pathway Learning* by John Janka, *Congregations*. March/April 2002

## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Our movement takes review seriously. Review creates a professional atmosphere and promotes accountability. We see four steps:

1. an assessment of the congregation as a whole and its mission;
2. rabbinic self-evaluation and
3. leadership's assessment of the rabbi and
4. feedback to both the rabbi and lay leadership.

Creating an assessment committee is a key to success. We recommend a three to five person committee selected jointly by the President and Rabbi. . Someone mutually agreeable to both the Board and Rabbi needs to have this role as well as chairing the feedback and planning meeting. This role could be served by a person either inside or outside the congregation but must be someone who is trusted by all for example, a respected past president.

The first step is for the Board and the professionals together to determine what the synagogue's goals and objectives are and then at a later date review whether the synagogue's goals and objectives have been achieved. As part of this process we need to assess where we are now. What have the goals been? What are they to be? What has the overall management and governance of the congregation achieved? Board members must take an honest and hard look at themselves: how do committees function; how do these bodies relate to the rabbi and to the other members of the synagogue's staff: are the rabbi's and Board's view similar; or are there differences which must be talked through and bridged. Rabbi's view of the Board's functioning should be a part of this assessment.

"Progress Assessment" (Appendix A) is a draft of a possible synagogue assessment tool. Synagogues should regularly and carefully set and review their goals, their mission and their work. Congregations enter into a process of self-assessment in order to strengthen their collaborative work with the key synagogue professionals, especially with the rabbi.

The second step is a self-assessment by the rabbi. It is an important ingredient in the review process because it gives both the rabbi and the Board a picture of the way the rabbi sees his or her position. (See Appendix B for a sample professional staff self-assessment. This document can be used by all professional staff.) The rabbi should share this document regularly with the synagogue lay leadership. It is always helpful to compare the rabbi's self-assessment with the assessment of the leadership. Where are the common points? Where are the gaps?

The third step involves understanding and assessing the rabbi's efforts, work and skills. Assessment is not achieved through a mechanical checklist, but rather focusing on questions similar to those asked of the Board. What have been the rabbi's goals this past year; what has been achieved; what remains undone? It is understood that as part of this assessment, the personality and interpersonal skills and relationships, which the rabbi brings to the congregation need to be appraised with great care and sensitivity. Both context as well as results, count in this assessment. And, of course, we need to look at past, present and future. See Appendix C for some model questions for a rabbinic review by the lay leadership.

The final step involves feedback and planning. The Rabbi and assessment committee meet together to review the results and answer the question where do we go from here? Prior to this session there must be coordination of all sources of information and the information gathered needs to be summarized. This feedback session needs to take place as soon as possible after the completion of the third step. Delay in summarizing the information and scheduling the feedback and planning meeting, dilutes the process and endangers the process.

This session consists of first reviewing the results in terms of the goals which have been articulated in step one, which goals have we met, which ones are we on the right track and where do we need to improve. Then the assessment committee and Rabbi need to set goals for the future and the steps needed to achieve these goals and they should then present them to the synagogue board.

The first time the process is implemented will probably take at least three months, given the difficulty of scheduling meetings and the departure from previous assessments. Once the process is in place the assessment should be completed in a month.

**It is imperative that the content the discussions be kept confidential; however the results in terms of congregational goals and steps to reach the goals should be distributed to the congregation.**

In addition, the assessment committee needs to have the responsibility for monitoring the long-term results of the review. Records need to be kept of the decisions made and these needs to be reviewed annually. This is especially crucial given the regular changes in synagogue lay leadership. We would also recommend that there be both stability and change in the review committee. People could have three year staggered terms.

Finally, but crucially, before attempting the process both the Board and rabbi need to be oriented and trained in the process.

### **PRUDENT REMINDERS**

It is prudent to begin by creating some guidelines that the rabbi and leadership should agree upon before a review begins. Some of these comments are obvious; nevertheless they should be mentioned.

1. Given its complicated nature and sensitivity, the review must be initiated with suitable foresight and timely planning. No surprises! The rabbi is a partner in the process and the co-creator of the course of action.
2. The review process must be communicated directly and openly to the rabbi.
3. The process must be bought into mutually by the rabbi and the Board. The rabbi should feel free to reject or renegotiate a poorly conceived or ill-timed review.
4. State the positives loudly and clearly. It is common that congregations dwell on the negative about themselves and their rabbi.
5. A review records patterns and not potshots. It is the recurring behaviors and actions that are worthy of discussion. One-time events or simple mistakes do not merit consideration.
6. Anonymous information should not be considered; if a congregant has an issue with the Rabbi or president, the congregant should be directed to discuss the issue with that individual.
7. Reject broad-based congregational surveys since they emphasize the negative and often make the marginal seem disproportionately important to the work of the rabbi.

8. Plan for suitable celebrations and recognition when significant milestones are achieved.
9. Confidentiality is always required (See Appendix D).

### **THE PAYOFF**

There is much to be gained by conducting regularly scheduled mutual assessments. First, new realizations will emerge. What are we doing better than we thought? Where do we need improvement? Second, new goals and directions can be established. What are the emerging needs of our congregation? What does our community need? What activities need to be brought to conclusion in order to make room for the unfolding areas of future work?

### **SUMMARY**

We must always be mindful of the impact of a review. It is often reported to the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly leadership how a poorly done review has an adverse effect on the performance of the rabbi. Because the review is perceived to be done poorly or is done unfairly or insensitively, it has the opposite outcome than expected. A poorly conceived or executed review can lead to decline in the professional's performance and morale. A poorly done review can drive out hard to replace or valuable personnel from the synagogue.

We continue to offer different assessment models because we do not find a single preferred or perfect mode to fully recommend. However, we provide a model for your review and use, which we believe, can be helpful to all involved.

Please feel free to be in touch with us!

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**APPENDIX A**  
Progress Assessment

A) A simple process to begin a formalized review, suggested by James A. Cross, focuses on three basic questions. These questions should be asked of the Board, major committees and key staff. For each of these questions seek a minimum of five responses.

1. What should we preserve? (This starts the review on a positive note, affirming the good things, which are happening.)
2. What should we avoid? (This identifies problem areas and potential challenges that need remedial measures.)
3. What should we achieve? (This closes the review on a positive note, pointing to the future and its dreams.)

B) Then a more in-depth assessment should occur with more directed questions.

1. How are we doing as a synagogue or institution?
2. What are we most proud of?
3. What are our three greatest strengths and what are our three greatest weaknesses?
4. What were the three major objectives of the synagogue this past year and how well are these objectives being realized? Did we accomplish what we set out to do?
5. Is the Board a positive, negative or neutral force in achieving organizational goals?
6. Are the committees of the organization a positive, negative or neutral force in achieving organizational goals?
7. What specific actions and decision are necessary to clarify the proper role of the Board and/or key committees?
8. How have we grown and/or what have we learned in the past year?
9. What additional resources would have been helpful to make us even more effective?
10. What adjustments to the structure or practice of leadership might enable us to function more effectively? One thing to change is \_\_\_\_\_?
11. What are the two or three most critical objectives for us to achieve over the next year?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Rabbi Staff Self-Assessment**

1. What three accomplishments in the context of the synagogue's goals and mission stand out in your mind from your professional experience of the last year?
2. What three things do you appreciate about your synagogue and its accomplishments?
3. What are the three most important things that you learned about yourself and your work in the last year? What insights have been gained?
4. What three of your professional roles are most important to you?
5. Are there areas where you need to improve and what will you do about it?
6. What are your organizational and/or personal goals for the coming year and how do they fit with the synagogue's current goals and objectives?
7. What are your priorities for the coming year?
8. What external factors (outside of yourself), if any, interfere with your abilities to achieve your personal goals? Your organization's goals?
9. What specific decisions and actions are necessary to strengthen your professional role? What additional resources are needed to make you more effective in your work?

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For the Joint Placement Commission

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Assessment of the Rabbi**

1. What three accomplishments stand out in your mind about this professional?
2. What three skills, talents and knowledge does this professional demonstrate that fit in with your synagogue?
3. What are the most important things that this professional learned this year?
4. What three professional roles of this position are most important to the Board and the synagogue?
5. What three areas does this professional need to improve in? How will the congregation help the professional move in this direction?
6. What will the Board and synagogue do to help the professional grow, learn and improve?
7. How well did the synagogue's mission and goals fit in with the professional's accomplishments? What are the synagogue's overall mission and goals for the coming year that the professional needs to be aware of?
8. What should the professional's priorities be for the next year?
9. What synagogue actions, policies or factors interfere with the professional's abilities to achieve his/her professional and synagogue priorities?
10. What can the synagogue do to strengthen the professional's work and role? What additional resources are needed to support the professional?

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## APPENDIX D

### Evaluating Ministry

Some helpful thoughts adapted from an article, Evaluating Ministry, which appeared in the journal Congregations (March 1993) sponsored by the Alban Institute, a church consulting group.

#### **The Purpose of Evaluation**

"The purpose of evaluation is not to prove but to improve." This quote from the fly-leaf of the Phi Delta Kappa books states positively the goal of evaluation. Evaluation can be considered an ongoing process that strengthens a synagogue. It helps both professional staff and lay leadership in areas where things are working well, what may need more attention, and what can appropriately be "put to rest" as no longer needed.

#### **The Importance of Mutual Evaluation**

Excellence in a synagogue is not a one-person show. Even with vigorous and dynamic professional leadership, long-term excellence in a synagogue occurs only where the lay leadership is committed to the vision of what their congregation can be.

#### **Anticipated Outcomes of Evaluation**

There are two large payoffs for congregations and rabbis willing to engage in mutual assessment.

1. **New Realizations Will Emerge.** Whatever methods are used in the review process, surprises will surely occur. Areas of activity which have felt troubled or uncertain may yield the key to the puzzle. Dynamics of synagogue life that were thought to be going well may reveal areas of concern. What are we doing better than we thought? Where do we need improvement? There will be unexpected success and honest feedback. Even the long-standing successes may help us discover new insights.
2. **New Goals and Directions Can be Established.** The process of examining current synagogues activities can lead us to the development of new priorities. Where are the emerging needs of our congregation, and our community? This also involves weighing what needs to be lovingly brought to conclusion in order to make room for the unfolding areas of future ministry.

In summary: A rabbi and congregation who are willing to explore the effectiveness of synagogue together can expect mutual growth. Mutually reviewing goals and objectives can result in revitalizing and reenergizing professional staff and the congregation. Everyone wants to believe that what they are doing is worthwhile and making a difference. Regular review gives confidence that what everyone is striving for is a shared vision of the mission of the congregation in question.

#### **Tools Not Weapons!**

Even though we recommend that evaluation occur in the context of reviewing the whole congregation, we recognize that many times only the professional staff person is reviewed. All too often this evaluation is used as a weapon against the person. Awareness of the limitations and possible minefields in any evaluation process may help us to consider carefully when and how to engage in such reflection.

Evaluation that is seen as judgment for the purposes of reward and punishment will be doomed to failure. One of the greatest pitfalls for evaluation is tying the process to compensation issues. This puts the professional being evaluated into position of needing to "prove his / her worth," putting a best foot forward, or not revealing areas needing attention. The fear of losing salary or not receiving even a cost of living raise may interfere with the professional's honest examination of his or her effectiveness, create a defensive atmosphere, or worse, encourage the camouflaging or even misrepresentation of important congregational issues. It is the experience of many that when financial reward is coupled with evaluation, the review cannot be an opportunity for growth. Therefore, the way to avoid this pitfall is to keep these two important processes completely separate.

### **Ouch! Will the Truth Hurt?**

In an interview, Roy Oswald, senior consultant for The Alban Institute, indicated that the longer a professional is in a position the more difficult it is to obtain quality feedback. Since most long-tenured professionals are open, warm, and accessible, they are usually deeply loved. No one wants to "hurt" the professional, and so often people withhold constructive information that, in fact, could be valuable for the person's growth. Unfortunately, these "feeling" types also have greater difficulty accepting criticism - even that given in good faith. It takes only one episode when the professional's feelings were hurt to curb a congregation's willingness to share concerns.

The best way to avoid this pitfall is never to evaluate the professional without evaluating the entire synagogue. The professional who truly wants the feedback must say clearly that he or she needs this information in order to stay fresh and effective. Providing a supportive environment for learning congregant's perceptions of the strengths and areas needing improvement can also keep these lines of communication open. Finally, assuring the congregation that whatever information comes through the review will not be used for salary determination or to decide the future of the professional relationship can ease this concern.

We need to be aware that no one evaluation technique can do it all. There are drawbacks and shortcomings to every process. While a questionnaire with numerical ratings can reach a large number of people quickly it may produce only shallow information. Interviews may probe the depths of an area of ministry but are time consuming, reach few people, and yield information that may be difficult to correlate. An outside consultant brings expertise but may also bring biases. Being aware of the limitations of whatever procedures are used and, when possible, tailoring the process to the unique needs of a congregation can balance the assets of such techniques with the liabilities.

In summary: Procrastination never serves us!! Now is as good a time as any to get started. Anytime we begin to focus on human situation we find ourselves in an area of subjective opinions. Some things can be easily measured: Were four adult education classes taught? Other aspects are not so clearly assessed: Was he/she a good teacher? Did the congregation grow in the understanding of Torah?

Evaluations that are tied to compensation prohibit healthy assessment. All processes have strengths and limitations. People don't like to criticize loved professionals and are quick to decimate unloved ones! Evaluations are most helpful during times when things are going well, not when conflict looms large. Evaluating the professional along with that of the congregation minimizes the anxiety an evaluation creates. Staying aware of these potential pitfalls and determining how we will acknowledge them (or avoid them when possible) can improve the possibilities for a useful evaluation,