



PROGRAMMING NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR TEMPLE BETH AVODAH

A Summary of Focus Group Discussions
for the Board of Directors

September 2016

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Background

In the fall of 2014, Temple Beth Avodah administered an online congregational survey to help identify the programming needs of the community.

Members who completed the survey suggested soliciting ideas from congregants on programs and developing programs geared to specific demographics of the TBA community. In response to these suggestions, a series of focus groups were conducted in the winter of 2016 to better understand the range of programming needs across TBA's diverse congregation and inform future programming and strategic planning.

In February, congregants were randomly selected from the current membership list. From the list, 163 invitations were emailed to capture the following 7 groups: New members, Preschool families, Families with elementary or middle school age children, Families with high school or college age children, Men, Women and Seniors.

Participants

Of the 163 invitations sent, 30 people expressed interest in participating in a focus group. Given the demographics and availability of those congregants, four focus groups were created: Families with elementary & middle school aged children, men, women and seniors. In February and March 2016, 21 individuals participated in four 90-minute focus groups. There were 15 women and 6 men with membership ranging from new members to membership more than 20 years.

Each focus group ranged in size from 4-6 congregants and was led by an outside facilitator using predetermined questions to encompass general and group specific questions. The groups were audio recorded, transcribed, quotes identified and coded into themes.

Summary of findings

What follows is a summary of findings from these focus group discussions which is intended to shed light on and inform the programming needs of TBA congregants. For each question asked, a word cloud is presented using the words and themes identified from all the focus groups. The larger the text, the more frequent the word or theme was for the groups. Each word cloud is then followed by a selection of themes and quotes. To protect anonymity, quotes are identified by the group of origin: Family, Women, Men or Seniors.

What TBA events have you enjoyed the most?



Jazz Shabbat, 18 tables, High holidays and Shabbat Kulanu were the most widely reported as enjoyable but other events also resonated with members. These include:

-Community gatherings around tragic events

Men- *"I mentioned coming to the marathon bombing service. I can't say I enjoyed it, but it was meaningful. I felt like I and many other who were there needed some place for a little community for such a horrific event."*

-18 Tables

Seniors- *"I must admit I was nervous because I didn't know anyone who was going to be there and I wasn't sure because I had been at other things at the temple where the younger people are not that interested in talking to us. So I wasn't sure but it was a small group and it really worked."*

-Women of TBA

Family- *"Every time I'm available I go to the women's programs. I was shocked about how much I felt welcomed and liked when I walked in here. Because I don't like women's only programming generally."*

-Wise aging

Seniors- *"I feel like there are so many things we could be learning about together...being with our peers in the wise aging group and there were 15 of us and the age range went from 62 to 85 it's really quite wonderful. But there's something very special about being together like that, studying together."*

-Programming at TBA overall

Family – *"I'm very impressed by how much they have to offer. If I were to take advantage of all they had to offer I would have a very fulfilling time here...there's trips to Israel, there's trips to Europe, there's*

everything...It seems to me there's everything you could imagine. And maybe that's part of it, there's so much going on that I feel like it's a little hard to swift through and figure out what can actually fit."

What TBA events have you enjoyed least?



Members typically had trouble identifying things they didn't enjoy but of those mentioned, the Women of TBA, the Gala and Texas Hold'em – due to the loss of money – were a few.

-Women of TBA

Seniors – "I was happy to come because the sisterhood had sort of disappeared and then there was a very big group that gathered to resurrect it. I thought this is something I was interested in but then it didn't go anywhere for me either."

-Gala

Women – "We did not enjoy the galas or the fundraiser event. We don't drink, and it felt very cliky. To be perfectly honest, we're not in an income bracket where we can do that. So we asked for help and it was given very generously...and we were very welcomed, but we felt out of place with the crowd and even the entertainment"

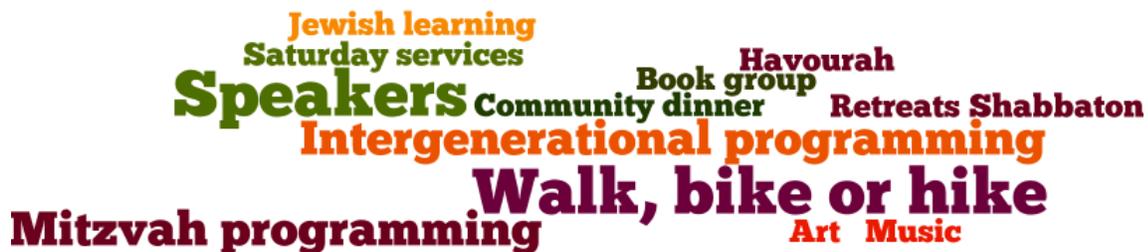
-Texas Holdem

Men – "I've played texas holdem, and other than the fact I lost money it was really fun. If you can fix the losing money part it would've been better."

-Nothing

Men –"Yea, nothing really comes to mind about a program that I've come to that was a bad experience or that I didn't really like. It's interesting, I'm trying to think of something cause I really want to have something for you."

What programs are you interested in that TBA does not currently offer?



Members had an array of wonderful suggestions: outdoor activities (e.g., an organized walk, hike or bike ride), events highlighting the arts or music, book groups, and mitzvah programming to help build and support the TBA community. Among the Seniors and Men’s focus groups, having guest speakers or a series of guest speakers– around Judaism and topics of Jewish learning – was of interest.

-Mitzvah programming

Family - *“I don’t know if it was here or at the other synagogue we went to but we went as a group to family table so you went with people you knew and you met people from the congregation and you were doing service. So it was community building and community service.”*

Women - *“There are a lot of older members who may not be driving at night and want to come to services or Jazz Shabbat. If we could form a telephone tree for carpooling or if people need a ride... Cause then I made a commitment to someone else and I can’t flake out because I’m too tired.”*

Men- *“I’m sure there’s a long list of seniors who are alone at home, the ability to shovel someone’s driveway or walk who is unable to. You can have people who need some fall clean up or something, or some work, and just for the kids or adults to get together to try to help the community that way, especially the Jewish community, the TBA community could be really nice. “*

-Havurah

Family - *“I don’t know if this is considered programming but we used to belong to some other temples before we moved to Brookline that had the havurah program. I feel like we haven’t connected with families with a similar make up. So that is something that we have kind of been looking for and moved*

on....Being connected to other families so like my husband is not Jewish so finding another family where one spouse is not Jewish same age kids just kind of getting to know a couple of families in a smaller – different type of environment then at an event where you have to seek them out yourself.”

-Arts programming

Men- “...to just create a café or a salon where once a week or twice a month on a certain evening or weekend time, coffee is served, and there could be a string quartet from a local music school.. but informal not like you have to sit in a row and pay attention in the same sort of way.”

-Speakers

Seniors – “I’d like to see speakers, really interesting speakers and every speaker doesn’t need to be about Israel either...Do you know how much Jewish history there is in the United states that none of us know about?”

Men – “There’s so much that’s happening now in science and academics and we have such a rich community here, including members of the temple. Do we take full advantage of that? To have speakers on the multi verse string theory, brain science, all these sorts of things... whether it’s someone who’s already in the congregation and/or it can be easy to tap into local people who would be glad to come by and give a talk some evening”

-Programming when parents are already at TBA

Family - “I think they could offer ...more programming on Sunday mornings to keep the parents here. May be not every week because everyone likes those 2 hours”

Family - “Monday nights I’m picking up my daughter at 6:30 and she will have had dinner. If you could invite parents to may be pay \$5 and be part of a little parent group and join the dinner. I’m there starving waiting for my kid to come out so I can rush home that would be such a great time to connect with other parents when you just happen to be there. You’d actually be accomplishing something because you’d be getting dinner, hanging out with other parents from your kids’ same grade which I don’t know the other parents are so I think that would be an opportunity.”

-Parallel programming for children & adults

Family - “If we had some of our older teens here to have like a movie night – you can have something here for the parents and the kids could be here. The parents could be doing date night or whatever the program is and the kids could you know...[hang out, etc]”

Family - “My kid is in a play this weekend at X but they have this big fundraiser –some had to say to me- do you want to go to this? And then I opened it (email) and I was like, yeah we do want to go to his. It has a whole kid thing with activities for the kids, a silent auction for everyone, performance for the parents that is separate from the performance for the kids – I’m like we’re definitely going to this. This is right up my alley, something that combines hanging out with your kid but you can also separate – that is the sweet spot.”

Making connections was a theme identified by these discussions.

Family - *“What about...a **posting board on a website**. Let’s say I need a babysitter, right, and I want to pull from someone from our community ...Or let’s say you want to find another family and start a havourah you could...post that. Or some way for our community to...interact and find groups.”*

Women - *“Have a speaker that’s at the dinner that can have people engage in conversation at their tables not just – you know – who are you? What do you do? etc.. but **to engender conversation** and get people talking...you just **have a good facilitator in the room** talking about current events or whatever in the context of going to Shabbat services and having dinner together.”*

Seniors- *“...to be honest, and I’m a very social person, I have lots of friends and lots of activities, but I wouldn’t pick myself up and go to one of these dinners by myself. I would feel uncomfortable but **if I had a friend to do it with or met someone at the temple who said – ‘oh come on go with me’-I would go.**”*

Women - *“I think about how to meet people and meet some community needs at the same time.”*

What influences your decision to attend TBA events?



Members identified a number of factors that influence their participation and attendance at TBA activities. The most common were their availability, strongly influenced by the activity's actual interest to and relevance for them, and the perception that their attendance was really desired by other TBA members or the organizers. Organizing and scheduling activities which appeal to multiple age groups is a real challenge but the groups had many interesting suggestions!

-Time

Seniors - *"I think that one of the things that has to be looked into is timing, what time of day, what day of the week and there are some groups on the older side of the spectrum may not want to come out at night and some don't mind it and enjoy having an evening program. Certainly during the day for retirees, that's something to explore because people have more time to fill."*

Seniors- *"but if it were once a month or one 2-hour session that would be different then I would be able to do it."*

-Continuity of Programming

Men- *"I think continuity of a program. So if it is a speaker series, oh it's the speaker series, and there's this program which is ongoing. Maybe there are only five speakers once a year, but the fact that the speaker series has some sort of momentum or some sort of value because you're familiar with it"*

Women - *"I like the idea of having whatever activity go over a course of a month. So it's not just a one-time thing, it's a multiple time thing...not one shot deals all the time."*

Family - *"I think it's critical that this synagogue continue to offer the things it's offering - people see what they want to go to but can't make it – either in a different way or at a different time. Because when I do make it happen, which definitely not all time...I never say I wish I hadn't gone to that. Not once and I think that is really telling about the quality of the programming."*

-Personal invitation

Seniors- *"it's still about the topic but the truth is if someone called me and said I'll pick you up at 8 o'clock, I would go"*

Family – *"Hey are going on Friday night? I get texts from a few people with kids in the same grade as my younger son... So that's really nice and it will motivate me to go a little bit more. So how can we harness that across the congregation so that people are reaching out to one another?"*

Women *"...and then there's the second level of having a friend call and say come do this with me...that's really going to get you in the door."*

-Target audience and marketing

Family – *"Sometimes your **messaging and the way that you are talking to a certain group matters** and when you have limited time and conflicts to say –ok I'm going to put that on my calendar and I'm actually going to go..."*

Men - *"I think the weekly emails are great. **I do think sometimes getting a little more clarity about this is an event for kids, this is an event for school aged kids and their parents...it's not always clear and you try to read between the lines.**"*

Seniors –*"A lot of older people are not in tuned with computers and emails and stuff. Even my computer isn't at my fingertips... However, **I always love to get a hard copy of something in the mail** and I have it in my hand and I can circle the dates. It's the immediacy of having that paper knowing what's happening in advance of the events.... If you get a monthly newsletter, I like we used to get, then you know what's coming up and you can participate a little easier."*

Women- *"can you drop in, do you have to make a commitment to be there from the beginning...so not really knowing the culture of certain events, programming and would it be a good fit?"*

-Jewish aspect

Men- *"So for me and I think for my wife, this is the Jewish place. You know, you can do other things in other venues, but here I go for Jewish stuff. And that's what would attract me to come to things here. Although I would be interested in these other things, it's primarily the place for Jewish stuff. "*

Men-*"And one of the things that keeps coming to my head, and there's no easy answer here, but we're a Jewish congregation compared to being just a social group. And I don't have an answer here, but is it enough to say let's all get together at the synagogue and therefore that's enough, or should there be some Judaic aspect because it is a synagogue? "*

How does TBA attract other people to our events?

Personal invitation
Events open for non-members
More religious programming
Clarify audience
Ice breakers
Singles/Widowed events
Learning opportunities
Community building

There were a number of suggestions shared on ways to influence members' attendance at programs. Some were more general and had to do with how the events are described and "marketed" to the congregation, but others were more specific and about offering more appropriate activities to attract a specific target audience.

-Personal invitation

Family – *"There are ways from an event programming stand point - to have a host committee where people are actually calling people ... You make a list and go I know that person well enough to send an email or make call. May be you don't know them but I appreciated the welcoming committee when I first showed up here. The fact that anybody bothered to write me a note and send it in the mail."*

Seniors – *"Even though I feel comfortable coming to something at the temple, when someone says are you going? I am much more likely to say I'll think about that and put it on my calendar than I am if I just read it. Any phase of where you're at, whether you're new or have been here many, many years there's something about having someone mention it to you and say – well, we're going. It's just nice to know I'll know someone there"*

Women – *"I think with a larger congregation it is harder to be as welcoming. People are off in their own groups and don't realize that you're kind of off on your own and not walking up to people. Not because you don't want to walk up to people but because you don't know anybody and you don't know what to say. I've been here twenty some odd years and I'm still there."*

-Religious programming

Men – “...there’s a subset of people who tend to be more observant or come from backgrounds but they’re also here because they like the reformed, and...just like I don’t go to the softball thing but it’s nice to know that there’s a softball thing...each Shabbat it would be nice if there were a service. And maybe to combine those two things together where maybe there’s a group of people who want to do a more participatory, regular, organic way sounds like that’s what people are saying. “

Men-“I bet there are members who are turned off in general because there isn’t any regularity with the worship. It’s more of when there’s a bar mitzvah we have to get together and read the Torah. I kind of get the feeling that we want to bring more people into the synagogue and create a sense of community, so the great ideas we’ve heard today, and you know the cooking clubs and speaker series that’s all great stuff, but there’s this core Jewish purpose. And its kind of like we’re a hospital but we don’t cure people necessarily 7 days a week we only do it Tuesdays and Thursdays. But come, give us others reasons why you should come to the hospital. And I kind of feel like we’re missing that. “

-Facilitate community development

Women- “There are so many interesting people in this congregation, with really...every single person has a story, every single person has something to share...how do you get to know that?...get to know your congregation”

Seniors –“ Or having an intergenerational discussion after temple. To be forced in a situation where you have to mix with people. I’ve met some younger people and it’s really great. And I love it “

Family - “I think one of the things and this is just thinking big picture going forward, is for synagogues to remain relevant for your source where you go to be fulfilled in this day and age where there are so many other – Jewish and other organizations putting out events and programs you might also want to attend Is to constantly be thinking about how you innovate what we do under this roof that makes this place seem new and fresh & interesting.”

Seniors –“ I think we need to bring people in and make them feel like they belong and have a stronger attachment. I myself have not participated for a long time. I have missed out, I see, on several things that interested me but I was totally unaware of them because I didn’t have a bulletin in my hand and I didn’t go to the computer to look at it.”

-Other topics – Timing of services

Though not asked directly, the timing of Friday night services came up at all four focus groups. There was consensus that 6:15 was just too early. It was challenging to leave work, pick up children and /or eat dinner and make services. Starting services 15-30 minutes later would be preferable. Participants of the Women, Men and Seniors’ focus groups also expressed interest in having one or more Jazz Shabbats start at 7:30 as these were more likely to be attended by adults and the current 6:15 start time made it difficult to attend.

Recommendations

The information obtained from these groups does not point to universal recommendations across demographic groups. Not surprisingly, TBA's diverse community has a diverse range of needs which correlate with their stage of life and family commitments. Participants of the focus groups were thoughtful about programming not being a 'one size fits all' format and commented on the need to accommodate a wide range of individuals.

-Demographic-specific insights

Members with school age children mentioned 'not being able to fit in another thing'. Engaging these members at times their children are at the synagogue or provide a format where parents and children can attend an event with parallel programming would be ideal. Parallel programming has the benefit of bringing families together and building community among the children and parents.

The Men's focus group highlighted a strong interest in speakers, Jewish learning and religious programming beyond what is currently provided [daily minyans for kaddish, Saturday services which could be lay led].

The Seniors' focus group was also interested in speakers and Jewish learning by tapping into members of the TBA congregation. The timing and frequency of events was also important to Seniors.

The Women's focus group looked beyond religious programming to other programming: hikes, walks, yoga, team sports for women.

-General insights

Participants highlighted the importance of communication about programming and events. Seniors prefer notification by mailings such as a bulletin or the Kadima, as all are not comfortable with computers or do not access them routinely. Several groups suggested clarifying the target audience for events and marketing it as specific to families, teens, seniors for example. Participants also suggested online message boards to facilitate members' interest in various activities [cards, playing music or sports] as well as connections between members [crowd source when a member needs a ride, a babysitter, help with yard work etc.].

There was also an overarching theme of need for connection – how to meet and connect with other members – went across the focus groups, primarily the three groups which were exclusively female [family, seniors & women]. Some ideas included: name tags, ice breakers at events, creating Havurot and having individuals facilitate discussions at dinners or services. Events that build community [18 tables, mitzvah programs or book /cooking series] were of interest. Programming provided in a series, so members can meet other congregants more than once, was suggested by multiple groups.

Participants, regardless of how long they had been a member, wanted help facilitating connections with others. Knowing others at an event or being personally invited by another to attend an event, influences ones' decision to attend.

Suggested Next Steps

The committee will prepare a one-page report for focus group participants, summarizing the information included here and informing them about the the actions to be taken by the board of directors as a result of their participation.

The committee's recommendation to the board is the following:

- Revise the program planning process to be more aligned with the interests, availability and needs of each demographic group as highlighted in the report. Consider creating a process whereby a representative(s), (chosen by that group of the congregation) from each focus group demographic is involved in the program planning process for that group's targeted activities.
- Implement an infrastructure to facilitate communication between members (i.e., a web-based "bulletin board" where members can crowdsource their needs and make connections). This should interface with the existing TBA website and events calendar.
- Review the existing programmatic marketing materials and modify, as needed, to more clearly identify the intended audience and provide alternative vehicles for congregants who don't use the on-line tools.
- Re-evaluate the scheduling of Friday night services, specifically to consider a later start to some services, like Jazz Shabbat.
- Direct that all TBA sponsored activities will include an activity or mechanism to more personally invite, welcome and or include member participation, including but not limited to: personal outreach invitations, use of ice breakers and introductions at the outset of the event and the interspersion of event representatives throughout the activity.