

The Attributes of a Thriving Congregation

Version 091317

Robert Leventhal
Kehilla Leadership Specialist, USCJ

Sulam Leadership® is committed to strengthening leaders to build thriving and sustainable kehillot.

Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines **thriving** as a condition beyond mere survival, implying growth and positive development. Key words associated with thriving are growing, flourishing, healthy and successful.

In our work at USCJ, our Sulam Leadership Transformation Team has developed some insights about what helps congregations thrive. One of the principles of Conservative Judaism is that we stand in sacred relationship to our ancestors. When we pray, we are connected, to use Chancellor Arnold Eisen's terms, "vertically" to all the Jewish communities throughout history and "horizontally" to Jews around the world. We are **nurtured** by these connections. When we get to tough issues, we are nurtured by the knowledge that we are not the first Jewish leaders who have wrestled with the challenges of our day. We can stand taller because we know we are not alone. We draw upon ancient wells of wisdom as we address contemporary problems. Let's reflect on the following text:

"Rabbi Hanina: Torah is like a deep well full of water whose waters were cold and sweet and delicious, but no one was able to drink from it. Then a certain person came along, and supplied the well with one cord tied to another, one rope tied to another, and drew water out of the well, and drank from it. Then everyone began to draw water and drink it."

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1.1:8

In this story, there was a deep well of sweet water, but the people, using their normal methods, could not access it. A leader came forward who found some innovative way to reach what had been unreachable. He decided to bring different elements together and repurpose them. In this way he made the connection between one cord and another in order to create a longer cord.

Leadership Tool for Engagement

The Thriving Congregations Assessment is primarily a tool for the meaningful engagement of synagogue leadership. It is meant to help the leaders around the table reflect on their situation, and to make the connections between their different leadership perspectives and experiences. When leaders are empowered with a **shared language**, they bring their diverse gifts to the board table. We believe they will find that what is created is greater than the sum of the parts. Together they will have made a longer cord and they will find that the water is **abundant**.

Now the bucket can be lowered and the sweet water is accessible. There is now an abundance of water and everyone can drink. Everyone can get their needs met.

Many of our congregations come from a view of **scarcity**. They feel they have to compete for what little there is rather than collaborate to make what they have reach farther. They may set groups against each other, old vs young, new vs. longstanding members, ritual conservatives vs. liberals etc. We believe that if we can uncover some of the things that are thriving, then we can work together to build on these so we can all get our needs met.

Thriving Congregations Leads to Deeper Reflection

Thriving congregations are complex. While there is no single “recipe” for a thriving congregation, we do believe that there are some helpful nurturing ingredients that are usually present when a thriving congregation is at work. We call these elements the Attributes of a Thriving Congregation.

We ask leaders to share the assessment with their executive committee and their board so that they can collaborate to reflect on the results. One person’s insight is not enough. The Thriving Congregations Assessment is a way to invite leaders to go deeper in reflection so they can attain new insights.

Leadership with Energy, Growth and Momentum

According to our data, the senior rabbi is one of the most important reasons why people remain members. The senior rabbi is critical in casting a vision and aligning the rest of the organization to that vision. With that said, we do not just look at the star qualities or personal charisma (star power) of the rabbi or the cantor. We don’t assess their ability to give a great sermon or chant a prayer. We don’t focus on their ability to remember everyone’s name at Kiddush lunch, as valuable as these skills can be. The assessment looks at how their skilled leadership is motivating more people to learn or more capable leaders to step up. Do they bring people together to learn something together - to “lengthen the cord”?

Thriving congregational leaders know how to identify those individuals seeking to take the next leadership step and know how to use the energy and ideas to generate momentum for the whole community. Thriving congregations require leadership with intellect, energy, vision and emotional intelligence. They have a vision of welcoming their member’s gifts and they put that vision into action in all they do.

Leaders Continuously Strive to Improve

Since no two congregations are alike, we do not suggest that you try to graft the programs of another congregation onto yours without thinking about how it will fit in your culture. What might be considered a very successful program in one kehilla might fail elsewhere because they lack the same staff, volunteer capacity or demographics. We also don't suggest that you create strategic plans that list everything you want to fix. Congregations have limited capacity, so choosing initiatives that have the greatest potential promise for your culture is a critical leadership skill.

It is important for Thriving Congregations to be able to understand the following principles:

- Few congregations are thriving in all areas. Thriving congregations do not have to excel in everything.
- A complete failure of one of these Foundational Practice areas, however, can take an otherwise thriving congregation off track. Poor organizational structure and lack of lay or staff accountability, for example, can frustrate the best intended plans.
- There is no one "right" place to start. Leaders can focus on the development of a keystone practice in one area and find that it provides new insight and energy for another. A commitment to collaboration can help leaders be more open to outside resources and partners. This might lead to working with new coalition partners on social justice issues.
- Leaders can, and must, strive to continually strengthen and address these attributes in order to thrive.

Purpose

The purpose of the Thriving Congregation Assessment (TCA) is to do the following:

- Identify areas where kehillot are thriving and explore what is driving growth.
- Identify areas where the congregation feels stuck and explore what is getting in the way.
- Consider unexplored areas where a congregation could potentially thrive.
- Connect leaders to ideas, resources and partners that will help them thrive.

The Roots of the Assessment

I have been working extensively with congregations since 2001, and have worked with over 500 congregations at one time or the other as a consultant for the Alban institute. At Alban, we discussed drivers of success in such works as the Hartford's Seminary Facts on Growth. I have also worked with groups discussing synagogue vitality, growth and success. This assessment draws from this work, as well as from the work of UJA Federation of New York, Sasha Littman's Measuring Success, and change management processes like Synagogue 2000 and 3000 (captured in the book Sacred Strategies).

USCJ as a Learning Laboratory

The Thriving Congregations Assessment is also rooted in my four years of experience at United Synagogue. As we developed our Sulam suite of programs, our Kehilla Strengthening Team has been exploring how to help synagogues be more successful and to build their capacity. Our connection to the stories of over 600 congregations is one of the critical advantages we have in developing new approaches. United Synagogue is a learning organization. Our synagogues offer us countless opportunities for experimentation. We have the capacity to convene congregational leaders, gather data and explore ways to shape our leadership work together.

Keystone Habits at Alcoa

In the book, *Habit*, author, Charles Duhigg, tells the story of Alcoa Aluminum. Alcoa had been struggling. They hired a new CEO, Paul O'Neill. When O'Neill was introduced to investors, he didn't choose to focus his talk on profit margins, revenue projections, or anything else that would normally be comforting to Wall Street ears. He began, "I want to talk to you about worker safety". The room went silent. It was reported that investors ran out of the room as soon as the presentation finished. One analyst sprinted to a payphone and called his twenty largest clients. He said, 'The board put a crazy hippie in charge, and he's going to kill the company,'" The investor told Duhigg, "I ordered them to sell their stock immediately."

Why did O'Neil focus on the practice of safety? Alcoa had experienced terrible labor- management relationships. He needed to find a place to start where there was some common ground. He chose safety because the union cared about worker safety, and management wanted to reduce costs, injuries, and lost work time. It was potentially a win-win issue.

When management and labor worked together to strengthen this one area, they found that the "cord for the bucket" got longer. They could reach deeper agreement about helpful and safe practices.

The larger lesson for a synagogue planner was that that by focusing on that one critical dimension, or what Duhigg refers to as a "**keystone habit**," you may be able to create change that ripples through the entire culture. You can also start with various attributes where there is opportunity.

"It turns out that **focusing on one, highly impactful habit can improve several routines** - and the bottom line." said Paul O'Neil. Profit at Alcoa dramatically improved in the following year.

Foundational Practices for Kehillot

We have repurposed the concept of these "Keystone Habits and now call them "Foundational Practices." We believe that leaders can increase the vitality of their congregations by focusing on these practices and learning to develop attributes of thriving congregations.

7 Foundational Practices





1. Develop a Shared Compelling Vision of Purposeful Jewish Living
2. Engage in Reflective and Accountable Leadership
3. Manage Change & Conflict
4. Ensure Sustainable and Sound Operations
5. Welcome Participation and Connection
6. Motivate Deeper Engagement in Torah and *Tefila*
7. Advocate for Prophetic Justice & Practice Covenantal Caring

The 22 attributes are organized under these 7 foundational practices. If the foundational practices are the "branches" of the tree that provide the supporting structure, the attributes are the "leaves" on the tree. They give shape to the tree. They fill in the picture. So too, thriving congregations' attributes help leaders see the shape of the life of the congregation.

The 22 Attributes of Thriving Congregations




Foundational Practice I:

Develop a Shared Compelling Vision of Jewish Living and Community

1	 Collaborative Shared Vision	Leaders have gone through a participative process to create a shared mission and vision (within the last 5 years).
2	 Visionary Clergy Put Vision in Action	Clergy demonstrate how the mission and vision of the congregation can shape the community by connecting them through their preaching, teachings and actions. They motivate lay leaders to put vision to work.
3	 Stable Clergy Leadership Committed to Continuous Improvement	History of stable clergy leaders with time to build trust and commitment of staff, leaders and members. They don't let up.
4	 Integrated Communications Plan	There is a team effort to tell a compelling story about how the congregation builds meaningful Jewish lives. It uses integrated communications (web, bulletin, social media, video clips, and signage) to make its case.




Foundational Practice II:

Practice Reflective Leadership




5	 Clear Expectations and Accountability for Lay Leaders and Staff	Lay leaders and staff have clear job descriptions, know who they report to and what is expected of them.
6	 Reflective Leadership	Staff and lay leadership take time to review their environment, their organization and their challenges. They evaluate programs and services to see what is working well. They look for root causes of problems.
7	 Sustainable Lay Leadership	There is a continuous pipeline of lay leadership. The Nominating Committee and/or a Leadership Development Team constantly identifies, recruits, trains and engages new leaders.

Foundational Practice III:





Manage Change and Conflict

8	 Commitment to Innovation	Leaders seeks to learn from others. They are willing to experiment and try new things and they are willing to risk failure for worthwhile initiatives.
9	 Strategic Focus	There is a strategic plan in place which helps guide all leadership, clergy and staff work. They have the capacity to launch important task forces when needed.
10	 Collaborative and Constructive Culture	Leaders look outside the synagogue for partnerships and collaborative experiences (either with other synagogues and/or organizations). They work inside synagogues to break down walls and create synergy between departments. They can manage conflict constructively.



**Foundational Practice IV:
Ensure Sustainable and Sound Operations**

11	 Leadership Transparency	Leaders ensure that synagogue strategies and goals are made known to the entire community. They know how major decisions are made.
12	 Financial Sustainability	The synagogue has created a viable sustainability plan that addresses membership, costs and financial resource development. It has communicated the plan to the community. They have sound administrative procedures in place.
13	 Facilities Plan Provides an Appropriate Setting for Your Mission	Facility is appropriate in size and design for your community. Facility is attractive and welcoming. It supports your functions. It is in a viable location.




**Foundational Practice V:
Welcome Participation and Engagement**

14	 Participatory	They intentionally widen the circle of participants in life of <i>kehilla</i> .
15	 Community Engagement	There is a covenantal and intentional process to create affinity groups around demographics (young families, seniors, new members, etc.) and interests (book groups, field trips, cooking, etc.) so members can find a spiritual home.
16	 Help Engage Families as they Transition through Life of the Community	Leaders have programs and services to engage families as they enter congregation, join preschool, transition to religious school, move into youth programs post <i>b'nai mitzvah</i> .
17	 Teen Engagement	There is a systematic approach to use informal and formal educational experiences to engage teens from post <i>b'nai mitzvah</i> through high school so that youth enter college with a strong identity. Leaders partner with camp and youth programs.

**Foundational Practice VI:
Create Richer Engagement with Judaism through Torah and Tefila, Go Deeper**

18	 Meaningful Engagement in Jewish Learning	The core of people engaged in serious meaningful learning is intentionally developed and is expanding. Learning leaders help welcome and engage the larger learning community.
19	 Meaningful Participation in Jewish Spiritual Life	Through a framework of Conservative Judaism they explore different areas of spiritual practice to enrich participation and engagement (multiple <i>minyanim</i> , different approaches to prayer, within and outside their walls).They connect prayer to learning and social justice.

**Foundational Practice VII:
Advocate for Prophetic Justice: Covenantal Caring**

20	 Israel Connection	<p>Leaders help connect the congregation to the land, traditions and people of Israel. They encourage missions, face challenges and opportunities of partnership with Israel.</p>
21	 Caring & Inclusive Community	<p>The synagogue community is inclusive. It has empathy for people with different needs. It reduces barriers for them. Lay and staff members provide care for all in times of joy and sorrow.</p>
22	 <i>Tikkun Olam</i>	<p>The congregation has an external focus. It has a deep commitment to <i>tikkun olam</i> and advocates for social justice (prophetic voice) outside of the congregation (their larger general community, Israel and around the world).</p>

Conclusion: Conservative Judaism is about Striving

Conservative Judaism is about a constant striving for growth. It challenges the modern Jewish mind to wrestle with the richness of the tradition while repurposing and reengaging with it. Sulam Leadership is inspired by this challenge. It encourages leaders to reach up for the next rung-to grow. We are hopeful that the Attributes of Thriving Congregations Assessment (ATCA) will engage leaders in reflective leadership and motivate them to develop a compelling vision of Purposeful Jewish Living and leading that inspires greater learning, spirituality, engagement and acts of *chesed*.