The Blessing of Epic Failure: Psychological Safety and (Re)Visioning Synagogue Success

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By Rabbi Joshua Rabin

J.R. Briggs is a failure. Well, not really. While Briggs began his career as a pastor on a rocketship of professional success, a series of organizational incidents left him unemployed, aimless and depressed. And worse, Briggs had to deal with personal failure at a time when his colleagues used social media to present the sunniest possible picture of how they had it all figured out in how to revitalize their churches. Briggs writes in *Fail: Finding Hope and Grace in the Midst of Ministry Failure* that, "…churches have not left room for failure in their doctrine. The corrosive effect of the current standard of church success wreaks havoc on our souls and the souls we have been called to love" (51).

This is an essay about failure. Well, not exactly. What I want to talk about is a secret ingredient that too many of our synagogues lack: psychological safety. Today, the Jewish Community uses terms like "failing forward" or "daring to fail" as a way of patting ourselves on the back for trying to be innovative, while engaging in avoidance about the reasons most professionals and leaders are terrified to attempt innovation, in the first place. Instead, I want to share how synagogues can open up tremendous space for growth when they release tension and acknowledge what's not working in a way that plants the seeds for newfound vitality.

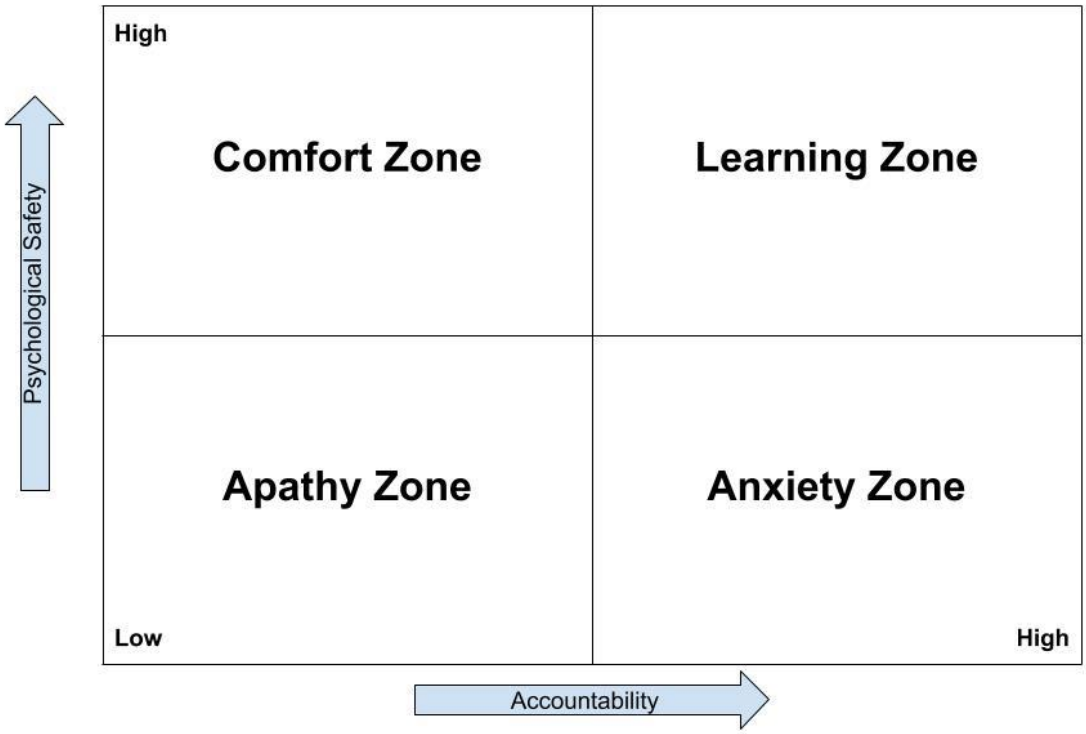
1. **Amy Edmondson and the Power of Psychological Safety**

Amy Edmondson writes in *Teaming: How Organizations that Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* that in a rapidly changing world, our understandings of teams and hierarchies need to shift as institutional structures flatten. She calls the skill that organizations need to cultivate "teaming," the ability to learn, grow and achieve in a groups, rather than relying on the effort of a few charismatic or dominant individuals. Edmondson argues that teaming "requires a new type of leadership that supports speaking up, asking questions, and sharing ideas…a leadership mindset that cultivates an environment conducive to learning" (26).

In order to build this kind of organization, Edmondson argues that teams must maximize their capability at simultaneously fostering "high accountability" and "high psychological safety." While most of us are familiar with accountability as a concept, Edmondson introduces the term psychological safety to describe, "a climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings," one where colleagues possess "the ability to seek help and tolerate mistakes" (118), skills that are surprisingly difficult for most organizations. Below is Edmondson's schematic for the relationship between accountability and psychological safety:

USCJ Seek meaning together

Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming*, "Psychological Safety and Accountability," 130.



Where would you put your organization in this matrix? Sadly, too many of our organizations fall into what my colleague Robert Leventhal calls "sustaining and surviving" mode. Sometimes, it is easier to remain passive about a program, committee or member of the professional or lay leadership rather than having a difficult conversation. However, most of the big things that synagogues are reluctant to change stem from an unwillingness to be honest, for fear of what others might think about someone rocking the boat, or what offended parties might say about them, in return. But in times of struggle, changing momentum

comes from a willingness to release tension and acknowledge what is not working so that we might discover together what could.

2. **Epic Fail Pastors Conference**

J.R. Briggs' response to his confrontation with failure was to create the first-ever Epic Fail Pastors Conference, an opportunity for Christian leaders to "put their worst foot forward," name all the ways in which they feel lost in their leadership, and build community designed to "talk about … failures, identity and mistakes." Briggs felt that church conferences were a perfect example of a lack of psychological safety in church life, writing that, "The programming at these conferences is flawless and the presentations are perfect – but for attendees, the drive home is crappy" (16). At a time when churches are closing and participation rates are falling, conferences designed to teach the silver bullets of religious life leave no space for religious leaders to acknowledge failure, breeding persistent "insecurity and comparison." The consequence is that in our desire to show that much is working in religious life, we leave no space for leaders to bring their anxieties into a non-anxious space.

As I read Briggs' book, ideas jumped off the page about what could be shared at a conference organized by the Jewish Community on all the ways we fail, including dreadful prayer experiences, million-dollar federation campaigns that failed to launch, Hebrew school horror stories, feeble attempts at synagogues being "warm and welcoming," Israel education efforts that increased disengagement, and tone deaf attempts at reaching next-generation Jews. And yet, while I have no doubt that most Jewish leaders would acknowledge failure in a general sense, most of us would do anything to avoid having the label "failure" affixed to us.

However, a struggling synagogue is not the same as a failing synagogue. Synagogues rise and fall for complex and varied reasons, yet creating a culture of continuous improvement begins when leaders and professionals know that they can acknowledge what is not working, challenge the assumptions that contribute to the current culture, dream audacious dreams, and know the others will welcome bringing those questions into the conversation, however difficult they might be.

3. (**Re**)**Visioning Success in the Twenty-First Century Synagogue**

The first weekend of June, I had the honor of representing USCJ at the first conference of the Jewish Emergent Network, seven Jewish communities who came together to revitalize the field of Jewish engagement. I consider the rabbis of the network to be my teachers and friends, and they inspire me to think about how I can help synagogues leaders in legacy institutions succeed in a new Jewish paradigm.

While I loved seeing the ways these communities model inspiration and excellence, what impressed me the most was the way in which the leaders of these communities acknowledged what wasn't working, in both their communities and the Jewish community at-large. A willingness to acknowledge weakness is not the sole reason for their success, but I have no doubt that the creativity and energy they bring to Jewish life comes for their willingness to build, measure, learn, and be unafraid to try again. The Jewish Emergent Network is a powerful form of institutional feedback; the only question is whether or not we will listen.

At the end of the programming year for most synagogues, many leaders can find themselves depressed at missed opportunities and financial targets, and an anxiety as to whether or not the coming year will bring more of the same. But in that moment, the most important thing that leaders can do is patiently and openly bring those concerns into the open, so that the community might join together and use that honesty as the foundation of building new paradigms. My prayer is that we allow leaders to be "bold with strength in my soul" (*Tehillim 138:3*), an awareness and honesty about struggle so that we can plant new seeds of vitality together.

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