

# The JOURNAL

NATA/NAASE

A Joint Journal of NATA/NAASE

WINTER 2016/5776

*“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”*

—Hillel



בסנכרון

B'Synchron – In Harmony



## Editors' Message

Susan Zemsky, Executive Director  
Temple Shalom, Chevy Chase, MD

Susan Goldstein, Executive Director  
Congregation B'nai Israel, St. Petersburg, FL

***"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"—Hillel the Elder (Pirkei Avot: 1:14)***

We face many challenges as synagogue executive directors/administrators. This question, posed by Hillel, may well articulate the most difficult one for us. Our lay leaders, clergy, and congregants all expect us to give 100% of our efforts 100% of the time. We demand more of ourselves. Eventually, we are forced to face the fact giving all of ourselves all of the time even to worthy endeavors is not a good choice. We owe it to ourselves, our families, and – yes – even those we serve to take time to care for ourselves. We must take the responsibility for finding the time and means to do so. The alternative is that we may well find ourselves unable, mentally and/or physically, to do the jobs we love. And there's the conundrum.

Fortunately, we have an incredible, talented group of colleagues from whom we can learn. This edition of *The Journal* contains articles written by some of them that directly confront some of the challenges we face as synagogue/temple executives. There is a representation of a variety of disciplines from which strength and renewal can be found. Spirituality, adult learning, taking care of oneself, leadership and development, time management, and mentoring are explored within. We plan on continuing the conversation on this topic on our respective web pages.

Thank you for the opportunity to produce *The Journal*. We hope that many of you will be inspired to submit articles for future publication. Our special thanks go to the people who have been most supportive in this collaboration: Janice Rosenblatt, NATA President; Bernie Goldblatt, NAASE President; Ellen Franklin, NATA Vice President, Susan Kasper, NAASE Vice President; Harvey Brenner, NAASE Vice President; Michael Liepman, NATA Executive Director; and Harry Hauser, NAASE Executive Director; and to the leadership of the synagogues and temples who have allowed us the honor of working on *The Journal*.

*L'Shalom,*

Susan Zemsky & Susan Goldstein

—Susan Zemsky has over 25 years of experience in Jewish congregational and communal leadership in the metropolitan Washington, DC area. She is currently in her 15th year serving as Executive Director of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

—Susan Goldstein has worked as a Jewish professional for over 13 years after many years as a lay leader in the Chicago Jewish community and successful careers in banking and law. She currently serves as Executive Director of Congregation B'nai Israel in St. Petersburg, Florida.

## THE NATA/NAASE JOURNAL

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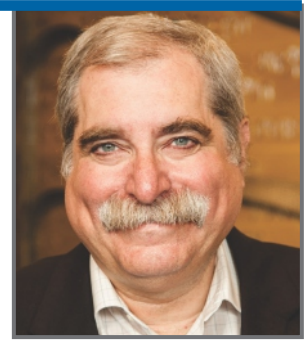
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# Presidents' Messages

Janice Rosenblatt, FTA, Executive Director  
Temple Beth Ami, Rockville, MD

Bernard Goldblatt, FSA, ATz, Executive Director  
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Dear Colleagues,

This issue of the *The Journal* is the second in a trilogy of journals informed by the famous Hillel quote: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

The focus of this issue – "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" – speaks directly to our need to take care of ourselves – professionally and personally – if we are to be able to take care of others.

This journal focuses on ways we can take care of ourselves through finding time for our own personal renewal. Yet finding time – making time – is often the very reason we give for not taking care of ourselves. While we cannot lengthen the day, nor would we want to, we can engage others to help us. We can turn to our lay leaders, volunteers, and other staff members to create an environment of shared purpose, a vibrant environment in which everyone is empowered and works as a team to make things happen. Nordstrom's philosophy simply stated: "find the best people you can to do the job and let them do it." We can do that, too. We have to let go in order to hold on to ourselves, which will ultimately enable us to do better and be better.

There are people who will "be for me." We just have to reach out, ask, and empower.

Thank you to our wonderful NATA and NAASE editors and editorial boards for creating this important joint edition of the *The Journal*.

Janice Rosenblatt, FTA  
NATA President

—Janice Rosenblatt has been in the profession, at Temple Beth Ami, for 24 years. Her background and previous work experience was in marketing/advertising, both in Boston and in DC. Janice served as President of the Temple several years prior to becoming its first executive director.

Dear Colleagues,

Sometimes different streams of Judaism have the potential to divide us. In this special joint issue of NATA and NAASE journals we choose to see that the commonality of what we do unites us on a deeper level. Congratulations to leaders of both professional associations who had this vision.

The focus of this issue, one part of the famous Hillel quote in Pirke Avot 1:14, is the phrase, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" In the synagogue world, where much of our focus is dealing with congregant needs, it is easy to forget to take care of our personal needs and our spiritual selves.

If I have learned a concept that I consider crucial to happiness and success it is balance. Balancing our needs with those of others helps us help them more effectively. One of the great opportunities NAASE offers our members is a week of study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. We do not learn new synagogue administrative skills, but we immerse ourselves in Jewish studies and spirituality with wonderful teachers. As some attendees have described the experience, "it refreshes our souls."

I look forward to the articles in this publication to help bring balance into our lives. I also encourage all our members to attend our joint national conference in 2017 as an additional opportunity to learn from and share with colleagues to be better and more balanced professionals. It is wonderful to spend time with colleagues, make new friends, and all "be for each other."

Thank you to our NATA and NAASE colleagues who wrote for and edited this joint journal.

Bernie Goldblatt, FSA, ATz  
NAASE President

—Bernie Goldblatt has a B.A. in Near Eastern studies from the University of Michigan, a J.D. from the George Washington University School of Law and studied for one year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A brief career in law was followed by 25 years in business; 10 years for a large public corporation and the remaining in his own company. Bernie received his FSA in 2005.

## FEATURES:

"If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me?" . . . . .	4
HUBRIS: Long Term Executive Directors Beware . . .	6
Mens Sana In Corpore Sano. . . . .	8
Hillel and Harvard . . . . .	10
You Are What You Learn. . . . .	12

Caring for Your Staff (and Yourself). . . . .	15
The Challenges of the Ever-Changing Professional Life. . . . .	16
Confession of a Synagogue ED and the Path to Balance . . . . .	17



## “If I Am Not For Myself, Who Will Be For Me?”

Amy Alfred, Ph.D.  
Licensed Psychologist and Synagogue Consultant, Narberth, PA

We all remember the admonition from our friendly flight attendant that we must put on our own oxygen masks first before assisting others. This idea speaks well to the first line of the famous Hillel quote, “*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*” The thrust of this article stresses the importance of self-care in order to prevent burnout. As synagogue professionals, there are myriad responsibilities, both big and small, that make up each and every working day. In order to have the most energy to do this sacred work, it is imperative that our own tanks are filled so that we can give the community what it needs.

### I can hear you all saying but...

- But I don’t even have time for lunch...
- But I don’t have time to go to an exercise class...
- But I can’t make it home periodically for evening meals for my family...
- But the only way I alleviate stress is to yell in my car on the way home...
- But I can’t say no to this request even though I have no time to fulfill it...

and yet these are the **VERY** issues that need to be addressed – satisfying your need for food, exercise, and important relationships, finding healthy ways to decrease your stress levels, and learning to create good boundaries that will set the stage for a bit of breathing room.

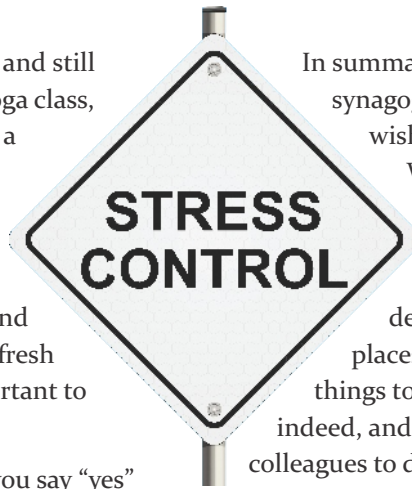
We teach people how to treat us, and we model for our staff what we expect of them. As an effective leader, it makes sense to run on all cylinders as much as humanly possible. In that way, your staff, your congregants, and your lay leaders will see you as an effective change agent who can get the job done. So here are some concrete suggestions to incorporate into your daily life that may ease the stress, as well as create some extra space for more creative thinking and problem solving.

1. Your plates are already overloaded and your in box is overflowing. It is important to be able to say no to some of the requests that cross your desk. Saying no respectfully allows you to say yes to other things that require your attention. In fact, saying no often allows a different yes to emerge that can be very powerful and effective.
2. Is this a life or death situation, or is this something that can wait? As Konrad Adenauer said, “We all live under the same sky, but we don’t all have the same horizon.” Keeping your perspective is a key component to keeping your sanity.
3. Your congregants only see a small piece of what you do on any given day, and in fact, that is how you like it, for it means you are doing a good job of running the show. But given that they do not know the half of what you do, sometimes you may need to explain the bigger picture, and why you need to work on one thing but are going to need to delegate another. You are in the driver’s seat when faced with the task of prioritizing.
4. Focus on the importance of a regular dinner meal with your family, and make it sacrosanct that you are not in the office for meetings on that evening. Family time can be rejuvenating and remind you of life outside the office. In that same vein, schedule a meeting with **yourself** during your workday, to go over your projects, to think about an important issue, to create the beginnings of a new program, to take a few deep breaths and have some lunch. You wouldn’t cancel the meeting with your rabbi, so do not cancel on yourself either.
5. Everyone experiences stress differently. Some people feel irritable, others have stomach problems, and still others turn to drinking or eating more to buffer themselves from pressures or tensions. Regardless of the method employed, adding some relaxing activities to your week is advised. Some may want to write in a journal to alleviate the strain, others may




learn about deep breathing exercises, and still others would benefit from taking a yoga class, indulging in regular baths, or visiting a masseuse. Whatever it is that allows you to be in a happier, calmer, clearer place is what I recommend to try. And while you may lament the fact that you have no time for “that kind of stuff,” it is those very things that refresh and replenish your soul that are important to honor.

6. Take a hard look at how many times you say “yes” when you really want to say “no,” and think about the consequences of your response. Are there times when you could hold your line and turn down the request? Or delegate that task to someone else within your staff? Working on setting appropriate boundaries and what might get in your way is paramount to your personal and professional success. Many people have negative associations with saying no and do not want to hurt people’s feelings. Saying no is not disrespectful of the relationship. In fact, saying no respectfully may be exactly what is needed to keep the relationship intact.



In summary, self-care is not a luxury for the synagogue professional, but a necessity if one wishes to keep working in a healthy way.

While there are challenges specific to each synagogue, there are still avenues for focusing on personal needs to maintain one’s sanity in a job that by definition requires you to be in many places at the same time, as well as to be many things to many people. This is a herculean task indeed, and I would invite you to connect with your colleagues to discuss creative ways to find small pockets of time in your daily routine to make self-care a priority. As Hillel said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

—Dr. Amy Alfred is a licensed psychologist who maintains a private practice, along with consulting with synagogues around the areas of conflict resolution, leadership development, creating and maintaining appropriate boundaries, board management, and crisis management. She invites your comments and questions, and can be reached at [amyalfred@aol.com](mailto:amyalfred@aol.com) or 610-755-2929, for more in depth discussions. 





## HUBRIS: Long Term Executive Directors Beware

By Livia Thompson, Past NATA President and Senior Director  
Central Synagogue, New York, NY

When I first became a synagogue executive director, long ago and far away in 1993, I looked up to long-time executive directors<sup>1</sup> – wondering what skills and talents helped them survive the complex and intense role they had. It wasn't long before I understood that an executive director constantly moved between roles as leader and supporter, implementer and planner, and “chief cook and bottle washer.” Successful executive directors with long tenure appeared to be able to balance all of these different roles well and to do so quietly and without fanfare. At the same time, they need to continuously build and maintain relationships and know when to be quietly in the back and when to be a leader.

Now I find myself in the curious position of being one of those with a long tenure about to leave the field that I love and have had a career that has provided me with great opportunities to learn, develop my own strength and skills, become a more engaged Jew, and continuously explore how I can be an effective second chair leader<sup>2</sup> in a Synagogue serving the lay leadership, the staff, and the congregation. I leave my profession with a full heart, and with excitement about my future retirement.

I know I am fortunate to be leaving on my own terms, and when and how I want.

During the last 23 years, I have seen many long time colleagues leave abruptly from their positions – some having been asked to resign, some not having contracts renewed, some having been fired – and in each situation our colleagues have been hurt and have often felt betrayed by congregations to whom they have given years of dedicated service. These difficult departures have brought feelings of shock and dismay to our National Association for Temple Administration (NATA) colleague, and questions about what happened and why.

Of course, each story is different, and each situation has its own specific fact patterns and differing perspectives of what happened. But, there is a common theme in many of the sad endings to illustrious careers – we can sometimes overestimate our influence within our synagogue and the extent to which we are central to the institution. The belief in our organizational importance sometimes happens simply because of years of service, but also may happen after significant leadership change, because of the completion of a major project, or because of other particular circumstances leading to a sense of significant personal power.<sup>3</sup> But, in the end, executive directors are employees and as such, can be encouraged to leave, given incentives to retire, or fired. To forget this is to fall into a trap that the ancient Greeks called *hubris*, excessive pride or self-confidence and lack of appropriate humility while in a position of power. *Hubris* suggests that one is over-estimating one's competence, accomplishments and capacity. In a number of Greek tragedies and Shakespearean plays, among other literature, remind us that *hubris* leads to personal pain and suffering and a loss of power.<sup>4</sup> *Hubris*, generally defined as “pride” is a common religious theme as well. As the Book of Proverbs describes *hubris* as “pride goeth before the fall.”<sup>5</sup>

Humility is praised as a virtue in Judaism and its opposite – pride (or *hubris*) is considered a vice that leads people astray and destroys communities.<sup>6</sup> Josephus, a Jewish historian who was steeped in classical tradition, uses classical Greek notions of *hubris* throughout his writings about Jewish history and texts.<sup>7</sup> The concept of *hubris* and divine punishment is a theme throughout the Torah and other Jewish texts even though the word “*hubris*” is not used. The story of Purim describes what happens to a key administrator of the Persian King Ahasuerus. Haman, who in the beginning of the Megillah is the King's right hand man, is destroyed by his own actions after he mistakenly believed that he had the authority and

political strength to go after the Jews in the kingdom. Miriam, Moses' sister, is temporarily removed from the community and afflicted with leprosy when she publically chastises Moses and the leaders.<sup>8</sup> The Torah also celebrates those leaders who display traits of humility. Moses is described as a humble man (see Numbers 12:3), who needed his brother Aaron's support to free the Israelites. Similarly, Abraham describes himself as dust and ashes (Deut. 17:20).<sup>9</sup>

Long term executive directors generally have the technical knowledge and skills to do their job – that is to manage, administrate, strategize, and implement. But, their ability to continue to be successful is much more about continuing to develop and maintain relationships and their ability to work successfully with the myriad of personalities that make up the staff, the lay leadership and the congregation.<sup>10</sup> Long timers often outlast presidents who generally serve two to four years, and some senior staff including senior rabbis. It is easy, with longevity, for an executive director to begin to feel that he or she is the lynchpin that holds the synagogue together, and has all of the key information and secrets about the congregation. Indeed, often the executive director is one of the pillars

of the community, and as such does have a significant role in the synagogue's success. Long-tenured executive directors are also vulnerable as newer professional and younger lay leadership perceive the executive director's self-confidence as prideful arrogance, and their professional competence as belittling others.

The dynamics can be fatal – newer and younger leaders may feel threatened and the long term executive director may begin to feel that he or she is indispensable at the same time. As tensions build, there is a danger that the executive director will manifest characteristics of pride or *hubris* such as talking ill of leaders within the congregation, and being less patient about working effectively as a from behind leader and


less humble about the gifts and skills he brings to the position. It also can lead to forgetting that in the end, the executive director may have been a beloved employee, highly respected and valued, but he needs to continue to show that he or she is flexible and able to change, grow and develop over time, and understanding the delicate power balance in which executive directors operate. New leaders need to feel that their executive director has the talents they need for their time. Successful long term executive directors have learned these lessons well. They also tend to find their satisfaction from successfully furthering their congregations' mission, and not from power plays or focusing on their own authority and importance. As second chair leaders, they know that they both have a

key role to play, and also that they need to make sure that their lay and professional leaders feel their humility, and not their pride. Better to be Moses asking for help from his brother in speaking to Pharaoh or from wise men to create a viable judicial system, then Moses striking the rock in anger and being punished as a result by not being able to go into the land of Israel.

Long time executive directors have much to offer their congregations, and experience is a great

skill builder. My hope for my NATA colleagues is that they know when it is time to leave their positions and they do so for the right reasons, celebrated by their congregation for everything they have done for their community.

\*Footnotes to this article can be found online at [www.natanet.org](http://www.natanet.org) along with the digital version of *The Journal*.

—Livia Thompson has served Central Synagogue as its Senior Director since February, 1993. Prior to that, she worked at the Anti-Defamation League and the Lawyers Alliance for New York, and before that she worked in the private sector as an attorney. Livia has a BA and a JD from Columbia University. 







## Mens Sana In Corpore Sano (Latin, from the Poet Juvenal – 1st Century AD)

Harvey M. Brenner, FSA, FTA, Executive Director  
Temple Beth Tzedek, Amherst, NY

*A healthy mind in a healthy body* is something that Juvenal espoused to his fellow Roman citizens approximately 2,000 years ago. Two millennia later, it is no less relevant to today's Jewish professionals than it was back then.

Maimonides wrote in his Commentaries on the Mishnah V that, *"The purpose of maintaining the body in good health is to [make it possible for you to] acquire wisdom."* If our energies are lagging and our attention spans are diminishing, how can we expect to perform at our highest levels? How can we continue to learn and achieve if we don't take good care of ourselves?

In my case, about 11 years ago, I was experiencing some shortness of breath and feeling "not quite right." During an angiogram, I was diagnosed with blockages in three cardiac arteries and told I should undergo immediate cardiac bypass surgery.

If Hillel's words are to be taken literally (*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*) we must develop a regimen, an action plan if you will, that gets us up and out from behind our desks, away from our phones, tablets, computers and emails, and makes us do something physical for ourselves. I didn't really heed this advice myself until I received this wake up call.

For me, this wasn't like the game of Monopoly™ where you could still "Pass Go and Collect \$200.00." This was life-altering, life-threatening thoracic surgery that felt more like "Go to Jail! Go directly to Jail. Do not pass Go and Do Not Collect \$200.00!"

Once diagnosed, I was not permitted to leave the hospital until the surgery was performed the next day. No warning, no fanfare, no nothing! Have the surgery and have a 99.997% chance of success or don't have it and have a 70% chance of having a heart attack. Those were my choices. It seemed pretty straight forward to me.

My first thoughts were, "what of the kehilla I serve?" "Who's going to do all that I do?" "Do they even know all the things I do on an hourly, daily or weekly basis?" I knew intuitively that the surgery would be a success, so

I wasn't concerned about living or dying. I was, like most of us dedicated professionals, concerned about my congregation and would they be able to get along without me.

They did, and for the ten weeks that I was out on medical leave, they figured out new procedures to cover the things that I did. The office staff would call me at home with questions, FEDEX and UPS drivers became my new BFF's (Best Friends Forever) since packets of documents went back and forth between us, and telephone calls and emails could be handled from my home just as well as from my office. In fact, there were many congregants who didn't even know I was off site for the 2½ months. (A blow to my ego, but funny nonetheless!)

"So what did I learn from this?...I give myself the same respect and 'kavod' that I give each member I meet with so that I can be healthier, more vital and vigorous and more productive each and every day."

So what did I learn from this? It's simple really. I need to carve out "me time" every day so that I can be better to my congregation during our "meeting times." I now spend between one and two hours a day at the gym before arriving at the shul for minyan and/or work. I give myself the same respect and "kavod" that I give



each member I meet with so that I can be healthier, more vital and vigorous, and more productive each and every day.

I know me; if I were to plan to go to the gym after work, as we all know something will happen during the day to make me deviate or drop the plan entirely. Too many fires arise to put out; too many committee meetings to attend; too many reports to generate; too many email and phone calls to return. So I do it first thing in the day. In a sense, it's my "Modeh Ani L'fanecha" my being grateful to HaShem for giving me another day. It is my opportunity to do something good, healthy and productive for myself so that no matter how badly the rest of my day goes, I did something I can point to with a feeling of success and pride!

I do other things as well while I'm at work. I get up from the desk every hour or so and walk the hallways of the building. I see and feel what's going on that way, but I also improve blood flow and change my perspective on some things during my short walk. I stretch and flex tight or tensed muscles to relieve the stress and strains that comes from being hunched over a computer screen hour after hour each day. When I can, I take the stairs and not the elevator in buildings (more difficult nowadays with increased security precautions) but even the few extra steps have benefits. I no longer look for the closest spot when trying to park my car; rather, I want to find one far enough away to force me to walk a bit. In short, I try to incorporate something "good and healthful" for me before, during, and after my work day.

Does it take commitment? Of course! Many a cold, wintry morning I wonder why am I getting up at four or five and donning shorts and t-shirt and trundling off to the gym to work out. Why? All I need do is look at my chest and see a tangible reminder that I am now a card-carrying member of the "Thoracic Zipper Club" (my chest scar from the cardiac surgery).


We're all great thinkers and planners. It's what we do every day of our work lives. It makes sense, therefore,



that we take some time and plan a regimen for ourselves. Taking better care of ourselves (by extension) takes better care of our beloved *kehillot*.

As the anthologist/humorist Leo Rosten quotes, "Take care of your health – you can always hang yourself later!" (Author Unknown)

—Harvey Brenner joined Temple Beth Tzedek after a successful 30+ year career in sales, marketing and general business management, before transitioning into the not-for-profit world as a synagogue executive early in the decade of the 2000s. Harvey is both a Fellow in Synagogue Administration ("FSA" as conferred by the North American Association of Synagogue Executives {NAASE}) and a Fellow in Temple Administration ("FTA" as conferred by The National Association for Temple Administration {NATA}, The Union for Reform Judaism and The Central Conference of American Rabbis).

Harvey is also the author of the thesis, "Merging Congregations: The Exploration, Facilitation and Execution of a Synagogue Merger and the Role of the Administrator/Executive Director in the Process" published in April, 2008; and the article "The Synagogue as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy" published in the 2012 NAASE Journal (pp. 20-22). 



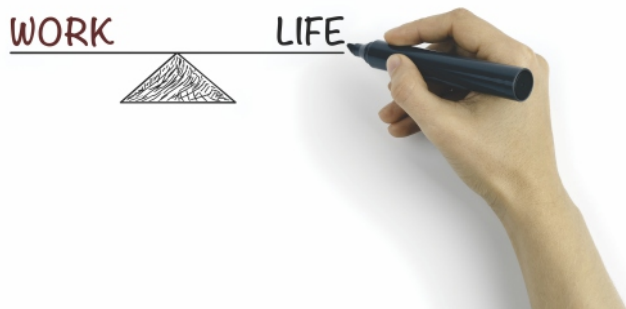
## Hillel and Harvard

Karen Wisialowski, Chief Community Officer  
Peninsula Temple Sholom, Burlingame, CA

*Hillel would have been right at home at Harvard Business School, my alma mater, where his probing question, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" resonates today.*

In a class called Management of Human Capital, 600 MBA students recently explored this very question. They surveyed nearly 4,000 executives to learn how this successful group of individuals makes choices in their personal and professional lives. They discovered that achieving a desired work-life balance depends in large part on each individual's definition of success, whether it is measured in time at home, participation in certain activities, or the quality of relationships. Despite differences, there were some common themes, including making deliberate choices, gaining control over electronic communication, and building a network of personal and professional support.

As a new executive director of a synagogue, I too am reflecting on how I can keep up with my to-do list, inspire my staff, serve my congregation, and maintain a healthy personal and spiritual life. Indeed, I learned during the High Holy Days, my first as a synagogue professional, that there was little time for my own spiritual renewal. And, with email and social media active round the clock, I can literally be working 24/7 responding to congregants and colleagues.



So, finding work-life balance is critical to having joy in life and sustainability in my career. However, trying to achieve our cultural ideal of work-life balance can be just as stressful as being out of balance. I imagine life in the center of a teeter-totter with work on one side and personal life on the other. Any small misstep, or even an intentional, temporary shift to one side, will send the other crashing to the ground. This kind of work-life balance is not for me.

Instead, I like to envision work-life balance as a complicated and challenging ropes course, the kind that I did every year with my kids at a family camp in northern Michigan. There were tightropes to cross, poles to climb, and obstacle courses to overcome. There was joy in achievement and, sometimes, when the task was too difficult, contentment in trying my best. My theory is that the challenges were so intensely rewarding because they required full, undivided attention. No multi-tasking; no checking a cell phone; no mental to-do list for the next day; and no confusion about what is important in that moment. When trying to walk across a narrow log 25 feet off the ground, it's all about focusing on the task at hand. For me, balance and focus go hand in hand.

All of this brings me to my three personal rules for a healthy, meaningful, and joyful life, one that includes time for serving my community, enjoying my family, and taking care of myself.

- 1. Be present in the moment.** Knowing that there is no perfect balance of time at work and time at home, I try to be fully engaged where I am. Unless I have a nighttime meeting, my husband and I sit down to a proper dinner every evening, just like we did when raising our kids. We hang out together, talk, read, watch TV, and help each other mull over sticky work issues for one or the other of us. Sure, I do work at home, but I don't let it overtake me. Similarly, at work, I stay focused on the needs of my congregation. When a colleague or congregant knocks on my door, I






put down what I'm doing to look him in the eyes and understand his question or concern.

2. **Turn off and tune out.** Email. Facebook. Hineynu. Yammer. There is no shortage of incoming communication, and it's easy for me to get overwhelmed by its quantity and to think that it is all important in the moment. So, my goal is to limit work-related screen time from home to essential matters. But, if I lapse, I don't berate myself. I simply remind myself to disconnect, or my husband does the reminding. To make this easier, I removed my work email from my personal iPad and I sleep without my iPhone nearby. Unplugging is a good idea every night, but essential for me on Shabbat. My colleagues and lay leaders know not to expect a response to emails on Shabbat, and, if I'm really strong, not even until Monday morning.
3. **Nurture my closest relationships.** I was not surprised that many of those surveyed by HBS stated that emotional support from their partner at home was a big factor in their success. Just like with these top executives, my husband pushes me to be better at what I do. He believes in me, encourages me to take risks, and is an excellent sounding board for ideas.

He also takes care of so many practical details of our lives that would be impossible for me to do on my own. So, I know that it is my task to nurture him back in all the same ways.

My "rules" are hard to follow when life gets busy. They don't necessarily result in perfect balance, and, even if mastered, they are only a starting point. Hillel went on to ask, "If I am only for myself, Who am I?" Hillel is beckoning us, as leaders in our organizations, to take care of ourselves so that we will have the energy and the inclination to take care of others. If not now, when?

—Karen Wisialowski, a long-time member and past president of Peninsula Temple Sholom, joined the staff in 2015 as the congregation's first Chief Community Officer. Karen is passionate about family, Jewish community and social justice.

Karen is a former investment banker turned mom turned community volunteer turned Jewish community professional. Just prior to joining PTS, she served as Peninsula Region Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. 



# You Are What You Learn

Barbara Merson, Executive Director  
Temple, Shaaray Tefila, Bedford Corners, NY

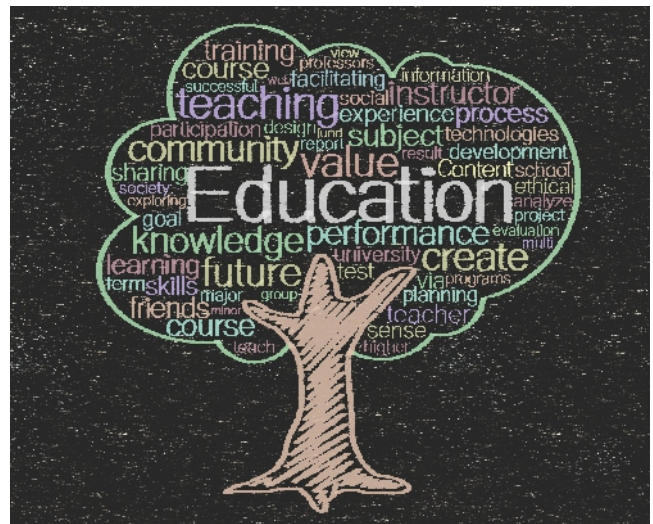
“You must be crazy!” This was the universal reaction I received when I announced that I was going to pursue a Ph.D. while continuing in my job as the executive director of a large synagogue. My response was always that I would be crazy not to take advantage of the opportunity to learn and grow. And I am pleased to report that based on the survey and interviews done for this article, many other executive directors agree with me. Learning is transformative – it allows us to move beyond our usual frame of reference, break our usual pattern of thoughts, and explore new ideas. Learning is collaborative – our peers can be our best teachers. And learning is enjoyable – especially since we can pick the time, place, and subject matter.

Before we look at some of the specifics of why, what, and how executive directors are learning, it is interesting to look at some of the literature on this subject, both Jewish and secular. A very relevant text can be found in the Talmud: Ben Zoma said, “Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone as it is said, ‘From all who would teach me have I gained understanding.’” (Pirke Avot 4:1). And certainly it seems like executive directors are taking this to heart. The depth and breadth of the educational endeavors described by the over 100 respondents to our survey are very impressive. What happens when we learn? Why can it be such a powerful experience? Possible answers are provided by two well-known theorists of adult learning, Jack Mezirow (1997) and Peter Jarvis (2015).

We all have a comfort zone which includes our usual “habits of mind” and “points of view” (Mezirow, 1997). In order to move out of our comfort zone and grow, there needs to be a disruption that causes us to reflect. For adults, education often provides this disrupting experience by providing new ideas, new people, and a new setting. This is why some of the most powerful education experiences take place at conferences – all forces are working together to create optimal conditions for mental transformation.

As executive directors, we often rely on our own often extensive experience to help us do our jobs. But sometimes this isn't enough. In the words of Peter Jarvis (2015), "Time does not stand still and our own experiences are only valid for a while and then we are confronted with a problem because our previous experiences do not help us a great deal in new situations" (p. 83). The experience of not knowing creates a "disjuncture" which is resolved by combining new learning with previous experiences to form a new mindset. In addition, much of what we know from experience is intuitive – we didn't consciously set out to learn it. When we learn in formal settings, we can both validate our intuitions and expand them to encompass situations that we have yet to experience.

To summarize the wisdom from the literature, education has the power to transform us and we should therefore learn as much as possible from as many sources as possible. This leads us to a more explicit exploration of why and how executive directors learn. Not surprisingly, the reason to learn most often cited in the survey is to gain new skills, mentioned by over 90% of respondents. However, there are a number of additional reasons why people learn, including bonding with colleagues, increasing Jewish knowledge, and





Torah lishma – learning for its own sake. In fact, over 80% of the survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I participate in educational experiences because I love to learn” and a number of respondents commented that in addition to formal educational programs, they learned through self-study including books and articles.

Both NATA and NAASE foster a culture of self-improvement through sponsored study experiences. Many survey respondents mentioned the NATA institute as not only a primary source of education but also a great chance to reboot and refocus. The following statement is representative of the general sentiments, “The NATA institute provided an opportunity for focused learning and great networking with peers. It was a chance to be away from the office and the day to day activities in a beautiful place with warm weather during the winter.” NAASE partners with the Jewish Theological Seminary for a week of Jewish learning. “We want to be well-rounded Jewish leaders,” states NAASE president Bernie Goldblatt. “Not all learning needs to be related to professional skills.”

Education can also help us appreciate different perspectives. One survey respondent reports, “Recently I attended a one-day workshop on classroom management – even though this is not my area of expertise. I enjoyed the nature of the class which was taught in an experiential manner rather than having someone lecture.” Another respondent mentioned, “I was proud to be part of the first ever gathering of Northern California Jewish professionals focused on child sexual abuse in our community. I learned a great deal about this subject from a wide array of experts.” My own experiences as an executive director in both MA and Ph.D. programs in educational leadership have given me an enhanced understanding of educational issues and how they relate to the life of the organization as a whole.

But perhaps the best evidence for why very busy executive directors make the time for education can be found in their own words:

*“When I was a new executive director, I remember meeting friends right after attending NATA institute and they were so enthusiastic about the experience. I*

*wanted to feel what they were feeling, which led me to the institute and ultimately to getting my FTA.”*

—Harvey M. Brenner, VP of Education, NAASE (former NATA member)

*“We should always be learning. If we want to be the best person we can be, there is no option – we have to keep learning. It’s like a Bar/Bat Mitzvah – your personal educational background should be the beginning, not the end of your education as an executive director.”*

—Abigail Goldberg Spiegel, VP of Education, NATA

*“When I came to this job, I did not have an MBA or a great deal of experience. The Columbia Business School certificate program for Jewish Professionals was serious and high level, and gave me many tangible takeaways that changed my work patterns in positive ways.”*

—Erica Leventhal, NAASE Member

*“Being a participant at the NAASE convention last year, especially since I was only three months in my job, was a fascinating and important experience. It was good to hear from some of the true veterans and learn that many of my suspicions were correct – few outside our group would believe some of the questions we are asked or the requests made of us.”—Survey Respondent*

*“I still have fond memories of NATA institute. It was wonderful to be so totally immersed in education, and bond so closely with the colleagues with whom I attended.”—Survey Respondent*

Executive directors find educational opportunities through many sources. Ninety-two percent of our survey respondents have attended a webinar over the past year and 78% have attended a conference/multi-day seminar. In selecting programs, the executive directors in our survey look at topic and convenience first. Cost and who is teaching are lesser factors in making a decision as to what programs to attend.

In addition, a number of academic institutions offer degree, certificate, and non-degree educational opportunities for Jewish professionals. “As we continue to work our vision gets bigger and we can’t only rely on our own experience,” states Rabbi Dr. Michael Shire, Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew College. “Jewish professionals need to continue their education and there are now options to do so through on-line programs that combine both Jewish and professional



topics.” Rabbi Dr. Shire was instrumental in creating a partnership between Hebrew College and Lesley University so that Jewish professionals could have the opportunity to participate in a Ph.D. program which combined Jewish and secular learning. As a member of the first cohort of this program, I really appreciate the depth of learning and expanded resources that education provided by two excellent academic institution. Yes, participating in a Ph.D. program is a great deal of work, but I have found that the returns to me personally and to my organization are equally great.

However, another more intangible decision factor in whether to participate in an educational program is whether or not the congregation appreciates and recognizes the effort of the executive director to continue their education. In some cases, educational programs increased the credibility of the executive director by giving them additional credentials. However, in other cases executive directors felt that their efforts were not appreciated, which made motivation difficult to sustain. While some of this comes from the congregation, there are definitely ways in which the executive director can encourage appreciation. Suggestions from interviewees and survey respondents


included speaking to the Board about major takeaways from conventions, giving back Jewish knowledge gained to the congregations by teaching classes or giving sermons, and including writing articles about educational topics for Temple publications. In short, it is a good idea to make sure that your educational funders (whether the funding is time, tuition, or both) see the returns from their investment.

The theme of this journal issue is “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” I hope that this article has made the case that one of the best ways that executive directors can be for themselves is through education. There is a whole world of knowledge out there that can help us do our jobs better and can help make us better people. Whether we want to acquire specific skills, bond with colleagues, gain perspective, grow

Jewishly, or just take a break from the daily routine to reflect, everyone can benefit from continuing their education. See you in class!

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—Barbara Merson has over 20 years of experience as a leader of Jewish communal organizations. She has served as Executive Director of Temple Shaaray Tefila of Northern Westchester New York since 2008. Barbara has an MBA in Finance, an MA in Religious Education, and is currently a PhD candidate in a joint program of Lesley University and Hebrew College. 



# Caring for Your Staff (and Yourself)

Steven D. Bram, M.S.S.A., FTA, The Murry Kleinn,  
Executive Director, Rodef Shalom Congregation, Pittsburgh, PA

*Are you suffering from burnout? Remember to care for yourself. Here are some of the ways that I, as an Executive Director, care for myself and suggestions for you to do the same.*

**Set boundaries.** I maintain respect within the temple community, by ensuring that congregants and staff are respectful of each other and me. I also encourage staff to set the same boundaries for themselves. This results in a hospitable and safe environment.

**Keep your distance.** Try not to live near the temple where you work. This allows you to have a transition time to move from work-mode to personal time. The distance makes one evaluate the level of seriousness of temple “emergencies” from those that are true emergencies. As a director, you work weekends. Remember to take your days off during the workweek. Flex your schedule to accommodate late meetings and keep overtime to a minimum.

**Relax.** Turn your mind off from work on your days off. Limit responding to emails to once or twice a day on your day off, especially on the Sabbath. Encourage staff to text or call if there is an urgent issue. Be certain to engage in the leisure activities that bring you enjoyment – yoga, exercising, day trips, spending time with friends or family or reading. Whatever interest makes you tick.

**Re-energize.** Use your vacation days and, if possible, negotiate a sabbatical. Arrange proper staff coverage and step away completely. I have taken a sabbatical myself and it is amazing how refreshed you feel afterward.

**Create an effective Shared Leadership Model.** Lean on your staff to make all of the wheels turn and don’t take on all of the responsibility yourself. Learn to delegate and stop creating the symptoms that add up to burnout.

**Let go of the reins.** Allow your executive assistant to manage your calendar. Provide criteria for the maximum number of meetings per day, schedule in “think time,” etc. I recently handed over calendar management and my assistant does a much better job than I do myself.

**STOP being a fireman.** You do not need to put out all of the fires. Delegate said fires and certain projects to your operations director or assistant. Focus on the big picture.

**Don’t be a cruise director.** Prioritize to include only the special events or functions in your synagogue. You don’t need to be present at every event.

**Continue to develop yourself.** I am a member of Leadership Pittsburgh. This allows me to network with

approximately 60 community leaders and learn the city’s culture. I also work with an executive coach to keep my skills current and continually improve myself. I expect my staff to develop themselves, so I walk the talk.

Utilize all of these aspects to remain calm and relevant. 

“Use your vacation days and, if possible, negotiate a sabbatical. Arrange proper staff coverage and step away completely.”







# The Challenges of the Ever-Changing Professional Life

Ed Altman, Executive Director  
Temple Sinai, Dresher, PA

Professional life, regardless of industry, title, or role always presents unique situations. As we become more seasoned, we learn to more effectively handle those situations. However, executive life within a synagogue brings with it a unique set of circumstances which add complexity and pressure to the work environment.

Factors that distinguish the professional world of the Executive Director/Temple Administrator include:

- the turnover of lay leadership every two years, variable/inconsistent priorities;
- unqualified individuals assuming leadership positions; and
- roles and responsibilities being somewhat changeable based on the interests and capabilities of our lay leaders.

Indeed, we all understand how quickly things can change within synagogue walls where prior fruitful alliances can morph into challenging relationships as leadership and priorities shift. In addition, professional and personal boundaries can be ambiguous, and work demands often far outpace the availability of reliable resources (professional/volunteer) to accomplish the work.

Learning how to successfully navigate such a complex and demanding work setting is critical for executive directors. Creating effective partnerships with lay and professional leaders, anticipating needs, knowing when and how to say “no,” and establishing a healthy work/life balance, all help to address the overload that often characterizes our worlds. Another less recognized but important opportunity is to establish a professional mentoring relationship with a qualified and trusted peer.

Most of us assume that we have the fundamental skills to deal with whatever challenges come our way. We are, after all, highly motivated, hardworking, creative professionals. The truth, however, is that the executive director’s panel of responsibility is particularly wide

ranging, embracing administration, facilities management, event planning, technology and security – not to mention supervising employees with limited compensation and career paths, and financial management within a fiscally constrained environment amidst shrinking membership. It takes time to hone the necessary skills in all these areas. No matter how long we have been in our profession, all of us can benefit from refining our functional or political skills, or could benefit from outside counsel to broaden our perspective.

Mentors act as important sounding boards, provide an unbiased viewpoint, and tap their own wisdom to help others. Most importantly, a mentoring relationship can provide a safe zone where issues and opportunities can be confidentially shared without worry of judgment or repercussion. It is not uncommon for individuals to get too close to a situation, thus precluding them from understanding another’s reaction or appreciating a different perspective. The result can be an emotional response rather than a strategic one. When we allow a mentor to test or modify our thinking and approach, we acknowledge that we need not hold all the answers and are mature enough to allow others to further shape our thought process and refine our responses.

There are countless reasons to become a mentee. You may be searching for guidance around a particular challenge. You may be working on something you’ve never encountered before. You may be interested in a new role or greater responsibility or have concern about the viability of your current position. While the reasons may vary, entering a mentoring relationship can be an important step in our personal and professional growth.

As a mentor, you serve as an advisor, sharing your knowledge and providing meaningful feedback to your mentee. There are several qualities that make for an effective mentor; they include generous listening, patience, honesty, and a supportive nature coupled with prior management background. Perhaps the most important quality is the mentor’s having experience with professional-lay leadership organizational models.




Mentoring can be topic specific or more generalized, short or long term, informal or structured. Regardless of choice, two of the most important elements that require up-front consideration in creating a mentee/mentor dialogue include (a) clarity around what is to be accomplished; and (b) the logistics to be relied upon. Will the relationship be grounded in face to face meetings, skype sessions, phone calls or a combination? Will contact be daily, weekly, or monthly? Will action items be documented and reviewed? Assuring up-front specificity around these parameters prevents the relationship from drifting into a vague and unfocused situation.

I would estimate that around 800 executive directors and temple administrators, representing a wealth of wide-ranging experience, hold positions in the US and Canada. By any measure, we belong to a small group charged with critically important work. Regardless of whether you have just entered this profession or have been a practicing professional for 25 years, the ability to

tap an external resource can be of invaluable benefit to ourselves and our congregations.

I hope many of us look to participate in a mentoring relationship as one more way of “being for ourselves.”

*—Ed Altman has been Temple Sinai’s Executive Director for the past six years. Prior to that he worked in a variety of industries including consulting, banking, telecommunications and technology. His experience includes being the President and COO of a technology services company, Chief Information Officer for a large telecom manufacturer, Senior Vice President of Technology Services for a major insurance carrier and senior consultant.*

*Ed serves on The Board of Governors of NAASE, he has program management responsibility for NAASE’s mentoring program, and currently serves as President of DVASA (the Delaware Valley Association of Synagogue Administrators).* 



## Confession of a Synagogue ED and the Path to Balance

Bekki Harris Kaplan, Executive Director  
Beth Emet The Free Synagogue, Evanston, IL

I will never forget the moment. The Search Committee had approved my appointment as Executive Director, and I was waiting in the library for my contract to be approved so I could then be introduced to the Board of Trustees. The then Senior Rabbi walks in and wishes me a *Mazal Tov*...and then the defining words that shaped so much of what was to come, “and now we have your soul.” I laughed it off then, but 14 years later those words still ring true.

I, as I’m sure is the case for many of you, spent the early years of my tenure throwing my entire self into the position, with fluid boundaries between work and personal life. I struggled with the balance, but found if I could not do it all, I was simply lazy...and kept pushing forward. After years of hearing from members who were in awe of my boundless energy, I finally came to the realization that I’m not only doing a disservice to

myself but to the organization as well. After all, to borrow the words from Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Something had to give.

Work-life balance is a life-long journey that needs to be navigated with deliberate choices, hard decisions, difficult conversations, occasional sacrifices, and equally important – regular evaluations. Much to my initial dismay, work-life balance satisfaction does not happen by following a one-size-fits-all approach espoused by the latest guru, but rather it’s a journey that requires pressing pause when I feel most overwhelmed and assess that which is important. After filling my personal library with numerous books and articles, here’s a few guiding principles that I’ve adopted as my own to bring more balance in my life, much of which are deeply rooted within our Jewish tradition.

continued>>>

**Love, care, and nurture yourself.** Find something that brings internal happiness, and do it regularly. And make the time to put yourself first.


**Introspect for a balanced life.** Carve out dedicated time with yourself each day. Increasingly we hear the health benefits of meditation – from disease and pain management, to sleep, to controlling emotions. A regular practice of meditation keeps one grounded in the present and can play out in powerful ways at times when you need it most. For those nayzers amongst us who say that they can't do it, five minutes sitting peacefully in a chair, focused on your breathing, is a great start. Or treat yourself to an adult education program that has incorporated contemplative Jewish practices such as Kabbalah or Mussar.

**Set Priorities.** Setting priorities and reevaluating on a regular basis brings balance when you are able to plan accordingly. Making sure that I also prepare for my own Shabbat is one way in which I clear my head from the past week and reassess for the coming, giving the peacefulness of the day (assuming no big programs) to clear my head and re-align.

**Be present with your emotions and evoke happiness whenever possible.** Much of what can be gleaned from mindfulness training is creating awareness of habits and patterns that dictate our lives, and teach us how to pause before reacting. By learning

to be present in those moments, we build a capacity that will serve us well for those all too familiar daily moments when we need to act from a higher place. And while mindfulness itself is not a practice that is specific to any religious tradition, increasingly there are opportunities that integrate the powerful techniques with profound intellectual, ethical, and spiritual wisdom of Jewish tradition.

Through this ongoing exploration I've come to conclude that work and life can never be completely in balance. But as we grow and change, our priorities and needs shift as well, and the balance will follow accordingly. The focus remains on our need for greater meaning, and ultimately it's incumbent upon each of us to take care of ourselves so we can express our best selves and serve our communities with a gentle heart. And this, I now believe, is what it means to serve with our soul.

—Bekki Harris Kaplan joined Beth Emet's professional team in July 2001 after working as the Associate Executive Director and Membership Director at Temple Sholom of Chicago. In addition to supervising the functioning of Beth Emet's day-to-day operations and working closely with leadership, she focuses her abundant energy and enthusiasm on helping congregants connect with one another and with the community as a whole. 

*“If I am not for myself alone, who will be for me?”*  
—Hillel

NATA members participate in social action projects during the recent NATA Conference



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## NATA Mission

The National Association for Temple Administration (NATA) is an active professional network committed to Judaic principles of ethics and integrity.

NATA's mission is to support its members by:

- providing education and training activities and standards
- providing its members and their congregations with access to NATA resources
- advocating for the profession of Temple Administration
- serving as a resource to the Union for Reform Judaism

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## NAASE Mission

The North American Association of Synagogue Executives (NAASE) is a Jewish membership organization serving the professional needs of executives of Conservative Synagogues. NAASE serves as the central resource for professional development, job placement, information-sharing, and peer support for executives serving in Conservative congregations, and to raise the profile of the Association in the Conservative Movement and the Jewish Community.

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