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Urban Synagogues-Changing Relationship with Tikkun Olam

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May 2016

A Research Project

**Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester,
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the degree of Master of Arts in the department of International Development,
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And accepted on the recommendation of

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ABSTRACT

Urban Synagogues-Changing Relationship with Tikkun Olam

Synagogues in their urban context are searching for ways to responsibly act on the value of tikkun olam. Tikkun olam has adapted in the American context but in its essence is Jewish value of repairing the world. Five rabbis and one organizer were interviewed to shed light on the intricate dynamic between Jewish synagogues and social justice work in their city. The five synagogues were challenged by the Jewish call to social justice, and challenges that influenced their vision for a better world. Therefore, rabbis need to strike a balance between appeasing internal issues and being a present force in issues of justice. Once they find this equilibrium, synagogues will be able to meet the multiple needs of the Jewish community and the community at large.

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Introduction

Many Jewish Americans connect to their Jewish identity through the value of tikkun olam, or repairing the world (Cooper, 16). The value of tikkun olam serves as a link for American Jews to their Jewish identity as they assimilated into American society. Synagogues remain central institutions that develop and support Jewish identity development through shared values and relationships (Kaufman, 3). Therefore, synagogues must grapple with how best to pursue the value of tikkun olam in their institutional context. Challenges for acting upon the value of social justice in the city arise from differing understandings of how to fulfill the value of tikkun olam and respecting multiple perspectives in the synagogue.

Synagogues are different from other organizations because they are autonomous as individual entities yet affiliated with a broader network of similar entities. Synagogues value their individual identity, values and way of engaging with the Jewish faith and are still supported by other synagogues in their denomination and the denominational institutions. Synagogues use different elements of Judaism to create a collective identity for their institution and one relevant way to connect the community is through tikkun olam. Social justice efforts create an avenue for participation and connection with the Jewish faith that may not otherwise exist for the members of the community.

Though there is a wide range of opinions on what constitutes tikkun olam, American Jews are finding meaning in acting for justice regardless of these disagreements. The 2013 PEW study uncovered that the Jewish community tends to be more progressive in their future vision of America. "Most

Jews are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the country today; 56% say they are dissatisfied, compared with 39% who are satisfied. Among the general public, 64% express dissatisfaction with the way things are going in the country, while 31% say they are satisfied” (PEW, 2013). In comparison to the non-Jewish American, an American Jew is more critical of the current circumstance of the country. The dissatisfaction of American Jews emphasizes a need for change in the current reality.

In order to accomplish this vision for a better world, Jewish institutions need to shift their focus to meet that need of the liberal Jewish communities. Although the older generation was less engaged in American politics, the Jewish community of the 20th century supported the Democratic Party more than those of Republicans (Moore, 229). The awakening of the American Jewish community in political efforts displays a shift in their American identity. “At home in the Democratic party, or at least the liberal urban wing of it, second generation Jews increasingly considered Jewish and Democratic concerns to be interwoven” (Moore, 228). The American Jewish Identity Survey in 2001 uncovered that 55% of people who defined themselves as Jews by religion were Democrats and 13% considered themselves Republican. Contrastingly, 41% of Jews of no religion defined themselves as Democrats, while 13% of Jews of no religion considered themselves Republicans. Therefore, Jewish Americans are more comfortable with the Democratic values and therefore support a hands on approach to social justice efforts in the country.

A complex relationship exists between synagogues and social justice in their cities. Jewish institutions are still called to act in solidarity with

marginalized communities, and work for justice, even though there are complications with tikkun olam. After interviewing five rabbis and one community organizer it was evident that synagogues are interested in understanding how to pursue social justice in their contexts. This study aims to highlight the underlying factors that challenge and contribute to the relationship between synagogues, social justice, and their urban environments.

Commonalities arose throughout the conversations which included a lack of institutional capacity for social justice, internal debates surrounding issues, community organizing as a mean for social justice, strong relationships with the broader denomination, and the political climate. Understanding the common challenges and strengths with tikkun olam is helpful for Jewish institutions to cater programming and efforts that reflect the current realities of the Jewish community.

Conceptual Framework

Many pieces construct the American Jewish relationship with tikkun olam. Individual Jews are foundational in the context of social justice, but the presence of Jewish institutions is less present in the struggle for justice. Jewish Americans exist in a polarity between the desire to establish one cohesive community while also respecting each individual's needs and perspectives. Therefore, when analyzing the Jewish community's engagement or perspective it is important to respect the multitude and dynamics of the community. The Americanization of tikkun olam, the desire to maintain synagogues as relevant structures for Jews, adopting community organizing and new focus on relational

Judaism, and overall denominational direction of tikkun olam help create a framework to understand the multiple pieces of social justice in the Jewish context.

American Value of Tikkun Olam

Language is a powerful tool for expressing values whether used intentionally or unintentionally and therefore people interpret words differently. The ability to morph and change meaning can create a clash of interpretation. Tikkun olam is a Hebrew word that is defined and used in a range of different ways. Acknowledging the variety of meaning of tikkun olam helps highlight how multiple synagogues believe tikkun olam is central to their identity but act upon it in their own way.

Tikkun olam is an ancient Hebrew term, used to describe the desire to repair the world. “I’taken olam bemaichut Shaddai—to give permanence and stability to society by establishing the kingdom of God on earth amongst men. We have no other goal. Judaism has no other aim” (Krasner, 27). The Hebrew term is rooted in the bible, and holds multiple layers of meaning. For example, the Kabbalistic (Jewish mysticism) interprets tikkun olam as a process of everlasting repair (Cooper, 14). While the Hebrew term is layered with meaning and complexities, English language has one-dimensional words to describe different elements of “repairing the world” including charity, social action and social justice. Yet, depending on who is speaking, the meaning of tikkun olam fluctuates based on its English counterparts (Cooper, 2013). Therefore the term itself cannot be limited only to a one dimensional context, rather, it continues, builds, and develops how Jewish communities engage in community efforts.

Jewish institutions value tikkun olam and shape it to meet their perspective of the world. Conversations that stem from the value shape how synagogues approach social justice and their view points on the urban environment. When synagogues value tikkun olam it is unclear what element of the term they value, is it social justice, social action, charity or a combination. While Jews are empowered by their Jewish identity through actions of tikkun olam (Cooper, 16), there is a need for a clear definition for the term on a Jewish level. This is one of the main challenges of having a layered word represent different elements of social responsibility.

Over time the use of tikkun olam changed in the American Jewish context. A conservative rabbi named Rabbi Schulweis dedicated himself to understanding the role of tikkun olam in the American context in 1940. He came to the understanding that tikkun olam played a central role in the Jewish 'struggle', and that "Judaism must open itself 'to those interests- economic, social, cultural- more often relegated to the secular in doctrinally- centered theology'" (Krasner, 69). The Reform movement historical usage of the word differed. They used terms like social justice and social action, but shifted towards the term tikkun olam in the 1960s (Krasner, 67). While both the Reform and Conservative denominations cultivate different levels of meaning in the term, the Orthodox community originally used tikkun olam to define internal processes and motivations (Cooper, 18). The different interpretations and usages of the term display how the approach to tikkun olam is different.

There is a disagreement today on what defines actualization of tikkun olam. This disagreement complicates the Jewish collective value of tikkun olam

in synagogue life, because each synagogue has agency to define any action as tikkun olam. Many Jewish leaders interpret tikkun olam as any action towards justice by a Jewish person. “Jews can add more meaning to their good deeds if they are taught to regard them not only as acts of humanitarianism but as the fulfillment of mitzvot. That perspective links them to the Jewish community past and present, to the Jewish tradition, and to God” (Dorff, 102). While the intrinsic Jewishness of an act is true for some, others find that this inherent link between Jewishness and action to be limiting. While this disagreement is important to acknowledge, the argument is complex and creates barriers. Therefore, for this research, all social justice- oriented actions by Jews with other Jews is tikkun olam.

Yet this misconfigured unclear definition of tikkun olam is still one of the central connections liberal Jews feel toward their religion. In America, the value of tikkun olam connects liberal Jews to their religion.

“The secret of the rise of tikkun olam was its power to give meaning to Jewish identity by reinforcing liberal political and social values that were already deeply ingrained in the vast majority of American Jews. Most Jews had a vague sense of correlation between their Judaism and their liberalism. Tikkun olam legitimized it and gave it a name. Tikkun olam promises much and demands comparatively little in the way of sacrifice” (Krasner, 91).

This inability to understand tikkun olam is actually a powerful tool for Jewish institutions to establish their own definition and cohesive identity in regards to the socially oriented projects they choose to take on and make their own.

Synagogue Relevancy in America

Synagogues have undergone different processes throughout their existence in the American context. Synagogue relevancy is crucial for their

ability to meet the current realities of the community. In the 1800s ten synagogues existed in America, and by the 1850s there were ninety synagogues in the U.S. (Karp, 5). Although synagogues have remained an institution for centuries they evolve with the current realities and context of the time.

The civil war sparked a passion for American Jews to live a secular life “...free of religious discipline, but at the same time demanded that American Jewry maintain a communal religious identity” (Karp, 41) Jewish Americans strived to balance the freedom provided by American life while remaining faithful to Jewish values. Therefore, the structures in place for Jewish Americans needed to evolve with this lifestyle shift. Synagogues molded and structured themselves to meet both the religious and secular needs (Kaufman, 15). Today freedom is a value that continues to shape the meaning of Jewish life in America.

In 2001, the American Jewish Identity Survey reported that about one million households were affiliated with a Jewish congregation, which was a dramatic increase from 1990, when there 880,000 affiliated Jews (Meyer, et.al) The 2013 PEW study uncovered that 31% of Jewish Americans belonged to a synagogue, and 18% were members of another Jewish organization. More Jewish Americans are not members of Jewish organizations. These statistics highlight that synagogues currently are struggling to establish a relevant, and cohesive identity for 69% of Jewish Americans. Snapshots of the history of American synagogues and the current process of rebuilding congregational membership highlight the challenges facing synagogues today.

Saul Alinsky's Community Organizing

Community organizing is a tool used to agitate powers to create change in communities. Unlike other methods of establishing change, like community building or others, community organizing is a method of engaging people in action through viewing the current realities of a situation, and accomplishing an attainable vision. Community organizing evolved into one of the most central tools for establishing change in community. One person who institutionalized community organizing was Saul Alinsky, who accomplished his vision for a better world through this effort. Organizations, institutions, organizers, leaders, and many other community members embody Saul Alinsky's methods for producing a new environment for just communities.

Alinsky wrote Rules for Radicals for people who are looking to create change in the world, not as an intellectual exercise. "What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be... In this book we are concerned with how to create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the people; to realize the democratic dream of equality, justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which man can have the change to live by values that give meaning to life. 'Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.' This means revolution" (4). The book outlines specific steps and understandings on how to anger the status quo and create the vision for a better world. Alinsky's model of community organizing is a way of accomplishing tikkun olam because it makes

communities choose what side they are on, and Jews are called to be on the side of justice.

Power is central to Alinsky's understanding of creating change. In Alinsky's writing, three classes exist in society: The Haves, The Have-Nots and the Have-Little. These classes are engaging in a power-dynamic and a deconstruction of that power is necessary to create a societal shift. A revolution is won when all people join together for social justice because everyone's liberation is interconnected (Alinsky). Power and the "wins" are constantly changing within the current reality of the community. Accepting that the realities are constantly changing and the wins should also be changing is a way to produce actual change (Alinsky, 11). Power and wins are rooted in deciding what efforts are needed and how to maintain those efforts.

Alinsky focuses in the book on the politicization of words, specifically words that have power and words that do not. "The words most common in politics have become stained with human hurts, hopes and frustrated. All of them are loaded with popular opprobrium and their use results in a conditioned, negative and emotional response" (49). Similarly to the analysis of tikkun olam above, words change over time through overuse and over politicized. Different words can change over time and can morph into new meaning. Using words as tools, like politics, is helpful to calling towards action in a new way.

Needless to say, many people organizations and activists have found meaning in the community organizing model. From labor unions, to school boards, to housing, every issue has found need and utilization in community organizing tactics. While it has evolved into different forms, faith based

communities and coalitions use this model of community organizing to build constituents and power (bjae.org) Many organizations utilize community organizing tools for internal efforts and also to gain an understanding of what the community needs and how to move them towards justice and a more thoughtful world.

Relational Judaism

Many Jewish professionals have joined the understanding of the importance of community organizing in the internal and external practices of the synagogue. One of those people, Rob Wolfson, took it a step farther and has completely adapted his own way of engaging people in the Jewish institutions through relationships and connections.

Rob Wolfson created a new way of engaging with Judaism that emphasizes covenants between congregants and each other, their leadership, and mirroring that covenant with the biblical relationships with characters and God. Wolfson realized through observation and his own experience that the Jewish people's membership to synagogue life was declining. He understood this decline as a way as a problem of intentional and positive relationships in the synagogue structure. "People will come to synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, Jewish Federations, and other Jewish organizations for programs, but they will stay for relationships" (Wolfson, 2). As someone who found connection and meaning and connection in the Jewish world, Wolfson works diligently on establishing a place that meets the need of the broader community.

Ron Wolfson has undertaken the desire to reengage American Jews in Jewish institutions. His book, *Relational Judaism* outlines his relationship-

focused approach to spark interest in the uninterested. Relationships are more powerful than programs, and therefore the most successful modern synagogues are prioritizing relationship building through community organizing tactics (Wolfson, 2013). Along with case studies of synagogues that have undergone this process of re-centering their congregational life around relationships, he utilized Congregational Based Community Organizing to help synagogues redirect their efforts towards Relational Judaism. The Saul Alinsky focused approach originates from the Industrial Arts Foundation (IAF) and focuses on building a leadership team to accomplish three goals: build power for social and economic justice, transform the synagogue into a congregation in which members are more deeply connected to one another, and to shape synagogues into “places where activists want to be” (Wolfson, 108). Relational Judaism inspired many rabbis to redefine their congregational life and approach their synagogue work with a modern twist. The new perspective of relationship focused community is key to Wolfson’s theory and to those that undertook his method of pursuing change.

Denominational Direction of Tikkun Olam

Synagogues in America are not isolated entities, rather they belong to a community of synagogues that share their denominational affiliation. The most well-known denominations of Judaism are Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. Yet the denominations only represent a portion of the multifaceted Jewish community. While tikkun olam is a value in all aspects of Judaism, the Reform and Conservative movements historically worked on social justice projects (Kaplan, Sarna). Although in different ways, both Conservative and

Reform Judaism engage with questions of tikkun olam and American values on a broader religious level. The elite religious institutions that serve as a guide for Conservative Judaism are the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly, and for the Reform movement this structure is the Union for Reform Judaism and its subsidiary, the Religion Action Center.

A distinction between elite and folk religion is necessary when exploring the relationship between synagogues and social justice in urban contexts. According to Liebman, unlike the term institutional religion, elite religion is understood as the beliefs and religious symbols. The decentralized nature of Conservative and Reform Judaism emphasizes the need to separate elite religion from a more institutional perspective about religion. “The very mention of the words **requirement and obligatory** send many Reform Jews screaming to the hills” (Kaplan 3). Folk religion is the more spiritual religious practice, and often represents a spectrum of religious interpretations. “As far as elite religion is concerned, folk religion is not a movement, but an error or a set of errors shared by many people” (Liebman, 1). Each temple has their own method of prioritizing specific Jewish values. “Reform Judaism presents us with challenges because there is no central decision-making body that has authority to make policies that are obligatory and binding” (Kaplan, 3). Therefore, the Union for Reform Judaism and the Religion Action Center are not solely defining institutional direction of the movement’s direction, but instead help shape interpretation and collective action.

The Religious Action Center is a non-partisan non-profit organization that is dedicated to American public policies that reflect the value of tikkun olam

(RAC.org). The president of the Religious Action Center, Rabbi Jonah Pesner is an experienced community organizer who has worked diligently on issues of justice. “Our folks want to be a part of the solution. And they want the Reform movement to stand for that justice. They want to see America take on the racial and economic disparities and for us to be a leader, as we were in the civil rights era and at other times” (Boorstein, 2015). The work of the Union for Reform Judaism focuses on strengthening communities, and provides outlets for exploring the meaning of being a Jew through “advocacy campaigns, hands on volunteering opportunities, and training for leaders” to ensure “religious freedom, pluralism, acceptance, and justice” (URJ.org). The Religious Action Center is located in Washington D.C. and provides space for political advocacy Reform Judaism. As an organization, it is focused on over seventy different issues, including economic justice, civil rights, and religious liberty.

The elite Conservative Jewish institutions are the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. The Rabbinical Assembly was founded in 1901 as an institution that shapes daily elements of a Conservative Jewish person’s life. (rabbinicalassembly.org). As an international organization, the Rabbinical Assembly focus on passing resolutions relevant on an international lens that focus on general social justice issues, civil rights, environment, food justice and hunger, LGBTQ community, and more. The resolutions passed by the Rabbinical Assembly focused on Israel and religious issues, and less focused on national matters of justice (rabbinical assembly.org).

The Union for Conservative Judaism is a community of Conservative Religious communities that are dedicated towards creating a vibrant Jewish life (USCJ.org). One of the methods of establishing a vibrant Jewish life is through tikkun olam. In 2001 the Union for Conservative Judaism drafted a strategic plan commission to reenergize the Conservative movement. Therefore, they suggest that instead of isolated individual actions of justice, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism wants to support collective efforts to improve social justice, community service or environmental programs” (Ukeles, 2011). Although only a strategic plan draft, it highlights that the Conservative movement understands efforts of social justice are important.

Methodology

Intentional steps were taken in order to responsibly understand the relationship between synagogues and social justice in their urban contexts. Five rabbis, and one community organizer from five different synagogues participated in interviews that lasted between twenty minutes and an hour. All of the synagogues included in the study are located an hour range between Boston, MA and Worcester, MA. Each synagogue was coded as Synagogue A, Synagogue B, Synagogue C, Synagogue D, and Synagogue E.

The synagogues in the study are associated with Reform or Conservative movement. While each denomination has distinct ideologically differences, they both responded to their American context and changed practices in order to remain relevant. For the purpose of the study, there is no

differentiation between the two branches of Judaism, rather they will be referred homogenously as “synagogue”.

An International Review Board application was reviewed and approved in order to interview the five rabbis and community organizer. Names of the rabbis, synagogues, community organizer, and the specifics about the synagogue’s location are protected by a consent form that guarantees confidentiality of the key informants. Signed consent forms were collected in person or by email.

Rabbis are the representatives of the synagogue and responsible for accomplishing the mission and vision. The rabbi of a congregation is responsible for knowing where the direction of energy is in a congregation both in the past, present, and a potential future. As a result, this study consists of interviews with rabbis. The sixth interview was conducted with a community organizer at one of the congregations. One of his responsibilities is to deepen the congregational involvement in social justice, and facilitate structures for addressing the tikkun olam interests of the congregation. Within those conversations, the language used to describe efforts of social justice by the key informant was mirrored by the interviewer. In order to deepen the conversation with the key informants, the terminology used in the interviews mirrored the language used by interviewee. For instance, if a rabbi used the term “social justice” instead of “tikkun olam”, the interviewer also used the term, “social justice” in regards to those actions. The interviews reinforce shared themes between Synagogues, highlighting common challenges with individualized approaches in regards to social justice.

A few limitations arose in the course of the study. For one, scheduling interviews was a challenge. Many rabbis were contacted to participate in the study but they did not respond, or were unable to participate because of their busy schedules. Rabbis hold a range of responsibilities, such as a death in the congregation, a trip to Israel, or a full schedule of internal meetings. Five rabbis and one community organizer were available and eager to participate but constructed a smaller sample size. Therefore it was necessary to combine Reform and Conservative synagogues together. In further studies a larger sample size will bring more depth to the research, and make room to analyze the differences between the two denominations.

Geography was also a limitation in this study. In between Boston, MA and Worcester, MA there is a range of urban environments and cultural compositions that construct the communities. Future studies around synagogues and social justice should analyze one synagogue in depth, interviewing the different leaders, members, and employees that create the fabric of the institution. Analyzing one synagogue would reflect the multiple levels and dimensions that exist when a synagogue engages in social justice.

Findings

The way each synagogue operates is distinct and is influenced by their own culture, history and personality. Individual qualities of the synagogue are essential in understanding the individual challenges and opportunities in regard to tikkun olam in their urban context. Below is a table that expresses the size of the congregation, year established, number of rabbis and if there is an

institutionalized interfaith partnership. These characteristics outlines why each synagogue interacts in their specific way.

Name of Synagogue	Decade Established	Size of the Congregation	Number of Rabbis	Interfaith Partnership
A	1850s	1300-1400 families,	4	Yes
B	1950s	800-900 families	3	Yes
C	1940s	300-400 families	3	Yes
D	1920s	250 congregants	1	Yes
E	1920s	300-400 families	1	No

Synagogue A is an established synagogue, with a rich history. It is locally and nationally recognized for its continuous commitment to social justice. In the synagogue, there are multiple paths available for community engagement that involve different types of social justice efforts. If an avenue does not exist currently, the community organizer, and lay leaders help create a social justice initiative with excited congregants. As a powerful force in the interfaith organizing community, the synagogue leverages its institutional faith based partnerships to lobby for issues of economic, racial, and social justice. The members have a high level of agreement in regards to social justice efforts in the city. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the congregants’

thoughts on social justice and other issues, the community organizer and other congregational leaders facilitate community conversations.

Currently, Synagogue B is focused on relationship and connection building in the congregation. The rabbi is dedicated to cultivating excitement around Judaism for current and potential members. Congregants at Synagogue B are sponsoring a village in Mexico, selling their products and crafts in their synagogue. They are associated with the interfaith organization in their community but are not as keen to participate in every action. The board, clergy, and president developed a protocol to outline how to mitigate disagreements that arise around social justice issues. In the past the synagogue facilitated Mitzvah Day (one day of direct action), donated presents on Hannukah, and sponsored food drives. Recently the synagogue decided to postpone Mitzvah day indefinitely to reevaluate how to effectively participate in social justice work.

In the past year, Synagogue C refocused their energy and institutional direction to adopt the values and approaches of Relational Judaism. The rabbi is committed to deepening congregational connections to each other, and will then accomplish the goals of the congregation. The relational model of Judaism guides every aspect of their synagogue life. Continually, the rabbi at Synagogue C emphasized their bottom-up approach. Therefore, when choosing a social justice project, congregants meet with the community organizing team, a group at the synagogue, in one-on-one and house meetings. The outcome of the community organizing efforts are unanimously agreed upon because as a very liberal congregation there is limited disagreement. Synagogue C's commitment to social justice work is interwoven with their relationship building model.

Synagogue D is experiencing a unique, all-encompassing challenge. Two synagogues in the community merged together to create Synagogue D as a result of an array of factors. The rabbi is currently grappling with creating a cohesive synagogue identity while also respecting the special traits of each preexisting congregations. Her experience at her previous congregation in the south prioritized social justice and activism, but her position at Synagogue D is focused on cohesion. Tikkun olam efforts on an institutional level are focused on direct service instead of systemic change. While individual members are involved in social justice efforts on their own, the synagogue is not an active space for those projects. In her future vision for the congregation, the rabbi at Synagogue D hopes to refocus energy towards social justice work.

The primary tikkun olam efforts of Synagogue E are direct service. They host food drives, volunteer at soup kitchens, and organize traditional Bnai Mitzvah projects. The rabbi hopes to build an awareness of local issues in her congregants as her members focus more on international issues. She is working on building relationships with other communities in the city in order to spark a desire to act locally. The intention is to connect the congregants to individual's experiences to develop empathy and understand that local issues influence real people. Along with this internal process, Synagogue E recently joined the local interfaith organization to partner to lobby for economic efforts.

Analysis

Despite each synagogues unique set of challenges and strengths, there are common themes between the synagogues. Each common thread provides an understanding to the visibility of synagogues in regards to social justice issues. The themes that impact the synagogue's involvement in social justice in the urban context were their institutional capacity, the presence of internal debates, the value of community organizing and relationship building, the relationship with their broader denomination, and the political climate of the time. Understanding these emerging themes help determine what attributes and characteristics help a synagogue successfully engage in tikkun olam projects in their urban environments.

Institutional Capacity

Although each rabbi emphasized the importance of tikkun olam to their synagogue, other factors influence their ability to participate in social justice initiatives. The ideal for the congregation is to address the internal needs of the congregation while also participating in efforts of justice in their communities. Other factors arise that challenge the desire to be present in social justice initiatives. Each synagogue had a distinct point of view on how the range of factors influenced their ability to participate in social justice efforts. Although the barriers differed, their presence highlighted a general inability to work on larger issues when internal problems exist.

Rabbis are dedicated to creating relevant and cohesive spaces for their congregational members. The rabbi at Synagogue B described that, in synagogue life, there are moments of peaks and valleys with leadership roles in the congregation. Peaks and valleys define whether or not the synagogue is in

a state of growth, or if they are deficient and need rebuilding efforts. In this moment, Synagogue B is in a valley, and therefore is dedicating energy and effort towards rebuilding their core team. Difficulties in the context of social justice in the community arise when there is no core leadership that drive the congregation towards those actions. This lack of leadership leaves them in a lull of tikkun olam involvement. Therefore, they are in a process of cultivating leadership and understanding who is excited by what. Similarly, Synagogue A is at a point in which a certain part of their congregation is participating in social justice efforts. Members in their 50s and 60s are more involved in direct action than other age groups of the synagogue. While Synagogue A is at a peak in their synagogue leadership, they still are in a process of understanding why certain members are engaged while others are not. Even with a strong base of leaders working towards justice, it is important to readdress and understand how to engage potential leaders in these processes.

Synagogue D is facing a unique transitional period that influence its ability to participate in tikkun olam in their communities. Two synagogues have merged together to create Synagogue D, and their current goal is to establish one cohesive congregation. The challenge for the rabbi at Synagogue D is to respect each of the synagogue's personalities, while also building a new space that uplifts the commonalities. Therefore, there is a limited amount of energy available to focus on issues outwardly when congregational identity is not consistent or defined. As a synagogue they have limited capacity to work on social justice issues, but individuals of the congregation are active members of causes for justice. While the rabbi at Synagogue D emphasized how important

tikkun olam is to her identity, she recognized that by addressing the current realities of her congregation, they will be better partners for social justice in the future. She hopes in the future the synagogue will act as a center for social justice for their congregational members who are engaged in social justice work individually. The cohesive identity is a more pressing issue for the congregation than external factors of justice. The lack of time and energy is a strong factor of why Synagogue D is not present in broader community causes.

The rabbi at Synagogue D mentioned that the amount of time and energy available in a day is a factor in regards to participation in social justice work. Staff and volunteers are already working to capacity based on all of their responsibilities. Synagogue C experiences this challenge in its own way. Every action and effort from Synagogue C, both internally and externally is done in a Jewish lens in the context of action, study and worship. Social justice projects are facilitated through the lens of community organizing to improve Jewish life. The social justice leaders of Synagogue C make space for conversation then work towards social action. A tension arises in synagogue involvement in social justice in both of these cases because of staff capacity and the time it takes leaders to engage the community.

Internal Debates

When working towards justice, there is a need for synagogues to engage in internal conversations about their chosen stances. Efforts of tikkun olam inherently take a stand, and therefore the leadership needs to engage their congregation on conversations surrounding the issues. While some synagogues experience internal disputes regarding specific issues, two of the

sample synagogues have a high level of agreement within their respective congregations. For some synagogues engaging in internal debates before standing up for specific issues is essential in order to best represent the beliefs of the congregation.

Synagogue C is located in a liberal neighborhood, with liberal congregants with a high level of agreement. Their recent focus has been on building relationships, and the efforts of community building support the rabbi's understanding of his constituents. The rabbi at Synagogue C mentioned the likely presence a small minority with conservative view points who oppose the direction of the congregation. Yet, those conservative viewpoints rarely arise in internal discussions around social justice. Similarly, Synagogue A has a high level of agreement within the congregation, because of their longstanding reputation as a liberal congregation. Even with the high level of agreement, sometimes congregants feel tension around economic issues and stances the congregation takes. For example, the community organizer of the congregation typically sends an email blast of social justice opportunities in the community; one of the efforts in the blast was a ballot measure in Massachusetts that raised taxes on incomes over a million dollars. After the email was sent, many congregants emailed the community organizer with angry responses, which highlighted to him how divided the congregation was in terms of economic issues. Even as a synagogue with high level of agreement, they decided to hold a community conversation around issues of economics. From his point of view, it was more divisive to talk about divisive taxes in a liberal congregation than it was to discuss LGBTQ rights.

An interesting tension arose when discussing interfaith organizing. Synagogue A and C congregants supported their relationship with the interfaith organization, while Synagogue C highlighted some tensions. The rabbi at synagogue C mentioned that while joining the interfaith organization positively influenced his congregation, it provoked internal debates. Some congregants disagreed with the stances taken by the interfaith organization, and felt a lack of agency present through this partnership. Therefore, in order to appease this internal debate, the rabbi, board, and president created a protocol to create a clear process that addresses how a synagogue will resolve internal debates regarding specific issues. The need for a distinct process to address internal debates highlights that partnerships between the synagogues and community organizations are constantly readdressed and need intentionality.

Currently, Synagogue B is in the process of discussing the tension of whether a day of action actually constitutes tikkun olam or if a more continuous action is needed to create system change. This debate reflects the shift in the meaning of tikkun olam, towards an approach of steady participation in specific similar to the approach of Synagogue A, and Synagogue C. Synagogue B used to facilitate a “mitzvah day” in which everyone in the congregation had an opportunity to participate in a day of social justice. Recently, the congregation decided to postpone the day of action to process, and creatively imagine a new alternative. With the present conversation, Synagogue B will still have a mitzvah mall, but will include more community-oriented non-profits. The mitzvah mall is an event in which non-profits set up booths to explain their organizations and members of the community learn about their efforts, while donating money.

In the past, the event only included Jewish non-profits, but they now include half non-Jewish and half Jewish organizations. While this event still follows the old ideology of what tikkun olam is, Synagogue B is in the midst of taking on these struggles and working through the meaning of their actions.

The rabbi at Synagogue D understands her job as learning to navigate the tension between her beliefs, and the current politics of the congregation. With intention, she works to move her congregants towards current issues. Her sermons on the pulpit are a space for her to speak to that tension. She does this through Jewish text, and connecting issues of justice to religious text. At her previous congregation in the South, she officiated a same sex marriage when her congregation was not in agreement on the issue. While some supported her choice, others were less pleased. This action created space for conversation in her congregation around same sex marriage. Her actions highlighted that sometimes a need arises to mitigate the disconnection between the rabbi's belief on specific issues and the stances of the congregation. All of the rabbis in this study, except the rabbi at synagogue B, spoke about their usage of the pulpit to tactfully connect Jewish texts with social justice efforts. Individual conversations are necessary after a political sermon because they challenge some of the beliefs of the congregants.

While internal debates block actions of social justice, they also show awareness and a need present. For those reasons and more, the rabbi at Synagogue E craves internal discussion and debates. For her, those conversations are ways to expose and ignite interest in issues in her community. Although internal debates provide challenges, they also provide an

opportunity to call the congregation towards action. Yet to her, disagreement builds a much needed acknowledgement that the issues in the community are real even if the congregants do not directly face them, or have relationship with them. She highlighted that her community is a hub for refugee resettlement, but because the Jewish neighborhood is further away from where the majority of the refugees live, it feels less relevant to them. Therefore, sparking internal debates and conversations around refugee resettlement internally and with the refugee community will help move people towards action.

The Value of Community Organizing

Community organizing is a trend used by Jewish institutions to engage their constituents on different issues. The community organizing approach is a way for synagogues to highlight passions of the congregants both specifically for social justice efforts, and generally for synagogue life. For some congregations, like Synagogue A and Synagogue C, community organizing is engrained in their culture. Synagogue B utilizes the tools of community organizing to help them understand how to partner with issues of justice more effectively based on the opinions of the congregation.

Relational Judaism is the fundamental belief of the rabbi at Synagogue C. He recently shifted his ideology towards building relationships inside and outside the synagogue. Community organizing tactics move the congregation towards a Jewish life, focused around understanding their Jewishness and engaging in critical Jewish acts. Synagogue C is in the process of designing a new building and the team working on the redesign are intentionally creating a

building that facilitates connection building. All of these examples highlight how central Relational Judaism is to the rabbi of the congregation.

Relationship building and connections are a way for synagogue to engage in social justice. Community relationships and community organizing help create a sense of accountability and creates a support network when rabbis take a stand on specific issues. Building relationships and internal processes are a key component to community organizing when engaging in external struggles in a community.

Interfaith coalitions utilize community organizing techniques successfully to accomplish a wide range of “wins”. While congregants at Synagogue A appreciate their connection the interfaith organization, congregants at Synagogue B were challenged by the loss of agency in social justice causes. Congregations felt uncomfortable with “just going along” with the campaigns of the interfaith organization, and it was difficult for them to process how to include their individual voice in the coalition. Synagogue B began an internal process in order to understand what their individual voice was in regards to social justice. Their shared identity is beginning to unfold through house meetings and one-on-one conversations. After this internal process, the rabbi will have a stronger understanding of the social justice issues the congregation cares about.

A similar process of house meetings, and one-on-one conversations was conducted at Synagogue C. They established a committee of six people who dedicated themselves to developing a process to cultivate strong internal relationships. One hundred congregational members attended a series of meeting to learn and meet each other around the question “what is important to

you". These conversations are now used to leverage the congregational membership towards acting on those values. Without that internal process, the path to action is less clear.

Synagogue A and C use community organizing as a way to teach social justice to their youth. The youth who engage in programming at the synagogues, participate in a denomination wide initiative that sends young people to lobby for a issue they feel passionate about in Washington D.C. The effort and time taken to teach young people these skills show the passion and relevancy the synagogues feel community organizing has on their congregational life. Engraining those skills at a young age build a socially minded young person prepared to enter the social justice communities.

Denominational Relationship

Synagogue A, B, and C identified supportive and important relationships with their broader denomination. Synagogue A is a longstanding leader in the broader denomination; Synagogue B and C are strong supporters of their denominational direction. The broader denominational stance on specific issues influenced how different synagogues took a stand on the particular issues.

In the context of tikkun olam, Synagogue A and C are operating consistently within the larger vision of the denominational movement. Rabbis and lay leaders who were involved in Synagogue A are now working with the elite religious institutions. The rabbi at Synagogue C created a strong network of partners in his denomination and is very engaged in denominational initiatives. Both Synagogue A and C find connection in social justice in their relationships with other synagogues who follow the same elite religion. For

example, the rabbi at Synagogue C participated with other rabbis of his denomination in the NAACP walk for racial justice from Selma to Birmingham. A group of leaders from Synagogue A joined a denominational gathering that outlined a plan for synagogues to approach racial justice through their Jewish lens. While both of these initiatives are distinct, they are connected to the broader denomination and signify a strong sense of belonging with the denomination. A positive relationship with the denomination and the agency to outline the larger denominational tactic is positive, but also does not cater to each individual synagogue on a local level.

Contrastingly, the rabbi at Synagogue B views the relationship with their denominational as very strong, but he emphasized how every policy and stance of the denomination are not known by him or the board. A paradox exists between the synagogues feeling a sense of connection to their denomination because of shared identity but a lack of clarity over the vision of the denominational direction.

Political Climate

The Jewish community's excitement and energy for social justice work is influenced by the current events and political climate. The political debates today are difficult, full of hatred and bigotry towards immigrants, Muslims and generally people who are "othered" in mainstream society. Because Jews were once "othered" in mainstream society the community is finding momentum around organizing to support the marginalized communities in regards to the current political debate.

Rabbis at Synagogue A and Synagogue C were involved when the quest for same sex marriage was at the center of political debates. The members, clergy, and other elements of the synagogue worked diligently to create a just society for LGBTQ. This was at the center of their religious life of the past. Members of Synagogue A were at the forefront of the fight for creating a world that supported the LGBTQ community. Without the consent of her congregation, the rabbi at Synagogue C officiated a same-sex marriage. Yet, both rabbis felt compelled to act in the quest for LGBTQ justice because of the connection to Jewish values and tikkun olam. Inclusion for LGBTQ was a pressing issue at that time.

Synagogue D approaches current event issues with a more conservative approach. The rabbi mentioned that she feels prepared to lead conversations about current events but the internal cohesion is a more pressing issue. She wants to establish a formal way to deal with injustices as they arise, especially when they are real and alive for the nation. She believes that her congregation currently is unprepared to ask “the questions of our time”, and an internal shift is needed in the general approach to social justice work. With time, Synagogue D will have the resources and internal agreement to answer the challenges of modern day tikkun olam.

Discussion

The current reality of the Jewish community is reflected in the themes presented in the study. As Wolfson stated, a need is present to redefine what it means to engage in Jewish institutions and Jewish life, and create institutions that are able to attend to the need. Synagogues in the study are grappling with

what that means in the context of tikkun olam and are working towards establishing a more relevant space for their congregants. The themes therefore are not occurring in a vacuum, rather the context of the Jewish community is prevailing through the themes discovered.

The rabbis' efforts towards justice are happening simultaneously to the internal processes. In order to successfully interpret tikkun olam in a modern context it is important to undertake what each issue holds for each of the congregants. The preliminary work of building up conversations and mindsets around social justice is essential for the rabbis to effectively act for specific issues. A tension arises then when the meaning of tikkun olam is broadened to include the internal processes without direct action in the urban context. Achieving a balance between the internal and the external is essential for a synagogue to remain relevant and contribute to the community at large. Only when both processes are in motion will tikkun olam be actualized.

Synagogues have a unique organizing structure, as they are connected to a broader denomination but hold their own individual identity and values. Each synagogue has its own relationship to the broader denomination, and therefore a choice on how they want to engage with other denominational entities. Synagogues affiliated with a denomination are constantly balancing between the national resources and opportunities provided for them, and staying true to their uniqueness. The Union for Reform Judaism outlined a process for their denominational synagogues to engage with racial justice but each synagogue has a choice on whether or not they want to use the program. This relationship and the choices each synagogue makes is helpful for other

organizations to understand how to navigate the complicated nature of all the relationships and opportunities.

As mentioned earlier, community organizing is a useful tactic for social justice efforts both within the Jewish community and at-large. Yet the depth in which it is used differs depending on the synagogue's specific vision for social justice and the issue at hand. Many synagogues in the study partner with interfaith organizations through traditional Alinsky community organizing, and hold similar power analysis to the traditional model. There are also other ways to engage people in social justice outside traditional community organizing. Relationships are a key component to moving people, and the internal discussions as the main effort are not the focus of community organizing. Therefore, using community organizing tactics interchangeably for efforts internally and at the community level does not allow for real change to occur. Synagogues must learn how to be active participants in their communities by using the skills they gained in their internal processes.

The uncovered results in the study can shed light for organizations, both non-faith based and faith based to learn how to engage constituents in social justice. As members of the Jewish community, there is a call to justice through history and the code of values. Jewish institutions need to grapple with the issue of social justice to embody all that it means to be Jewish. Understanding the multitude of dynamics and interconnections between modernizing an institution, establishing a equilibrium between processes, and using organizing tools in multiple ways will help any community succeed.

Conclusion

The Jewish community is responsible to work in partnership for a better world. Jewish institutions are responsible to act and stand up for justice. Many Jewish Americans fled oppression and found opportunity and freedom in America. Therefore, standing in partnership for justice for targeting communities is necessary for the Jewish community. While there are real challenges facing synagogue life today that require internal processes, action is needed in conjunction with those processes. Striking a balance between action and process is the key to successful and sustained engagement in efforts of social justice. Synagogues have immense potential to be the space where relationships are built to facilitate processes of digesting and acting on the injustices in the community.

While each synagogue uniquely processes their set of challenges, the connections between the challenges are powerful. Open conversations between synagogues have the possibility to create a strong network of local synagogues for justice. System of support could facilitate a level of understanding and a system of accountability between the synagogues. With encouragement in place, synagogues can be more present, visible forces in the social justice efforts of their community. An internal exploration of social justice issues is crucial, but there also needs to be an element of visible social justice effort made in the broader community.

The local, national, and global political climate today perpetuates ignorance and an intensely dangerous hate. Jews are called to fight against the negativity. Relationships are powerful tools for tikkun olam, and facilitate a

unique partnership and can be used to fight against the bigotry spewing from political leaders. In these moments, the Jewish community, institutions and individuals are responsible to leverage their relationships to support the voices that call for justice, dignity and equality for all.

Appendix A: Consent Form

The signing of this form constitutes consent to participate in a 30 minute interview being conducted by Rena Schuman Stoler, graduate student in the IDCE department at Clark University. The purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between Jewish institutions and social justice today. Your participation may impact society by helping us better understand the connection and complexities between Jewish Institution and social justice movements. You will be asked a series of questions about Judaism and Jewish institutions, and about social justice movements. You will be asked to respond to the ideal relationship between Jewish institutions and social justice movements and what the reality is today. Attribution of your input or quotes will only be used with your permission. At any point, you can decide to terminate the interview or skip a specific question. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to terminate your participation in this research at any time without penalty, or to refuse to answer any questions to which you don't want to respond. Your participation in this study is confidential. Neither recordings nor interview transcripts will contain names or any other information allowing identification of individual participants; participants will be identified by code number only.

Signed consent forms will be stored in a locked storage area in Kathryn Madden's office at Clark University accessible only to Rena Schuman Stoler separate from audio recordings and transcripts. Transcripts will be stored in electronic form only, in password protected files on Rena Schuman Stoler's computer. Recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the research in May 2016. Password protected transcript files will be retained for three years. If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact Rena Schuman Stoler, 847-217-9603

By signing below, I verify that I have read this consent form and agree to participate in this interview. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____ (Signature) _____
(Date) _____ (Printed Name)

This study has been approved by the Clark Committee for the Rights of Human Participants in

Research and Training Programs (IRB). Any questions about human rights issues should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. James P. Elliott (508) 793-7152.

The person has agreed to be audio recorded (circle one): YES NO _____ (Initial)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- Does “tikkun olam (repairing the world)” play a role in your institution? If so, what role does it play?
- How does your synagogue act upon the values of social justice and tikkun olam?
- What recent community projects have the community engaged with together?
- Does your institution have community partnerships? If so, what are they?
- How does your interpretation and actions around social justice differ or relate to the values of the broader religious movement?
- Do you see tensions between Jewish engagement in social justice movements and Jewish institutions? If so, what is it? If not, Why not?

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