

UJA-Federation of New York

SYNERGY

Innovations and Strategies for Synagogues of Tomorrow

Alliances, Mergers, and Partnerships: Lessons from the Journey 2008 – 2013

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The year was 2008, and merger was a hot topic on Long Island, where at least 10 synagogues were involved in recent or impending mergers. In response, UJA-Federation of New York asked the Alban Institute to create a workshop that would acquaint Long Island congregations with merger options, issues, and steps. The initial event in Syosset in 2009 grew into a five-year initiative to resource synagogue leaders — the Alliances, Mergers, and Partnerships Project (or AMP, for short).

“Alliances” are networks of congregations and Jewish organizations that generate resources, joint programming, and positive energy that no individual synagogue could create on its own. “Mergers” (humorously dubbed “the M-word” because leaders may avoid using it) is the combination of two or more synagogues into a single institutional entity. “Partnerships” are major program initiatives involving two or more synagogues, and perhaps Jewish organizations as well.

Supported by a grant from Synergy: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together, the multiyear AMP project involved three different Alban consultants; workshops and webinars attended by dozens of Long Island rabbis and lay leaders; and on-the-ground consultation with six different congregations representing modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform traditions.

By inviting workshop participants to apply for a consultation component, the AMP project aimed to bridge the gap local leaders often experience between the ideas they hear at a learning event and the steps they can actually implement in their local situations. In each of the six selected congregations, leaders worked with the consultant to identify a realistic “next step” that would help their particular synagogue to explore, adopt, or implement AMP options. The consultant then offered on-site education or meeting facilitation appropriate to that step.

Over the lifetime of this project, AMP has addressed not only long-term synagogue challenges like declining rates of affiliation, aging congregations, and shrinking budgets, but also the impact of external events such as the 2008 financial crisis, the Madoff case, and Hurricane Sandy. It has been a full five years.

The AMP journey has also been a time of learning, affirmation, frustration, exhilaration, setbacks, serendipitous discovery, hard work, and revitalization. Much of what we have experienced, particularly in intensive consultation work with six congregations, affirms the expectations and learning that we brought into this project from broader organizational research, from Alban Institute’s work in Protestant congregations, and from collected stories of synagogues engaged in mergers or collaborative work. Some of what we learned was new and particularly helpful in shaping the path forward for other congregations. Emerging from this work are 10 Best Practices for AMPs, plus a closing reflection about campus-sharing strategies.

1. Face facts and prepare for change before proposing a major step like merger.

While this may sound obvious, laying such groundwork is a very demanding task. Faced with unfavorable demographics and long-term institutional decline, leaders need considerable skill, courage, and stamina to present the congregation with unpleasant facts, lay out the basic options, and weather the storm of reaction that typically results from this type of presentation. Sometimes leaders imagine that they can skip over such preparation and jump straight into merger negotiations as a solution; however, without a robust dose of reality under their belts, synagogue leaders and members are unlikely to support proposals that require substantial organizational changes, particularly mergers.

For example, one of the AMP congregations brought to the consultation an especially **firm grasp of its financial realities, a culture of collaborative leadership, and a well-developed capacity to examine even controversial options with a cool head.** These strengths served the congregation well as it embarked upon bold visioning for a cooperative relationship with another synagogue.

2. Name and study all the options, including those that might meet emotional resistance.

While this, too, sounds obvious, careful examination of the full range of options is less common than you might expect. Many congregations find that their process of deliberation is stuck in either denial (refusal to address painful realities) or stalemate (competing solutions that seem to cancel each other out rather than leading to a thoughtful choice). One important role that a consultant can play is to help an exploration committee to list all the options, undertake basic fact-finding, and identify “pros and cons” for each approach. By reporting these findings to the Board and the members, and soliciting their additional insights about options and implications, the exploratory committee gains credibility by demonstrating due diligence. While public discussion of the options often touches on painful subjects and elicits intense controversy, the creation and ongoing development of this “options list” can help to balance the most intense reactions and the loudest voices with thoughtful analysis. When sufficient groundwork has been laid, a handful of the most promising options can be selected and explored in greater depth.

When leaders bring forward a specific proposal without a careful exploration of all the options, they are likely to encounter denial or stalemate and arrive at no decision at all. Absence of a decision is, of course, a decision in itself: to “just keep doing what we are doing until we can’t do it anymore.” Figure 1 describes graphically the

role of outside assistance in helping a congregation get “unstuck” and move through denial and stalemate into an informed, intentional choice.

3. Rule out non-merger options before making any proposal to merge.

Not only do synagogues need to face facts and study a wide range of options before they become good candidates for merger, they must also satisfy themselves that “going it alone” is no longer viable. In a master’s thesis called “Merging Congregations,”¹ Executive Director Harvey Brenner at Temple Har Shalom in Warren, New Jersey, urged congregations to consider a merger only *after* other avenues for revitalization have been seriously explored, such as changing staff, refocusing the program, improving public relations, cutting expenses, and finding new sources of revenue. Until a congregation has either *attempted* such strategies for “going it alone,” or *ruled out* such approaches through serious deliberation, it will have difficulty engaging in successful negotiations toward a merger or substantial partnership.

Addressing the “stand-alone” options first has two potential benefits: such efforts may clear the way for collaboration by clarifying the need, and may also yield newfound vitality, whether or not the ultimate decision involves joining forces with another entity.

A synagogue searching for merger partners should still make the most of its strengths in the meantime!

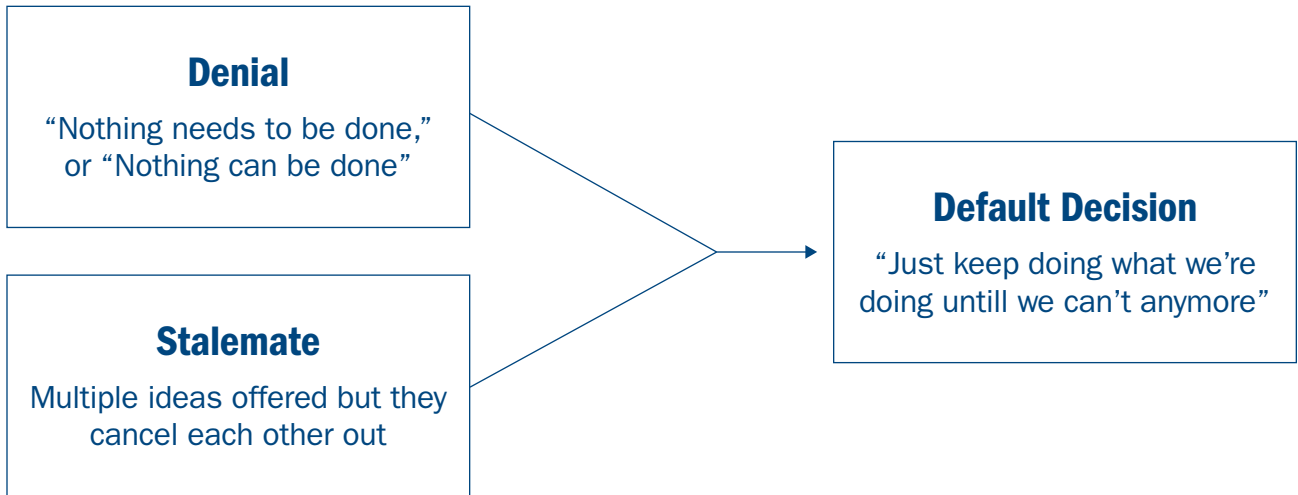
4. Charter an Exploration Committee.

Sometimes an Exploration Committee is formed at the moment when a particular merger or partnership opportunity has been identified. In that case, the committee’s limited role (suggested in Brenner’s “Merging Congregations”) is to determine whether there is sufficient compatibility to launch more formal negotiations. However, our Long Island experience suggests the need for an Exploration Committee with a broader charter and a longer timeline: even highly motivated congregations have found the process of exploration to be more of a spiral than a straight line. They have engaged in broad exploration of options, moved into more serious research and negotiation with particular partners, then returned to active exploration — or else to watchful waiting until conditions might become more favorable to ratchet up negotiations again.

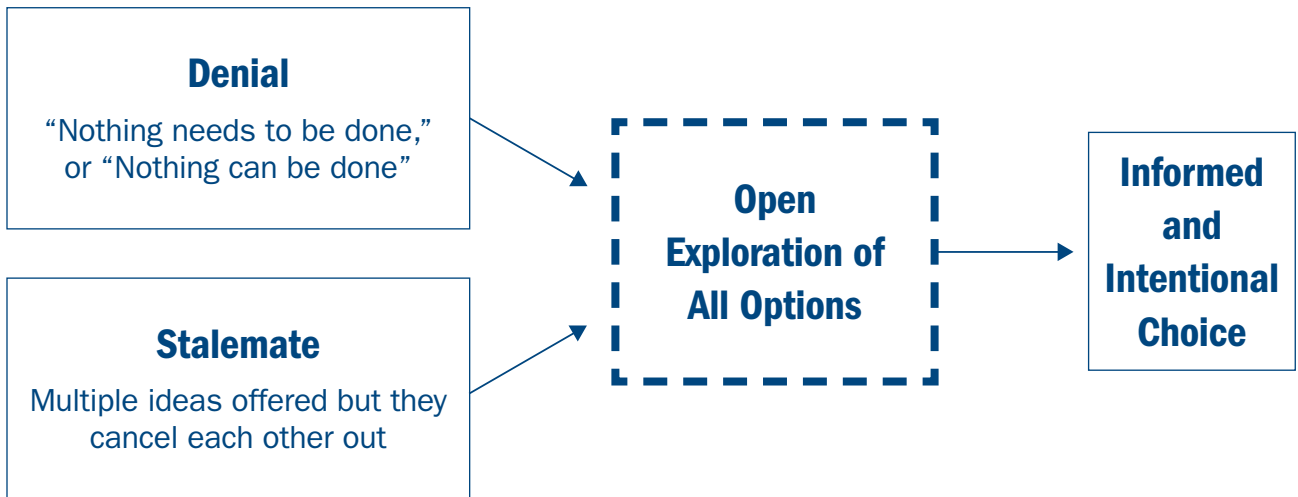
¹ “Merging Congregations: The Exploration, Facilitation and Execution of a Synagogue Merger,” and the Role of the Administrator/Executive Director in the Process. Presented by: Harvey M. Brenner, Executive Director Temple Har Shalom Warren, New Jersey. Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for Fellow in Temple Administration Certification January 2008 (rev. April 2008). <http://tinyurl.com/pvgzs9l>

Figure 1 Getting the Conversation “Unstuck”

Current Situation – Denial and stalemate lead to a decision by default.



Purpose of Consultation — Set the stage for informed choice.



We have learned that congregations exploring AMP’s should be prepared for an extended, reiterative process. When a synagogue has studied its options and initiated talks with promising partners, but still has no AMP agreement in sight, it may be wise for a Board to keep an Exploration Committee chartered and populated. Its job would be to meet periodically (perhaps every six months) to update the list of possibilities, and determine whether circumstances have changed sufficiently to gear up to a more active exploration. This structure would set the stage for Practice #5.

5. Stay alert for historic “openings.”

Readiness to engage in an alliance, partnership, or merger emerges from a complicated mix of factors, and conditions sometimes change (for better or worse) over time. As an exploration committee works through a list of options, leaders need to remain flexible enough to revisit possibilities when a new “opening” occurs, or when previous readiness seems to have faded.

We found that it was not uncommon for a congregation's leaders to identify at least one "missed opportunity" — a sort of "if we had known then what we know now" moment. At the same time, being courted by a newly interested partner can overshadow the congregation's strategic goals and intentions. **The ability to balance focus, deliberation, and diligence with openness to new opportunities is key to finding the right moment to act.**

6. Establish a clear process of deliberation and stick to it.

Congregational anxiety about the future is usually quite high by the time leaders are willing to consider a merger. It may also be high regarding alliances and partnerships. Two different types of emotional perspectives can charge the atmosphere:

- **Courtship:** In relationship terms, these discussions can resemble a courtship. People often bring to the table their memories of past experiences (especially painful ones); wishful thinking and/or suspicion about the partner; fear of rejection; touchiness about signals perceived as negative; and a tendency to take things personally if the courtship does not continue.
- **Mergers and Acquisitions:** In business terms, these discussions resemble the corporate practice of mergers and acquisitions. Sharing sensitive internal data with a potential partner can feel very risky. One entity may fear they will simply be "taken over" by the other.

Boards can help the congregation to cope with such anxieties by communicating what the steps of exploration will be, how congregants can make input, where and when specific proposals will be presented, and how the final decision will be made.

Leaders who launch merger conversations without clarifying the steps in the process, or who attempt to conduct negotiations "offline" without authorization from the Board, are likely to run afoul of congregational anxieties, and their proposals are likely to fail. Initiatives that catch the members unprepared can poison the atmosphere for well-planned explorations that might otherwise have succeeded.

7. Balance transparency with discretion.

The process of deliberation needs to be authorized by the Board and fully understood by the congregation. But the details of conversations with any particular partner need to be held with considerable discretion,

so that it is safe enough for participants to be candid about difficult issues and feelings, and to work through tough moments without damaging the process. Clear written guidelines help leaders to decide which information to share, and when.

Sometimes this fine balance between transparency and discretion is maintained by limiting the number of face-to-face communicators to just one or two per congregation, until there are substantive proposals to bring forward. On Long Island, we experimented with another method — a sort of "shuttle diplomacy" by the consultant between two congregations that were assessing the fit between them and the timeliness of possible talks.

For any relationship to grow, the parties themselves must demonstrate the capacity to talk directly with each other. But **at a particularly sensitive juncture, utilizing a consultant in a "go-between" role may enhance the exploration process for both congregations.**

8. Build an effective Board to "hold" this work.

Only the synagogue Board can provide the necessary institutional framework to undergird the difficult work of adaptation. Congregations in this project that had undertaken previous Board development work did the best job of empowering an exploration committee, organizing their options, and steadily pursuing those options over a period of three to five years. Two previous cycles of intensive consultation funded by UJA-Federation — programs called "Synagogue Visioning Process" and "Synagogue Board Development" — played a major role in preparing these Boards for AMP explorations.

A robust process of deliberation can only be sustained if the synagogue Board is strong enough to withstand the heat of AMP conversations. Board development work is excellent preparation for AMP deliberations.

9. Make sure that formal and informal leaders are pulling in the same direction.

Leaders with the initial vision for creating an alliance, merger, or partnership must take the time to build an effective "guiding coalition" — a loosely-drawn circle of 25 to 40 people, including official leadership, members with high informal influence, and emerging leaders of constituencies the synagogue most needs to reach. Examples of such constituencies might be younger adults (with and without children) and "empty-nesters" seeking personal meaning and adult connection through the synagogue.

The edges of this “guiding coalition” can remain very fluid, but members of this group should be actively recruited (not just “invited”) to attend key events where information about AMPs is being shared and a vision is being created.

10. Build a compelling vision – beyond survival – that addresses the new context.

Survival fears can be useful motivators at the earliest stage of change management, when leaders are establishing a systemwide sense of urgency. However, any promising revitalization strategy, including a merger or partnership, will require the congregation to take some risks.

Only a positive, values-based vision can motivate people to take life-affirming risks, and tolerate the pain and disruption that accompanies even the most deeply desired change. **Congregations need to flesh out a vision of something qualitatively different from the status quo — an approach that is well-suited to one or more populations who are not here now (or at least not present in sufficient numbers for sustainable institutional life).**

Beyond these 10 best practices, the AMP initiative yielded one additional area of learning that merits further investigation. Our initial scan of stories from around the country revealed that campus-sharing with other synagogues and Jewish agencies appeared to be an important and creative option for congregations to consider. In some of these cases, merger was never part of the strategy. But in other situations, congregations have co-located with the hope that this will facilitate even more robust forms of cooperation, such as sharing of a rabbi or administrative staff, joint programming, and potentially an institutional merger.

Based on information gathered from Long Island and beyond, it appears that the progression from an initial lease arrangement (bringing one or more congregations onto the campus of another) toward merger or deep partnership may be more difficult than the congregations initially anticipate. Dynamics of a “lease-to-merge” strategy may include:

- Early excitement about what co-location might make possible.
- Urgency (perhaps even impatience) to move swiftly into talks about structural options.

- A pullback, precipitated by a recognition that talks about structural integration (such as a formal partnership or merger) were premature, because leaders and/or members were not sufficiently “on board.”

In our view, co-location is still an excellent option for synagogues to consider, among others. We have seen wise leaders navigate through the “pullback” stage to launch both near-term program experiments and sustained visioning work to address the bigger demographic and cultural challenges. But we would advise congregations considering a “lease-to-merge” option to lay substantial groundwork, both before and after a physical move. This would include relationship-building among formal and informal leaders, defining shared values, establishing a positive vision for the future, and experimenting with cooperative programs. Talks about structural integration should follow the development of a well-supported vision for cooperative effort.

The five-year AMP initiative has been a rich and challenging experience for the consultants involved as well as for the local leaders who have participated in the workshops and consultations. The 10 best practices described here are lessons drawn from specific experiences, rather than findings from rigorous research. They reflect the struggles and commitments of real people in Long Island synagogues. These courageous congregations are helping to forge new pathways and build new kinds of relationships, to address a new and changing environment. We hope that these reflections on their efforts will lend hope, encouragement, and practical wisdom to synagogue leaders in New York and beyond.

We are pleased to share this article written by Alice Mann, consultant at the Alban Institute, in the hopes that it will assist synagogue leaders and leaders working with synagogues considering the wide spectrum of alliances, mergers, and partnerships. We are interested in your reflections. Join the conversation on Twitter at [@adinafriedman](https://twitter.com/adinafriedman) or send us an e-mail at synergy@ujafedny.org. Additional copies of this and other volumes from our *Innovations and Strategies for Synagogues of Tomorrow* series are available for download at www.ujafedny.org/synergy-resources.

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