

## **FOCUS GROUPS: For Congregations Beginning a Rabbinic Search**

*Thank You to the SAJ – Judaism That Stands For All for permission to use this material that they created for their rabbinic search.*

(One of the first and most important steps in beginning a rabbinic search is to let the members of the congregation know and to ask them for input on the role of the rabbi in your congregation. Focus groups have proven to be a valuable first step. An invitation is sent to each member explaining what a focus group is and why it is being done with sign-up information – dates, times, location. Groups usually meet in the congregation but some congregations have found that meeting in member's homes works as well.)

*Thank you for signing up for a Rabbinic Search focus group.*

*The group will start promptly and last for 30/60/90 minutes.*

*A time of rabbinic succession provides us with an opportunity to consider our hopes and aspirations for the future and the role that new leadership can play in helping to achieve them.*

*What is the leadership needed to help sustain our future, meet the needs of our current members and adapt to the challenges of our environment?*

*Over the years, the community has selected its rabbinic leadership based on its understanding of what was needed at that time to sustain its future. In each instance, the priorities were different.*

*We now have the opportunity to address these questions anew.*

*The focus groups enable the Search Committee to consider your views on how we can best serve our generation and the generations to come.*

*Please be prepared to share your views and to engage with the views of your fellow congregants on these central questions:*

- ***How would you describe the one or two values that you think best represent us and are shared across our community?***
- ***What are the most important things a rabbi could do for our community?***
- ***What does our congregation need from a rabbi at this point in time?***
- ***What are the specific qualities and skills of a rabbi who would be able to do these things?***
- 5. ***What one question would you like the Rabbinic Search Committee to ask each applicant?***

*We look forward to meeting with you.*

### **Search Committee Focus Groups – Facilitators Guide**

*Below you will find bullets with a combination of key ideas to cover, and some sample language (if helpful). Feel free to use directly, or amend to fit your own style. The most important things are: a) sticking to time; and b) making sure that people truly talk to one another, as opposed to getting derailed by complaints. In addition to notes on the flow of the group, I've given some sample language for conversation prompts and things to say to stop derailment (on the last page).*

#### **A. Introductions (5 min max)**

- *Welcome everyone to the group and thank them for donating their time to this important effort to shape the future of the synagogue.*
- *Ask each person to go around and simply say their name, how long they've been a member, and something about their participation in the community.*
- *Model this 20-second introduction, and make sure introductions take no more than five minutes.*

**B. Explain the goals of the session (2 min)**

- *Before we start, I'd like to tell you a little bit about what the search committee considers the goal of these sessions, and I'd like to set a couple of ground rules for our conversation today.*
- *A time of rabbinic succession provides us with an opportunity to consider our hopes and aspirations for the future and the role that new leadership can play in helping to achieve them.*
- *The goal of these focus groups is to help us talk and think about what type of leadership is needed to meet the needs of our current members, but also help sustain our future and adapt to meet new opportunities and challenges.*
- *Rather than having people think about what might be best for them individually, we are hoping that these groups will be an opportunity to talk to each other about what values and goals we share and what might be best for strengthening, supporting, and invigorating our community as a whole.*
- *It is very important to the committee that these conversations be about the future, not the past. As much as possible, we ask you to frame your comments about what you'd like to see in the congregation in coming years, rather than things that have disappointed you in the past. Think about what you'd like this new rabbi to be in his/her own right, not how you'd like him/her to be different from rabbis of the past.*

### **C. Set ground rules and get buy in (3 mins)**

- *We may not all share the same views or sentiments, and it's OK to disagree in this conversation – different perspectives build a more interesting and vibrant community!*
- *But we are going to ask that each of us be aware and careful to speak with respect at all times.*
- *And even most important, we are going to ask you to listen and respond to each other as much as possible when making comments. The benefit of a focus group is not in its ability to conduct individual interviews with multiple people at one time. The power of focus groups lie in their ability to bring people together to talk and listen to one another, to consider new points of view, and to consider new perspectives. Before bringing up a new topic or idea, try to respond to the comment that may have just been made by someone else. Try to tell the group whether you agree or disagree, and why?*
- *I will do my best to challenge you to consider this type of dialogue over the course of the focus group.*
- *I will be keeping time and making sure that we move through the different topics, while still being sure to end on time, as we promised. I appreciate that there may be things that some of you want to discuss more or things that you might not get to say on a specific topic. If you have ideas/thoughts/comments that you feel you weren't able to fully express during the session, we very much invite you to send an email to Janet or anyone else on the committee, and we will be sure that those comments are incorporated into our final report.*
- *Finally, as facilitator, it's my job to make sure that everyone's voice is heard over the course of the session. Please try to be aware of the extent to which your voice is being heard in comparison to others, and be understanding if I try to make room for comments from people who haven't contributed as much as you.*
- *Does everyone agree to those ground rules? Great. Let's get started.*

#### **D. Focus Group Questions (60 minutes)**

Note: Think about spending ~15 minutes on each of the four questions below. However, don't worry if the group spends more time on one question than another. The prompts are designed to be used to spark additional discussion and reflection, as needed.

- 1. How would you describe the one or two values that you think best represent the congregation and are shared across our community?**

##### Potential Prompts

- a. What draws you to us and keeps you here?*
- b. What about the congregation makes you proud to be a member?*
- c. How would you describe our community in one or two sentences?*

- 2. What are the most important things a rabbi could do for our community?**

##### Potential Prompts

- a. Think about goals that you'd like us to achieve in the near and more distant future. These could be participation goals, activity goals, integration goals...*
- b. Think about specific issues that we face as a community, and w*

- 3. What does our congregation need from a rabbi at this point in time?**

##### Potential Prompts

- a. What are the most important issues/challenges that face our congregation, and how might we like a rabbi to help us with them?*
- b. How do you see these needs changing in the near and distant future?*

- 4. What are the specific qualities and skills of a rabbi who would be able to do these things?**

### Potential Prompts

- a. *What do you think are the most important areas for rabbinic involvement?*
- b. *What are the least important areas for rabbinic involvement?*

### **5. What one question would you like the Search Committee to ask each applicant?**

### **Additional Prompts for Discussion and Engagement**

- *Do people agree or disagree with what [NAME] said?*
- *Do other people have different experiences?*
- *Does anyone have similar ideas but want to say more?*

### **F. Summary (15 minutes)**

- *About 15 minutes before the end of the session, the facilitator and/or note-taker should make a couple summary comments about the key themes and main points that have emerged from the discussion. DON'T TAKE MORE THAN 5 MINUTES WITH THIS. Think of it just as short hand about main points, not recapitulation.*
- *I'd like to spend the last 10 minutes that we have making sure that everyone has a "last word" in this conversation. I'd like to go around and ask each person to (pick the one you think fits best with your group):*
  - *Name one thing that you've learned from this conversation or something that occurred to you that you never thought about before.*
  - *Name the most important idea that you think has come out of our conversation today.*
  - *Name one thing that you want to make sure the committee pays close attention to as it is creating the search application.*

### **Sample language to stop derailment**

- *I really appreciate what you are saying, but I'm going to need to move on to the next topic. If there's time at the end, I'll be sure to come back to this.*
- *In order to respect everyone's time and make sure we end the group on time, I'm going to have to move on to the next topic now.*

- *I understand that this is an important concern for you, but I want to remind all of us that the purpose of this group is to focus on the future, rather than the past.*
- *Before changing the topic, can we stay for a minute with what [NAME] said? Do people agree or disagree?*
- *I'm going to note this issue down as an important concern, but now I need to move on to the next topic.*
- *I'm going to ask you to remember our ground rules and focus on what we'd like to see for the future rather than what we haven't seen from the past.*
- *I want to make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak – [NAME], do you want to comment on this?*