It is often said that the best way to understand a system is to try to change it. Indeed, over the past decade, as we have studied various synagogue change initiatives, we have inevitably learned a great deal about the synagogues themselves. This paper highlights findings from our research and some of the questions they raise. The presentation is intended to be a generative Jewish process in which data invite discussion, and answers beget more questions. A list of the studies that form the basis of this work appears in the Appendix.

All of these studies, I will honestly admit, have been undertaken with a firm belief in the importance of synagogues and their role--both actual and potential--in the community. I have a good friend who is convinced that synagogues are a dying institution that will soon disappear. In truth, every synagogue has its ups and downs, and some have merged or otherwise closed their doors. We can also safely say that some synagogues are doing better than others. But despite that, my friend is wrong. Day after day, synagogues add great value to the lives of their congregants and to the community, and will undoubtedly continue to do so well into the future.

In the American context, synagogues create community, provide points of affiliation and identification, handle life transitions, educate children and adults, and bring Jewish religious views to the wider community. In order to excel in this work, synagogues need to grow, not necessarily in terms of their numbers but in terms of their capacity for spirituality, action, and impact. Such growth requires Jewish public support. As a social scientist, I believe that it also requires systematic research that provides synagogues with a context for gauging their achievements and analysis for understanding the forces that facilitate or obstruct their efforts.

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Congregation and Synagogue

It is worthwhile to distinguish between synagogue and congregation. I use the term “synagogue” to refer to the organization’s structure—its physical plant; teachers, clergy, lay leadership, and other personnel; programs; governance and all of the concerns that come under the rubric of the business of synagogue. “Congregation” refers to the human system—the people; their Jewish lives, learning, and aspirations; and their connections to each other. Both synagogue and congregation are critical concerns. Leaders need to think strategically about the work of the institution at the same time that they must also attend to community, spirituality, and meaning. The research suggests that for maximal effectiveness, they must discover the space where synagogue and congregation overlap, as these two aspects of the institution need to grow together as an organic system.

For example, we have found that synagogues expend enormous effort on capital projects. Most are either exploring options for their building, conducting feasibility studies, planning capital campaigns, working on architectural designs, living in the midst of construction, or managing the aftermath of a completed building project. They are dealing with issues related to mortgages, debt and risk management, as well as concerns with environmental factors such as population migrations or local real estate developments. They are investing increasing amounts of time and energy in endowment campaigns, revenue enhancement, and financial resource development.

Decisions made about these matters affect the quality of the community that resides in the building. Some congregations upgrade their physical plant in order to attract and accommodate more members, hoping in this way to meet income goals. At the same time, they worry that increases in membership may jeopardize the feelings of intimacy that have long defined them. In the best of cases, the leaders of these congregations understand the physical structure to be a symbolic representation of the congregation and an opportunity to achieve the kind of community that they envision.

Question:
How can synergy be achieved between the business of synagogue and the Jewish mission of the congregation?
Congregational Complexity

Congregations are not monolithic entities. Rather, the research strongly and consistently supports the notion of concentric circles of members, distinguished by their level of participation in synagogue life. When we look at data from non-, occasional-, and regular- attendees in Reform and Conservative congregations, we find that they have vastly different experiences in and perceptions of the congregation. However, on questions related to their secular lives (e.g., the value they place on professional achievement), no difference is discernible.

This finding is important because the data further indicate that the fate of the congregation is intertwined with the percentage of its members who choose to be actively involved. The high correlation suggests that a change in the size of the active core *ipso facto* changes the nature of the congregation. Note that in Mead’s terminology, growing the active core is an issue of maturational growth, not of numerical growth.

It is common knowledge, as well, that different people affiliate for different reasons and that they choose their particular synagogue/congregation for different reasons. Overall, however, the data are clear that only a small minority of the affiliated population is motivated by study, prayer, or spiritual seeking. Moreover, congregants describe services as warmly welcoming more often than they describe them as personally relevant, emotional, or inspiring. Interestingly, non-attendees, occasional attendees, and regulars differ in the intensity of their responses to these questions about religious services but not in the rank ordering of their descriptions. The communal aspect of services is always rated higher than the spiritual. Other data, as well, support the conclusion that our synagogues are succeeding well in their efforts to create community, but are less successful in their efforts to reach people on an affective and religious level.

Questions:

*Can synagogues bring their success at building community to the challenge of creating religious and spiritual experiences?*

*What causes the spiraling increase in participation in certain synagogues, the deepening sense of community, and the heightening of energy within their congregations? Whatever it is, can it be packaged and brought to other settings?*
**Synagogue Interventions**

Recent years have seen several attempts to revitalize synagogues. Initiatives entail different approaches and rest on different concepts of growth, variously aiming at enhancing community, prayer, learning, service, or organizational culture and processes. Importantly, the nature of primary outcomes is determined by the particular approach taken. For example, the Jewish Family Educator Initiator in Boston or Grotta Synagogue H.O.P.E. in New Jersey tried to effect change through the placement of professionals in the synagogue. The most visible outcome from this approach is programming: Hire professionals and you get programs. Although programming can have secondary effects on the congregation (e.g., strengthening people’s connection to Judaism), its primary effect is on synagogue structure. Synagogue 2000 (S2K), in contrast, operated through a “grassroots” team and paid great attention to group process. The predominant product of such an approach is the team itself and the relationships that form among its members. The most predictable change, as a result, was in the lives of individual team members and not in the synagogue or the congregation more broadly construed. As we look at other approaches (charismatic leadership, strategic planning, consultation, leadership development, or congregation-wide events like Synaplex), we need to be cognizant of the link between approach and outcomes.

A link is also seen between the specific techniques employed by an intervention and the outcomes it produces. For example, the goal of the Jewish Family Educator Initiative was to increase Jewish home practices by making parents a partner in their children’s education. Family educators ran synagogue-based programs that were to prepare parents to assume this role. The approach produced no measurable increases in Jewish activities carried out by parents alone or with their children, and no increases in home holiday observances. It did, however, lead to increases in the amount of time that parents spent in the synagogue. Simply put, you get out what you put in.

**Question:**

*How can the right intervention be selected for the right synagogue at the right time?*
The Nature of Change

Synagogues are awash in change. As with any living organism, change is inevitable, a natural function of time. Over the course of three years, one community we studied saw one synagogue built and others remodeled, rabbis terminated, staff and clergy added, staff restructured, membership numbers greatly increased in one congregation and decreased in another, dues restructured, new committees created, and endowment campaigns established. All of these changes had important consequences for the congregations. While such changes dominate the picture, the change intended by S2K—the creation of kehila kedusha (sacred community)—was much less noticeable, harder to capture in interviews and survey measures. Despite evidence of change in pockets around the community, the program’s vision appears difficult to achieve and slow to take hold. Here we see the paradox of change: Although synagogues are constantly changing, sometimes in dramatic ways, the congregation and its root culture remain intact and are highly resistant to change.

To understand this problem, think of synagogues as having surface and deep structures. The goal of S2K and other such initiatives is to change the deep structure, to make the congregation a warmer and more welcoming place, for example. The initiative, however, is limited to working on the surface structure. In this example, it might teach participants how to organize and train a welcoming squad. If the new behavior is implemented, lasts long enough, and becomes sufficiently entrenched in the congregation, it is possible that the culture of the congregation will eventually change. Beyond that, current initiatives have few mechanisms for moving change from the surface to the deep structure, from program to culture, or, if you will, from synagogue to congregation.

A second difficulty is that change is difficult to sustain because the new quickly becomes the old. We found that change would transform the synagogue experience for a short time but then, inevitably, what had been special moments became routine. Many interventions support “single loop learning” in which they teach the congregation to engage in a new behavior. They are less successful in encouraging “double-loop learning,” in which the congregation learns how to become an innovating organization.2

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Question:
Are synagogues destined to endlessly pursue ever new, ever more change initiatives?

Why Some Congregations Benefit More than Others

Social research commonly finds the world divided into thirds, and the synagogue research is no exception. In three of the S2K cohorts we studied, about one-third of the participating synagogues had high outcomes from their efforts, one-third had moderate outcomes, and one-third had low outcomes. What accounts for these differences? According to our survey data, the factors that contribute to high outcomes generally fall into three categories: leadership, resources, and creativity. Of these the *sine qua non* is the positive endorsement of the rabbi. In instances where the rabbi was not negative but simply stayed out of the way, the desired change did not occur.

Other factors, as well, were found to affect outcomes—the match between the culture of the congregation and that of the intervention, the match between the intervention’s focus and the front-burner issues in the congregation, the capacity to locate new initiatives within existing and vital synagogue structures, and the occurrence of serendipitous events that either facilitated or obstructed change.

As well, congregations have differing levels of success at achieving consensus for change. Our surveys generally reveal a diversity of opinion among congregants. In one congregation, about two-thirds of the members thought that the current worship and ritual in the synagogue were “just about right.” The others were equally divided between those that found them “too liberal” and those that considered them “too traditional.” On S2K teams, we often found a slim majority that felt that the pace of change and innovation in the synagogue was “just about right.” Most of the others felt that it was too slow. Effecting change in a setting marked by such divergent views necessitates a careful process of communication, dissemination, and consensus building.

Question:
If we know all this, why is change so hard?
Congregational Uniqueness

Researchers love to uncover patterns and trends in the data. In this regard, synagogue research is challenging as it often leaves me with a strong sense of the uniqueness of each synagogue, each congregation. We recently looked at decision-making patterns in 22 congregations in Westchester only to find that each has a distinctive pattern, a fingerprint unduplicated elsewhere. Indeed, each synagogue has its own essential character (size, denomination, and history) as well as its culture, leadership, membership, and resources. Each undertakes these change initiatives with different needs, level of readiness, and expectations. Each goes through the process in its own way. And in the end, each seems to achieve outcomes commensurate with these inputs. This diversity is a challenge as interventions obviously cannot be applied in the same way in every synagogue. It is also a source of community strength and vitality—a rich display of the various ways in which Jews build institutions and fill them with Judaism, community, and purpose.
## APPENDIX
### Synagogue Research Studies

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<th>Name</th>
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<th>Method</th>
<th>Reports/Publications</th>
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<tr>
<td>ECE, The RE-IMAGINE Project</td>
<td>15 synagogues in Metropolitan NY, sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York</td>
<td>• pre- and post-program survey of participants&lt;br&gt;• post-program survey of synagogue and school leadership&lt;br&gt;• case study of three congregations&lt;br&gt;• background information forms</td>
<td>(On-going study.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grotta Synagogue H.O.P.E. (Help, Opportunities, and Programs for Jewish Elders)</td>
<td>21 New Jersey congregations, sponsored by the Grotta Foundation for Senior Care</td>
<td>• interviews with rabbis, and congregational and community leaders&lt;br&gt;• Years 1-3: annual interviews with coordinators&lt;br&gt;• biannual reports completed by coordinators&lt;br&gt;• focus groups with older adult leaders&lt;br&gt;• telephone survey of older adult participants&lt;br&gt;• applications&lt;br&gt;• congregational needs assessments</td>
<td>Sales, A.L. (2005, Summer). Synagogues in the continuum of care. <em>Jewish Education News</em>, 34-36.³</td>
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³ Available at cmjs.org
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| Project Soul      | A 600-family Reform congregation                                      | • congregation database  
• focus groups by stage of life  
• congregation survey  
• “coffees” organized by neighborhood  
| S2K Pilot Sites   | 16 synagogues (8 Reform; 8 Conservative) in CA, DC, MA, MN, NE, NJ, NY, RI, and VA | • interviews with rabbis, lay leaders, and lay participants  
| S2K Denver        | 11 synagogues in Denver-Boulder, sponsored by the Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado and the Rose Community Foundation | • pre- and post-program survey of participants  
• pre- and post-program interviews with rabbis  
• applications  
| S2K Detroit       | 13 synagogues in Greater Detroit (including Windsor, Ontario and Ann Arbor, MI), sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit | • pre-program survey of participants  
• pre-program interviews with rabbis  
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| S2K URJ National Cohort                    | 18 Reform congregations in CA, CT, IL, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, NH, NJ, NY, and PA, sponsored by the URJ | • pre- and post-program surveys of participants  
| S2K Westchester                            | 21 Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox synagogues in Westchester county, sponsored by UJA-Federation of New York | • pre-program survey of participants  
• post-program interviews with rabbis, presidents, and S2K team facilitators  
| Sh’arin: The Jewish Family Educator Initiative | 11 synagogues in Greater Boston, sponsored by Combined Jewish Philanthropies | • Year 1: surveys completed by 2nd and 5th grade parents  
• Year 4: surveys completed by 2nd, 5th, and 8th grade parents  
• focus groups with parents and synagogue professionals  
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| URJ Outreach          | 6 Reform synagogues in the Northeast and Southeast (2 small, 2 medium, 2 large congregations), sponsored by the UAHC-CCAR Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach | • interviews with clergy, staff, and lay leaders  
• focus groups with members in in-married, interfaith, and conversionary households  

³ Available at CMJS.org