

**Building Our
Reform Jewish Future
in Baton Rouge:
Stronger Together**



Our Questions, Our Impact

**Leaders do not need to know all the right answers.
They do need to ask the right questions.**

Ron Heifetz, Harvard University

**Let us always remember that
we are the ancestors of the future
and what we do now,
even the smallest act,
changes the universe.**

*Liturgy of the Feminist Minyan,
Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, New York City
Adapted by Rabbi Lisa Edwards*



How Do We Ensure a Reform Jewish Future in Baton Rouge?

- Build on our rich histories
- Inform our decisions with our common values
- Create and implement a shared vision
- Combine and maximize resources:
 - Human
 - Financial
 - Physical Assets



Why Consider Unification?

- Best opportunity to ensure that our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have a Reform Jewish future in Baton Rouge.
- We are excited about the present and future possibilities that our coming together offers.
- Each congregation is approaching this from a position of strength:
 - We don't need each other; We WANT each other.



Why Consider Unification?

- This as an opportunity to enhance our Jewish community.
- We believe unification will increase our strength and presence.
- We are engaged in sacred work - not merely a business transaction - as we bring two religious communities together.



Baton Rouge



What Does Unification Mean?

- Term for bringing two entities such as BSS and CBI together to function as one.
- Each congregation will bring all of their tangible and intangible assets to the new congregation.
- The initial governance structure will reflect the spirit and desire to become one congregation and provide equal representation from each current congregation.



Why Discuss Unification?

- Demographic changes in Baton Rouge
- Sociological changes in how folks connect and affiliate
- Economies of scale offer more efficiency and less duplication.
- Our desire to ENSURE a Reform Jewish Future in Baton Rouge
- Our informed and unwavering belief that we are stronger together



Who Has Been Involved in Exploring Unification?

- WE have ...
- Your fellow congregants and leaders:
 - Joint Synagogue Exploratory Committee (JSEC)
 - Task Forces
- All Congregants through:
 - Participation in our Mission/Vision Task Force survey
 - Reading bulletin articles
 - Asking significant questions



What Has Been Done So Far?

- JSEC Meetings and reports
- Task Force deliberations and reports
- Welcomed one another to congregational programs
- Joint programming
 - Shabbat Services
 - Seders
 - Family Programming
 - Religious School planning for 2021-22 school year



Joint Synagogue Exploratory Committee

- For nearly two years we have:
 - Done our due diligence
 - Explored possibilities and obstacles
 - Sought advice from experts
 - Reported to our boards on a regular basis
 - Come to know each other
 - Listened to the different perspectives expressed
 - Developed trust and comfort with our new friends
 - Learned that we have more commonalities than differences

Barry Blumberg, Linda Posner

James Bullman, Steve Cavalier, Diane Dean, Mark Hausmann,
Jak Kunstler, Susan Lipsey, Jill Roby Pike, Robbie Rubin



What Has JSEC Accomplished?

- Developed ***Guiding Principles*** accepted by both boards
- Created a forum of mutual trust and respect for discussion of concerns and issues
- Confronted hard topics and found no roadblocks to unification
- Distributed information through meetings and bulletin articles
- Appointed Task Forces to study — Mission/Vision, Governance, Finances, Ritual, Facilities and Human Resources
- Reviewed the Task Forces reports
- Encouraged participation in joint activities



JSEC Task Forces & Leaders

- **Mission and Vision** | Lucas Spielfogel & Mary Ann Sternberg
- **Staffing and Human Resources** | Lisa Binder & Lindsey Burton
- **Facilities** | Jack Dampf & Steve Winkler
- **Finance** | Ralph Bender & Mitch Rayner
- **Governance** | David Rubin & Mike Rubin
- **Ritual** | Harold Brandt & Rachel Hausmann



Task Force Reports

- All available reports will be posted on the JSEC website following the 2nd Informational Meeting.
- The link to this website has been sent to you in bulletins and weekly announcements and is available through both congregational websites.

BnaiBR.org/BatonRougeJewishFuture



GOVERNANCE

Task Force

- This Task Force developed six overriding goals:
 - Inclusive membership eligibility
 - Equal control
 - Board membership rotation
 - The Board elects congregational officers
 - One congregational president; no co-presidents
 - Stability in the first three years through supermajority requirements

The members of the Governance Task Force unanimously agreed on all provisions of the proposed Bylaws, which reflect these stated goals.



GOVERNANCE

How Will We Govern?

- The Task Force believes it important that the new entity start off as unified and not as factionalized.
- The proposed by-laws provide for
 - Board of 6 members from each current congregation
 - Officers selected by new congregational board
 - Governing by consensus
 - Supermajority vote needed for most major decisions

MISSION & VISION

Task Force

- Conducted congregational survey
- Received 212 responses
- Analyzed survey data
- Created working drafts of Mission and Vision Statements for the new congregation

MISSION & VISION

What We Learned From Our Survey

- Great majority of respondents recognize the many potential benefits of unification and are excited about those benefits coming to fruition.
- Congregants from both synagogues want a larger, warmer Reform Jewish community that, at once, is inclusive and attuned to people's unique preferences.
- They want choices for how to engage with Judaism, in and outside the sanctuary, that speak to their tradition and spirituality.
- They want what will make us a strong, stable organization: great facilities; dynamic and consistent spiritual leadership; capable staffing; and effective, representative direction by the board.



FACILITIES

Task Force

- Reviewed both buildings
- Open to considering all options:
 - Renovation of one existing building
 - Purchasing an existing structure to house the new congregation
 - Building a new building
- Awaiting professional appraisal of both properties before issuing final report/recommendations.

FINANCE

How Will Our New Congregation Be Funded?

- Each current congregation is financially stable/solid.
- All current assets of each congregation will become part of the new congregation.
- The leadership of the Congregation B'nai Israel Foundation has pledged support to the new congregation.
- No current plans to raise annual financial commitments (dues).

FINANCE

- There are many unknowns (including facility, staffing and membership).
- This Task Force believed that presenting various scenarios would be the fairest and most transparent approach. Their current projections are very conservative.
- They created initial sample financial models and budgets which will be part of the report available on our website.
- We are hopeful that the energy and enthusiasm of a combined new congregation will encourage participation and support at levels far greater than we currently experience in our vibrant Jewish community.
- This Task Force agreed to reconvene in the future when information with more certainty is developed.



RITUAL

Task Force

- Tasked with understanding and clarifying our differences and suggesting how to approach and resolve these differences in an inclusive way.
- Conducted a detailed evaluation of each congregation's
 - weekly Shabbat observances
 - annual holiday observances
 - b'nai mitzvah education practices
 - dietary guidelines
 - guidelines for Shabbat and holiday programming

RITUAL

- All of our discussions were held acknowledging and respecting that there are *halachic* (religious) decisions or opinions that are solely within rabbinic authority and outside of the scope and responsibility of the JSEC Ritual Task Force.
- Ritual Task Force members participated in open and meaningful dialogue that ultimately revealed that our congregations today have far more in common than either of the respective synagogue members once thought.

RITUAL

How Will Our New Congregation Preserve Our Different Ritual Traditions?

- The work of the JSEC Ritual Task Force has provided a good model.
- Our search for a new rabbi to lead our combined congregation will focus, in part, on finding a spiritual leader who is respectful of, and can help us to build upon, our rich and varied ritual traditions and practices.
- We will continue as we have in joint services and observances to date:
 - Trying and reflecting on different approaches
 - Being open to different things while preserving our sense of what is familiar



STAFFING & HUMAN RESOURCES

Task Force

- Task:
 - To study and recommend staffing needs for a combined synagogue with a focus on developing a staffing structure that will inspire members of the community from all generations.
- Scope:
 - The scope of this task force was to study and recommend to JSEC the staffing structure for a new combined synagogue.

STAFFING and HUMAN RESOURCES

- This Task Force developed a research strategy to generate the information necessary to thoughtfully address the objectives.
- Individual members sought relevant sources, information and data, and reported back to the Task Force for discussion.

STAFFING and HUMAN RESOURCES

Conclusions

- This Task Force concluded:
 - It is important to build a team based on the abilities and personalities of the various staff members, whose work can and should complement each other's.
 - It is important to clearly define the responsibilities and expectations of each job position, clearly define the organizational and reporting structures, and make sure all members of the team work collaboratively.

AUGUST 22 VOTE

What Will We Be Voting On?

- Intent and desire to consolidate/unify
- Required legal documents
- Initial governance structure

AUGUST 22 VOTE

Why Haven't All the Important Questions Been Answered Before Calling For a Vote?

- We are asking for agreement in principle.
- It is important to take the legal steps toward unification so we can move forward.
- The leaders and members of our new congregation will guide and make key decisions.



BEYOND THE AUGUST VOTE

What Decisions Will the New Congregation's Leaders and Members Be Asked to Make?

- Congregation name
- Congregation location
- Initial ritual practices
- Rabbinic search process

How Can We Move Forward Without All the Answers?

The Jews accepted the Torah with the statement

naaseh v'nishma נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע

— we will do and we will hear —

Exodus 24:7

We do not yet have all the answers, but we believe
that we are asking the right questions.



How Will We Manage Differences?

- *Shalom Bayit* (peace in the home) is a guiding Jewish principle.
- Judaism has a long tradition of honoring different opinions. Varying viewpoints are even reflected and encouraged in the study of Talmud.
- Patterns of respectful dialogue and working together that have been established in JSEC and Task Force work will continue.

AUGUST 2021 VOTE

Who Will Be Eligible to Vote?

- According to each current congregation's by-laws, any member in good standing is entitled to vote on any matter put before each congregation.



AUGUST 2021 VOTE

What Do We Need in Order to Vote?

- A 30 day notice of meeting to comply with existing by-laws or statutes.
- Every person entitled to vote will receive a copy of the "Joint Plan of Consolidation" and the proposed Articles and Bylaws when the notice is given.



I Don't Want to Lose What I Love Best About My Current Congregation

- This unification is built upon the rich legacies of Congregation B'nai Israel and Beth Shalom Synagogue.
- We are all committed to continuing and enhancing those legacies.
- We fully anticipate that signature programs such as the Rayner Learning Center and Big Buddy Shopping Spree will continue.
- We will find places for our precious ritual objects in our new or renovated home.
- We will expand and broaden connection in our sacred community by coming together.



WHAT'S NEXT?

- Continue to get to know each other.
- Prepare for August 2021 votes as promised in the original JSEC Guiding Principles.
- Finalize initial governance documents.
- Continue investigating facilities options.

Toward a Strong Reform Jewish Future for Baton Rouge

- One congregation with close to 300 households.
- The ability to recruit a dynamic rabbi from a larger pool of candidates.
- The combined resources to enhance our musical and worship experiences.
- Greater diversity, larger numbers and renewed enthusiasm.
- Expanded Jewish educational, social and community programs for all ages.
- An increased cadre of volunteers for all aspects of synagogue life.
- One unified place for Reform Jews living in and re-locating to Baton Rouge.



Our Dream, Our Vision, Our Future

**And the old shall dream dreams,
and the youth shall see visions,**

And our hopes shall rise up to the sky.

We must live for today; we must build for tomorrow.

Give us time, give us strength, give us life.

Debbie Friedman | inspired by Joel 3:1