

Toward A Strong Reform Jewish Future for Baton Rouge

*When I was born into this world, I found many beautiful trees
planted by those who came before me.
Just as my ancestors planted trees for me,
I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren,
so they will be sustained.*
based on a Midrash in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit 23a

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

June 2021

1. Why are we discussing unification?

Ensuring a strong future for Reform Judaism in Baton Rouge is our primary goal. Demographic and affiliation changes are impacting our existing congregations now and will likely continue to do so. One unified congregation will have resources to provide an active and vibrant Jewish home for the community. Toward that end, each congregational board appointed members of JSEC (Joint Synagogue Exploratory Committee), and approved the hiring of a consultant, in order to explore the possibilities and challenges that impact the unification of our congregations and create a plan to move forward.

2. What's the unification process been so far?

- JSEC has been meeting regularly and communicating about our progress since Fall 2019.
- JSEC adopted (with the approval of both congregational boards) a set of Guiding Principles that specified equal participation for each congregation in all activities and decisions and that each congregation was participating without any preconditions.
- Six Task Forces (Facilities, Finance, Governance, Mission and Vision, Staffing and Human Resources, and, Ritual), made up of 60+ members of our community, have been hard at work, learning about current practices at each of our congregations and gathering information to help create a vision of what is possible for our potential new spiritual and communal home. Among their tasks:
 - Evaluating the facilities, staffing, and financial needs of a combined congregation.
 - Crafting recommendations about how such a congregation might be governed.
 - Discussing the similarities and differences in our worship and other ritual practices as they explore opportunities for creating new experiences together, while honoring, respecting and preserving what is precious from our legacy congregations.
 - Engaging in their specific work of gathering information and crafting recommendations and doing the equally (some may say even *more*) important work of building community.
- Some of our Task Forces have completed their initial work, others will do so in the next month or so. As we review their initial recommendations, we anticipate they will help us to both respond to some open questions and direct the next stage of our work.

- Our rabbis, professional staff, and lay leaders are creating joint programming and are working hard to promote our individual programs at both congregations so that we can all be part of that community building. As we observe holiday traditions, study, pray, cook or read together, we have been getting to know each other better and starting to build a unified community.

3. What is the role of our consultant?

Just as we would turn to a legal or medical specialist for guidance in those respective areas, or a real estate expert to advise on a significant transaction, our consultant is providing expertise to guide us in our decision-making and help us to achieve our goals. He is also able to share best practices from other communities where congregational unifications have occurred.

4. Who will be rabbi of the new congregation?

Rabbis Appel and Appleby will be with us as interim rabbis through June 2022. As we are part of the North American Reform Movement (URJ and CCAR), we anticipate appointing a search committee and participating in their rabbinic hiring and placement process to find a rabbi for the new congregation. The hiring cycle for July 2022 will begin right after the High Holidays 2021.

5. Will unifying our congregations save money?

Building a strong Jewish community for our future is our primary goal. Over time, we may realize some operational savings by consolidating human resources, physical space, and expenses. However, the initial costs of the unification may mean that we do not realize those savings immediately. Ultimately, we may also choose to “reinvest” those potential savings in enhanced staffing and programming.

6. Will my congregational annual support (dues) be increased?

We do not anticipate changes in the annual support/dues structure in the immediate future. We will have more detailed financial information as the unification process continues.

7. Which siddur (prayer book) will we use?

This is one of many issues discussed by our Ritual Task Force. While there is no final decision yet, we invite you to read the summary of the Ritual Task Force’s work in our May 2021 congregational bulletins.

8. Where will the new congregation be housed and what will happen to our current facilities?

Our Facilities Task Force is working diligently to explore all options and develop an initial recommendation. We anticipate that their recommendations will take into consideration what is best for our community and the financial impact of any decision. We expect the proposal we vote on in August to include options, and perhaps a recommendation, from this Task Force. If unification is approved, then the property belonging to each legacy congregation will become the property of the new congregation. The leadership and membership of the new congregation will make the final decisions about the future use or sale of those properties.

9. What will happen to the significant ritual objects from my current congregation?

We are committed to ensuring the preservation of the rich histories of our “legacy congregations” as we move forward. As we get closer to an actual unification date, we

will have more specific plans about how that will happen. We will preserve important objects and artifacts from both synagogues.

10. What will the new congregation be called?

No name has yet been explored or determined. Among our upcoming tasks is to develop a process by which we can gather input on the values and ideals we want our new congregation's name to reflect. The name will also be subject to vote and approval by our congregants.

11. How will the new congregation's Board be selected?

Our Governance Task Force is finalizing some recommendations. Among their considerations are ensuring equal representation from both current congregations in the new governance structure, applicable state laws, and best practices from other congregations.

12. Who will vote on the unification?

JSEC will present a proposal for unification that will require approval by the board and membership of each congregation separately in order to proceed. Every member in good standing from both congregations will vote. Where our own congregational by-laws are not specific, Louisiana state law governs the consolidation of non-profits. Each congregational board is reviewing its bylaws and the relevant state laws so that they can clarify and communicate the procedure to their members well in advance of the vote.

13. What will we be voting on?

We are preparing a "Joint Plan of Consolidation" which, if approved by each congregational board, will be presented, along with proposed Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, to the membership of each current congregation for approval. The Plan will likely include specific answers to some issues. However, some issues will be ultimately decided by the new congregation.

14. When will the vote be held?

The first of JSEC's Guiding Principles, adopted on August 2, 2020, and confirmed by both congregational boards, says that "we are committed to building one congregational family within the next 12 months." We continue to work toward that stated goal. The congregational votes are scheduled for August 22, 2021.

15. How can I find out more information?

Continue to read our bulletin articles and updates.

Call any JSEC member anytime.

Most important, plan to attend **one of our informational meetings** on

Sunday, June 27, 4:00 p.m.

at Beth Shalom Synagogue

9111 Jefferson Highway

or

Wednesday July 7, 6:00 p.m.

at Congregation B'nai Israel

3354 Kleinert Ave.

We encourage members of both congregations to attend on the date that is most convenient for them. Please do not feel limited to the meeting being held at your current congregation. Childcare will be provided with advance reservation.

Each congregation will hold a follow up meeting for questions for their members only.

Beth Shalom - Sunday, July 11, 2021 at 10:00 a.m.

B'nai Israel – date and time TBD

Our current plans are for these meetings to be held in person with a Zoom attendance option also available. Watch for details and an RSVP request soon!

16. Where can I ask a specific question?

We welcome and encourage your questions. We have set up a dedicated e-mail address that will be monitored by JSEC members. Please send your questions about the unification to: batonrougejewishfuture@gmail.com. A JSEC member will respond within 48 hours.

17. What's next?

We ask for your patience and your input as we continue to build on what we are learning. We are working to be both thorough and timely in our deliberations. We promise to continue to keep you updated. We must all remember that while there are some similarities, the unification of two sacred communities differs dramatically from a business merger.

All of the planning for our new spiritual home is built upon the strong and enduring foundation established by our legacy communities, Congregation B'nai Israel and Beth Shalom Synagogue. Those precious congregations have nurtured generations of Jews and Jewish families - some of whom are here planning for future generations in Baton Rouge - and others who have carried this legacy with them as they build Jewish lives in other places. Unification would carry forward those rich histories and create an even stronger foundation for our collective future, and the generations that will follow. Our goal is not and cannot be to negotiate each aspect of congregational life, so that Beth Shalom and B'nai Israel each "win" on a few points. Rather, we must decide whether we want to come together as a *new* congregational family, casting our lot jointly as we build a vibrant new community that can bring even more joy and meaning to our lives and secure a strong Jewish future in Baton Rouge.

We have heard from some of you that the process is moving too slowly; that we should have been finished months ago. Others believe we are moving too quickly; that we need more concrete answers before anyone should be asked to vote on unification. We are striving to move this process forward at just the right pace. For better or worse, there are no real guidebooks. We are listening to, utilizing and learning from outside professionals, the experiences of other congregations, our own community leaders, and our congregants.

We are at a point in our Torah reading cycle where we recently began the book of Numbers, known in Hebrew as *B'midbar*, literally 'in the wilderness'. Among many other things, this section of the Torah reminds us that it is important to note who is counted, and whose voices are heard. It is also a time when our ancestors experienced uncertainty about their future, much as we are experiencing now. Yet some say that during that period of uncertainty and indecision, our ancestors put in place structures and practices that determined the entire future of the Jewish people. We take the current work for our beloved Jewish community with equal seriousness.

We look forward to continuing the journey with you.

JSEC Committee Co-Chairs: Barry Blumberg and Linda Posner

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

<p>We are especially grateful to the large and diverse group of congregants who have risen to the occasion, embraced the challenge, and jumped into this work with open minds and open hearts.</p>
