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# A New Path Forward

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**Northern California Board of Rabbis**

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# A New Path Forward

## Study and Redesign for the Northern California Board of Rabbis

### The Question

The Northern California Board of Rabbis (BOR) is one of the oldest Jewish institutions in Northern California. Over the years, it has adapted to meet the needs of new generations and once again finds itself at a critical juncture. An immediate concern is a 2017 end to funding from the *Jewish Community Federation & Endowment Fund of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties*.

This funding challenge is coupled with the changing roles and needs of rabbis and the evolving nature of the organized Jewish community in Northern California.

**The focus of this study and redesign is to chart a path forward. From the outset, one possibility for this new direction has been a complete dismantling of the BOR. However, the results of the study indicate a continued desire and need for a healthy and active BOR.**

The BOR currently has no staff and no governing structure. Marv Goodman, the former Executive Director, has volunteered to remain involved in a supportive capacity through the conclusion of this study and redesign.

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## The Methodology

Data for this study was gathered “internally” from rabbis and “externally” from local Jewish organizations:

### **Internal:**

In-person focus groups in: Berkeley, Los Gatos, Marin, Redwood City, San Francisco, and Santa Rosa.

Virtual focus groups via Zoom web-conferencing on two separate dates.

Study session at the High Holy Day Seminar following the keynote speaker.

Individual interviews with rabbis in the region.

Survey of 250 rabbis with a return rate of 40%.

### **External:**

Interviews and data gathering from:

Jewish Community Federation & Endowment Fund of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties

Jewish Federation of Silicon Valley

The Jewish Federation of the East Bay and the Jewish Community Foundation

Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center

Osher Marin JCC

Oshman Family JCC

San Francisco JCC

The Brandeis School of San Francisco

Shalom Hartman Institute of North America

J Newspaper

Sinai Memorial Chapel

American Jewish Committee

Boards of Rabbis in Chicago, Boston, Southern California, and Greater Miami

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## The Findings

### General Observations

1. There are four distinct groups of rabbis in the BOR. The percentages reflect those who self reported in the online survey:
  - a. Congregational Rabbis (42%)
  - b. Independent or organizational rabbis who are active professionally in Jewish life (31%)
  - c. Rabbis who are not active professionally in Jewish life (i.e., teachers, consultants, etc.) (17%)
  - d. Retired Rabbis (10%)
2. Rabbis are increasingly burdened by travel and time constraints.
3. Each of the above groups of rabbis feels overlooked, at times, by the BOR.
4. Of the 250 rabbis on the BOR mailing list, approximately 100 are dues paying members.

### Profile

Rabbis and Executive Directors<sup>i</sup> of local organizations have little knowledge of the BOR and its coverage area. They may know Marv Goodman and his work, but do not necessarily make the association to the BOR. They may also know of other rabbinical organizations (i.e., East Bay and Silicon Valley) but only associate The Northern California Board of Rabbis with the city of San Francisco.

Retired rabbis and rabbis who have been in the area for 10 or more years have a much better sense of the BOR.

### Expectations

Rabbis and Executive Directors generally have low expectations for the BOR and do not know its function. For both, needs are often met on an individual basis and through personal relationships.

<sup>1</sup> “Executive Director” is used to refer to the senior staff member of an organization even when the official title is Chief Executive Officer, etc.

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Rabbis may rely on one or two local colleagues for support or on national/international organizations for continuing education, collegiality, and personal and professional support. It is common for rabbis to say, “I don’t personally need the BOR.”

Executive Directors may have “go to” rabbis they call upon for support rather than calling upon the BOR.

## **Internal Needs**

Rabbis recognize a number of personal and professional needs that could be fulfilled through the BOR. In some cases, the opportunities already exist, yet they are admittedly not taken advantage of by BOR members.

**Collegiality** – Rabbis are yearning for connection with other rabbis.

Suggestions for connecting rabbis:

- a. Regional subgroups;
- b. Mastermind groups – “a peer-to-peer mentoring concept used to help members solve their problems with input and advice from the other group members;”
- c. Affinity groups based on: issues of the day (addressing the housing crisis), text (studying *mussar*), profession (non-congregational rabbis, assistant rabbis), thought leadership (shaping the future of Judaism in Northern California), etc.;
- d. Retreats;
- e. Trips domestically and abroad.

**Purpose** – Rabbis want to support a BOR if it serves a vital purpose in their own rabbinates. See Mastermind and affinity groups above.

**Resource** – Rabbis want to know the resources in the community: who is teaching about death and dying, who is offering support for single parents, who is available to provide extra coverage, who is an expert in biomedical ethics, etc.?

**Skills building** – Rabbis are interested in learning or sharpening new skills through innovation labs, certifications, etc. This is especially important for those without sizeable budgets for continuing education.

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## External Needs

**Breaking down silos** – Executive Directors observe that there are many silos in the Northern California Jewish community and see the BOR as a possible leader in increasing collaboration and cooperation.

**Visioning** – There is no organized discussion around the future of Judaism in Northern California. The SF Federation is completing a study of the Jewish community but is not seen by many as the leader for the discussion of what happens next. Approximately 60% of the rabbis who completed the online survey supported this idea.

**Resource** – Executive Directors expressed a need for rabbinical support for their organizations both for pastoral needs and ethical questions. There is also a need for the BOR to serve as a referral source for qualified vetted rabbis to officiate at lifecycle events, give pastoral care, teach, and represent the Jewish community.

**Voice in the public sphere** – Many rabbis and a few Executive Directors are interested in the BOR being an active participant in community initiatives. Approximately 70% of the rabbis who completed the online survey supported this idea.

**Chaplaincy** – There is a state legal requirement that rabbis serving certain chaplaincy positions are endorsed by the BOR.

## Funding

Of those who completed the online survey, 86% were willing to support the work of the BOR financially.

Though no formal requests for funding were made during this study, Executive Directors did indicate a willingness to support the BOR for both the wellbeing of rabbis and in support of their own institutional needs.

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## A New Path

Over the course of this study and redesign, participants were presented with questions and scenarios that served as prototypes for what the BOR could become. From these sessions, a newly designed Northern California Board of Rabbis could look like the following:

### Functions

The BOR serves as a central coordination hub for a confederation of Boards of Rabbis located throughout the region, scheduling speakers and trainings, and encouraging gatherings.

The BOR uses technology such as Zoom web conferencing and “closed/secret” Facebook pages to build and maintain mastermind and affinity groups.

The BOR coordinates three events per year including: A High Holy Day prep, a program not specifically focused on congregational rabbis, and an overnight retreat.

The BOR creates a robust website to promote all rabbis who are available to the community for teaching, life cycle events, or other specialties and expertise.

The BOR promotes and coordinates trips domestically and abroad for rabbis.

The BOR endorses state chaplains.

### Governance

The BOR is led by an advisory committee representing each sub-region.

The BOR represents rabbis to the larger community through the elected president or a representative from a sub-region.

The BOR establishes guidelines for membership.

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**The BOR hires a part time staff person to coordinate the above functions.** In speaking with Boards of Rabbis across the country, it is possible for these duties to be completed within 10 hours per week. However, during the first year of piloting this new model for the BOR, 10 hours would be seen as a minimum.

## Next Steps

The above recommendations are made after seven months of conversations and study. There is, however, no formal authority for making the final decision on how to move forward.

The recommendation for moving forward is to put the above report to a vote of the rabbis presently on the BOR mailing list. This will be followed by an implementation meeting of those who volunteered for leadership roles through the online survey.

