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The URJ Rabbinic Transition Roadmap

Module 1: Understanding Transition

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Welcome to the Journey of Rabbinic Transition

The journey of rabbinic transition begins before the search for a new, settled rabbi. It begins the moment when a congregation learns that their current rabbi will be departing. It is a journey that challenges everyone involved to be mindful and respectful of the broad range of individual emotions and feelings generated by the departure of one settled rabbi and the welcoming of a new settled rabbi.

The URJ has developed this four-module Rabbinic Transition Roadmap to help congregational leadership guide their congregations on this journey. It is highly recommended that you begin with Module 1—“Understanding Transition”—no matter where you are on the path. It sets the stage and builds a foundation for the successful management of the transition process. After that, each module can be used independently and can even overlap based on the congregation’s transition timetable.

Realizing that in today’s world “the only constant is change,” perhaps the most enduring value of this resource is that once you have learned and applied the key principles of transition management to your rabbinic process, you will be able to apply them to many other change processes that you undertake as a community, from that of other staff or leadership to anticipated programmatic changes. As experimentation and change processes become more crucial to the success of congregations in the 21st century, we hope that the value of this resource will expand to meet your needs well beyond this immediate journey of rabbinic transition.

May Adonai bless you and your congregation on this journey, and on your journeys yet to come.
The URJ Rabbinic Transition Roadmap

Module 1: Understanding Transition

The URJ Rabbinic Transition Roadmap is a self-guided resource for congregations who are in the process of planning for the departure of their current rabbi and the welcome of their next settled rabbi.

The resource is divided into four modules. Module 1 focuses on understanding transition and is an important starting point no matter where the congregation is in the transition process. Modules 2–4 cover the three chronological, or task-oriented, stages of transition. It is highly recommended that you begin with Module 1 no matter where you are in your transition. It sets the stage and builds a foundation for a successful transition. After that, each module can be used independently and can even overlap based on the congregation’s transition timetable.

Each module includes the following:

- Key concepts for that transition stage.
- In-depth presentation of the main content for that stage of transition, including teachings from recognized experts in the field of transition management, case studies or other narrative examples of congregations in transition, and best principles for successfully managing that stage of the rabbinic transition.
- Exercises to engage various groups in your congregation, including both lay leaders and professionals. One of the core principles of effective transition management is engaging directly with various stakeholders in your congregation. Exercises like the ones in each module provide you with structured, intentional ways to help your congregation thoughtfully move through each phase of your congregation’s rabbinic transition.
- Resources for further learning and networking for those who wish to delve more deeply into the theory, best principles, and practices. These include readings by experts in the field of transition management and clergy transition, ways to connect with other congregational leaders who have been through it before, and other materials produced by the URJ and CCAR.

As you use the materials in this resource, you’ll see a few key ideas recurring throughout:¹

- **Change and transition are different phenomena.** Change refers to an external, situational shift, while transition is about the human process of reorienting from one reality to a new one.

- **Managing rabbinic transition is different from managing a rabbinic search.** Managing transition begins sooner and lasts longer.

- **Transition happens in stages.** These include endings/saying goodbye to the current reality, a “neutral zone” that represents the stage in between the old and the new, and beginnings/entering into the new reality. Additionally, different congregants and staff move through the stages at different times, and sometimes move back and forth between stages instead of moving through them in a direct line.

- **Transition is not a short-term process.** Transition begins the moment that the congregation learns that their rabbi will be leaving and continues through at least the first eighteen months of the next settled rabbi’s tenure. A transition process will be successful if congregational leaders recognize and attend to the human experience of the transition process. Different cohorts and different individual congregants will experience this transition differently, and many varying issues and questions will emerge. This resource intends to help you navigate these realities and support you as you experience this meaningful journey.

¹ Much of the theory and practice behind The URJ Rabbinic Transition Roadmap is based on the work of William Bridges, PhD, whose Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Di Capo Press, 2009), can be a valuable and accessible resource.
Understanding Transition: Two Ways

There are two different, though related, ways of understanding the transition process. The first is a **conceptual** understanding of how individuals experience transition, a framework developed by William Bridges: endings, neutral zone, and new beginnings.²

The second way of understanding transition is **chronological** and represents the actual tasks that the congregation, led by a rabbinic transition team, will be focusing on at different steps along the way. These steps (planning and discovery, saying goodbye, saying hello) are tied to the actual calendar of rabbinic transition.

² Reproduction permitted by William Bridges Associates.
Best Principles for Managing a Transition

At the URJ, we often reference the 8 Principles that Drive Strong Congregations. These principles strengthen congregations in general, and many of them also specifically apply to the transition management process.

1. **Manage the transition, not just the change.** William Bridges, the father of transition management, spoke about transition as the human side of change, the psychological process of adapting to change. Very often congregations make changes that make sense strategically, make sense from a resource perspective, and may even make sense from a congregant perspective. Sometimes changes happen all on their own (a rabbi decides to leave or retire). Whether a change is by choice or not, if congregational leaders ignore the human side of change, they are often left wondering why there is so much resistance to a move. Applying Bridges’ principles to rabbinic (or other kinds of major transitions) can help congregants who have a more difficult time with the transition feel like they are being heard, and the entire community better embraces the transition.

2. **Start with why.** When a congregation becomes aware that a rabbi is leaving, it is important to engage in a planning and discovery process. Before beginning the process of looking for the next settled rabbi, a congregation needs to explore the questions of who they are and why they exist. Understanding a particular congregation’s “why” will help in the search for a rabbi who is a good fit for the congregation.

3. **Be aware of the sacred.** A synagogue is not a business or a corporation; it is a sacred community. A rabbinic transition can be a very stressful time in the life of a congregation. It is of critical importance that congregants treat each other, the outgoing rabbi, and the synagogue staff *b’tzelem Elohim*, as created in God’s image. All relationships in the synagogue should be seen as holy relationships. Decisions that are made should not just be business decisions but also ethical and sacred decisions.

4. **Focus on best principles, not best practices.** “Everyone wants an easy answer—“Tell me what to do, and I’ll do it!”—but given congregations’ varied histories, cultures, demographics, physical spaces, and resources, no one solution will work for every community, and given the complex challenges presented by a rapidly changing world, simple plug-in solutions are unlikely to work for long. Instead, we work with “best principles,” not “best practices.” Different congregations may implement a best principle in different ways. One example is holding events to meet the next settled rabbi. Some congregations have small events in people’s homes, others hold them at the synagogue, still others have meetings around different topics to discuss with the next settled rabbi. Each one of these are ways to help the next settled rabbi and congregation get to know each other, depending on the needs and style of the congregation.

5. **Work as a team.** The transition process can be long and exhausting. Each stage requires the time and focus of the community. No one person can be responsible for its success; it takes the talent and dedication of a team of people working together. The temple board, search team, transition team, and temple staff need to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities in this important process.
6. **Listen.** As Amy Asin, vice president of Strengthening Congregations at the Union for Reform Judaism, observes, “Because our leaders sit in pews next to one another, and our clergy may officiate at lay leaders’ weddings or visit them in their hospital beds, our relationships are much more intimate and complex than even those at other Jewish organizations.” Members of congregations are emotionally invested in the congregation and their rabbi in ways that the leadership often doesn’t know or understand. It is critical to listen to people’s concerns, fears, hopes, and dreams for the future. This can be done in formal ways, like focus groups or in one-on-one conversations. Members of the community need to feel heard and valued.

7. **Bring participants into the process.** This means listening to members of the community (see above), but it also means communicating on a regular basis. Transition breeds anxiety, and not knowing what is going on only adds to that anxiety. The board, search team, and transition team must communicate in an open and transparent manner. Even if specifics cannot and should not be shared (such as names of candidates), the process as well as timing of the process can and should be shared. Members of the search and transition teams should be as diverse as possible, representing different age groups, social groups, and interests. This way, as many voices as possible will be represented in the transition process. While it is not appropriate for staff members to serve on the search committee, they (particularly the executive director, if the congregation has one) are often integral to the work of the transition committee.

8. **You must say goodbye before you can say hello.** The congregation needs to create as many opportunities as possible for members to say goodbye to the departing/retiring rabbi and allow people to express their feelings about that rabbi and his/her departure. The congregation should celebrate the accomplishments of the congregation during that rabbi’s tenure and the accomplishments of the departing rabbi. People need to celebrate and mourn what they are losing. It is only then that they can move on and embrace the next settled rabbi and a new era in the life of the congregation.

9. **Redefine success.** It is easy to assume that once the next settled rabbi is engaged that the transition is over. And yet, in some ways it is just getting going. During the next eighteen months to two years the congregation will need many opportunities to welcome and get to know the next settled rabbi, build new relationships, and help the next settled rabbi really feel settled in the new community. This should be done in a deliberate and thoughtful way. Success will look different to different people in the process. But it is important for everyone to remember that a transition is a marathon, not a sprint. Success is not winning the race but rather helping everyone take the time they need to build meaningful relationships and a healthy future for the congregation.

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About the Congregational Transition Team

Purpose of the Team

The transition team informs itself about transition and attends to the transition dynamics and stages in the congregation. It strategizes and implements learning for the congregation and leadership around transition organizationally and spiritually through an intense and serious discovery phase. It listens carefully to collect and process input from the congregation throughout the transition time. In a respectful and professional manner, it focuses energy and attention on the goodbyes to the outgoing rabbi as well as attendant needs in the congregation. It will coordinate with the search team when appropriate, and it will enable a respectful and celebratory welcome of the next settled rabbi by providing resources and being a resource. Because its scope of work extends far before and after the next settled rabbi’s first day of work, it can ensure that shared history, culture, and norms may be transmitted in a meaningful way. It communicates with the congregation—and, when appropriate, the larger external community—clearly and frequently about these matters. All of this creates a vision for the future of the congregation, engages members, and deepens consensus.

Note: If the congregation chooses to engage an interim rabbi before embarking on a search for a permanent rabbi, the transition team would work with the interim rabbi. Please contact the CCAR Rabbinic Placement office for more information about the interim rabbinic program. For more information about considerations around interim rabbis, visit the Senior/Solo Rabbinic Transition group in The Tent; by searching for the keyword “interim” you’ll see the most recent files and conversations.

Size of the Team

The president and/or board generally appoints three to six people to serve on the transition team. This group may be supplemented after the search is complete with a few members from the search team to welcome the incoming rabbi. In some congregations, the transition and search teams may have some overlapping members. The transition team might choose to delegate responsibility for tasks that focus on event planning, such as farewell, welcome, and other events to short-term task-oriented sub-teams, in coordination with synagogue leadership.

Duration of Service

Depending on how far in advance notice from the departing rabbi is given, the transition task force could serve for a period of two to four years. During this period of time, sub-teams might be developed to address specific aspects of the transition. These sub-teams would serve for shorter periods of time. Naturally, the intensity and nature of the work varies over that period of time.

Benefits to Team Members

In addition to the satisfaction of making a lasting contribution to the well-being of the congregation, transition team members will also acquire a deeper understanding of transition management through a Jewish lens, which will be applicable to a wide variety of transitions they may encounter personally, professionally, or in their volunteer roles. As a congregation, you will develop a cadre of individuals with shared capacity to manage a variety of transitions across different areas of congregational life.

Team’s Role and Makeup

This team will be the focal point of transition leadership in the congregation. With the assistance of The URJ Rabbinic Transition Roadmap and other resources, the team members will learn and study together, develop working agreements, create a timetable for the work, implement engagement and learning experiences, collect and synthesize input from all constituents in the congregation, and more. Individuals on the team understand that synagogues differ from other nonprofits and organizations as religious communities of values and spiritual depth.

Using the material in this module, including the additional resources listed, work with a small group of congregational leaders (such as the current and incoming presidents and an additional trusted lay leader, for example an executive committee member or a past president) to familiarize yourselves with the conceptual framework, the task flow of transition, and how it may play out for your congregation.
As you read through this module and discuss it together, keep a list of the skills and attributes that will be valuable on your transition team. While no individual possesses all of these characteristics, the following skill sets, attributes, and experience will be assets to the team's work.

- **Skill sets**: Organizational ability and follow-through, good communication skills including ability to listen, group facilitation, respect for as well as knowledge of the rabbinic role.
- **Personal attributes**: Confidentiality as appropriate, emotional intelligence, wisdom, fairness, respected within the congregation, holds the best interests of the synagogue at the fore, reflective.
- **Experience**: Prior experience with rabbinic transitions, informed and knowledgeable about the congregation, past and present.

Note that while there will be opportunities for event planning at every stage of the transition, some of this work can be tasked to a sub-team or even outsourced to a separate group; take care not to focus on event-planning skills to the exclusion of other very important skill sets.

As you brainstorm possible members for the transition team, you may find it useful to make a chart like the one below, to keep track of the desired demographic groups and skill sets. As you consider each individual, put a check mark in the appropriate columns. As your list grows, you will be able to see any gaps and consider whether they need to be filled. Note that the column headings below are not exhaustive and are just examples, these categories should be filled in as appropriate for your own congregation and take into account demographic information, skill sets, personal attributes, and relevant experience.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Member 0–5 years</th>
<th>Member 6–10 years</th>
<th>Member 10–15 years</th>
<th>Member 15+ years</th>
<th>Facilitation skills</th>
<th>Knowledgeable about congregation’s past and present</th>
<th>High emotional intelligence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Name A</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>Name C</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exercises and Resources for Step 1: Learning about Transition

The goal of this section is to provide exercises and Jewish texts that can be used to help members of the congregation understand the transition process. The exercises can be used with a variety of groups (executive committee, transition team, etc.). Feel free to use all or some of the exercises or even just some of the activities within the exercises as needed.

What Are the Goals of This Step?

1. Introduce William Bridge’s theory of transition management
2. Define the steps of the rabbinic transition process
3. Identify the congregation’s transition leadership team
4. Educate other stakeholders about transition, building outward from the leadership core

The exercises in Module 1 are intended to educate the transition leaders as well as other congregational stakeholders. The three exercises are as follows:

- Transition ≠ Change
- In-Between Times and the Parable of the Trapeze
- Transition Means Stages

The steps and timing for each exercise are described below. It is suggested to include snacks and name tags with each exercise.

In addition, at the end of the module is a resource dedicated to understanding the importance and role of the transition team.

This URJ resource, available online, will supplement your own learning and can easily be shared with other transition leaders:


These resources provide insight into the theory of transition that is the foundation of the URJ’s work on all types of transition management:


Have more questions? Connect with these resources:

- URJ Consulting and Transition Management Team
- URJ Knowledge Network Team
- The Senior/Solo Rabbinic Transition group in The Tent, where you can ask your own questions and get advice from other congregational leaders
Exercise: Transition ≠ Change

Overview: This exercise, which builds on the work of Williams Bridges, will ask participants to draw on their personal experiences to help them understand how transition is different from change.

Suggested Audience

- Board
- Executive committee
- Professional staff
- Committees
- Other stakeholders (for example, auxiliaries, religious school parents, or founding members)

Goals: During this session, participants will

- Identify the differences between transition and change
- Categorize personally generated examples of transition and change
- Discuss how the distinction between transition and change is helpful in understanding the current congregational process of rabbinic transition

Materials Needed

- Flip chart (or whiteboard) and markers
- Microphone
- LCD projector, screen, and necessary cables for connecting to laptop or tablet
- Prepared slides
- Pens or pencils for participants
- Several stacks of 3 x 3 sticky notes, enough for each participant to have three to four individual notes
- Abram story texts

Timeline: 75 minutes

00:00–00:05 Welcome
00:05–00:15 Connection
00:15–00:25 Text Study: Transition and Change
00:25–00:35 Affinity Grouping
00:35–00:45 Applying Themes to Rabbinic Transition
01:45–01:00 Abram’s Transition
01:00–01:10 Reflection
01:10–01:15 Next Steps

Note: If the necessary audiovisual equipment is not readily available, the information to be shared can be written up ahead of time on flip charts and pulled out at the appropriate time in the session.
Preparation for the Facilitator(s)

1. Read at least the first chapter of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (pp. 3–10), by William Bridges.

2. Prepare the following slide:

   Bridges quote: “Most people do not resist change. What we resist is transition… Change is a situational shift, such as a new job or promotion, a new boss, a new home or remodeling the house, a new policy at work, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. Transition, on the other hand, is the process of letting go of the way things used to be, and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become.” (William Bridges, *The Way of Transition*, 2001, p. 2)

3. Prepare two flip charts or divide the space on a whiteboard by writing two headings across the top:
   “Transition” and “Change.”

4. Set up a table near the entrance with pens and name tags so that participants can create a name tag as they arrive.

5. Set up the audiovisual equipment and speakers so that they are ready to go at the beginning of the session.

6. Arrange chairs so that people can see and hear one another as well as see the flip chart or whiteboard and projected images.

Facilitation

1. Welcome
   • Welcome the participants to the gathering and thank them for coming.
   • Explain that this session is one of several discussions that the congregation will be having as the community addresses the upcoming rabbinic transition. The input collected in these conversations will assist the transition team in supporting the congregation during this time, as well as help inform the search team in doing its work.
   • Explain the timeline for the next 75 minutes. Let participants know they will be exploring their own experiences with change and transition and how this relates to different aspects of the congregation's rabbinic transition process.

2. Connection: Invite the participants to introduce themselves by sharing how long they've lived in the community and what brought them there.

3. Text Study: Transition and Change
   • Turn the participants' attention to the Bridges quote on the slide.
   • Invite one of the participants to read the Bridges quote aloud for the group.
   • Ask the group:
     ○ According to Bridges, what is the difference between transition and change?
     ○ Do you agree? Why or why not?

4. Activities
   Affinity Grouping
   • Explain to the participants that they are going to do an exercise called affinity grouping, which is a method of organizing ideas and brainstorming that focuses on finding commonalities between ideas.
   • Distribute pens and pads of 3 x 3 sticky notes, instructing each person to take a few notes. On each sticky note, participants should write down the description of a change they are going through or recently went through. They should feel free to use many adjectives. Each sticky note should have only one example on it. Participants may fill out as many sticky notes as they like in order to offer several examples. For example, a “change” sticky note might say, “My job change was not my choice—the decision was made for me,” or “There are so many details to manage in my house remodel.” They should then write down transitions on sticky notes. These are their
emotional responses to the changes. A “transition” sticky note might say, “I was nervous and excited at the same
time,” or “I wasn’t sure if I would come out OK.”

• After writing down their examples, invite participants to place their “change” sticky notes on the “change” flip
chart (or under that heading on the whiteboard). Similarly, they should place their “transition” sticky notes on the
“transition” flip chart (or under that heading on the whiteboard).

• Divide the group in half: one group will take the “change” sticky notes, and the other group will take all the
“transition” sticky notes. Instruct each group to work together to identify themes that emerge from their set of
sticky notes. What patterns do you see? What commonalities? Are there any significant outliers that should be
noted? Ask the group to make a list of the themes or patterns that emerged.

• Gather back together as a whole group. Invite each of the groups to share the themes and patterns that emerged
in their examination of the sticky notes. Make a list of the themes and patterns on a flip chart at the front of
the room.

• Discuss the following questions with the group:
  ◦ How do these themes help us understand the concept of transition in a more nuanced way?
  ◦ How do these themes help us understand the concept of change in a more nuanced way?

Applying Themes to Rabbinic Transition

• Up until now we have been exploring the concepts of transition and change in relation to our own personal
experiences. Invite the participants to look at the list of themes and consider which of them are relevant to the
congregation’s current situation and the rabbinic transition.

• Discuss the following:
  ◦ What themes of transition are relevant to our rabbinic transition? How might we see those playing out?
  ◦ What transitions might our congregational community need to undergo?
  ◦ What themes of change are relevant to our rabbinic transition? How might we see those playing out?
  ◦ What changes might we each need to make?
  ◦ What changes might our congregational community need to make?
  ◦ Make notes of participants’ answers by writing them on the flip chart at the front of the room.

5. Reflection

• In bringing the session to a close, reiterate how, according to Bridges, transition is about emotions and change is
situationa.l. The upcoming rabbinic transition is much more than hiring the next settled rabbi to sit in the rabbi’s
study or occupy the rabbi’s seat on the bimah. There are a lot of emotions related to the change that need tending.

• Ask the participants to share any final thoughts they may have about how understanding the difference between
transition and change can help them cope with and manage their current rabbinic transition.

• Remind the participants that everyone will need to be cognizant of the phases of transition and gentle with
themselves and each other as they experience a range of emotions as one rabbi prepares to leave and the successor
rabbi comes on board.

6. Next Steps

• Collect the notes and recorded reflections. Save this feedback for future reference.

• Thank everyone for coming. Let them know whom to contact if they have additional thoughts or questions.

• If appropriate, inform participants about the date and time of the next gathering.
Text Study: Abram’s Transition 1

Instructions:

- Distribute the handout on the following page.
- Read through the text and answer the questions together or in small groups.

For your convenience, we are listing the questions here as well, together with sample answers in brackets to some of the questions that can help you guide the conversation:

1. Abram is being told to make an enormous change in his life. What are the changes God is telling Abram to make? What are the transitions?

2. God describes what Abram is leaving in three different ways (“your land, your birthplace, your father’s house”). Why do you think God does this? [Part of the transition process is understanding all the implications of the change and facing all of the loss that a change can bring.]

3. What does this force Abram to do before he leaves? [Recognize what he is losing and possibly mourn those losses.]

4. In the first verse God tells Abram what he is giving up. What does God tell him in verses 2 and 3? [What he will gain through this change.]

5. The Torah doesn’t tell us how Abram feels about this change. How do you think he feels? What feelings might he have at different stages of his transition?

6. Sarai and Lot and the people who went with them did not hear the command from God. They have had no choice in the change. How do you think they feel? Do you think they are in the same place in the transition as Abram?
Abram’s Transition 1

Lech L’cha: Genesis 12:1–6

1 The Eternal One said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and I will pronounce doom on those who curse you; through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” 4 So Abram went forth as the Eternal had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother’s son Lot, all the possessions they had amassed, and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set forth for the land of Canaan, and they arrived in the land of Canaan. 6 Abram then traversed the land as far as the sacred site of Shechem, as far as the Oak of Moreh.1

Questions for Discussion:

1. Abram is being told to make an enormous change in his life. What are the changes God is telling Abram to make? What are the transitions?

2. God describes what Abram is leaving in three different ways (“your land, your birthplace, your father’s house”). Why do you think that God does this? What does this force Abram to do before he leaves?

3. In the first verse God tells Abram what he is giving up. What does God tell him in verses 2 and 3?

4. The Torah doesn’t tell us how Abram feels about this change. How do you think he feels? What feelings might he have at different stages of his transition?

5. Sarai and Lot and the people who went with them did not hear the command from God. They have had no choice in the change. How do you think they feel? Do you think they are in the same place in the transition as Abram?

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Exercise: In-Between Times and the Parable of the Trapeze

Overview: This exercise uses Danaan Parry’s “The Parable of the Trapeze” to explore the emotions and realities that are connected to undergoing transition and relates them to the upcoming rabbinic transition.

Suggested Audience

- Transition team
- Board
- Executive committee
- Professional staff
- Committees
- Other stakeholders (for example, auxiliaries, religious school parents, or founding members)

Goals:

During this session, participants will

- Share experiences of going through their own transitions
- Explore the trapeze metaphor for transitions and how that makes them feel about the upcoming rabbinic transition
- Identify existing and potential safety nets that could help the congregation through the transitions

Materials Needed

- Flip chart (or whiteboard) and markers
- Microphone
- Digital device for playing one of the following:
  - mp3 file: audio interpretation of “The Parable of the Trapeze” with music by Fran McKendree
  - YouTube video: audio and visual interpretation of “The Parable of the Trapeze” with scenes from the movie Trapeze (1956)
- LCD projector, screen, and necessary cables for connecting to laptop or tablet
- Speakers
- Handout: “The Parable of the Trapeze,” by Danaan Parry
- Pens or pencils for participants

Timeline: 75 minutes

00:00–00:05 Welcome
00:05–00:15 Connection
00:15–00:30 Text Study: “The Parable of the Trapeze”
00:30–00:45 Small-Group Discussion of Rabbinic Transition
00:45–01:05 Reflection
01:05–01:15 Next Steps
Preparation for the Facilitator(s)

2. Set up the audiovisual equipment and speakers so that they are ready to go at the beginning of the session.
3. Room setup: Flexible space so that participants can break into smaller discussion groups for part of the evening. If possible, place chairs in a circle—or concentric circles if necessary—so that all participants can see and hear one another.
4. Set up a table near the entrance with pens and nametags so that participants can create a name tag as they arrive.

Facilitation

1. Welcome:
   - Welcome the participants to the gathering, and thank them for coming.
   - Explain that this session is one of several discussions the congregation will be having as the community addresses the upcoming rabbinic transition. The input collected in these conversations will assist the transition team in supporting the congregation during this time, as well as help inform the search team in doing its work.
   - Explain the timeline for the next 75 minutes.

2. Connection
   - Invite each of the participants to introduce themselves, share how many years they've been members of the congregation, and share how many years they've been living in the community.
   - Explain that in this session they will explore the dynamics of going through a transition.
   - Invite the participants to think about the transitions they may have been through in their lives. What were those transitions? Take examples from the group and list them on the flip chart or whiteboard. (Examples might include: getting a first job, changing jobs, moving, going through a divorce, becoming a parent, or experiencing the death of a loved one.)
   - Explain that keeping those transitions in mind, they will next listen to and read a text about the emotional dynamics that are part of a transition process.

3. Text Study: “The Parable of the Trapeze”
   - Distribute copies of “The Parable of the Trapeze” handout to each participant.
   - Explain that everyone is going to listen to an audio interpretation of “The Parable of the Trapeze” and should follow along with the text on the handout. Instruct the participants that while they are listening, they should make note of key phrases or words that resonate with them. They can do so by circling those words or phrases on the page.
   - Play one of the following:
     - mp3 file of “The Parable of the Trapeze,” with music by Frank McKendree
     - YouTube video: audio and visual interpretation of “The Parable of the Trapeze,” with scenes from the movie *Trapeze* (1956)
   - At the conclusion of the recording, give participants a few moments to look back over the text and circle key words or phrases that resonate with them.
   - Ask several of the participants to share their reactions to the parable. You may take several responses from the participants. Questions might include:
     - What was a key word or phrase that resonated with you? Why?
How does this story compare with your own experience of transition? Did you feel like you were on that trapeze? How so or why not?

How did you get through that “transition zone”?

Does the author’s suggestion that real learning, growth, and change happen in that moment of flying between one bar and the other reflect your own experience of transition? How so or why not?

- Explain that they will now break into smaller groups to explore these ideas in relation to their own congregational transition.

4. Activity: Small-Group Discussion of Rabbinic Transition

- Break the participants into groups of five or six people per group. Ask one person to serve as a notetaker for the group. Ask one person to serve as the reporter for the group.

- Using the same text as a foundation for the discussion, each group should discuss the following questions:
  
  - How does this parable apply to our current rabbinic transition?
  
  - The rabbinic transition affects us each individually. How are you personally feeling about this transition? Why? Possible answers might include: excited, scared, hopeful, or grateful. Where are you in the trapeze swing? Which bar are you holding? Are you flying in between? How do you know you are in that place?
  
  - The rabbinic transition affects us as community. Where do you think our congregation as a whole is in the trapeze swing? Which bar are we holding? Are we flying in between? How do we know we are in that place? How does it feel to be in that place?
  
  - One thing this text doesn’t talk about is the safety net underneath the trapeze flyers. What safety nets do we already have in place? What additional safety nets might we need?
  
  - What will grabbing hold of that next bar feel like for our congregation? What will it mean for our congregation?

5. Reflection

- Gather back in the circle of chairs with the whole group.

- Invite brief reports from each of the small groups by asking the reporters to focus on the following questions: Where is your group in the transition swing, and how does it compare with where your group thinks the congregation as a whole is in the swing? How does it feel to be in that place?

- If time permits, share responses to the questions about safety nets: What safety nets do we already have in place? What additional safety nets might we need?

- As a final exercise, go around the circle and invite people to share one word that expresses how they are feeling about the upcoming congregational transition.

- Conclude by reminding everyone that transition takes time, that people go through it in stages and at different paces, and that it is important to attend to emotions at the time of transition. The transition team and leadership will continue to work to assist and support the transition.

6. Next Steps

- Collect the notes and recorded reflections. Save this feedback for future reference.

- Thank everyone for coming. Let them know whom to contact if they have additional thoughts or questions.

- If appropriate, inform participants about the date and time of the next gathering.
The Parable of the Trapeze

Turning the Fear of Transformation into the Transformation of Fear

by Danaan Parry

Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I’m either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments in my life, I’m hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I’m in control of my life.

I know most of the right questions and even some of the answers.

But every once in a while as I’m merrily (or even not-so-merrily) swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It’s empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart of hearts I know that, for me to grow, I must release my grip on this present, well-known bar and move to the new one.

Each time it happens to me I hope (no, I pray) that I won’t have to let go of my old bar completely before I grab the new one. But in my knowing place, I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar and, for some moment in time, I must hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new bar.

Each time, I am filled with terror. It doesn’t matter that in all my previous hurtles across the void of unknowing I have always made it. I am each time afraid that I will miss, that I will be crushed on unseen rocks in the bottomless chasm between bars. I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives. So, for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of “the past is gone, the future is not yet here.”

It’s called “transition.” I have come to believe that this transition is the only place that real change occurs. I mean real change, not the pseudo-change that only lasts until the next time my old buttons get punched.

I have noticed that, in our culture, this transition zone is looked upon as a “no-thing,” a no place between places. Sure, the old trapeze bar was real, and that new one coming towards me, I hope that’s real, too. But the void in between? Is that just a scary, confusing, disorienting nowhere that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible? NO! What a wasted opportunity that would be. I have a sneaking suspicion that the transition zone is the only real thing and the bars are illusions we dream up to avoid the void where the real change, the real growth, occurs for us. Whether or not my hunch is true, it remains that the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Yes, with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out of control that can (but not necessarily) accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives.

We cannot discover new oceans unless we have the courage to lose sight of the shore.

Anonymous

So, transformation of fear may have nothing to do with making fear go away, but rather with giving ourselves permission to “hang out” in the transition between trapezes. Transforming our need to grab that new bar, any bar, is allowing ourselves to dwell in the only place where change really happens. It can be terrifying. It can also be enlightening in the true sense of the word. Hurtling through the void, we just may learn how to fly. ¹

¹ Danaan Parry, Warriors of the Heart (Kalaheo, HI: Earthstewards Network, 2012). Please contact Earthstewards (earthstewards.org) if you need permission to use “The Parable of the Trapeze” for your own materials. You can purchase the book on their website.
Exercise: Transition Means Stages

Overview: This session helps participants learn about the three stages of transition as defined by William Bridges and how they pertain to rabbinic transition. It also addresses the idea that transition takes time.

Suggested Audience
- Board
- Executive committee
- Professional staff
- Committees
- Other stakeholders (for example, auxiliaries, religious school parents, or founding members)

Goals: During this session, participants will
- Identify themselves in the stages of transition
- Explain what they have done in order to move from one stage of transition to the next
- Imagine what they may need to do in order to move from one stage of transition to the next in the coming months

Materials Needed
- Flip chart (or whiteboard) and markers
- Microphone
- LCD projector, screen, and necessary cables for connecting to laptop or tablet
- Prepared slides
- Prepared flip charts
- Pens or pencils for participants
- Several sets of sticker dots in three colors (red, yellow, green) for each participant

Timeline: 75 minutes
00:00–00:05 Welcome
00:05–00:15 Connection
00:15–00:25 Text Study
00:25–00:35 The Stages of Transition
00:35–01:00 Finding Ourselves in the Stages of Transition
01:00–01:10 Reflection
01:10–01:15 Next Steps

Note: If the necessary audiovisual equipment is not readily available, the information to be shared can be written up ahead of time on flip charts and pulled out at the appropriate time in the session.
Preparation for the Facilitator(s)

1. Read *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, by William Bridges, paying particular attention to chapter 1, “It Isn’t the Changes That Do You In,” and the description of the three stages of transition.

2. Prepare a slide of the illustrated chart showing the stages of transition, as taught by William Bridges (see last page).

3. Prepare three flip charts, each with a separate heading:
   - Flip chart 1: “When I heard about the rabbi leaving I felt…”
   - Flip chart 2: “I feel…”
   - Flip chart 3: “In six months I think I will feel…”

   Under the headings on each of the flip charts, re-create the stages of transition as illustrated in the slide (see last page). Make the chart large enough so that participants will be able to put their dots inside one of the sections of the chart during the exercise.

4. Prepare sets of dots so that each participant can take a few of each color as they arrive.

5. Set up a table near the entrance with pens and name tags so that participants can create a name tag as they arrive.

6. Set up the audiovisual equipment and speakers so that they are ready to go at the beginning of the session.

7. Arrange chairs so that people can see and hear one another, as well as see the flip charts (or whiteboard) and projected images.

Facilitation

1. Welcome
   - Welcome the participants to the gathering and thank them for coming.
   - Explain that this session is one of several discussions that the congregation will be having as the community addresses the upcoming rabbinic transition. The input collected in these conversations will assist the transition team in supporting the congregation during this time, as well as help inform the search team in doing its work.
   - Explain the timeline for the next 75 minutes. Let participants know they will be exploring the stages of transition as they apply to the congregation's rabbinic transition process.

2. Connection
   - Invite the participants to introduce themselves.
   - If you have a group of people who've participated in previous conversations, invite them to recall “The Parable of the Trapeze.” If necessary, the facilitator can briefly summarize it for the group.
   - Invite the participants to think about a time in which they felt they were in the “in-between space”—between the two trapezes—in that moment of transition. Ask the participants to turn to someone next to them to briefly share that memory and what it felt like to be in the “in-between space.”

3. Activities
   - The Stages of Transition
     - Turn the participants’ attention to the slide illustrating the three stages of transition. Explain that Bridges has language to help us understand, more deeply, those stages of moving through a transition. While the three stages of transition generally happen in the order presented, everyone travels through the stages at their own pace.

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6 Note: Depending on the timing of this session in relation to the rabbi’s retirement, the facilitator may choose to change the heading to “In a year I think I will feel…”
• Explain the three stages and the predictive emotions associated with each stage. 7

1. Ending, Losing, Letting Go: This stage is about letting go—letting go of old ways of doing things, old attitudes, and old self-images. This may come with a sense of loss, anxiety, anger, fear, or resistance.

2. The Neutral Zone: The neutral zone is about being between the old and the new. We are neither one nor the other. This phase brings confusion, disorientation, and apathy, and it is hard to commit to action. There is uncertainty and, perhaps, a lack of stability. Yet ultimately, this stage can lead to a sense of creativity, adventure, and learning.

3. The New Beginning: This stage is about embracing the new reality, the new attitudes, the new self-image. It brings excitement; there is new energy and a sense of renewal, and people are beginning to see the gains.

Finding Ourselves in the Stages of Transition

• Explain to the participants that they might all be at different stages of the transition process. They may have even begun this process at different stages.

• Turn the participants’ attention to the three flip charts that have been prepared.

• Looking first to the flip chart with the heading “When I heard about the rabbi leaving I felt…,” invite the participants to use a red dot to mark the stage/feelings they felt they were in when they were notified of the rabbi’s pending departure.

• Looking at the flip chart with the heading “I feel…,” invite the participants to use a yellow dot to mark the stage where they are now.

• Looking at the flip chart with the heading “In six months I think I will feel…,” invite the participants to use a green dot to mark where they think they will be in six months.

• Once everyone has had a chance to post their dots on the flip charts, give them a few moments to step back and look at the three charts.

• Analyze the results of this activity by discussing with the group:
  ◦ Where were the majority of us when we were notified of the rabbinic transition (red dots)?
  ◦ Where are we at this point in time (yellow dots)?
  ◦ Has there been change? If so, what has helped you move from one stage to another? If not, why do you think you haven’t yet made that shift from one stage to another? What do you think would help you move from one stage to another?
  ◦ Where do people think they will be in six months (green dots)?
  ◦ What do you imagine you will need to do to move further through the stages?
  ◦ What else can we be doing as a congregation to help move people further through the stages?

• Take notes of participants’ answers by writing them on the flip chart at the front of the room.

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7 Bridges, Managing Transitions, pp. 4–5.
4. Abram’s Transition 2

- If you did the first exercise you may have read this text together. Either way, it is worth exploring it again with the stages of transition in mind. Read the text and then discuss the questions below either as a whole group or in smaller groups.

  - As before, we’re sharing the questions here together with sample answers in brackets to some of the questions that can help you guide the conversation:

  - Abram is being told to make an enormous change in his life. God describes what Abram is leaving in three different ways (“your land, your birthplace, your father’s house”). Why do you think that God does this? What does this force Abram to do before he leaves? Which of Bridge’s stages does this make you think of? [Recognize what he is losing and possibly mourn those losses. Saying goodbye.]

  - In the first verse God tells Abram what he is giving up. What does God tell him in verses 2 and 3? Which stage does this seem to belong to? [What he will gain through this change. Saying hello.]

  - The Torah doesn’t tell us how Abram feels about this transition. How do you think he feels? What feelings might he have at different stages of his transition (ending, neutral zone, new beginning)?

  - Sarai and Lot and the people who went with them did not hear the command from God. They have had no choice in the change. How do you think they feel? Do you think they are in the same place in the transition as Abram?

  - What does Abram do when he arrives in his new land? What is his new beginning about? How do you think he feels now?

5. Reflection

- Take a few moments to debrief this exercise:

  - What did we learn about our congregation?

  - What did we learn about ourselves?

  - What do we know?

  - What do we still want to know?

- Conclude the session by reminding people that transition takes time and that people go through it in stages and at different paces. It is important for each of us individually, and as a community, to attend to the emotions that come with the various stages during this time of transition. The transition team and leadership will continue to work to assist people and support the transition.

6. Next Steps

- Collect the notes and recorded reflections. Save this feedback for future reference.

- Thank everyone for coming. Let them know whom to contact if they have additional thoughts or questions.

- If appropriate, inform participants about the date and time of the next gathering.
Abram’s Transition 2

Lech L’cha: Genesis 12:1–6

1 The Eternal One said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, your birthplace, your father’s house, to the land that I will show you. 2 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and I will pronounce doom on those who curse you; through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” 4 So Abram went forth as the Eternal had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. 5 Abram took his wife Sarai, his brother’s son Lot, all the possessions they had amassed, and the people they had acquired in Haran. They set forth for the land of Canaan, and they arrived in the land of Canaan. 6 Abram then traversed the land as far as the sacred site of Shechem, as far as the Oak of Moreh.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Abram is being told to make an enormous change in his life. God describes what Abram is leaving in three different ways (“your land, your birthplace, your father’s house”). Why do you think that God does this? What does this force Abram to do before he leaves? Which of Bridge’s stages does this make you think of?

2. In the first verse God tells Abram what he is giving up. What does God tell him in verses 2 and 3? Which stage does this seem to belong to?

3. The Torah doesn’t tell us how Abram feels about this transition. How do you think he feels? What feelings might he have at different stages of his transition (ending, neutral zone, new beginning)?

4. Sarai and Lot and the people who went with them did not hear the command from God. They have had no choice in the change. How do you think they feel? Do you think they are in the same place in the transition as Abram?

5. What does Abram do when he arrives in his new land? What is his new beginning about? How do you think he feels now?

The Stages of Transition

William Bridges

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