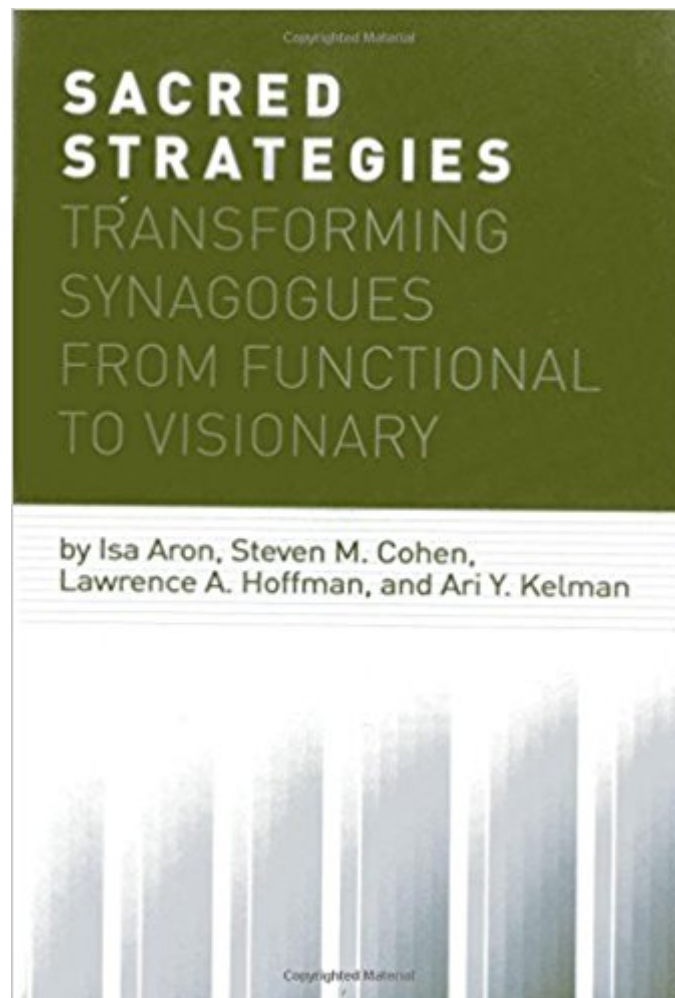




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# **Sacred Strategies: Transforming Synagogues From Functional To Visionary**



## Synopsis

Sacred Strategies is about eight synagogues that reached out and helped people connect to Jewish life in a new way—congregations that had gone from commonplace to extraordinary. Over a period of two years, researchers Aron, Cohen, Hoffman, and Kelman interviewed 175 synagogue leaders and a selection of congregants (ranging from intensely committed to largely inactive). They found these congregations shared six traits: sacred purpose, holistic ethos, participatory culture, meaningful engagement, innovation disposition, and reflective leadership and governance. They write for synagogue leaders eager to transform their congregations, federations and foundations interested in encouraging and supporting this transformation, and researchers in congregational studies who will want to explore further. Part 1 of this book demonstrates how these characteristics are exemplified in the four central aspects of synagogue life: worship, learning, community building, and social justice. Part 2 explores questions such as: What enabled some congregations to become visionary? What hindered others from doing so? What advice might we give to congregational, federation, and foundation leaders? The picture that emerges in this book is one of congregations that were entrepreneurial, experimental, and committed to “something better.”

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Aron, Cohen, Hoffman and Kelman map out the journey from functional, cash-for-service synagogues to compelling, purposeful, and visionary Jewish communities. It’s easy to kvetch about what’s not working in the Jewish world; this study demonstrates the

transformative power of dissatisfaction when harnessed by creative and bold leaders committed to real, sustainable change. (Rabbi Sharon Brous, IKAR) Sacred Strategies is a vital book that must be read by all who are concerned with the future of Judaism in North America and the role that synagogues can and must play in that future. Challenging and insightful, this book provides models for the creation of vibrant Jewish congregations that will speak to the minds and souls of contemporary Jews. The visions this work presents and analyzes offer inspiration and hope for our community. (Rabbi David Ellenson Ph.D, President, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion) Sacred Strategies tells how eight American synagogues became visionary congregations—entrepreneurial, experimental, and committed to engaging members—and serves as a primer for other congregations seeking to join them. Anyone who leads or attends a synagogue will be inspired by this book. It is a refreshingly optimistic study of how synagogues can change for the better. (Jonathan D. Sarna, Brandeis University) Can liberal congregations transform themselves from functional institutions primarily geared to the consumerist wants of their members to become sacred communities offering something far more meaningful—a religious vision, serious prayer, learning opportunities for all and a means to engage in acts of kindness? In an age when many have come to despair for the future of synagogues, the authors of this wise and probing book answer with a resounding “yes”; and then show us how it can be done. This is an indispensable resource for all engaged in the vital task of congregational renewal. (Jack Wertheimer, Provost and Professor of American Jewish History, Jewish Theological Seminary)

Isa Aron is professor of Jewish education at the Rhea Hirsch School of Education, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and was the founding director of the Experiment in Congregational Education, a project of the RHSE now in its eighteenth year. She is the author of *Becoming a Congregation of Learners* and *The Self-Renewing Congregation*. Steven M. Cohen is research professor of Jewish social policy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at NYU Wagner. With Arnold M. Eisen he wrote *The Jew Within*, and with Charles Liebman he wrote *Two Worlds of Judaism: The Israeli and American Experiences*. His earlier books include *American Modernity & Jewish Identity* and *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* Lawrence Hoffman is the Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship and Ritual, and the co-founder of Synagogue 2000 (now Synagogue 3000). For over thirty years, he has taught classes in liturgy, ritual, theology, and synagogue leadership. He has written or edited over 35 books, including *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary* for

Congregational Life, which is widely used by congregations of all denominations engaged in transformational change. Ari Y. Kelman is an assistant professor of American studies at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio* and co-author of a number of influential studies of contemporary Jewish identity, community, and culture.

My congregation has been participating in community organizing for the last two years and the process had reached a dead end. This volume has served as a stimulus for the leadership to rethink and re-engage in a way that had not happened before. Learning of the struggles of other communities and their successes and failures in meeting the challenges has been so helpful. The framework of functional and visionary congregations outlined early in the book offers an excellent starting point. I recommend this book to all who care about their communities and are looking for new ways to think about engagement and leadership.

Community organizing and our synagogue met each other 5-6 years ago. Since then, together with wonderful professional and lay leadership (present company excluded), we've made great progress in the sacred task of continually energizing, and re-energizing, a vibrant Jewish congregation that really tries to speak to the minds and souls of contemporary Jews. While many of the strategies described in the book are familiar to us, reading of the stories of other congregations is incredibly helpful in validating what we've done to date, refining initiatives, and more importantly, thinking about the future and how we can continue to improve. This is a must read for synagogue leadership in 2013.

In addition to describing the kinds cultural characteristics various temples have tried while attempting to transform themselves the authors astutely cover the immense challenges of achieving transformation. The book provided a lot of practical advice for the journey of transformation while avoiding the the perspective of "we've got THE ANSWER". This feels far more authentic.

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