Discovery Circles 2.0: Final Report
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Introduction

In March of 2025, the Temple Micah Board and Transition Committee tasked Joel Korn and Lizzie Worden with co-chairing a second round of Discovery Circles, following up on the process that took place in 2024, to inform and enrich the rabbinic search. The primary goal of this second round was to gain as much insight as possible into Temple Micah congregants' interests and expectations for the next senior rabbi to inform the Transition Committee's application to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). In this report, we overview the key findings regarding characteristics for the next senior rabbi, discuss differences within the congregation, and conclude with reflections on continuity and change for Micah.

Drawing from the Discovery 1.0 model, we trained 15 volunteers [1] to serve as facilitators and scribes for discussion groups with Micah congregants. From April 27 to May 17, 2025, approximately 185 congregants participated in 20 groups (15 met in person at Temple Micah and 5 met online). The groups represented a wide range of Micah members in terms of age, gender, life stage, and experiences (e.g., teens, young parents, recently retired, former Temple Micah presidents). The participants were randomly assigned to one of the groups scheduled for the day they requested (an effort was made to separate couples), and the conversations lasted approximately one hour. The facilitators set ground rules to keep the discussions on point and create an inclusive environment where everyone was comfortable speaking (or not). Participants were asked to keep the conversations confidential and be respectful of each other.

The facilitators asked the following questions:

1) "What keeps you committed to Temple Micah?";
2) "What are the things you would like to continue at Temple Micah and what would you like to see change?";
3) "What qualities are important for our next Senior Rabbi to have?";
4) "What do you see as the role of the next Senior Rabbi during times of turmoil and/or differences in the Congregation (such as relates to US politics and Israel)?";

[1] The work of the Discovery Circles benefited from the participation as facilitators and/or scribes of: Olivia Ivey, Emily Tamkin, Jordan Tama, Lindsay Ballet, Julianna Caplan, Mark Blumenthal, Kathryn Ceja, Roberta Aronson, Melanie Aron, Susan Bandler, James Hamos, Jamie Gardner, Arlene Lutenegger, Betsy Broder and Lauren Laitin. We also received critical support from Beth Werlin and Sarah Brown.

5) “At the biggest moments in your life, what would you want from your Senior Rabbi?”; and

6) “Anything else that you would like to share that we have not covered?”

The scribes took notes and submitted typed summaries to us.

We read all the summaries with an eye to salient themes, contradictions, and outliers. We discussed our initial thoughts, finalized the themes, and worked together on the writing of this report.

Key Characteristics

We identified six key characteristics that the next senior rabbi should possess and enact based on a review of all responses. The characteristics are presented in alphabetical order and do not reflect any weighting in their relative importance.

1. Intellectual

Congregants want the senior rabbi to be a scholar; someone with “gravitas”, “with a depth of knowledge we can tap into”, who is excited to share and teach the congregation. Members are not looking for someone to tell them *what* to think but *how* to consider and analyze issues of the day through a Jewish lens, through Jewish teachings. In the Discovery Circles, a member described their hope for a senior rabbi who is “intellectual, erudite, authentic.” They want a senior rabbi who “doesn’t talk down, just shares their knowledge.” Members are especially attracted to Micah due to the “serious intellectual air” through sermons, letters to b’nai mitzvah students and programming. Members indicated that, “they enjoy being challenged by sermons, even when they don’t agree with what is being said.” In summary, “this is a bright congregation. We need someone who is not pretentious and needs to be understated and humble. I want someone who tells me what they think, but not what I should think. Someone who challenges me and takes me out of my comfort zone.” Using the senior rabbi’s “intellectual heft”, members would like to be assisted on their quest to figure out “what it means to be Jewish in modern times.”

2. Skilled Manager

Congregants commented that the senior rabbi should have managerial skills, including the ability to mentor and motivate and the willingness to give space for the professional growth of the rabbinic and administrative teams. The senior rabbi should be a team builder. They should be accessible both to staff as well as to congregants, and open to congregant generated initiatives. A congregant stated that “the senior rabbi should promote decision-making in an open, transparent and inclusive way,” and “increase congregational involvement in decisions, a little less *one voice* from the top.” The senior rabbi should have their views and beliefs but not expect all the clergy to think in the same manner. Different viewpoints should be expected and encouraged. The senior rabbi must strive to have a good rapport with the other rabbis.

The senior rabbi should respect Temple Micah's history and traditions while also helping it to evolve with the times and adjust its organizational structure and processes (as needed) to reflect the current membership of almost 700 family units. Participants recognized that many of the things that they cherish(ed) about Temple Micah may no longer be feasible with the current size.

Summarizing, the expectation is for the senior rabbi to have a "broad set of skills that one needs to run an organization: leadership skills; open to people, they may like some people more than others, but they shouldn't show it; high emotional intelligence; get the input in order to make the hard decisions."

3. Skilled Mediator

The Discovery Circles confirmed that there exist differing viewpoints within the congregation on some key issues facing our community. Congregants want a senior rabbi who creates comfortable spaces for dialogue and demonstrates an openness to all positions without feeling the need for everyone to agree. It is "okay to take positions but I would like the senior rabbi to be open to dialogue; have diplomatic skills; express views even if some disagree." One member stated "times are so extreme. What we may need is a referee." This sentiment was highlighted throughout the Discovery Circles. It overlaps with the earlier mentioned characteristic of listening. A scribe summarized their groups' comments, "Here the group was looking for balance: a senior rabbi should provide clear moral leadership while also making space for discussion and disagreement. While it was agreed that this is a tricky balance to strike, it was seen as possible, because our rabbis now do a good job with that. Temple Micah has been a safe and even necessary place for people to come during times of turmoil, and this should be sustained."

The senior rabbi should help members understand and apply a Jewish lens to issues of the day and "give congregants Jewish meaning and hope in difficult times." As someone else noted, "not fearing the difficulty of disagreement is a core Jewish value." Though challenging especially at this moment, the senior rabbi should strive to help members with differing viewpoints find some level of consensus. Members described their hope for a "free pulpit, making sure the rabbis feel able to speak freely and that congregants feel able to share too." Along these lines, congregants highlighted the importance of the "ability to challenge opinions while making sure that Micah is a sanctuary for all lines of thinking" and "recognize that there can be nuanced views, comfortable with disagreement, differing opinions." A senior rabbi who is comfortable with conflict and who is accepting varying viewpoints is essential to Micah. Related to the characteristic of humility as mentioned above, several participants mentioned the need for a senior rabbi to reflect and possibly reconsider their views, as exemplified by this quote: "Sit with hard issues and perhaps even change one's mind with deep reflection." Last, the senior rabbi should make members of the rabbinic team feel comfortable expressing their own opinions.

4. Social Emotional Skills

In addition to intellectual leadership, participants across the Discovery Circles emphasized that the next senior rabbi must have exceptional social-emotional skills. These skills include empathy, listening, humility, and "knowing the community."

A senior rabbi should be empathetic, which is essential for supporting congregants during life's milestones. One participant gave the example of working with a new rabbi officiating the funeral of a loved one, and despite not having a close relationship with the family, their empathy nonetheless carried the day. Someone else added "Empathy is such an important value – the empathy shown to me at the loss of my father led to everlasting gratitude." One scribe summed up their circle's comments with "empathy is supreme."

Empathy goes hand in hand with listening, which has two manifestations across the Discovery Circles: 1) listening to individual congregants to support them; and 2) listening across the congregation to understand and accept differences. Good listening also serves as a bridge across constituencies, fostering further inclusivity. For individuals, a rabbi who is "good listener and empathetic makes you feel you [that you] matter."

Listening across the congregation is important for understanding and recognizing differences, especially for those congregants who have different views than the senior rabbi. A Micah member notes that the rabbi should "love, even if you don't like, 100% of the Congregation." Another added, "this may be kind of an impossible feat, but someone who can work with a wide range of people who have various levels of faith and may not ascribe to one definition. That level of humanity is really essential here." Someone else added: "We're not going to get Danny 2.0 and we don't want Danny 2.0, but getting a rabbi who is not only an intellectual giant and well-versed in Judaism and "Judaisms" and having someone who can listen well, like really, really listen well is crucial." This listening across constituencies is important for those members who felt that Micah could be an even more inclusive place.

Characteristics of humility and openness are interwoven with the importance of listening. One participant remarked in talking about Micah's founding, we had "A realization that the congregants have interesting lives and things to teach, that they could learn from us. We wanted a low bima, where the rabbis took the robes off." A scribe recorded that their group agreed that the new rabbi should be able to listen, "having the courage to have the tough conversations," recognizing that they don't have all the answers and being open to their own journey.

Underpinning the ideal characteristics of empathy, listening, and humility is the mandate that the senior rabbi must "know" the Micah community. This sense of knowing is salient throughout the circles. As one member described, the next senior rabbi should have a "PhD" in the Micah community. Many members spoke about "being known" or "feeling known" as a reason for what keeps them committed to Micah.

5. Support Activism and Progressive Values

Congregants almost uniformly want a senior rabbi who will maintain our progressive outlook and promote Temple Micah's involvement beyond its doors. Members desire for the senior rabbi to be

active in the greater Washington, DC community as well as be willing to address issues of concern, both national and international, on the bimah. A member described the role of the senior rabbi as one who "engages with the world around them and then puts it together in a way that I can engage with." One participant described this as a "blend of the engagement with what is going on in the world from the bimah and also in the different group activities". The senior rabbi should follow an approach of Micah not backing away from important issues of the day. Discovery Circle participants emphasized that as a congregation we are motivated by, "social action, involvement in the greater world," and that "being progressive aligns with our values". An additional important message heard from congregants was, "Jews don't thrive in any place that is not a liberal society – (the senior rabbi) needs to be outspoken about that."

6. Support for Interfaith Families

In 15 of the 20 Discovery Circles, acceptance of and support for interfaith families was discussed as an important and necessary attribute for the next senior rabbi. Some participants remarked that this is what sets Micah apart from other reform synagogues and many others remarked that this is why they joined Micah and what has kept them committed. Some reflective quotes include participants wanting: "A rabbi who is completely committed to interfaith families" and "commitment to interfaith families is more important than I can express." This sentiment was also reflected in the question about what keeps people committed to Micah: "That Temple Micah is explicitly welcoming of interfaith families got us in the door and kept us here;" "Feel welcome as a mixed (interfaith) family;" and "The welcoming attitude towards interfaith families is incredible. My wife feels very welcomed and included." A scribe noted, "Several participants mentioned that the inclusion of non-Jewish members of Micah (in b'nai-mitzvahs and on the High Holy Days) was special and wonderful." There was a strong consensus that the next senior rabbi should continue the welcoming inclusion of interfaith families.

Differences within the Micah Community

Temple Micah is not a homogeneous block. While the congregation is "progressive," it is made up of individuals who have different backgrounds, interests, political views, expectations, and needs. We draw attention to a few differences that emerged from the conversations: music, incumbent rabbi, Israel, and politics versus spirituality.

1. Music

Music is one of the reasons that keeps people committed to Micah, as we heard from a full range of congregants. Across the Discovery Circles, there was great admiration and support for Rabbi Slakman. Congregants agreed that she is "fabulous," down to earth, and has a beautiful voice. Many appreciated the changes to the musical offerings. A congregant reflected, "whether handled well or not, the change with the music has created services that are so much more spiritual and that is phenomenal. People really love what's going on." Someone in a different circle added, "we gush about the music with Rabbi Slakman and Philip. They have taken the music to another level,

but many miss the traditional choir." As one participant said, "Singing in a group resonates deeply within us. Has ebbed in our secular society. It creates bonds between people. This conversation about the music is important. It is good to get introduced to new things, but there needs to be a mix of the familiar so that the congregation can join in the singing." Another remarked that "the changes to the choir – not a criticism of the music which is great – but the loss of choral music and lack of communication with the choir has left a gap. Not having a choir as I remember it feels like losing a piece of my soul. Pop-up rather than fully rehearsed complex choral music. Something gained but something lost."

Last, a scribe summarized the growing pains of the new musical directions at Micah: "While the transition to a new senior rabbi is a significant change, it is not the only change in recent years. Music is a highly valued component of worship and connection, and transitions in that area have left some feeling less connected than they were before and others a little more. Music was thus discussed as an area that needs both continuity and change. Perhaps attentiveness and care would best describe the shared sentiment on that front."

2. Current Rabbinical Staff

While the facilitators and scribes stressed that the Discovery Circles were not the forum to suggest specific rabbinical candidates, there was very public support for Rabbi Beraha. He is a beloved and respected rabbi and part of the Micah community. One congregant remarked "Rabbi Josh has been a huge influence on me and my family." Another added that "Rabbi Josh has depth and availability. He is extremely thoughtful." One parent in a different circle made a similar point, "Most of my closest relationships are extensions from Machon; related to that is the role of Rabbi Beraha, which is what keeps me here." Another participant discussed joining Micah and recalled, "... my Jewish identity is in this place [and meeting] Rabbi Josh felt like a homecoming."

A vocal, organized minority of the congregation would like Rabbi Beraha to be the next senior rabbi. Some did not think that Micah should conduct a national search and used the Discovery Circles to share this view. Within this subgroup, many were concerned about the continuity of the congregation and institutional memory. One participant reflected, "With [Rabbi Crawley] leaving, this is our time to show support for Josh. A new person will never have the relationships that he has." Others were concerned that Rabbi Beraha would leave too: "If we lose him, we don't have continuity." Another added that Micah needs a rabbi "who really gets the DNA of Micah. With so many people leaving, how do you keep the DNA? I think the world of Josh," who can maintain the Micah DNA.

Although there was strong enthusiasm in some Discovery Circles for Rabbi Beraha to become the senior rabbi, this possibility was not discussed as ardently in other circles. A number of congregants support a national search. One member thought that Micah would "attract a lot of talent" for a rabbinical search. A scribe from one circle recorded these thoughts: "Micah seems like a choice job that should attract good candidates; we should engage in the search broadly; won't be able to find someone who is all things for all people, shouldn't choose based on fear or rush to judgment; want to be able to find and choose among the best candidates; will never get the ideal;

we do have a rabbinical team." Another scribe summarized it well, "At the end [of the discussion], one person reiterated support for Rabbi Beraha and another said that it was important to her that Rabbi Beraha not be a foregone conclusion and that it be a true national search - both of these very different views were felt in the Circle."

3. Israel: room for differences of opinion

There was consensus that Temple Micah needs to provide a safe space to discuss the enormous challenges facing Israel and its neighbors, though there were differences of opinion as to whether the focus and programming, especially since October 7, 2023, have been too supportive and not sufficiently critical of actions taken by the Government of Israel. Some members called for more vocal support for the State of Israel especially in a time of war. Other participants identified themselves as "Zionist but able to criticize Israel for its policies." Some felt that Israel seems to be the exception to the idea that Micah is a place where you can have an idea and move forward with it. A Discovery Circle participant commented that they "wanted to have a discussion group about Palestinians and Gaza and was told no. Surprising given the history of *home for tough conversations* and yet Israel-Gaza was treated as too tough." Another said, "I was shocked by the response to Israel and the Gaza war. I felt it was autocratic."

The role of the senior rabbi managing this sensitive situation was well described by one congregant, "the senior rabbi should be able to speak with moral authority and express a view ("be a strong rudder") while being open to differences and encouraging dialogue; being able to see both sides and understand other perspectives." The senior rabbi should "give space for us all to have our own thoughts but give the framework intellectually and theologically."

4. Too political – want more spirituality

There are divergent opinions as to whether Temple Micah has become too political. Some members are comfortable with the attention given to political issues whereas others seek less politics and more spirituality. Regardless of the eventual point of balance, there was consensus in terms of the role of the senior rabbi "for a strong moral compass that was unwavering, while also noting that views are fractured and a Jewish space should be one where robust debate is welcomed and encouraged."

One participant suggested pairing more action with the political discourse: "I would like to see leadership with a plan. There's a lot of railing against this or that, but never what to do about it. Unless you have an idea about what you can do to make things better then it's just blah blah blah."

Last, someone else added: "I don't want someone who is overtly political. But we do need someone who can actively participate in the discussions and guide them. There needs to be a sensitivity about the congregation's political viewpoint; there needs to be something of a fit, a commitment to social justice action."

Beyond the Rabbinical Search: Change and Continuity for Micah

We included a question related to what members would like to continue and what they might like to see change at Temple Micah. The Discovery Circles provided an opportunity to gather feedback, identifying areas for improvement from a large, representative sample of the congregation.

Change

The suggestions covered a range of topics, some simple but difficult to resolve like the parking problem, and others more complex. Below we highlight those that most frequently came up during the Discovery Circles.

1. **Youth education (Machon)** – some members stressed that the Machon needs to adapt to better serve a diversity of learning styles. A suggestion was for the Machon to look to the secular education world for best practices in this regard. Some said that it could benefit from improved communication. Critiques of the Machon were not uniform and some made comments such as "I appreciate Machon Micah. I like everything about the way it's structured, even the forced participation."

   Members suggested parallel programming for parents (adults) and kids and greater availability of childcare. A clear message was, "for the future of the congregation, the senior rabbi has to connect with young people."

2. **More opportunities to build community** – many participants commented on their desire to strengthen their relationships within the Micah community. There were numerous concrete suggestions such as bringing back the auction, small group activities related to common interests, programming based on zip codes, and identifying ways to integrate groups with generational differences.

3. **Cliquey-ness** – we heard repeatedly that Micah was cliquey. Some said they had never been asked to take a leadership role, and the same people are always running volunteer opportunities. One comment that summarizes how some members are feeling, "have long felt that there is an in-group whose questions, concerns, and suggestions are listened to and there is an outgroup that is not."

4. **Integration of new members** – there was a general sense that more needs to be done to help new members integrate into the community. One participant stated, "there needs to be an easier way to get to know the clergy as relatively new members." Another said, "the transition period of new members is not well tended and truly feeling like one is known can take years." "The Rabbis need to establish themselves as available to new members (monthly, quarterly) and get to know you. It is important that a new person in a group can tell their story. Meeting the Rabbis is a critical first step."

A single parent stated, “I never felt included I would like it more open to single parents who are struggling to do this on their own.”

5. **Clergy should become more pastoral** – this comment was repeatedly heard. Reflecting several participants in the Discovery Circles, a participant stated, “the older I get, the more I feel the pastoral should be more important. I’ve been somewhat disappointed to date regarding the pastoral care issue. It should be a more prominent point of what rabbis consider their duty.”

Continuity

Time and time again, congregants discussed the uniqueness of Micah from its activism to music to inclusivity. Micah’s uniqueness is a source of pride and identity. One member captured this sentiment: “I love that it’s not a Bar-Mitzvah mill – this is a congregation.…Here it’s about justice, Judaism, community, it’s a community in a way that other places don’t have. This place has a secret sauce. Commitment to the community here and the community outside of Micah.” For so many, Micah is a place where they can “be who you are, believe theologically what you believe; a place where we can struggle with difficult issues, especially related to Israel and political issues.” Discovery Circle participants felt Micah to be a different and special Jewish space, a place that is accepting, inclusive and where one can grapple with both spiritual and political issues, and this must endure.

Support and commitment for interfaith families must also continue. This is a thread that ran throughout the conversations. Many congregants remarked on the significance of recognizing non-Jewish family members at the High Holidays. As one congregant stressed, “Commitment to interfaith families is more important than I can express.”

Micah’s music – in whatever form it takes – must also continue. The music is part of Micah’s “special sauce.” The Machon is also a critical part of the community (despite some of the suggestions for change) because it plays such an important role in bringing young families to Micah.

Micah is a vibrant, diverse, and dedicated community. This committed community is sustained by the rabbinical team, staff, and congregants. Micah’s values are deeply held and enacted everyday by its members.

Closing with the words of one congregant, “the underpinning values of Micah are more enduring than any one personnel shift.”