

Guess Who's Coming to Shabbas?

How a simple Shabbat dinner can transform a community

By Debbie Albert

JUST A YEAR AGO, on a Friday night in September 2012, over 80 families from one synagogue shared Shabbat dinner together in 29 different homes as part of a new initiative called "Guess Who's Coming to Shabbas?"

By May of 2013, just nine months into the monthly program, over 76 percent of the congregation had either hosted or been invited to someone's home for Shabbat dinner. What the program has done for Temple Sinai, a Conservative synagogue of just over 500 families outside Philadelphia, has been nothing short of remarkable.

The initiative, which has since spread to at least three other congregations across the country, was actually conceived from a broken heart, mine, when I lost my father, Bernie Albert, z'l, in March 2012.

Just three days after my parents and I returned from our first AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington, DC, my father was felled by a heart attack. Sitting on his dresser was his "to-do list" for our Shabbat dinner that night, which we had reviewed just hours earlier in what was to be our last conversation.

Following his death, there was discussion about what to do to honor his life. For those who really knew him, it was essential that whatever we did engage the unengaged, be interactive and help strengthen our congregation.

At AIPAC, we had seen a video about a woman in Chicago who organized Shabbat dinners across that city with a focus on Israel advocacy. We talked about it on the way home, trying to figure out how to replicate it within our community.

As we struggled to come up with just the right tribute, combining the idea of those Chicago dinners with our own lively Shabbat dinners made sense. But we had to make them sustainable, especially in a congregation like ours, where most people don't keep kosher and many don't light Shabbat candles.

Ever hear of a pyramid scheme? How about a Shabbat dinner pyramid scheme? The idea would be to find a handful of initial families to host other congregant families for Shabbat dinner, with the expectation that the guests would then serve as hosts the following month, and so on.

We named it "Guess Who's Coming to Shabbas?" because in our house, when the kids come downstairs on Friday mornings and see the table set, they always ask, "Who's coming for Shabbas?"

We were excited by the idea, but needed to gauge interest among the congregation. We invited a handful of people, many of whom were active in sisterhood, men's club and Hazak, as well as those with children of different ages, those in day school and public school, and others we considered.

We presented our idea, and explained there was no right or wrong way to "do" Shabbat. It could be as simple as saying the three brachot over candles, wine and challah. For those who don't keep kosher, we asked that they only serve kosher meat, chicken or fish and not mix dairy and meat.

The program has other essential elements ensuring its success:

NO RULES

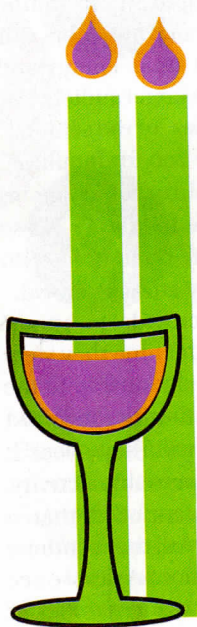
We make it clear that everyone does Shabbat differently. Lighting candles, making Kiddush and saying Motzi is the bare minimum, and we provide a brochure with the blessings in English, Hebrew and transliteration. We also send audio files to all the hosts with the brachot, *Shalom Aleichem* and the blessing of the children, allowing them to brush up on anything they may have forgotten. Whether serving pizza poolside or chicken at the dining room table, anything goes. (On a side note, our local supermarket now puts kosher chicken on sale to coincide with the program, complete with the logo in their weekly circular!)

THINKING OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

When inviting, we ask hosts to think beyond their immediate circle and invite those they may not know well. Reciprocity is not expected. We don't want guests inviting their hosts the following month. Rather, we ask congregants to "pay it forward" by engaging new families. For hosts unsure of whom to invite, we play Shabbas matchmaker.

BRANDING IT

People love logos and this program is no exception. Hosts receive a reusable shopping bag bearing the logo and



Debbie Albert is a third-generation member of Temple Sinai in Dresher, Pennsylvania. To find out about bringing "Guess Who's Coming to Shabbas?" to your synagogue, email her at GuessWhoShabbas@gmail.com.

containing a challah, the brochure (which includes the brachot, a recipe, and ideas for making Shabbat easier), and table talk cards. The cards have questions for discussion such as "If you could invite anyone from the Torah to your Shabbas dinner, who would it be and why?"

COMMUNICATION

All communication emanates from an e-mail account managed by volunteers. The synagogue staff is not burdened with any aspect of the initiative. An online Google doc allows hosts to sign up and emails are sent before and after the dinners, allowing for clear, consistent communications.

PHOTOS

People love seeing themselves. We ask hosts to take photos of their guests before Shabbat and send them in for posting on the synagogue Facebook page and for display on an electronic kiosk in the lobby. It's a great way to show participation and get others to sign up to host.

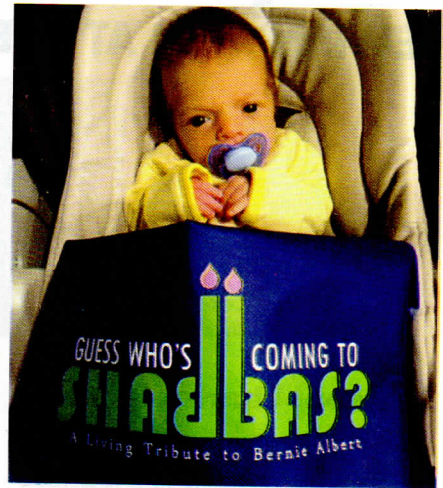
SHABBAT MORNING ALIYAH

Because one of the goals is to strengthen the congregation, all participants (hosts and guests) are invited to the bimah for a group aliyah on Shabbat morning. We've seen a 30 percent participation rate, with some hosts feeling the most fulfilled by this aspect of the program.

WITH A YEAR BEHIND US, what have we learned? First, people love finding easy ways to be Jewish together, especially in their own homes. Among our repeat hosts are people I never imagined would participate.

We also learned what a great tool this is for marketing to new members and retaining current members. People in our area are now talking about Shabbat dinner – from what they're serving to whom they've invited. We've even had people rush to invite another family before they get "taken" by another host!

Our congregants are looking ahead to year two of the program and as of this writing, three other congregations



are on board, utilizing the name, logo and promotional items. The brochure is now available for use, a cookbook is in the works, and Shabbat workshops are planned for the fall.

What started as a one-synagogue tribute to my dad is now a living, engaging program, used around the country and bringing families and congregations closer together, one Shabbas dinner at a time. CJ

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