

It's About People, Not Programs

A leading Jewish thinker says synagogues will succeed in engaging people only if they foster meaningful relationships

By Dr. Ron Wolfson

RECENTLY, I WAS INVITED to be scholar-in-residence at what was once one of the largest synagogues in the United States. The congregation was celebrating its 100th anniversary. The campus was dominated by a huge building, built in the 1960s. The sanctuary was enormous, and a labyrinth of hallways led to dozens of classrooms, offices and meeting halls. In the year 2000, the community had no mortgage, no debt and a balanced budget. Most synagogues would love to be in such great shape.

Yet, there were signs that the coming decade would be challenging. The building was aging and in need of renovation. The senior rabbi who had served the congregation for decades was retiring. Most ominously, the demography of the community had changed; young people were moving north. The synagogue membership was slowly but surely declining from a high of nearly 1,500 households. The leaders of the synagogue knew that something had to be done.

Here's the something they did.

In the year 2000, they decided to borrow one million dollars to invest in the future growth of the congregation. After the long-serving, beloved rabbi retired, they hired a high-priced rabbi ... who lasted less than two years. That cost a half-million dollars. The other half-million was spent on programming, all kinds of programming—big events, concerts, community lectures with nationally renowned speakers, highly touted initiatives to get more people into the synagogue on Shabbat—all sorts of things. Many of the programs had clever names, good marketing and high appeal to specific segments of the community. Lots of people showed up for these programs and, by all accounts, enjoyed them. And then ... they left.

Nothing was done to change the ambience of the congregation, which was widely considered cold

and unwelcoming. Nothing was done to engage the people with others in attendance. Nothing was done to connect individuals with the congregation itself. Nothing was done to find out who they were. Nothing was done to follow up. Nothing was done to convince the members that the institution truly cared about them.

The result: after ten years of this initiative, the congregation was a million dollars in debt, and membership had shrunk to 300 households. By the time I got there, the leaders were kicking themselves, asking me what they could do to reinvigorate their community.

I told them what I will tell you.

It's all about relationships.

People will come to synagogues, Jewish community centers, federations, and other organizations for programs, but they will stay for relationships. Programs are wonderful opportunities for community members to gather, to celebrate, to learn. There is nothing wrong with programs; every organization has them. But, if the program designers have given no thought to how the experience will offer participants a deeper connection to each other, with the community and with Judaism itself, then it will likely be another lovely evening, afternoon or morning with little or no lasting impact.

For those interested in living a Jewish life and for those professionals and lay leaders seeking to increase Jewish engagement, permit me to put my cards on the table, up front:

It's not about programs.

It's not about marketing.

It's not about branding, labels, logos, clever titles, websites, or smartphone apps.

It's not even about institutions.

It's about relationships.

In *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, I posited that the

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Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community

(Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013), from which this article is adapted.

first step in transforming congregations into sacred communities must be establishing a “welcoming ambience” for newcomers and spiritual seekers. Since the publication of the book in 2006, I have continued my visits to synagogues of all types, sizes and geographic locations throughout North America and across the globe. Invariably, a synagogue president will greet me during these visits, a well-marked copy of the book in hand, proclaiming, “I bought a copy for every member of our board!”

Of course, I am thrilled when this happens. I become even more excited when I detect evidence that the synagogue leaders are serious about taking to heart the lessons we learned in Synagogue 2000/3000 – that the synagogue as sacred community must offer engaging worship, lifelong learning, social justice, and a healing community, and begin the process of building relationships by implementing strategies that lead to extending a warmer welcome to members and strangers alike.

Surprisingly, I have also been invited to teach this approach to leaders of Jewish day schools, federations, Hillels, summer camps, JCCs, women’s and men’s groups, youth educators, teachers, cantors, rabbis, and executives of major organizations. It is as if the entire Jewish community understands the truth that, with few exceptions, newcomers to our *mishpachah* (family) often feel ignored, intimidated, and put off by the reception they receive when they walk into a Jewish setting.

But improved signage, greeters at the door and name tags represent only the beginning of a transformative process that moves an institution from an ostensibly busy place with a calendar full of programs to a community of relationships. What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage. When we genuinely care about people, we will not only welcome them; we will listen to their stories, we will share ours, and we will join together to build a Jewish community that enriches our lives.

I suggest a new term to conceptualize the Jewish experience: Relational Judaism. The vision of Relational Judaism is to strengthen Jewish consciousness and commitment by encouraging individuals to build relationships with nine levels of Jewish experience: self, family, friends, Jewish living, community, peoplehood, Israel, world, and God.

The methodology of creating Relational Judaism rests on principles of relational engagement strategies that leaders of Jewish institutions can employ to attract new people and deepen relationships with those already in the ranks.

The questions I invite you to consider are these: How do we transform our communities from institutions of programs to communities of relationships?

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How do we shape a relational community? How do organizational leaders spend their time when the goal is to engage people in relationship, not simply invite them to programs? When are the key points of recruitment, engagement and retention during the life cycle of affiliation in a relational community? How might we transcend denominational boundaries, ideological differences, and institutional walls to develop a Relational Judaism in the 21st century?

Let me blunt: the stakes are high. Until recently, we have done pretty well to engage Jews through some connection with the Jewish community. Estimates suggest 80 percent of Jews affiliate with some institution – a synagogue, community center, federation, school, youth group – at some point in their lives. We get ‘em, but then, we lose ‘em, usually at key transition points. Why? Because we are, frankly, terrible at transitioning our people from one organization to another, from one city to another, from one life stage to another.

We can do better.

In our rush to turn out numbers, in our frantic search for ways to get people through our doors, our institutions spend most of their time, energy and money devising programs for one target audience or another. “Let’s have a lecture series for the seniors!” “How about an afternoon at the zoo for families?” “Why not a once-a-month worship experience with a band?” “A cooking class for the foodies?” These are wonderful programs. They are often done with panache and style. They regularly attract a crowd.

But what happens after the crowds go home? Has anything happened during the time they were at the program to deepen their relationship to the community, to the sponsoring institution, and most importantly, to each other? Or, will they check it off their to-do list, another consumable activity, demanding little or no commitment other than a couple of hours of their time? And, will they continue their relationship with the institution? A rabbi once confided in me, “A woman who was a member of my synagogue for 20 years resigned. I was shocked because she showed up to all of our programs. So, I called her to ask why she was leaving. You know what she said? ‘I came to everything, and I never met anybody.’”

Something is missing. Something critically important. Something so crucial, it could determine the health of the North American Jewish community in the 21st century.

It’s time to shift our paradigm. It is time to shift the shape of Jewish engagement.

This shape shifting begins with a question: What’s the goal? The goal of Jewish institutions is not self-

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IT'S ABOUT PEOPLE

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preservation; it is to engage Jews with Judaism. It's not gaining more members; it's gaining more Jews. It's about people, not programs. It's about deep relationships, not fee-for-service transactions. It is time we turn the paradigm of programming-to-engage-Jews on its head, envisioning a new approach that begins with engaging Jews in a personal relationship with other Jews and Judaism and then program events for them.

Our new goal is served by putting people before programs. Let's learn who they are before we try to figure out what they want. Let's inspire them to see Judaism as a worldview that can inform the many different levels of relationship in their lives. Let's work toward a rededication of our mishpachah, our people, to a renewed Relational Judaism. **CJ**

THE TORAH READING

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A drug to quell performance anxiety got me through my Torah chanting, that and a year of intense practice. But my father's whispers were right. The bat mitzvah did not bestow the mantle of literacy.

Maybe I needed to read the Torah again. I knew how to figure out the trope and pronounce the words. Would their meaning infiltrate my brain? Encouraged by our congregation, I volunteered to read every few months. But each time I failed. I made mistakes, lost the trope, did not recognize the words I thought I knew, failed to sing the correct phrase signaling the end of the sentence. Shame and relief were the only things I took away when the reading was over.

I had to learn Hebrew, not just how to read it. How many more years could I wait?

I found a teacher, someone who taught rabbinical students and who was my study mate in a course we took at Hebrew College, in Newton Centre, just outside Boston. Sigalit was an Israeli, married to an American doctor, and a demanding teacher.

Besides Hebrew grammar, Sigalit gave me an appreciation for contemporary Hebrew literature and the joy and astonishment of translating the Bible. We had lengthy discussions of the origins of various words or grammatical phrases, and she laughed when I complained that the grammar in the Bible was sloppy. "But, Judy, this was written 3000 years ago. Think of what English looked like even 600 years ago."

So I decided to try chanting the Torah again now that I was studying Hebrew. Finally I understood that the trope wasn't arbitrary but grammar itself. It told the listener, "Hey, pay attention, this is an important statement," or "you can doze now, just filling in some details." I stopped mumbling and read with what my second grade teacher used to call "expression."

Last Shabbat, the congregant reciting the Torah blessings stumbled, and I murmured the words with him. "Please hold the wooden handles," I asked him before starting to read. "The scroll is rolling."

And then I read. The congregation disappeared. There was only the parchment, the words, the story told for 3000 years. An eternity of words. An eternity of readers. Finally I was among them. I think my father would have been proud. **CJ**

After several decades doing research on women's health at MIT, Judith Wurtman now blogs for Psychology Today and the Huffington Post. She is a docent at the Jewish Museum of Florida.

A SPRINKLE OF CAMP

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once they attend a five-day training in Los Angeles, they are closely bonded. Marcy Morris pointed out that "adults need to put themselves in a mindset where they know how to play and understand that they are also learning. It's learning how to play and how your teaching resonates with the students." Michael Fingerman, a college junior, singled out a visit to the Zimmer Children's Museum in L.A., a museum modeled on the immersive Jewish camp experience, as particularly inspirational. It "gave me a larger perspective about how what we're doing at camp is molding the lives of campers and counselors."

During the school year, webinars and breakout sessions keep the interns enthusiastic, inspired and connected. "The most important part is the planning and bouncing ideas off each other," said Morris.

The interns create three camp-style programs during the year. Morris tried to put camp spark into each, developing different music programs and instilling learning by stealth. Israeli dancing, Better's specialty, provided physical activity, spiritual connection and immersive learning. Atterman devised a range of programs, including Shabbaton weekends. In one activity, each grade created a song about Israel. When designing programs, Atterman aims for "deeper things in which kids are active participants." At the Brachah Café, for instance, they order food using the correct brachah. For one of his programs, Fingerman ran a Pre-Passover chametz scavenger hunt.

In some instances, the internship has been life-altering. Atterman, a counselor at Ramah Darom and until recently a Jewish day school teacher, has been with both the corps and her shul long enough to be charged with overseeing new interns. She credits the Service Corps as the catalyst for her recent decision to work with Ramah full-time so she can share the magic with others. If the program's goals were to ensure that young leaders remain devoted Ramah ambassadors and inspire some to become Jewish professionals, then the service corps has been a triumph. **CJ**

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