

Spring 2007

# The **NAASE** Journal

A Forum on Synagogue Management & Leadership

## **TIKKUN OLAM:** Revitalizing the Social Activist Voice of our Congregations

...שמרו משפט ועשו צדקה...

...observe what is right and do what is just...

— Isaiah 56:1

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**NAASE**  
נעשה

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# A Message from the President of NAASE

Glenn S. Easton, FSA, ATz

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The publication and distribution of this issue of our annual [NAASE Journal](#) occurs as we prepare to announce the new Hebrew month of Nisan, the month that represents the beginning of the months of the year. However, Nisan is but one of several beginnings or “new years” throughout the Hebrew calendar which includes Tu B’svat (new year of the trees), Rosh Hashanah (birthday of the world), and even the new year for the tithing of animals beginning in the month of Elul.

While these multiple years may seem strange at first, when we look at our personal and professional calendars we notice many “new years” such as the new school year, the calendar year, the fiscal year, or an anniversary year.

Similarly, NAASE experiences several “new years” in a calendar year. Our annual conference celebrates the conclusion of a term of our NAASE leadership as well as the beginning of the next; our June Week of Study comes at the time when, for many of us, the synagogue programming year is coming to a conclusion, and marks a renewal of study and camaraderie for us; and July 1 marks the beginning of our fiscal year. The publication of our annual [NAASE Journal](#) marks the new year of celebrating our sacred profession through writing and sharing essays and scholarship aimed at enhancing and expanding our work as synagogue executive directors, and by sharing in a broad forum ideas to enhance synagogue life.



Glenn S. Easton

No profession can exist without the research, writings, and creation of practical and philosophical thoughts by practitioners in the field. NAASE represents a special profession as demonstrated by this fine [NAASE Journal](#).

We owe a debt of thanks for the leadership and creativity of our [NAASE Journal](#) “team” ably led by our Editor, David Rothenberg, NAASE Vice President, Gilbert Kleiner, Past President Robert Hill, along with their Editorial Board and journal contributors.

May we continue to celebrate new beginnings and continue to learn together, with each other, and from each other in the months and years ahead. ■

L’shalom,  
Glenn S. Easton, FSA, ATz  
NAASE President

## ABOUT THE COVER

The photograph chosen for the cover has many layers of meaning:

We encounter the phrase “*tikkun olam*” at the conclusion of every worship service, in the *aleinu* prayer, when we pray for “*letakein olam bemalchut shaddai*” – for the world to be fixed or perfected under God. Therefore, on one level *tikkun olam* is a theological concept in that we ask that all humankind unite to believe in God so that God will fix the world... “God loves what is right and just; the earth is filled with the loving-kindness of the Lord” (Psalm 33:5)... According to the Zohar, there was a “shrinking” of the universe – a *tzimtzum*, and that led to a need for a “perfecting agent” – a *tikkun* – to partner with God. Humans share responsibility to continue the work of creation in the partnership. Does our picture depict God “handing off” the world to humankind? And if so, which hands are God and which are the humans? And is God the female or the male hands?... The hands depict a team working together, either with God, or perhaps a total community effort... The globe in the photograph is made of crystal, denoting fragility or delicateness... When it comes to a single person – “whoever saves one life is considered by Torah to have saved an entire world (Talmud Mishna Sanhedrin 4:4)... The use of the phrase *tikkun olam* to denote that God works through concrete human actions toward social improvements is a relatively recent (mid 20<sup>th</sup> century) concept... The closing words of John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address: “Here on earth, God’s work must truly be our own.”... There is a beautiful Hebrew phrase found in our liturgy – “*maasei yedeihem*” – literally – the work, or the creation, of their hands, from the prayer for the congregation recited on Shabbat. In the *melave malka*, following the conclusion of Shabbat - may the work of our hands (“*maasei yadenu*”) bring blessing and success... The Talmud records that the world is sustained by the presence of thirty-six righteous people, the *lamed-vav tzaddikim* (Sanhedrin 97b; Sukkah 45b). These people do their work quietly, their identity unknown to all – might the hands of those supporting the globe in our photo belong to a few of those people? ■



## B'reishit: The Beginning A Message from the Editor

By David I. Rothenberg, FSA, ATz



David I. Rothenberg

Last fall, when we started planning this issue of the NAASE Journal, we talked of the possibility of doing a theme-based issue, possibly in the area of finance. I was skeptical about the viability of an issue that was centered on a theme. It would be difficult, I reasoned, to get six to twelve quality articles centered on a single overarching topic. Colleagues were already promising articles on diverse subjects such as selecting sound systems, remodeling facilities and responsibly investing synagogue funds.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the printer – we never got those articles. As we looked at the draft articles sent by colleagues, we actually saw the makings of a themed issue. It became apparent that this issue of the NAASE Journal would be quite different. And I must admit, quite refreshing. The Rabbis say that the world rests on three things – Torah, avodah, and gemilut hasadim...on (study of) Torah, worship, and on deeds of loving kindness. Our synagogues commit a lot of resources to the first two... but how much time and resources are our synagogue communities devoting to gemilut hasadim? Granted – every day in our synagogues many kindly acts take place, most of which go unseen and may not appear in our synagogue newsletters. And – of course - Mitzvah days, the occasional orchestrated rally, and activities such as going to soup kitchens give a few of us some small victories and a sense of accomplishment. However, a survey recently concluded that the number of people living in poverty is at a 32-year high. We might therefore want to ask ourselves some more penetrating questions...

In the last few decades, especially as Jews have become more “mainstream” – have synagogues as institutions become comfortable, overly cautious and too politically correct? How often do synagogues organize beyond the immediacy of the social action committee, on a congregation-wide scale, beyond the annual Mitzvah Day, to effect a change in the wider community - to either speak out or take action on conditions in our communities?

We try to attract new members to our synagogues based on how friendly we are, on the ambience of our services, our education programs, etc. Certainly these things are important. However, surveys consistently find that the primary meaning that most Jews find in their Jewish identity is expressed in (1) a strong sense of community, and (2) the Jewish sense of social action, commonly expressed as tikkun olam – repairing or fixing the world. Respondents identified “commitment to social justice” as the most important Jewish value. Farther down on the list were “religious observance” and “support for Israel.”

Are we who are already active in synagogue life missing the forest for the trees? Or are we seeing the beginning of a paradigm shift, away from the “sovereign self” / “me generation” attitudes that have been so pervasive over the last few decades?

Our articles fall into two groups. The first group takes us through necessary shifts in “standard operating procedures” if our synagogues are to be at the forefront of community activism. Where to start? With ourselves, of course. Harry Silverman and Gilbert Kleiner suggest ways we can change the way we approach our responsibilities. Next – we need to build community. Being part of the community is increasingly a matter of choice, not necessity. What to do when they walk in the door? Henry Feller has some important thoughts on that. And Andrew Hoffman suggests that inreach to existing members is a necessary step in building a base of synagogue activists. While our synagogue doors are open to new members and their active participation, the doors must also be open so that we can go out into the world. But before we head out to reshape our communities, we would do well to consider the thoughts of Richard Lederman and Meir Lakein.

Woven like a thread through these articles are a second group of essays. Alan Teperow, Danny Siegel, Michael Landy and Robert Hill share personal observations from their own tikkun olam experiences. And finally we have photographs, including our own NAASE trip to Biloxi, Mississippi. Yasher koach to all of our authors and photographers, and to those who submitted worthy material that we were not able to include in this issue.

I am grateful to many colleagues and friends - the NAASE officers, Board of Governors, and those who volunteered to proofread and be on our Editorial Board have never wavered in their commitment. I am indebted to Rachel Walter of Goin' Graphic, whose superb sense of graphic style and personal attention to the content of our Journal is evident in her design work. In overseeing this publication I am fortunate to have the support of the officers and staff of Beth Israel Congregation. Finally, I am grateful for the love of my family, whose dining room table and various computers spent many weeks being overwhelmed by the NAASE Journal.

As for those articles on finance, buildings, investments, and sound systems... maybe next issue... ■



# Re-envisioning the Synagogue Executive Director in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Harry J. Silverman, FSA

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*Editor's note: The following article is an adaptation of the author's presentation given at the 2006 NAASE Annual Conference in Las Vegas, the annual Irma Lee Ettinger Memorial Lecture.*

In the past several decades we have witnessed tremendous change in American life. Since Jewish life in America mirrors life in the general American community, it follows that we, in synagogue leadership roles, have witnessed similar marked changes in the American Jewish community as well.

In his book, Bowling Alone (Simon & Shuster 2000), Robert Putnam analyzes the social and political habits of twentieth-century Americans. He observes a number of important trends in our society that have significant implications for synagogues. For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, he writes, increasing numbers of Americans became deeply engaged in the lives of their communities. This occurred in all aspects of community: civic, political and religious. For the past few decades, however, that trend has silently reversed. We have been, as Putnam notes, "pulled apart from one another and from our communities."<sup>1</sup>

For example, in the mid-1970's, nearly two-thirds of all Americans attended local club meetings. By the late 1990's he finds that nearly two-thirds of Americans never do.<sup>2</sup> This includes all types of local social, religious, civic and political organizations - such as fraternal associations, Hadassah chapters, bridge clubs and bowling leagues.

Between 1973 and 1994, the number of men and women who took any leadership role in any local organization decreased by more than 50 percent.<sup>3</sup>

In 1960, 62.8 percent of voting-age Americans voted in the presidential election. In 1996, that number dropped to 48.9 percent.<sup>4</sup>

From 1960 to 1990, daily newspaper readership among people under 35 declined by half, from two-thirds to one-third. In this same period, TV news viewership in this same age group dropped from 52 percent to 41 percent.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, tremendous increases have been reported in what we might call "mailing-list" groups. Groups such as Greenpeace, the Sierra Club and even the National Rifle Association have seen their memberships explode in recent years. This, while groups such as Rotary and the League of Women Voters, groups that have historically relied on the active participation of a volunteer base, have steadily and heavily declined in membership.

At first glance, we might conclude that this trend merely illustrates a change from an "old-fashioned" to

a "contemporary" affiliation pattern. Putnam, however, explains it differently. The increase in "mailing list" groups is not due to a "deeper civic consciousness," he claims, but to the power of direct mail.<sup>6</sup>

Membership in such national associations involves merely writing a check. In fact, many so-called "members" of such organizations do not even consider themselves members, as such. "More than half of Environmental Defense Fund 'members' say that 'I don't really think of myself as a member; the money I send is just a contribution.'"<sup>7</sup> In contrast, membership in local organizations, such as synagogues, involves not so much symbolic ties, but instead, real ties to real people.

Similar patterns are seen in the American political world. Involvement in the political process has sharply declined in the past few decades. While in the past, political campaigns involved masses of volunteers at the precinct level ringing doorbells and stuffing envelopes, these activities have been taken over by anonymous calls from a paid phone bank, mass e-mails and direct mail fund raising. Participation in politics is more and more based on writing a check rather than on working for a cause or a party. American political parties have replaced scores and scores of volunteers with an elite cadre of paid professionals. "In short," reports Putnam, "while the parties themselves are better financed and more professionally staffed than ever, fewer and fewer Americans participate in partisan political activities."<sup>8</sup>

The American religious community also reflects this alarming trend. Putnam notes that both survey data and denominational reports indicate "a long, slow slump of roughly 10 percent in church membership between the 1960s and the 1990s."<sup>9</sup> By church, Putnam is referring to all religious institutions, regardless of their particular faith. Not only has membership dropped, but attendance at services also slumped by roughly 10 – 12 percent over the past 25 years. In addition, Americans' involvement in the social life of the church, beyond worship, has similarly fallen. We, in particular, have seen that in religious life, as in political life, volunteers have been replaced by a cadre of paid professionals. The growth in NAASE's membership is testament to this phenomenon.

The trend in the religious world is particularly significant, Putnam notes. His research indicates that, "nearly half of all associational relationships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context."<sup>10</sup>

Putnam does indicate that these trends in the area of religious life are generalizations, and in two important aspects are



Harry J. Silverman

oversimplifications. In the first place, not everyone in our society is equally affected by the trends. While one group of Americans has withdrawn from religious involvement, another has become more committed. Second, he notes that, "the pace and direction of change has varied markedly among different denominations."<sup>11</sup> Putnam reports that, "growth has occurred at both ends of the religious spectrum, the most orthodox and the most secular, while the middle has collapsed."<sup>12</sup>

We have seen similar trends in the Jewish community. While both the Orthodox and Reform Movements have shown growth in affiliation as measured in the number of congregations and number of members, the Conservative Movement has declined in both measurements. However, there is some good news: surveys indicate that of those who do consider themselves members of Conservative congregations, the percentage of Conservative Jews involved in their congregations and in their personal observance has actually increased.

According to Putnam, the increasing withdrawal of people from active communal participation is part of our increasing lack of connectedness to one another. Americans are not just bowling alone – they watch movies at home instead of in theatres; they shop on-line instead of in stores. Across the entire spectrum of American life, people are losing the sense of community, mutual support, cooperation, and trust. Putnam's conclusion is that Americans need to reconnect with one another.

What does all of this mean to us as synagogue leaders? The implications and the challenges are many. To a great extent, I believe that initiatives such as Synagogue 2000, STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) and the recent collaborative effort of STAR and the National Center for Jewish Policy Studies at Hebrew College, in Newton Centre, MA, entitled Re-envisioning the Synagogue, are a direct result of this loss of connectedness. We all recognize, as Putnam does, that we need to be connected to each other and to the institutions that foster that connectedness such as the synagogue. Our challenge is to re-envision the synagogue so that it reaches out to everyone who should be included. Rabbi Zachary Heller sums it up when he states: "The synagogue must be open and inviting to all Jews, both for those who are already committed to Jewish tradition and find fulfillment in it as well as for those who find the language and symbols of the synagogue either unfamiliar or lacking in meaning."<sup>13</sup>

In discussing this re-envisioning of the synagogue, David Gordis, Zachary Heller and David Kaufman warn of some challenges. While not speaking specifically about the Conservative Movement, they refer to what has been the central theme of Conservative Judaism, the dichotomy of "tradition" and "modernity." The issue for them is "maintaining the normative patterns of the past . . . and the equally important need for change, in direct response to the enlightened intellectual progress of the modern age and the most recent innovations of contemporary culture."<sup>14</sup>



Our challenge is to take these two equally important ideals and put them on the same plane in the contemporary American synagogue. As Gordis, Heller and Kaufman warn, “tradition untempered by modernity is bound to become a stultifying and regressive culture; and will never attract any significant portion of the American Jewish public. On the other hand, modern innovation unimpeded by traditional norms will err to the extreme of a consumer-driven agenda and an efficiency-based approach.”<sup>15</sup> This has always been the challenge of the Conservative Movement. That challenge is even more critical for us today; and it is not confined to the Conservative Movement. “... The religious leadership from all denominations is taking the initiative to increase the level of religious observance of its adherents.”<sup>16</sup>

“The synagogue of the future must continue to represent the traditional values of Jewish peoplehood, community and congregation, while also creating space for the equally cherished American values of self-expression and individualism. Turning (American) individuals into members of a (Jewish) group, while continuing to honor their independence and iconoclasm, is perhaps the central challenge confronting the American synagogue.”<sup>17</sup> Rabbi Hayim Herring, a Conservative rabbi serving as Executive Director of STAR states that the problem is that the majority of American Jews find the synagogue unresponsive to their individual needs.<sup>18</sup> Dr. David Starr, of Hebrew College says that, “The real problem with rabbis, and by extension synagogues, is that many fail to matter much in important areas of peoples’ lives.”<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Herring says that American society today is challenged by the conflict between what he calls the “sovereign self” and the “commanding community.” However, recognizing the need for community and connectedness, Rabbi Herring also states that, “in building the Jewish identity of individuals, synagogues strengthen the fabric of the Jewish community.”<sup>20</sup>

Jewish identity, states Rabbi Herring, is an on-going process. “As such, its expression will be idiosyncratic and evolutionary, contingent upon specific needs and events in a person’s life history.”<sup>21</sup> Herring cites the research of Bethamie Hoffman who concludes that, “There are different ways of connecting to Jewish life in America today, and what is needed is a better understanding of the full range of connections.”<sup>22</sup> Unless we recognize this and understand that what touches a person at one time in his or her life may be inconsequential at another, synagogues will miss out on reaching potential members.

This will be especially challenging when we look at the next generation of synagogue membership – the two currently maturing generations, the Gen. X’ers and Millennials. Citing recent scientific research on Jews in these generations, Herring states that these young individuals express pride in being Jewish, but express that pride differently than previous generations. They are generally unsatisfied with the Jewish education they received and therefore are drawn to institutions that offer serious study of Judaism. They are interested in cultural and artistic expressions of Judaism; especially those from unaffiliated or interfaith families. They are generally interested in learning about the Holocaust and Israel, and

desire raising their children as Jews. “Formal affiliation with Jewish institutions is unimportant, as is the practice of ritual behavior and attendance at synagogue services.”<sup>23</sup> They have fewer memories of Jewish family celebrations and fewer experiences of being in the synagogue with their families. While they value education, they also value entertainment. They need to be reached through multi-media channels. They need to have their loyalty earned and maintained, especially Jewish males, who already tend to be less involved in Jewish communal life. Most importantly, they want to be respected as individuals capable of contributing to their community.<sup>24</sup>

Like Jewish identity, Rabbi Herring believes that for many people today, the decision to become a synagogue member is also a process. While some Jews will always join a synagogue out of a sense of responsibility, many view synagogue membership in the same way as they view any other commodity. They will buy it only when they need it.

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*“We need a radical rethinking of how to  
increase the relevance and meaning of  
Judaism through the synagogue.”*

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Rabbi Herring suggests that “this is a reality that needs to be institutionalized instead of lamented.”<sup>25</sup> He says that in response to this reality, synagogues need to abolish the terms “affiliated” and “unaffiliated.” Affiliation, he says, means that synagogues value membership only by the “bottom line,” not by one’s level of participation. Herring suggests an approach whereby synagogues offer different categories of involvement or participation, with different fee structures. “Thus,” he says, “synagogues could educate people into the idea of joining a participatory community, whose message is that while we need money to run our institutions, what we ultimately value is membership involvement.”<sup>26</sup> To accomplish this, Herring proposes that synagogues create many smaller group experiences.

Lest we believe that this approach comes from a rabbi who is no longer in a pulpit and therefore, unconnected with the reality of running a synagogue, Rabbi Morris Allen, of Beth Jacob Congregation in Mendota Heights, Minnesota, reports that his congregation has no dues. He says, “Dues are a bad thing, they imply fee for service.”<sup>27</sup> They have replaced dues with what they term an “annual sustaining contribution.” This, he says, “creates a community that understands that each member has a responsibility to sustain it.”<sup>28</sup> Beth Jacob does not provide services for a member’s dues; rather they work to create a community through member’s contributions.

So what does all of this mean for the future of the synagogue? To a certain extent, it means that we have to re-envision how



we market ourselves as well as how we provide programs and services to those who do join. But, having said that, we must also recognize that even today, most people join synagogues for a sense of community. Recognizing the characteristics noted about Gen. X'ers and Millennials, Dr. Riv-Ellen Prell, of the University of Minnesota, states that, "Feeling passionately about being a Jew, even being proud of being a Jew is not the same as living as a Jew."<sup>29</sup> "Synagogues," she says, "must do more than make Jews feel Jewish. They must foster community because without community Jews cannot experience Judaism as a living and shared reality."<sup>30</sup>

It is interesting to note that the *brachot* we use before performing a mitzvah are recited by individuals, but expressed in the first-person plural. Dr. Michael Hammer, a Fellow of the Business School at Oxford University and a Senior Lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, says that the reason for this is that, "the commandments are incumbent on the Jews as a community, not as individuals. . . . It is in creating and nurturing community that the synagogue will find its future."<sup>31</sup> Synagogue leaders, across the board - rabbis, executive directors and lay leaders will find their primary roles not as defenders of the faith, but as builders and creators of community.

Rabbi Allen says that, "what will ultimately attract Jews to synagogues is a sense that the community itself has a compelling message that speaks with pride and honesty."<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Prell cites a study in the Chronicle of Higher Education

(October, 2003) which found that well over 50 per-cent of the students surveyed at UCLA were interested in spirituality.<sup>33</sup> Modernity, she says, did not solve the problems of transcendent meaning; it has only created more choices.

She states that, "membership in the synagogue should be grounded in knowing that however one defines Judaism, whether in prayer, rites of passage or study, the work of Judaism is to offer Jews as many ways as possible to understand that Judaism is a system of knowledge and meaning in which one is situated as an actor. The fragmentation of high modernity is answered by Judaism not as a set of rational prescriptions, but as a way to live."<sup>34</sup> This, she says, must involve synagogues placing a high value on serious adult education.

Studies show that 25 per-cent of American Jews hold graduate degrees while only 6 per-cent of all Americans have achieved this level of education. The implication for our congregations is quite clear. As Rabbi Allen states, "unless we create an atmosphere that is not pediatric oriented in nature, young, intelligent career oriented 20s and 30s will not be in attendance."<sup>35</sup>

All of us are aware of the ever changing world of technology and that our congregations must take advantage of newly created means of communicating with our members and potential members. E-mail and the world-wide web have changed the way in which we communicate as well as market our congregations. But, as Putnam has warned us, "the information itself needs a social context to be meaningful."<sup>36</sup> The internet can be a great tool with which to communicate and educate our members and the community at large. But the internet must compliment, not replace, the human interaction, the community, which have been the hallmarks of our congregations. "The synagogue of the future must clearly and unambiguously declare its loyalty to the importance of the human connection, not an electronic substitute."<sup>37</sup>

So where does the executive director fit into all of this? I know that if anything is going to be done in the synagogue, it is the executive director who is going to get it done! If we are to successfully re-envision the synagogue, we must do so with the full support and guidance from all of our leadership, lay and professional, and it will be the executive directors who will be at the forefront of this effort.

In his ground-breaking book on non-profit management, John Carver outlines his theory of Policy Governance, where he envisions the board of the nonprofit involved solely in the broad area of policy making and turning over all of the day-to-day operations of the organization to the CEO.<sup>38</sup> In the Carver model, the board's role is not to think about what the organization is doing, but why it should exist at all. Carver's model has been adopted most often by leaders in secular nonprofits such as school boards, health institutions and municipal governments. Carver's model is not well known in the religious world. About a dozen or so Unitarian Universalist congregations in the United States have adopted it. One of the major issues for congregations in considering the Carver model is the issue of the strong CEO.



Not long ago, our NAASE list serve had a lively discussion on the topic of who is the CEO in the synagogue and what is the proper place of the executive director. In addressing the issue of the CEO in congregational life, Dan Hotchkiss says this is an interesting question. Most of the Unitarian churches that have adopted Carver's model have assigned the CEO role to a team consisting of the minister, the administrator, and one lay leader.<sup>39</sup> In addressing this issue on the list serve, our president, Glenn Easton, referred to the model at his synagogue as a three legged stool consisting of the rabbi, the executive director and the president.

Congregations have a difficult time adopting the Carver model because the model depends on clearly defined roles for board, staff and clients. However, in congregations, role confusion is the rule rather than the exception. As Hotchkiss notes, "clear role definitions are hard to achieve when everyone plays multiple roles."<sup>40</sup> Often, board members function in what in other nonprofits are staff roles. When confronted with a problem, most board members try to solve it rather than guiding it to those who are charged with solving such issues, namely staff members.

While Carver's model may not be adopted entirely by many congregations, if at all, I believe that if we want to seriously re-envision the synagogue, and I believe that we must, synagogue boards will need to take a lot more time dealing with the issues raised here and with the specific issue of why the synagogue even exists at all. To do that will require boards to get away from micromanaging the day to day operations of the congregation and put that squarely where it belongs, in the hands of the executive director.

Further, if we are to be successful in re-envisioning the synagogue, we will need a strong leadership team guiding the effort. Our synagogues do not have a single CEO. I believe that the model should be as both Hotchkiss and Glenn Easton have articulated, the three legged stool. But we need leaders on the team who understand that we cannot continue with a "business as usual" attitude. We need leaders who are committed to the same vision of the synagogue. That shared vision can only develop if synagogue leaders at every level work together to frame that vision. It cannot come from a rabbi, a president or an executive director alone articulating his or her vision of the congregation. And, it cannot come from the leadership team alone. The team must share its vision with the board and the membership at large and must secure buy-in and ownership of the vision by the congregation. Executive Directors have a crucial role to play in this process.

Rabbi Herring tells us that, "we need a radical rethinking of how to increase the relevance and meaning of Judaism through the synagogue."<sup>41</sup> For those who fear the term "radical," here is what one business leader had to say about it:

"Does the word 'radical' still make you uncomfortable? Get over it! Today's world is a tough place. It's going to remain a tough place for the foreseeable future. You can wallow in timidity, or you can realize that the case for radical innovation

is stronger than it has ever been, because there are fewer options than there ever have been. My question to anybody who's still skeptical is this: What other choice do you have? What's your Plan B?"<sup>42</sup>

As executive directors charged with leading our congregations, I would ask you the same question. What is your Plan B? And, as Hillel put it: *Im lo achshav, aimatai*, If not now, when? ■

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*Harry Silverman FSA is the Executive Director of the Southeast Region of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. He has been actively involved in the Conservative Movement for over thirty-five years. Harry has served NAASE on the national level as a board member, treasurer, and vice president.*

#### NOTES:

- 1 Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), p.27
- 2 Ibid, p.61
- 3 Ibid., p. 60
- 4 Ibid., pp31-32
- 5 Ibid., p. 36
- 6 Ibid., p156
- 7 Ibid., p 158
- 8 Ibid., p. 38
- 9 Ibid., p 70
- 10 Ibid., p. 66
- 11 Ibid., p. 75
- 12 Ibid., p. 76
- 13 Zachary I. Heller, editor. *Re-envisioning the Synagogue* (Hollis, NH: Hollis Publishing Co., 2005), p.vii
- 14 Ibid., p. xvi
- 15 Ibid., p. xvi
- 16 Ibid., p 69
- 17 Ibid., p. xv
- 18 Ibid., p. 55
- 19 Ibid., p. 43
- 20 Ibid., p. 57
- 21 Ibid., p. 71
- 22 Horowitz, Bethamie (2000) *Connections and journeys; assessing critical opportunities for enhancing Jewish identity. [Report]*. New York: UJA-Federation of New York, cited in *ibid.*, p. 71
- 23 Heller, op. cit., p. 79
- 24 Ibid., p. 80
- 25 Ibid., p. 90
- 26 Ibid., p. 90
- 27 Ibid., p. 143
- 28 Ibid., p. 143
- 29 Ibid., p. 123
- 30 Ibid., p. 123
- 31 Ibid., p. 128
- 32 Ibid., p. 134
- 33 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 121
- 34 Ibid., p. 122
- 35 Ibid., p. 136
- 36 Putnam, op. cit., p. 172
- 37 Heller, op. cit. p. 138
- 38 John Carver, *Boards that Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 1990) This book sets forth the theory and practice of Policy Governance
- 39 Dan Hotchkiss, *How church boards Can Benefit from Secular Practices*, Congregations, Spring 2005
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Heller, op. cit., p. 101
- 42 G. Hamel cited in *ibid.* p. 101

## Our Tents may be Large Enough, But are they Truly Accessible?

Alan Teperow



Alan Teperow

I had an uplifting experience in shul recently. A member of our congregation, well-known in the Boston area as a Jewish educator and retired camp director, read from the Torah as part of a regular service. At our synagogue women have received aliyot and read from the Torah for many years. But this particular woman was in a wheelchair.

About six months before, I had overheard her talking to a mutual friend during the kiddush. The essence of the conversation was that she was lamenting the fact that she was no longer able to stand at the reader's desk to read from the Torah. From the wheelchair, she could not see the words or reach the appropriate spot in the Torah with a yad. I wondered whether a table could be procured that would enable her to leyn. "Is that possible?" she asked. "Why not?" I responded. "Let me check with the rabbi." Stealing a moment of our Senior Rabbi's kiddush time, I asked what he thought, and his response, without equivocation, was, "Yes." So I quickly went over to our head of maintenance, and he joined us at the kiddush table, figuring out the logistics that would make it happen. Our sanctuary and bima are already handicapped accessible. We could easily devise a physical

Who would have thought that a woman with such ability and passion could be unwittingly prevented from doing that which she does so well - simply because the Torah table was too high, or because of Jewish law or practice? Sometimes there are ethical and moral imperatives that must lead us to new answers and solutions. People of good will, caring people, individuals who believe in works of hesed and tzedakah -- all of us, somehow need a little reminder that there are those whom we are leaving off the bima or outside the sanctuary door. And we need to do everything in our power to help get them into our synagogues and be full participants in our communities.

A lower table was found, and placed to the left of the regular table. That morning, the choreography was seamless, to the extent that we in the pews barely noticed the movement of people and objects. The rabbi walked into the congregation and led a discussion about the parasha, while quietly and unobtrusively the Torah was moved from one table to the other, and the ba'al k'riyah was wheeled to her place at the Torah. A microphone was placed on her lapel and another microphone was moved to the table for the couple that had received the aliyah. When the reading was finished, again with no fanfare or noise, the Torah and microphone were put back in their original spots while our friend left the bima. Her smile was radiant, her pride in her accomplishment clear to all.

We are taught that there are "*shivim panim batorah*" - seventy faces of Torah. There are many ways to understand this: different interpretations of the meaning of Torah, different musical variations to the cantillation, different views of how Torah can be applied to our lives. The interpretation that speaks most profoundly to me is the notion that there are multiple ways of living Jewishly, worshipping God, and expressing ourselves as Jews. Too often, we only think of the variety of faces in the Torah in terms of denominational leanings and ideological differences. I want to be sure that our tent is large enough, AND ACCESSIBLE ENOUGH, for those who simply can't walk up to the Torah, or can't hold the siddur, or can't see or hear what is happening in the service.

Thank you, to our friend, for raising your voice...and our awareness. ■

solution for a suitable *amud* (Torah Table). But what about enabling a person in a wheelchair to read from the Torah, from the perspective of *halacha* (Jewish Law) or *minhag hamakom* (local custom)? The reading of Torah to the congregation is seen as symbolic of the revelation at Sinai, at which time the people stood. They also understood the public reading as *talmud Torah*, as study, at which time one could be seated. We have many ways to express proper *kavod laTorah*, honor and respect for Torah. Can't our practice be adjusted to allow others to express their own commitment to, and love for, the Torah? When someone cannot stand for the Amidah or Barchu, they are not excluded from those prayers. Should *seder k'riat hatorah* be any different?

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# Becoming a True Leader

Gilbert Kleiner, FSA

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*Editor's note: The following article is an adaptation of the author's presentation given at the 2004 NAASE Annual Conference in Toronto, the annual Irma Lee Ettinger Memorial Lecture.*

Dr. Harvey Silver's session this morning - "Stretching Ourselves to Reach the Top" - was a wonderful antecedent to my remarks tonight. In his book Leadership at Work, Dr. Silver provides a guide on how we can improve our management style to become the "best that we can be." With this Ettinger Lecture my intention is to explore that theme from my own perspective of many years' work in our field, and to challenge you to reach for the goal of becoming a true leader in your congregation. I will do this in the context of acquainting you with one of the works of John C. Maxwell, whose writings on leadership, honed by his own experience in Christian congregations, I find particularly axiomatic and easily applicable to our profession of leadership in synagogues.

It is most appropriate to begin this Ettinger Lecture about leadership by telling you about a true leader in her congregation—Irma Lee Ettinger, FSA. In 1981, Adat Ari El Congregation honored Irma Lee for 25 years of distinguished service. The congregation yearbook produced in connection with that event was dedicated to "A Woman of Our Times." The wording of that dedication shows that her congregation realized that Irma Lee had indeed been a trailblazer. Irma Lee began her career in 1955, an era in which women generally stayed focused on home. As the Adat Ari El yearbook noted, "She achieved success when women were just beginning to emerge into the working world. She was one of the first women in America to become a temple administrator, paving the way for many more to follow."

But longevity in itself does not denote successful leadership—so what was Irma Lee's secret for successful leadership? And what is her legacy to us here in Toronto in 2004, nearly fifty years later?

Leonard Smith, the late executive director of Valley Beth Shalom Congregation in Los Angeles, once interviewed Irma Lee. In that interview she explained her administrative style. She said: "There were certain goals which I had, some that were more easily attainable than others, and I recognized that if I wanted to achieve them that I would need the support and understanding of lay leadership. And so from the very beginning, that's how I worked. When I presented ideas or programs or procedures, I generally presented them through the committee, up to the executive, and then up to the board. I've also found, and perhaps, this is a result of some courses that I took in social work, that when you work in a people organization such as a synagogue, the unilateral decisions, no matter how good they are, or how sound they may be, generally fall flat on their face because they don't have the grass roots support of the lay leadership of the congregation."

I think you can probably tell from this excerpt alone that Irma Lee built a cohesive, forward thinking administration within the congregation, resulting in a long-term appreciation by congregants of her leadership style.

John C. Maxwell, is the author of The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership<sup>1</sup>. Maxwell distilled the successes and failures of his thirty years of professional leadership into 21 lessons. What makes his views of leadership particularly striking to me is that Maxwell is also a minister. He served in congregational ministries for many years before moving into the motivational communications field. He understands religious communities. His succinct version of key leadership principles is a useful lens through which to view what we do as synagogue executives.



Gilbert Kleiner

Maxwell would classify Irma Lee's leadership style as one that uses the "Law of Buy-In," that persuades others in the organization to accept and endorse an idea or program, thus broadening its support and assuring its eventual success. Irma Lee understood the centrality of this "law" to the success of a real leader.

I challenge all of us to look at the kind of leaders we are and to be honest with ourselves. We should set forth the goal of becoming stronger forces in our synagogues. We are the chief operating officers, working in conjunction with our rabbis, our congregation presidents, and our boards to mold and direct the future survival of our congregations.

Bernice Levine, FSA, in her 2002 Irma Lee Ettinger Memorial Lecture stated, "Let us always bear in mind that no other professional has the same interaction as we do among the many arms of the synagogue. Each executive director must be many things to many people." These interactions with others lead to unique opportunities to assert leadership roles, and to get unity and consensus between the often disparate constituencies of our synagogues. In turn, as we develop our leadership skills, we become more effective managers. And that, in turn, leads to greater self-realization as individuals, spouses and parents.

A true story: There was an administrative assistant who moved up the ranks in the front office of the synagogue. That individual became the executive director when the prior executive director was dismissed in mid-contract. This newly promoted executive director held the position but did not lead. For over 10 years the congregation as an institution suffered. The facility was in disrepair and showed major signs of age. Administrative and personnel decisions were not effective, and over a period of two years, in the absence of executive leadership, the rabbi gradually assumed the responsibilities for all day-to-day decisions. This executive director remained in the limited mindset of the office manager and performed

accordingly. With undeveloped leadership skills and a lack of desire to gain knowledge in our field, this otherwise bright and potentially talented person could not lead. This is an example of Maxwell's "Law of the Lid": a person's leadership ability determines a person's level of effectiveness. (A variant of this law was made famous by Professor Laurence J. Peter, and is known as the "Peter Principle"<sup>2</sup>; Professor Peter noted that hierarchical organizations tend to promote people to their highest level of competence, and then to one level higher—to their first level of incompetence, where they fail.) So what happened to our ineffective executive director? That individual was forced into early retirement. And the new executive director faced the daunting task of re-earning the respect of the rabbi, the lay leaders and senior staff. The new executive director's task was to transform the position of office administrator back to that of executive director and congregational leader.

When one has the right person with leadership skills in the job, organizational effectiveness is gained and sustained. An example: Ray Kroc is considered to be the visionary who created the McDonald's Hamburgers fast food empire, as we know it. But he did not invent the McDonald's philosophy nor did he start the company. Dick and Maurice McDonald opened the first McDonald's and came up with the prototype concept. The McDonald brothers did not have the leadership skills needed to grow the business beyond a few local stores. Along came Ray Kroc, who had the leadership skills needed to build a few hamburger stands into a worldwide multibillion-dollar corporation. Kroc had the necessary skills to expand, promote and build the McDonald's empire.

Personal and organizational effectiveness is proportional to the strength of leadership. One can be ineffective and still have limited success, but the organization will never reach its full potential. As executive directors, one of our continuing goals must be to strive to reach our full potential thereby assisting our congregations to reach their full potential. Dr. Harvey Silver expresses this thought in his book Leadership

At Work: How to be an Effective Team Leader Anywhere, Anytime, with Anyone<sup>3</sup>. If one wants to be a successful leader, one must develop and improve one's skills. I urge every single one of you to pursue your certification as a Fellow in Synagogue Administration (FSA). When you study and prepare for your FSA you have that opportunity to "exercise your mind" and improve your skills by presenting programs, doing independent research, leading workshops, and writing articles for the NAASE Journal. It is up to you. Successful leaders are learners, and those who constantly develop and improve their skills are the ones who distinguish themselves as successful leaders. Every one of us as executive directors has areas of strength as well as areas that we need to work on to improve as executive directors. NOW is the time to make the time to exercise your mind and move forward in your goal of becoming the "Best That You Can Be."

According to John Maxwell's "Law of Connection," "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." During my 15 years at Beth El Congregation, I've been asked time and again by members, "Why do I need to meet with the executive director regarding my child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah?" For me, these meetings give me the opportunity to get to know our member families on a personal level. It is much better to interact with a family for a simcha than for a sorrow. This interaction, along with my numerous daily contacts with other congregants, helps me strengthen my personal connection with my congregants. (And for me, one of these sessions led to my meeting my wife, Carol—a truly life-changing outcome.) Caring connections must also be built with our staff. Showing we care about people builds trust fosters fondness and loyalty from our employees towards us. As Maxwell states, "To lead yourself, use your head; to lead others use your heart." Show everyone that you sincerely care about him or her.

Maxwell's "Law of Empowerment" urges us to develop our staff—or as Dr. Silver puts it, "Be a gardener, not a caretaker." It is a valuable lesson for us to consider and strive for as we

develop into stronger leaders. Weak leaders worry that if a subordinate grows, the leader will become dispensable. Strong leaders recognize that their strength lies in developing their staff so that any one of them becomes capable of taking over if needed. In such a model, that leader becomes even more valuable to the organization he or she serves.

Leadership lessons are found in many places in the Torah. When the Israelites were in the desert, the pressures of leadership and his reluctance to delegate exhausted Moses. But as he recounts in his first farewell address, he finally appointed tribal leaders to assist him in "deciding justly between any man and a fellow Israelite or a stranger." (Deut.1: 16-



17). He established levels of authority, delegating to others. However, he maintained a level of control: "And any matter that is too difficult for you, you shall bring to me and I will hear it." Through his empowering the judges Moses freed himself to deal with larger issues related to the conquest of Canaan, and made it possible for Joshua to become "the right hand of Moses." And through this empowerment, Moses created a means for orderly succession.

Through our ability to train others and help them grow, we build their personal value and self esteem. We provide ourselves with the opportunity to devote time to different responsibilities that otherwise we could not pursue. The Law of Empowerment is in our hands, as it was in the hand of Moses.

Another of Maxwell's Laws can be illustrated in the text of Genesis 12:1— "The Lord said to Abram 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" Maxwell would probably say that this is an excellent example of the "Law of Sacrifice" relating to leadership. Leave your home in Haran, says God, just take your wife and possessions and go to Canaan. Leadership is not developed without cost. Personally, I feel that this is the toughest of Maxwell's laws to completely follow. Everyone must decide on the costs versus the benefits, or the investment versus the return, as they weigh the sacrifices they may have to make in developing their professional careers.

Did you ever realize how infrequently professional sports teams win back-to-back championships? If a coach can take a team to the championship game and win it, the team often assumes they can duplicate the results the next year without making changes. They become reluctant to make additional sacrifices in the off-season. However, what propels a team to the top is not what keeps it there. The only way to stay on top is to grow even more. Leadership success according to Maxwell requires continual change, improvement and sacrifice. Sacrifice is an ongoing process, not a one-time payment—consider the series of ten tests and sacrifices endured by Abraham, - including leaving home, going to Canaan, then Egypt, the trials with his wife Sarah, the Akedah, and finally Sarah's death. On the other hand, if Abraham had stayed in Haran, would he have become the great biblical leader and father of the Jewish people?

As an executive director, you must determine how much you are willing to sacrifice to be one of the best in our field:

- Will you take the time to earn your FSA?
- Will you connect with your congregants and staff?
- Will you develop yourself and empower others?
- Will you be an active participant in your congregation or just a 9-to-5 administrator?

You can set the example for your congregation; the choice is yours to make! Remember John Maxwell's philosophy on leadership:

- Personnel determine the potential of the organization
- Relationships determine the morale of the organization
- Structure determines the size of the organization

- Vision determines the direction of the organization
- Leadership determines the success of the organization.

As we all strive to be better leaders, we not only better serve our synagogues but also ourselves and our families.

"The day is short; the task is great."<sup>4</sup> ■



*Gilbert Kleiner, FSA, has been Executive Director of Beth El Congregation in Baltimore, MD since 1989. Prior to this, he was the Director of Public Relations for the Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore for 13 years. Gil holds a Master's Degree from the American University Kogod College of Business Administration. Gil has served as president of the Mid-Atlantic Association of Temple and Synagogue Administrators. He was a founding member of Adat Chaim Congregation in Reisterstown and was involved nationally with the JCCA Maccabi Youth Games for 1991 to 2004 as a coach and delegation head.*

#### NOTES:

- 1 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, Thomas Nelson, Inc, Nashville, 1998.
- 2 The Peter Principle, Dr. Laurence Peter. William Morrow & Co. Cutchogue, NY, 1969.
- 3 Leadership At Work: How to be an Effective Team Leader Anywhere, Anytime, with Anyone, Harvey Silver, Ph.D. and Bart Mindszenty, LifeWorks Books, New York, 2000.
- 4 Pirkei Avot 2:20.



## A Conversation with the Mitzvah Man, Danny Siegel



Danny Siegel

*Editor's note: Danny Siegel, the so-called Mitzvah Man, is an inspiring teacher. Anyone who has experienced his frantic and frenetic teaching style has certainly come away from the experience feeling that there are many simple, powerful projects that can easily be undertaken in the name of tikkun olam. Those who were on our most recent trip to Israel had an eye-opening experience as Danny introduced us to a myriad of projects that could be undertaken in the US and Canada to help improve the lives of ordinary Israelis. Recently NAASE President Glenn Easton "caught up" with Danny and asked him for some thoughts he could share in the Journal.*

**Our upcoming issue of the NAASE Journal will focus on mobilizing the synagogue to do the kinds of things you have a passion for – Mitzvah projects, social action, tikkun olam. Any thoughts you would like to share with the readers of NAAE Journal?**

As Executive Directors, you are all in positions that can facilitate incredible Mitzvot. This is nothing new to you, but I want to focus on only one — donating leftover food from (1) events held at the synagogue, (2) synagogue-related events held outside the building, (3) regional/international conventions hosted in your community that you are involved in planning, (4) food-related events held by congregants in other locations.

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*"As Executive Directors, you are all in positions that can facilitate incredible mitzvot."*

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**Is it (1) OK to donate "slightly unused food," is it (2) legal to donate leftover food, and (3) is there liability if a recipient becomes ill from eating it?**

- (1) Yes
- (2) Yes
- (3) No

The federal law known as "The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act" states:

**"(c) Liability for damages from donated food and grocery products:**

- (1) Liability of person or gleaner: A person or

gleaner shall not\* be subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the nature, age, packaging, or condition of apparently wholesome food or an apparently fit grocery product that the person or gleaner donates in good faith to a nonprofit organization for ultimate distribution to needy individuals. [\*My underlining and italics]..."

If your synagogue would like an additional formal legal document beyond "Bill Emerson," contact Jonathan Howe of the Chicago law firm Howe & Hutton Ltd. (312-263-3002) and ask for his "Indemnification Agreement" for food donations.

### Why donate?

In Jewish tradition, donating food involves a positive and a negative Mitzvah. Negative: *Ba'al tashchit*, not wasting food. Positive: *Ha'achalat re'ayvim*, feeding hungry people.

### What kind of homework/legwork do I have to do before I begin?

1. You have to find the appropriate recipients for the food — soup kitchen or similar places feeding hungry people, food banks, people who still live on the streets. Keeping in mind that you are donating Kosher food, you may want to consider Jewish recipients. You will want to check with JFS, JVS, your local Mitzvah heroes, and other possible resources for logistics of distribution. Contact Chicago's The Ark (773-973-1000, ark@arkchicago.org) and New York's Project Ezra (212-982-4124, codirector@projectezra.org) for possible assistance.

2. Many communities have a food pick-up service, which makes it very easy. Examples: NY's City Harvest and Island Harvest, Philabundance, and a Jewish service in Springfield, MA – Rachel's Table. (Debbie Rubenstein, 413-733-0084, drubenstein@jewishspringfield.org, www.rachelstable.com).

3. One special aspect of this Mitzvah is that many synagogues consider it important to offer the first choice of leftover food to: (A) members of the synagogue staff whose personal income is limited and who could benefit from the supplementary food for themselves and their families or (B) members of the congregation who live on limited incomes and would most certainly benefit from receiving this food.

### What's the most important name and phone number I need to know about anything-and-everything relating to donating food?

Syd Mandelbaum, founder of Rock and Wrap it Up!, 516-295-0670, sydmandelbaum@worldnet.att.net, roseflex@aol.com, www.rockanwrapitup.org. You can also get all the relevant answers and information from his wife, Diane, at that number.

He knows everything you need to know.

***How do I find another synagogue that has had long experience donating food and can help me with synagogue-specifics?***

Check the NAASE ExecNet.

***You mentioned synagogue employees. How about those employees who are present at the event – synagogue staff and food service (caterer) employees? How do I work out all the logistics of this aspect of the Mitzvah?***

It has been important Jewish practice since the time of the Talmud to allow the waitstaff to enjoy the same food as the guests. (Relevant passages to examine are Ketubot 61a; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 169:1/). Most likely, you will be able to work out the details yourself with the caterer or with your own particular synagogue. Also, check the NAASE ExecNet to see what others have done.

***Should a synagogue (1) make it obligatory that whichever caterers they use donate leftover food, and, if so, (2) where can I obtain a sample clause for the caterer to include in the contract?***

(1) It is, of course, the individual synagogue's choice whether to make it obligatory or to recommend this policy.

(2) Contact Syd Mandelbaum.

***How do I introduce this policy of donating food to members who are sponsoring food events?***

Each synagogue should develop its own strategy for informing the members. The one thing to remember is that, clearly, the sponsors have the choice (1) to donate all of the leftover food, (2) to donate whatever portion they choose to donate, or (3) not to donate.

***Any other Mitzvot that you see as "low hanging fruit" that are ripe for the picking?***

Yes! Donating flowers. Many synagogues that have flower centerpieces or bima flowers donate them to hospitals, nursing homes, or similar locations. However, you may wish to consider donating to congregants who might very much appreciate having them. The problem: They are usually too big for a private apartment or home and would look out of place. The solution: Your local florist or some of your volunteers can help you design sectionalized flower arrangements that look fine both as a combined piece, and as easily-separated smaller pieces. Should you still have any difficulty, you are welcome to contact my good friend and teacher, Rabbi Chaim Casper, who is a florist. He explained it all to me one Shabbat morning and welcomes your being in touch. [Sufrrflorist@juno.com, 305-651-6296 (h), 865-0433 (w)]



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Danny Siegel's Ziv Tzedakah Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to the collection and distribution of funds to various little known Tzedakah projects. It provides money and support for individuals and programs that offer direct, significant, and immediate services with a minimum of overhead and bureaucracy. Ziv is also involved in bringing the educational message of Tzedakah to communities and Jewish schools throughout the United States, Canada and Israel and empowers ordinary people to become Mitzvah heroes.

Ziv Tzedakah Fund, 384 Wyoming Avenue, Millburn, NJ 07041 973.763.9396, or go to [www.ziv.org](http://www.ziv.org)

## Warm and Welcoming — A Never-ending Goal!

Henry Feller



Henry Feller

I am sure each and every one of us has walked into a franchised “big box store” in a different neighborhood or town where the colors, floor plan, displays and inventory are virtually the same. The staff and customers are different, however, and no one greets you or asks if they can help.

Synagogues exist to provide a physical locus for Jewish communal life. To do this, it must attract the people who aspire to be part of that community. In that regard, the synagogue is no different than other organization that needs to attract the people it aspires to serve. A starting point to creating that atmosphere would be to place ourselves in the shoes of our congregants, prospective congregants, and visitors and objectively assess if the synagogue is truly warm and welcoming.

“For the spiritual seeker, shul shopper, and guest, the welcoming ambiance is the first gateway into a sacred community.”<sup>1</sup>

We need to be pre-active if we are going to meet the “warm and welcoming” objective. Our “regulars” already buy-in to the feeling that we are warm and welcoming – the facility and the ambiance of the congregation are familiar to them.

“Synagogue members can be divided into marginals or watchers, and regulars or loyalists. Marginals rarely attend anything, and when they do attend, they watch from the margins because they know so little about what is going on. Regulars are people who sit on committees and come to everything. They are fiercely loyal to the synagogue that would not exist without them. Ask marginals why they join a synagogue, and you get the laundry list of limited liability expectations. Ask regulars, however, and a higher order of need gets mentioned: community.”<sup>2</sup>

But that which is familiar to regulars will not necessarily

attract new and active congregants who must first overcome a number of natural obstacles to finding the warm and welcoming environment we believe exists. Start your assessment with your parking lot. Who parks closest to the synagogue? Whose parking spaces are reserved? How would you feel if a number of spaces at every store you shopped at were reserved for store management and you as the paying customer had to walk further than they did every time you shopped there? Many commercial establishments have a policy that management and staff never park in the areas of the parking lots closest to the facility, allowing customers priority access. While rife with politics, consider ways to balance the respect given to clergy and professional staff with the respect given to our congregant/customers.

Look at your facility, means of access, orientation of the main sanctuary, and location of your chapel(s). How do people approach and enter the building? If you had never visited the facility before would you need signage to assist you in locating the coatroom, restroom, sanctuary, or office?

“... But most things in synagogues are mediocre: bad lighting, messy rooms, and poor acoustics, just a sense of things being shabby. My generation is used to the best. We look for excellence, and can usually find it, somewhere. Synagogues have to compete by being more than mediocre.”<sup>3</sup>

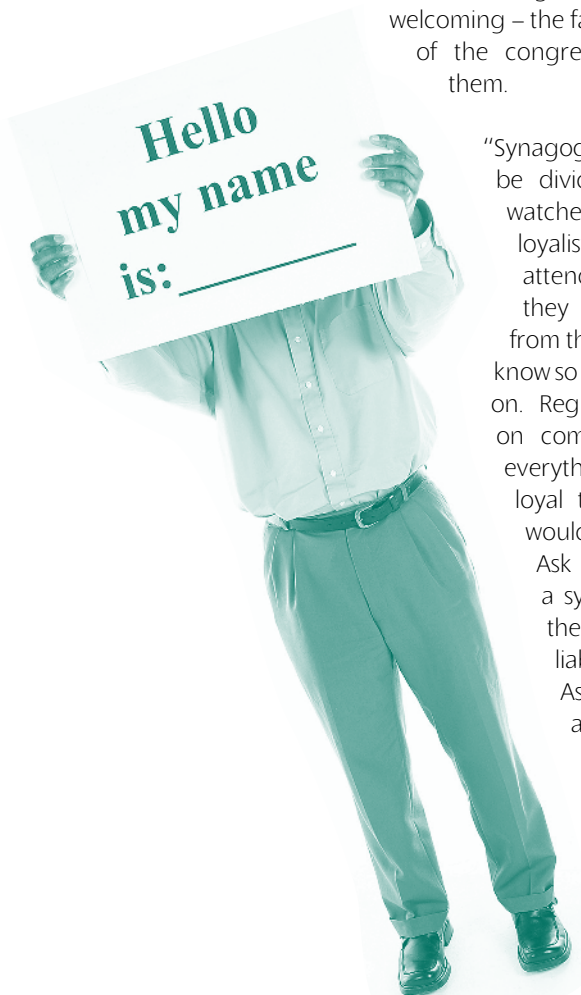
If this were your first visit to your synagogue, what would your experience be during the first 30 seconds after you opened the door (assuming you found, and could open, the door)? First impressions need to be addressed from the perspective of “visitors in our own house.” Is our lobby area too small or oddly shaped so that the necessary ambiance or essential features (coatrooms, waiting areas, rest rooms, entrances to the sanctuary, social hall, etc.) are not readily visible? In many cases inhospitable room layout and architectural constraints can be overcome by well-placed greeters (to be further discussed later in this article). A welcoming community we may be able to mitigate some of the facility-related issues that may not be conducive to physical change due to structural or budgetary constraints.

Would you like to be greeted when you attend a synagogue as a prospective member?

“...it took nearly twenty minutes before someone finally said hello... I knew his name because it was stitched onto a nametag on his shirt. He was the head custodian.”<sup>4</sup>

Situations like this happen every day and are not unique to synagogues; church congregations experience similar situations.

As a visitor to a new synagogue, wouldn't it be nice if someone





directed you to the tallitot or the available seats rather than looking around for them? Consider the warm, positive atmosphere created by everyone being greeted nicely and politely with a "Shabbat Shalom."

Now that you are in the sanctuary do you find all of the seats seemingly reserved for "special" people? Don't you feel as if you want to be treated as special as the "regular attendee?" Towards the end of non-special services/events, does your rabbi ask guests to introduce themselves? After services you stroll into the Kiddush, nosh, and leave – what's wrong with this picture?

"Being asked to get out of "someone else's seat," being ignored by everyone else present, and being asked to mop a floor are not the kinds of welcomes which make people want to return to a congregation."<sup>5</sup>

How to welcome both the stranger and the friend and make them feel equally comfortable being together is the challenge we face. Anytime an individual crosses the threshold into the building is an opportunity. This is often lost in the shuffle of "providing the venue and the religious service." If we consider every person who enters our facility as a guest on one hand and a paying customer on the other we are heading in the right direction.

One of our responsibilities as Executive Directors is to assist our lay leadership in developing the tools to ensure that we have warm and welcoming congregations. Lay leaders should be given tours of the facility and asked some of the questions posed above. Invite them to "wear a different set of shoes" by suggesting that they visit a shul in another town or city to experience it as a visitor and bring back their ideas. Hold a follow-up meeting to collect the comments and ideas, and then brainstorm possible changes. Have your president charge one or more committees with the responsibility of "reintroducing" your shul to those individuals who will be your greeters and/or ushers. Reintroducing is key as the odds are that most regulars have become comfortable and are not seeing things through the eyes of a first-time visitor.

"There are some churches whose narthex, sanctuary, hallways, and parking lots are filled with a spirit of genuine community among its workers and attendees. But there are far too many churches that are filled with a spirit of "uptightness," anger, passive-aggressive energy, and outright judgments. This all has to do with the congregation's energy source expressed in its relationships. People give expression to the goodwill, energy, and fruit of the spirit (or lack thereof) in congregations. One person's attitude can change things in significant ways."<sup>6</sup>

The greeters/ushers should be people who are comfortable relating to others (and especially strangers) in a friendly manner. They need to be familiar with the service and the traditions of the congregation as well as the facility, in order to be project a knowledgeable confidence in what the visitor will experience at your synagogue. A cross-section of greeters/

ushers (older, younger, long-time & relatively new members, locals & transfers to the area, etc) who know or can relate to the varied constituencies in your congregation will yield the best results.

Post the greeters just outside the entrance to the building or just inside dependent upon your facility, weather, access, or other related factors. Instruct them to welcome everyone, stranger and regular alike. Comfortable, genuine greetings are worth more than forced attempts at being cordial. Positive experiences have the potential of yielding positive opportunities to recruit new members and solidify existing relationships; negative experiences can be destructive. Depending upon the size of your congregation, the size of a particular service, the orientation of your structure, or a host of other factors you may also have ushers within the sanctuary. Body language says a lot when someone doesn't know where to go, where to sit, when to enter or remain outside the sanctuary; your greeter/ushers should observe people entering for their body language to determine if they need assistance. If that is explained in training they will have a handle on how to spot someone who needs assistance and guide him or her appropriately – we've all been there!

"...When you enter a Disney theme park, how many employees will you likely interact with before you get on the first ride?



The answer is seven: the parking gate person, the parking lot attendant, the tram operator who takes you to the front gate, the ticket seller, the ticket taker, the person who sells you a Coke or rents you a stroller, the person who guides you into line, and the person who puts you onto the ride. Every one of those interactions can be positive or negative. Their mission is clear: to make you happy. If any one of the employees is rude or unhelpful, your day is off to a terrible start. So every Disney "cast member" is trained to be a greeter. They know that the front line is the bottom line."<sup>7</sup>

You may be reasonably sure an individual is a visitor or prospective member but they may not divulge that when being greeted. If you find out that they are in fact visitors, you might have an usher or whoever is handing out honors inquire if the individual would like an aliyah (assuming it is your policy to offer aliyot to non-members.) Remember that some newcomers may feel reluctant to take an aliyah, out of

being unfamiliar with the choreography of your service; your volunteers should be perceptive and quickly offer to provide the necessary assurance and information to minimize that discomfort. Advise an officer or member of the membership committee that there are visitors, point them out (politely) so that they might approach the visitors later, or introduce them directly at the Kiddush.

"... congregations are characterized by being "honeycombed" with groups of laypersons who provide for one another's needs. The [staff] cannot, take on a member service/nurturing program alone."<sup>8</sup>

"We have 50,000 moments of truth out there every day... A moment of truth for the church or synagogue may be defined as any episode in which a person comes in contact with any aspect of the congregation and gets an impression of the quality of the membership experience."<sup>9</sup>



The “ball is in play” and the rabbi, cantor, executive director, synagogue staff, lay leaders, and congregants are all players. No one can accomplish the task of doing the welcoming alone, but together we can succeed and it goes well beyond the religious service.

Our task is not complete after services are over. Most of us have a Kiddush of sorts after services; some of us have a full Kiddush luncheon. Be sure to enlist officers, board members, committee members, membership contacts, and generally outgoing congregants to ensure that visitors and prospective members (everyone is a prospective member) don’t wander in and leave feeling lonely. Avoid over-attention, but never assume someone is happy to be left alone unless they tell you that. Information from the conversation can help connect the prospective with your congregants who have related interests, backgrounds, professions, and create a bond that may change the prospect a member. If you find out the prospect is a member who decided to attend services more than three days a year you may create a bond that will

enhance their membership experience.

We need to take a very positive approach to what should be a very natural process. Each of us - clergy, professional staff, lay leaders, office and custodial staff, and even our security guards, are ambassadors for and of our institution.

“...If we let ourselves remain so self-satisfied or focused on our own needs that we do not truly welcome new people, we will restrict the church’s potential... The future of many congregations appears dim if persons cannot learn how to better appreciate one another and to celebrate rather than lament their differences.”<sup>10</sup>

One of Hillel’s famous sayings is, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.”<sup>11</sup> Welcoming can be easy, we know ourselves how we would prefer to be treated. Evaluate, modify, develop, create, and implement a unique welcoming environment for each of your synagogue. Each synagogue needs to be sure that every clergy member, professional and support staff, and lay leader is sensitive to and participating in the process of welcoming as if he / she is searching for a feeling of warmth and inclusion for themselves. We need to do this now to ensure the place of the synagogue in the future of Jewish communal life. ■



*Henry Feller has been the Executive Director of Beth Am Synagogue in Baltimore, MD for seven years. He earned an M.B.A. in marketing and management from Rochester Institute of Technology as well as a B.S. degree in business administration from Alfred University. He brings over 25 years of experience in financial institutions as well as sales, systems consulting, and entrepreneurial experience to his congregation.*

#### NOTES:

- 1 Dr. Ron Wolfson, *The Spirituality of Welcoming* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006) p. 83
- 2 Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, *ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006) p. 117.
- 3 Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, *ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006) p. 197.
- 4 *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, p.18.
- 5 Fred Bernhard and Steve Clapp, *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality & the Vital Congregation - 3rd Edition* (Elgin, IL: Christian Community-Brethren Press, 1999) p.14.
- 6 Norman Shawchuck and Roger Heuser, *Managing the Congregation: Building Effective Systems to Serve People*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 205.
- 7 *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, p.66.
- 8 *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively*, p. 322.
- 9 *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively*, p. 323.
- 10 *Widening the Welcome of Your Church: Biblical Hospitality & the Vital Congregation - 3rd Edition*, 16
- 11 “Hillel the Elder,” *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate 31a, 18 February 2007, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel\\_the\\_Elder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder)>



## The New Reality for a Post Katrina Synagogue

Michael Landy, FSA



Living in Orlando in 2004, I made three new friends, Charley, Frances and Jeanne. They each blew into town, leaving their unique marks on the community. The summer of 2004 was a recurring nightmare of wind, rain, loss of power and fresh water, store closures, waiting in lines, broken homes, downed trees, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and insurance companies. My new friends, the three named hurricanes that passed over my home, my synagogue and my community, had left a lasting impression, as well as devastation and loss. I was deeply distressed by what happened to the Gulf Coast as Katrina, and later Rita, introducing themselves to Mississippi and New Orleans. By the time I attended the NAASE conference in Las Vegas in March 2006, I was hearing that the Conservative shul in New Orleans was rebuilding and needed to replace their pews. I was happy to make a contribution toward the newly dedicated "NAASE pew."



In the summer of 2006, as I was getting ready to leave Orlando to become the Regional Director for Mid-Continent Region, I was asked to visit Congregation Shir Chadash in Metairie, Louisiana, the Conservative congregation in the New Orleans metropolitan area. On June 15<sup>th</sup>, nine months after Katrina, Harry Silverman, FSA, the USCJ Southeast Regional Director, and I traveled to New Orleans as representatives of the United Synagogue to visit, check on repairs and offer our support. I made most of my arrangements by working with our colleague, Michael Kancher, Executive Director, Shir Chadash Congregation. With my prior hurricane experience I thought I was ready for New Orleans.

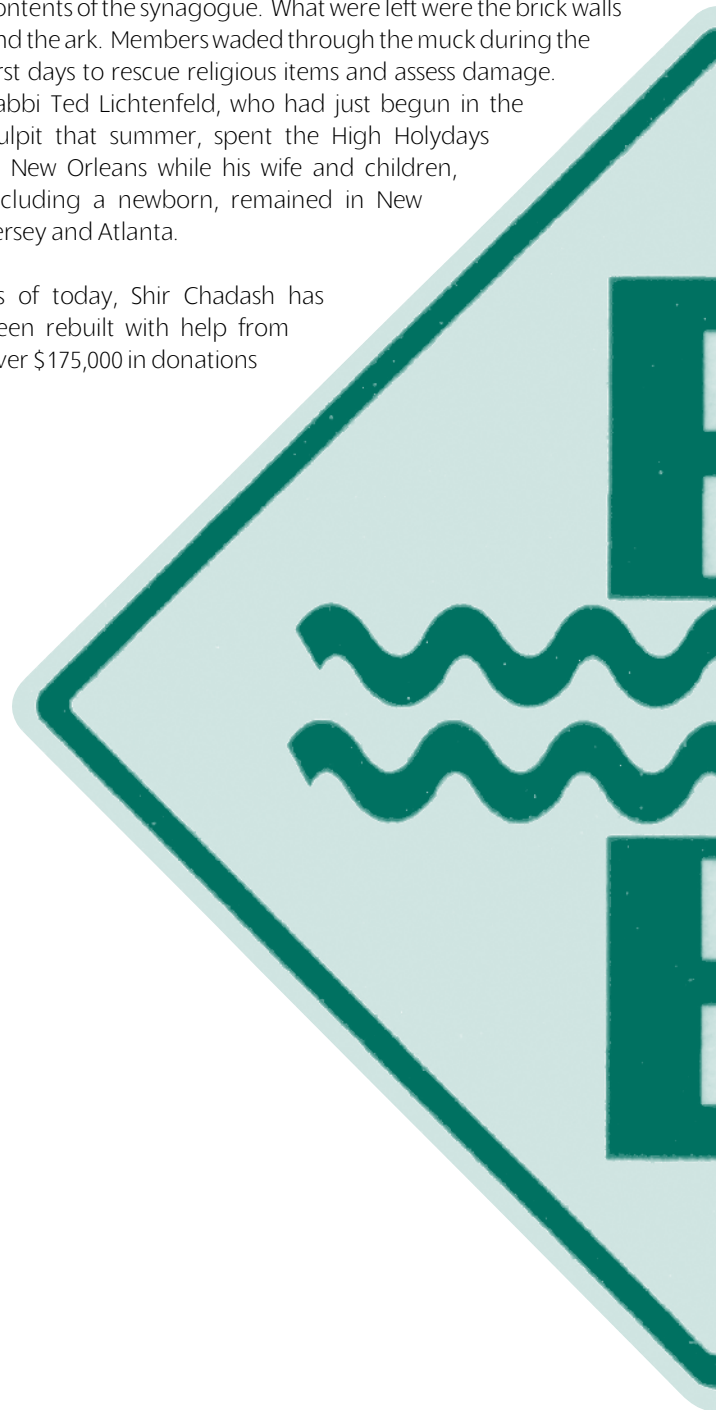
Was I wrong! Nothing I had experienced had prepared me for the extent of the destruction in New Orleans, physically, economically and emotionally. New Orleans had changed in ways not even close to anything I had experienced while living in Orlando, or anything I was aware of in other similarly affected location in the US or Canada. Harry and I were shown where the tragedy had taken place as we toured the neighborhoods near Shir Chadash.

Here we were, nine months after Katrina. I expected to see the roads cleaned up, houses repaired or being worked on and debris gone. Just the opposite was true. Not only was there debris covering every yard and street corner, there were

lamp posts, abandoned cars, large trees and FEMA trailers in every neighborhood, near the water and far away. It did not matter where you were in the area affected by the flooding. The destruction was everywhere.

Shir Chadash sits along a canal on Esplanade Avenue. During Katrina, the crews that were to work on the canals were reassigned to work on levees. Thus the canals backed up and flooded and put as much as two feet of standing water throughout the shul. The water sat for days and damaged floors, walls, pews, chairs, books, shelves, rugs, electrical systems, computers, desks - the entire infrastructure and contents of the synagogue. What were left were the brick walls and the ark. Members waded through the muck during the first days to rescue religious items and assess damage. Rabbi Ted Lichtenfeld, who had just begun in the pulpit that summer, spent the High Holydays in New Orleans while his wife and children, including a newborn, remained in New Jersey and Atlanta.

As of today, Shir Chadash has been rebuilt with help from over \$175,000 in donations



to the USCJ Hurricane Relief Fund that were directed to New Orleans, as well as additional support from national Jewish organizations, private donations, individual synagogues and groups. I have even had the honor of sitting in the pew NAASE dedicated when I spent Shabbat there in August. It was an emotionally moving weekend as we heard stories from so many that had stayed and rebuilt Shir Chadash.

But not all stayed. After the destruction, Shir Chadash worked passionately to make the Congregation and its facilities whole. But 30% of the membership moved to Houston, Atlanta, Birmingham, Dallas, San Antonio or wherever they could make a new life. Shir Chadash Congregation has suffered great emotional and economic loss. Losing more than 120 families means a loss of about \$200,000 in annual revenue. With efforts being made to raise funds for refurbishing buildings, fixing homes and businesses and efforts to bring back people to the community, there was no room for fundraising or stretching members for extra volunteer work. After making appropriate budget cuts, the congregation now faces a long term funding challenge. Those 120 families are not coming back and few new Jewish families are moving to New Orleans. Their hope for increasing the membership now rests with the unaffiliated Jewish community.

Those 120 lost families

were parents, children and friends. The Congregation's social, cultural, and economic dynamic has changed; families that had generational ties with the Conservative Jewish community of New Orleans are now gone. Close friends have scattered. Years of friendships, davening together, watching children grow together, learning together, helping each other, are now gone. The emotional loss is more than just houses and jobs. It is the erasing of memories and friendships that can only be reclaimed if those who have left can return.

So how can we help? Shir Chadash has established associate memberships for anyone who would like to be a part of the recovery efforts for stabilizing and rebuilding Conservative Judaism in New Orleans. Other congregations can make

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*"Nothing I had experienced had prepared me  
for the extent of the destruction..."*

*"The 120 lost families...The congregation's  
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donations to support the ongoing services currently being provided to its membership. Go to [www.shirchadash.org](http://www.shirchadash.org) to learn how you can assist.

For an overall assessment of the situation go to the New Orleans Jewish Federation website at <http://www.jewishnola.com>. You can also volunteer in non-Jewish community based projects listed at the federation website. The site lets you see what projects are still in progress and how you can participate. We continue to bring resources to New Orleans. Rabbis and Cantors have volunteered to be guests for Shabbat. The Rabbinical Assembly held a two-day kallah in January and SWUSY held its Winter Shabbaton there in February.

So on your next trip to New Orleans, besides Bourbon Street and beignets, come to Shir Chadash and hear their new song. They look forward to adding your voice to theirs. ■

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*Michael Landy has been the Executive Director of Mid-Continent Region of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism since July 2006. Previously he was the Executive Director at Congregation Ohev Shalom in Orlando, FL and has worked in Jewish or other not-for-profit settings for 20 years. Michael has a Masters degree in Public Affairs from the University of Florida and a Bachelors degree in Religious Studies from the University of Pennsylvania.*

# Synagogue Leadership: A Community Development Model (And I'm Not Talking About Money!)

*Andrew M. Hoffman*



Andrew M. Hoffman

My concern for synagogue leadership reaches back over the last 17 years. After several years of active participation in synagogue life, I narrowly missed (avoided?) becoming president of a small synagogue in Irving, Texas by joining the staff of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) and shifting my personal synagogue affiliation to a large Conservative shul in Dallas. While I did my best to keep a low profile in my new shul, my interest and participation gave me the opportunity to be an active lay member while my work with Conservative congregations between Mexico City and Tulsa, with later expansion north to Saskatoon, gave me opportunities for insight into many forms of lay and professional synagogue leadership.

Years before this, I had earned a Master's Degree in Community Development from the University of Missouri, a program focused on developing collaboration between indigenous communities and an outside developer, expert, facilitator, or in my case, agitator. In its early years the United States Peace Corps was devoted to this model, and many of the Community Development faculty and students had experience in the Peace Corps, the United States Agency for International Development, and State Agricultural Extension organizations.

"So, what's the connection?" you ask. As I left Dallas three years ago to become a synagogue executive director in San Diego the connection crystallized in my mind, and I've enjoyed many hours of conversation since then expounding on my pet theory.

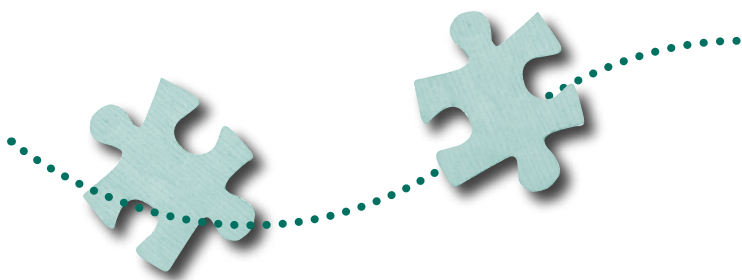
Community development, as defined within the Department of Community Development at the University of Missouri, is

an organized effort among a defined community to enhance the capacity of that community to accomplish its objectives. Community development works when the objectives of the community are in conformity with the interest of the actors, the members, and leaders of the community. Since community is not defined as just a given geography or demography, a synagogue is very much a community. A synagogue is a community of mutual interests, those interests being all the things that make up Jewish life. For the synagogue community, community development is also a mitzvah.

Synagogue community development works when synagogue members are both the givers and the receivers, the teachers and the students, the organizers and the organized, the actors and the audience, and the developers and the developed. Synagogue leaders, both professional and lay, are the development agents working with the community. However, no matter how skilled the agent, successful community development is defined by both the outputs and the inputs. In other words, what you do to get to the destination is as valuable as the destination itself.

Permit me to concretize this with an example with which we executive directors are most familiar. Who loves your synagogue the most? Who are the most active members? Who attend services most frequently? Who serves on committees? What is the pool of prospective volunteer leadership? In my experience, 80% of the answers to each of these questions are basically the same folk. These active members of the synagogue community are the givers and takers, the actors and the audience, the donors and the beneficiaries. Within the synagogue community, we do "it" for each other and "to" each other.

So, how can the executive director, (or the rabbi, or the president) help develop the synagogue community? Mostly, it is the recognition that the members that get the most benefit out of synagogue membership are the ones that put in the most energy. A large part of the benefit of being a synagogue member is the opportunity to serve the synagogue community. Most of us would agree that being a member of a synagogue is a mitzvah. Most of us would agree





that being an active synagogue member is a mitzvah. Most of us would agree that being an active synagogue worker, whether layperson or staff, is a mitzvah. Since we are in the mitzvah business, you could make a case that the purpose of a synagogue is to facilitate mitzvot—and helping, running, managing, participating, serving, advising, and donating, are just as much mitzvot as are praying, studying, and comforting.

Helping the synagogue community to “develop” is one of the key responsibilities of the executive director because the executive director is in a unique position to see the broad picture, while at the same time to be intimately involved in so many of the details. The executive director helps members “develop” the community by involving other, less active members in the life of the synagogue. Some examples:

- Harriet and George have been asked to serve on the subcommittee to choose new carpeting for the youth lounge. It is fair to say that involving Harriet and George is unnecessary and it would be far more efficient for the youth director to select his or her own carpet. However, the objective isn't necessarily efficiency; the objective is connecting Harriet and George to the development of the community. That carpet choice is a tool that takes on a life of its own. In a fundamental sense, Harriet and George “own” that decision, (and in a peripheral sense they may even feel as if they “own” the carpet). The concern for, and care they put into the decision and selection connects them to the community. Agreeing to serve on the subcommittee to choose the carpet is itself a mitzvah, one that connects them, even in a small way, to the Jewish identity development of their congregation's youth, and demonstrates that the community cares about its youth, and the importance of informal Jewish education and bonding that youth programming represents.
- Fred and Ethel have agreed to be on the adult education committee, to help organize programs for the upcoming year, and choose the topics and teachers. Couldn't the rabbi have done this alone? Of course he/she could, and probably with much more finesse and far less consumption of time and resources. However, the powerful act of connecting Fred and Ethel to adult education as planners brings them closer to Torah, and gives them the opportunity to give creative input into how to bring others closer to Torah by engaging others

in adult education that interests the laity. This is a powerful mitzvah, and an act of community development. Fred and Ethel are far more likely to attend adult education programs, when they have a stake in the success of the program. In addition they become spokespersons for the program and role models, encouraging other members to devote time to Jewish learning.

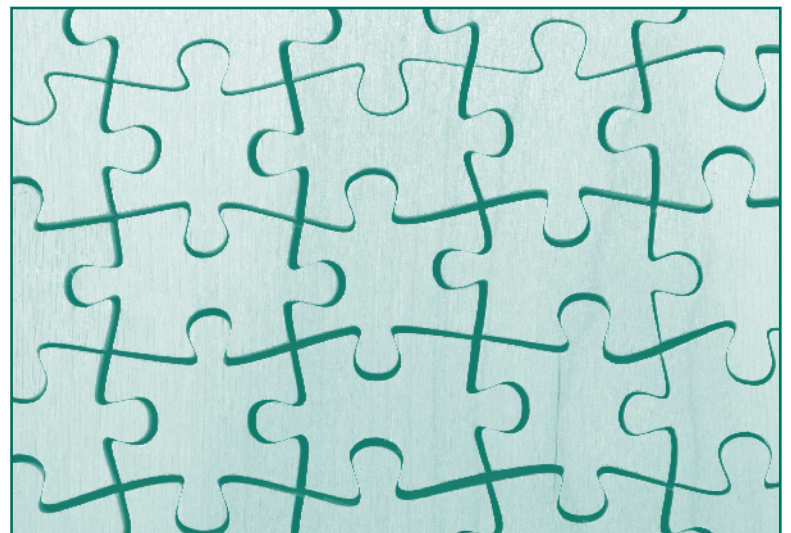
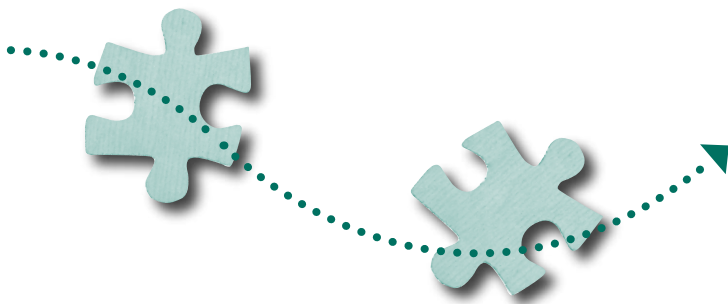
Too often, we think that love must precede work—the members who most love our synagogues are the best candidates when we need assistance, support, or leadership. I suggest that we must train ourselves to remember that just the opposite is even more powerful—that work leads to love, and those we turn to for assistance, support, or leadership – even those with no track record of activism - can come to love our synagogue the most as a result of providing that assistance, support or leadership.

In our daily routines of developing synagogue communities so Jews can be better developed as Jews, we need to keep in mind that the key to development is that the act of doing for others benefits the doer as much as the one done for. Tzedakah benefits the giver as much as tzedakah benefits the recipient. Those who serve the synagogue community are themselves served by the community through the act of service.

We build stronger synagogue communities by opening more activities and decisions to the members of the community. Keeping community development high on the agenda of synagogue leadership is, perhaps, the most important strategy in developing the leadership itself. ■

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*Andrew M. Hoffman is the Executive Director of Congregation Beth El in La Jolla, California.*



## Are we Truly up for Tikkun Olam?

Dr. Richard Lederman



Dr. Richard Lederman

Having assumed the position of Director of Public Policy and Social Action of United Synagogue in July 2006, after six years as a regional director in Cleveland, I am just beginning to articulate an understanding, a vision of the role of tikkun

olam/social action in our congregations and in our movement. I am thoroughly convinced that as congregational and movement leaders we are mandated to tap into a deep concern for social justice that motivates our people; that to do so provides us with a powerful opportunity to energize our congregants, to connect them to our congregations—our sacred communities—and to open up for many of our disenfranchised, under-affiliated members a new channel to the sacred values of Judaism.

To make this transition, we must evolve our model of organization. Congregation-based Community Organizing is a transformation of synagogue organization from a programmatic, marketing model, where members are clients or customers to whom we provide service, to a relational model, where members are citizens, owners, who have values, interests, passions and who look to the sacred community to provide a venue for embodying those values and passions. The primary vehicle for bringing to light those values and passions is one-on-one encounters where people are encouraged to recite their personal narratives, the stories of their lives. It is through these personal narratives that peoples' core concerns and values come to light, and those core values can be captured, combined with other's whose stories are similar, to create a network of support and energy to actualize those values and repair the world.

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*"The prophets railed at our indifference... they warned us against a society that is so wealthy that it no longer feels the pain of others... those who marginalize will in turn be marginalized."*

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I encountered this concept at a conference sponsored by the Jewish Funds for Social Justice (JFSJ) titled *K'hillot K'doshot*: Holy Congregations, Just Communities. I must confess that the whole concept and process are very new to me, and I want to understand it all a bit better before advocating it in congregations. But since the starting point is story, let me tell you one.

As I write these words, I am sitting in the airport in Houston, TX, waiting for a connecting flight to BWI after having spent three days with 17 other members of USCJ in Biloxi, MS. Some of our NAASE members visited Biloxi last year, and they know many of these stories<sup>1</sup>. The statistics are astounding, and I'm not one for statistics: how many structures destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in Biloxi; how few rebuilt even 18 months later; how high the wall of water was when it hit the coast, then receded back out to sea. We stood on a street corner several hundred yards from Highway 90, the beach highway. Before us was a beautiful, clear view of the Gulf of Mexico, and that scene extended for blocks up and down that stretch of Highway 90. Before the hurricane, that clear view of the Gulf would have been blocked by some eight rows of houses, hotels, restaurants, strip malls—all gone, even 18 months after the storm.

Those of you who went on the NAASE trip to Biloxi met Steve Richer, the executive director of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Convention & Visitors Bureau and president of Beth Israel in Biloxi. Steve was able to evacuate before the storm hit, but when he returned, his home was still filled with three feet of water. Then the mold set in, and the house had to be gutted. So Steve has been living for the past 18 months in a trailer parked in his driveway.

Steve's homeowner insurance wouldn't pay, of course, because Steve's house wasn't destroyed by a hurricane; it was destroyed by a flood, which is not covered. So Steve has had to rely on grants and a small business loan to pay off his first mortgage and the \$250,000 second mortgage needed for the renovation. And this story is repeated throughout the Beth Israel community. Imagine homeless Jews in America.

The 18 of us who traveled to Biloxi from all over the country were deeply moved by the stories that we heard and the work that we did to help heal that deep wound. We were also deeply touched by the stream of volunteers, almost all of them from faith groups, who have given up significant portions of their lives to bring life to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Indeed, the UJC has contributed millions for mental health services in Mississippi and Louisiana, and two years of funding for a rabbinic pastoral counselor through the New York Board of Rabbis, a position held by Rabbi Myrna Matsa, a member of the RA. Steve Richer quipped that if you don't believe in organized religion, come witness the volunteer relief efforts along the Gulf Coast.

But I am haunted by words offered by Rabbi Matsa when she spoke to us Sunday evening. She spoke of a prophetic vision. "The prophets railed at our indifference to the suffering of others," she reminded us. "They warned us against a society that is so wealthy that it no longer feels the pain of others. They warned us that those who marginalize will in turn be marginalized."

More and more frequently we are discovering that there is a

great yearning among Conservative Jews to reassume the mantle of Abraham Joshua Heschel and recreate a prophetic movement that responds to the Jewish urge for tikkun olam. There is a new spirituality—perhaps lying dormant for some time—that looks beyond the individual’s need for connection to God and community toward an image of a society living in accordance with a Jewish vision of Truth, Goodness, Compassion, Justice and Righteousness.

All too often, our people seem to detect a disconnect between Conservative Judaism as a halachic movement and Conservative Judaism’s commitment to social justice. Adherence to the laws of Shabbat and kashrut are often raised as demonstrations of Conservative Judaism’s commitment to halachah, but we are not quite as clear on the halachic requirements for creating a just, compassionate and righteous society.

Recently the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly and the Board of USCJ voted to accept the principle that the movement should develop a “hekhsher tsedek,” a set of social justice criteria to be applied to the production of kosher food. Then, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly accepted a teshuvah allowing for the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis and the development of commitment ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples. These are both groundbreaking decisions for the movement. And I must tell you that I have heard more from the “rank and file” members of our movement about hekhsher tsedek than about the CJLS decision, and all of it overwhelmingly positive. The notion that kosher food should be produced under conditions that support a just society has hit a very deep nerve among our people. At this moment, a more detailed proposal is being considered by USCJ with regard to hekhsher tsedek. I am confident that we will move forward with this initiative and that it will capture the deep desire throughout the Jewish community to create a more just world through Torah.

But I am still haunted by Rabbi Matsa’s words and by Heschel’s words in his book, *The Prophets*, where he insists that the prophetic message includes the understanding that the pain of the downtrodden, the disenfranchised, the poor, the homeless, the widow, the orphan, is actually God’s pain. Are we prepared to truly hear the words of our prayers, the words of the Amidah, which calls God, *somekh nofelim*, “supporter of the fallen,” *rofeh holim*, “healer of the sick,” *matir assurim*, “one who frees prisoners,” *mekayem emunato lishene afar*, “one who remains faithful to those who sleep in the dust?” While we’re housing the homeless and feeding the hungry, are we prepared to tackle the root, structural causes of hunger and homelessness in our society? While we visit the sick, are we prepared to push for universal health care in our society? While we tutor kids in inner city schools, are we prepared to

advocate for high quality public education for every child in America?

Are we prepared, as congregations, as a religious movement—a religious voice in the public square—to perform the hard core political advocacy that it takes to follow up these positions? I’m not yet sure what the answer is, or even how we could do it should we decide to do it. But I suggest we



begin the conversation. Let’s talk to each other, one on one and in small groups. Let’s tell our stories and the stories that we hear in places like Biloxi. Let’s begin to build a network of care, concern and passion for what is true and right and just. Who knows? We might actually find not only the consensus, but the collective energy needed to truly repair the world. We may even find that we can build our congregations and our sacred Jewish community in the process. ■

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*Dr. Richard Lederman is the Director of the Committee on Public Policy and Social Action for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Executive Director of the Seaboard Region of USCJ. Richard assumes his position in Rockville after six years as Executive Director of the Great Lakes & Rivers Region of United Synagogue headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio. Before arriving in Cleveland, Richard spent 11 years as program director of Har Zion Temple, a 1400 family congregation in suburban Philadelphia, where he was responsible for all congregational programming, including membership services, conferences, adult education, as well as holiday, family and youth programming.*

#### NOTES:

- 1 Editor’s Note: See back cover for photos of the NAASE trip to Biloxi, May 2006.



## A Homeless Shelter in the Synagogue: Spreading Over Others the Sukkah of God's Peace

Robert E. Hill, FSA

This article describes one congregation's accidental involvement in a major social problem, and the profound effects that involvement had on congregational life. It illustrates how little we knew, how strongly we reacted, and how much the experience taught us.



Robert Hill

In the winter of 2002-2003, the State of Rhode Island experienced a surge in the number of homeless citizens that completely outstripped the resources of its available shelters. The state was unprepared, and the winter was very cold. Private agencies like the Red Cross and Travelers' Aid, plus a few churches who were able to mobilize quickly, tried their best to meet what they could

of the need, but all in all the response of officialdom was not something to be proud of.

As the winter of 2003-2004 approached the State paid a lot more attention, but acknowledged that the now-known need would again outstrip its official resources. The State sought the help of the Rhode Island Council of Churches, proposing that the "faith-based organizations" of Rhode Island come to the rescue of the State and agree to serve as "overflow shelters" when the State facilities became full.

The situation was made even more complicated, however, in the aftermath of the disastrous Station Nightclub fire on

February 20, 2003, in which 100 had been killed and hundreds of others seriously injured. In May and June of 2003 the state had dramatically increased its official requirement for fire safety systems in places of public assembly, which of course included churches and synagogues. The result was that the state was asking "faith-based organizations" to help it meet its duty to Rhode Island citizens—but at the same time preventing them from doing so by holding them to a new safety standard they had neither the time nor the resources to meet.

In fairly short order an action plan began to coalesce. The state had contacted only the Council of Churches, but the leaders of the Council quickly reached out to include the leaders of the Jewish community in the planning as well. There was so much to try to understand. How big was the homeless problem likely to be? Churches were not legally protected as agencies of the state, nor were they chartered, like the Red Cross—what were the legal issues they might face? Some homeless clients have drug and mental health issues—what were the risks to property and to congregants? Where would congregations get the equipment they would need to operate a shelter? What about the new and stringent fire code?

Temple Emanu-El, a historic Conservative congregation of about 1,000 households, occupies a large physical plant high on the ridge of the east side of Providence. Its facilities are used not only by the congregation but also by the adjacent Solomon Schechter School of Providence. Rabbi Wayne Franklin and the temple's social action committee felt that our obligation in the face of this grave need was clear, and gave the new umbrella State Coalition on the Homeless a preliminary commitment not just to assist in developing the statewide emergency response, but actually to serve as an overflow shelter.

Many meetings were held that spring in which Rabbi Franklin, or I, as executive director, or lay leaders, participated. The Coalition came up with an inventive system whereby each "faith-based organization" was partnered with one or two state-chartered social service agencies, such as the Red Cross, or Travelers' Aid, or Amos House, or United Way. Complex legal "MOU's" (Memoranda of Understanding) for each partnership were created and signed which spelled out the responsibility of each entity in making the overflow shelters operational.

In Temple Emanu-El's case, we were partnered with Travelers' Aid and Amos House. Travelers' Aid would serve as the intake site and the screener of those seeking shelter. We were not to take walk-ins; we were to take only those whom Travelers' Aid had screened and assigned to us for the night. (In the first year we were given the easy ones—single women. In the other two years we took in families.) Travelers' Aid diverted the hard-core cases (the drug-dependent, the mentally ill, and the violent)



to more hardened (and experienced) shelters. Travelers' Aid would also provide transportation for the short distance from their downtown facility to our shul. Amos House would provide the social worker or trained professional who would remain on-site all night long, as well as a paid guard. Amos House would also have brought in hot meals—but the temple declined that option for reasons of kashrut and committed to providing all the meals ourselves, which seriously increased our volunteer duties. The Red Cross was not one of our actual operational partners, but would provide all the cots and blankets.

Our in-house team met more and more frequently as summer advanced. What space could we commit to the shelter effort on a nightly basis that would not impact the space needs of regular temple programming? What would it mean to have "them" not just on the tony East Side of Providence, but in the shul? How could we guarantee that guests would not wander through the rest of the synagogue complex? Would "they" cause safety issues for our children? How would we handle meals, since we could not accept the non-kosher meals of Amos House? How would we handle the logistics of being open on Shabbat? How in the world would we find enough volunteers to staff this effort on a long-term basis? Where would we store all the materials and equipment we would need? What would the Fire Marshal require of us in terms of plant upgrade, given the new fire code? Since people would be sleeping in our building, would we have to meet the higher code standard set out for a "hotel," or would we have to meet the lesser standard for a "rooming house?" What about showers? Would we have to wash bedding every day? Could bedding be re-used? What about disinfecting?

We quickly decided that the best space for us to use was also the only feasible space, viz., the cafeteria-gymnasium used daily by the Schechter School and on the weekends by our USY and religious school students. We figured we could easily accommodate up to thirty guests in this room plus have space for food tables and play areas, if the fire code permitted. The difficulty, of course, would be that it could not be dedicated space: it would have to be completely converted twice a day, from gymnasium to dormitory every night, and from dormitory to gymnasium every morning.

Our lay team worked out the volunteer logistics, and we realized that we would have eighty slots to fill every week that we were open. We needed volunteers to convert the gym to a dormitory at night; to shop, cook, serve dinner, and clean up; to welcome the guests into our synagogue home by assisting them, engaging them in conversation, or playing with their children; to stay overnight; to come in with the morning shift to make and serve breakfast; to sweep, clean and stock the bathrooms, convert the dormitory back into a gym and store all the bedding for the next day.

As the fall approached we issued a call for volunteers. We had hundreds within days. Training sessions were set up so that experts from the social services agencies, who knew the facts about homelessness and the cold realities of shelter operation, could instruct our volunteers. Rabbi Franklin consistently

and eloquently kept us focused on the Jewish teachings which gave meaning to this work, teachings about human beings as images of God, about welcoming guests, about feeding the hungry, about respecting personal dignity at all costs, about tikkun olam.

We opened that first year in mid-winter, not all that long after Sukkot. The timing could not have been more powerful. As Jews we had all been commanded at Sukkot to leave our homes and move for a brief time into flimsy shelters, and to pretend to experience fragility and deprivation. Now—we were facing for the first time those who were actually fragile and deprived, and who were not pretending.

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*"... we learned that if the need is compelling and immediate, and the remedy involves meaningful and direct assistance, individual members of our synagogue would step forward in droves.*

*This said a lot about their opinion of the tasks we routinely asked them to volunteer for."*

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For the banner on all our internal shelter memos, duty rosters, and documents, we adopted the phrase from the *Hashkivenu* prayer: "Spread over us the sukkah of Your peace."

Temple Emanu-El operated the shelter in the shul for three winters. In that first winter the fire department required us to make a few minor building upgrades, and exempted us from certain other obviously impossible requirements. We installed two new doors for security reasons, and worked out traffic flow plans and evacuation routes, which protected the rest of the building from inappropriate wandering. The Schechter School was fully cooperative in sharing the space with the synagogue and with the shelter. It was not really possible to predict the need. Some nights we were open with few guests, some nights we had up to capacity. But we had to be ready for capacity operation every night we were scheduled for.

After the first winter the Governor of Rhode Island, in a ceremony, gave citations to the key figures from our synagogue and the several churches that had bailed the state out by operating the overflow shelters. I know that the Rabbi, and the lay chairs of Temple Emanu-El's shelter, and I, felt embarrassed at receiving these citations. We felt that it was we, and our synagogue community, who should instead be

grateful for having been awakened to the opportunity to do what we did, and to learn what we learned.

And so, what did we learn?

First of all, we learned that if the need is compelling and immediate, and the remedy involves meaningful and direct assistance, individual members of our synagogue would step forward in droves. This said a lot about their opinion of the tasks we routinely ask them to volunteer for. In all the time we operated the shelter, even when we needed to fill eighty slots a week, we never had to cut back for lack of volunteers. They always met their commitment. Furthermore, the response involved a very wide cross-section of the congregation. We had financiers and store clerks setting up cots, teenagers and physicians stocking the bathrooms, professors and the unemployed cooking the meals. One young temple staff member, from the maintenance department, volunteered in his free time because, as he said, he had been homeless, and he knew how it felt.

Second, we learned that operating the shelter in our shul had unexpected significance. If events had gone another way and we had been asked merely to provide volunteers for an agency shelter elsewhere, the sense of involvement would have been very different. But we were operating this shelter in the shul. The congregation was not just “sending a check,” as it were, but was stepping up to hands-on work in its own facilities. A synagogue was joining the front lines along with churches, and our involvement was no longer at arm’s length. We had committed our *beit kneset* itself to this work. Our congregants were proud of that fact, and they would have done anything to ensure that the shul was able consistently to meet its chosen responsibility.

Third, we—and I mean hundreds of congregants, not just the leadership team—learned an enormous amount about the overall problem of homelessness, including how oblivious we were to it before. For virtually all of us, we didn’t “see” it, and we certainly didn’t see its human face. But we learned many things that overturned old assumptions. We learned, for instance, that 80% of the homeless are homeless only once in their lives: they lose their jobs, or their landlords evict them, and they are in temporary freefall until they regain their footing. Many, many of our fellow citizens are only one paycheck away from disaster. Only 20% of the homeless experience homelessness repeatedly. Some of the homeless are in fact employed—but cannot make enough money to pay high rents. We learned first hand about affordable housing.

Fourth, we learned to harness the new clarity of vision of our congregants and their moral indignation at the situation we were helping to address. We learned not to romanticize what we were involved in. We learned some hardnosed politics from older hands in the social service agencies. We learned, for instance, that we and the other “faith-based organizations” should not be too successful in relieving the homeless bed shortfall, causing it to disappear from the front pages, because we did not want to let the State off the hook in meeting its obligation to be the irreducible safety net for all its citizens. The fundamental social compact needed defending.

Fifth, we learned about community-based organizing, and mobilized our first team in that direction. Out of our volunteer corps came another large congregant effort, this time a lobbying group organized to affiliate with other homeless advocacy groups. These allied forces sought to educate the Rhode Island General Assembly on homelessness, to pressure them to fund more low-income housing, and to work on minimum wage issues.

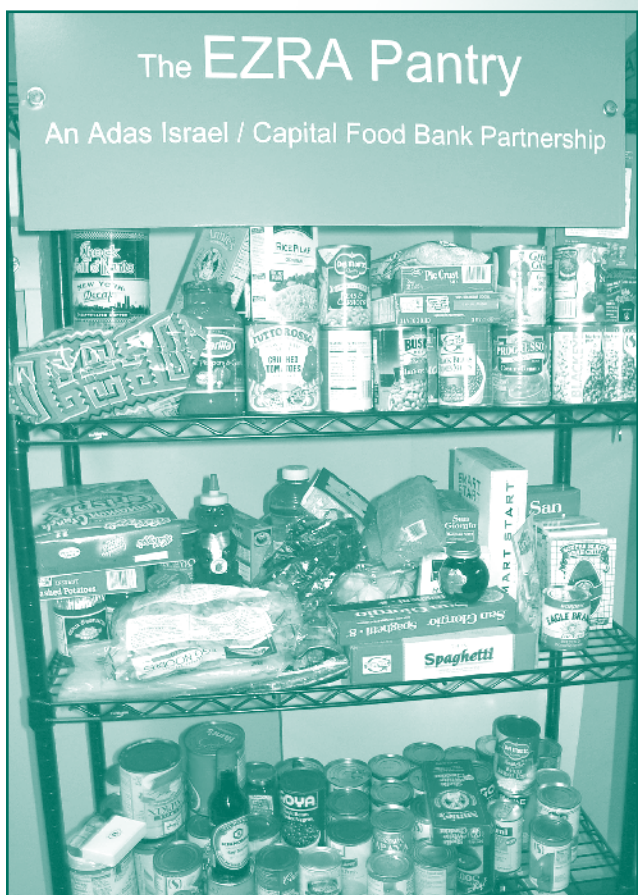
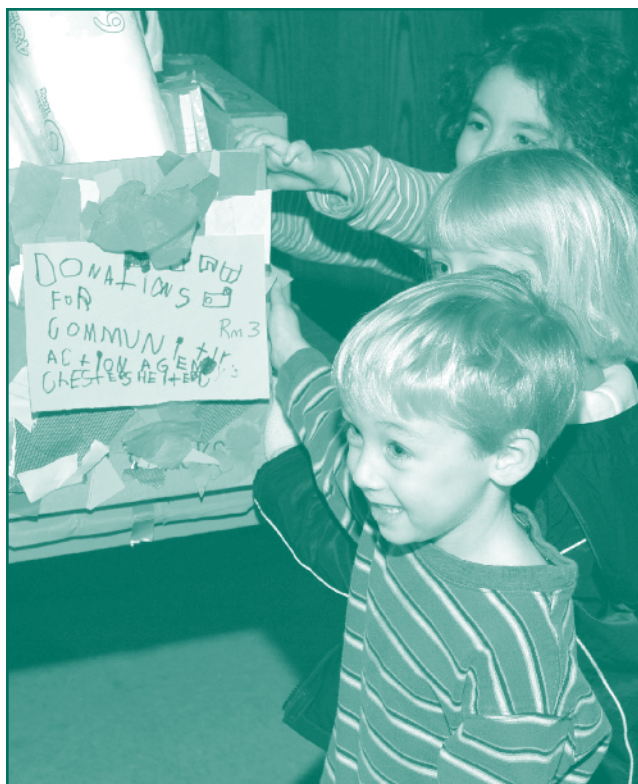
Over the three years that Temple Emanu-El operated its overflow shelter, the State did in fact gradually increase its capacity to deal with the homeless. It opened new permanent shelters and created new contingency shelters, so that by the end of the third winter the efforts of the “faith-based organizations” were no longer needed directly, and the Temple shelter closed for good. Success on the low-income housing effort is far slower, but some progress has been made.

But the effect of the shelter effort will remain with the congregation for a long time to come, as it sees itself with new eyes, realizes its full capacity to mobilize for justice, and understands more deeply the empowerment wrought by *mitzvot*. ■

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*Robert Hill FSA was the Executive Director of Temple Emanu-El in Providence Rhode Island at the time the Temple undertook this effort. He is immediate past President of NAASE. Now “retired,” he is the Executive Director of Temple Shalom in Newton, Massachusetts.*





Thanks to the following synagogues for photos of tikkun olam projects used on this page:

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## Sof Hadavar - End of the Discussion: Writing Our Own Story

Guest Commentary by Meir Lakein

Reprinted with permission from *Shma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* ([www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com)).

The Ramban writes that there are so many rules governing interpersonal conduct that the Torah couldn't possibly list them all; we are expected, therefore, to discern how to act from God's actions, commandments, and theology. In public life — in politics, in the business of the polis, in institutions, and in how we act in relationships — we must, therefore, discern how to act "Jewishly." We also know that we may get it wrong; to claim otherwise is arrogance. How might organizing help us increase our chances of getting some things right? It starts with story and power.

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*"Rather than being a shul, synagogues often  
settle for being a business, marketing a product  
— even though that turns congregants into  
nothing more than customers."*

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Though power may seem a strange choice of words, power is simply the ability to act, to write our own story and base it around our needs, values, and dreams, rather than being a bit player while our lives are written by others. In public life, in our community, in our synagogues, do we feel this way? Do we write our own story?

Through my work as a professional community organizer, I'm privileged to see countless examples of what our shuls are doing right. But because I need the community I love to be better, I must admit that we're often writing someone else's story.

Rather than being a shul, synagogues often settle for being a business, marketing a product — even though that turns congregants into nothing more than customers. How many of our shuls have turned our rabbis into glorified bureaucrats rather than religious leaders? When I ran a training program for a synagogue board (in another region), the leadership came up with a very thoughtful list of reasons why other people get involved, but insisted that they only did it because they'd been "suckered" into their leadership roles. Because I had met with several of them individually, I knew how much their leadership meant to them. So why couldn't they admit

it, publicly, to each other? Small wonder, with that message, more people didn't want to serve.

How many synagogues believe that although half the shul's members are caregivers to elderly parents, the shul's role is to comfort them rather than to help them act collectively to improve their situations? Most synagogues have convinced themselves that the dominant culture's story is better than our own story.

Rather than configuring a single Jewish narrative for our communal life, we create singular, narrow stories: this box for "social justice" work, that box for "community building." This is the realm that values the individual, that realm values the collective. We've got this time slot to pray and learn and another time slot to do business. These matters are internal to the synagogue, those are external (which means we should avoid them for fear of draining energy from the internal even though we know from experience that if someone acts and grows from it in one area, they're more likely to take action in others, too).

But other models are possible, as the recent experience at Temple Emanuel in Newton, Massachusetts, illustrates. To help that synagogue community learn how to understand its own potential to organize for change, The Greater Boston Synagogue Organizing Project worked with Temple Emanuel members for many months, through many one-on-one conversations and house meetings, to identify basic social justice issues and "life" issues that were central to the lives of many congregants. Out of that process came a gradual understanding that issues of aging were the widest-felt, affecting huge numbers of people, either older members themselves, or members serving as caregivers to their parents, locally or at a distance.

The culmination of all those parlor meetings and background efforts was an open assembly in December 2006, attended by 420 congregants, to organize for action, and to write a new story. People testified to the private pain of trying to navigate impermeable systems that made it hard to age with dignity and to the pain of falling short when serving as loyal caregivers to their elderly parents. Many people who knew each other didn't know these stories. Then, people committed to turn their private pain into public action. They launched synagogue-wide chesed initiatives. They also began a campaign to organize for long-term care legislation that would make it easier for seniors to stay in their own homes and obtained commitments from their legislators to support their campaign. The morning's energy filtered over into other areas of the synagogue — 50 teens obtained the mayor's support for improved recycling efforts and the support of the rabbi and president for efforts to help teens become more engaged in the synagogue. This wasn't stereotypical "social



action"; it was a community discerning how a powerful Jewish community should act in every aspect of life.

Through organizing, the synagogue developed new leaders, and the leaders brought hundreds of congregants into a communal conversation about their common interests and values and how their shul could act on them collectively, inside the shul and in the world, in an authentically Jewish way. The organizing itself isn't "Jewish" per se; the organizing was a tool for the synagogue to organize the members, the leaders, the resources, and the imagination necessary to be able to have the power to successfully write and act out a new story.

What does the future hold? We will better be able to write an authentic Jewish narrative when we organize with others — Jews and non-Jews. First, it will provide enough power to fully act on our values — for, if we can't make it easier to do fundamental things like raising children, balancing work and family, and helping seniors age with dignity, how can we figure out what God wants of us? Second, we can't understand our story until we can compare and contrast it to the stories of other peoples with whom we are in relationship. In *Masechet Brakhot*, we're told that Ben Zakkai and Rabbi Haninah both had the power to heal, but, when each was sick, they needed the other to heal them. Why couldn't they heal themselves, the Talmud asks? Because prisoners cannot free themselves from prison. No institution can transform itself alone.

As a Jew, I hand over part of my freedom to God and, in return, get a freedom that's far greater. It's hard to connect to God and try to discern what He wants from us if we're not free. Organizing, and doing it with others, is one way to assert our freedom. ■



*Meir Lakein has worked as a professional community organizer since 1990, in both the U. S. and Israel. For two years, he served as the lead organizer for the Greater Boston Synagogue Organizing Project, a national model of collaboration of synagogues dedicated to organizing around values and interests, and transforming leaders and institutions. Prior to his work with GBSOP, Meir spent seven years as the lead organizer of the Brockton Interfaith Community, a broad-based organization of 25 congregations, including three synagogues, which during his tenure won major victories in areas such as housing, healthcare, and job training. He is a trainer and mentor for a new generation of young organizers.*





# NAASE

*Lends a Helping Hand ...*

*Biloxi, Mississippi  
May 11-13, 2006*



*Our thanks to the  
participants for their  
hard work,  
and the photographs...*