

**PEARL: Providing Education and Resources for Leadership**

# **Growing Your Congregational Community**

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**Jewish Reconstructionist Federation**

***Transformative Judaism for the 21st Century***

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## **Kehillah Builders: Jewish Values-Based Approaches to Building Sacred Reconstructionist Communities**

**Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Resources – Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit**

<http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kehillah-builders-main.htm>

*"Being a Reconstructionist Congregation or Havurah means taking the building of sacred community to heart. Our purpose is to reach in and reach out - that is, to extend ourselves inwardly to our existing community, and also to reach out to the unaffiliated and the searching and offer them ways into our community. It means conscious efforts to grow, strengthen, and deepen the love for our community, the Jewish people and the world at large."*

Adapted by Rabbi Shawn Zevit from the Inreach/Outreach committee of Reconstructionist Congregation Beth Emeth, New York

The overall growth of our movement has been tremendous over the last decade. Most of our communities are dealing with meeting new needs: increased staffing, more physical space, financial resources, youth and adult education programs, lifecycle and spiritual support, planned growth and outreach, and more services in general.

**It is important that we understand the interconnections between effective outreach and inreach.** Far too often there is a tendency to equate growth only with quantitative increases in membership. A proactive and consciously framed in/outreach campaign recognizes the way this work invigorates every aspect of a community. Such work helps a congregation to better serve its current members, to reevaluate its mission and to deepen its community bonds. The importance of this work is magnified when attached to conversations about inclusion, outreach, Jewish identity, public relations, and building faith communities. However, through study, effective listening and open discussion of our attitudes and expectations, we can turn a potentially challenging subject into a profound opportunity for building relationships and community.

As a living dynamic system, no community that seeks to reconstruct and renew itself can retain its vitality and vision without effective outreach and internal growth, linked to programs that support their faith communities and religious cultures at large. What we are trying to develop is a workable system where the process of reaching in and reaching out is attuned to our purpose and mission in a way that reflects our values and inspires deepened Jewish living and responsible membership in our global community.

**Being a Kehillah Builder is an opportunity to educate ourselves around issues of consciously growing our communities, and the approaches and structures by which we might do this.** This is a profoundly Reconstructionist educational process, as we look at our own attitudes on a given subject, studying traditional and contemporary Jewish sources, examining global approaches, sharing resources, information and insight with each other, and exploring ways to educate and inspire our home communities to incorporate these ideas.

We hope these resources help you discover your own values-based approach to building sacred community, and enables you to do this in Godly ways that deepen your relationships, Jewish identity and religious life.

\* \* \* \* \*

We begin together by focusing on our sacred task, with the following blessing:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלְּךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּצַרְכֵי צִיּוּר.

*Baruh atah Adonay eloheyenu meleh ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'a'sok b'tzorchei tzibur.*

Blessed are you God, Creator of the Universe, Source of Holiness in our engaging in the needs of community.

Developed by Rabbi Jeremy Schwartz

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## **Study Texts on Community and Growth**

### **Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 9:12**

One who settles in a community for thirty days becomes obligated to contribute to the charity fund together with the other members of the community. One who settles there for three months becomes obligated to contribute to the soup kitchen. One who settles there for six months becomes obligated to contribute clothing with which the poor of the community can cover themselves. One who settles there for nine months becomes obligated to contribute to the burial fund for burying the community's poor and providing for all of their needs of burial.

### ***Iturie Torah* (a collection of Hasidic exegeses) – Parshat Zakhor**

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey after you left Mitzrayim. How he surprised you on the march, and cut down all the weak ones who were behind. When you were famished and weary and were not God fearing. Therefore, when Adonai your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you; in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion. You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the Heaven. Do not forget! (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)*

Had the children of Israel not forgotten about the slower ones in back but instead, brought them closer under the protecting wings of God's Presence, binding the slower to all of Israel, the Amalekites would not have succeeded in their attack. But because you allowed the slower ones to be *aharekha* (meaning both "behind you" and "other"), that you separated them off from you and made them "other," and you forgot about your brothers and sisters, Amalek could viciously attack them. Therefore, the Torah tells us to remember Amalek, so that we never forget to bring our brothers and sisters who need special attention into our midst.

*"What does it mean to join Am Haskalah? Member of what? As I see it, we are both a **community** and a **congregation**. A **community** is a network of relationships. You join it by taking part. The more you take, the more you will build those relationships, the more connected you will feel, and the more our community will grow.*

*While the **community** is an informal network, the **congregation** is a formal organization. We have bylaws, officers, committees, employees, income and expenses. To be a member you have to fill out a form and pay your dues. The **congregation** provides the platform, the structure, in today's parlance, the hardware. The **community** is the software, the spirit and the real soul. I believe that if you are going to be a member of this community, you have a responsibility at some point to joining the congregation. And if you are a member of the congregation, please be a part of this community.*

Cary Oshins, Past-President of Am Haskalah, Allentown, PA

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⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-outreach-inreach.html> for an overview of issues related to Outreach/Inreach.

Many strategies and pragmatic tactics can be implemented – both internally and externally – to attract new members. But crafting a community that attracts new members is an art, not a science. As people's needs and motivations are different, there are no easy formulas that can be readily replicated and applied everywhere. Below, our aim is to share with you a variety of good and successful ideas and best practices, and point you in the direction of helpful resources.

Community building and membership growth is not exactly akin to marketing a product and increasing sales. Genuine, dynamic changes can lead to positive growth and increased participation and commitment. AND (not "but"), there is a third "pillar" on which congregational growth stands. In addition to internal (sometimes administrative) practices and external marketing efforts, there is the all-important aspect of relationship. Ultimately, it is not about the specific programming or the executive functioning of the office or the pizzazz of the public relations, as vital as they are. These are secondary and instrumental to the primary purpose of **fostering caring relationships** that address people in their whole-ness and support them in their growth as Jews and human beings. Rather than a "cafeteria" to which we invite folks to "buy" a particular product or service, it is a *community* to which we invite them.

## **INTERNAL FOCUS**

⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-values-inventory.html> for a template on identifying the values you currently embrace and communicate across your congregational system.

⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-outreach-plan.html> for a template for a comprehensive Inreach/Outreach plan.

### **A. Message and Mission, Resources and Goals, Means and Ends**

Once you know your vision and approach, your objectives and purposes, you will be able to more clearly define your strategies and tactics, i.e., the means to your ends. We assume here that the objective is to grow your membership and the vitality of the community (which will help grow even more members), though a particular number of members is not the *raison d'être* of your synagogue.

Another way to view this foundational step is to define the resources required to achieve your goals and set about developing those resources. If, for example, it will take “x” number of members at an average of “y” contribution to afford the “z” staffing and programming you want, then you are ready to think about strategies and tactics required to obtain the resources that match your ambitions.

### **B. Roles to Play – Multiple Entry Points**

Providing varied opportunities and avenues for meaningful participation is potentially the most promising vehicle for attraction and absorption of new members. These can include “mitzvah opportunities” (i.e., participation in *tikkun olam* projects), singing and music for services and celebrations, study groups, book clubs, cultural events, a wide variety of committees, and so on. Perhaps satisfying, rewarding, fulfilling action will lead to a sense of belonging and responsible citizenship ... a member is made.

⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-stages.html> for an introductory exercise on “Stages of Membership.”

### **C. Prospective and New-Member Programs**

Whether it's a special *Kabbalat Shabbat* service, a *Havdalah* event, a Sunday morning brunch, or some other occasion, setting aside a particular time to recognize,

welcome, and honor new and prospective members can be a source of positive appreciation that can reverberate throughout the community. This would be a good time for the sharing of personal stories as we want to get to know each other. Participants might be treated to a special educational opportunity or gifted something like a book on Reconstructionism or a symbolic object such as a *havdalah* candle.

#### **D. Mentoring / Pairing**

You know the debate: What's more important – the Friday evening service or the *oneg* afterward? It is often social connection that promotes the sense of belonging. New or prospective members can be paired with existing members with something in common, such as children the same age, geographic location, or similar professional or personal interests. More veteran members can serve as a “welcome wagon” that invites and facilitates newcomers' attendance and participation, making sure to inquire about newcomers' needs and desires.

#### **E. Newsletters – More than “Upcoming Events”**

A monthly vehicle for communication is essential and ought to reflect well on the community. Is it informative of upcoming events? Is it a forum for the sharing of “good and welfare” news (*simchas* and sorrows)? Do you have any special features, such as congregant or community accomplishments? Is it a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinion? Are there linkages to other interesting websites or organizations or public events? Does it project an upbeat, engaging tone? (Or does it have an “all business, just-the-facts” kind of attitude?) Successful, well-regarded and eagerly anticipated newsletters are the result of critical feedback and a certain amount of communications savvy. Ask everyone how yours could be better.

Join us on March 19, from 12:00 – 1:30 pm EDT, for a PEARL session entitled  
**Using the Web and Newsletters for Successful Community Building and Engagement.**  
Register online at <http://www.jrf.org/PEARL-Registration>

## **F. E-mail – Short and Sweet**

Used judiciously, short e-mails can serve as timely reminders, and they can direct people's attention to other places, such as your website or another one that provides further details about a topic or program. This is also the vehicle for connecting with your list of contacts and "friends of" your congregation, simply to keep them apprised of what you are offering.

## **G. Personal Testimonials**

The best promotion comes from satisfied congregants. Think of the many ways you can make room for (and use of) personal testimonials: Can your newsletter feature one each month? Can your services include the sharing of a story or something that is meaningful in the liturgy? Can your website include first-person accounts and quotes about positive experiences?

## **EXTERNAL FOCUS**

### **A. "Members Beget Members"**

In what ways can your enthusiastic members bring their friends, neighbors, colleagues, and relatives? After all, if you were searching for a synagogue community, or connection to Judaism, or a meaningful and relevant way to engage and activate your Jewish identity, what is a better and more credible source than someone you know?

**This may be the best way to grow.** What might you learn if you asked every congregant, "How might you bring in a new member? What would it take?" Many of us live in a variety of social and professional networks, and there may be someone who is waiting to be invited and brought in.

### **B. Advertising and Public Relations**

Marketing people will tell you that the best advertisement is the kind you don't pay for. **An article *about* you carries more credibility than what you might pay**

**to say about yourself.** Whether you have congregants writing and submitting articles in the local press or you interest an editor in doing a story, you gain what is known as “third-party endorsement” when something appears in print.

In addition, **targeted press releases** can be very effective in spreading the word about you and your programs. Most local newspapers and magazines will be happy to publicize special events, and you will be able to take some credit, and gain public name recognition, as the sponsoring organization. Many local businesses, such as bookstores and coffee shops, have bulletin boards and their own e-mail lists through which your offering can be publicized. This is also true of neighborhood associations.

⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-guide-to-publicity.html> for the JRF “Guide to Publicity.”

⇒ See <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kb-create-visibility.html>.

### C. Community-Wide Offerings

What can you bring to your congregation that you can also make available to the wider community? It could be a short **mini-course** on a topic of interest. It could be a **guest speaker**, or a **scholar- or artist-in-residence**. It could be a **holiday celebration** to which all are welcome. At each of these events or programs, you will be able to pass around contact information sheets, allowing you to follow up with a phone call for feedback and another invitation.

### D. Targeting Niche Demographics

Depending on the particular strengths, resources, and capabilities of your congregation and its leadership, are there any particular groups that you could serve well? Do you have the resources to serve families with small children? Interfaith couples and families looking for Jewish community and connection? The GLBT community? Urban, hip twenty- and thirty-somethings without partners or children? Jewish Buddhists? Lawyers? Doctors? Teachers? Therapists? Football enthusiasts?

Whether you choose to advertise (invite) in a print or online mode, or set up a speaking engagement for a target group, you can **find the right avenues and people for your message**. An example in Baltimore is the monthly magazine

“Baltimore’s Child;” with a monthly (free) distribution of 50,000 copies each month, it is certain that a good many parents of young children read this publication regularly.

### **E. “Friends of – ”**

Your ever-expanding list of contacts – those who have attended one or more of your programs or events and put something down on a “sign-in” sheet – may be your best prospective members. At the very least, they are invaluable sources of information and feedback about what you do and (perhaps) how well you do it. These are the folks that someone can call for a casual, no pressure conversation that includes a question about their interest in becoming part of the community. They, too, can be valuable ambassadors of good will and PR even if they decline to join as paying members.

### **F. Website**

Having an attractive and appealing web site is a valuable tool for those exploring and shopping around online. On this website, you can inform people about what your congregation is all about, what it offers and when, and communicate via visuals that “show” as opposed to merely “tell.” A viewer can glean a lot about a congregation from its site: Does this community speak to my social justice agenda? Is it child- and family-friendly? Does it offer educational opportunities for me? Am I welcomed and invited to call a contact person or the rabbi? What are the self-identified strengths of the community?

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### **G. Organizational Alliances, Coalitions, and Partnerships**

When you co-sponsor an event, you expand your market and help to share program costs. With coalitions, you gain outlets to get your name and your word out. And it is likely that you will be aligning with mostly like-minded folk, so your presence and your message will become known to a wider pool of potential contacts. Having other organizations spread the word about you and your events, and vice-versa, helps

you more clearly define yourself through association, giving you a better chance of attracting people who might share your values orientation and vision.

⇒ See <http://www.jrf.org/external-affiliations> for a listing of JRF partnerships with external organizations, many of which have local agencies to which you can reach out.

## **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

### **A. Rabbi's Personal Contacts**

Who was it that said, "They won't care what you know until they know that you care"? Even in this age of e-mailing and text messaging, the power of the **hand-written note or direct phone call** remains un-diminished, perhaps even enhanced.

Many people join a specific synagogue because of the particular rabbi. Therefore, it makes sense to allow your rabbi to perform **weddings, funerals, and other life-cycle events for non-members**; there is a good chance that those folks might become members due to their relationship with the rabbi.

### **B. The "Caring" Business**

Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, of JRF affiliate Kehillat Israel in Pacific Palisades, CA, has a motto on his wall that says, "Caring for people is our only business." More than any other "enterprise," synagogue communities rise and fall on the strengths and weaknesses of personal relationships. He writes, "The number one reason why most people end their membership in synagogue life is they simply don't feel connected, or believe that anyone would really care very much if they left." The same is true for joining; **people want to be connected and cared about**. Our communities ought to be models of such behavior.

### **C. Fostering Bonds**

Congregational growth is, at the end of the day, about deepening relationships – with one's self, with others (past, present and future), with the world, and with one's God.

We might profitably ask, "What are the 'core enterprises' our synagogue

communities are engaged in?" Worship? Education? Celebration? Comfort? *Tikkun Olam*? Once again, these activities may be means to the primary end, which is "connected-ness" in its many dimensions. Success breeds success; **community connection, along with substantive content, is what may, in the end, best lead to membership growth.**

## **INTEGRATION**

You may have realized by now that **these spheres overlap with each other.** In fact, nearly everything we do within a synagogue community has multiple dimensions in play simultaneously.

For example, inviting a new member to have a role in a given event does many things: it promotes internal social connections; it may solidify more commitment to shared visions; it may be an opportunity for more of a relationship with the rabbinic and lay leadership; it may lead to talk outside of the synagogue and word-of-mouth "marketing." Or, as another example, creating and inviting people to serve on a *hesed* committee, and having those folks check in with and be helpful to those with *simchas* and sorrows, also serves objectives in all three spheres: internally, externally, and relationally. The same idea applies to a special event, like a wine-and-cheese or coffee-and-dessert *Havdalah* "open-house" hosted in the synagogue, in someone's home, or in another location – the purposes of internal development, external awareness and invitation, and caring face-to-face interest and connection are all served.

⇒ See <http://www.jrf.org/heart-mind-spirit> for over 20 half-hour audio programs that you can use as outreach and adult education program enhancements.

See <http://www.jrf.org/listserves> for a variety of leadership list serves to support your work of communal growth.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### **Kehillah Builders: Jewish Values-Based Approaches to Building Sacred Reconstructionist Communities**

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/cong/res-kehillah-builders-main.htm>

### ***Sacred Trust Seminar Workbook***

A 950-page resource manual on:

- Perspectives on congregational leadership and governance from classical Jewish texts and Reconstructionist literature and articles.
- Theoretical framework and practical resources for developing effective systems of congregational governance.
- Samples of by-laws, mission statements, strategic plans, Board and Committee structures, meeting agendas, Board manuals, and Board orientation materials.



⇒ This can be purchased for \$54 plus shipping from the **Reconstructionist Press**. Please contact Hattie Dunbar, Reconstructionist Press Fulfillment, via e-mail to [hdunbar@jrf.org](mailto:hdunbar@jrf.org) or phone to 215-885-5601 x30.

### **Becoming a "Kehillah Mekabelet," *The Struggles of Transformation***

Roberta Israeloff (from *Reconstructionism Today*, Summer 1998)

⇒ <http://63.115.67.94/rt/transformation.html>

### **Ways to Welcome New Members**

Rabbi Shawn Zevit

A list of ways to warmly welcome new members into your community, from partnering new members with veteran members to running special programs for members' uninvolved partners and families.

⇒ <http://www.jrf.org/showres&rid=188>

### **Resources on Community Building**

Rabbi Shawn Zevit

A list of books, periodicals, and articles about congregational growth, outreach, and inreach.

⇒ <http://www.jrf.org/showres&rid=186>

⇒ <http://jrf.org/resources-library&tid=2:13&show=#Membership>

⇒ <http://jrf.org/resources-library&tid=2:12&show=#Marketing>