

SYNERGY



UJA - FEDERATION OF NEW YORK AND SYNAGOGUES TOGETHER

Outreach Perspectives and Practice for a New Time

A Conversation

Demographic studies of the Jewish community universally demonstrate that those who are part of a synagogue community are more deeply engaged in Jewish life than are their counterparts at any point on the religious spectrum who are not. In an effort to increase synagogue affiliation (and to sidestep old shibboleths about *keruv*), over the past two years, UJA-Federation has funded a synagogue *keruv* outreach initiative through grants to the local regions of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), the Orthodox Union (OU), the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), and United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism (USCJ).

In the conversation that follows, we have the opportunity to learn from leaders of each movement about their perspectives on outreach and what leads to success, particularly now. Participants include **Frank Buchweitz**, director of community services for the OU; **Kathryn Kahn**, membership specialist and former director of the William and Lottie Daniel Department of Outreach at the URJ; **Rabbi Charles Savenor**, director of the New York district



FRANK BUCHWEITZ

of USCJ; and **Rabbi Shawn Zevit**, director of outreach and affiliation for JRF.

SYNERGY: Let's start the conversation with how each movement defines *keruv*. What motivates or drives your efforts? Who do you seek to reach?

Kahn: The Reform movement defines *keruv* as "drawing near those who are far," referring to all who are considering or seeking a connection with the Jewish community, specifically with our Reform congregations. This includes born Jews seeking to come closer to their tradition, those who are



KATHYRN KAHN

not Jewish but are looking for a spiritual home, and those non-Jews who are in an interfaith relationship and are considering having a Jewish home, raising their children as Jews, or converting themselves. Our motivation is the belief that Judaism teaches a valuable and meaningful way of life, and should be shared with all those who wish to be part of our tradition and our community.

Buchweitz: For the Orthodox Union, outreach is essentially reaching out to Jewish men and women having little or no affiliation with the Jewish community, or to those new to Torah observance,

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New York Synagogues in the Economic Downturn

In late November 2009, SYNERGY: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together surveyed synagogues in New York City, on Long Island, and in Westchester County to gauge the impact of the economic downturn on congregants and on synagogues themselves, and to help shape effective responses. The full summary of findings can be found at www.ujafedny.org/synergy. The following highlights relate to the strengths and challenges of New York synagogues as they seek to maintain and build their *kehillah*.

Impact of Economic Downturn on Congregants

Jobs and Housing: Reflecting the trends in the overall economy, every synagogue reported job loss among members — three large Manhattan congregations reported more than 45 members out of work. Thirty percent of synagogues reported that one or more members had lost a home.

Synagogue Responses

New York synagogues themselves are actively providing relief and respite to affected congregants, and drawing on community resources available through UJA-Federation.

Direct Relief: Compared with a year ago, 90 percent of synagogues are providing special dues arrangements to more congregants, and more than half increased the use of clergy discretionary funds for emergency congregant needs. Seventy-five percent of synagogues have referred congregants to UJA-Federation's Connect to Care services for employment assistance, counseling, and legal and financial consultation.

Counsel: Similarly, more congregants are seeking supportive counsel from rabbis at 50 percent of synagogues, and from synagogue-based UJA-Federation-funded Partners in Caring social workers at 25 percent of synagogues.

In-House Support: Congregations have mobilized to create a wide range of new in-house aid for congregants including, in order of frequency, supportive workshops or groups, the use of public forums to offer aid, the enlistment of volunteers to help with job searches, increased use of scholarship funds for camp, online job bank or networking sites, special task forces to organize congregational help, and food pantries.

Impact of Economic Downturn on Synagogues

Membership and program enrollment appear to be influenced by cost.

Synagogue Membership: Membership overall appears to be relatively stable, despite fears to the contrary expressed in a comparable

survey conducted in March 2009. More than 40 percent of synagogues report membership numbers at a similar level, 25 percent at a higher level, and 30 percent at a lower level compared with a year ago. Membership loss appears most pronounced on Long Island, where the number of synagogues reporting decreased membership match the number of those reporting similar or increased membership.

Congregant Activity: Participation appears to be at greater risk when additional costs are incurred; the desire to help others in the synagogue context draws increased participation. Education programs are suffering — 37 percent of synagogues with early-childhood centers have decreased enrollment, and 28 percent of all synagogues report decreased participation in religious school. On the other hand, member participation in *chesed* activities and volunteering is stable or up almost universally, and adult learning, prayer services, and social activities tend to enjoy steady or growing participation as well.

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DRU GREENWOOD

From the Director...

Shalom, friends,

With Pesach behind us and Shavuot just ahead — the time in our annual cycle that readies us for the giving of the Torah and our birth as a covenant people — this spring issue draws attention to the state of our New York synagogue communities and some of the efforts under way to hold them whole and assure that all have a place.

In these challenging times, attention to caring for, maintaining, and growing the *kehillah* is ubiquitous among New York synagogues. Your responses to the SYNERGY survey of the impact of the economic downturn on both congregants and synagogues reflect that reality, as you'll see from some of the findings, highlighted here. Many timely and creative responses — drawing on the commitment and skills of congregants and professionals to help those in need, new fundraising and restructuring of synagogue

priorities and systems, collaborations that begin to reweave the community in new ways — all are under way. In the process, many have renewed fundamental values, even as they have embarked on innovative ways to achieve them.

Here, we focus on the fundamentals of *keruv*, or outreach, one of the central principles of building our *kehillah*, writ large or small. First, movement leaders speak in their unique voices about a commonly held commitment and share available resources. We learn as well from the experience of a few of the many New York congregations that have renewed their outreach efforts in successful ways. Finally, general principles gleaned from the rich experience of the Reconstructionist movement's *keruv* initiative are shared.

Surely these conversations will continue in multiple ways in the months ahead. Please don't hesitate to share your thoughts and your experiences with SYNERGY.

The giving of Torah is one and eternal; the receiving of Torah is unique and daily. May each of us, and you and the *kehillah* you lead, be ready to enjoy a sweet and meaningful Shavuot. *Chag sameach,*

Dru Greenwood
Director of SYNERGY:
UJA-Federation of New York and
Synagogues Together

Sign On for SYNERGY Updates

SYNERGY e-mails for presidents, rabbis, and executive directors of synagogues in New York, Westchester, and Long Island provide timely information about grant opportunities, conferences designed for synagogue leaders, and a variety of community resources that benefit synagogues.

If you are not receiving SYNERGY e-mails and would like to do so, please forward your name, position, synagogue name and address, and e-mail address to Sarah Ecton at ectons@ujafedny.org. Stay in touch!

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to develop a heightened sense of Jewish identity and identification. A welcoming and ongoing supportive personal connection is essential in developing a level of comfort and continued participation for linkage to the broader Jewish community. Although outreach can take place in many venues, our goal is to bring men and women into the synagogue, which can become a home away from home. Target populations can include young couples who may be inclined to join when they have preschool or school-age children, families preparing for a child's bar or bat mitzvah, friends, neighbors or co-workers, individuals who come to synagogue to recite Kaddish or participate in a simcha, members who may come just once or twice a year.

We engage in *keruv* because Jewish population growth worldwide is close to zero percent. With about 46 percent in North America, representing approximately 6.5 million Jews; an assimilation rate estimated at 50 to 52 percent; low fertility rates; and disruptive migration patterns, we project a decline of one-third, to 3.8 million over the next 80 years. We cannot sit idly by while witnessing such a great loss.

While these numbers may be staggering, we see that our efforts can effect positive change on the individual, synagogue, and communal levels. Outreach can result in a stronger personal and communal Jewish identity; a larger,



RABBI CHARLES SAVENOR

more vibrant synagogue community; and an increase in Torah and mitzvah observance. By engaging in outreach, the synagogue not only ensures Jewish continuity, but expands the potential to welcome new members, while invigorating its community.

Savenor: USCJ currently focuses on one distinct area of *keruv* — which we call *edud*, enthusiasm — recognizing the need to welcome intermarried families into our Jewish community; reaching out with warmth, passion, and compassion; and hoping for the eventual conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. As an example, Building Our Jewish Home, our pilot young-family *keruv* program here in New York, reaches out to families with nursery school–age children, particularly those that are interfaith and/or marginally affiliated with the Jewish community. Recognizing that conversion may be a long-term aspiration, our goal is to help all young parents feel more knowledgeable about Judaism, more comfortable with Jewish traditions, and more fully at home within the

Jewish community. Since children who attend Jewish early-childhood centers often do not continue their Jewish education after nursery school, we hope to counter this reality by enabling families to have positive Jewish experiences that will encourage them to continue their children's Jewish education through grade school and beyond.

We seek to educate and inspire, but most important to include and welcome — to make families aware that there is a place for them within the synagogue community.

Zevit: By its nature, Reconstructionist Judaism is inclusive and welcoming — our communities embrace and comprise Jews and their families of all backgrounds, orientations, configurations, and faiths. So *keruv*, for our movement, is an extension of our core values and principles.

In our *keruv* efforts, we are, of course, hoping to grow our movement, but more important, we hope to connect with those who have a Reconstructionist approach to Judaism but were not aware that their ideas have a home with us. Our siddur series, Kol Hanesamah, sends a welcoming message with meaningful translations, as well as transliteration. We view *keruv* as an effort to engage unaffiliated, but interested Jews in Jewish communal life, and to connect with Jews who may find a spiritual home in our communities. The search for personal meaning and community, as well as an openness to the

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Innovations in Outreach: A New York Case Study

Rabbi Hannah Greenstein

The New York/New Jersey region of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation has completed its two-year outreach grant, Kehillah Kedoshah: Every Voice Matters, which enabled its New York congregations to learn, create, and implement new approaches to outreach. What follows are five key strategies for any synagogue interested in successfully reaching out to newcomers.

I. Be strategic.

Identify target populations that reflect a pre-existing demographic at your synagogue.

Plan a step-by-step recruitment effort that includes:

- Marketing existing programming to your target demographic.
- Welcoming prospective members when they attend synagogue programs.
- Following up with prospective members after programs. The follow-up should be done by synagogue members of a similar age cohort as the prospective members.

II. Create Welcoming Points of Entry

Think about all points of entry: website, phone calls, religious school, programs, services.

A friendly voice over the phone or responsive e-mail to prospective members goes a long way.

Keep records on who calls the congregation, the ages of their children (if applicable), and their interests. Be in touch with these people when synagogue programming occurs that may interest them.

III. Work With What You Have

Programmatically — What programs are your most successful? Can your “signature programs” be marketed to the general population?

Marketing — Current synagogue members are your best resource. Encourage synagogue members to invite their friends to programs and share with acquaintances why they love your synagogue.

IV. Follow-Up

Personally welcome newcomers.

You may want to consider a volunteer cadre of “ambassadors” to welcome prospective members at programs and services.

Connect newcomers to people with similar ages or interests. Building relationships is key to integrating prospective members into your community.

V. Focus on the High Holidays

The High Holidays are a natural opportunity for locating interested parties.

Invite unaffiliated people to your High Holiday services through personal invitations and marketing in the local secular press.

Help prospective members feel at home in the community (this can be challenging among the High Holiday crowds).

Find or create opportunities for intimate settings where prospective members can make personal connections.

For additional outreach resources, visit JRF’s Keruv Outreach Resource Library, launched as the final step of the grant, at www.jrf.org/keruv-library.

Rabbi Hannah Greenstein was the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation’s New York outreach coordinator from 2007 to 2009.

Stretching Outreach

Elinor Nauen

Finding effective ways of engaging people is a challenge for every Jewish institution. Many synagogues find that focusing on age and affinity groups gets the best response. Congregations in the New York area have successfully reached out to young families, teens with special needs, the unaffiliated, and others.

Building Our Jewish Home (BOJH) is an 18-month-old program currently working with five Conservative synagogues in Westchester and Long Island, designed to draw families with nursery school–age children, help those families become more fully involved in their synagogue communities, and help young parents take an active role in their children’s Jewish education.

At Hewlett-East Rockaway Jewish Centre’s Mezuzapalooza, for example, kids and families learned what a mezuzah is and made their own. “Parents and kids were able to spend time together, parents got an opportunity to socialize with other young parents, and families learned about an important Jewish concept that they could put to use in their own homes,” says Rabbi Cara Weinstein Rosenthal, BOJH coordinator. “It was wonderful to see the parents’ joy at watching their children learn and create a Jewish ritual item, and wonderful to see the parents learn along with their kids.”

BOJH minimizes or erases the hurdles that often keep young families from participating in synagogue life. “Our programs are generally free,” says Rabbi Rosenthal. “Although they all incorporate Jewish themes, activities are carefully selected to ensure that people of varying backgrounds can feel comfortable participating.”

Westchester Jewish teenagers of all denominations with developmental challenges find a home in Congregation Kol Ami’s Yad B’Yad (Hand-in-Hand) program, which focuses on social skills and Jewish education through role play, class discussion, and field trips. Participants team with peer mentors and engage in social action, Jewish holiday programs, and other special events.

Yad B’Yad Program Director Karen Millman reports the greatest successes have been that the students become more socially savvy and confident, integrate better into their communities, and learn strategies to keep themselves safe. They also make new friendships with other Yad B’Yad teens and with students from the religious high school program, and many volunteer as assistant teachers with the younger grades or as helpers in Kol Ami’s Sunday Religious School.

Millman’s advice to other synagogues who would like to develop outreach programs: “Go for it! If you discover a need and have the passion and



desire to fill it, write up a proposal, and seek support for your idea from the clergy, principal, and board. With work and tenacity, you can make it happen.”

Temple Shaaray Tefila, a Reform congregation in Manhattan, has attracted young people in their 20s and 30s with a monthly Shabbat Unplugged service, sponsored by JeTSeT (Jewish Twenties and Thirties at Shaaray Tefila). Shabbat Unplugged features a prayer book, created by Shaaray Tefila’s Rabbi Joshua Strom, that is accessible to people of all backgrounds and levels of Jewish education, as well as a band that sets prayers to popular music. “We try to provide a worship experience and social opportunity that helps everyone in this age group feel comfortable, regardless of Jewish background or whether one is in a relationship or single,” Rabbi Strom explains.