

SYNERGY



UJA - FEDERATION OF NEW YORK AND SYNAGOGUES TOGETHER

Creating a Culture of Volunteer Engagement

Jill Friedman Fixler
and Sandie Eichberg

Volunteering is nothing new in Jewish life. The first volunteers were the Israelites who built the *Mishkan*, desert sanctuary. God said to Moses, "Make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," and Moses said to the Israelites, "Let all among you who are skilled come and make all that Adonai has commanded," and "everyone who excelled in ability and everyone whose spirit moved him came" until "their efforts had been more than enough for all the tasks to be done" (Exodus 25:8; 35:10–22; 36:7). If only inspiring the right volunteers to step forward to build our sacred communities were so easy in synagogue life today!

Leaders of synagogues with whom we have worked express the pressing need to find able congregants eager to help. What are some common reasons people do not volunteer their time and talent? We hear the following: many congregants fear that if they volunteer at the synagogue they may be signing up for a life sentence. Or they will not be supported in the work they do. Or they will have to reinvent the wheel because their predecessor is not available and left no documentation. The invitation may have been an



JILL FRIEDMAN FIXLER

impersonal "cattle call" for volunteers or the job may have nothing to do with their interests. When there is more to do than any 10 people can handle, or when synagogues rely on volunteers in order to adopt transformational programming like Synaplex, the lack of congregants willing to embrace volunteerism is hard felt.

Following is a checklist of six foundational ideas that underlie our work with synagogue leaders in building toward a culture of volunteer engagement.

Make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them. Aligning volunteer roles with congregational priorities and designing purposeful volunteer opportunities can build



SANDIE EICHBERG

a synagogue's capacity to fulfill its potential and increase energy and enthusiasm. *How do you design volunteer opportunities to align with your congregation's vision?*

Everyone who excelled in ability. Congregants are more likely to enlist as volunteers when they are sharing skills at which they are proficient or learning skills of interest to them. This means that synagogue leaders must make an effort to learn about each congregant and make use of that knowledge in matching congregants to opportunities. Whether you commit the resources to individual interviews or simply use an initial intake form with your membership application, it is counterproductive

Continued on page 4

Panim-el-Panim: Building Community and Justice

Amanda Silver

In fall 2002, B'nai Jeshurun's (BJ) Social Action/Social Justice Committee was searching for a way to deepen the community's engagement in social justice. The core committee consisted of a small group of about 10 people, many of whom were burned out from planning social-action events that few people attended. The rabbis, too, were concerned about discussing justice issues from the bimah without a structure in place to engage the community in sustained action. One board member shared, "We are good at talking about important issues here, but we're not going any deeper. We don't have the people to do any of the follow-up."

Two-and-a-half years later, I sat in a packed sanctuary on a weeknight with a diverse crowd of 700 congregants, clergy, labor-union members, and local community members that had gathered to ask the speaker of the New York City council to support a bill to provide health care to low-income workers. It was a pivotal moment for B'nai Jeshurun, the culmination of a yearlong effort to help pass the bill. Nearly 70 synagogue leaders had put in hundreds of hours of work. Many times over, I witnessed our congregants assume new leadership roles by speaking publicly, running meetings, lobbying city council members, and mobilizing other members. The congregation came together as a whole to put their religious values into action in the public sphere.

What happened in those two-and-a-half years that made this possible? How did we get from a social-action committee of 10 to engaging dozens, and ultimately hundreds, of congregants in our social-justice work?

Quite simply, we decided to listen to one another.

Concerned by the lack of congregant participation and structure to support sustained social-change work, our Social Action/Social Justice Committee, with the support of the board and our rabbis, began a new, congregation-based community-organizing initiative we named Panim-el-Panim, Face to Face. Using the techniques of community organizing, the core leadership launched a listening campaign designed to build deeper relationships between congregants and to uncover the stories, passions, and concerns of the community. Over a year's time and 700 one-on-one conversations, congregants shared their values, dreams, and hopes with one another; they discussed what they cared about and why. Common areas of concern began to emerge that people wanted to address together. Access to health care was one of these initial concerns that also included women's rights, the environment, and public school education.

This initial one-on-one campaign — a second one is now complete — had a profound impact on the community that stretched far beyond the Social Action/Social



AMANDA SILVER

Justice Committee. Congregants who sat near one another as strangers in synagogue for years began to develop relationships with each other. One woman told me that she had been a member of BJ for more than 10 years and never felt a part of the community until she participated in a one-on-one. As a result of the connections and stories shared through their conversations, another set of individuals decided to start a *havurah* for members who lived in downtown Manhattan.

Participating in one-on-one conversations gave congregants the opportunity to reflect on what was most valuable and important to them, and new leaders began to emerge through the process. One congregant who had never been involved in social-action work told me that after reflecting on what he most cared about, he realized he didn't want to be "all talk and no action." He soon became one of the key leaders in the healthcare campaign.

The one-on-one aspect of Panim-el-Panim introduced a new model of engagement in the synagogue;

Continued on page 5



DRU GREENWOOD

from the director...

Shalom friends,

Current synagogue research describes a conundrum with which you are most likely all too familiar. On the one hand, only 1 in 3 congregants feel that their synagogue makes good use of their skills and abilities, signaling a lost opportunity. On the other hand, the perennial concern of synagogue leaders is how to build an engaged *kehillah* — to involve members more deeply in Jewish life, particularly in strengthening Jewish commitments in the synagogue context.

Many questions arise: How can this gap be filled? Is the current 20-percent rate of highly engaged members predictive, or is it possible to increase the size of the committed core? What might the impact be? (Just to be concrete, imagine the difference an additional 20 highly involved volunteers could make in your congregation!)

Dr. Amy Sales defines congregant development as “any and all efforts to hear people’s stories, identify their passions and talents, match them to meaningful opportunities, and

help them bring their full selves into the synagogue.”

This issue of **SYNERGY** focuses on building an engaged *kehillah* from several perspectives. Our two lead articles, one by Amanda Silver on congregation-based community organizing and the other by Jill Friedman Fixler and Sandie Eichberg on creating a volunteer culture, point to positive directions for change. Jennifer Rosenberg mines the *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002* for insights into the connective power of *kehillot*. Rabbis Lippmann, Marder, and Skolnik, gifted New York teachers, elucidate a vision of community engagement rooted in tradition.

Enclosed with this issue of **SYNERGY**, you will find the **2007 SYNERGY Resource Directory**, an annotated list of UJA-Federation of New York synagogue-related grants, programs, and resources. (The directory, as well as all issues of the **SYNERGY** newsletter, can also be found online at www.ujafedny.org/synergy.) As always, I welcome your comments — on the resource directory and UJA-Federation’s work with synagogues; on the challenges of creating an ever-deeper, more fully engaged *kehillah*; or on other issues of concern to you and your synagogue.

In this season of our redemption, may we all learn to sing once again with one voice, every family and every person lending his or her strength, talent, and inspiration to the unfolding Jewish enterprise. Wishing you and your loved ones a sweet and kosher Pesach,

Dru Greenwood
Director of Synagogue Renewal

Rabbi Gerald C. Skolnik

Forest Hills Jewish Center
Forest Hills, New York

*V'khol mi she'oskin
b'tzorkhei tzibbur be'emunah,
Hakkadosh Barukh Hu
Y'shalem S'kharam... And
all of those who engage
faithfully in the work of the
community, the Holy One
praised be He will pay them
their just reward.*

— Shabbat morning liturgy

People often refer to communal work — Jewish or otherwise — as a thankless task. I, myself, in contemplating these words from the liturgy, have sometimes wondered whether the liturgist’s true intent was to say that God will reward those who labor to build community, because the people for whom they labor probably won’t! I smile at the thought, but I also suspect that there’s more than a kernel of truth there . . .

Building an engaged *kehillah* involves getting people to reach beyond their natural inclinations — what I like to call their “default behaviors” — and their comfort levels. People will rarely thank you for making them try to be a better and more-engaged version of themselves. But when we do this work in a Jewish context, we realize that building *kehillah* is sacred work. The truest reward for our efforts will emanate from within, if not from God, and from the knowledge that the work that we are engaged in is being done *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of Heaven.

to ask for information and not use it, as it undermines a sense of trust in the synagogue's commitment to engaging its members. *How does your congregation assess skills and talents of members? How do you make the match? How do you track congregants' skills?*

Everyone whose spirit moved him came. Congregational volunteer engagement is about community building and creating a sense of belonging. Ideal vehicles for creating connections are meaningful, high-impact service opportunities, such as planning Havdalah services, recruiting participants for study groups, participating in projects that help the disadvantaged, and mentoring new *chavurot*. When synagogues attend to clarifying expectations and aligning volunteering with congregational priorities, more congregants will want to be part of creating a better community. *How do you design and convey expectations for key volunteer roles? How do you build a Judaic framework into synagogue volunteer engagement?*

And these are the gifts you shall accept from them: gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns... Engaging volunteers beyond the traditional roles of office assistants and board leaders engenders fuller participation and buy-in from the full diversity of members. A variety of volunteer opportunities that are short term and flexible enables congregants to choose ways to participate that complement their life style. *How do you adapt volunteer opportunities to the demands of work and family facing your congregants?*

Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work, . . . brought it as a freewill offering to Adonai (Exodus 35:29).

By building esprit de corps, by acknowledging each gift and those who give it, the volunteer experience becomes more compelling, fun, and rewarding for participants.

Volunteer service can and will enrich the value of membership for congregants. *In what variety of ways does your congregation celebrate those who volunteer? What stories do you tell about successful volunteer engagements? With whom do you share these stories?*

Adonai has singled out Bezalel . . . endowed him with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft.

. . . and to give directions (Exodus 35:30–33). A key role of clergy and staff is volunteer engagement. When rabbis, cantors, and staff view their role as empowering congregants as their colleagues, consultants, and team members, the result of the volunteer's work has maximum impact. Often, this is a new skill for clergy, staff, and even lay leadership and will require professional development in order to implement the new culture. Leaders of synagogues must create staff position descriptions that directly describe staff responsibilities with volunteers, hire staff who have volunteer engagement experience, and discuss their interaction with volunteers during performance reviews. Advocates of volunteer engagement must obtain buy-in from the Board through strategic conversations about volunteerism. They must point out that engaging congregants as volunteers is an essential community-building tool and an opportunity to build the capacity and strength of the

synagogue. *What resources of time and funding are devoted to training staff and board leaders for volunteer engagement? What can you do to hold staff and board leaders accountable for effective volunteer engagement? How can you align the work of volunteers as a resource for implementing congregational strategic planning?*

Volunteer engagement is much more than rounding up warm bodies, coercing reluctant congregants, and waiting for the inevitable burnout. Building the *Mishkan* required a sense of purpose and thoughtful assessment and planning. Similarly, renewing a culture of volunteer engagement requires both of these so that each goal of the congregation is met by volunteers uniquely suited for that responsibility. Lay and professional leaders can transform the volunteer culture within a congregation by clarifying expectations of volunteers, giving them appropriate access to decision making and authority, and supporting them in their work.

The new culture of volunteer engagement invites each and every congregant to shape and nurture the synagogue and the future of the community. This is accomplished by crafting a vibrant congregation in which all members are inspired by their passion to bring their skill to fulfill the mission of the synagogue. When this happens, wonderful synergy will occur. Torah, study; *avodah*, worship; and *g'milut chasadim*, acts of kindness will thrive.

Jill Friedman Fixler is principal of JFFixler & Associates, a nonprofit management consulting company specializing in volunteerism. Sandie Eichberg is a Jewish communal professional with extensive experience in volunteer engagement. Both are STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) faculty.

Essential Elements of Volunteer Engagement

Excerpted from STAR MAPS

(Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal)

The new culture of volunteer engagement builds community by using a skills-based system. It is a simple equation: assessment of the congregation's mission and goals + assessment of each congregant's skills and interests + making the match = a high-functioning congregation.

♦ **Organizational support**

Resources for budget, tools, staffing, recognition, training, and space are allocated. The volunteer resource is a key component of synagogue strategic planning and goal setting. The board has adopted a philosophy of volunteer engagement.

♦ **Needs assessment**

Volunteers work to fulfill the mission of the synagogue, and volunteer participation is factored into every facet of congregational life. All volunteer assignments have a written position description that outlines the expectations of the volunteer.

♦ **Effective recruitment**

The synagogue recruits volunteers based on its database of skills, talents, and interests that congregants are willing to share. There is a personalized recruitment plan for all volunteer assignments. Recruitment does not rely exclusively on announcements or flyers.

♦ **Interviewing and placement**

Congregants are matched with assignments that suit them and the synagogue.

♦ **Orientation**

Volunteers understand policies and procedures of the synagogue, and they receive training pertinent to their assignment.

♦ **Supervision and support**

Every volunteer receives support based on the level of responsibility of their assignment, and they are held accountable for the work they do.

♦ **Retention strategies**

Volunteer success is celebrated and documented both formally and informally.

Continued from page 2

one that was based on people, not programs. Conversation by conversation, the initiative produced a slow cultural shift in the Social Action/Social Justice Committee. Whereby before the committee operated to simply get things done, it became clearer to the team that the foundation for any effective action needed to be rooted in building relationships and investing in leadership development. This focus remains at the core of the diverse social-justice work happening now, involving dozens of lay leaders.

Early on, the core leaders of Panim-el-Panim debated about what to call the community-organizing initiative. Some wanted a name that conveyed action or justice, but another lay leader put it well when she said: "Relationships are at the heart of our justice work. By being in relationship with one another face to face, we build the possibilities for justice in the world." The core leadership agreed. In Exodus 33:11, we are told that God speaks to Moses *panim-el-panim*, as one person speaks to another. In taking the time, effort, and energy to build relationships face to face, through one-on-one listening campaigns, we emulate the divine and contribute to building a *kehillah kedoshah*, sacred community.

Amanda Silver is the former director of social action/social justice at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and currently works as a nonprofit consultant. For more information on Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO), contact Jewish Funds for Justice at 1.212.213.2113 ext. 41, or the Union for Reform Judaism's Just Congregations at 1.212.650.4234.

Community Connection and Synagogue Membership

From the *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002*

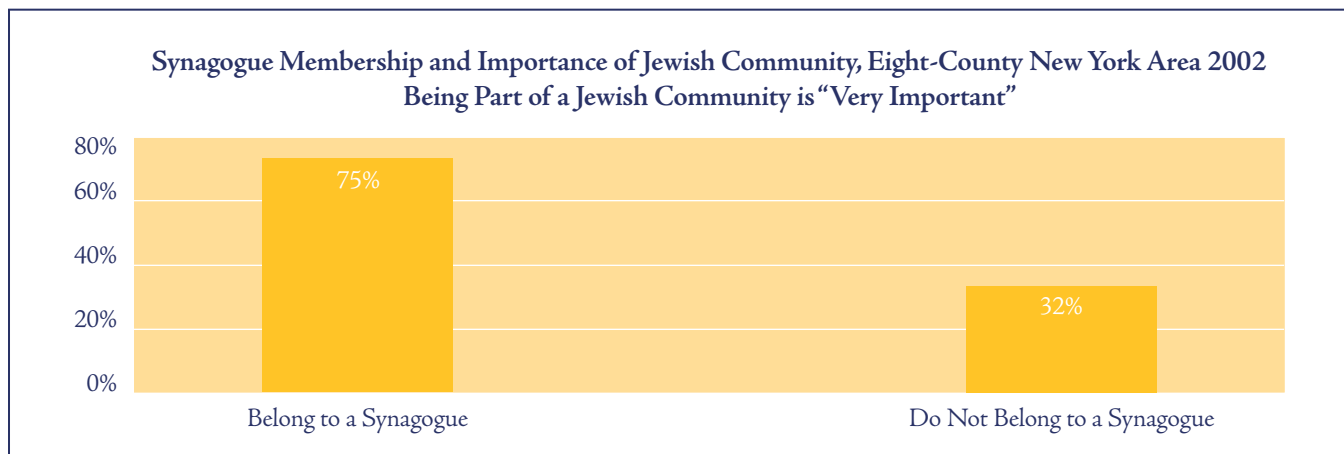
Jennifer Rosenberg

Synagogue Membership and Valuing Community

When asked about the importance to them of being part of a Jewish community, about half of all Jewish respondents said that being part of a Jewish community is very important to them (52 percent).

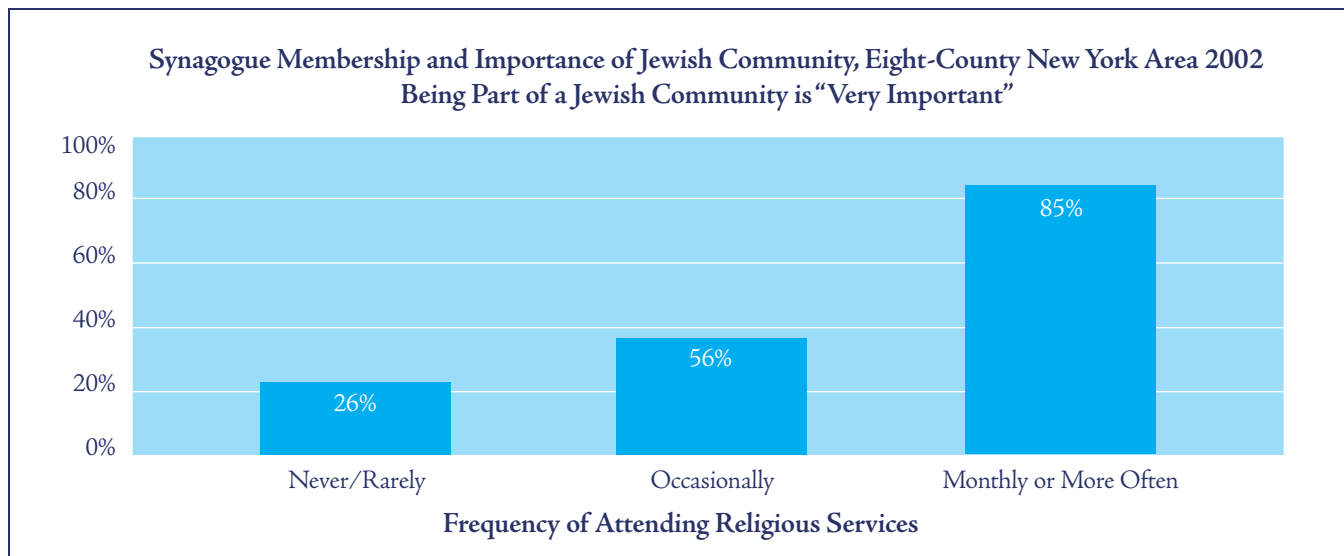
There is a strong correlation between synagogue membership and valuing being part of a Jewish community.

- 75 percent of Jewish respondents whose households belong to a synagogue say that being part of a Jewish community is very important to them, compared with 32 percent of nonmembers.



Valuing being part of a Jewish community also correlates strongly with synagogue attendance.

- 26 percent of Jewish respondents who never or rarely attend synagogue say that being part of a Jewish community is very important to them, compared with 56 percent of those who attend religious services occasionally (including High Holidays) and 85 percent of those who attend monthly or more often.



A Research Challenge

Dr. Amy Sales

Congregations are not monolithic entities. Rather, the research strongly and consistently supports the notion of concentric circles of members, distinguished by their level of participation in synagogue life. When we look at data from non-, occasional-, and regular-attendees in Reform and Conservative congregations, we find that they

have vastly different experiences in and perceptions of the congregation. However, on questions related to their secular lives (e.g., the value they place on professional achievement), no difference is discernable.

This finding is important because the data further indicates that the fate of the congregation is intertwined with the percentage of its members who choose to

be actively involved. The high correlation suggests that a change in the size of the active core ipso facto changes the nature of the congregation.

Dr. Amy Sales, SYNERGY: *Mining the Research, Framing the Questions*, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, prepared for January 2006 SYNERGY: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together Conference.

Rabbi Chaim Marder

Hebrew Institute of White Plains
Chairman, Department of Professional
Rabbinics/Yeshivat Chovevei Torah
Rabbinical School
White Plains, New York

Our tradition shares two different readings of these words of the Prophet Bil'am. The first reading, that he looked out on the encampment of the Israelites and noted that the doorways of the tents of the Israelites were set so that no one could see into the tent of the other. The private life of each Jew was respected and maintained, even in the cramped conditions in which they lived. The second reading, Bil'am praised that which he saw with his prophetic eye, namely the future gathering places of the Jews, where God's presence could be seen residing among us.

At first blush, it would seem that we invoke this second interpretation when we recite these words on entering the *Beit Knesset*, the House of Gathering of Jews, as if to say as the service begins, This shul is a special place, and we are privileged

“Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael — How goodly are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel.”
This is how we begin the service each and every morning.

to feel God here. But it is possible that the first reading is yet meant to be in communication with the second one, even as we walk into the synagogue. The key to this assertion lies in the insertion that Rabbi Isaac Luria makes in the *siddur* beforehand: “It is proper to say before beginning prayers, ‘I accept upon myself the affirmative commandment of *Love your neighbor as yourself*.’”

How might we see this all together? In this way: the synagogue is no place for the privacy we keep elsewhere, where I don't peer into your tent and you don't place your nose in mine. Oftentimes, that protection of privacy is a clever disguise for what is actually human disinterest. In shul, we function with a different ethic.

This is not to say that the shul is the place to *yenta*, God forbid. Rather,

when we walk into the *Beit Knesset*, we all become inhabitants of the same space; everyone present dwells now in a shared tent, and our lives are meant to intertwine — so much so, prayers can't begin until I make the effort to reach out for you, to realize that you and I are family, that we are made of the same stuff, that you are as I; that what weighs upon you, what worries you, weighs upon me too; and that what lifts you, helps lift me as well.

Here in shul, we all — different stripes and unique needs and goals — come together to share ourselves with one another, and with God. That's how a *tefillah* begins, and that's what a shared *tefillah* can be. *Mah tovu ohalecha Yaakov —* What a beautiful tent, O Jacob, which we will dwell in together with God, as one family, with one destiny. So may it be.

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

Kolot Chayeinu/
Voices of Our Lives
Brooklyn, New York

Rabbi Bunam of P'shiska suggests that "before them" in this first line of *parasha Mishpatim* means that there are rules that must come first, rules that come "before them," before others. He wrote: "The Torah teaches that there will be *mishpatim* — which we understand as the mitzvot about relations between people — that come before all others, even before the mitzvot about relations between people and God. *Derekh erez* (respect, civility) precedes the Torah."

The value of *kehillah* — of community — lies in its ability to instill respect for and by each

V'eleh hamishpatim asher tasim lifneyhem... These are the rules that you shall set before them...

— *Mishpatim*, Exodus 21:1

member of that community. A community is not made up of friends or loved ones, but of people who share a desire for the learning, prayer, or action found there. Certainly great friendships are made within a community, but the test of a true *kehillah kedosha*, a holy community, must be in the ways it urges, instructs, models, and insists on kind and respectful interactions between its members. How can Torah study go on if members of the community are fighting? How can prayer be intentional if the prayers are insulting one another? How can community members engage in acts of social justice if the simple

justice of personal respect is lacking in their communal home?

At Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives in Brooklyn, we end every study session and every meeting by singing *Shalom Haverim*, recognizing through the song that we are all *haverim* — connected as participants in this community, regardless of whatever tensions have arisen during that meeting — and *l'hit'ra-ot* — we will see each other again and so cannot give vent to our anger in a way that would cloud that future seeing. It is a lesson we all need to learn over and over and over again.

UJA-Federation Leadership

President
Morris W. Offit*

Chair of the Board
Susan K. Stern*

Executive Vice President & CEO
John S. Ruskay

Chair, Caring Commission
Jonathan Plutzik*

Chair, Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal
Dorothy Tananbaum*

Chair, Commission on the Jewish People
Harriet Mouchly-Weiss*

Chair, Jewish Communal Network Commission
Allan H. Glick*

General Campaign Chairs
John M. Shapiro*
Merryl H. Tisch*

Campaign Chairs
Michael G. Jesselson
William L. Mack
Linda Mirels*

Treasurer
David Silvers*

Secretary
Esther Treitel

Executive Committee At Large
Al Berg*
Feliks I. Frenkel*
Eric S. Goldschmidt*
Jerry W. Levin*
Howard P. Milstein*
David M. Sable*

Special Advisors to the President
Roger W. Einiger
Jodi J. Schwartz

Senior Vice President for Financial Resources Development
Paul M. Kane

Senior Vice President for Agency and External Relations
Louise B. Greilsheimer

Senior Vice President for Strategic Planning and Organizational Resources
Alisa Rubin Kurshan

Chief Financial Officer
Irvin A. Rosenthal

Chief Marketing Officer
Debra E. Goldberg

Executive Vice Presidents Emeriti
Ernest W. Michel
Stephen D. Solender

Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal

Chair Synagogue Task Force
Erika Witover

Managing Director
Deborah Joselow

Director, Synagogue Renewal
Dru Greenwood

*Executive Committee member

www.ujafedny.org
Main Office New York: 130 East 59th Street/New York, NY 10022/1.212.980.1000
Overseas Office Israel: 48 King George Street/Jerusalem, Israel 91071/ 011.972.2.620.2053
Regional Offices Long Island: 6900 Jericho Turnpike, Suite 302/Syosset, NY 11791/1.516.677.1800
Westchester: 701 Westchester Avenue, Suite 203E/White Plains, NY 10604/1.914.761.5100
Northern Westchester: 27 Radio Circle Drive/Mt. Kisco, NY 10549/1.914.666.9650

UJA Federation
of New York
190th

Caring for those in need, rescuing those in harm's way, and renewing and strengthening the Jewish people in New York, in Israel, and around the world.
Editor Dru Greenwood Liaison Sarene Shanus Project Coordinator Laura Sirowitz Graphic Designer Shahphar Nili