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UJA-Federation of New York

# SYNERGY

Innovations and Strategies for Synagogues of Tomorrow

## SYNAGOGUE ENGAGEMENT: BUILDING BRIDGES TO YOUNG ADULTS

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Recognizing the unique role that congregations play in people's Jewish journeys, UJA-Federation of New York seeks to support and encourage congregations to meaningfully engage young adults in their 20s and 30s, a group that is often underrepresented in synagogues. After extensive learning and strategic planning, UJA-Federation funded several pilot programs that focused on building bridges to young adults at New York synagogues.

This paper reflects UJA-Federation of New York's commitment to identifying and sharing innovations and strategies that can strengthen synagogues. Thriving synagogues seriously consider the ways they engage with those inside and outside their synagogue community. This paper was authored by UJA-Federation planning professionals Ariella Goldfein and Ilana Sidorsky, who oversaw the funding of these pilots together with UJA-Federation volunteer leadership. We are pleased to share these best practices for the benefit of all synagogues interested in connecting to young adults, and we welcome your thoughts and reflections.

**Join the conversation by e-mailing us at [synergy@ujafedny.org](mailto:synergy@ujafedny.org).**

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*SYNERGY: UJA-Federation of New York and Synagogues Together*

# Synagogue Engagement: How Congregations Can Build Bridges to Young Adults

In 2007, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks captured critical changes taking place in the life-cycle patterns of young adults in their 20s and 30s. The “odyssey years,” as Brooks called them, describe “the decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.”<sup>1</sup> This new life stage is characterized by a spirit of fluidity: in contrast to previous generations, young adults often delay getting married and having children until their late 20s/early 30s, vacillate between living at home and living with friends, and explore a variety of jobs before deciding on a career. They seek new definitions of community and belonging, and feel empowered to “create new rites and institutions”<sup>2</sup> for themselves and their peers.

The Jewish community, like many other communities, has been feeling the reverberations of this trend. Dr. Jack Wertheimer, a historian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, noted that, “As more young people live out their so-called ‘odyssey years’ well into their 30s, even more young Jews are removed from the established organizations of the Jewish community, which have tended to be focused on families with children.”<sup>3</sup> The Jewish community and young adults have responded in various ways to this change.

## Landscape and Opportunity

In the past 10 – 15 years, the North American Jewish landscape has been flooded with innovative organizations seeking to provide young adults with meaningful entry points into Jewish life. By focusing on young adults’ wide range of interests — social justice, the environment, arts and culture, spirituality, and more — and highlighting the relationship between these interests and Jewish text, tradition, and values, these organizations have helped many young adults find communities of like-minded peers and discover

new meaning in their lives. In 2010, Wertheimer conducted a study looking at a broad range of Jewish leaders — both professionals and volunteers — in their 20s and 30s. Wertheimer observed that these young Jewish leaders are deeply committed to building a particular type of Jewish community “that helps their peers find meaning in being Jewish, and that is welcoming and inclusive,” the type of Jewish community they and their peers would want to engage with.<sup>4</sup>

Congregations, too, can offer young adults welcoming and inclusive communities and meaningful opportunities to engage with Jewish life. Synagogues have traditionally been the primary gathering places for North American Jews and provide points of entry and connection to Judaism through Jewish learning and ritual/spiritual practice. As many young adults are searching for meaning and connection, the opportunity is ripe for congregations to engage them. While young adults may not join as members (more on that later), a congregation’s embrace provides them with the opportunity to engage with the Jewish community and can be a source of the meaning they seek.

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Congregations can benefit in the long run as well. Engaging young adults brings new energy and dynamism into the congregation, and working to understand and meet the needs and interests of a new generation will help ensure that synagogues continue to evolve, staying relevant for generations to come.

## Learning from Experiments

Recognizing this unique opportunity for congregations, for the past two years UJA-Federation of New York has offered congregations in the five boroughs of New York City the opportunity to apply for small grants

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1 David Brooks. “The Odyssey Years,” *New York Times*, 9 October 2007. [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/opinion/09brooks.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/opinion/09brooks.html?_r=0), 2007.

2 Ibid.

3 Wertheimer, Jack. 2010. *Generation of Change: How leaders in Their Twenties and Thirties are Reshaping American Jewish Life*. New York: AVI CHAI Foundation. <http://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Generation-of-Change-FINAL.pdf>

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4 Ibid.

of \$10,000 each to pilot or expand their young-adult engagement efforts. By doing so, UJA-Federation sought to motivate more congregations to engage postcollege/prefamily young adults and to create meaningful opportunities for people in their 20s and 30s to connect with Jewish life.

In addition to spearheading their individual programs, the congregations were brought together several times this past year to engage in a community of practice. Together, they learned from each other and experts in the field, shared successes and challenges, brainstormed program ideas, and explored opportunities for collaboration. The diversity of denominations, geographic locations, and congregation sizes certainly enhanced these discussions.

This paper elaborates on the five key questions we believe congregations would benefit from asking themselves before launching their efforts to engage young adults. The questions were heavily informed by the learnings gleaned from individual grant recipients, observations from the community-of-practice gatherings, and discussions with experts working in the field. We hope that the best practices included here will serve as a helpful guide throughout your planning and execution processes.

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## The Five Questions

### 1. What are our expectations?

While many young families are motivated to join congregations to be part of a stable, local Jewish community, to meet other new parents, and/or to send their children to the congregation’s nursery school, the benefits of congregational membership for young adults without families of their own are not as obvious. Affordability issues aside, many young adults find the idea of joining a single institution limiting and are hesitant to put down seemingly permanent roots. People in their 20s and 30s are interested in participating in compelling and interesting opportunities, regardless of which organization or institution is the sponsor. As a result, the concept of membership tends not to resonate with them. The first question is then: **Is your congregation interested in engaging young adults despite recognizing that membership cannot be an expectation or necessarily a marker of success?**

### Grant Recipients

**Central Synagogue:** Warehouse Shabbat (Manhattan)

**Congregation Beth Elohim/Brooklyn Jews:** Shabbat in the Hood (Brooklyn)

**Congregation Shaare Zedek:** Chadash Yamenu, “The Chai Minyan”(Manhattan)

**Darkhei Noam:** Young Professionals Engagement Initiative (Manhattan)\*

**Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun** (Manhattan)

**Kolot Chayeinu:** Locally Grown & the 411 on Brooklyn Jewish Life for People in Their 20s and 30s (Brooklyn)\*

**Magen David of Manhattan:** Friday Night Dinner Series (Manhattan)\*

**Romemu:** The Romemu Young Tish (Manhattan)\*

**The Prospect Heights Shul:** 20s/30s Engagement through Community Organizing (Brooklyn)

**Town & Village Synagogue:** 20s and 30s programming (Manhattan)\*

**Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale:** Keshet (Bronx)\*

**Park Slope Jewish Center:** ATID — Brooklyn Jewish 20s and 30s (Brooklyn)\*

**The Stanton Street Shul:** Old Bottle, New Wine — Gen i on the Lower East Side (Manhattan)\*

**Stephen Wise Free Synagogue:** Shabbat After Dark for 20s and 30s (Manhattan)\*

*\*2013 – 2014 grant recipients that participated in the community of practice.*

It is important to note that young adults are savvy and can spot agendas at a distance; if they sense that they are being urged to become members, even if the explicit message is that membership is not expected, it can deter them from getting involved or even returning. **Authenticity for this generation is critical.**

But if you offer the right kinds of programs and experiences, you *can* expect young adults to get involved and be engaged. Many of them would be interested in what congregations have to offer, including opportunities to learn, to connect spiritually and ritually, and to meet and surround themselves with other young adults.

## 2. What is our vision?

In order to achieve success, **it is critical that you have a clear vision.** What's your congregation's vision for engaging young adults in your community, and how does this vision embody your congregation's personality and the needs, interests, and preferences of the young adults you seek to embrace? A number of observations on this point:

- Consider the broader experience that you would like to offer young adults. **How do the individual programs you offer connect to your larger vision?** What values or messages about Jewish community and connection are you trying to relay through your work?
- Congregations that offer a consistent continuum of experiences tend to engage wider audiences. **Beyond Shabbat dinners, what other Jewish experiences would be most fitting for your community to provide?** These could include holiday celebrations, social justice activities, cultural events, lectures, etc.
- **While postcollege young adults in their 20s and 30s who do not have children are all in a similar phase of life, it is clear that the needs and interests of those within that phase vary greatly.** While a 24-year-old and a 32-year-old may both fall into that category, they will likely be interested in different types of programs. Consider offering a range of programming (social, intellectual, inside the congregation, outside the congregation, etc.) to ensure you are meeting the diverse interests of your participants.

Similarly, a number of congregations reported that their **program participants tended to reflect the ages of those on the lay leadership committee.**

In other words, if the leadership committee is made up of 22 – 24-year-olds, it is primarily 22 – 24-year-olds who participate in their programs. If you would like to engage a wider range of young adults, be sure to have an age-diverse group of volunteer leaders sitting around the table.

- While many, if not most, young adults are primarily interested in participating in programs with their direct peers, some are interested in engaging with the broader intergenerational community. Should your young-adult community be interested in such opportunities, find ways to both accommodate programs exclusively for young adults and to foster intergenerational connections.

## 3. What does success look like and how will we measure it?

With your vision as a guide, **it is important for congregations to consider what success looks like.** Is success having 50 people at every Shabbat dinner? Having 300 unique participants in your programs all year? That your participants took part in two other Jewish events in the community? That they feel more connected to and engaged with the Jewish community? Success can look different for every congregation, but it is important to set both qualitative and quantitative goals to determine the extent to which you are achieving them.

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**“The more systems you have in place to measure your impact, the better positioned you’ll be to have the impact you seek.”**

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**Once your goals are clear, determine how you will measure them:** what tools will you use to track program attendees and their individual rates of participation? How do you plan to collect feedback, and how often will you do so? The more systems you have in place to measure your impact, the better positioned you’ll be to have the impact you seek. For system suggestions, please refer to this UJA-Federation resource for synagogue database management: [www.idealware.org/reports/synagogue-management](http://www.idealware.org/reports/synagogue-management).

#### 4. What's our congregation's capacity?

A number of the congregations in the community of practice struggled with the question of capacity — the congregation's management, infrastructure, and human and financial resources required to successfully do this work. This stands out as a key factor in the success of a new initiative, especially an initiative that might require a shift in the priorities and work of the congregation. The following five related questions are worth considering:

- *Can we focus human resources on a project that may not lead to increased membership? Consider whether your congregation can devote time and resources to a project that may not deliver an immediate financial return on investment.* Engaging young adults in your congregation is less about cultivating a pipeline of new potential synagogue members and more about fostering their connection to Jewish life, the broader Jewish community, and the Jewish people. While many of the congregations in the community of practice were theoretically committed to this concept, in practice many still struggled to reconcile their efforts with the potential lack of financial benefit. People in their 20s and 30s who you engage may become active participants, but young adults are transient and often relocate; their experience at your congregation, however, increases the likelihood that they will be involved in the Jewish community wherever they find themselves next, or that they will join a congregation wherever they end up. And that is something you can be proud to be a part of.
- *Is our board "on board" with this initiative?* It is not particularly surprising that **the most successful programs tend to be run by congregations whose professional and lay leadership are fully supportive of the projects.** When congregational boards are excited by and invested in engaging young adults, the staff members and lay leaders managing the initiatives feel empowered, supported, and better poised for success. The board's enthusiasm can also trickle down to the broader community of congregants and generate excitement for welcoming young adults into the community.
- *Do we have the budget?* Creating programs costs money. You may wish to compensate a staff member for planning time, subsidize Shabbat meals, or sponsor a guest speaker. Charging participants a fee can cover some expenses, but

additional funds may be necessary. Collaborating with other congregations or organizations may help reduce costs and often produces stronger, higher-quality programs.

- *Can we maintain an online presence?* As "digital natives," young adults explore, engage, communicate, and do just about everything online. How can you effectively create and/or maintain a strong presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, GrapeVine, and others? These platforms can be used to publicize events and connect to your young-adult community between programs. **In order for your efforts to be successful, it is critical that you engage with young adults in the way in which they engage with the rest of the world.**
- *Who can facilitate this project?* **Congregations with a dedicated point person, lay or professional, often produce the most robust and successful programs.** The primary role this point person often plays is managing a team of young lay leaders who are tasked with determining the direction of your young-adult engagement efforts. This person can take the lead in ensuring that the critical elements necessary for developing and running successful programs are looked after, and that the various responsibilities for executing the program are divided between the point person themselves and a lay committee. The nuances of this arrangement are discussed below.

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#### 5. What leadership structure are we willing to support?

Millennials, roughly defined as those between the ages of 18 and 33,<sup>1</sup> are often referred to as "prosumers," a combination of producers and consumers who know what they are looking for and are capable and eager to create the experiences they desire. The majority of the successful programs

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1 Pew Research Center. 2014. *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center. [http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07\\_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf)

in UJA-Federation's community of practice were guided by a committee of volunteer leaders in their 20s and 30s, which operated largely independently from the board or other synagogue volunteer leadership groups. **Consider the extent to which you would be willing to share, or even relinquish, ownership over your young-adult engagement efforts to young adults themselves.**

Also, your volunteer leaders in their 20s and 30s will likely operate differently than the other volunteer leaders in your congregation. Young adults are less interested in serving on committees for extended periods of time, but are excited by short-term, task-oriented, time-bound roles that reflect their skills and fulfill their passions. Lay leaders can take on a variety of tasks including recruiting for events via social media, chairing specific programs, welcoming newcomers, coordinating program logistics, leading rituals, and collecting and processing feedback. They may wish to have one task for one program and a different one for another. Flexibility is important, but clarity on who's doing what will be critical in order for your efforts to be successful.

Empowering young adults to help create their own Jewish experiences not only ensures that you are meeting their needs and interests, but it's also a strategy for increasing participation. **Relationships are at the core of engagement work, and peer-to-peer relationships are perhaps the most powerful of all.** Young adults like to go where their friends are going. Members of your leadership committee will likely encourage their friends and contacts to get involved, and, chances are, many will show up. Leveraging the social networks of your lay leadership committee, both on and off-line, will be critical for building an engaged and connected community.

## Conclusion

The suggestions and best practices outlined above are intended to serve as a guide for your efforts, but are not the only blueprint for success. Just as no two congregations are exactly alike, no two young-adult programs can, or should, be identical. As the community of practice found, there are many opportunities and avenues for congregations to engage young adults, and determining what works best for your community will be an instructive and illuminating process.

Jewish journeys are comprised of a variety of transformative experiences, and while engaging with a synagogue might not be the *only* stop young adults make during their explorations, it can be an important and meaningful one.

## Questions at a Glance

1. What are our expectations?
2. What is our vision?
3. What does success look like and how will we measure it?
4. What is our congregation's capacity?
  - a. Can we focus human resources on a project that may not lead to increased membership?
  - b. Is our board "on board" with this initiative?
  - c. Do we have the budget?
  - d. Can we maintain an online presence?
  - e. Who can facilitate this project?
5. What leadership structure are we willing to support?

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"Synagogue Engagement: Building Bridges to Young Adults," was authored by Ariella Goldfein, senior planning executive in UJA-Federation's Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal (COJIR), and Ilana Sidorsky, a graduate intern in COJIR.



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