

MOVING TO THE LEADING EDGE: VOLUME 3

Engaging Congregants

A URJ Resource and Discussion Guide to Move Your Congregation Forward



Foreword

A lot of attention is paid these days to innovative start-ups in the Jewish world, and much of this attention is well-deserved. The energy and creativity being unleashed are both extraordinary and critical to the present and future of Jewish life in North America and, likely, worldwide. But too often, it is similarly assumed that because established institutions are, well, established, they are not innovating internally. Frankly, that's not the case.

At the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), we spend our days engaging with congregational leaders representing the 900 congregations of the URJ, and I can tell you that there is significant innovation happening in synagogues across North America. The conventional wisdom has shifted. No longer are congregations waiting for the conveyor belt to deliver them new members. They realize that existing solely to sustain their institutions is not a long-term prospect for growth or even for survival.

Instead, they now see that they must innovate, by transforming the way they create sacred community and meaningful Jewish experiences to have an impact on the participants and the world around them. More and more URJ congregations are experimenting, some of them on their own and some in partnership with other congregations. And it's happening in congregations of all sizes and demographic profiles, all over North America.

To achieve the innovation that needs to happen in congregations so they can continue to thrive, board members must be able to move beyond managing the day to day; they need to have generative conversations about the future of their congregation and increase the risks that they are willing to take. This is why we publish *Moving to the Leading Edge*. We want to give congregational board members leading-edge ideas to wrestle with and discussion guides to help them navigate the process.

This edition of *Moving to the Leading Edge* comes in three separate volumes:

- **Principles that Drive Strong Congregations**
- **Leadership and Governance**
- **Engaging Congregants**

In this volume, we have collected articles and discussion guides related to congregational engagement across the demographic spectrum. Many of the examples in this volume come from our work with congregations in URJ Communities of Practices and through URJ Youth initiatives. The articles in this resource have been written by URJ staff members, experts in the fields of leadership and congregational life, and leaders from URJ congregations who are doing innovative work.

We hope that these pieces will help you innovate and inspire sacred action at your congregation. After all, our ultimate goal of creating a world with wholeness, justice, and compassion can only be achieved with strong congregations.

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Special Thanks

The articles in *Moving to the Leading Edge* have been written by URJ staff members, experts in the fields of leadership and congregational life and congregational leaders who are doing innovative work. Bios for each of the writers can be found at the end of each article.

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Photos

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Congregational Engagement Strategies

Creating a Welcoming Culture in Your Congregation

by April Baskin and Carly Goldberg

Leaders at almost every synagogue would say their congregation strives to be a welcoming community. The challenge, of course, is how to put that into practice. Your congregation's clergy, leadership, values, and policies set the tone for practicing audacious hospitality. Member-to-member relationships, however, will ultimately determine the welcoming culture of a community.

Ideally, welcoming guests is a sacred obligation that should be embraced by every member of the community. The reality is that, for any

number of reasons, it takes real effort and intention to reach out to people whom we don't know, are new to our community, or appear different than us.

Here are a few practices you and your community can embrace in order to create a welcoming culture.

1. **Smile.** A friendly face can go a long way in helping everyone feel they can participate fully in congregational life. As Shammai, the Talmudic rabbi taught, "greet every person with a cheerful face" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:15).
2. **Widen your circle.** Greet everyone you pass or everyone who comes within a few feet of you. A simple "hello" or "*shabbat shalom*" will do the trick.
3. **Take five.** Spend the first five minutes after the conclusion of a program or service talking to people you don't already know, whether they be newcomers or longtime members with whom you've yet to connect. At times, informal schmoozing can be awkward for anyone who doesn't have a friend by their side—and this is especially true for newcomers to your community. The transition time between the end of a program or service and an informal coffee hour or *oneg* is when people are likely to dash for the door. Encourage people to stay and help them feel more comfortable by spending time talking with them.
4. **Mention names.** Not sure where to begin? Try a straightforward, "Hi, I'm... What's your name?" Repeat their name back to them to be sure you heard it correctly and to help it stick with you. If you're sure you've met this person before but you're not sure of their name, honesty is the best policy. Preface your introduction with, "I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name..." or "Tell me your name again..." If their name is difficult for you pronounce, admit it, apologize, and practice until you get it right.
5. **Greet thoughtfully.** Not sure if someone is new to the community or just new to you? Begin your introduction with, "I'm not sure if we've met before..." or ask, "Have we met before?" When you're introduced to someone, try, "Nice to see you" rather than "nice to meet you," just in case you've actually met before.
6. **Just listen.** Don't assume you know or can tell someone's gender identity, family make-up, Jewish identity, or religious, racial, or cultural background. Rather, take a curious stance, allowing time and space for people to share more about themselves on their own terms—when they want to, what they want to, and in the way they want to.
7. **Share something positive or neutral.** Not sure what to say next? Consider offering a small piece of relevant information about yourself and the congregation. For example, "I've been a member here for a long time. I love

our rabbi,” or, “I moved here about a year ago.” You can also try an innocuous statement like, “I love when the choir participates.” Share something positive or neutral. Please don’t bond over a shared complaint!

8. **Introduce.** Introduce the person with whom you are speaking to someone else you know, or offer to introduce them to lay leaders or your rabbi or cantor. You can ask, “Have you met our rabbi? Would you like me to introduce you?” And, yes, it’s OK if they decline your offer.
9. **End the conversation with a positive remark.** After you’ve had an initial conversation, give space to the person with whom you were talking by saying “nice to talk with you,” or something similar, as you leave.
10. **Follow up.** Next time you see this person, say hello. Refer back to one or two details of your initial conversation to remind them who you are. You can ask a warm and friendly question such as, “How is your child liking her new school?” or “How did you find Shabbat services last week?” Being remembered and seen goes a long way to building a culture of connection and belonging.

These ten practices are simple first steps to creating a welcoming and engaging culture in your congregation. These staples of audacious hospitality and others can be found in the [URJ Audacious Hospitality Pilot Toolkit](#).

Additional Resources:

- [The URJ’s Audacious Hospitality Pilot Toolkit](#)

Discussion Guide:

1. How do we want our visitors/members to feel when they first enter the synagogue or sanctuary?
2. In what ways—both verbally and non-verbally—do we convey a sense of welcome and belonging?
3. How do we prepare ourselves for doing the work of welcoming individuals and families into our congregation?
4. In what ways can we be inclusive to all, not assume a level of knowledge about Judaism, and differentiate needs?

April Baskin is the URJ’s vice president of Audacious Hospitality. **Carly Goldberg** is the URJ’s associate director of Audacious Hospitality.



Congregational Engagement Strategies

Closing the Gap Between Good Intentions and Bad Results

by Allison Fine

Nearly every synagogue faces enormous pressure to recruit and retain members. Yet, when Big Tent Judaism conducted its signature research project (the Environmental Community Outreach Scan) in northern Westchester County last year to test, among other things, how “warm and welcoming” synagogues were, an overwhelming number of synagogues failed to respond to emails and calls from prospective members. While there are nuances, the bottom line is that synagogues are not as responsive as they think they are.

These failures reflect the enormous gap between the good intentions of people running synagogues and the actual experiences of new or existing members. People have lots of choices about where and how to spend their time and money, and, increasingly, they reject institutions that use a secret language, make them feel anonymous and unimportant, talk at them rather than with them, and only seem to need them when their dues are late.

This behavior confounds the synagogue leaders who are working so hard to keep people engaged and informed. “We’re busy every day!” they say—answering calls, sending out letters and bills, getting kids ready for their *b’nai mitzvah*. Yet it is exactly this internal busy-ness, the fear of losing control and the obsession with efficiency, that pushes people farther away.

There is an alternative to this way of thinking and working that I call “matterness.”

Matterness means refocusing efforts to make sure people feel known, acknowledged, and powerful. It happens everywhere—online and on land, in the hallways, in boardrooms, and in living rooms.

Matterness means asking more than telling, putting aside the old management mantras that staff are supposed to have all of the answers and that working fast is the same as working smart.

Here are a few steps congregations can take to increase matterness and begin to close the gap between the values synagogues espouse and the experience of potential and existing members:

1. Check your default settings.

The culture of an institution reflects the values and assumptions of its leaders. If leaders are afraid to let go—if they assume that the answers are all inside and never outside—then the default settings, automatic responses, and processes become closed rather than open. The result is that synagogues become fortresses in which it is difficult for prospective members to know what goes on inside, much less get in to see for themselves. It is the reason so much time is spent in meetings discussing what could possibly go wrong—even if the likelihood of that happening is very small.

These defaults need to be questioned to figure out what is powering the to-do list. Questions can include:

- What are we doing to encourage or discourage new ideas and experiments?
- To whom do we talk regularly? If it’s the same people over and over again, how can we break this pattern?

- Do we create new programs behind closed doors rather than talk to our congregants about developing new ones together? Do we even *need* new programs, or could we just get together and socialize without agendas and curricula and speakers?

2. **Work with your people, not at them.**

Too often, annual programming becomes a cycle of doing the same thing as last year, with few changes. Time to wake up from business-as-usual! Figuring out what's going to happen next year shouldn't just happen behind closed doors, especially when there's a wealth of latent capital sitting untapped in your congregation.

Ask congregants for their reaction to programming ideas online *before* they're set in stone. You can even run a Sunday afternoon programming day where congregants can participate in developing programs that interest them and that they spearhead. Your congregants have skills, passions, creativity, and connections that will be unleashed only when you start co-creating programs *with* rather than *at*.

3. **Measure matterness.**

Synagogues often measure outputs: how many people show up to events, how many new members join, how much was donated to our annual fund. These are useful proxies for satisfaction, but they aren't enough.

Congregations need to know whether and how they are making people feel known, cared for, and empowered. The questions have to be asked explicitly: "How do we make you feel?" Do you feel like you are known and appreciated here? "When and how do we make you feel like an ATM?" And, of course, "How could we make you feel like you matter more to us?"

Synagogues are vitally important in communities, but before you create one more program or have one more staff meeting that focuses on what could possibly go wrong, stop and ask yourself this question: How would working this way make you feel if you were on the outside looking in?

Additional Resources and Discussion Guide:

- [*The 2015–16 Scholar Series on Leadership*—URJ resource and discussion guide](#)

Allison Fine is an award-winning author and a URJ faculty member. Her books include *Matterness: Fearless Leadership for a Social World*, *Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age*, and *The Networked Nonprofit*.



Congregational Engagement Strategies

How Your Congregation Can Transform Life for Its Members

by Rabbi Esther Lederman

In 2013, four visionary congregations—[Central Synagogue](#) in New York, NY, [Temple Emanu-El](#) in Dallas, TX, [The Temple](#) in Atlanta, GA, and [Congregation Emanu-El](#) in San Francisco, CA—began to work together, in partnership with the Union for Reform Judaism, on a new strategy and vision for congregational life. That vision centers around “small groups,” a concept adapted for our purposes from the world of mega-churches.

Leaders at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas articulated the vision this way: “Imagine hundreds of temple members gathering regularly in small groups to learn and laugh, to rest and rejuvenate, and to deepen connections to one another, to the congregation, to the Jewish people, and to the rhythms of Jewish time and life.”

What exactly are small groups—and how do they help us reimagine congregational life?

Small groups (fewer than 15 people) focus on the lives and significant concerns of a congregation’s members. Organized around topics of shared interest, similar life stages, and neighboring geographies, small groups feature shared Jewish experiences, learning, and celebration, and are guided by lay leaders. The groups meet regularly, and shared accountability among members is high.

In some ways, small groups are an incarnation of *chavurot* (friends, literally, who gather for Jewish worship, learning, and lifecycle events), but they have two distinct differences:

1. **Small groups are meant for every member in the congregation.** In many congregations in which *chavurot* have developed, they are seen as something in which only a small sub-section of the congregation will engage. The vision for small groups is much larger. As Rabbi Peter Berg from The Temple aptly said, “I want every person in this congregation to be part of a small group.”
2. **Small groups are a philosophy, not a program.** They are not meant to be another “program” the congregation adopts, but rather are designed to reshape the way we think about everything we do in the synagogue world. Congregations successfully using this model are rethinking their membership engagement strategies with an eye toward making all areas of synagogue life—from Torah study to scholar-in-residence initiatives and from worship to social action—more relational. As one leader explained, “We are trying to move synagogue membership from a business transaction to an emotional investment.”

These stories exemplify how small groups can transform congregational life.

1. **Small groups create paths to congregational leadership and engagement.** According to Rabbi Lydia Medwin, traditionally there were three ways to becoming a leader within The Temple: become the rabbi, join the board, or chair a committee. Thanks to small groups, there are now 48 different ways to lead, and there will be more as the number of small groups grows.
2. **Small groups enrich relationships among congregants.** When Temple Emanu-El’s community garden members participated in an early pilot of a small group, a longtime congregant had this reaction: “I thought I knew these people. I had been gardening next to them for years. It turns out I knew nothing about them. Today, I feel much closer to them; we have supported each other through periods of mourning with meals

made from the garden's produce, shared hilarious moments of camaraderie, and developed meaningful spiritual practices.”

3. **Belonging to a small group becomes the most meaningful aspect about synagogue membership.** At Central Synagogue, a member of the 20-somethings small group, whose members typically are in a transient stage of life, spoke volumes about the work of small groups when she said, “I’m going to miss New York City and the great things about this place. But the hardest thing is leaving my small group.”

Using a collaborative model similar to the one the first innovating congregations used to develop their small groups, including the curricula and training that helped make the groups successful, in 2016 we began working with 19 additional congregations of various sizes across North America in a [URJ Community of Practice on Engaging Congregants through Small Groups with Meaning](#). Not only is this work generating tremendous energy, but also transforming congregations into the focal point of meaning and relationships in people’s lives. It is making the impossible seem realistic for all. Indeed, I am energized when I think about what congregations may look like with a small group mindset at their core.

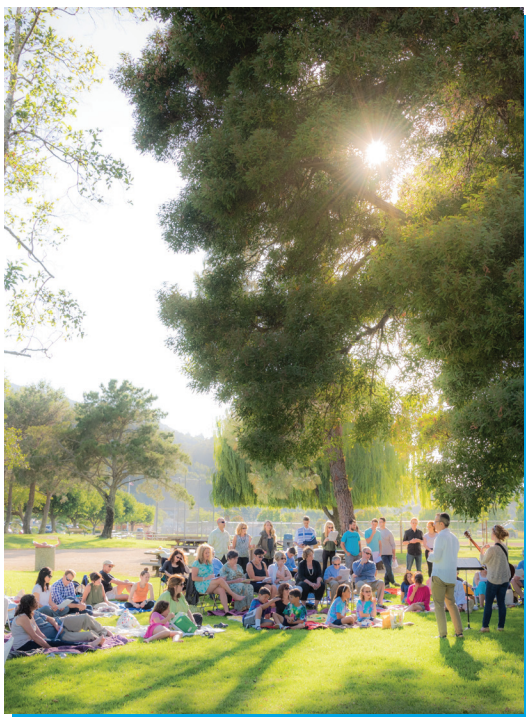
Additional Resources:

1. [Temple Connect Leaders Packet](#)—A resource packet courtesy of The Temple, Atlanta, GA
2. [Temple Connect Pocket Guide for Leaders](#)—A resource packet courtesy of The Temple, Atlanta, GA
3. [Sh'ma Emanu-El](#)—An online introduction to small groups by Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, TX
4. [Front Porch](#)—An online introduction to small groups by Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco, CA

Discussion Guide:

1. Think of a time in your own life when being part of a small group (at work, at camp, at school, in synagogue) had an impact on you:
 - a. What was the impact?
 - b. Why was being part of the small group successful?
 - c. What were some of the characteristics of the group that gave it its impact?
2. Is there an example of a small group in your congregation that is deepening connections between members, to the community, and to Jewish wisdom and tradition?
 - a. What makes it successful?
 - b. How could you replicate the impact of this group to other areas of synagogue life?
3. Imagine hundreds of your congregants in small groups. What is the story your congregants would tell about the meaning and impact those groups are having on them, their community, and their connection to Jewish wisdom and teaching?
4. Each of these groups started small—with a particular population. With whom would you start a small group experiment?
5. *For small congregations in particular:* What resources might you want or need in order to be able to consider starting small groups in your congregation?

Rabbi Esther Lederman is the URJ’s director of Congregational Innovation.



Congregational Engagement Strategies

Engagement Strategies for the Unique Challenges of Small Congregations

by Merry Lugasy

What makes engagement in small congregations different from engagement in larger congregations?

The most obvious answers are lack of income, a smaller volunteer pool, and few—if any—paid staff. While every congregation, regardless of size, could use those same excuses to explain their challenges, the scarcity of these resources is amplified in small congregations, and results in unique problems.

Here are four challenges that leaders from small congregations face—and how you can deal with these issues to increase engagement.

1. Energize burned-out leaders by redefining your congregation's purpose.

Small congregations tend to have a limited pool of possible leaders from which to draw. As a result, these individuals are constantly called upon or repeatedly feel the pressure to volunteer. The result is a high rate of burn-out.

One of the best ways to rejuvenate burned-out leadership is to spend time discovering your congregation's true mission, which [meaningfully explains why your congregation exists](#). While small congregations are often the only Jewish community in the area, “existing for the sake of existing” is not enough to guarantee membership attraction or retention. When you begin to discuss your beliefs, goals, and what makes you special—instead of how you're going to fix the roof, pay for the grape juice, and vacuum the sanctuary—you introduce a refreshing level of energy, and your congregation can begin to communicate its purpose to the larger community in a livelier way.

Involving all leaders in the process of articulating your congregational mission is important, and not only to get buy-in. In a congregation of any size, but especially in a small congregation, leaders play the role of ambassadors. Relying solely on your current congregational board to understand and communicate your mission and purpose isn't practical, because your small pool of leaders will cycle through various positions of leadership and will ultimately all be responsible for instilling a deeper belief in what your congregation stands for.

2. Prioritize and focus on what your members can bring to the table.

With a limited core of active members, it's easy to look at what your small congregation needs to function and feel like your resources aren't sufficient. Focusing on what you *do* have by [shifting from a mindset of scarcity to a mindset of abundance](#) will alleviate some of this stress.

Start by inviting your leaders and active members to create a wishlist of ways to engage existing and prospective members. It might include ideas such as:

- Enhancing your online presence
- Hosting a neighborhood open house

- Holding a “Meet the Rabbi” event at a local café
- Offering a Shabbat dinner at temple, in homes, or in the local park
- Hosting a cholent-off
- Holding a special music service, children’s service, or teen service
- Taking on a community-wide social action project

Inviting active members to form this list will help uncover their passions and creative engagement ideas. You can then start with the ideas your members are both excited about and can volunteer to lead. For example, a small congregation might not think it has the staff to maintain a social media presence—but a tech-savvy teen or other lay leader could make your online presence a priority by taking charge of this important engagement tool.

3. Rethink how you welcome new members.

Due to their small number of tight-knit members, small congregations can sometimes appear cliquy or unfriendly. It’s stressful to walk into *any* congregation without knowing someone, but when there are only 10 or 20 people in a room, being new is even harder. This may make it difficult for new members to integrate into your congregation.

The practice of [audacious hospitality](#) is paramount to engaging potential members, but you have to be careful about coming on too strongly. Being surrounded by 20 people can be just as off-putting as being ignored by 20 people! By creating a thoughtful plan for greeting guests, you can be both hospitable and engaging.

4. Find power in networking.

Small congregations in remote areas may not be experiencing growth. In addition to the general feeling of isolation that comes with living outside of Jewishly dense metropolitan areas, watching the numbers decline can cause a doomsday mentality.

A shift of mindset to the positive—being proud of and invested in your community—is essential to building a more vibrant and welcoming community. [The Tent](#), the URJ’s online communication and collaboration platform, offers the opportunity to interact with leaders from other small congregations experiencing challenges similar to yours. Networking and exchanging ideas will help you gain a brighter perspective and know that you’re not alone.

The Tent isn’t the only powerful networking tool available to isolated and remote communities. Each URJ member congregation also belongs to one of 35 [URJ Communities](#), connecting leaders from similar geographic areas to discuss best principles, share resources, and create a network of support. URJ Community events and other URJ programs are a great way to feel the power of belonging to the Reform Movement—and [URJ Small Congregation Grants](#) can provide financial assistance to get you there.

Engagement in small congregations isn’t just about attracting new members. It begins with looking inward to understand what is unique about your community, and what talents your members bring to the table.

Additional Resources:

1. “Want Your Congregation to Be Relevant and Effective? Start with Why,” by Amy Asin, *eJewish Philanthropy*
2. [Uncovering Abundance: A New Strategy for Youth Engagement](#), by Miriam Chilton and Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE

3. [“Creating a Welcoming Culture in Your Congregation,”](#) by April Baskin and Carly Goldberg
4. [“Becoming a Values-Based Leader,”](#) by Harry Kraemer, *Inside Leadership*
5. The [Small Congregations discussion group](#) in The Tent

Discussion Guide:

1. What is your “Why?”
 - a. Why does this congregation exist?
 - b. Why are you a member? A leader?
 - c. Why do you give your time, energy, and money to your congregation?
2. Why is it necessary to articulate your why?
3. What are the unique gifts and talents that your members can bring to the table? How can your congregation be strengthened by these gifts? If you can’t name these gifts, make it a priority to talk with your members and find out what unique talents they possess.
4. Imagine that you are now joining a group of people who have known each other for a long time. How would you like to be greeted and introduced to the members of this group? What new approaches can your congregation take to welcome those who are new to your community? Read the article, [“Creating a Welcoming Culture in Your Congregation,”](#) by April Baskin and Carly Goldberg for tips.
5. How can you look outside of your walls to network and build relationships with others?



Engaging Families with Young Children

4 Ideas for Engaging Families with Young Children in Jewish Life

by Cathy Rolland, RJE

Every new parent understands the pressure and stress associated with finding the best ways to create a rich and fulfilling future for their children. Faced with societal expectations, money constraints, and more programmatic opportunities than ever for their young ones, Jewish life may not always make it to the top of the priority list.

As a part of the Union for Reform Judaism's [Communities of Practice](#) work, we're partnering with congregations (both those with and

without preschools) to further and more effectively engage families with young children in congregational life.

The full results of this work can be found in a URJ resource, [Engaging Families with Young Children](#). Here's a look at some of the best principles:

1. Engagement is a congregation-wide activity, not an isolated program or department.

Engagement must be a true value of the entire congregation, including those in leadership positions. To sustain any effort to build a community of parents with young children, congregational leadership needs to fully support these efforts, ensuring that holidays, programs, and services focus on the idea of family.

At [Temple Emanu-El](#) in Utica, NY, leaders initiated a number of changes that combined to have a large impact on parents. They installed a changing table in the restroom, created a musical family service and dinner once a month before congregational services, began holding family *Havdalah* events and playgroups, and reconfigured the youth committee to include parents of kids up to age 18. They're also involved in the community PJ Library® program operated by the local JCC. The rabbi, herself a young mother, has developed relationships with the other parents in the community, and parents have come to share responsibility for congregational programming. In two years, participation rates have more than doubled. Just as parents make their homes “kid-safe” before bringing children into the world, so must congregations create spaces for families that foster the understanding that they're supported by an entire community.

2. Focus on engagement, not enrollment.

Community isn't measured by how many people attend a program but by the quality and depth of the relationships between people in attendance. Your congregation can host 100 great programs a year, but if no meaningful relationships exist between the congregation and its community members, nobody benefits from great programming. [Temple Beth El](#) in Charlotte, NC, [has taken engagement to a new level](#) by building The Porch, a community of young adults and parents, whose name symbolizes the hospitality and neighborliness of the South. The Porch offers a variety of weekly and monthly activities, including some for adults/parents only, some for parents to enjoy with their children, and others for the whole community together. Parents appreciate the opportunity to engage with a community of peers, and regular participants now take responsibility for planning a weekly Torah study group that meets at Whole Foods®. When congregations form relationships with families with young children, they create a community for today *and* for the future.

3. Do your research to figure out what young families need.

Rather than focusing on what families with young children can contribute to the synagogue, synagogues need to see themselves as having something to offer those starting their parenting journey. Synagogues must be intentional in their efforts to meet parents' needs, and that begins with knowing what those needs are. The last 10 years have yielded a wealth of national research into families of Jewish children, and it's equally important to know about local trends. What venues or activities are popular for these families in your community? Where do people go for information about local community life? Which organizations currently serve this cohort well? Lisa Farber Miller of the [Rose Community Foundation](#) in Denver, CO says, "Providing services for parents with young Jewish children presents a rare opportunity for synagogues to be relevant to young families who are looking for places to spend their child-related dollars." Synagogues can provide inspirational Jewish experiences that engage families in meaningful ways from an early age—if they truly see it as their congregational mission.

4. Experiment and reflect—then do it all over again!

Congregations that have made significant strides in engaging families with young children are those that have created a culture of experimentation and reflection, where risk-taking is both supported and encouraged. The early childhood education director at [Temple Sinai](#) in Summit, NJ, wanted to do something new to engage families with young children: a Pajama Tot Shabbat. The congregation involved all of their stakeholders in the decision process, from teachers and early childhood families to clergy and lay leaders, and though some initially expressed concern that pajamas in the sanctuary would show a lack of proper decorum, Pajama Tot Shabbat was a great success, representative of collaborative preparation. During the reflective conversation afterwards, the rabbi encouraged the director to schedule more such events—and even offered to wear his own pajamas! The whole community discovered the importance of staying true to the synagogue's mission while providing families with high-quality, innovative experiences and accessible, relevant Jewish content.

Additional Resources and Discussion Guide:

- [Engaging Families with Young Children—URJ resource](#)

Cathy Rolland, RJE, is the URJ's director of Engaging Families with Young Children.



Engaging Families with Young Children

Congregational Perspective

Why We Closed Our Synagogue's Preschool and Started Over from Scratch

by Rachel Stein

As a former preschool teacher and director, I was enjoying my role as a parent and lay leader on the “other side” in our preschool at [North Shore Congregation Israel](#) in Glencoe, IL. As my two boys happily made their way through our small preschool, I chaired the parent committee and volunteered on our early childhood task force,

which explored ways to expand the school and reach target families, many of whom were sending children to other area programs.

In the midst of this work, we were invited to join the URJ's Pursuing Excellence Through Your Early Childhood Center, [Community of Practice](#), and we headed off to the kick-off retreat, where we met other professional and lay leaders working through their own programmatic challenges and successes. As we contemplated the next steps for our preschool, a few points resonated with us:

- Get families in the door before their child turns two years old.
- Meet families where they are.
- Sometimes it's best to dive in and take a risk. Don't overthink it, just do it!

Following the retreat, we spent one more year attempting to keep our diminishing program afloat before we decided to close the school and find other ways to engage families with young children. As difficult as this decision was, it opened doors to new, innovative, and exciting programming.

Working with our director of education, we applied for and received a mini-grant from Chicago's [Jewish United Fund](#) (JUF) that enabled us to offer a free, drop-in program for children up to two years old—and their caregivers—at a local bookstore one Friday a month for four months. Our main goal was to create an opportunity for parents of young children to connect with one another, which we believe is at least as important as (if not more important than) connecting with the congregation.

We advertised this new offering rigorously on social media, in ads in local newspapers, and on websites geared to families with young children—and then, on that first Friday, I waited in the bookstore with Susan, our newly-hired program coordinator, and wondered whether or not anyone would show up. Twelve participants showed up to that first event, and by the fourth class, we had 25 toddlers. We'd outgrown our space in the bookstore!

Each session focused on an upcoming holiday or Shabbat, and included age-appropriate songs, sensory activities, art, stories, and more. Rabbi Lisa Greene, playing her guitar, sang with the kids before they headed home, each clutching a children's book related to the holiday that had been highlighted in the session. Holding the class beyond the walls of the synagogue helped us meet people where they were, and attracted non-members who, unfamiliar with the building, might have been intimidated about attending an event there.

An online survey told us that, after having made social connections with other participants, as well as with Susan and me, the class's adult participants were interested in additional sessions, even if the program were to be held within the synagogue walls. We've now been running this free program for more than a year, mostly at the synagogue, and we still pack the house each month, both with "regulars," who greet one another with hugs, and with drop-ins, who come when they can and often bring friends. Perhaps most telling is the chatting among the parents, who talk about going out to lunch together after the class and ask if they will see one another at our tot High Holiday services and other synagogue programs.

In fact, building on the momentum created by this class and its participants, Susan has created a series of other free-of-charge classes for this cohort, including an art class for two- and three-year-olds and a Sunday morning movement class for dads and tots, which is also funded by a JUF grant. We initially thought our need to charge for the art class—to cover the cost of the materials—might be a barrier, but we were pleased to learn that through our other high-quality program offerings, we had established trustworthy relationships with participants, who were happy to pay and keep attending!

In summer 2015, we hosted two family programs: a Friday night Shabbat picnic followed by a movie screening on the lawn and a Sunday afternoon event at a local pool. Thanks to that first bookstore event, many families who never would have walked through our doors now have real roots in our synagogue. Indeed, the connections and relationships keep growing—from synagogue to family, from family to Jewish learning, and from family to family.

What more could we ask for?

Rachel Stein, who holds a master's degree in child development, serves on the youth and family community committee at [North Shore Congregation Israel](#) in Glencoe, IL.



Engaging Families with Young Children

Congregational Perspective

How Tots Helped Our Small Congregation Grow

by Harriet Skelly

In 2013, [Congregation Shir Ami](#) in Castro Valley, CA, was at its lowest membership in 15 years. Several years earlier, we had implemented a new, low-cost dues structure in the hopes that it would help increase the membership. At about the same time, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, visited the Bay Area and spoke with local congregational presidents about audacious hospitality, relational

Judaism, and “going outside the walls.” I was intrigued by his language, but still didn’t really get it. I was just stuck on how to find unaffiliated Jews in our area to bring into our congregation.

A few months after the meeting with Rabbi Jacobs, I was manning Shir Ami’s booth at the Castro Valley Pride Festival when an interfaith lesbian couple with a nine-month old son approached me. As we chatted, I learned that they were looking for a place to bring their son to learn about being Jewish—but sadly, I had to tell them we didn’t have programs for children under age five.

I encouraged them to come check us out anyway and gave them our schedule of activities, but right there and then—as they walked away from the booth—I decided that our congregation had to create something for families like theirs.

That encounter led me to understand that, as an aging community with very few students in our religious and Hebrew school, our congregation needed to attract families with young children. In September 2013, I learned that the URJ was forming [Communities of Practice](#) (CoP), bringing together members of various congregations for 18-24 months of guided learning around congregational change on a topic of shared interest. Shir Ami was accepted into the CoP that focused on engaging families with young children. At the time, we had 49 member families with nine school-aged children, and we wanted to learn how to attract unaffiliated and diverse families with young children.

After meeting that young family at the Pride Festival, I’d been tossing around the idea of offering a free, monthly program for children under five and their parents or guardians. In addition to being fun and educational, it would provide a peer group for families with young children and—perhaps most significantly—get them in our doors. I invited one of the membership co-chairs to join me in this experiment, and after attending the CoP kickoff in Chicago, she presented what she’d learned to Shir Ami’s board of directors.

Although the board was hesitant to offer anything for free—that was *really* thinking outside the box!—they gave us their blessing to implement the program I’d envisioned. For starters, we asked a few members who are parents of young children to brainstorm with us. As a result of those sessions, Tot Talk was born.

Held once a month, Tot Talk is scheduled for a Sunday when religious school is in session and a rabbinic intern is present (we don’t have full-time clergy at Shir Ami). The one-hour session starts at 11:30 a.m., the time the school breaks for *oneg*, which lets the tots interact with the big kids, and lets their parents check out the environment and mingle with one another before the session officially starts at about 11:45 a.m. Parents and guardians are required

to participate with their children in the session, which usually includes a welcoming song, a read-aloud story tied to the theme of the day, and a hands-on project—usually making something edible. At the end of the session, every family leaves with their project and a handout that includes information about the session’s topic and links to related topics (we get a lot of our ideas from ReformJudaism.org).

The first family to attend Tot Talk in January 2014 was the interfaith family I’d met a few months earlier at the Pride Festival. Since then, tot participants have ranged in age from nine-months to four years in any given session, and six of the participating families have joined our congregation. This effort has boosted our membership to 65 households, with 17 students (excluding the Tot Talk children) enrolled in our religious school.

I attribute some of this growth to the Tot Talk program itself. The rest I attribute to the CoP, which is where we learned to market the congregation (using the URJ’s free marketing materials), advertise our programs on our website’s home page, and go “outside the walls” to meet people where they are. Although we know that potential congregants are not just going to show up on our doorstep, when they do, we’ll greet them with audacious hospitality!

Harriet Skelly is president of Congregation Shir Ami in Castro Valley, CA.



Engaging Youth

9 Principles to Help You Engage Jewish Youth

by Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE, and Miriam Chilton

In 1924, educator Joseph L. Baron shared with the Chicago Rabbinical Association his plans for creating “clubs” to engage youth in Reform Jewish life and supplement the existing education-focused programs:

“Jewish youth...want adventure, want romance, want the heroic... To enthuse the young with the idea of helping in the creation of a new people, to invest them with immediate duties toward that end, to show them where Judaism is not academic but vital and urgent and immediate, that is a means of arousing souls and installing new fervor in dry bones... And perhaps because of this, [these clubs] will strive with force into the sensitive heart and thirsty souls of our youth.”

Our journey to engage young people in compelling Jewish life is not new. As Dr. Gary Zola notes in the American Jewish Archives Journal article, [“The Founding of NFTY and the Perennial Campaign for Youth Engagement,”](#) since the establishment of liberal Judaism there has been “a persistent concern that the American synagogue might become irrelevant to the rising generation of Jewish youth.” And yet, it is this very concern that keeps Judaism relevant, urging us to continue reimagining it.

In 2011, the Union for Reform Judaism launched the [Campaign for Youth Engagement](#), designed to inspire more young Jews to embrace Jewish life as a path to meaning, purpose, and joy. The campaign’s nine guiding principles were developed by professionals in numerous congregations—[Congregation Beth Or](#), Maple Glen, PA, [Congregation Beth Israel](#), West Hartford, CT, and [Temple Emanuel](#), Greensboro, NC, among others—in our collaborative work with them. We share them with congregations and use them to inform our own ongoing efforts to develop new camps and year-round programming.

1. **Talk to kids before they become teenagers.** It is much easier to engage teens who already have had positive Jewish learning experiences. Building relationships prior to *b’nai mitzvah* can be the key to continuing them. Reinvent religious school curriculum, create social opportunities, or engage families together. Consider having an “aspirational arc,” where younger teens can see what older teens are doing, as is the case with campers who look forward to being camp counselors someday.
2. **Cultivate a safe environment.** Programs are not enough. Successful organizations focus on relationships and creating a space for teens to explore identity, make friends, and feel valued as individuals.
3. **Make it age-appropriate.** We often lump 9th to 12th graders together, but they are in different places both psychologically and emotionally. Keep these differences in mind when building programming strategies.
4. **It takes a team.** Yes, it’s vital to have a committed, charismatic rabbi who can relate to youth, but a successful strategy depends on more than one person. More adults in youth engagement, including professionals, lay leaders, camp staff, college students, and parents, means more youth participants.
5. **Listen to your teens.** Too often we discount what teens themselves ask for, but many organizations are exploring new avenues for inviting them to be co-creators. Bringing audacious hospitality to their level not only means welcoming them, but also allowing them to mold the experience to fit their needs.

6. **Offer varied options.** We need to recognize that one size does not fit all. Broaden your programmatic menus to include deep engagement opportunities, such as confirmation classes and years at camp, and lighter opportunities, such as social outings and afternoon activities. Some offerings will attract a wide audience; others will appeal to smaller groups.
7. **Consider partnerships.** Offering many engagement options can be daunting. Collaboration (and reimagining “competitors” as allies) can allow us to do more—in smart and financially sustainable ways. Alternately, simply recognizing the myriad offerings available can help expand your options. Congregations are experimenting by being connectors, helping teens find the right program, and then helping them reflect on what they learned.
8. **Engage parents.** Even as teens try to differentiate themselves from their parents, they also continue to be influenced by them. In a recent study, [Generation Now: Understanding and Engaging Jewish Teens Today](#), the majority of teens spoke about their families’ positive influence in enabling them to make life choices, including those related to being Jewish. Such studies highlight the importance of engaging and supporting teens—early and frequently.
9. **Keep content relevant and “real.”** We must ensure our offerings meet young people where they are and fulfill their need to help make the world a better place—one of our core values as Reform Jews. Our teens are seeking leadership opportunities that will be relevant in other aspects of their lives. Some congregations connect teens to roles as *madrichim* (classroom assistants), *b’nai mitzvah* and confirmation tutoring opportunities, youth group mentorships, and leadership positions in summer programs.

Additional Resources:

1. “[Uncovering Abundance: A New Strategy for Youth Engagement](#),” by Miriam Chilton and Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE
2. “[Finding Youth Engagement Under the Table](#),” by Rabbi Dena Shaffer
3. “[The Founding of NFTY and the Perennial Campaign for Youth Engagement](#),” *The American Jewish Archives Journal* LXVI, no. 1:59-82.

Discussion Guide:

Consider using this piece in your next board meeting with the following activity:

1. Think of a time in your life (ideally as a child or teen) when you were part of a moment or experience that was adventurous, romantic, and heroic, which showed “Judaism as not academic but vital, urgent, and immediate.” A moment that “aroused your soul.”
 - Where were you and what happened?
 - What made the experience so powerful?
2. Reflect on the experiences that your group shared in relation to this article.
 - Do any of the stories illustrate one of the principles in this article? Which ones, and how?
 - Which of these principles do you find most compelling?
 - Which of these principles do you find most challenging?
 - How do these principles add to your understanding of how to engage youth?

3. Read together Rabbi Dena Shaffer's article, found in the additional resources section. As you read it, consider:
 - What is compelling about this model of youth engagement?
 - What is challenging about this model of youth engagement?
 - Which of the nine principles are at play in this model?
4. Think about the programs your congregation offers to engage youth.
 - Which of the nine principles are already at play in your programs?
 - Which principles are not at play, but are compelling to you?
 - What would be some opportunities to use these additional principles in your work? What would it look like to use these additional principles in each of these opportunities?

Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE, is the URJ's director of Learning and Innovation for Youth, as well as a consultant for the [Foundation for Jewish Camp](#).

Miriam Chilton is the URJ's vice president of Youth.



Engaging Youth

Congregational Perspective

Finding Youth Engagement Under the Table

by Rabbi Dena Shaffer

There's an old Chasidic story about a prince who is convinced that he is a rooster, and therefore takes off all his clothes and refuses to eat unless he may do so from underneath the king's table. After inviting many experts in child rearing (whose advice fails to make an impression on the prince), the king finally calls upon the local rabbi. Much to everyone's surprise, the rabbi too crawls under the table and eats a meal there with the prince. After some time he says to the prince, "Hey, did you know that roosters can wear clothes if they want?"

"Oh good," replies the prince and pulls his sweater over his head, "I was getting cold under here." After a few more minutes the rabbi continues, "Did you know that roosters, too, can eat at the table if they want?"

"Oh good," replies the prince, crawling out and climbing into a chair. "My back was starting to hurt sitting under there." And thus the rabbi succeeds in bringing the prince back to the king's table.

The story is an allegory, and one that has profound implications for those of us who work with teens. It hits upon the lesson we have been learning and repeating for years. As a Jewish professional, the rabbi knows that he may never convince the prince that he is not a rooster, but he also understands that this is not his job. Instead, his job is to crawl under the table and simply be with the prince wherever he happens to be.

This idea of "meeting them where they are" is one that drives us in youth engagement, and has become our mantra in recent years. We know that when we do this, we are successful, even when it is difficult and accompanied by a sense of sacrifice and loss. When we don't, we are typically less successful. We are left wondering why, though we lead the proverbial horse to water time and time again, he never takes a drink. We talk about this adaptability in youth leadership all the time, but it is so much harder to follow in action. I suspect there are a few reasons for this gap from theory to practice.

First, we get stuck in the rut of trying to replicate what worked for us when we were young. We know that those methods are tried and true; clearly they were powerful strategies of engagement, or else we wouldn't be doing the work we are doing today. And yet, we forget that a teenager's world today is vastly different than our own was. Even aspects that remain unchanged, such as the value of youth group programming, have to be re-interpreted for this new generation.

Secondly, we get caught between competing values in our profession. The first: Act like that rabbi in the story who is unafraid to go out on a limb and try something completely crazy in order to prove the relevancy of Judaism to our youth. And the second: Protect and safeguard the authenticity and sanctity of Jewish life. This conflict often makes it easy to talk about revolutionary change but much, much harder to implement it.

The youth culture in my community—[Congregation Beth Israel](#) in West Hartford, CT—found itself in the midst of these competing values. We had watched as our traditional youth group, West Hartford Temple Youth, dwindled to a mere fraction of what it once was. Our participation in regional events had, over time, become nearly non-existent, and our young leadership was nowhere to be found. By May of 2014, we were at a point of no return. Only one teen, a rising high school senior, expressed an interest in "running" for a position on what was an effectively defunct youth group board.

So what were we to do? As you might imagine, in the months leading up to this demise, my youth programmer and I spent many hours rehashing what went wrong and what we could have done better. These conversations were largely unproductive. There was a feeling of “what was done was done.” We then spent time with that rising senior, teaching him about engagement and strategic conversations, role-playing with him so he could replicate these experiences with his friends and try to subtly prompt them into becoming active members of the youth group. But it was to no avail—he simply, as teenagers often do, did not follow through.

We were at an impasse, and plagued with the challenge that our youth group would not look like it was “supposed to.” In my mind, we had two choices: fold up the entire operation, shift our efforts to our 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, and hope that in a few years we would create the culture we envisioned (and hope, also, that suddenly the secular high school experience in our community would be different). Or we could run our youth group ourselves with no student board, using a model traditionally reserved for much younger cohorts, and thus disenfranchising the population we were hired to empower.

But perhaps there was a third option. Instead of following either of these paths, we did something that was, for us, revolutionary. We listened to the kids themselves. Over a few weeks, we had dozens of impromptu, completely informal conversations with teens. These were not forums. They were not organized by the synagogue. They were off-the-cuff dialogues that took place in hallways, in the car, over the phone, and through texting.

We simply asked kids, with no judgment, “Where are you?” We asked them questions like, “How come we never see you? Do you know that this programming is going on? Why don’t you ever want to come?” And what we got were honest answers that confirmed none of our worst fears. It wasn’t that teens thought youth group was lame or that they weren’t receiving communication about it. Instead, their answers clustered around one central theme: college.

What our students cared about more than anything else was getting into a good college. They were thoughtful and careful about their activity choices with this end in mind. They weren’t stepping up as leaders in WHTY programming because they did not see it as serving this goal. We were not meeting them where they were; we had failed to get under the table! We knew how youth group was “supposed” to be run, so instead of listening we were trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.

So, we abandoned the sacred structure. We no longer have programming vice presidents or membership vice presidents. We painstakingly threw all of that away in an effort to get under the table. In 2015, for the first time, three incredible youth engagement interns ran our youth group. They spent the year building their resumes and learning skills that will benefit them in the college and professional worlds. We paid them a stipend, they were supervised rather than advised, and they built partnerships with both professional staff and key lay leaders in our community. Our interns have portfolios, not positions; an office, not a lounge.

We cut the programming calendar down to just three events, which they planned and executed for their peers. The rest of the time they managed projects in the fields of development, member relations, and communications—projects that have an impact on the entire congregational landscape, not just their own WHTY corner of the map. We know that it may be harder for them to relate to their peers in NFTY-North East (regional events are now “professional development opportunities,” by the way), and only time will tell whether this change will be as successful as it predicts to be. But for now, the view from under the table looks pretty good!

Rabbi Dena Shaffer is the associate rabbi at [Congregation Beth Israel](#) in West Hartford, CT.



Engaging Youth

Uncovering Abundance:

A New Strategy for Youth Engagement

by Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE, and Miriam Chilton

Is the glass half full or half empty? Often in Jewish youth engagement and education work we begin with a “scarcity mindset.” We ask ourselves, “Why aren’t participants coming to our programs?” or “Why do they drop out?” It’s an understandable mindset. After all, when you’re at an event where you would expected to see double the number of participants, it’s easy to wonder, “Where *is* everyone?”

In our work with congregations, the URJ has begun to identify simple strategies for shifting our thinking to uncover the hidden successes of Jewish youth engagement and education.

Social scientists and business leaders alike encourage us to fight the focus on scarcity and, instead begin with an “abundance mindset.” An abundance mindset asks us to look for those areas that are working—those that impact the lives of our youth and invite them to embrace Jewish life as a path to meaning, purpose, and joy. In this approach, we uncover overlooked successes to understand their root cause and learn how to amplify their impact and replicate their strategies.

The abundance mindset begins with the assumption that there *is* abundance in our systems; that there are meaningful and impactful experiences occurring, and we just need to find them. Once uncovered, these successes can open up new ways of approaching youth engagement work. By showing us possibilities we didn’t know existed, these successes help us break out of old models.

Though abundance can be found anywhere in our organizations, here are three areas its likely to hide in Jewish engagement and education work:

1. **Relationships:** Is there an amazing teacher to whom your students flock? Are there people in your community (think *b’nai mitzvah* tutors or active seniors) who forge meaningful relationships with your teens? Relationships are essential to helping people feel connected to our communities; sometimes they develop right under our noses, and we don’t even know they are there.
2. **Memorable Moments:** We know that standing on the bimah, becoming bat mitzvah, or celebrating with the confirmation class are memorable moments, but are there other moments, perhaps smaller in size but equally impactful, that you are missing? A classroom teacher who created a special ritual for kids coming home from camp? A bonding moment during singing a specific song at Shabbat services? By uncovering these moments, we can learn how to bring people into our community and find opportunities for holiness in our work.
3. **Isolated Programming:** Do you have dozens of teens who are *madrichim* (religious school aides)? Are teens going to one another’s homes to enjoy Shabbat dinner together? Sometimes we are so busy looking at the forest that we miss the trees.

How do you find this abundance? Start digging! Interview your teens about their memorable moments, the people who inspire them, and what they enjoy doing. Interview their parents to understand what they see at home and what matters to them. Take a deep look at your attendance at classes, activities, and programs, and look for your high points.

These steps can often reveal hidden trends. As Kathy Schwartz, director of lifelong learning at [Congregation Har HaShem](#) in Boulder, CO, wrote:

“I interviewed 14-year-old post-b’nai mitzvah students and asked them about the most powerful part of becoming b’nai mitzvah. Something quite remarkable emerged to which, until those conversations, our congregation had only given passing attention. Our teens spoke of the impact of their relationship with their tutor, which they said influenced how they felt about themselves and about Judaism. Through these conversations, we learned that tutors have the most influence in helping b’nai mitzvah students understand [and] develop confidence...”

The goal of this process is to be open to what you find. Often, we don’t see the abundance because it is so far from what we expect. Rabbi Ryan Daniels of [North Shore Congregation Israel](#) in Glencoe, IL, shares this example: “We spent so many hours brainstorming new ways to engage teens post-*b’nai mitzvah*, and then it hit me: We already have 50 teens who are here every Sunday as *madrichim*...” The teens were there the whole time, but not where we expected to find them.

Once you know the abundance in your system, the possibilities begin to unfold:

- “Our *b’nai mitzvah* students have an amazing relationship with their tutors.” How can you help celebrate and amplify this connection?
- “Our teens show up to be *madrichim* in our religious school.” How can you bring their experience into your systems and engage them in deeper ways?
- “A specific teacher is a reason our teens show up for a class.” Where are opportunities to expand this teacher’s role?

It’s easy to get caught in a scarcity mindset; we are deeply concerned about our Jewish youth finding meaning, purpose, and joy in Jewish life. However, if we can push past that place and do the listening and research that an abundance mindset asks of us, there are hidden nuggets of success to drive our holy work. We need to begin with knowing that they are there and then embark on the task of uncovering them.

Additional Resources:

1. “[Nine Principles to Help You Engage Jewish Youth](#),” by Miriam Chilton and Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE
2. “[A New Approach to Mentoring Children through B’nai Mitzvah](#),” by Kathy Schwartz
3. “[How We Bridged the Gap in Post-B’nai Mitzvah Engagement](#),” by Stefani Carlson

Discussion Guide:

Consider using this piece in your next board or board of education meeting with the following activity:

1. Share a time in your own experience (or that of your children) when you felt abundance in the congregation—a time when things were working and resulted in an impactful experience, something that helped you connect to individuals and to the community. This abundance may be found in a specific relationship, a memorable moment, or a specific program.
 - What happened?
 - In what ways does your experience demonstrate abundance?

2. Read the articles by Kathy Schwartz and Stefani Carlson, found in the additional resources section. For each article, explore together:
 - Where was the abundance they uncovered?
 - What did they learn about their community when they uncovered this abundance?
 - What is similar about the work that each congregation did? What is different?
 - What did you find interesting in what they found? What possible area of abundance in your own community does this make you curious about? What do you want to learn more about?
3. Create an action plan for your board to uncover abundance in your youth programs by considering the following:
 - Whom do you need to interview?
 - What do you need to ask them?
 - How will you use this information to identify areas of abundance?

Michelle Shapiro Abraham, RJE, is the URJ's director of Learning and Innovation for Youth, as well as a consultant for the [Foundation for Jewish Camp](#).

Miriam Chilton is the URJ's vice president of Youth.



Engaging Youth

Congregational Perspective

Bridging the Gap in Post-B'nai Mitzvah Engagement

by Stefani Carlson

Imagine a congregational school in which the Sunday before a child's *bar* or *bat mitzvah* is their last day of classes, forever. A school where classes for students in grades 8-12 are not even offered, and where previous attempts at establishing a youth group have all failed, leaving no teen-specific programs. What would happen to the congregation's teens once they became Jewish adults? And, perhaps more immediately, what would happen to their families' involvement?

These were the existential questions facing me when I was hired as education director at [Temple Beth Shalom](#), a congregation of 110 families in Hudson, OH. The void in post-*b'nai mitzvah* programming was causing a crisis of continuity—not only were the teens themselves disengaged, but nearly three-quarters of their families had left the congregation entirely. With new congregational leadership and staff coming in, the time was ripe for change.

In the four years since then, our congregation has created a teen program series that has seen nearly 100% retention. To do this, we set our minds to engage our key stakeholders—our *b'nai mitzvah* and post-*b'nai mitzvah* families—in shifting from a scarcity mentality to one of abundance, and let them design the community to which they would ultimately want to stay connected.

We started the process by reviewing what had previously been offered for post-*b'nai mitzvah* students, and learned several lessons. Perhaps surprisingly, the congregation's small size became one of its greatest assets. Unlike a larger congregation with multiple layers of bureaucracy, our small organization is nimble and more able to create significant change quickly. It also costs less to create an entirely new program for a smaller group of students; and just a few individuals who get involved can have dramatic impact.

Additionally, we found that the rates of participation in Jewish community programming were much higher in cohorts for which a confirmation class had been offered, even among those students who did not enroll in the class. In other words, just offering the class suggested to the teens that the obligation, and opportunity, to participate in Jewish communal life extended beyond *b'nai mitzvah* age, and increased their rate of engagement.

Finally, we realized that prior attempts at starting a youth group had been based on re-engaging teens who had already left. The thought behind this was, “How do we get the high school kids back?” which struck us as an example of scarcity mentality. We needed a shift that would help us focus on our strengths and the resources available to us to help us to grow. This lens helped us identify two opportunities. First, we had an exceptionally strong incoming *b'nai mitzvah* cohort of highly motivated students and families with whom I had already established a deep personal connection through my role as a *b'nai mitzvah* tutor. Second, we had many willing community partners available to help us in this work.

I began by asking the incoming *b'nai mitzvah* class and their families to join me in the visioning process for a program that would serve as a bridge between *b'nai mitzvah* and confirmation, and we named it the *Gesher* (bridge) Program. The students were remarkably clear about what they wanted: a class that would meet outside of regular religious school hours, be taught by a beloved teacher, and in which they could co-create their learning

experience. They wanted a social action component, through which they could do meaningful work together; and a leadership component, through which they would be able to build a youth group from the bottom up.

Our teens also wanted to build connections with other Jewish teens in our area, which was where our community partnerships, and the wider network of resources they helped us access, became essential. For example, not only did the NFTY regional advisor and other area youth professionals support us in establishing a new NFTY chapter, the regional board even created a special track for our teens at *Derech Atid*, a regional NFTY event, so that our 8th graders could develop the skills they needed to build their own youth group.

Over the last four years, our teens have built strong Jewish identities through study, service, and social activities. HuBSTY (Hudson Beth Shalom Temple Youth) is now a fully-fledged member of NFTY Northeast Lakes Region (NEL). Our teens have served together in the community and as *madrichim* (aides) in the religious school. Most significantly, they blazed a trail for the classes that came after them, which also have a near-perfect retention rate. Today, that initial *Gesher* cohort is in 10th grade. Every one of them remained in the program and was confirmed on May 19, 2017. I look forward to seeing what they accomplish next.

Stefani Carlson is a member of Temple Beth Shalom, Hudson, OH, where she has served as a teacher and lay leader since 2008, *b'nai mitzvah* tutor since 2011, and as the education director since 2013.



Engaging Youth

6 Areas of Incredible *B'nai Mitzvah* Innovation

by Lisa Langer, RJE, and Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, RJE

What do we want students to say and do as they prepare for and mark *b'nai mitzvah*? How do we want them to experience this part of their Jewish journey? For the last three years, the [URJ *B'nai Mitzvah* Revolution](#) has supported more than 150 congregations in asking and answering these questions, spurring congregations to experiment in areas that inspire *b'nai mitzvah* students to express what matters to them in the experience.

Here are six areas of innovation:

1. Repairing the World

At this age, students have a growing awareness of the world around them and want to play meaningful roles in making it just and whole. [Congregation Solel](#) in Highland Park, IL, engages *b'nai mitzvah* students in projects that reflect their interests and questions and that relate to the values reflected in the Torah portion they will read. The *Mitzvoteinu* program at [Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel](#) in Elkins Park, PA, introduces fifth-grade students to the congregation's existing social action activities, then asks sixth-grade students to volunteer with one of the projects multiple times as preparation for planning a project of their own.

2. Innovative Rituals

The typical *b'nai mitzvah* service is filled with ritual and meaning, serving as a peak Jewish experience for many families. In fact, though, there are many other moments throughout a young person's Jewish journey that are ripe for ritual. By recognizing and ritualizing them, we can contextualize *b'nai mitzvah* as one special time among many within a lifetime. [Temple Beth Elohim](#) in Wellesley, MA, has done this with Milestones, which celebrates key moments in the learning process, beginning with consecration. Students receive a siddur at the end of third grade, a *Tanach* at the end of fourth grade, and a *yad* at the end of fifth grade; each milestone is marked with ritual and celebration.

At [Congregation Beth Ahabah](#) in Richmond, VA, each *b'nai mitzvah* family is invited to meet the rabbi on the bimah one year before the child's service for a special ritual that marks the beginning of the formal preparation process. Parents bless their child, and the child blesses his or her parents, a ritual that reframes preparation from a set of mundane tasks into the realm of the sacred. Such innovative rituals enrich families' lives by giving pause to mark sacred moments and acts with meaningful ceremonies.

3. Participating in Community

Emerging adolescents are working to develop their identities and find their unique place in the world. Some innovations encourage students to share themselves with the community, weaving their interests and questions into every aspect of the *b'nai mitzvah* experience. Some clergy encourage creative interpretations of Torah through painting, dance, sculpture, drama, game shows, or comics, designing and exploring individual learning plans tailored to each child.

At [Congregation Bet Ha'am](#) in Portland, ME, *b'nai mitzvah* students bring questions about a Torah portion to their individual meetings with the rabbi, who uses these questions to determine which verses the student will read. The rabbi also responds to one of these questions during the *b'nai mitzvah* service, personalizing the teaching to the individual student while also offering learning with depth and meaning for the general congregation.

4. Becoming an Adolescent

The process of becoming an adolescent has an impact on both the child and his or her family, and as such, Jewish communities seek ways to support teens and adults as they move through this phase of life. *B'Naiture* at [Wilderness Torah](#) in Berkeley, CA uses nature as a vehicle for exploring transition from childhood to adolescence, linking it all to Judaism. [Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion](#) in Oak Park, IL, offers a 15-week class for sixth graders and their parents to learn about Judaism and Jewish life.

5. Mentoring

B'nai mitzvah preparation offers a unique opportunity for young teens to build relationships with older teens and adults, incorporating mentoring as an important feature in the *b'nai mitzvah* experience.

At [Temple Adat Elohim](#) in Thousand Oaks, CA, post-*b'nai mitzvah* teens tutor and guide younger students throughout the *b'nai mitzvah* process. At [Har HaShem](#) in Boulder, CO, research revealed that the tutor/student relationship is one of the most powerful experiences for *b'nai mitzvah* families. Through intense training and careful matches, tutors build meaningful relationships with students as they nurture skills, beliefs, and a sense of belonging, responsibility, and agency.

6. Family Engagement

Parents are the most powerful role models, and family engagement in Jewish life—including the *b'nai mitzvah* process—makes a strong impression on children and adults alike. Many congregations include family retreats as part of *b'nai mitzvah* preparation as a way to build community and share experiences among a cohort.

[Central Synagogue](#) in New York, NY provides families with a special journal for tracking their Jewish journey. They also share a *b'nai mitzvah brit* that specifies the values and responsibilities of all parties involved in the *b'nai mitzvah* process.

Additional Resources:

1. [The URJ B'nai Mitzvah Revolution Innovators Map](#)—an online gallery of *b'nai mitzvah* innovations
2. [Innovative B'nai Mitzvah Rituals](#)—a URJ *B'nai Mitzvah* Revolution webinar
3. [B'nai Mitzvah that Respond to Individual Needs and Interests](#)—a URJ *B'nai Mitzvah* Revolution webinar
4. [“Taking the Torah Home at Kol Tikvah,”](#) eJewish Philanthropy
5. [“Students Connect with Growing B'nai Mitzvah Revolution,”](#) *Jewish Journal*

Discussion Guide:

The six areas of innovation outlined in this article can also be seen as six purposes. Discuss the six areas of innovation:

1. Which areas of innovation, or purposes, make the most sense to you in connection with your vision for *b'nai mitzvah*?
2. On which areas of innovation, or purposes, does your congregation focus?
 - a. How well are these purposes being met?
 - b. What's working and what's not working toward meeting each purpose?
3. Which of the areas of innovation, or purposes, are not a focus in your current *b'nai mitzvah* process?
 - a. Does this seem like a gap you want to address?
 - b. Why or why not?
4. Which of the following would you want to explore?
 - a. Enhancing what you are already doing toward furthering one of the areas of innovation.
 - b. Focusing on an area of innovation that is not currently being addressed.
5. What are one or two areas of innovation that you would like to explore? Discuss how they align with your vision.

To delve further into this, see the URJ *B'nai Mitzvah* Innovators Map, which provides [full discussion guide](#).

Lisa Langer, RJE, is the associate director of the URJ *B'nai Mitzvah* Revolution.

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Engaging Youth

Congregational Perspective

A New Approach to Mentoring Children through *B'nai Mitzvah*

by Kathy Schwartz

Since my congregation became part of the pilot cohort of the Reform Movement's [B'nai Mitzvah Revolution](#) in 2012, our goal has been to make *b'nai mitzvah* more meaningful. As it turns out, though, this is no simple task.

Along with 12 other congregations, URJ staff, and HUC-JIR professionals, our congregation has learned, shared resources

experimented, and explored ways to revolutionize the *b'nai mitzvah* experience. We've rewritten curricula, altered programs, changed expectations, deepened family involvement, and tinkered with the service.

Even with our progress, though, we find ourselves struggling with the question: "How do we make it more meaningful?"

In 2014, in an attempt to address this question, I interviewed 14-year-old post-*b'nai mitzvah* students and asked them about the most powerful part of becoming *b'nai mitzvah*. Something quite remarkable emerged to which, until those conversations, our congregation had only given passing attention.

These teens spoke of the impact of their relationship with their tutor, which they said influenced how they felt about themselves and about Judaism. Through these conversations, we learned that tutors have the most influence in helping *b'nai mitzvah* students understand, develop confidence in, and bring meaning to becoming a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

At the same time, our congregation was in the process of doing away with our Hebrew school. Even in the best class and with the most competent learner, our students still required a significant amount of tutoring to be "ready" for *b'nai mitzvah*. There must be a better way, we thought, for our students to build a relationship with Hebrew. We rebuilt and lengthened our Sunday program, adding [Hebrew through Movement](#) and song sessions in which we taught Hebrew words and generally integrating Hebrew vocabulary into all aspects of the morning.

How would we now give the same kind of attention to the tutoring relationship, especially in light of what we learned from our students?

We began by changing expectations of our tutors. They went from being solo practitioners to a team that spent the next year learning about mentoring and adolescence. Together, they formulated objectives for their time with the students.

We created a rubric that included mastery of Hebrew skills as well as goals we had for students who were coming of age:

- Identifying one's unique gifts
- Learning from mistakes
- Developing and asking big questions

- Owning opinions about and comfort and discomfort with prayer
- Considering one's place in the Jewish community
- Adding one's voice to the Jewish story

We drafted a series of protocols by which tutors would help students move through this rubric—and we eliminated the term “tutor.” Instead, we chose the Hebrew word *m'amein*, meaning coach, supporter, coming from the same root as *amen*, an affirmation of what has been done or said. This seemed like a more appropriate a term for someone who guides a young person through such a transition.

All of this was an enormous risk. Said one *b'nai mitzvah* parent and member of our lay team:

“I was skeptical when our congregation decided to do away with our traditional Monday evening Hebrew school for a one-on-one m'amein program. I wondered if my daughter would have connections with her Jewish friends that my older daughter [who went through our traditional Hebrew program] had, and I wasn't sure my youngest would like the one-on-one style—that there may be too much pressure. My concerns were all unfounded, as I was amazed week-by-week by the astounding connections, realizations, and enthusiasm my daughter experienced during her weekly tutoring sessions.”

Of her new role, one *m'ameinet* said:

“[The program has] allowed us to engage with students... Getting to spend multiple years with them throughout this process truly facilitates our ability to become another kind of mentor—one that is not related to them, not giving them a grade... We help them become the people they can be...”

Our *m'ameinim* now begin with the student at the start of their formal Hebrew studies, the timing of which is determined with each family based on their [individual learning goals](#). Their relationship formally concludes with a post-*b'nai mitzvah* meeting, asking the student to reflect on his or her experience and growth.

What's next? We're determining what formal role our *m'ameinim* should have in the *b'nai mitzvah* ceremony that would represent the type of guide and elder they have become for the child. We're also continuing to explore how we can utilize our *m'ameinim* to make the journey through this rite of passage more meaningful. As one summarizes, “I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of the *b'nai mitzvah* process... continuing the journey together with students and families, experiencing and finding meaningful Torah in our lives, our community, and our world.”

Kathy Schwartz, RJE, is the director of Lifelong Learning at Congregation Har HaShem in Boulder, CO, a clinical faculty mentor in HUC-JIR's executive MA in Jewish Education program, and the vice president for finance for the Association of Reform Jewish Educators.



Engaging Young Adults

5 Innovative Ways to Engage Young Adults in Jewish Life

by Lisa Lieberman Barzilai, RJE

It's no secret that engaging Millennials in congregational life requires innovative and creative thinking. While former generations of American Jews engaged in congregational life in traditional ways, today's Jewish young adults in their 20s and 30s want to craft their own Jewish journeys.

The Union for Reform Judaism has been partnering with congregations across North America to innovate young adult engagement as a part of its [Communities of Practice](#) work. The full results of this work can be

found in a URJ resource, [Paving the Road to Meaningful Young Adult Engagement](#). Here, we highlight five of the best principles of young adult engagement:

1. Make sure your online presence is compelling.

When today's young adults seek information or want to find new opportunities—including ways to get involved in their local Jewish community—their first stop is the Internet. Consider your congregation's presence on your website, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, et al. Lisa Colton of See3 Communications reminds congregations to be responsive and personal, and to share engaging content. More than calendar listings, the content your congregation shares online should be inviting and newsworthy, helping to connect individuals to others within the congregation. Don't be afraid to let your congregation's personality shine online, demonstrating the warm environment you truly seek to build.

2. Lower young adults' barriers to entry.

It's vital that congregational leaders recognize the real and perceived barriers to young adults' engagement in Jewish life, says Rabbi Oren Hayon, a congregational rabbi who previously served as director of the Hillel Foundation for Jewish Life at the University of Washington. For example, he says people in this age group typically have less discretionary income at this point in their lives than older members might. Of course, congregations can't necessarily just lower or eliminate dues, but they must demonstrate to young adults the value in paying for a Jewish congregational experience. Cultural barriers may also stand in the way of young adults' engagement: If your building is not easily accessible or is very formal, consider moving programming outside your walls to a coffee shop, restaurant, or someplace else with a more casual vibe.

3. Embrace do-it-yourself Judaism.

Organizations that successfully engage young adults in their 20s and 30s have learned how to involve them in planning programming, creating experiences that reflect the organization's mission and the unique interests of this age group. Jamie Berman Schiffman, Director of Professional Development at Hillel International, explains that this tactic creates programming that appeals to the target audience while also empowering young adults in the community to step forward and take on a leadership role. One successful example of such programming comes from [Congregation Beth Elohim](#) in Brooklyn, NY. Leaders at the congregation describe their program "Shabbat in the Hood" as one that "help[s] young, unaffiliated Jews build robust Jewish experiences based

on what *they* want. Evenings can be structured around dinner, learning, singing, prayer, wine and cheese, or anything else you can imagine! You provide the space, we together invite the guests, and CBE will send you a rabbinic student with a guitar, a prayer book, or whatever else you think might add to your evening.”

4. Value quality over quantity.

Often, we evaluate success by counting the number of attendees—and more equals better. But don’t lose sight of the bigger picture: Large attendance numbers don’t always translate into long-term engagement. For example, when young adults take part in more intimate programming—small groups coming together to talk, learn, eat, and *kibbitz*—they are more likely to become engaged and even assume leadership roles. At [Temple Shalom](#) in Newton, MA, for example, leaders realized that rather than competing with the large-scale programming being done in the Boston area, they wanted their young adult engagement program—called [Shalom Y’all](#)—to focus on forming deep relationships. Their young adult leaders decided that instead of hosting large gatherings at bars, they’d instead focus on smaller cohorts. This realization and ownership of their collective identity opened the door to strategic partnerships within the community.

5. Give young adults a seat at the table.

To sustain a successful young adult community, it’s imperative that the congregational leadership supports their work. [University Synagogue](#) in Los Angeles, CA is home to a young adult community called [Brentwood Havurah](#), which hosts nearly all of its programming “off campus” and doesn’t require traditional congregational membership. Though synagogue leadership had always had a theoretical understanding of the need to invest in and support young adults in their 20s and 30s, that understanding didn’t always translate into practice. To address this issue, Brentwood Havurah’s leadership wanted a seat on the congregation’s board. This request seemed questionable to some board members, but following a campaign to educate the board about the value of this position, University Synagogue’s board not only welcomed a young adult at the table, but rewrote its bylaws to reflect the inclusion of this new position.

Jewish young adults seek meaningful connections to Judaism. Taking these ideas into account, your congregation or community can develop creative ways to successfully engage Millennials as they continue their Jewish journeys.

Additional Resources and Discussion Guide:

- [Paving the Road to Meaningful Young Adult Engagement](#)—URJ resource
- [Social Media: Communicating in the 21st Century](#)—URJ resource

Lisa Lieberman Barzilai, RJE, is the director of the URJ Leadership Institute.



Engaging Baby Boomers

Congregational Perspective

Boomers in Transition: How Our Synagogue Meets the Needs of New Empty Nesters

by Fran Martin

It had the makings of a perfect storm.

In 2008, I joined [Congregation Rodeph Shalom](#) in Philadelphia, PA.

That same summer, at a synagogue get-together of BoomerS—members who gather for social, spiritual, and educational opportunities at Rodeph Shalom and beyond—many in the group realized they all had children who were about to leave for college.

The BoomerS came up with the idea that Rodeph Shalom ought to offer a discussion series about becoming empty nesters. Although I was a brand new member of the synagogue, the director of community engagement asked me—knowing about my training as a psychologist and my experience working with families—if I would lead such a series. I loved the idea, and, before long, we were off and running.

That fall, we scheduled four sessions of the new series, and I created a syllabus to guide the discussions. More than 20 men and women, most of whom did not previously know one another, attended our first session. Throughout the series, we addressed such topics as separation and individuation, effective communication, resilience, and understanding emotions—both our own and others'. Over time, our meetings provided a forum in which members could tell their own stories, not only sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to having a newly empty nest, but also creating unique bonds and connections with one another.

As we approached the end of the series, we heard positive feedback from our participants: Everyone wanted more. We added a fifth session and invited recent graduates and young adults to tell us about their challenges and ways parents could be helpful. As with the earlier meetings, it was the personal stories that connected participants to one another, and ultimately, we agreed to meet monthly for the rest of the year.

We have been meeting ever since.

In 2011, we changed the group's name to "BoomerS in Transition," which more accurately reflected the issues that concerned us. We also conceded that we were part of an inescapable trend: Despite efforts to include everyone from the congregation who wished to join us, we seemed to attract only women. Although we never intended an all-female membership, ultimately, we accepted that we were, in fact, a group of boomer women.

Today, we meet approximately every six weeks from September through May, with one summer gathering at a member's pool club or shore home. Our membership includes a handful of women who were participants in the original "Becoming Empty Nesters" discussion group, and they are the foundation of our group, but we continue to grow and evolve in myriad ways. Numerous members of our group have taken on leadership roles within the congregation, and we have generated at least one spin-off group, which meets specifically to discuss issues around dealing with aging parents.

In our group, though, the meetings are, as they have always been, a place for people to be heard, to tell their own stories, and to create unique bonds and connections. We have new members who come, meet others, and develop relationships that form the foundation of their membership at Rodeph Shalom. More seasoned synagogue members come to see old friends, and to let us know what is going on in their lives. Although every session is different, we always take time to report on how we're doing, and no one—whether a first-time attendee or a longtime member—ever leaves feeling alone.

Although initially we set out to create a group for empty nesters, it evolved into a place where both new and seasoned members can make and maintain real and profound connections that allow us to be our truest and best selves. As our group continues to grow and change, we are confident that the wisdom we have gleaned from our past experiences will guide us in creating new opportunities to engage, both with one another and within the larger Rodeph Shalom community.

Fran Martin is a psychologist who has facilitated the BoomerS in Transition group at [Congregation Rodeph Shalom](#) in Philadelphia, PA, since 2008. She also is a co-chair of community engagement at the congregation.

Notes

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