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The Power of Engagement Congregations look to members to guide — and create — the future

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By Marc Shapiro



Lynne Kirsner and her husband have remained members of Temple Oheb Shalom over the years mainly to attend High Holiday services and because they have a number of friends there. Until recently, Kirsner wasn't very involved in the congregation.

But after being tapped for a role in assessing what the congregation can do to engage more members, Kirsner has found herself more engaged. She's made new friends in the congregation, come to know acquaintances better and is even facilitating a newly formed interest group that is taking a day trip to Philadelphia.

“As we continued to meet and respond to relational questions, I came to love and admire my social acquaintances that I have known for 30 years,” she said. “I got to know some congregants I had never known before, and I’m really enjoying these relationships.”

Oheb Shalom is one of six Baltimore synagogues that recently took part in an engagement partnership through The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore and the Darrell Friedman Institute for Professional Development at the Weinberg Center. The goal of the partnership is to help the synagogues, along with a number of Jewish communal organizations, engage more members and become more relevant in members’ lives.



Clockwise from front: Rabbi Rachel Blatt, director of lifelong learning at Beth Israel; Ken Davidson, executive director of Baltimore Hebrew; facilitator and Beth Am member David Lunken; and Beth Israel Rabbi Jay Goldstein at a synagogue engagement partnership meeting. (Photo by Provided)

The idea came out of a statistic from The Associated’s 2010 Greater Baltimore Jewish Community Study. Nearly half (43 percent) of those surveyed felt that Jewish organizations were remote and/or not relevant. Thanks to a \$40,000 grant from the Kolker-Saxon-Hallock Family Foundation and a \$15,000 grant from The Associated, the synagogues and organizations were able to come together for trainings and exchange ideas as they underwent their engagement campaigns to try to reverse this trend.

Jeannie Appleman, senior organizer and trainer at Jewish Organizing Institute and Network for Justice, led the trainings, which focused on creating a culture of ownership in organizations and how to leverage congregants and leaders and the relationships among them to achieve this.

“I’m what you call an old-school organizer, so it’s very much about relationships and what’s called ‘the iron rule,’ which is don’t do for others what they can do for themselves,” she said.

Appleman trained the organization in how to conduct “listening campaigns,” structured conversations with congregants in one-on-one and group settings in which congregants talk about his or her connection to the synagogue, interests and a variety of personal stories.

“It’s a way to do several things at once,” Appleman said. “One is to uncover new leaders and to uncover the hopes and dreams, the passions, the concerns, the talent and really the myriad of self-interests that members have. When you have that kind of information about your membership, it does a lot of things. It can direct the synagogue going forward.”



Vicki Spira (left), chair of Temple Oheb Shalom’s engagement partnership committee, and Maxine Lowy, director of development and special programs. (Photo by David Stuck)

The first cohort of synagogues included Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Temple Oheb Shalom and Beth Am Synagogue in 2014, and a year later they were joined by the second cohort, which included Beth Israel Congregation, Chizuk Amuno Congregation and Beth El Congregation. The organizations involved in the partnership were CHAI, CHANA, DFI, Jews United for Justice, the Myerberg Center, the Louise D.

and Morton J. Macks Center for Jewish Education, The Associated and a Washington, D.C., synagogue, Temple Micah.

Those involved in the partnership look at it as a cultural shift within synagogues that focuses on empowering congregants to take ownership of their experiences and build deeper relationships within the organizations.

Oheb Shalom focused its listening campaign on baby boomers, who make up about a third of its congregation with approximately 400 people.

“We really felt at this point they were the least engaged demographic at the congregation. We do a lot for our young families, but baby boomers are our biggest financial supporters,” said Maxine Lowy, director of development and special programs. “We run the risk of them saying, ‘My kids aren’t here, I don’t need to belong to a congregation anymore.’”

Oheb Shalom spoke with about 175 people in small group conversations, and even hosted a baby boomer Shabbat service in which members played guitar and sang with the cantor and shared stories about their relationship with the temple. From Oheb’s efforts, the congregation learned that baby boomers want to be involved in small groups that are centered around common interests, and they’d be willing to plan activities.

Three groups have already sprung up — a contemporary issues group that is planning a trip to the National Museum of American Jewish History and the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, a foodie group that is planning a variety of activities and a tikkun olam group that wants to go above and beyond what the synagogue is already doing in social action.



Andy Wayne, director of communications at Baltimore Hebrew Congregation. (Photo by David Stuck)

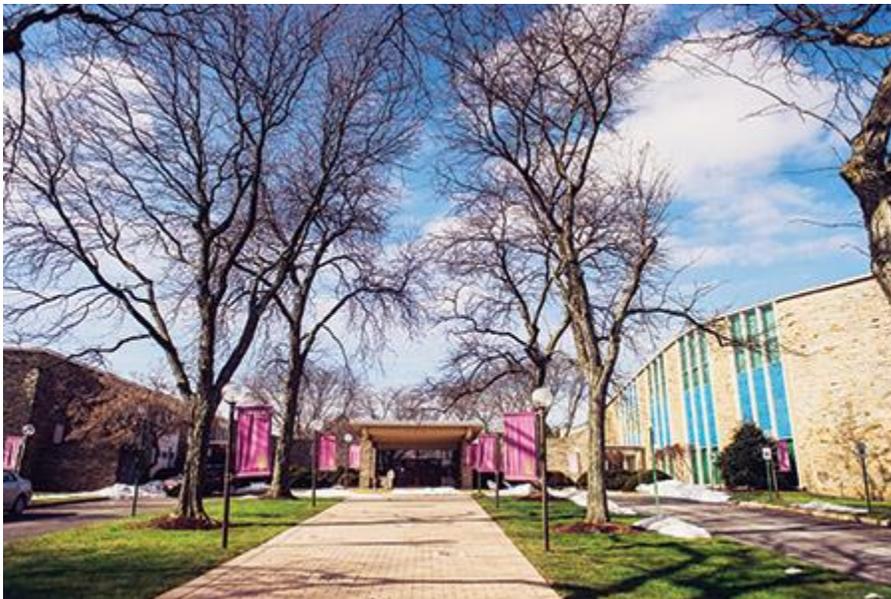
“What we’re really doing is going back to a time when congregants created their congregation,” Lowy said.

Vicki Spira, one of the board’s executive vice presidents and the chair of Oheb Shalom’s engagement partnership committee, said she’s seen a lot of engagement and leadership development come out of the effort.

“It really is a culture shift, and I think that takes time. I’m encouraged by it. I don’t by any means think it’s a panacea, but I’m energized by it,” she said. “I’ve seen more happen than I’ve seen in a long time.”

Baltimore Hebrew may soon follow in Oheb’s footsteps. The synagogue’s listening campaign focused on the congregation’s adult population. One-on-one conversations were held with about 70 people ranging in age from the late 20s to the early 80s.

“First of all, we learned that there’s a great love of our clergy and we have provided for congregants in times of need,” said Andy Wayne, director of communications and engagement. “We’ve also learned that there are so many opportunities to deepen our congregants’ involvement based off their ideas, their talents and their investment in Baltimore Hebrew Congregation.”



Chizuk Amuno Congregation (Photo by David Stuck)

The themes of social justice and social action came up a lot in conversation.

Those who conducted conversations presented their findings to Baltimore Hebrew’s board recently, which will determine what actions to take based on those findings.

Bobbi Perlman, chair of Baltimore Hebrew’s engagement partnership and a board member, said members of the engagement committee will reach back out to people who took part in the

conversations to see if they'd like to get groups together around common interests, and a letter will be sent to the congregation's members about the findings.

"We learned a lot from it," Perlman said. "With this mechanism, the one-on-ones, we can do this for other information we might want to hear about from our congregation."

Wayne said the partnership came at a great time for Baltimore Hebrew as it prepares to absorb the members of Temple Emanuel into its congregation, the details of which are still being worked out.



Temple Oheb Shalom (Photo by David Stuck)

"There's a lot of opportunity for us to think about our mission, to have BHC continue as a dynamic congregational community," he said. "This year is the 10th anniversary of Rosh Hashanah Under the Stars, which is nationally one of the largest gatherings of Jews. We know we are prime to grow our congregation but we also want to see how we can be a light for Baltimore's Jewish community."

At Beth Am, those who took part in conversations found it to be a very positive experience, so the congregation decided to take this model of relational meetings to three areas of the synagogue.

"Listening to congregants was interesting, rewarding, and we learned a lot, and those that were listened to definitely said it was a positive experience," said David Lunken, who was involved in Beth Am's engagement process. He also was on the original committee that formulated the engagement partnership and served as a facilitator for Baltimore Hebrew and Beth Israel. "We did get some insights into specific things that were working that we could do better. We also learned about people's passions and interests and things they'd like to be doing."

In onboarding of new members, the synagogue will utilize these meetings to learn about and engage new members. Committee chairs and others leading certain synagogue groups are implored to have these kinds of relational meetings with those they work with in order to get to know them better and

capitalize on people's strengths and interests. And the synagogue board will also use the methods to engage and learn about Beth Am's congregants and leaders.



Beth Am Synagogue (Photo by David Stuck)

Chizuk Amuno Congregation, part of the engagement partnership's second cohort, is undergoing a listening campaign that will likely last until May. The committee is hoping to interview 75 to 100 congregants in small groups and has decided to focus its campaign on individuals in the 35 to 50 age range.

"They represent a large portion of our overall membership and also are a lot of school families, between Krieger Schechter Day School and Hebrew school. They, hopefully, have a lot invested in the future of the synagogue," said Stephani Braverman, the board chair for member engagement.

In addition to getting to know its members better, Braverman said the hope is to identify future leaders and make listening campaigns an ongoing part of member engagement as well as integral to the new member experience.

Beth Israel is focusing its listening campaign, which is still in progress, on families with children that are pre- and post-bar and bat mitzvah age. Beth Hecht, the chair of the engagement partnership team, said she sees this a culture shift at the synagogue.

"We're looking at our future, we're looking at making synagogue as meaningful as possible," she said. "The synagogue should be relevant to [members] throughout their lives."



Beth Israel Congregation (Photo by David Stuck)

While she said it's too early to quantify any results, the general trend is that people have enjoyed being a part of the process and sharing their stories.

Cindy Goldstein, executive director of DFI, thinks that overall the engagement partnership reignited the idea of the power of relationships and added that the fact the listening campaigns and community conversations caught on so well signals to her that people want to get to know each other and be engaged on a deeper level.

"I hope that ultimately every organization will recognize the art of relationship building and create this culture shift of people before program, of being transformational as opposed to transactional," she said via email. "A one-to-one relationship with people takes time — in order to build in a culture of ownership — but it's the only way we will ultimately be able to engage and re-engage all members of our Jewish community and be sustainable and relevant into the future."