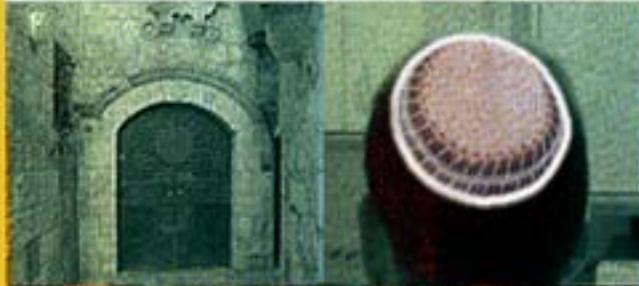


The American Jewish
Joint Distribution
Committee



Beyond the Synagogue or the Jewish Community Center: **WHERE JEWISH COMMUNICATION HAPPENS**

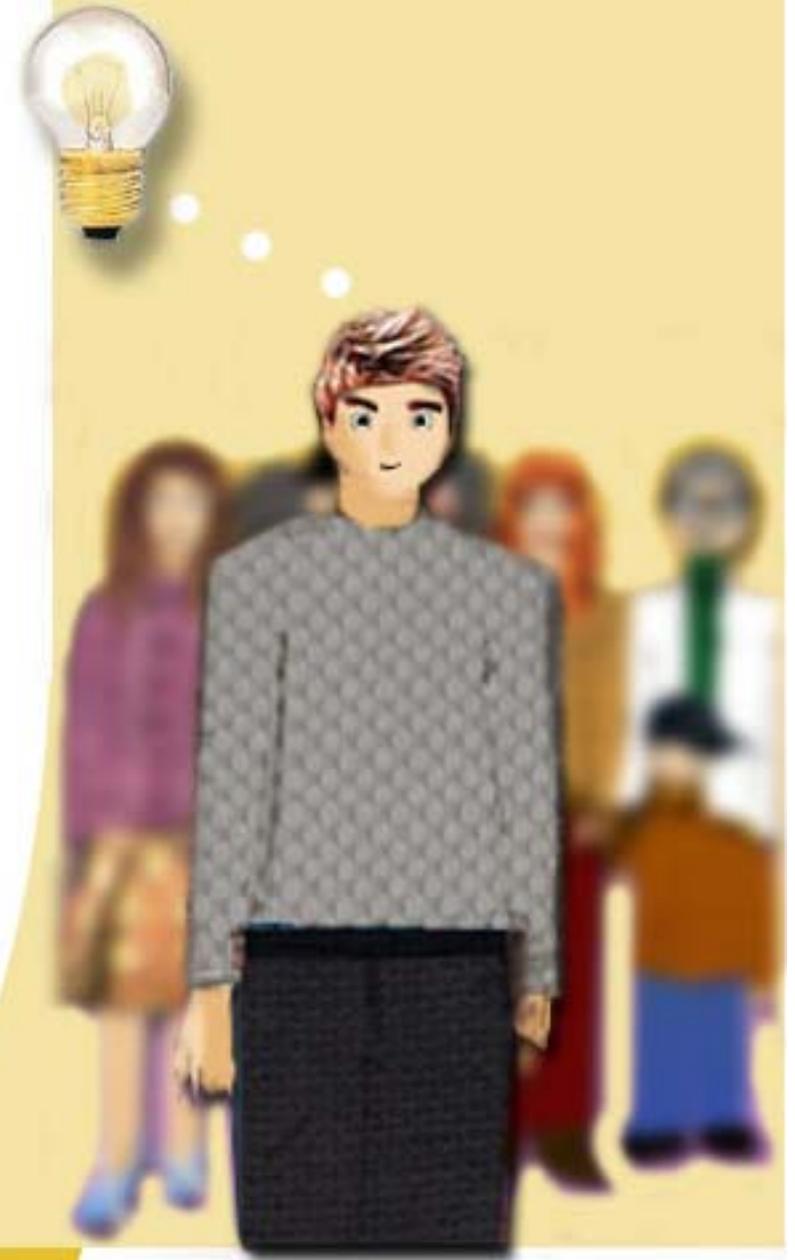
By Marcus Freed

Objectives

- To explore how positive Jewish experiences can happen when existing community life can be perceived as stifling and uncreative.
- To look at possible ways of connecting to Judaism outside of the formal communal and synagogal structure.
- To indulge the fantasy of creating a 'perfect' community and what it might look like!
- To consider some examples of experimental communities in the USA.
- To look at ways of creating your own programmes beyond the synagogue & existing community institutions.

Venue

These programmes can take place in your synagogue (!), in a community centre, or in a private home.



ACTIVITY ONE: Getting Together (90 minutes)

Objective:

- To explore how positive Jewish experiences can happen when existing community life can be stifling and uncreative.

Materials:

Pens, paper, space.



1

Invite everyone to sit in a circle and read the following quotation as a group:

2

I. Going around the circle, ask everyone to complete the following sentence as they see it; 'Community is...'

a. (i.e....community is challenging, annoying, difficult to be a part of....)

"Jews must gather, not because they are friends or even because they agree but simply because they need each other to go on being Jews. Hermits are noticeably absent from our history. What is more, tzaddikim - the pious ones, the ego models for the Jews - who could probably live their Jewish lives without the support of a group, don't want to. They teach us by their example that there is intrinsic value in performing mitzvot - commandments - as a group. The very act of working with the congregation for the sake of heaven is a mitzvah in itself. And so it has been until our own era - a time in which the gathering together of Jews has become so efficient and the groups so large and the means so technocratic that the very institution of the synagogue itself threatens to destroy the religious life it purports to sustain."

Lawrence Kushner

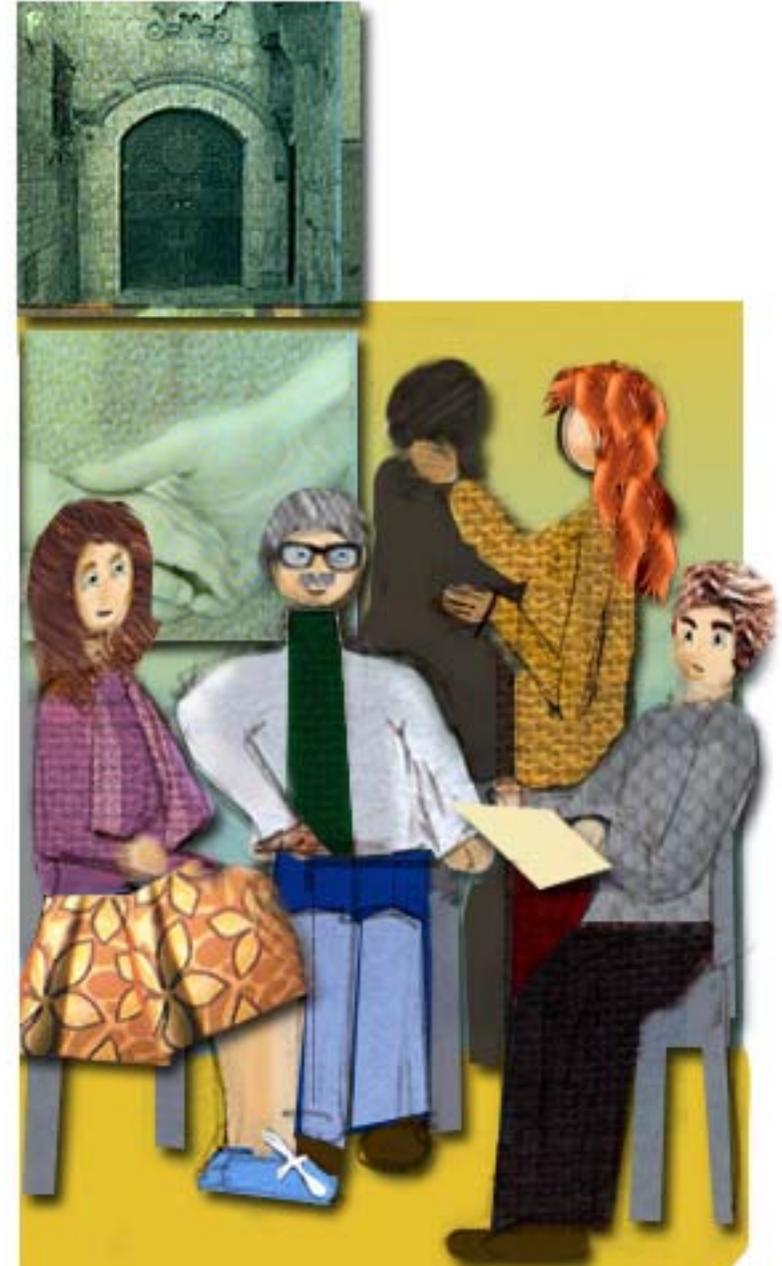


3

- a. As everyone in pairs to share with their partner a story of one positive example of community and one negative experience (ie a positive one might be how members of the community got together when a member of the family was bereaved and helped with funeral/shiva arrangements, or helping after a baby had been born etc, while a negative example might be how somebody moved into an area and went to a Jewish social event, only to find that nobody was friendly!
- b. Share the stories with the group.

Discuss:

- I. How can community let people down?
- II. How can we set up an 'early warning' system when the community isn't fulfilling its social responsibility?
- III. What are the limits to a community's social responsibilities, ie does it have to ensure that somebody has a great social life when they are shy? Does it have to ensure somebody has healthcare when they have brought a situation upon themselves (ie through alcohol abuse).



4

Split people into groups and give them a copy of the following two quotations, along with pens and paper;

- I. Appoint someone in the group as 'secretary' to take notes of what has been decided as a group.
- II. Who feels that any of Kushner's comments are true of either your community or your personal experience?
- III. Choose which of the following community experiences your group like to find a creative solution to: **Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony, Wedding ceremony, naming ceremony, Holiday, Shabbat.**
- IV. Follow the activities for the 'experience' that you have chosen;

Bar/Bat Mitzvah

Choose a selection of supplementary readings for a Bar/batmizvah service that can be of relevance to a teenager and the theme of 'coming of age'. You might choose poems, pop songs, extracts from a novel and so forth, but the important thing is that they are true to the theme.

If a tallis is going to be worn, choose some words for the parents to say that are relevant, such as something about parenthood/growing up/letting go.

"At present, rabbis, cantors, teachers, and youth leaders do most of the creative work, including leading services, teaching, working with youth, conducting weddings, etc. Where laypeople Exercise their capacities, as in administration or fund raising, it often duplicates what they already do daily in their work; hence it does not explore their full potentialities. Adult study sometimes boils down to merely listening to lectures, for services are too often performances. Underlying much of the problem is what we might designate as the TV cultural stance: passive and vicarious experiencing. This is a society-wide problem of great seriousness, with political consequences as well, and one might hope that the synagogue can offer something to counter this tendency."

Lawrence Kushner

"You shall not separate yourself from the community"

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers: 2:5

Wedding

If anyone is about to get married, this can be even more relevant! Choose a selection of readings, pictures and even dance movements that could be extra significant for a couple

Write seven blessings that could be read by the couple, in addition to the 'sheva brachot' that are usually read.

Naming Ceremony

Create a speech for parents about hopes, fears and expectations for their child at the point of receiving their name or Brit Milah. Create a small *dvar torah* (torah talk) about the importance of names (ie talk about Abraham who changed his name from Abram).

Holiday

Encourage small groups to plan and work out their own holiday celebrations in home settings, parks, forests and beaches. Synagogue staff can be available as resources, but the projects should be run by participants.



Shabbat

Design a themed Shabbat with activities and a full timetable, ie

Friday

- 17:00** Musical pre-Shabbat activity
- 19:00** Prayers
- 20:00** Meal
- 21:00** Discussion groups/Israeli dancing (with singers)

Shabbat

- 08:00** Early morning meditation
- 09:00** Creative learning of *sedra*
- Etc...

5

As a group, come back together and discuss your ideas!



ACTIVITY TWO: Fantastic Community 1

(60-90 minutes)

Objective:

- To indulge the fantasy of creating a 'perfect' community and what it might look like!

Venue:

If it's possible, meet in a community centre that is different from the one you usually go to, i.e. another synagogue, or possibly even a non-denominational community hall. The benefit of this is that it will get people thinking differently from the usual mode of thought.



The synagogues that have the most members usually have their pick of the rabbis, and certainly they have the most clout within national organisations.

1

Hand out the following quotations on pieces of paper and get people to read them out loud:

"Synagogues try to get as many members as they can. Since families shop for the best religious school, the nicest service, and the most attractive rabbi, the more members a synagogue has - it is almost universally assumed - the better it is."

Since more members mean more dues, which means more money, which means more services, which means the more you get for your money, success and size of membership are understood to be directly related.

Synagogues are almost never selective in membership. Financial needs combine a commendable spirit of hospitality to make the synagogue open to all who can afford it. This means, in practice, however that each synagogue tends to have such a mixture of people in it that, attempting to meet the needs of all this quite random grouping, there develops a distressing uniformity among the institutions.



2

Discuss:

- a. Which of these statements do you agree with? Why?
- b. Which do you disagree with? Why?

3

Fantasy! Explain the following:

- a. Imagine a very small congregation that is like an extended family. This sort of group isn't a committee because they don't have a larger organisation. They are a social group by accident. They come together because they are Jews. They might be friends but that is irrelevant to their common experience and search. They would be, in most senses, a 'congregation'.
- b. They group must have a constant membership over a period of time and be large enough to ensure diversity but small enough for each member to feel like an integral part. The group must be small enough so that they can all physically gather in the presence of somebody's living room.
- c. Bring all kind of materials (ie pens, paper, card, old magazines, fabrics) and ask the groups to design the community space they would like.



4

Designing a community:

- a. Go around the room and ask each person to make a brief biographical description of their spouse/partner or parents.

- b. Ask each person to describe how they would imagine this kind of congregation working;
 - I. What would it do (i.e. activities)?
 - II. Why would it do it?
 - III. How many families should it include?
 - IV. How often would they meet?

- c. Decide on a key communal mitzvah that the community could undertake, such as studying torah or collecting tzedakah for a local charity.

5

Learn the following piece of Torah together, and consider what lessons can be learned related to leadership, community building, consensus and opposition that could be projected into the community context.

6

It is the story of Korach, from Numbers (*Bamidbar*) Chapter 16. the cousin of Moses, who disagreed with the way that Moses was leading the Jewish people, and tried to run things his own way;

Numbers Chapter 16

- 1 Now Korah, the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On, the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men;
- 2 and they rose up in face of Moses, with certain of the children of Israel, two hundred and fifty men; they were princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown;
- 3 and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them: 'Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?'
- 4 And when Moses heard it, he fell upon his face.
- 5 And he spoke unto Korah and unto all his company, saying: 'In the morning the LORD will show who are His, and who is holy, and will cause him to come near unto Him; even him whom He may choose will He cause to come near unto Him.
- 6 This do: take you censors, Korah, and all his company;
- 7 and put fire therein, and put incense upon them before the LORD to-morrow; and it shall be that the man whom the LORD doth choose, he shall be holy; ye take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi.'
- 8 And Moses said unto Korah: 'Hear now, ye sons of Levi:
- 9 is it but a small thing unto you, that the God of Israel hath separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to minister unto them;
- 10 and that He hath brought thee near, and all thy brethren the sons of Levi with thee? and will ye seek the priesthood also?
- 11 Therefore thou and all thy company that are gathered together against the LORD--; and as to Aaron, what is he that ye murmur against him?'
- 12 And Moses sent to call Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; and they said: 'We will not come up;



13 is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, but thou must needs make thyself also a prince over us?

14 Moreover thou hast not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us inheritance of fields and vineyards; wilt thou put out the eyes of these men? we will not come up.'

15 And Moses was very wroth, and said unto the LORD: 'Respect not Thou their offering; I have not taken one ass from them, neither have I hurt one of them.'

16 And Moses said unto Korah: 'Be thou and all thy congregation before the LORD, thou, and they, and Aaron, to-morrow;

17 and take ye every man his fire-pan, and put incense upon them, and bring ye before the LORD every man his fire-pan, two hundred and fifty fire-pans; thou also, and Aaron, each his fire-pan.'

18 And they took every man his fire-pan, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon, and stood at the door of the tent of meeting with Moses and Aaron.

19 And Korah assembled all the congregation against them unto the door of the tent of meeting; and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation. {S}

20 And the LORD spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying:

21 'Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.'

22 And they fell upon their faces, and said: 'O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, shall one man sin, and wilt Thou be wroth with all the congregation?' {S}

23 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:

24 'Speak unto the congregation, saying: Get you up from about the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.'



25 And Moses rose up and went unto Dathan and Abiram; and the elders of Israel followed him.

26 And he spoke unto the congregation, saying: 'Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing of theirs, lest ye be swept away in all their sins.'

27 So they got them up from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, on every side; and Dathan and Abiram came out, and stood at the door of their tents, with their wives, and their sons, and their little ones.

28 And Moses said: 'Hereby ye shall know that the LORD hath sent me to do all these works, and that I have not done them of mine own mind.

29 If these men die the common death of all men, and be visited after the visitation of all men, then the LORD hath not sent Me.

30 But if the LORD make a new thing, and the ground open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down alive into the pit, then ye shall understand that these men have despised the LORD.'

31 And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did cleave asunder that was under them.

32 And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods.

33 So they, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit; and the earth closed upon them, and they perished from among the assembly.

34 And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them; for they said: 'Lest the earth swallow us up.'

35 And fire came forth from the LORD, and devoured the two hundred and fifty men that offered the incense. {S}



ACTIVITY THREE: The Sudbury Experiment

(60 minutes)

Objective:

- To find out about an experiment in the USA and to see how new ideas can be generated for our own communities.

1

Read or handout the following two texts:

The Sudbury Experiment

"For several years now members of the Sudbury experiment have been into reorganising the congregation. The principal form for communal involvement has become the small family congregation. Of course the older structure is still dominant - and it may remain so - but its perpetuation per se is no longer essential for the religious needs of the congregation. At Beth El in Sudbury (USA) we have [several] such groups. They are at different stages of self-awareness...

One group began as an experimental parent-child religious education venture. Parents and their sixth-grade children met weekly to discuss the weekly parasha. They participated in a weekend retreat together. But for a year after their rabbi stopped 'teaching' the class, the group continued to meet weekly to study, celebrate, worship and do mitzvot...

Another group has begun - again, around religious education for children - as a sort of family centre. Six families planned and arranged a year-long series of weekly meetings, which exposed their children to a broad range of Jewish activities, from building a sukkah to visiting an old-age home, from studying Hebrew to holding communal Shabbat meals...

Another group of four families has formed a year in advance for the approaching group bar/bat mitzvah of their children. They too constitute a miniature congregation. And a new group of families with 13 -year-olds had formed, as has a group with 15-year-olds...

In any case, what has been created is a sense of organic human interconnectedness where before there was only the golem of an institution existing for its own sake and rarely for the sake of heaven'...."

Congregation Beth El

If Not Us, Who?

This committee's name draws on the famous three-part quotation from Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" The "If Not Us, Who?" committee focuses on the challenges of contemporary genocide around the globe. It calls upon the congregation, and our religious and secular institutions, to respond to the atrocities of genocide around the world, just as we would have wanted our communities and governments to have assisted the Jewish communities in peril during the Shoah. This committee has met extensively to develop programs inside and outside Beth El to combat genocide and ethnic conflict around the globe. Initiatives have included: The development of a Passover liturgy that addresses genocide issues; the active collaboration with two organizations, the American Jewish World Service and Aegis; collaboration on development of curricula for the Religious School; and engagement of speakers at Beth El.

Congregation Beth El

Shalom Bayit (Peace in the Home)

This committee ("Peace in the Home") seeks to raise congregational awareness about and educate us to become more sensitive to the issues of domestic violence. Last year, it organized Beth El's hosting of an interdenominational vigil to honour victims of domestic violence and collected used cell phones to be restored and used by at-risk women. This year, it will sponsor the participation of a congregational delegation, led by Rabbi Thomas, in the "Safe Havens" multi-denominational resource building and training program.

Congregation Beth El

2

In groups, plan activities or new 'rules' for your community that will expand its Jewish practice beyond standard synagogue life. Here are some examples, and be as creative as you can:

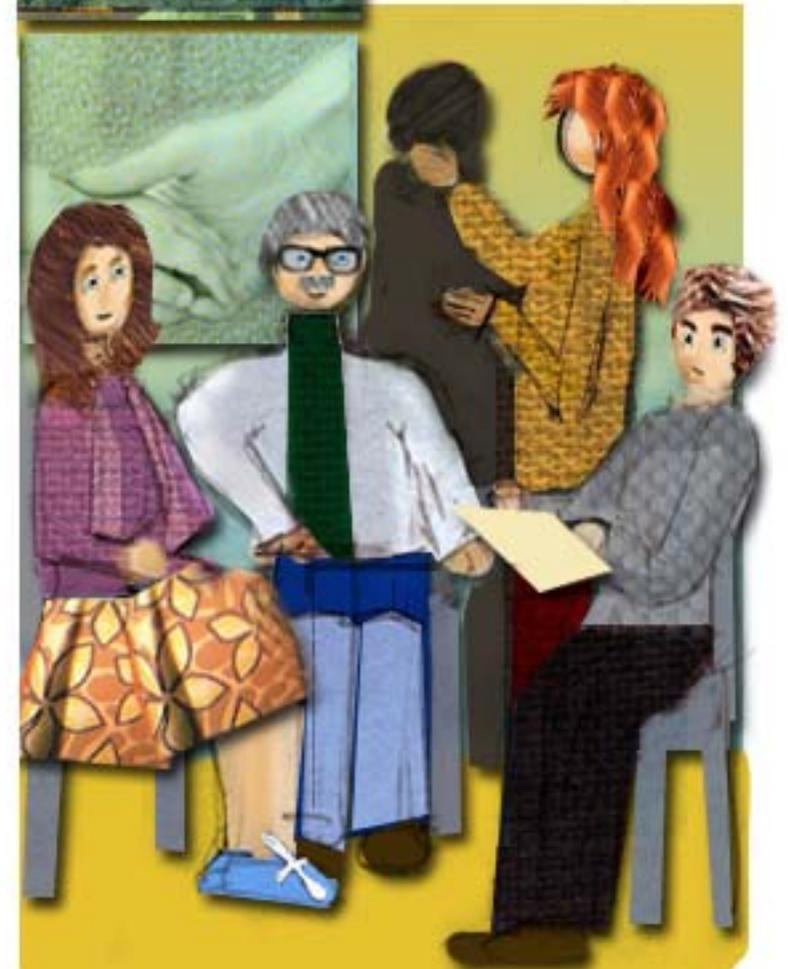
- a. Start a **"22-year" bible study course** - spend a year learning each of the books in the bible.
- b. **Employment for the underprivileged** - design a programme for creating employment for people who are limited through their skills or economic circumstances.
- c. **Youth as fully-fledged members** - is there a plan for the teenagers in your community? How are they involved? What can be done to get a teenager involved in every area of your community?
- d. **Magazines for members** - plan a new magazine for your members that deals with social action issues in a Jewish context.
- e. **Blood bank & creative giving** - plan a project that enables people to give things they haven't given before, but place it in a Jewish context, i.e. find out about the local blood bank, or local social action projects.

3

Spend around 30-40 minutes on the above activity, planning the detailed action plan of how you can make your idea into a reality, and present it to the rest of the group.

4

Now, put it into action! If not now, when?



ACTIVITY FOUR: Fantastic Community 2

(60 minutes)

- To look at ways of creating a community beyond the synagogue and to build on the work done in Activity 2.

How do you make bread? It all depends. Do you want something rich and nourishing or a light and airy slice to frost with butter? Will you be pleased with a plain and tasty loaf or satisfied with nothing less than a braided work of art? Do you have the time to nurture and knead it, or would a quick bread, whipped up in half an hour, better suit your schedule and your plate?

There really is no recipe for forming a religious community either. The only essential ingredient we can think of is the wish to search for the formula in the company of others....

Linda Weltner

1

When your group is gathered together, present the above quote and discuss;

- a. Does everyone believe the ideal community should have an authoritarian structure, or should a group of people share leadership responsibilities?

2

Split people into three groups and get them to decide answers to the following questions, before presenting their ideas back to the main group.

GROUP 1

- a. Should Jewish tradition remain intact or are they seeking new interpretations of the tradition?
- b. Which Jewish scholars do you have access to nearby? Who are the knowledgeable people in the community?
- c. Who are the most energetic people in your community who would like to learn?

GROUP 2

- d. What are the group's real goals?
- e. Should celebration be the focus of the first year?
- f. Are there clear educational aims for children or adults that dictate areas of concentration?

GROUP 3

- g. What are possible topics for discussion if the group decides to concentrate on new definitions of Jewish lifestyle?
- h. How will you deal with disagreements?
- i. How responsive must people be when one member has an overriding problem or finds him/herself in pain because of personal difficulties?
- j. Which confrontations are best avoided?

3

And finally, for everyone...

- I. A community needs **music** as well as **words**, **practicality** as well as **spirituality**. If you had to put these in a list of priority, which would be the most important and the least important?
- II. What does 'religious' mean?

4

Communal paint exercise:

Roll a long piece of blank wallpaper or (large sheets of paper taped together) onto the floor and give everyone some pens or paints. Play some music and explain that the following exercise will take place in silence.

Everyone has to decorate the paper in their own way using the painting/colouring materials. The theme is **community**, and they have to use their own interpretation of the word.

The results may be chaotic, apparently contradictory, random or completely inspiring. After 15-30 minutes, encourage everyone to stand back from this 'painting meditation' and look at the results.





5

Ask everyone to share one thought on the process that has just happened.

6

Remind yourselves of the quote from the Mishna from the first activity:

"You shall not separate yourself from the community"

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers: 2:5

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