

The essence is to wake us all up

Creating, balancing, trying

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Local Jewish leaders talk about innovation

It's true, Lisa Harris Glass said. Jewish millennials are a hard group to reach.

Ms. Glass is the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey's managing director for community planning and impact, and she is talking about the generation now in their 20s and early 30s. According to last winter's Pew study — the Bad News for Jews Report — the Jewish world in general is having a hard time attracting young Jews, and the problem is particularly acute among liberal Jews.

"For the millennials, the idea is making the world a better place," she said. "Everyone is worthy. That makes the idea of being a chosen people almost anathema to them. They want to make the world a better place, but for everybody, not just for Jews.

So pick, say, two or three liberal synagogues, she was asked. (For the sake of this discussion, "liberal" includes Conservative; the terminology is a historic artifact that makes no sense intuitively but we're stuck with it.) Point us toward shuls that are thriving, where creativity prevails, where spirituality or community or shared purpose is bringing people together. And don't go with the big ones. We know about those. Let's look for hidden glinting jewels.

So she did. Ms. Glass suggested looking at Beth Haverim Shir Shalom in Mahwah, Congregation B'nai Israel in Emerson, and the home shul of her colleague, Stephanie Hausner, who manages the federation's Synagogue Leadership Initiative and belongs to Congregation Sons of Israel in Nyack, N.Y.

Beth Haverim Shir Shalom's "community is so fully engaged," Ms. Glass said. Membership numbers are rising, no doubt aided, among other things, by the clever videos the shul posts on YouTube. The Hebrew school offers a number of alternatives, including a program that allows parents to study with their children instead of dropping them off, and the synagogue is deeply involved with social justice. "You drive onto their property, and you see their little micro farm, where they grow food for the local community," she said. "I was literally six inches inside the front door and I knew who they were. There are collection boxes for this, sign-up sheets for that.

"It is a different approach, and it seems to be working," she said.

What he does is not magic, and really "it's not brain surgery," the shul's rabbi, Joel Mosbacher, said. "It's all about the relational side of things.

"We focus heavily on trying to build real relationships with people. It permeates everything we do."

He used to meet with bar and bat mitzvah students and their families twice before the big day, he said. "It was to help the kids get ready for their speeches, and to get to know them a little bit. The speech part they pretty much could do in two meetings, but there would be times when I would get up on the bimah to give them a charge, and they would be looking at me, and I saw sure that they were thinking 'You don't know me at all.'

"And in many cases they would be right. I didn't."

So now Rabbi Mosbacher meets with each family at least seven times. This year, there will be 60 bar or bat mitzvah celebrations. "That's a lot of time," he acknowledged. He also tries to meet with congregants for no particular reason, maybe over coffee, just to get to know each other; his staff and key lay leaders share that responsibility with him. "People sometimes ask me how I have the time to do that," he said. "I feel that I cannot not have that time.

"If we don't do that stuff well, it doesn't matter what else do. We can have the best program, with the slickest pr, but if we are not in touch with people, how do we know what people want?"

New leaders are recruited in an ongoing talent search; "whenever anyone comes in to talk about something they bring an agenda; we are there for that agenda but we are also always curious about people. What do they do? What skills or talents do they have? What are they passionate about?" Then he can match the person, skills, talents, passions, and all, with a need or dream within the shul.

"These processes don't come into being overnight," Rabbi Mosbacher said. "It isn't a formula. This has been a gradual process, and I am very proud of it. And it's not just me — it's the whole staff. We see it as our role not just to serve the

purposes of the corner of the building that we happen to work in.”

The staff also takes care not to let anyone slip away unnoticed. “I don’t know how many times I have heard people say that they left another institution, and no one ever called me to ask why,” Rabbi Mosbacher said.

They ask. If it turns out that someone is moving, that person is connected to a synagogue there; if the move is caused by financial problems there is help offered; if there is anger or dissatisfaction it is talked through.

Even social action programs are chosen based on congregants’ concerns and interests.

“I would like to think that if we are thriving, it is no small part due to the intentional work we do,” Rabbi Mosbacher said.

Rabbi Debra Orenstein of B’nai Israel has a gift for programmatic and liturgical innovation; she also seems somehow to be inherently welcoming. “To be in her presence is a spiritual encounter,” Ms. Glass said. “Whenever I see her, I find myself feeling more serene.”

Rabbi Orenstein approaches innovation knowing that it can lead to failure; that, she says, is freeing. “You have to be okay with the idea that some things will work in the moment, some will work in the long term, and some won’t work at all. Sometimes both rabbis and communities are risk averse, but if you don’t try, in the end you are taking an even greater risk.”

When she first got to B’nai Israel, she said, she began a drumming circle for families before kabbalat Shabbat services once a month. “It was great for everybody,” she said. “Preverbal kids can bang a drum, and so can the elderly, and everybody in between. It was a great program, and it brought out a lot of people. It was successful for a long time — and then we started to have drum fatigue. This year, we did only two drumming circles.”

How to fill that 45-minute slot before services? With different kinds of programs, including, once, Elijahpaloozah.

“I wanted to get people ready for receiving Elijah on Passover,” she said. “I told stories of Elijah from the Bible; we sang some songs about him, and I did a little Elijah quiz. ‘Here is great man of God — would you guess that such a person would be grumpy?’ They say no, and then I get to tell them that he was.

“My favorite part was a big risk. I didn’t know how it would play out. I called a member of the synagogue who is a regular — but doesn’t come at the time when the younger kids usually are there. They wouldn’t recognize him.

“So I asked him if he would come, and I designated a time. I said ‘Be a little rude, a little inappropriate, look a little raggedy, ask for things.’

“In the middle of my telling a story about Elijah, he came in, and said, ‘Don’t you have any hot dogs around here? I’m hungry. I need food.’

“I looked around the room, and I saw the kids and their parents all looking a little alarmed.

“He wasn’t wearing a kippah, so I asked my husband to take him out of the room to put it on. Before he left, he said, ‘If I don’t eat soon I will fall over.

“My own daughter was alarmed. And there was a little boy whose eyes got really wide, and he said, ‘Maybe he’s Elijah.’”

When the man came back, kippah in place, Rabbi Orenstein asked if he could wait until she finished the story before she gave him food. Then she read more about Elijah, and said, “You don’t know who Elijah is, so be nice to everyone you meet.”

And then, she said, “ ‘I have something to tell you. This man is Elijah — and he isn’t Elijah.’ They were confused. I said, ‘The name we usually use for him is Wally Krieger, and he is a member of CBI.’ He smiled, and introduced himself.

“And then I said, ‘But he might be Elijah. He visits sick people, he helps poor people, he comes to the synagogue and helps the rabbi. Doesn’t that sound like Elijah?’

“And one of the kids said, ‘What should we call you? Wally? Or Elijah?’

“It could have been a disaster, but it turned out to be completely heartwarming. You never know.

“You always want to be changing things, turning things, shaping things, in a way that supports the tradition. It’s not to change for the sake of change, but to bring out the relevance and the importance of the tradition in a way that’s appropriate for the audience, for the time, for the season.”

She remembered a time in California when she had taken a huge risk — “the most crazy and daring thing I ever did, ritually speaking.”

She was rabbi of Makom Ohr Shalom in Los Angeles then, working with Rabbi Zalmen Schacter-Shalomi. It was the second day of Rosh Hashanah, when the Torah reading is one of the year’s most emotionally evocative — the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, when Abraham’s arm is stayed as he is about to sacrifice his son.

She decided to approach the reading in a way she had never tried before.

Some background for this story helps.

First point — there were many people in the shul who had shofars and brought them along. Before the Torah service, Rabbi Orenstein went over the sounds and the meanings of each of the shofar’s cries with the whole congregation.

Second point — Rabbi Orenstein has an unusual way of reading Torah — a way, she points out, that is in keeping with very

old tradition. After the Torah is read the traditional way, she chants the same passage in translation, using the trope she had used for the Hebrew reading, and then she chants a commentary, also in trope. On Rosh Hashanah, she chanted the Hebrew and the translation, but not the commentary. That was to come from the congregation.

Now, the story.

"I randomly divided the synagogue into five groups," Rabbi Orenstein said. "The people in each section would represent one of the five characters — Abraham, Isaac, the ram, God, or the angel."

At any point when they felt moved to do so, she told the congregation, "as your character, you should blow a blast as commentary — for example, if your heart was broken, blow shevarim.

"Just as you stop during the Purim megillah reading whenever the groggers are sounded, I stopped whenever there was a blast. And then, after the blast, anyone who wanted to could shout out a one-word commentary.

"I had no way of knowing whether this would work — whether it would just be a very loud reading. But I thought that if nothing else, it would cause people to listen in a new way to the story," she said.

"As it turned out, it was an amazing spiritual experience. What I most remember is that I got up to the line where it says that Abraham lifted up the knife to slaughter his son, and at that point the room became an extraordinary cacophony of every style of blast, from every corner of the room. From every character. People were weeping.

"Several people had done a tekiyah gedolah, but finally the noise died down. And there was a vibration in the room, and in that moment of very pregnant silence two people simultaneously shouted out a one-word commentary.

"One yelled out 'obedience.' And the other yelled out 'betrayal.'"

That is not the kind of moment that can be planned, and most likely it cannot be repeated.

"There is a certain surrender," Rabbi Orenstein said. "You can't always know what is going to work until you do it. You want to construct things so there is not an opportunity for grand failure, but it is possible that it will not meet your expectations.

"I think that sometimes we dismiss things that work at that moment we say 'I am going to pour my energy into the things that can repeat.' I will pay attention to whatever innovations I can make from year to year or week to week, but those idiosyncratic moments also are worth a lot."

Stephanie Hausner is a third-generation member of Sons of Israel and she went to USY there. Her roots are deep; at 29, she sits on its board and chairs its membership committee.

Most people her age do not have such a strong connection to Sons of Israel (or to any other shul) and so there are not many people her age there.

That is situation she is changing.

"A couple of years ago, we started something called 'Party on the Porch,'" she said. The screened-in, heated porch is part of a vegetarian Israeli restaurant in Nyack, and its owner belongs to the shul. He welcomes young shul members on Thursday evenings, after the restaurant proper is closed, and he gives them snacks. "We started getting 15 people each time," Ms. Hausner said. "Some would be people we knew, some would come through word of mouth. We threw up a couple of fliers.

"It broke down a lot of barriers."

The informality and openness worked. "People said yeah, this is fun, this is great. We love free hummus, and we want to do more."

The group now has a name — Jews on the Hudson — and it has begun to program events. It threw its second Purim party this year, and it has begun to lead hikes in nearby Harriman State Park.

Some people first introduced to Sons of Israel through Jews on the Hudson have joined the shul, and some have not. "I want people to join, of course, but sometimes it is not the right time for them to join," Ms. Hausner said. "How many people at 26, or 27, or even 30 who are not married and do not have kids are joining synagogues? Not many.

"But if they see that you are out there, that you care about them, then when they do reach the point when they are ready, then you are their synagogue."