Programming and Membership: Close Relations for the Future

February 12, 2019

Gloria Adelson, Barbara Ezring

Gloria, are you available to meet on Monday?

I’ll be at a synagogue board meeting. How about Wednesday?

I’m going to my Sisterhood meeting. How about Sunday?

Hadassah is sponsoring the all-city event. How about Thursday?

I have a Federation event. How’s Tuesday?

I’m Gloria Adelson, Women’s League Sisterhood Affiliation Chair. My partner tonight is Barbara Ezring, Women’s League Program/Education Team Coordinator. Just as you are, we are being pulled in many directions. Is it any wonder that we are seeing a decline in membership of our synagogues and our sisterhoods?

What can we do? Tonight we are going to examine the connection between programming and membership. We will look at ways to bring them in and keep them coming.

Mainline religious groups, including synagogues, have been in decline since the 1970’s. We see the results of demographic changes - many of us participating in tonight’s program are members of merged congregations. Let’s take a look at how our sisterhoods followed the same demographic path as our synagogues. In 1918, Women’s League had a membership of 100 founding women in 26 sisterhoods. By 1925, there were 20,000 members in 230 sisterhoods in 6 branches in the United States. In 1968, Women’s League reached a peak membership of 200,000 women in 800 sisterhoods in 28 branches. Downward spiraling began in the 1970’s and in 1997 WLCJ membership was 150,000 women in 700 sisterhoods and, due to consolidation, 26 branches. [1] In 2005, the membership was at 120,000 women in 700 sisterhoods. Consolidation occurred again in 2008 when 26 branches became 13 regions. Here we are in 2019 with approximately 100,000 members in 400 sisterhoods in our 13 regions spanning North America from Mexico through the United States into Canada.

Why have people left synagogues? We know there was a large increase in religious affiliation in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Clergy and lay leadership patted themselves on the back for the return of their congregants. Social science researchers held back. They thought the growth was not so much extraordinary leadership or a new hunger for God and religion. They thought the cause was the post-WWII “baby boom.” Half a century later, “family-related trends [including fewer married Jews and fewer families raising their children as Jews] were associated with declining religious engagement.”[2] Around 2009, synagogues began to explore changing the dues structure of synagogues. Around 2014, 2015 articles began to appear suggesting dues might not be the reason people were not joining synagogues. In September 2014 in the Synagogue Strategies Group blog this comment was made,” if we focus more on engaging people and making them feel more a part of our synagogue, the issue of payment will no longer be a significant issue. If we just focus on the financial support model it is still just about a transaction. If we can get 200 adults to participate in our new Chavurah program, that will have more impact to our vibrancy and growth as a sacred community than any financial model.” [3]

In 2015, Nina Badzin’s article, “Expensive Dues Aren’t the Only Reason People Don’t Go to Synagogues” appeared in Kveller. She wrote, “I asked on Facebook what keeps people from wanting to be more involved Jewishly in and out of synagogues, and the discussion went on for 12 hours, yielding more than 100 comments from Jews around the country. One friend…summed up the issue…’Many [Jewish leaders] are asking, How can we get people more involved in our synagogue? as opposed to asking, How can we get people more involved with Jewish life?’ …Provide value and people will pay. Show members the joy of Judaism and empower them to bring that joy home. Engage members with discussions on how to be a better person, a better parent, sibling, spouse, friend, and a more ethical business person, and they will come back for more. If Judaism cannot answer the big questions in life and be relevant in our homes and everyday life, then members will go somewhere else and take their dollars with them. Our lives are short and finite and we only have so many lifecycle events for which we need a rabbi. Organizations don’t die because they provide no value; they die because they fail to provide enough value to enough people…The challenge for synagogues will be that members – and those not even considering joining – will find that community (and have found that community) in any number of places from yoga studios to the racquetball court to their careers, or their kids’ schools and sports teams.” [4] We need to give people a reason to infuse that circle with Judaism, not just with Jews.

Last September 2018, Joel Abramson wrote a short article in eJewish Philanthropy, “You want Young People to Join Your Synagogue? There’s a REALLY Obvious and Easy Solution…” He said, “With the high holidays behind us, I can finally share my biggest secret. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and even Sukkot give me incredible anxiety! Passover does too, but not likely for the reason you think. It’s not because I’m worried about knowing all the traditions, or making enough food, and it’s not about sitting through hours and hours of service worrying about the meaning of it all. No. What really stresses me out about the holidays are whether I’ll be invited to a dinner, or a break the fast, or a little gathering. I’ve lived in a few different cities (as millennials tend to do), and this upheaval of my life to move to a city where I didn’t have built in connections was nerve-wracking. I remember having a beautiful Rosh Hashana dinner with my wife, and while grateful for all life had bestowed upon us, I was feeling very lonely. Don’t get me wrong, we attended a local synagogue, as well as the local young adult fundraising events, and swapped cards and phone numbers with people, but there we sat, alone. What’s the message here? People (old, young, singles, couples, families, gay, straight, trans, etc.) don’t care about your programs, or your childcare, or even your services. They crave connections to community. They want a chevre (close-knit group) that will invite them over for Shabbat dinner and holiday meals and make them feel included in something bigger than themselves.” [5]

Recognizing that people crave connections and that they’ll go to the yoga studio or the racquetball court or to their kids’ sports teams to find community, how do we encourage them to be part of Women’s League, part of our Sisterhood?   
  
Why should women join our Sisterhood?  Because, we offer unique benefits.  Women’s League women become informed about women's issues, world communities, the arts, health, the family, Jewish traditions, and much more. Women’s League women become involved-- through representation in internationally recognized organizations such as having a NGO at the United Nations.  Women’s League women are enriched by sharing ideas and friendships with members of the Women's League’s international community. And, Women’s League women are inspired by the personal mark they make on their community, the Conservative movement, and the world-at-large.    
  
We learned earlier about declining memberships. Times have changed and we must change with them or risk losing what we have.  Years ago women did not work outside the home as much, sisterhood offered a commodity that other organizations did not and competition was minimal.  Several things happened beginning in 2000 to change that.  The dot com bubble burst led to layoffs, hiring freezes and consolidation of industries and businesses.  
  
Then came Sept 11, 2001 that cut us to the core and changed our perspective. In October 2008 we experienced the beginning of the Great Recession.  This meant persistent unemployment, decline in the value of homes, escalating federal debt, inflation and rising gas prices.  This held on for several years.  January 1, 2011 began the baby boom retirement years.   
  
This changing landscape altered many organizations, not just Women’s League and our sisterhoods.  We can survive and we will survive as we transform to meet the needs of the women in our communities.  
  
First, we need to have a niche and define it.  Can you define Women’s League's niche?  Of course, you can!  You can look at the mission statement or you can use our tag line: Engaging, enriching and empowering Conservative Jewish women!  
  
Second we need to build the right culture. And, what is culture?  It's the values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, experiences and habits that create our sisterhoods’ behavior and means of working together.  Dwindling membership and attendance at events are two red flags that indicate that culture should be a concern.  How do you think others see the culture of your sisterhood?  Is it your mother's sisterhood?  Is it run by one person or a very mighty few?  Are your events fun? Does learning take place?  
  
Culture matters because younger generations are looking for personal happiness.  If you feel that your culture needs a makeover, contact Consulting Services at [www.wlcj.org](http://www.wlcj.org) to request a Training Workshop in leadership development, team building, coaching or a specially developed training just for you - we’ll do anything to help you resolve conflict or improve members’ relationships!  
  
Third, we need to prove our value.  In other words, we must show women what sisterhood can provide for them, especially younger women.  The millennial generation wants a cause or two to help them feel that they are making a difference.  [6]   
  
So, how do we do this? How do we bring new women into our sisterhood community?  It is almost unanimous that the best way to get new members is, "drum roll," personal contact and a smile!  Our members and potential members want to know what’s in it for them. Ask your potential member what she values. We cannot provide value unless we know what our members want.  Just ask!  And, did you know that a smile could make someone's day or change it positively?  Look at the possibilities you provide with a smile, besides it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown.

Once we know what the member is looking for, we can demonstrate that sisterhood is the place for her.  We need to nurture the early experiences, welcome her, introduce her to other women with similar interests, and encourage relationships.  Following the program or encounter, follow up. Call and meet the new member for coffee or ice cream or take a walk. Call again and invite her to join you at the next Sisterhood event. Keep calling and meeting until she feels she is truly part of your sisterhood community!

Much of the information we have presented is based on research and best practices. Does this really work? Can we turn a Sisterhood that is dying into a vibrant organization? Let’s listen to a Sisterhood success story.

It is my pleasure to introduce you to Karen Knoble, the program chair from Women of Temple Israel in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Karen Knoble, Women of Temple Israel, Charlotte, NC

1. Background

* Temple Membership (TI) ~ 600 families
* Programming at TI for women was fractured and not creating community
* Pre-school mothers
* Informal Hebrew school group
* Sisterhood
* Sisterhood membership in 2018 was ~135 and trending downward
  + Limited commitment to the organization and poor leadership
  + Events were attended by the same few women, generally over age 55
  + Recent programming was tired and uninspired
* “Paid-up Luncheon”
* Sunday afternoon bingo
* Sisterhood *Shabbat* (Saturday service)
* “Closing Program” – focus on Israel
* Assessment
* The current Sisterhood model was not sustainable
* TI Sisterhood offered low value to its members
* Determine if there a desire for programming for women of all ages at TI
* **We needed to turn Sisterhood on its head!**

1. Formation of Women of Temple Israel (Winter, 2017)

* Sisterhood board met with a select, but representative, group of women to lay out the situation and clarify mission
* After several discussions, disparate groups agreed to work together as Women of Temple Israel (WoTI) and offer joint programming
* Formed a small Programming Committee
* Good cross-section of 6 creative women (ages, social groups, observance)
* All committed to the new WoTI vision
* First joint program offered January, 2018
* Tracey Curtis, author, humorist and mother
* Followed by informal reception and social hour
* Weekday evening event attended by ~100 women of all ages
* **The success of this program confirmed that women want program and enjoy an intergenerational event.**
* The key is to offer current and interesting programming at a day/time that is convenient

1. Establish Effective Programming Committee

* Determine and communicate clear goals for the committee
* Create a WoTI brand distinct from Sisterhood
* Offer value-added programming to women of Temple Israel and the broader Charlotte Jewish community
* Annual programming development based on simple framework and 3 elements

1. Focus on mission fulfillment
   * Jewish traditions experiential
   * *Tzedakah*
   * Social engagement
   * Lifelong learning
   * Ritual/spiritual
2. Targeted demographic(s)
3. Differentiated fee structure and access to programs (members/non-members)
   * Conduct meetings using best practices

* Set the tone for getting stuff done
* Create accountability for team members
* Effective meetings encourage greater attention and competency
  + Develop realistic budget for each event and stick to it
  + De-brief after each program
* Did we meet our goals?
* What went well and what can we approve upon?
* Who should we include in programming for next program?

1. Offer programs that bring women into the Temple and keep them engaged -

*Nosh, Cook &* *Kibbitz* Series

* Name reflects brand that is fun, engaging and Jewish
* Programs themed around Jewish holidays
* Short (5 minute) personal reflection or *D’var Torah* offered by a WoTI member
* Baking demonstration related to specific holiday
* Serve refreshments that are healthy, updated and creative
* Savory *hamantaschen*
* *Hanukah* “Get Lit” blue cocktails
* Shirley TempleIsraels
* Offer intergenerational experiences that focus on social engagement
* Cocktail hour
* Group baking requires interaction and encourages conversation
* *Tzedakah* associated with each event
* Create realistic timeline for the evening and stick to it!

1. Successful Marketing and Publicity

* Marketing is consistent with WoTI image – fun, creative
* Social media good for publicizing the event
* Targeted marketing for each demographic (preschool mothers, Hebrew school mothers, Baby Boomers, Seniors)
* In order to get women to come, reach out personally
* Online registration
* Convenient payment method
* Able to discern between members and non-members on registration site
* Hold events at convenient times to maximize participation - weekday evenings

1. WoTI Successes!

* Strong participation and engagement at each Nosh, Cook & Kibbitz
* ~ 60 women at each event
* Strong cross section of women (ages, social groups) attending, especially women under 40
* Non TI members attending
* WoTI engagement is encouraging participation in other TI events
* WoTI membership has grow to ~180 members - up 35% from recent years
* Women given the tools and confidence to carry on Judaic traditions at home
* Development of female leaders
* My personal goal
* Model effective leadership
* Mentor young women to become leaders
* Empower women to impact the TI community
* Numbers of women on the program planning and work teams have grown

1. Other WoTI programs in 2018/19

* *Rosh Chodesh* monthly discussions on *Shabbat*
* WoTI *Shabbat* – *Sing in Shabbat: Raise our Voices in Kavanah!*
* Friday evening rather than Saturday morning
* Spiritual, upbeat, and upscale experience
* Cocktail and hors d’oeuvre *oneg* to follow service
* Encourage families to attend
* Use event to highlight WoTI brand
* Summer Tea & Fashion Show

Karen has provided us all very good advice about bringing more women in, not just to the sisterhood event, but also to participate in a range of activities in the synagogue.

We can give you lists of program ideas tonight. You can access some of the best programs our sisterhoods have to offer. Log in to [www.wlcj.org](http://www.wlcj.org) and click on download member materials. Look under Sisterhood programming and you’ll find the Jewels in the Crown Award booklet from Convention 2017. There are terrific program ideas there. Contact your Region Education/Program VP/Chair. She’ll be happy to talk with you about program ideas.

People will *come* to your program; people will *stay* for relationships. If we want to increase Jewish engagement:

It’s not about programs.

It’s not about marketing.

It’s not about branding, labels, logos, clever titles, websites, or smartphone apps.

It’s not even about institutions.

It’s *about relationships.*

Dr. Ron Wolfson, author of Relational Judaism [7] describes principles of relational engagement.

* Personal encounters, those different ways we meet with people, like getting together for Shabbat dinner or family game night
* Telling out stories, sharing the experiences of our lives, one story leads to another and soon you’ve connected with someone new
* Learning together/doing together, one way that Jews “do together” is through learning, sitting in pairs around tables, face-to-face, in *hevruta.* The word *hevruta* comes from the Hebrew root *haver*, meaning “friend.” JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen said this about study: “Text study is good precisely because it puts you around the table. It’s very important to be around a table at which you all share, where everybody has equal access and the right of insight. And because you’re not sitting there talking to one another about yourselves but you’re talking to another about the text, it gives you the distance you need in order to talk about yourself. It gives you the distance to be personal and relational.”

How can we use programming to form relationships, to increase the number of women who join our sisterhoods, to increase the number of women who are engaged and come back for more? I will quote Dr. Wolfson one more time. I think he’s got the right theory. We need to create experiences for people. What are experiences?

Experiences include:

1. Content – something is learned
2. Emotion – something is felt
3. Food – something is eaten
4. Role models – someone leads
5. Action – something is accomplished
6. Celebration – some recognition of achievement

I’d like to take a look at the Experiences that Karen’s committee created.

*Nosh, Cook and Kibbitz* was fun and an engaging experience because:

1. It included content; everyone learned something.
   1. A member related a short personal reflection about the holiday being celebrated in a short D’var Torah.
   2. A different member demonstrated how to bake something for the holiday.
2. It included emotion; something was felt. Whether it was from the story told or the conversations held during the social, appetizers, wine/holiday drinks time, women felt something.
3. It included food.
   * 1. Food was eaten
     2. Food was prepared
4. It included Role models. A variety of women were role models
   1. The women who created the evening
   2. The women who marketed the evening
   3. The women who presented the Divrei Torah/personal reflections
   4. The women who demonstrated/taught the baking portion
   5. The women who helped at their tables when someone faced a cooking challenge
   6. The women who led the participants in cleaning up after food preparation
5. It included Action; everyone accomplished something.
   1. Everyone participated in preparing the baked goods.
   2. Everyone stood in small groups sharing the baking responsibilities. There were no electric mixers or microwaves. Everything was stirred by hand, each woman taking a turn.
   3. Each woman participated in multigenerational discussions around the cooking table.
6. It included Celebration, recognition of Achievement – everyone took home one of the baked goods prepared that night. What better celebration than to share what was accomplished with family or friends?

We can turn all of our wonderful program ideas into Experiences. What is most important about our programming/experiences is that we form relationships. We must continue those relationships beyond the program. Let’s remember that we all crave community. We all want to feel included. Let’s provide that community, infused with Judaism so that women leave the yoga studio community and engage in our special kehillah.

Thank you to Karen Knoble, program chair, Women of Temple Israel, Charlotte, NC

Thank you for sharing your precious time with us tonight. For more information about Sisterhood membership, please contact the Women’s League Membership Chairs, Sue Bengele at [sbengele@wlcj.org](mailto:sbengele@wlcj.org) or Sue Taffet at [staffet@wlcj.org](mailto:staffet@wlcj.org) or access the Membership Distance Workshop scripts from past years at [www.wlcj.org](http://www.wlcj.org), log on and click on Download Member Materials, Distance Workshops Membership.

Please, contact us if you have any questions about tonight’s workshop, Gloria Adelson, [happygaa6@gmail.com](mailto:happygaa6@gmail.com), Barbara Ezring, [bezring@wlcj.org](mailto:bezring@wlcj.org)

Sources

[5] Abramson, Joel, “You want Young People to Join Your Synagogue? There’s a REALLY Obvious and Easy Solution…” <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/you-want-young-people-to-join-your-synagogue-theres-a-realy-obvious-and-easy-solution/?utm_source=Oct+4%2C+2018&utm_campaign=Thurs+Oct+4&utm_medium=email/>, September 25, 2018

[4] Badzin, Nina, “Expensive Dues Aren’t the Only Reason People Don’t Go To Synagogues,” <https://www.kveller.com/expensive-dues-arent-the-only-thing-keeping-people-away-from-synagogues/>, February 4, 2015

[2] Block, Karen, Ezring, Barbara, “Distance Workshop – Modern Jewish Family,” download from wlcj.org, distance workshops programming, March 12, 2018

[3] “David, What do you think about the new dues model?” <http://synagoguestrategies.com/2014/09/david-what-do-you-think-about-the-new-dues-model/>, September 29, 2014

[1] Schwartz, Shuly Rubin, “Women’s League of Conservative Judaism,” Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia, March 1, 2009, Jewish Women’s Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/womens-league-of-conservative-judaism>

[6] Sladek, Sarah, <https://www.xyzuniversity.com>

Wertheimer, Jack, The New American Judaism, Princeton University Press, 2018.

[7] Wolfson, Ron, Relational Judaism, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013