MEMBERSHIP in the 21st Century

New Approaches to Building Community
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From the Editor

As you look through this latest issue of NATA Journal, you’ll find over and over again the same injunction: “Challenge your assumptions.” When it comes to Membership, the theme of our recent convention, our willingness to look hard at all we hold to be self-evident may be the difference between a vibrant congregation and one that’s stuck in a rut.

That’s not to say that all our assumptions must be wrong, or that we need to reinvent the wheel every time we set up a dinner for new members. Our assumptions help ensure that the work of the Temple gets done efficiently and well. But when our assumptions stop us from serving our members fully, or from attracting new members, then it’s time to shake things up a little.

As Temple professionals, we’ve seen the demographic changes in our congregations. We know Reform Judaism is becoming less homogeneous. But while we’re celebrating that diversity, are we thinking any differently? Or are we resting on our laurels, assuming that what has always worked just fine—last week, last year, even last decade—will continue to work just fine forever?

The contributors in the following pages are not talking about new programming, they’re talking about new thinking. If you assume you know who your members are, if you assume you know what they need, if you assume you know their backgrounds, their family makeup, level of Jewish knowledge, ethnicity—well, as my geometry teacher once poetically warned, “When you ASSUME, you make an ASS of U and ME.”

When we open our minds to new possibilities, we start a process of innovation that can energize our congregations. Let’s start on the most basic level: person to person. Rabbi Akiva taught, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. The rest is commentary.” But we often leave off the end of his speech: “Now go and learn!”

Nancy Schneider

President’s Message

A time to reflect.  
A time to share.  
A time for learning and self-renewal.

That is the essence of a NATA Conference. Temple Administrators give so much daily and weekly to their congregations, their members, and their boards. It is not easy to find time to enhance one’s own knowledge, experience and ability. The annual NATA Conference gives each of us time to do this. In the Talmud, the Rabbis teach that we should all take time to rest and study. On the top of the Rabbinic list are: 
Shabbat.  
Daily Torah study.

I add to the list:  
Time for your family.  
Time for yourself.

This issue of NATA Journal is the time for us. Time to reflect on the excellent programming of past NATA conventions and conferences. For those of you in NATA, enjoy the reminders of the past. For the others who read our Journal, if you find one new idea, one gem to take back with you and use in your rabbinate, your congregation, or your board, this Journal will have been a success.

B’Shalom

Gary S. Cohn, FTA
NATA and the URJ
Ida and Howard Wilkoff Department of Synagogue Management
are pleased to offer the

Congregational Consulting Service

NATA members with longtime professional expertise in the field of temple management work with congregations, board members, and appropriate synagogue personnel. Recommendations or referrals to enhance operations are provided after consultation.

NATA members are available for consultation on:
- Membership: recruitment; retention; communications with members
- Organizational structure: boards and committees; bylaws; staff roles and structures; leadership development
- Finance: dues and system analysis; financial controls; budgets; financial statements; endowments; capital campaigns
- Facility management: insurance; catering; use of facilities
- Personnel: job descriptions; personnel policies; performance evaluation; transitions; personnel manuals
- Construction/remodeling: planning; financing; project management; controls
- Technology: telephones; computer hardware/software; office machines

The consulting fee of up to $750 is waived for URJ member congregations. Synagogues are required to reimburse only the consultant's travel expenses.

Consultations may be requested by completing the form linked to the NATA website (http://rj.org/nata). The completed form should be returned to the Office of Synagogue Management at the URJ. You can also contact Marc Cohen (at 414-352-9288 or marc@cong-shalom.org) or Dale Glasser, Director of the Department of Synagogue Management, (at 212-650-4040 or dglasser@uri.org) for more information.
Refocusing on Membership for NATA Members

by Edward Alpert and Marc Swatez, FTA,
NATA Education Committee Co-chairs, 2004-2005

Three years ago, the NATA Board decided to change the educational format of our conventions with the introduction of a theme to the educational program. In the past, NATA conventions were successful at covering a wide range of topics relevant to our profession, but the model did not allow time to focus thoroughly on any specific subject. In 2002, under the leadership of NATA President Elizabeth Hirsch, we began this new system with the theme “Governance” and were able to uncover more of the substance of that topic. The theme in 2003 was “Finance.” This year, the Las Vegas convention focused our attention on “Membership.”

This new model still allowed us to offer a wide range of other topics through our workshops. These workshops were designed to appeal to both first-timers and the Executive Directors who have been in the field for years. There were 18 different workshops offered at the Las Vegas convention. They were taught by NATA colleagues, leaders of the Union of Reform Judaism (URJ), and a professor from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). Topics ranged from introductions to budgeting and human resources, to sessions on fundraising led by Directors of Development, to the changing nature of Reform worship and sacred aging.

At the 2004 convention, four keynote speakers and three symposia were conducted that dealt directly with the issue of membership. Each symposium had a different format, and two of the symposia were followed immediately by break-out sessions in which participants delved even deeper into the topic and applied it directly to the real life experiences of the Temple Administrator.

Rabbi Daniel Freeland, Vice President of the URJ, gave the opening keynote address. Rabbi Freeland’s presentation sensitized NATA participants to the issue of membership through a detailed macro-level analysis of the National Jewish Population Study. Rabbi Sam Joseph, Professor of Jewish Education and Leadership Development at HUC-JIR, demonstrated the impact that synagogue culture has on Temple membership. Dale Glasser, Director of the Department of Synagogue Management for the URJ, discussed the Executive Director’s role in the creation of members and memories. The theme was brought to a close by Rabbi Richard Address, Director of Jewish Family Concerns for the URJ, who educated NATA members on the changing makeup of our constituents and what we can do on an individual level to respond to these needs.

The first symposium, led primarily by Karen Kushner, Director of the URJ’s Project Welcome, dealt with the issue of Membership Recruitment and was followed by a series of break out groups that dealt with different aspects of recruitment. The second symposium was a round-table discussion of affiliated and unaffiliated lay people from the Las Vegas community. The purpose of this session was to examine membership from the perspective of the general Jewish population and was followed by break-out sessions to discuss the lessons we learned as well as our role as Executive Directors in the membership process. In the final symposium, a panel of Executive Directors shared their experiences and programs with regard to membership retention.

The goal of the entire educational theme of the convention was to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of one central question: “Why do people join, stay in, and leave Temples, and what can Executive Directors, as synagogue professionals, do to make our congregations more attractive?” Rather than examining this issue through the perspective of recruitment, retention, and integration, the NATA Convention challenged our assumptions and encouraged participants to seek out new approaches to this critical issue.

We wish to express our deep gratitude and appreciation to the convention chairs, all of our guest presenters, and especially the NATA Education Committee for their incredible dedication, energy, and insights throughout this endeavor.
Evolution and Transformation in Temple Membership

by Rabbi Richard F. Address,
Director, URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns

I wish to look at the issue of the transformation of membership from the perspective of our department and reflect upon some of the issues that we are seeing. Some of this has evolved as a result of our work in developing the Aleph-Bet of marriage pre-marital education project which allowed us to study and analyze the past decade and a half of population studies within the Jewish community. As important and revealing as the steady stream of statistics may be, they are merely indicators. Transformation, change, evolution—in order to be meaningful—is not the result of studies and charts. Rather, it is the result of the power of individuals to be together in relationship and thus community. Numbers and flow charts do not reveal the n'shamah and the need of that n'shamah to connect with others.

The organizing principle of our department is the creation of congregations as Caring Communities. This is based on a theological foundation of what we call the “theology of relationships.” We believe that the most powerful thing we can create within the context of our synagogues are sacred relationships. In fact, we believe those relationships are the key to creating a community, maintaining membership, and ensuring a meaningful future. The power of those relationships, often forged in moments of great joy or deep crisis, transcend the building, a program, and even the clergy as the glue that maintains our people’s affiliation and commitment to the synagogue. How we establish a climate of caring and relationship will determine the type of community we create. The need for a spiritual community that values, enhances, and affirms these relationships—regardless of the level of Jewish knowledge of the member—is never more necessary than in today’s person-centered society that often mocks community, elevates the needs of the individual over that of the community, and creates barriers between individuals and generations. We need connections, we seek community, we crave relationships, and we will seek them out. “Spiritual growth,” as David Ariel in his book Spiritual Judaism reminds us, “is not just personal. It involves the search for the connection with others.”

The evolution and transformation of our synagogues and our membership begins with the creation, enhancement, and support of personal sacred relationships, slowly, one relationship at a time. Over time, this helps to transform an entire community into a Caring Congregation. And the openness to that relationship-based community begins with each and every one of us.

Look no further than our own prayerbook to find the compelling reading that reminds us that each person enters the sanctuary with a different need. Some hearts are glad, some rejoice, some are weighed down with anxiety and concern, some are troubled, and some are searching. Yet, the final paragraph reminds us: “May we in our common need and striving gain strength from one another as we share our joys, lighten each other’s burdens, and pray for the welfare of our community.”

In doing this, our synagogues stand as the antidote to the secular American culture in which we and our members spend most of our time. This culture, so pervasive in its impact, and consumerist in its mentality, reflects that “me”-centered orientation that stands in opposition to the spiritual ecology we seek to create. This creative tension that exists between American culture and Jewish life is helping to create a new American Judaism. In this is the reality that we are Americans. And, as the study guide on the demographics reveals, it is the synagogue—and not the family—that is the last, best hope of transmitting Jewish values, beliefs, and culture to a Jewish future.

This age of transition is so difficult to examine because we are living it. Yet what does seem clear is the impact of American culture. In a challenging new book called The Transformation of American Religion, author Alan Wolfe traces the impact of this culture on the entire religious fabric of modern America. He cites the change inherent in our communities regarding the very basic relationship we have with God, noting that contemporary trends reflect the fact that “the reasons for observance have as much to do with the needs of the person as with the commands of an authoritative deity.”

So, we ask, where is God in our contemporary life?
Are we becoming so Americanized that we confuse personal spirituality with religious commitment? Do we seek to sell our synagogues to prospective new members the way corporations sell their product, and in doing so do we sell our own authenticity?

Brandeis Professor Sylvia Barak Fishman in her *Jewish Life and American Culture* notes the coalescence of the American and Jewish cultures into one. She writes, "In coalescing American and Jewish values, many American Jews—including some who are very knowledgeable and actively involved in Jewish life—no longer separate or are even conscious of the separation between the origins of these two texts."

Likewise, Eisen and Cohen's *The Jew Within* points to this personal-vs.-people tension (*yichud-yachad*) when they write that individual, subjective identity has, in many ways, replaced identity forged through community. They note that Jews in their 30s, 40s, and 50s find less meaning in communal expressions of Jewish identity (institutional identity, philanthropy to Jewish organizations, attachment to Israel, and political activity) than their parents. "In broad strokes" they write, "that which is personally meaningful has gained at the expense of that which is people- hood-oriented. American Jews today are relatively more individualistic and less collectivist. Taken as a group, their patterns of belief and practice are more idiosyncratic and diverse, less uniform and consensual. No less important, they regard the ever-changing selection of Jewish activities and meanings from the broad repertoire available as part of their birthright as Jews. They celebrate the autonomy of this choosing and do not worry about its authenticity. Indeed, they welcome the change in the pattern of their Judaism as a new stage in their lifelong personal journey."

This may be viewed, in an ironic way, as Reform Judaism's ultimate victory of its emphasis on personal autonomy. For we need to ask if we, as a movement, have become so wedded to the American belief in personal autonomy and individual rights that we have forgotten the power and passion of community and people- hood. Have we become a community that says: It is my experience, my needs, and my feelings that really determine the authenticity of my actions and beliefs?

The recent election raises this question in another way. Have we become the final product of liberal religious traditions that emerged from the European Enlightenment and American autonomy? And if this is true (as we are being told), how will this play out against what we seem to be observing as a new American social and religious fundamentalism? Are we losing our own unique Jewish n'shamah?

An additional challenge is the reality that the time people now spend as members of our congregations is shrinking. The population studies have clearly shown that the window of opportunity we have to impact our people is steadily declining. Our people join our congregations at a later age and leave at an earlier age. The affiliation gaps that we have written about leave us increasingly less time to make an impact. The stakes are higher.

We are marrying later and delaying having children. Thus, it is not unusual for members joining for the first time in order to enroll their children in your school to be not in their late 20s, but in their mid-30s.

One of the unintended consequences of beginning our project on Sacred Aging was to discover that there seems to be a developing trend for too many members in their late 50s and early 60s to leave membership—just as their life-cycle spiritual needs have been satisfied.

The project is also giving rise to the creation of new traditions and rituals that speak to the Jewish older adult, our new majority. New traditions for caregiver support, and new rituals for life-stage transitions such as chronic illness, entering an assisted-living facility, older-adult cohabitation, and more, demonstrate that 21st-century Judaism must speak to adult life experiences that may be part of our lives, not over a one- or two-decade span, but rather over three, four, or more decades of life.

How we see ourselves and how we are seen often impacts how our members see us and how prospective members view us. This may mean that we re-think how one

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becomes a member, or re-vision how we approach the high costs of being Jewish and the barrier that this sometimes presents to certain aspects of our community.

Likewise, we may have to revisit on an institutional level what defines a congregation. This is being made necessary by the rise in new forms of congregations, entities being created in retirement communities, active-adult communities, assisted-living facilities, and others, all of which may signal new forms of synagogue and URJ outreach.

The shrinking affiliation window points out the need for us to establish means through which we can create significant relationships and establish a truly Caring Community—a kehilat chesed. Again, this often starts with small steps, but small steps, done over a long period of time, help create a mood and send a message of community.

Ask yourself how your congregation welcomes and involves people. Do we invite them to the new members’ Shabbat and then forget about them, or do we develop an ongoing system that calls them, engages them, and brings them into the life of the community?

How many of our congregations spend as much effort in training new members to be a part of our community as we do in training 13-year-olds for bar and bat mitzvah? How many temples develop programs of enrichment and support for newly marrieds or create inter-generational mentoring programs that make use of the vast untapped spiritual capital that resides in the life experiences of our older adult members?

The diverse nature of the new Jewish family demands that we reach out to the increasing varieties of families. How do we welcome gay and lesbian Jews? The transgenders (a question more relevant given the societal shift in this last election)? Do we provide support for the newly single or the divorced? Do we seek to see how the stresses and strains of blending families, often interfaith blended families, impact membership and community?

How do we begin to create a caring and supportive environment for young people and parents who deal with issues of self-destructive behaviors?

Do we laud an educational system that teaches only to the test—the satisfactory completion of the bar or bat mitzvah—rather than educating for the creation of a total Jewish soul?

Do we worry about family values instead of celebrating the value of the family—no matter what shape or form that family takes?

Are we developing significant caring and support systems for caregivers? Do we reach out to shut-ins and the marginal? Do we develop electronic means of communication so that those who cannot get to the synagogue can learn Torah and attend a service? Do we break down barriers to synagogue life for the disabled?

Many of you are doing some of these things already. The success of the Caring Community program has helped transform the culture of many of our congregations. And, as many of you know, this does not need to cost the congregation huge amounts of money. The cost is time, which, for many of our people is more precious than money! Increasingly, boards of congregations, or Caring Community committee people call each member twice a year to wish them a happy New Year or a joyous Pesach, using

NATA Placement Service

800-966-NATA (tel.)
360-887-1118 (fax)
NATAORG@hotmail.com
that time to maintain personal contact. This need to keep in constant contact is vital. Our experience has taught that the congregation membership profile changes about every five years. New family dynamics occur, and new needs arise. The child preparing for bar or bat mitzvah this Shabbat will be going to college in five years. Parents who are healthy and vital now may, five years from now, need care and support in ways that fundamentally change the dynamic of a family and that family’s relationship with the congregation. Yet few congregations update demographic profiles on a regular basis. The leadership itself is often out of touch with the realities of the congregation.

Here is where you, leaders and members of NATA, can be so valuable. You often see trends emerging and issues developing before the Board and the clergy. You are key to the concept of keeping a congregation’s leadership aware of the realities of life and what may be needed to meet the future needs of your community.

In making sacred connections with our people, we open the door for the value of mitzvot. No matter how we look at any aspect of our work, the doing of mitzvot must be an essential element. We are reminded daily of how a congregation can create relationship-based mitzvot—indeed, it is presented as an obligation, not a choice! We need only look at the “Elu d’varim” prayer, a blueprint for creating a Caring Community, to be reminded that these life moments are to be celebrated and supported through community and relationships. It is often in the doing of these sacred deeds that the most powerful relationships are created, and as a result the giver and receiver of the mitzvah become even more motivated to want to give back to the community that allowed the relationship to evolve. This concept we have found to be one of the greatest benefits in developing a true Caring Community program. Once these relationships take hold, the individuals are much less likely to leave the community. They have been touched in a profound way, and the synagogue community becomes more than just the place where you get your lifecycle requirement fulfilled.

Something else may lie at the root of why sacred relationships are so vital to our search for meaning. It is a concept that is basic to us as creatures created in the image of God. Fundamental to who we are as human beings is, I believe, a basic fear of being alone. Perhaps, as some have argued, this is linked to the realization that we are all mortal. For us Jews, this discussion leaps from the study of Genesis 3 and our initial understanding that, while we may wish to live forever, we will not, and that our life is about answering God’s initial question in that chapter, “Where are you?”—and then seeking meaningful ways to model our fundamental relationship, which is with God.

So, I remind myself, and us all, of the power and importance of being in a relationship with other people, of the necessity of relationships, of the centrality of intimacy and love. We can transform members, congregations, and our own selves by seeing the divine in each encounter and infusing each individual with a sense of dignity, value, and worth that is at the heart of the Jewish value system.

Our own texts, as usual, give us the insight. The Torah portions of this time of year speak to personal transformation. Avram becomes Abraham, and Yaakov becomes Israel. Further on in the Tanach, Moses is called, as are prophets and sages. An individual transforms and, in doing so, contributes to the transformation of a community. And each transformation begins with the realization that in one’s alone-ness and need rests the potential for God’s presence. Just as Jacob dreams and comes to know that God—the potential for meaning, purpose, and transcendence—has always been with him, but his soul was not yet ready to know it. We come to know God through the relationships we create, and those relational help shape and transform ourselves, and our communities.

Each transformation involves risk, wrestling, fear, faith, and doubt. But, in the end, the answer for our ancestors is the same answer to which we strive: May it be God’s will that we have the courage to say to ourselves, our leadership, and our people: Hineni; here am I.

This article is excerpted from a speech presented at the 2004 NATA Convention.
Creating a Culture of Welcome: Greeting and Hospitality

by Jeanne M. Kort, FTA, Executive Director, Congregation Beth Torah, Overland Park, Kansas

"These are the obligations without measure, whose reward, too, is without measure ... hachnasat orchim, to welcome the stranger (literally, 'bringing in the guest')."

The Jewish value of hachnasat orchim is at the core of synagogue membership, for both potential and long-term members. The way an individual is greeted and welcomed into the synagogue community may have long-lasting effects on that person’s personal journey.

Synagogue 2000, a national not-for-profit institute dedicated to revitalizing and re-energizing synagogue life in North America, teaches the importance of welcoming the stranger. In its curriculum, Sacred Community: Kehillah Kedoshah, are the following points about the role of greeting in the synagogue:

- Accept the other. The unconditional acceptance of whoever walks into the synagogue is the hallmark of a culture of community. Everyone is made in the image of God and deserves to be accepted into the community.
- Recognize the presence of the other. Don’t ignore anyone. Don’t make anyone feel like an interruption, that they are less important than the conversation you are having or the task you are completing.
- Approach people with an attitude of welcome. Be enthusiastically friendly. Make the first move. Have your body language match your words: Make eye contact. Maintain eye contact. Smile, or nod, or show empathy in some other way.
- Greet the other. In the synagogue, offer the appropriate greeting in addition to the more usual “Hello, how are you? What’s new?” Add: “Welcome,” “Shabbat Shalom,” or a holiday greeting. Make the greeting personal, such as “How are the kids?” or “Mazal tov!” or “I’m sorry for your loss.”
- Offer assistance or guidance or directions as appropriate. “What can I do for you?” Help the physically challenged. Assist visitors with children.
- Teach the other. By greeting everyone warmly, you will establish a climate of welcome, and others may pick up your model of greeting. The Rabbi can encourage this from the pulpit by asking everyone to turn and greet the people around them.

The importance of welcoming and greeting is not just for potential members. The value of greeting should be extended to everyone who comes into the synagogue. A long-term member may feel as strange in the surroundings as someone who is entering for the first time. They often feel that, even though they are members, they do not know anyone. Regulars can become a part of the culture of welcome by understanding the value of reaching out to others. The synagogue is a spiritual center. Those who practice the art of hospitality not only fulfill an important mitzvah with their act, they also open the door to the possibility of a spiritual experience for those they welcome.

Two examples of extreme hospitality in today’s world are Chabad and the Christian megachurches. Both elevate the value of welcoming in their communities. Both encourage their regulars to be involved. Walk into worship at Chabad, and you will be immediately embraced by the community. You will be offered a place to share Shabbat lunch. Chabad regulars do not view strangers as intrusions. They view them as seekers. Welcoming them into their community is one of their highest priorities. Megachurches make room for the visitor with prime parking space, and individuals to greet and sit with newcomers to answer questions. Both cultures place a high value on the work of the regulars who reach out and welcome. They understand that bringing someone along on their spiritual journey is important to their own journeys.

All synagogues would benefit by nurturing a culture of welcome. If every individual is made in the image of God, then meaning in life is to be felt and discovered through close human relationships. Greeting is the entry point for making this happen.
# NATA Members with FTA Designations

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# NATA’s 2004 Award Winners

Since 1988, NATA has been honoring members for extraordinary achievements, and 2004 was no exception. The awards committee, chaired by Joyce Engel, consisted of Nancy Drapin, Brian Rissinger, Burt Dubowy, Ron Tolin, and Terry Taubman. Together, these members selected the following NATA Award Winners for 2004.

**Service to Judaism: Gary Simms, FTA**

**Service to NATA: Gary S. Cohn, FTA**

**Service to the Community: Eli Montague, FTA**
The Riverway Project: Creating Community

by Daniel Soyer,
Executive Director, Temple Israel, Boston, Massachusetts

The Riverway Project takes its name from an urban parkway along which Boston's Temple Israel is situated. The project's goal is to reach out to unaffiliated young adults and facilitate the creation of a Jewish community among them, while also connecting them to the broader Temple Israel community. A unique set of circumstances made this project possible.

- Jeremy Morrison, an entrepreneurial and energetic rabbinic student who had grown up at Temple Israel, decided to pursue an idea to help his contemporaries engage more actively in Judaism. He approached Senior Rabbi Ronne Friedman with the concept.
- The Temple's staff, led by Rabbi Friedman, and its lay leadership were prepared to take a bold step to maintain the synagogue's vitality. At age 150, Temple Israel is proud of its legacy and determined to be successful as an urban congregation. As the Boston area's Jewish population has diffused throughout the suburbs during the last 40 years, suburban congregations have grown, and Temple Israel's membership has declined. More than 2,000 families were affiliated in the 1960s; in 1999, when the Riverway Project began, membership was barely holding steady at about 1,400.
- A philanthropist from the Temple Israel community, who remains anonymous, found the concept of the Riverway Project compelling and worthy of strong financial support over many years.

In 2001 Temple Israel took the plunge, hiring the recently ordained Rabbi Morrison, and made use of generous donor support to get the program going. Through advertising, direct mail, internet postings, and a web page (www.riverwayproject.org), young adults learned about the existence of the Riverway Program. The biggest draw, by far, was the promise of High Holiday tickets as part of an introductory Temple Israel membership through the Riverway Program—at $36 all-inclusive first-year dues for a single person, $72 for a couple. More than 100 new members under age 36 have joined Temple Israel each year since the program's inception.

Rabbi Morrison, for whom the project is a full-time job (although his rabbinic responsibilities include some non-Riverway activities), designs and often implements programs for these new members. He points out that most of the programming ideas come from young adults themselves. “What we’ve found is that if you ask people what sorts of things they want to do, they come up with the answers. We’ve created our program by asking people what they want.”

Thus, while the Temple’s clergy conceived a special High Holiday study session for young adults and a monthly Bible study program called “Torah and Tonics” (“tonics” being a New England term for soft drinks), most of the program ideas came from Riverway members themselves. These programs include “Neighborhood Circles,” in which young adults who live in the same

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NATA-SCHMOOZE
@shamash.org

... a familiar e-mail address for those of us who subscribe to it. On it, we find a place to ask questions and the answers to our questions. It’s a place to turn for support and guidance, to learn from and share with one another.

This e-mail discussion group is limited to regular, senior, and courtesy members of NATA who are currently serving as temple administrators in temples or synagogues on a full- or part-time basis.

Subscriber information can be found at:
http://rj.org/nata/schmooze.html

For more information about NATA-SCHMOOZE, contact: Eli Montague, FTA, at emontague@tfi-stl.org.
neighborhood get together for Kabbalat Shabbat services and study at someone’s home, led by Rabbi Morrison, or put together potluck Shabbat dinners on their own. Riverway members proposed is “Riverway Tots”—where parents with young children are invited to join the Temple Preschool’s Friday morning Shabbat sing-along, and then have an hour-long play group.

Other innovative ideas, suggested by Riverway members, and developed jointly by members and the Temple’s staff, include “Salsa Under the Sukkah” (a dance with a live salsa band in the sukkah, decorated with chili peppers and lights), a Tu B’Shevat wine tasting, “Soulfood Shabbat,” a monthly Friday night Shabbat experience with contemporary liturgical music played by professional musicians, and “Mining for Meaning,” intensive study at neighborhood gatherings. Communication about these programs and sign-up, when necessary, occurs largely by email and through the Riverway’s web page. Of course, Rabbi Morrison also spends significant time simply meeting one-on-one with prospective and current Riverway members, helping them make connections, mostly among their peers but also with other people and programs at the Temple.

As noted above, first-year membership is $36 for single adults and $72 for two-adult households. At the end of the introductory year, Riverway members receive a letter regarding membership renewal. The letter [see next page] emphasizes the Temple’s commitment to retaining all people who wish to stay affiliated, regardless of financial means, but it also discusses the importance of membership contributions as the financial pillar upon which all of the Temple’s activities and good works depend.

With several years’ experience under our belt, we have found that from 25% to 50% of those who join the Temple through the Riverway Project opt to stay affiliated for another year. And of those who stay the second year, more than 85% stay a third year. We refer to those who stay past the first year as “core members,” and have found that the average dues per core member have increased each year. As the table accompanying this article shows, core membership has grown to 138 households, generating dues revenue of nearly $83,000. While this revenue is significant, and promises to become more so, we still depend on generous donor support to cover all the program’s costs, which include a rabbinic position, administrative support, and program expenses.

Financial viability is a key consideration, but there are other benefits. People who have come in through the Riverway Program now represent about 10% of the Temple’s membership, which has grown overall, thanks to the Riverway Project. They have brought energy and a wealth of talent to a variety of committees, particularly to our social action efforts. Dozens of young people, single and attached, attend Friday Kabbalat Shabbat services. Two members of the current Board of Trustees came in through the Riverway Project. The vitality and excitement of young adults congregating is palpable throughout our 80-year-old building on nights that Torah and Tonics takes place—not to mention the reverberations of Salsa Under the Sukkah! We like to believe that the Riverway Program has been good not only for Temple Israel, but for all the

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young Jewish adults whose contact with a synagogue, even if only for a single year, has reaffirmed a connection to Jewish heritage and values, and may someday contribute to ongoing affiliation with a synagogue.

We have learned several valuable lessons from the Riverway Project, with application to other membership initiatives and programs:

- The direct involvement of a Rabbi gives special cachet, especially from a member’s perspective.
- Using a ground-up, community-organizing model to design activities helps develop good programs and a greater sense of ownership among the program’s constitu-

Sample Letter: Renewal of Membership After First Year

Now that you’ve had a year of connection to Temple Israel through the Riverway Program, we hope you will want to continue that connection in the new membership year, which begins on July 1. One component of connection to Temple Israel is financial support.

Why financial support? Obviously, it costs money to hire rabbis and educators, to buy and maintain a building, and support all the worship, education, social action, and other activities. It costs lots of money: If you divided the total budget of Temple Israel by the number of member units the result is $2,000 per unit.

It’s not fee for service! A synagogue community isn’t like a health club, where each member pays for services received. At Temple Israel, some people pay more than $2,000 to support the synagogue and some pay less. Anyone who wants to be affiliated is welcome—regardless of how much money he or she contributes. Thanks to strong financial support from many of its members Temple Israel provides education, worship services and support of individual families experiencing loss, crisis, or illness. As a community we aid the needy, fight for justice, and promote goodness in the world.

Your financial support strengthens our community in fulfilling its mission. This is the true meaning and highest benefit of membership.

So, what are we asking from you? First, we want you to remain affiliated with Temple Israel. Second, we encourage you to lend the financial support that strikes the right balance between this institution’s need for resources and your capacity to contribute. We realize that you may be saddled with school loans, high rent, and a low-paying (but hopefully rewarding) job.

Our dues schedule is enclosed. If the amount shown corresponding to your age and family situation doesn’t work for you, we suggest using .5% of household income as a guide. (For example, if your household income were $30,000, then your annual contribution to the Temple would be $150.) If the .5% guideline isn’t viable, please contact me (617-566-3960 or dsoyer@tisrael.org) and we will work out a suitable arrangement. You may make payments in installments. Most emphatically, we want you to remain a member. Finances are not the determinative factor.

We hope your connection with Temple Israel has enhanced your life and strengthened your own sense of yourself as a Jew. Thank you for all you have already contributed to our community. We look forward to a wonderful year with you!
ency. We have used a Temple staff person in a community organizer role not only in creating Riverway Project programs, but also in developing our Temple's social action agenda. Under this approach, members meet and talk about their concerns, priorities, and goals. They develop consensus regarding the items on which they want to take action, with policies and programs emerging from that consensus. In this model, the Rabbi or staff person is a facilitator and a connector, but not necessarily the person providing the vision or setting the goals.

- Members respond to programs that are neighborhood-based. In an urban setting such as ours, where the Temple draws memberships from neighborhoods both within Boston's city limits and the greater metropolitan area, programs that connect members with other Temple members in their own localities are popular.
- Even young adults want more than the opportunity for social interaction. They are hungry for opportunities to study and worship—especially in settings that they have had a hand in creating.
- Good in-reach is the foundation of good outreach. Programs and activities that excite members generate a buzz, drawing more people in.
- Synagogues' traditionally expressed expectations about dues, building funds, etc., appear to pose a barrier to many potential members. Remove these requirements and many will join; and many of those who join, ultimately, will make a financial contribution.

A central question, yet to be answered conclusively, is: Will the financial contributions continue to grow among those who joined the Temple through the Riverway Project? Our generous donor continues to support the program, but our goal is to wean ourselves from this support and, while the trends seem favorable, we're not there yet. Nevertheless, the Temple is attempting to apply the lessons we have learned. For example, as we seek to gain new members among empty-nesters and older adults, we won't create programs and hope for people to come. Instead, we have talked to current members, often at meetings in their homes, about the sorts of things they want from the Temple, and we will base our actions on what they have told us. We will likely keep a Rabbi in a high-visibility role as we reach out to new members—but that role will be one that facilitates relationships among members and strengthens connections within our community. Vitality comes from members who are excited and motivated to deepen their connections to the Jewish community. The spiritual wellsprings feeding that excitement exist in us all, regardless of age.

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<th>Riverway Program by the Numbers</th>
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* The Temple introduced its young-adult membership rates in its 2000-01 fiscal year, although the full Riverway Program began the following year.
** Figures for FY 04-05 are estimates.
*** "Core Members" refers to member units that have remained affiliated past the introductory year.
Being a Welcoming Congregation

by Loree B. Resnik, FTA, Executive Director, Suburban Temple-Kol Ami, Cleveland, Ohio

A few years ago I served as the NATA representative to what was then the Union of American Hebrew Congregation’s Outreach Commission. I had the wonderful opportunity to work with Dru Greenwood, then the Director of the Department of Outreach, to publish a guide I thought would be helpful to our movement. I was invited to attend the Commission’s Executive Committee Meeting in New York to give a presentation on the possibilities of that guide that was designed as a partnership between NATA and Outreach that would help each congregation, its Temple Administrator, and its membership committee in addressing all the issues of welcoming the stranger into congregational life.

The day before, I had an experience that crystallized my thinking on the role of the Temple Administrator or Executive Director in that process. My husband and I decided to visit Ellis Island, where our families had first entered this country. We were puzzled by the lack of lines but asked the booth operator for two tickets. In a rude and sullen way, she explained that Ellis Island was closed to visitors that day. A benefit was being held in the evening, and because Hillary Clinton would be attending, they needed to set up security all day. In an epiphany, I thought, “This woman is the gatekeeper to Ellis Island. She has closed the doors to us, treating us rudely with no thought of our disappointment—ironically, just as others had kept many of our ancestors on Ellis Island, unable to enter the United States.”

We very often are the gatekeepers of our congregations. Whatever we do in outreach and affiliation, in working to make our congregations welcoming ones, we are working at keruv, drawing near the stranger, and this has always been a mitzvah central to Judaism. It deals with how we welcome the Jew by choice, Jews of color, and the non-Jewish spouses of members. Certainly, we cannot leave out those who are a part of us and always have been, and yet feel like strangers. These are adult singles, widows and widowers, and gay and lesbian singles and couples.

Let’s go back to the gatekeeper concept. Karen Kushner, working with the Union for Reform Judaism’s Department of Outreach and Affiliation, has reworked and developed some tools that can help us all. [See story on page 18.] We can look at assessment scales that help us determine whether we actually do the right things in attracting, recruiting and, of course, in welcoming. We can look at how we treat visitors and newcomers, what kinds of programming we provide to do this, and how welcoming our building facilities are. There are congregations, for example, that have wheelchairs in their lobby seating group. Why do they do that? To show that those with disabilities are part of the culture of that congregation. What an important message that sends!

When photographs are displayed, do we look for non-traditional families as our “poster children,” or do we choose only those who mirror the stereotype of the Jewish

The NATA Web Site: Log On!

Have you visited the NATA web site? If not, log on at http://jrj.org/nata.

Major sections include the Journal; convention information; FTA certification, papers, criteria, and information; officers; and the mission statement. You can also find information on the NATA Placement and Consulting Services. Two other sections include Judaic and other internet resource links, including links to other web sites that contain information of interest and help to NATA members.

New information is always being added, and suggestions are always welcome, as is assistance in our goal to make the web site more interactive.
family: mother, father, and two children who "look Jewish" (whatever that might mean today).

We need to assess our worship experiences and how they welcome others. My congregation's Rabbi, Eric Bram, leads our Hebrew service prayers at a pace that is inclusive, understanding that many of our members are just beginning to learn Hebrew and may never have heard it before coming into our sanctuary. It is, of course, truly important that each and every visitor is warmly welcomed in the lobby. Signage needs to be clear, and Board Members and others can serve as greeters who not only say hello, but find someone to sit with the newcomer. The oneg Shabbat can either be a celebration, in its true meaning, or an awkward time, when first-timers stand alone, and no one speaks to them.

As we welcome these people, it is my hope that we are clear as to what they can be a part of. That means that policies regarding the role of non-Jews in the synagogue must be understood by the Board of Trustees, the membership committee, everyone on the Temple staff, the Religious School faculty, and anyone else who needs to know. Obviously, that includes those affected by those policies. In a sensitive and caring way, your clergy can certainly share this with those congregants. But it is important that the Executive Director be able to articulate and, yes, feel comfortable with and defend those policies as well.

As our membership changes, with more and more non-traditional families, more singles, and couples who no longer live close to family, the Temple becomes an extended home. It is unlikely that a single adult will build a sukkah. However, he or she can be personally invited to join in the sukkah building at Temple. This is not an event only for young families. We need to create new, personal rituals that let empty-nesters celebrate Chanukah even though their grandchildren are living 3,000 miles away. These Jewish holidays have become times of sadness for many. We can help them create a new family—a Temple family—with whom they can bring back the joy. Temple Administrators can help make that happen.

We are very much in the center of synagogue life, and as such we carry an awesome responsibility. We can think about that signage, that accessibility, the disabled seating sections, a person at the curb to help those who are dropped off get in and out of the car.

We are very much in the forefront of the governance of our congregations. As such, we can have at least a seat at the table in discussing the role of non-Jews in the synagogue and how we transmit that message. We can join the clergy in being the voice of the ger, the stranger, in synagogue life. We can help committee chairs in making invitations welcoming to all, in not pricing events per couple, but per person, in discouraging obviously "couple-only" programs. We can be certain our membership applications don't use language that is off-putting to gay and lesbian couples and families.

We are the supervisors of our clerical staffs. As such, we need to train them to answer the questions that will surely come their way and to understand that, no matter what their faith, they are the gatekeepers to Judaism for the person on the telephone. The Shalom Guide, the joint publication of NATA and the Outreach Department, was created for this purpose, among others. Each new staff member can be trained by using this booklet, and new Administrators can better learn their own role.

We are celebrating an ancient heritage, in modern times. We have new kinds of celebrants. Our interfaith marriages are also interracial. Our spouses are not just Caucasian Christians with whom we attended college. They are Asian, Latino, and African-American. They are Buddhist and Muslim.

Our children are blonde boys and Chinese girls who were brought into freedom and Judaism at the same time. I was introduced to one such girl, who was consecrated in our congregation this past autumn, when she said to me, "Hi! I'm Hannah Rose Friedman. I'm Chinese, I'm American, and I'm Jewish!"

This is the face of outreach and affiliation. These are the new faces of Judaism, and it is our responsibility as Temple Administrators and Executive Directors to put smiles on them. May we all be up to the challenge.
The Jewish Future: Challenge Your Assumptions

by Karen Kushner,
Director, URJ Project Welcome

I know a young woman in San Francisco who is Jewish and black. She is not Ethiopian, she was not adopted by her parents, she is not a Jew by choice. She has been a Jew every minute of her life. She grew up in a Jewish home and went to religious school and Jewish camps. She was bat mitzvah. As an adult she crossed the country for her first job and joined a synagogue. Every time she reads from the Torah, she is asked by quizzical congregants at her new congregation how it is that she knows Hebrew so well?

We now know from the National Jewish Population Study that a tenth of Jews are Jews of color: Black, Asian or Hispanic. Jews of color are our partners and our children, they are the partners of our children and our parents and our siblings. They are Jewish professionals, administrators, cantors and rabbis.

When we see African Americans, Latinos and Asians walk through our synagogue doors we must not assume they are people who work for the bar mitzvah family. It is time to start assuming they are Jews!

This is about changing assumptions. Our inner picture of a Jew needs radical correction. It is about making the invisible visible.

We must educate our communities about the Jewish diversity in our own synagogues. One congregation made a photo collage of the membership with short stories of each member’s Jewish journey. Each month more photos and stories were added. It became a gathering place before meetings and services as members read stories of people they didn’t know and made discoveries about people they had known for years. The bonus was that anyone entering the building was greeted by the smiling faces of the congregants: old and young, white, black, Asian and Latino singles and families large and small.

Now I know that I am preaching to the choir, but despite all the braggadocio of the Reform Jewish community we have not done a very good job of being welcoming. The National Jewish Population Study tells us that less than half of adult Jews belong to synagogues. Yes, I know that most of those (39%) belong to Reform synagogues and we deserve to pat ourselves on the back, but no one should feel satisfied once they realize that the other half are not in a synagogue.

As Jewish leaders and professionals, we have betrayed a sacred trust. No justification for any commandment in the Torah is mentioned more times than “because you were strangers in Egypt,” yet our advertisements and our programming focus on only a small segment of those who could be part of our community.

Yes, I know the retort that 80% of those who are not members at the time of the NJPS study have been or will be part of a synagogue at some time. And we all know when that time is: the three years leading up to their child’s bar mitzvah. So we do have them as members for a while. But they come only to get a service that we provide, and then they leave having confirmed that synagogues have nothing else that they want or need.

We miss an opportunity to integrate new members when we have nothing and do nothing that incorporates them into the community once they have joined. People need more than announcements of classes and events to feel like they are a part of the community. It takes time and personal connections for new members to truly join the social fabric and absorb the culture of the synagogue community.

Everything We Know About What Jews Look Like Is Wrong

One morning I went with Jonathan and his partner to the mikvah for the blessing of their youngest child which would bring the boy into the covenant with his brother and his parents. Picture this: All four were in the mikvah together; two gay dads and their two biracial adopted kids. The two dads joyously aware of the newly recognized place for them made possible in the Jewish community, and the ability to bring two sons into the Jewish world. Outside in the hall we stood as witnesses bonded by the purity of their joy as they submerged together in the water. When the rabbi finished blessing
them with the Birkat HaCohanim, we all felt blessed. Some of us wept.

These dads want to feel at home in your synagogue. Here is what they tell me they look for to decide which synagogue to join. Will every form I have to fill out say “Husband and Wife” or “Mother and Father”? Will I see a photo of a family anything like us in your bulletin? Will my kids see any families that look like them in the textbooks, posters, or DVDs used in the school? Will the rabbi and teachers in your school speak about families without assuming every family is heterosexual? Did you realize that 15-20% of children adopted by Jewish families today are non-white and 10% of Jewish families are gay or lesbian?

Carol is single and went to a Taste of Judaism class to find out about the religion of the grandparents she never knew. Carol loved what she saw and heard in the Taste class and then went on to take the Introduction to Judaism class. Carol converted the next year. But now, she is lonely and feels awkward at services.

“I don’t get the jokes. The transliterations are so confusing. Everyone seems to have family at holiday times. The interfaith group is all couples and they don’t understand how difficult it is to live a Jewish life as a single woman, I wonder if I made a mistake. I’m thinking of going back to being a Unitarian.”

The National Jewish Population study reported that only a little more than half of Jewish adults are partnered. Ozzie and Harriet are dead. Why are we still stuck in a 1950’s mindset? There is no request that I receive more often than from singles looking for programs.

A few thoughts: Many temples have a dues category for singles but they also need school fees that do not assume two earners for single parents. Single people need to be chairing committees and on the board of directors. We need a Shabbat ritual for singles when everyone else is blessing their partner.

Being welcoming will decide whether the Jewish world grows or shrinks. It is our choice. We must bring in Jews of color and the gay lesbian community. We must acknowledge that single Jewish adults are a majority and not a minority, that Jewish families can have one parent.

We are blessed to have a generation of adult children of the Jews by choice of the last generation who are not named Greenberg and Lefkowitz but are fiercely identified as Jews. Our strength will be in our increasing diversity.

**Interrmarriage Is Good for the Jews**

Fernando is the Catholic Cuban husband of a Jewish woman. He accompanies his wife and daughter regularly to Shabbat services, participates fully in all the family education classes while remaining a dutiful Catholic son. In a discussion about the 613 commandments, other parents sanction the common pattern of ignoring commandments that they find uncomfortable.

“It’s too difficult to keep kosher” says one mother.

“For me it is impossible to keep Shabbat and live in the modern world, I can’t even give up shopping on Shabbat” says a father.

Fernando speaks in his heavily accented English. “I think if we drop one commandment because we don’t like it or it is too difficult, we should find another one that we can do to replace it, so there would always be 613.”

The room falls silent as the parents are floored by the commitment to Judaism behind these words—and their source.

You know the statistics: The National Jewish Population Study reports that half of young Jews who marry marry someone who is not Jewish.

If you have many members who are intermarried consider for a minute that perhaps it is precisely because they are intermarried that this family is in your synagogue. Perhaps, it is the non Jewish partner who has catalyzed the need for a family religion. Think about how this fact changes the Jewish synagogue world. We know that 30% of intermarried couples affiliate with a synagogue and 75%

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of conversionary households affiliate.

Ask yourself, ask any rabbi, cantor or educator about the ones who come to every event, who ask for more programs, who study with their kids at home, at the family education programs, and at adult education classes. Who is it who wants to learn every part of the liturgy so that they can sing along with the service?

The most active and most involved of congregants are frequently Jews by choice. They head committees, come regularly to services, and are not just present but emotionally involved in their Judaism. They sing loudly and joyously, they dance with the Torah without inhibition, they study seriously and ask great questions. They inspire us with their love of our tradition. I bet you see this too.

Last winter I sat on a beit din for a conversion for the first time. The young woman’s voice trembled as she softly answered our questions, and then she went to ready herself for the mikvah. We waited in the hall outside the pool until she descended into the living waters. As her sponsoring rabbi asked her to recite the Shema, I was startled, then moved to tears to hear her clear voice sing the Hebrew words declaring God’s unity.

Whenever I tell the story of the singing coming from the waters, I am as moved as I was on that day. It was her joy that moved me. That she sang the Shema, with joy; to this New Jew, Judaism is a great gift and treasure. This fills me with hope. I want people like her to model Judaism for the next generation.

As my friend Rabbi Ed Feld says, Jews by choice are a gift from God to keep us from being too ethnocentric after the Holocaust and, I may add, to remind Jews of something that the American experience with all its freedoms has made us forget—that we have the freedom to say yes to religion.

Legalizing the Common-Law Jews

Then there are the invisible ones, the “not yet Jews” or common-law Jews. Those who live Jewish lives through their children and partners but have not converted. These common-law Jews who have been living Jewishly with partners for years do not need an Introduction to Judaism class to get them to convert. Because they care about religion and know its importance they learn with their children, decorate their homes, prepare holiday meals and serve on committees.

When I ask them why they haven’t converted, they respond humbly that they don’t know enough! They feel they should know Hebrew, have read theology, studied Midrash. They think they are not fit for conversion because no one has asked them to convert. In our effort to not push, we forget that these folks are from traditions that proselytize; they expect someone to encourage them. They will stay in this state of limbo forever without an invitation.

Every synagogue has conversions, and every one can provide that decision-making moment for someone who is hesitating by creating some special way of celebrating the conversions in your synagogue. A new Jew needs acknowledgement through a public blessing, an aliyah to the Torah, an announcement in the bulletin, a chance to tell their story, all of the above!

Balancing the Jahrzeit List

It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment in the synagogue in Sudbury Massachusetts where I used to daven. The last service before Ne’ilah is the memorial service, with the seemingly endless list of names of friends and neighbors, parents, partners, and siblings. But first one moment of celebration, the reading of a list of the names of all the new Jews of the year. All those born, all those adopted, and all who chose Judaism read together. The entire community is comforted, joyful with each new name, new life for the community.

John grew up Catholic and studied with the Jesuits before concluding that the priesthood was not for him. At university he met Barbara and fell in love with her.

“I fell in love with a Jew. At least in part what I was loving was her Jewishness though I didn’t realize it yet. I came to understand later that much of what I love about
Barbara are qualities shared among many Jews."

Together they raised her daughter into adulthood as a Jew. This is what he says about those who, like him, live a Jewish life for years before they convert: "I think I'm the most typical kind of convert. I'm among the converts who somehow, sometime find that they have settled into a community that they recognize and that recognizes them, a community that they appreciate, that they share values with, can raise children with—that allows them to spiritually breathe. This folding into the community is a slow and gentle process. Then one day you realize that the actual conversion, the turning, the t'shuvah has happened long since.'

A Jew by Any Other Name Is Always a Jew

A friend of a friend works hard for the Jewish people. She has been on the board of directors of her small synagogue for years. She has organized the High Holiday services, made sure there were Torah readers each week, created holiday services and celebrations, and has studied to be a spiritual director. She has received honors and recognition from her Rabbi but she feels stigmatized. Why? Because her family is still referred to as an "interfaith family." "Yes, my husband is Protestant" she says. "But we are a Jewish family!"

According to the Jewish Outreach Institute, there are three kinds of interfaith families: one quarter who raise their children to be Jews; another quarter who raise them in another religion; and the rest who sit on the fence doing some version of both or none.

Dr. Bruce Phillips, a Professor of Jewish Communal Service at HUC-JIR Los Angeles, sees four groups lumped together under the label of interfaith, ranked from easiest to most difficult to bring into synagogue membership.

1. Endogamous couples. Phillips regards a Jew comfortable with a synagogue identity married to a secular Jew or an atheist Jew as an intermarriage. Their differences are greater than a couple with different religions where both partners agree that religion is important.

2. Dual religious couples, couples with one identified Jew and one identified Christian. They most often try to bring both religions into their family. Although they believe that "if one religion is good, then two religions are better"; we all know this plan most often produces superficial education in both religions and identification with neither. Trying to avoid conflict, they pass the conflict to their children by asking them to make the choice. Unfortunately, they may ask us to make a choice too. Will we educate their children when the children are also going to a Christian program? We know that most of these families will not be able to sustain two schedules of religious education for their children and will drop one somewhere along the way. The religion they keep could be Judaism.

3. Secular couples. When a secular Jew marries a secular Christian, they endorse each other's lack of interest in religious affiliation. Their level of Jewish observance is very low while their Christian observance level is close to the middle. Living in Christian America, the default religious observance dominates.

4. Christian supremacy. When a secular Jew marries an active Christian, the strength of the Christian commitment overrides the weaker Jewish identity, and the couple will be Christian. We have no chance of reaching these couples.

Interfaith families are not all the same. And using the same word "interfaith" for all paints those who are raising their children as Jews with the same brush as those who are not. Do we really mean to tell people like my friend that we see her as someone who threatens the future of the Jewish world?

We have declared that children of only one Jewish parent are Jewish, but the family is forever "interfaith"! The family's status continues to be based on the religious identity of the non-Jewish parent. But why that parent and not the other? If we are accepting patrilineal as well as matrilineal descent, if we are working to be welcoming of families like this, why do we preserve this hierarchy?

God created the world with a word. We do too. We want these children to know that they are Jews and that their family is a Jewish family, just with a non-Jewish

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member. This doesn’t mean we pretend that the non-Jewish partner does not exist. As a matter of fact, I would even go further. We need to reward the non-Jewish parents publicly.

A Long-Overdue Thank You

Last Yom Kippur, Rabbi Janet Marder singled out the non-Jewish partners of Jews for honor and gratitude and called them up to the bima with these words: “You are a very diverse group of people. Some of you are living a Jewish life in virtually all respects. Some of you are devoutly committed to another faith. Some of you do not define yourselves as religious at all. You fall at all points along this spectrum, and we acknowledge and respect your diversity. What we want to thank you for today is your decision to cast your lot with the Jewish people by becoming part of this congregation, and the love and support you give to your Jewish partner. Most of all, we want to offer you our deepest thanks to those of you who are parents, and who are raising your sons and daughters as Jews. In our generation, which saw one-third of the world’s Jewish population destroyed, every Jewish child is especially precious. We are a very small people, and history has made us smaller. Our children mean hope, and they mean life. So every Jewish boy and girl is a gift to the Jewish future. With all our hearts, we want to thank you for your generosity and strength of spirit in making the ultimate gift to the Jewish people.”

We must open our eyes. Some of the next generation of Jewish leaders will have been raised by at least one parent who was not born Jewish.

Our Children Are Our Hope, and Our Life

“I’m not at all convinced that children growing up today will choose Jewish lives for themselves in the future!” an acquaintance moaned. Curious, I asked her why she was feeling so pessimistic.

She began talking about Jews with Christmas trees as a terrible portent of the Jewish future.

“It is someone in your family, isn’t it?” I said.

“How did you know?” she blanched. “My sister and her Jewish husband have a tree! Oh, they only use blue lights and hang stuffed animals from it, but they put it up every year. My 5 year old niece, whom I’m very close to, wanted to make me a Chanukah card. She put a tree with a Jewish star on the top as decoration for a card saying Happy Hanukkah! She doesn’t know that Jews don’t have trees for Hanukkah!”

“Well, I said giving her a hug, how lucky she is to have you and your family.”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes. “Did you know that I’m married to a non Jew?”

Is this an unusual circumstance? I don’t think so. Two sisters from the same ambivalent assimilated Jewish family. One daughter marries a Jew and following in her parents’ footsteps, increasing the movement away from Judaism. One daughter marries out.

This is what I see again and again. The intermarried family is the more committed Jewish family. Without the Christian outlook toward religion, the move toward assimilation in the Jewish community could continue and produce a secular Judaism. Christians take religion and religious education seriously because they understand that their children need to have a religion on which to develop a value system.

We Jews may now look more like our Christian neighbors, but we have made a strong turn toward becoming more educated and more committed to preserving the wisdom of the past at least partly because our Christian partners have taught us.

They understand that there is something called spiritual health. They are not skittish when they speak of God. They seek God’s presence in their lives and talk about spiritual experiences. They enjoy Jewish rituals and Jewish worship and make them a regular part of their family life.

Where the Christian parents are clear and positive in their support of Jewish learning and Jewish ritual, the Jewish parents are conflicted and often absent from the family education events. With no spiritual life of their own, they end up neglectful of the spiritual life of their children.
These are the Jewish parents who are joining synagogues. What about the parents who are not sending their children to religious school?

This is the Jewish future I see. I see Jewish children being imbued with spirituality by parents who are Jews, and I see Jewish children being imbued with spirituality by parents who are Jews by choice. I see children grasping the importance of ritual and regular synagogue attendance under the tutelage of their non-Jewish parents who live religious lives that their Jewish partners do not.

These are dramatic and radical changes. The congregations that recognize them and are the most flexible and responsive will become the leaders of the future.

Sixty years ago it was unthinkable that there would be a Jewish army. Sixty years ago it was unthinkable that rabbis and synagogues would not be the center of Judaism. Sixty years ago, it was unthinkable that lesbian women and gay men would be rabbis.

The future belongs to those who can think unthinkable thoughts. This calls for a new mindset—not just a change in programs but an entirely new way of thinking.

Change is essential for the Jewish community, as difficult as it is. But change we must, and change we will because Jewish history demands change and action.

*Just last week I met a man in his 70s who struck up a conversation with me at a bus stop in that friendly San Francisco way. When he heard about my work, he told me this story: “My father was a Jew, but I’m not. When I was 12, I wanted a bar mitzvah, but the rabbi said I couldn’t because my mother was Catholic. All my life I’ve had girlfriends who were Jewish and have always liked Jewish people. I’d like to think I am a half Jew. Do you think that is all right?”*

*It was standing room only in the noisy rush-hour crowd on the #45 bus when I leaned over and said directly into his ear: “You’re not only a half Jew, you’re a whole Jew!”* •

This article is excerpted from a speech presented at the 2004 NATA Convention.