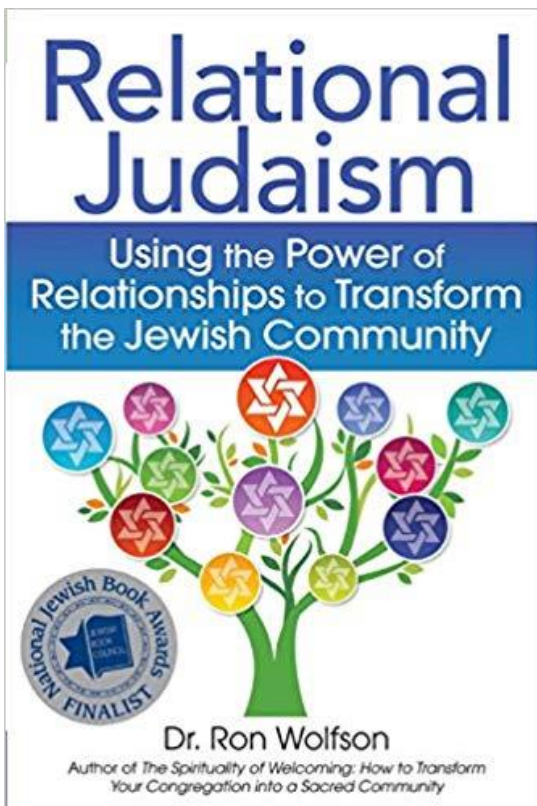


Secrets of building communities: It's all about Relationships

by Dr Ron Wolfson



Recently, I was invited to be scholar-in-residence at what was once one of the largest synagogues in the United States. The congregation was celebrating its 100th anniversary. The campus was dominated by a huge building, built in the 1960s. The sanctuary was enormous, and a labyrinth of hallways led to dozens of classrooms, offices and meeting halls. In the year 2000, the community had no mortgage, no debt and a balanced budget. Most synagogues would love to be in such great shape. Yet, there were signs that the coming decade would be challenging. The building was aging and in need of renovation. The senior rabbi who had served the congregation for decades was retiring. Most ominously, the demography of the community had changed; young people were moving north. The synagogue membership was slowly but surely declining from a high of nearly 1,500 households. The leaders of the synagogue knew that something had to be done. Here's the something they did.

In the year 2000, they decided to borrow one million dollars to invest in the future growth of the congregation.

After the long-serving, beloved rabbi retired, they hired a high-priced rabbi ... who lasted less than two years. That cost a half-million dollars. The other half-million was spent on programming, all kinds of programming – big events, concerts, community lectures with nationally renowned speakers, highly touted initiatives to get more people into the synagogue on Shabbat – all sorts of things. Many of the programs had clever names, good marketing and high appeal to specific segments of the community. Lots of people showed up for these programs and, by all accounts, enjoyed them. And then ... they left.

Nothing was done to change the ambience of the congregation, which was widely considered cold and unwelcoming. Nothing was done to engage the people with others in attendance. Nothing was done to connect individuals with the congregation itself. Nothing was done to find out who they were. Nothing was done to follow up. Nothing was done to convince the members that the institution truly cared about them.

The result: after ten years of this initiative, the congregation was a million dollars in debt, and membership had shrunk to 300 households. By the time I got there, the leaders were kicking themselves, asking me what they could do to reinvigorate their community. I told them what I will tell you. It's all about relationships.

People will come to synagogues, Jewish community centers, federations, and other organizations for programs, but they will stay for relationships. Programs are wonderful opportunities for community members to gather, to celebrate, to learn. There is nothing wrong with programs; every organization has them. But, if the program designers have given no thought to how the experience will offer participants a deeper connection to each other, with the community and with Judaism itself, then it will likely be another lovely evening, afternoon or morning with little or no lasting impact.

For those interested in living a Jewish life and for those professionals and lay leaders seeking to increase Jewish engagement, permit me to put my cards on the table, up front: 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.

What really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage. When we genuinely care about people, we will not only welcome them; we will listen to their stories, we will share ours, and we will join together to build a Jewish community that enriches our lives.

In our rush to turn out numbers, in our frantic search for ways to get people through our doors, our institutions spend most of their time, energy and money devising programs for one target audience or another. "Let's have a lecture series for the seniors!" "How about an afternoon at the zoo for families?" "Why not a once-a-month worship experience with a band?" "A cooking class for the foodies?" These are wonderful programs. They are often done with panache and style. They regularly attract a crowd.

But what happens after the crowds go home? Has anything happened during the time they were at the program to deepen their relationship to the community, to the sponsoring institution, and most importantly, to each other? Or, will they check it off their to-do list, another consumable activity, demanding little or no commitment other than a couple of hours of their time? And, will they continue their relationship with the institution? A rabbi once confided in me, "A woman who was a member of my synagogue for 20 years resigned. I was shocked because she showed up to all of our programs. So, I called her to ask why she was leaving. You know what she said? 'I came to everything, and I never met anybody.'"

Our new goal is served by putting people before programs. Let's learn who they are before we try to figure out what they want. Let's inspire them to see Judaism as a worldview that can inform the many different levels of relationship in their lives. Let's work toward a rededication of our *mishpachah*, our people, to a renewed Relational Judaism.