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FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: A NEW CONCEPT FOR ORTHODOX SYNAGOGUES

Mike Schultz

INTRODUCTION

Some shuls have so many members that many families feel lost in the crowd, unnoticed and disconnected. Some shuls do not have a strong feeling of community. Some shuls have an amazing, dynamic rabbi, yet he takes on everything himself and is headed for a burnout. Some of those same shuls have many uninvolved members who would take on a leadership role and do a great job if they were only approached in the right way. Some shuls find that despite putting a lot of work into their programs, they are still poorly attended and the leadership is unsure why. These shuls and others could benefit from Faith-Based Community Organizing (FBCO).

Over the last fifty years, thousands of churches and shuls around the country have internally strengthened their congregations and externally improved the world around them through a technique called Faith-Based Community Organizing. However, to this writer's knowledge, no Orthodox shuls have fully implemented the use of this powerful tool. The purpose of this article is to introduce the reader to an exciting approach to improving a shul's life in the hope that some readers will consider implementing FBCO in their own shuls.

WHAT FBCO LOOKS LIKE

THE ONE-TO-ONE MEETING

The key component to all FBCO is a one-to-one meeting between congregants in which the participants get to know each other on a deeper level. Although many of our shuls are blessed with a closeness and intimacy that larger congregations can only dream of, we often know each other very well on a surface level without knowing what really drives our fellow congregants. The goal of a one-

to-one meeting is to ask about and hear each other's story—where we come from, what were significant experiences in our lives that shaped who we are today, and what are our current goals.

It is not easy to do a one-to-one meeting, and it takes training and practice. Usually, in a single meeting, one person is asking about the other. A successful meeting requires the person being asked the questions to be willing to open up, something that we are not accustomed to doing in our society, particularly outside low-income communities. From the perspective of the questioner, the keys are active listening and empathy.

Listening means putting aside all of our own personal stresses and concerns and focusing entirely on what the other participant is saying. Active listening requires asking questions, to draw out what lies behind what is being said. “Why do you say that?” “How come it matters to you?” “Is there a story or experience of yours that underlies what you're saying?” In this way, probing without prying, one can find out where the other is really coming from and what is on his or her mind. Empathy means putting oneself in the other's shoes. Everyone's story is different, and none are less valid for being very different from one's own life. In this way, we can really get to know one another with great understanding and without being judgmental.

The goal of the one-to-one meeting, in addition to strengthening relationships by opening up on a deeper level, is to find out what the other's interests are. Not interests as in hobbies, rather interests meaning self-interest, the things people care about most for their own lives. Because Faith-Based Community Organizing is ultimately about moving from relationship-building to taking action, as we will see, a key part of the one-to-one meeting must be learning where the other's self-interest lies, since those are the same areas where the person will be motivated to take action.

Self-interest can generally be broken into two categories: self-preservation and self-realization. Self-preservation refers to the things a person needs for basic survival: The ability to afford housing, food, health insurance, and day school tuition. Self-realization means those things that this person needs to feel fulfilled, and it could include things like a feeling of achievement, advancement in Jewish learning, the opportunity to teach, taking a public stand on a matter one cares about greatly, being a better Jew, or being respected. Somewhere between these two categories lie the particular issues that matter to individuals, and we will consider later what some of the most common issues in our shuls might be.

Thus, the result of a successful one-to-one meeting is that one participant has formed a strong relationship with the other and now has a better sense of where they're coming from and what kinds of things matter most to them.

FBCO ON A SMALL SCALE

Full-fledged FBCO involves hundreds of one-to-one meetings. However, before we look at that method, we will consider using the one-to-one technique in a

limited fashion that has the potential to get a much larger percentage of shul members actively involved in shul life in a way that they find fulfilling and that keeps the current leadership from burning out.

Rabbis and shul leaders should consider setting up one-to-one meetings with members who haven't been so involved in shul life but who the leadership thinks could have a lot to contribute. Similarly, they might look to meet with people who are currently involved in leadership but not finding it fulfilling. By having these meetings, the shul leadership shows that it really cares about the member, who may have been feeling isolated and unvalued, and also learns ways in which it can better involve the member. If, in conversation, one learns that a member really feels fulfilled when he or she teaches others, then the next step would be to find a place for the member within the shul's education program. If one learns that a member feels like an outlier in the current congregation, then perhaps they would be motivated to work on the shul's membership drive to bring in more members like themselves.

It is certainly no *hiddush* that it is a good idea to reach out to the membership, but it seems that this outreach often happens in a variety of formats. We are suggesting, based on many years of experience of those who do FBCO, that following the precise form of the one-to-one meeting will make this outreach more successful. The one-to-one needs to be face to face, with just the two participants, and should usually last 30-45 minutes. This format is more private and longer than the usual conversation, and is certainly more personal. By drawing out people's stories and interests in a way that gets them to reflect on what really matters to them and that helps you understand what they're really about, the leadership will be much more likely to figure out an appropriate way to match the congregant's self-interest with ongoing shul needs.

FULL-FLEDGED FBCO

For the more adventurous shul, FBCO means a multiyear program of relationship-building, leadership development, and taking action on the issues that matter most to the congregation. Although the format varies to some degree from shul to shul, we will present a typical model of full-fledged FBCO in which dozens of shuls around the country have participated.

The commitment to trying out FBCO usually begins on the formal level, with board discussion and approval. From there, the shul forms a core team that is representative of the membership, perhaps ten to twenty people, who commit to doing a set number of one-to-one meetings over a specified time of a month or two. These leaders receive training in doing successful personal meetings and will orchestrate the campaign as it develops. The goals of those one-to-one meetings should include identifying additional leaders. At that point, after about two months, hopefully enough excitement will have been generated to expand the relationship-building across the shul. This may include an event of hundreds of simultaneous one-to-one meetings after shul one week instead of a sermon,

and hopefully transform into an extended campaign of one-to-one meetings and house meetings. House meetings, in which ten members gather together, directed by one of the trained leaders, become more practical than one-to-one meetings as the project grows in scope.

The goal of this expanded relationship building campaign, in addition to enabling the members of the congregation to get to know each other better, should be to identify major issues that come up again and again in one-to-one and house meetings. After three to four months of the expanded campaign, which might successively have one-to-one, then house, then congregation-wide meetings, the two or three most important and most common issues should be identified for the purpose of doing something about them.

There are any number of issues which might come up. Some shuls will choose to focus the conversations all along to a limited area; for example, B'nai Jeshurun, in New York, chose social justice work from the beginning and that's what the meetings focused on. However, it is not necessary to restrict the focus. One suggestion is that the congregation should try to identify two issues, one internal and one external. Internal issues might include membership size, handicapped access of the shul, the educational programming, teenage drug and alcohol use, or how the shul does outreach. Because of all the conversations that went into identifying these issues and the leadership that was developed along the way, the shul can be certain that these are issues of key importance and that shul members will now work to resolve them. External issues might include getting the local school district to pay for busing to or textbooks for the day school, working on zoning permissions to expand the shul, making the local parks handicapped accessible, creating more green space for kids to play in, prescription drugs for seniors, or larger communal issues such as getting affordable housing built or addressing the rising costs of health insurance.

Many of the congregations that have done FBCO on this level have focused on what we might consider larger communal social justice issues. However, for any shul to get excited enough about an issue to want to do something about it, they have to see effecting that change as being in their self-interest. Given that we are focusing on Orthodox shuls, one would hope that being a good, halakhic Jew would be religiously fulfilling for us and we would see it as being in our own interest. Thus, it is perhaps most incumbent on the rabbi to remind the congregation of the Jewish imperative to be involved in bettering the world around them, particularly in areas of housing, food, education, equal rights, health, and the environment.

Once the focal issues have been identified, the congregation should develop an action group for each issue to analyze the issue and determine which steps need to be taken next. Action is critical—some people have a tendency to enjoy speaking a great deal but won't move to action on their own, so it needs to be a clear part of the plan. Others, who put a lot of effort into the conversations, will be very frustrated if there is only talking but no action. For the campaign to be

worth all the time that went into it, it needs to culminate in action and, hopefully, success. Some shuls may be wary of “getting involved in politics,” but that is often the only way to accomplish the things that matter to the congregants. Because so much of the congregation has gotten involved and will support the action steps, the action taken will have the combined power of a whole congregation behind it and will be much more likely to succeed than if the shul had skipped the steps of relationship building and leadership development.

Congregations need not be alone in trying to do all this. There are professional organizers and various groups around the country who can provide the initial training and ongoing guidance both during the relationship building campaign and into developing and carrying out a successful plan of action. A plan of action for one of the external issues, in particular, can be quite complicated, involving determining all the people who have a stake in the decision and what their interests are and how to align their interests with the shul’s. This professional assistance requires some financial commitment by the shul. Additionally, in most major cities there is a broad-based organization of congregations who are all doing FBCO and who commit to working together. National umbrella networks of these organizations include the Industrial Areas Foundation, The Gamaliel Foundation, PICO National Network, and DART, the Direct Action and Research Training Center.

Should a shul consider joining one of these broad-based organizations, it has the benefit of joining their power with the power of dozen of other congregations in the area, leading to the potential for exerting major influence in the local arena. The downside, in addition to cost, is the difficult questions it raises about Jewish–non-Jewish interactions. We feel that in areas of bettering the community, there should be no hesitancy about working together with churches, and in fact this is precisely the primary area in which interaction should be happening. However, given that a common form of action is to bring members of all the congregations together in one place to confront the decision-maker on a particular issue, the halakhic question of entering into a church, which is often the only venue large enough to hold such events, must be considered.

There are also other possible models for the partnerships that a shul engaged in FBCO would want to form. Perhaps once a number of Orthodox shuls have begun participating in FBCO, an Orthodox FBCO network could be formed to share best practices, jointly fund training, and act on issues of common concern, such as Israeli poverty, anti-Semitism, the cost of day school tuition, and continued American support for Israel. Alternatively, shuls might partner with local nonprofit organizations active in the community, and it is this model that we will explore in a brief case study.

CASE STUDY

B'nai Jeshurun (BJ), a Conservative synagogue on the upper west side of Manhattan, has three full-time rabbis and many hundreds of member families, so many that the shul has to work hard to maintain a strong feeling of community. As a synagogue with social justice among its core values and with a sense that its great numbers could bring about significant social change, BJ in 2002 was looking for ways to improve its social justice efforts when it found out about FBCO. After doing their research, the rabbis and board signed on to an effort that would be intensive and long but held the potential to both build community within the shul and transform the way social justice work was done in the shul. Appropriately, they called their campaign "*Panim el Panim*."

BJ followed the full-fledged model described above, beginning with a smaller set of personal meetings and then expanding their efforts with kickoff events for the whole shul on Yom Kippur and Sukkot in which hundreds of congregants simultaneously engaged in one-to-one conversation. After a year of planning and building relationships through one-to-one meetings and house meetings, the congregation identified four areas of broad interest: women's rights, environmental action, economic hardship / healthcare access, and children at risk. They created four action groups, each with a core team of leaders and a number of other committed congregants, and these groups had some significant successes. The work of the children at risk group led to a tutoring partnership between BJ and a nearby public school in Harlem. Most notably, the healthcare access group campaigned for and got a law passed in the city council providing health care for 6,000 grocery store workers and ensuring continued health insurance for thousands more. A law modeled on the BJ proposition has now been introduced in the state legislature.

FBCO on a large scale always requires partnerships, and BJ worked on its own to find the right partners for them. Although the local FBCO organization in BJ's area, Upper Manhattan Together, provided some of the initial training, BJ ultimately chose not to join that larger group. Instead, BJ formed individual partnerships with a number of groups, as well as a long-term partnership for training and action with a coalition of labor, community, and faith groups organized by New York Jobs with Justice. BJ's *Panim el Panim* campaign was very successful at strengthening BJ's community and deepening members' sense of the fundamental Jewish importance of social justice work, and at the same time, it made a significant impact on the well-being of many workers in the community.

DIFFICULTIES

There will be a number of challenges to implementing FBCO that must be overcome:

- Many people may be uncomfortable opening up in a one-to-one meeting, and so the leadership needs to be very honest from the start about the purpose of the meeting.
- There may also be resistance to starting the process in the first place, as there is against many new ideas. There needs to be considerable initial discussion among the board and other lay leaders and a clear decision made to go ahead with the full-scale FBCO.
- There may also be some resistance among those lay leaders who currently hold the “power” in the congregation to engaging in a process that is, in large part, about democratizing the shul. In the full process, there is a long ramp-up period of conversations before any action is taken, and this may leave some people feeling frustrated, but if the leadership is committed to having the conversations lead to action, ultimately the eager members should be satisfied with the result.

SKILLS OR TRAININGS NEEDED

Whether a shul employs FBCO on a small or on a large scale, shul leaders who are involved need to be trained in the process of carrying out one-to-one meetings. For the full FBCO model, leaders also need to learn how to run effective house meetings, how to analyze an issue and come up with a campaign to address it, and how to effectively take action. The FBCO model for taking action, which we did not describe here, varies case by case but has specific frameworks and approaches that are not always intuitive.

THE BENEFITS OF FBCO

There are many benefits to a shul that participates in FBCO, several of which we already alluded to in passing.

- Congregants feel included and valued.
- In a shul where a small number of members seem to dominate the current discussion, the result of FBCO can be a greater feeling of equality of all members.

- More congregants get involved in current shul activities, and greater lay leadership is developed.
- Stronger and deeper relationships develop within the shul.
- Programming develops from the bottom up and always meets congregants' interests. FBCO will not only lead to large campaigns, but the lines of communication it opens will also bring out ideas for ongoing programming. In this way, the programming leadership won't have to guess what people are interested in.
- Some of the most important issues to the congregants get addressed in a well thought out, satisfactory manner.

CONCLUSION

A number of Orthodox shuls around the country have begun exploring the potential of community organizing as a tool for strengthening our communities and improving the world around us. Hopefully, there will soon be several model programs to learn from, demonstrating how these challenges are worked out in practice in an Orthodox setting and sharing great successes to inspire us all in this work.

RESOURCES

Jewish Fund for Justice, www.jfjustice.org

Industrial Areas Foundation, www.industrialareasfoundation.org

Gamaliel Foundation, www.gamaliel.org

DART Center, www.thedartcenter.org

PICO National Network, www.piconetwork.org

B'nai Jeshurun, www.bj.org, Guy Austrian, Director of Social Action/Social Justice, gaustrian@bj.org or 212-787-7600.

Jewish Community Relations Council of Boston // Greater Boston Synagogue Organizing Project, lead organizer Meir Lakien.

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