

“COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING”: An Outreach and Community Development Model for Federations

MAXINE EPSTEIN, LCSW, MAJCS

*Assistant Campaign Director—Major Gifts, Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco,
The Peninsula, Marin, and Sonoma Counties*

The “Community of Learning” program described in this article is an effective model for community building and outreach through Jewish study and learning. Given the challenges of today’s key environmental and philanthropic trends, this program strengthens Jewish identification, increases involvement in the community, and builds strong donor loyalty and philanthropic support for the long term.

Nearly two years ago, when G. L. walked into the regional office of the Jewish Community Federation in Marin County, California, and exclaimed, “I’m looking for a place to put my Jewish heart,” I knew the *Mashiach* was not long in coming. “I have some friends who also have some friends who are interested in creating close-knit families within a supportive Jewish community. Can the federation help us do this?”

On the second Friday morning of every month since the fall of 1996, under the auspices of the Women’s Alliance of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, sixteen women gather together in private homes for two hours of Jewish study and learning. The participants are physicians, business owners, social workers, attorneys, free-lance consultants, and stay-at-home mothers. All label themselves as “assimilated” Jews. Three of the women are not Jewish but are involved in interfaith relationships, some of the women are married to non-Jewish partners, and most describe themselves as having gone away from their Jewish roots but seeking a way back, a way to return.

Different from a synagogue or JCC-sponsored study group, the program, “Communities of Learning” (COL), is a non-denominational grassroots approach to strengthening Jewish identity, building community, and reaching out to the unaffiliated one by one. A COL offers openness, warmth, and room to

explore Judaism. It is an effective strategy that addresses the critical issues of Jewish identity highlighted in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. It provides a way for federations to “do” Jewish continuity, community building, and outreach. For many, COL is an entry point for the first tentative steps into the community. For others, COL provides a non-threatening way to return and become an active participant in the Jewish community.

The common denominators binding together the women in the first COL were their wish to raise their children in a Jewish home and their desire to create a supportive environment in which to have a positive Jewish experience. All of the women were searching for a sense of meaning and spirituality. “Jewish leaders and communities must be able to respond to this yearning by speaking from the heart of our tradition about the meaning of being Jewish in the modern world” (Shrage, 1995). “Communities of Learning” successfully connect Jews to Jewish life.

CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL AND PHILANTHROPIC TRENDS

The federation today is facing several key environmental and philanthropic challenges: a high rate of mobility, the break-up of the extended family, disappearance of concentrated Jewish neighborhoods, dropping rates of affiliation, the loss of Israel’s role as a

universally unifying factor, shifting nature of wealth/occupations, competition for the Jewish dollar, and Baby Boomers not buying into the federation approach/concept (Kent, 1993). These other philanthropic trends negatively affect the fund-raising ability of federations (Kent & Fruehauf, 1993).

- Jews in their 30s and 40s are assimilating and intermarrying at an accelerating pace. Intermarried and assimilated Jews have rarely, in the past, contributed to federations or other Jewish organizations.
- The annual campaign has become increasingly dependent on its top gifts, a large percentage of which comes from donors over 65 whose children do not share their parent's commitment.
- Over the next eighteen years the largest transfer of wealth in history will take place. FORTUNE magazine estimates that at least \$7 trillion will be passed from "elders" to their heirs in America.
- Studies show a declining interest in "umbrella" giving and a growing interest in donor choice, especially among Baby Boomers.
- The 'opening up' of American society, a major factor in assimilation, has also led to a significant shift in philanthropic behavior. For the first time in history, Jews report contributing more to secular charities than Jewish ones.

THE "COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING" PROGRAM

The COL program addresses each of the philanthropic trends, building donor loyalty and support for the long run. By providing an opportunity to connect intellectual curiosity with a sharing of emotions in a safe and supportive group, the COL speaks to the prospective donor who is unaffiliated, disconnected, and unfamiliar with Judaism, the federation, and the Jewish community in general. In addition to the intangible benefits, the positive correlation between participation in a COL and giving history is clear. In the first year of participation, gifts to the

annual campaign increased by 42%; the corresponding increase in the second year was 61%.

The Marin Jewish Community

The Jewish community of Marin County is a well-educated, affluent, but assimilated Jewish community. According to a demographic study conducted in 1990 by Gary Tobin, "The majority of Jewish households in Marin consist of two parents with children, although there are thousands of alternative households of single adults, single parents or married couples with no children living at home. Marin County also has among the highest rates of interfaith couples and therefore many families exist on the fringes of Jewish communal life." Many residents in the community are spiritually hungry, searching for a sense of belonging, and struggling with what it means to be Jewish in Marin County.

What defines Marin County is its proximity to San Francisco. It is a bedroom community in which most residents commute to San Francisco for their employment. Because of this separation of place of work and home, many Jews are less likely to affiliate with Jewish organizations and to volunteer their time at all. However, despite Marin's lower organizational connections, Tobin goes on to state that informal Jewish networks remain very strong. "Jews in Marin are more likely than those living in other regions (in the Bay Area), to count Jews among their closest friends" (Tobin, 1990).

Year One: "Starting Where the Women Are At"

The first "Community of Learning" program began in October 1996; two other groups have been started since then. What follows is a description of how this first "Community of Learning" came into being.

In July, 1996, G. L., the woman who requested a place to put her Jewish heart; E. C., the Leadership Development Chair of the Women's Alliance in Marin, who had just returned from a Wexner Foundation Leader-

ship retreat; and I decided to invite interested women to an initial meeting to see who might be interested in exploring Judaism in a supportive and non-threatening environment. Together we compiled a list of names made up of their friends and friends of friends and other women who had expressed an interest in learning more about their Judaism and becoming involved with the Women's Alliance.

E. C., who later became the President of the Women's Alliance, invited G. L. onto the Women's Alliance Board of Directors as Chair of Outreach and Education. Together they sent out an invitation inviting the women to a morning of "noshing, networking, and compelling discussion" at the home of G. L. Two weeks later, a follow-up letter with a questionnaire eliciting their interest in specific study topics was sent out to the women who attended that morning gathering.

After compiling all of the returned questionnaires (a 100% return rate) confirmation letters announcing the first study session and the cost involved were mailed to the participants. (Although partly subsidized by the federation, the fee for the group covered the expenses of the scholar and made it self-sustaining.) During this time the federation professional found a scholar-in-residence who would mesh well with the participants in the group and could stay with the group throughout the year to provide for optimal group cohesion and bonding. This professional was fortunate to find such a scholar, someone who had recently published a book about Ruth and Naomi and the female journey outlined in the Bible.

The scholar worked with the two lay leaders, the professional, and the group to formulate a curriculum for the year. The group decided to focus on Jewish ritual, the calendar, and life-cycle issues. Throughout the year, the scholar remained open and flexible, accommodating the wishes and desires of the group as they arose and making the group an organic and dynamic entity that changed over time.

The monthly study sessions were held on

a rotating basis in the group members' homes. About halfway through the year, the group closed, and new members were no longer admitted. The group settled on a comfortable size of sixteen women, which promoted maximum "group" benefits in terms of group process, cohesion, bonding, and intimacy.

By the end of the first year, the participants in the "Community of Learning" developed into a cohesive group of Jewish women friends. Jewish study and learning soon led to celebrating *Shabbat* and each other's simchas and sorrows of life. What began as an inward journey for each woman changed into a shared journey for the women as a whole. Creating "close-knit families within a supportive Jewish community" was becoming a reality.

To mark the completion of the first year and the transition into the second, the group went on an all-day study retreat at one of the participant's vacation homes. Women who had expressed an interest throughout the year in joining a "Community of Learning" were also invited. So much enthusiasm was generated that it became evident there was a need for additional groups to accommodate the numbers of interested women.

Year Two—Moving Outward: A Parallel Process

The second year was marked by a shift in format and in focus. The scholar-in-residence was leaving for Israel, and the women decided that they too wanted to branch out and study different topics with different scholars each month. These topics included "How to Talk to Your Children About God," "Raising Your Children in a Jewish Home," "A Woman's View of the Talmud," "You and Your Aging Parent," "Politics in Israel," and "Kabbalah."

During the second year, a parallel process was occurring. As the women began to move outward they increased their participation within the larger Jewish community. Three women were actively recruited from the COL group to join the Women's Alliance Board of Directors. Under the auspices of the Women's Alliance many women participated in out-

reach and community-building programs of their own making. And many of the women for the first time made gifts to federation's annual campaign in their own name.

**Year Three—The Vision:
Next Year in Jerusalem**

In the third year, it is the hope that the COL group will go beyond the individual and family to experience their heritage in its totality by studying and learning in Eretz Yisrael. Many of the women in the first COL have never been to Israel, and a mission of study and learning conducted in coordination with the United Jewish Appeal would strengthen Jewish identification, involvement, donor loyalty, and philanthropic support.

The Role of the Professional

In creating and developing the "Communities of Learning," the role of the federation professional was one of community organizer, group facilitator, educator, administrator, and fund-raiser. The professional did the most basic of tasks—securing a scholar, arranging for a home for each month's session, collecting fees, sending out reminder notices, writing thank-you letters, and making sure everyone was enjoying themselves. More "professional" responsibilities, such as facilitating the group process, acting as a resource for agencies and organizations within the community, and providing referrals to other federation programs and events, were also essential. The most important task of the professional was meeting individually with each and every participant outside of the group to begin cultivating the relationship. It is this long-term approach to building relationships with prospective donors that will ultimately yield positive fund-raising benefit (Hart, 1996). Though the professional is important in shepherding the growth and development of the group, it is the relationship between the professional and the lay leaders which will make the experience successful and magical.

A Men's Study Group

The first "Community of Learning" generated so much excitement and enthusiasm that several men wanted to have a group of their own. As mentioned earlier, Marin County is a bedroom community, and many of the heads of households travel into San Francisco for their livelihood. This dynamic has presented a great challenge for attracting volunteers to the federation and the community in general. The men's study group, chaired by the current Federation Campaign Chair in Marin and a past chair recruited specifically for this purpose, hit upon a successful format. The men meet in a restaurant before work for 90 minutes of Jewish study and learning on a monthly basis. The scholar-in-residence is a charismatic and dynamic rabbi who agreed for a small honorarium to study with this group of men for the entire year. Again, having one scholar throughout the year promotes group cohesion.

Of the 15 men who attend on a regular basis, 4 reported getting involved because of the impact the "Community of Learning" has had on their wives and families. Though the dynamics of this group are quite different than the women's group, the results seem to be similar. The men's group began in the fall of 1997 and is nearing the completion of its first year. There is a positive correlation between participation in the group and annual gifts, which have increased by 83% in the first year of the group's existence.

"DAYENU"

The "Community of Learning" program has had positive results far exceeding our highest expectations. A group of women gathering in each other's homes once a month for two hours of Jewish study and learning would have been enough. Sharing each other's life-cycle events, celebrations, and losses would have been enough. Lighting *Shabbat* candles for the first time and exchanging *challah* recipes would have been enough. Celebrating the holidays with each other's families would have been enough. Active

involvement in the community in a volunteer capacity would have been enough. Becoming a board member of the Women's Alliance of the federation would have been enough. Making a first time gift or increasing one's annual campaign gift would have been enough. Making the giving of that gift an enjoyable experience would have been enough.

We are connecting Jews to a Jewish life. The women who have participated in the first "Community of Learning" have experienced meaningful and positive Jewish experiences that are enriching their lives with vibrancy and spirituality. "Communities of Learning" are one example of how a federation with outstretched arms is addressing Jewish continuity, reaching the unaffiliated, successfully building relationships, developing community, and bringing Judaism home.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation and love to Eve Cohen and Ginny Lawrence for their exceptional leadership styles and skills. It has been an honor and privilege developing and creating "Communities of Learning" with them. It exemplifies the best in the lay leader/professional relationship. A special thank you to Wayne Feinstein for his feedback and critique of this article.

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