

Attracting Young People to Jewish Life: Lessons Learned from Kehilat Hadar

by Elie Kaunfer

Kehilat Hadar -- a grassroots community on Manhattan's Upper West Side committed to spirited prayer, study and social action -- has had great success in attracting those in their 20s and 30s to services and educational programs. The author offers some lessons learned from the experience.

The organized Jewish community is struggling to attract young people (in their 20s and 30s) to institutional Judaism. Four years ago, I helped found Kehilat Hadar, a grassroots community on Manhattan's Upper West Side committed to spirited prayer, study and social action. *Hadar* has had great success in attracting this "missing" age group to services and educational programs. Our e-mail list is 2400 strong, more than 500 people join us for *Yom Kippur* and *Purim* services, and our regular *Shabbat* attendance is over 200. More important than the numbers, however, the spirit at Hadar is our greatest success: There is a palpable feeling of joy and excitement, as well as reverence, in the services. People come not because they have to, or because their parents told them to, but because they want to.

What has accounted for this success? Below I have isolated a number of factors. While I certainly don't pretend to speak for all young Jews, I developed the following conclusions based on my experiences with the Hadar community. As other communities in New York City; Washington, DC; and Boston have already sprung up based on the Hadar model, I strongly believe these lessons are applicable to many different communities.

Many young people are interested in spirited and inspiring prayer.

The backbone of Hadar is our prayer service, which has always attracted the most attendees. Although it is tempting to claim that prayer services don't appeal to young people, it is more accurate to say that *existing* prayer services don't appeal to young people. At Hadar, we strive for spirited prayer. This is often hard to define, but some aspects include:

- ♦ Traditional liturgy with varying and innovative melodies.
- ♦ The prayer leader in the middle of the congregation (as opposed to the front).
- ♦ Short (5-minute) *divrei Torah*
- ♦ No guilt: People come to services because they want to, not because they are pressured.
- ♦ A room that holds only the number of people who come; no cavernous sanctuary.
- ♦ A willingness to experience prayer as joyful and also as reverent.

Substantive educational programming builds community.

A major highlight of Hadar's calendar is our annual *Shavuot* retreat in the Berkshires, where 300 people celebrate the holiday together. People come to learn with each other: 40 classes are offered during the first night, and most stay up all night learning with people they don't know well. By the end of the holiday, serious friendships have formed, sparked by connections made at these classes. At our weekly *Beit Midrash* on the *Torah* portion, we match participants in one-on-one pairs for study. Our philosophy is: teach at a high level, and support beginners. This strategy has attracted a diverse crowd of learners: a third with day school high school background, a third without any formal Jewish education.

First impressions count.

Young people are judgmental (as are most people). The Hadar leadership spends a great deal of time working to get the details right the first time through. We assume that people will not come back to a program out of loyalty to the institution; they will come back because of the quality of the program. Quality counts each time.

Certain types of authority are suitable to a community of young people.

Young people may bristle against top-down authority, and do not necessarily identify with the hierarchical model of a rabbi running services from the *bimah*. Walking into Hadar on *Shabbat*, by contrast, it is not clear who organizes the services. Our service leaders are all lay people and we cycle through many different prayer leaders, rarely repeating throughout the year. Nonetheless, there is a clear authority structure at Hadar: Five *gabba'im* (organizers) run day-to-day operations, while a larger Leadership Team provides strategic direction. People like to know that someone is watching the clock, finding the *daveners*, running the logistics and steering the ship; a strong leadership helps enable efficient services and programming. Committees that are big and unwieldy are often frustrating and end up dis-

Elie Kaunfer is a former corporate fraud investigator who is now in his third year of Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary. A Wexner Graduate Fellow, Elie is a co-founder and leader of Kehilat Hadar (www.kehilathadar.org). He is also a co-founder and board member of Limmud NY (www.limmudny.org) and is an advisory board member of STAR: Synagogue Transformation and Renewal. The Forward newspaper recently named him one of the 50 Top Jewish Leaders.

kaunfer@hotmail.com

appointing constituents. Our group of *gabba'im* has formed a culture of cooperation and consensus, providing a steady hand of leadership behind the scenes.

Flexibility and openness to new ideas.

Much of the innovation at Hadar comes from outside the leadership structure. For instance, a few years ago, someone e-mailed us suggesting that we have *Tisha B'Av* services in Central Park. A month later, we had a candlelight service in the dark, attracting our largest crowd to date. This requires an attitude from the leadership of "Why not?" instead of "Why?"

Prices are cheap.

Young people are not prepared to spend hundreds of dollars on synagogue membership (especially without clear benefits). While some may bemoan young people's aversion (or inability) to paying high dollar amounts, this is the reality. However, young people are not stingy. When people sign up for Hadar's High Holidays services, we suggest a donation (\$125, or \$75 for students), but people can pay whatever they want, or nothing; no one is coerced or forced to "buy a seat." The vast majority (88%) of people who signed up for High Holidays elected to donate to

Our programming is geared toward prayer, learning, and social action. If single people meet ... in this context ... it is through a common shared interest, not as singles.

Hadar, with the average donation around \$90. In addition, our weekly *Beit Midrash* costs \$5 for an hour and a half. Low costs for classes allow us to gauge what the actual demand is, without concern that prices are too high.

No singles events.

Although many people at Hadar are single, we don't hold singles events. Most people shun singles events because the only thing in common for attendees is that they are single. Our programming is geared toward prayer, learning, and social action. If single people meet each other in this context (and they sometimes do – I met my wife at Hadar's 2002 *Shavuot* retreat), it is through a common shared interest, not as singles. In addition, our programming caters to couples as well, which can take the edge off a sometimes detrimental "singles vibe."

No guilt.

We have always avoided "guilting" people into coming to programming. Our philosophy is: If people don't want to come, then maybe the program should change or end. Using this model, we have never once found ourselves without a *minyan* at the beginning of services; people are coming because they want to. In addition, we believe that programs with minimal numbers (such as classes) can often lead to a qualitatively better experience than simply ones that attract as many people as possible.

The Internet is crucial.

We could not build this community without the Internet. We communicate almost exclusively through e-mail and via our web-

site (www.kehilathadar.org). People sign up for programs, offer feedback, and pay for events online. This way, we don't spend any money at all on marketing or advertisements. We have grown simply by word of mouth and forwarded e-mails. Our sign-up process is very easy: all we ask for is your name and e-mail address. We also send only one e-mail a week; people often stop reading e-mails that come more frequently.

Diversity of backgrounds united in purpose.

Hadar has a focused religious vision that is attractive to a wide range of Jews. Hadar is not a break-away from a synagogue. We formed from disparate social networks across the city, and, therefore, cater to a wide range of Jewish backgrounds. A majority (60%) grew up Conservative, although 20% grew up Orthodox, 12% Reform, and 8% unaffiliated. Now, more than 50% of people at Hadar identify as unaffiliated. This diversity of background lends an excitement to the community, as people share experiences, melodies, and knowledge from a wide range of Jewish upbringings.

Focus on the details.

We have applied the "broken windows" theory to Jewish communities: Fix the little things, and people notice. For instance, we changed the position of the door at the entrance to the prayer space to block the view of people coming into the room. Now, people entering Hadar don't feel that the others already there are staring at them as they orient themselves to the prayer space. This is a minor detail, but one that many have noticed.

Volunteers have experience.

At Hadar, people prove themselves as valuable members of the community not through massive donations or speeches, but by executing flawless logistics: matching up hosts and guests for lunch, bringing the borrowed *Torah* to an apartment on Friday, coordinating a potluck meal. Unlike 30 years ago, many young people have had experience organizing in Jewish communities through their campus Hillel. There is no need to wait for an "established" community to get it right, because we have done this since college.

Personal relationships.

Since the first service, we have always e-mailed personal thank-yous to all the organizers and prayer leaders of each service. This personal touch takes just minutes, but goes a long way to building appreciation in an entirely volunteer community. Similarly, we do not only wait for people to volunteer for jobs: people like to be asked as well. We are always looking for the person who has a skill, but is too shy to volunteer or never thought about it in the first place. Identifying these people has led to three generations of strong leadership at Hadar.

This is not the only model of attracting young people to Judaism. However, it has been particularly effective in the Hadar community. As other communities in New York City; Washington, DC; and Boston form around a similar model, I am hopeful that other institutions will make use of the lessons we have learned through Hadar. ❁