

La'atid: Synagogues for the Future - An Experiment in Synagogue Revitalization

by Sandy Waldman Dashefsky, Lisa Grant, Regina Miller, and Lois Koteen

Segments of this article were based on: Leora Isaacs December 2000 report, La'atid: Synagogues for the Future, External Evaluation Report to the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, and the article, "Strategic Planning and Evaluation Strengthens Synagogues," which appeared in the Summer 2001 JESNA Program Update, pp. 1 & 11. (Thanks to Amy Stein, JESNA Director of Marketing and Communications.)

How can a synagogue nurture a strong sense of Jewish identity, knowledge, and living for all ages? What should a congregation do to help its community members live richer Jewish lives? Three synagogues in Greater Hartford, Connecticut, (Beth El, B'nai Sholom, and

Beth Sholom) were selected to be part of an initiative called *La'atid: Synagogues for the Future* to address these issues. The program was funded by the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, the Endowment Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford and the Covenant Foundation. This three-year project was designed to help synagogues develop to their fullest potential and build within their congregations a stronger sense of Jewish identity, increased Jewish knowledge and literacy, and enriched Jewish living in their constituents of all ages.

The *La'atid* process was developed through a strategic planning process of the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. Gail Weinstein, chair of the Commission on Jewish Education (CJE) of the Jewish

Federation of Greater Hartford's *La'atid* planning and oversight committee and a JESNA Board member, noted, "This project was successful due in large part to the leadership of the Federation's forward thinking and to the strategic nature of the initiative." It was also successful because of an experimental pilot program, *SIP: Synagogue Initiative Program*, involving two congregations (Emanuel and Kol Haverim) and funded by the Endowment Foundation of the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford, Inc.

Through *La'atid*, the selected congregations and their schools were engaged in individual organizational change processes which reflected and responded to each congregation's vision, culture, and needs, and which helped each advance toward its own goals. *La'atid's* philosophy was to bring together a broad-based group of professional and lay representatives within each of the three congregational communities and have them develop and implement their own visionary experimental action plans. There was also a strong focus on Torah study as a central element of their growth.

Through *La'atid's* carefully crafted model involving formal course work (through Hebrew College-Hartford Branch), retreats, and intensive ongoing on-site mentoring and consultation, each congregation developed its own unique vision and goals and successfully planned and implemented programs towards achieving them. These goals included: 1) integrating Jewish content, learning, and values in congregational life; 2) developing innovative, community building experiences for families with young children, as well as adults who are beyond the childrearing years; 3) providing creative opportunities and comfort at *Shabbat* and week-day services; 4) developing study and celebratory *havurot*; 5) providing support groups for young adults, intermarried couples, and their parents; and 6) offering opportunities for *tikkun olam*.

"A major element of *La'atid's* success was the scaffolded infrastructure of on-site facilitators guided by a *La'atid* education director," commented Karen Trager, execu-

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the bottom line, but this can be a frightening thought for Jews who don't usually extol the benefits of prayer, study, and active engagement as part of the Jewish community. Those currently involved in synagogue life and Jewish community life must get out of their buildings. They must "Reach Out and Touch Someone," a phrase which should not only be a telephone company advertising slogan, but rather the mantra of altruistic, caring outreach.

I am proposing that every congregation, no matter the denominational stream, make altruistic outreach to those unconnected individuals and families a priority. Congregations should offer programs, *havurot*, and services to any and all members of their local Jewish community, whether they are dues-paying customers or not. The goal must be to connect people to God and to Judaism, not to get paying members for the *shul*. Of course, synagogue programs cannot be same-old, same-old. They must be focused on the interests and needs of the targeted audience. Whether it be Hebrew

reading or positive parenting, the aim is to get people connected to each other and to the Jewish community. It is important to remember that it is hard to be Jewish alone. Or course, the hope is that, ultimately, individuals participating in these programs will connect to the synagogue and will become dues-paying members of not only the synagogue, but also other communal Jewish institutions as well.

I can attest to the fact that this work is labor intensive, at times discouraging or demoralizing, and costly. However, it is worth it! When that person or family shows up at an event, has a good time, comes again, and ultimately gets connected, it provide the most incredible high for the person doing the outreach.

So, let's get busy. Let's offer a Jewish home to those Jews who are looking for spiritual answers in all the wrong places. Let's surprise them by making Judaism and the synagogue that home. ■

Judy Beck is the Director of the Synagogue Leadership Institute at UJA Federation of Bergen County & North Hudson in Northern New Jersey.

tive director of the Federation's CJE. The *La'atid* project was fueled by ongoing concentrated mentoring and guidance to each of the synagogues. The CJE *La'atid* facilitators provided essential staff support to manage project planning and implementation and assure communication and accountability between professional and lay leadership and across the various work groups and committees operating in each congregation. The guidance they and the education director provided, along with the courses and retreats, created a cadre of new professional and lay leaders at each synagogue.

La'atid created new opportunities for engagement and increased momentum at all three synagogues. New programs drew impressively large numbers of participants in all three congregations, including previously uninvolved members and new members, thus fostering a new sense of community.

The focus of the programming presented through the *La'atid* process was primarily educational. These educational programs extended well beyond the confines of the classroom to all aspect of congregational life, including worship, social gatherings, and social action. In all three synagogues, crucial community-building and spiritual connection came about primarily through Jewish learning, collaborative visioning, and planning for the future.

A rigorous feedback process allowed the community to monitor its progress. Dr. Leora Isaacs, JESNA vice president for program and organizational learning, served as the external evaluator to assess *La'atid* processes and progress. Conducting an in-depth, impartial evaluation provided accountability that assisted the funders and the community in recognizing the success of *La'atid* and in providing additional funding through the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford for two new congregations, *La'atid* cohort 2. In addition, the three "veteran" *La'atid* congregations, cohort 1, will be provided with continued financial and consultative support through the Federation's CJE to enable them to maintain the momentum they have built in these three years.

In addition, based on the present needs of the three original congregations, a new dimension is being added to focus specifically on school change and professional development. The CJE will provide educa-

tional consultants on-site to lead monthly staff development sessions, as well as to be available for classroom observation and professional team building. As the *La'atid* initiative expands in the future, an external evaluation process will continue to provide mechanisms for accountability, feedback, and impartial evaluation on all levels.

CASE STUDIES

The system-wide change process that is at the heart of the *La'atid* initiative is a slow, delicate, complex, and fundamentally human process. Before systems can change, the perceptions, priorities, interpersonal relationships, and actions of the individuals who are responsible for leading the congregation, be they lay or professional, must change.

By means of illustration, we present three case studies of lay leaders who have been involved in *La'atid* at three different congregations. Each of them has made significant contributions to the systemic changes taking place at their synagogues. As a result of their involvement, each of them has been transformed in various ways as well. We examined this transformation in terms of their leadership skills, their views and vision of the role of Jewish education in the congregation, and their own personal religious growth.

CASE STUDY I

Jill Jones joined the School Committee at Beth El Temple several years before the *La'atid* initiative. Jill clearly stated that her personal religious growth had not been influenced by *La'atid*. "We make decisions as a family and that's a separate process," she said. In contrast to this personal and private process of religious development, Jill did note significant changes in her own leadership development and her evolving vision of what religious school education should be and who it should serve.

During the early years of her service, she perceived that the School committee served a largely figurehead role, listening to reports and offering suggestions, without having any significant impact on school programs or policies. In the last year, however, a number of major changes occurred, that, in sum, Jill characterized as resulting in a whole new school. These include a much greater focus

on parent education and teacher development, as well as more intensive integration of *Shabbat* as part of the religious school experience. Jill credited the *La'atid* process for providing the tools for initiating these changes. She observed, "Nothing that was changed in the school was appreciably different from what we had been talking about for the last five years. We just couldn't make it happen. *La'atid* gave us a sense that we could redesign the system, that we could get different people involved, that we could think about projects in a different way. That made a big difference."

While reluctant to speak directly about her own role, Jill recounted several instances where she felt empowered to act differently as a result of the *La'atid* process. "The courses I took with the *La'atid* education director and the support we have from our facilitator showed me the possibilities of thinking differently and approaching problems in different ways," she said.

General systems theory suggests that an understanding of the entire system must begin, but cannot stop, with an understanding of its individual component parts. Though Jill's focus has been almost exclusively on the religious school, she understood that this is only one part of an organic whole that cannot be changed without involvement from many other parts of the system. She credited the *La'atid* project facilitator as being key to the process. "Without our facilitator, the synagogue wouldn't be the way it is, let alone the school. She really helps people see all sides and is great at persuading people of the right thing to do."

Jill's commitment to ensuring that her children receive the best possible Jewish education within a religious school setting has remained steadfast throughout her tenure on the school committee. What has changed is her understanding of the major role the school can and should play in helping parents, not just children, build stronger connections to the synagogue and to Judaism. She understands this not just about programmatic change, but about changing a way of thinking.

We have to change how we think about our families. They aren't rejecting Judaism; they just don't feel a part of it. We need to find ways to make the learning touch the hearts of our kids and their parents too. We

aren't there yet, but *La'atid* has really helped speed up the process. It may not have finished the job, but it got us moving in the right direction.

CASE STUDY II

While Jill Jones described the impact of *La'atid* in terms of her leadership development, David Friedman characterized it much more as a process of personal change. When David agreed to be part of Congregation B'nai Sholom's *La'atid* Task Force, he saw it as a way to get involved in the synagogue he had just joined. He hoped to meet some people and make a few friends. David had no idea that *La'atid* would spark his own Jewish renewal, a journey that would parallel the one his synagogue would also take.

David was raised in Brooklyn to parents who were actively involved in the synagogue. He remembers dinner table conversations about Men's Club, Sisterhood, and Hebrew School activities. But shortly after his *Bar Mitzvah*, the family moved and his parents did not join the local temple. Slowly, without realizing it, the family's Jewish-centeredness fell away.

So too, with B'nai Sholom, a small Conservative synagogue in Newington, Connecticut. The small community focus was part of its appeal, and the members gathered regularly to pray, to socialize, to help, and to heal. But times would change, and slowly, without realizing it, fewer people made B'nai Sholom the center of their world.

For David and many others, the *La'atid* process began their journey back. As he got more involved, David experienced a life-changing *aha!* "I realized how important a synagogue is to Jewish identity," he said. "It doesn't just give you roots, it provides a community, people to share the experience." Memories of *Simchat Torah*, *Purim* and *Sukkot* celebrations came flooding back to him. "Those experiences really connected me to what being Jewish is all about, and I wanted my kids and others' kids - to feel that same connection."

With deeper insight into the role of community in his own Jewish renewal, David has been an important voice in B'nai Sholom's *La'atid* initiative. "People come to synagogue for many different reasons," he noted. "Some are on the fringe, because they

don't see the synagogue as part of their lives. You have to find the one thing that sparks them."

Building on ideas generated by focus groups, the *La'atid* Task Force has sponsored *Shabbat* dinners, Sunday brunches, *Havdalah* programs and *Sukkot* building. The response has been overwhelming. "People who dropped out are rejoining, people we haven't seen in years are coming back, people who used to drop their kids off on Sundays are staying," David says. "We've made a good start on our goals of creating a welcoming environment where people share the commitment to lifelong learning and *Shabbat* worship."

David's own renewal has been both personal and professional. He, his wife Terry, and sons Ben and Daniel now welcome *Shabbat* in their home every Friday night, something David had not done since his Brooklyn days. In the synagogue, he is a member of the board of directors, where he serves as financial secretary, and he is vice president of the newly re-established Men's Club. Thanks to *La'atid*, David feels like he's back home again and, he says, "It's a wonderful feeling".

CASE STUDY III

Arlene Cheiken joined *La'atid* when the *La'atid* education director, whom she describes as a pied piper, asked her to join the committee. Arlene was a newcomer in the community. Her own background was one of positive cultural Judaism, where she felt strongly identified as a Jew but was minimally engaged in religious observance.

A second marriage brought her to Temple Beth Shalom where she was invited to share *Shabbat* dinners, joined a *havurah*, and returned to her roots in a warm, supportive and happy environment. She now enjoys being part of the community since her involvement in *La'atid*. She knows more people by name and is a participator rather than an outsider. Early in her experience with *La'atid*, she was asked to prepare a *d'var Torah*, which was new for her and something that she enjoyed. She learned a lot and found the assistance of the rabbi most helpful. Her *havurah* group studies Jewish law. This has increased her understanding of *Torah*, and provided an increased joy in being Jewish and a deeper

appreciation of what the *Torah* teaches. Her views about Jewish education have changed as well, as a result of involvement in *La'atid*. She now believes that Jewish education has to be offered in non-traditional ways and made available to all ages through multiple formats.

She has seen firsthand how *La'atid* helped to encourage broad based involvement and investment of members of the Temple Beth Shalom community. Initially, Arlene had no plan to become a lay leader and yet she readily assumed the role of co-chair. In the beginning, she needed tremendous support. Like Jill, Arlene indicated that the mentoring and facilitation offered by the *La'atid* facilitator and education director helped her become a leader. In the beginning, she needed tremendous support. She enrolled in Hebrew College-Hartford Branch courses offered by the education director and loved the learning. "With the learning that I undertook in these courses, I was more invested." Each class inspired her and made her more aware of the agenda and techniques to be used in synagogue revitalization. She feels that the *La'atid* executive planning meetings of key professional and lay leaders, held prior to the whole group meetings, were extremely important learning opportunities for the change process.

Arlene was uncomfortable assessing her impact on *La'atid*. She acknowledged that as she attends board meetings, she is able to share what she has learned, so there is an understanding of the purpose and goals of *La'atid*. She knows that board members are now more responsive to *La'atid* and more supportive of the goals.

Arlene noted that as a result of the growth of a wide range of *La'atid* *Shabbat* programs and *havurot*, there is increased involvement and an energy that did not exist prior to *La'atid*. Parents are immersed in the programs and this has a very important impact on the families and the community. Parents are now looking to develop additional *Shabbat* family programs and *havurot*. The Adult *Shabbat* program is also bringing some of the older members back into the community. A new plan is underway to develop a "greeters" program to make members feel welcome as well as an out-reach initiative for new members. All of this has been a very gratifying experience for her.

CONCLUSION

Most theories of organizational change suggest that it takes at least five to seven years for substantive change to take root. The process of systemic change begins with individual change. As these case studies demonstrate, participants in the *La'atid* process were profoundly affected by their involvement. For Jill Jones, who entered the process with a strong commitment to Jewish life and Jewish education, *La'atid* helped strengthen her skills and confidence as a lay leader involved in shaping the vision for religious education at her synagogue. *La'atid* also enhanced leadership skills for David Friedman and Arlene Cheiken. More significantly for them, the process gave them a sense of connection to the synagogue, and to Jewish life and learning, that they had not previously felt. It was this enhanced connection that motivated them to increase their involvement in leading the change initiatives. As each of these individuals changed, they touched the lives of many others and helped them begin to see the possibilities of new ways of enriching the Jewish lives of their members. *La'atid* gave them the tools, the support, and the vision to see things differently, and the confidence and enthusiasm

to stay the course along the road to helping their synagogues realize their full potential as rich and welcoming centers of Jewish life and Jewish learning. ■

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Kol HaKovod Kol HaKovod Kol HaKovod Kol HaKovod Kol HaKovod

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America has conferred honorary degrees on seven people who made significant contributions to the fields of Jewish and general education.

Awarded honorary doctor of pedagogy degrees were:

Deborah Kantor Price, executive director, Jewish Education Association of Metrowest, Whippany, NJ

Howard B. Rosenblatt, principal for Judaic studies, Bet Shraga Hebrew Academy of the Capital District, Albany, NY

Paul David Schneider, headmaster, Krieger Schechter Day School of Chizuk Amuno Congregation, Baltimore, MD

President, Jewish Educators Assembly

Mark Steven Silk, director,

Synagogue Education Incubator, Jewish Education Association of Metrowest, Whippany, NJ

Chana Simckes, educational director (retired), Oceanside Jewish Center, Oceanside, NY

Receiving honorary doctorates of humane letters were:

Barry Shrage, president,

Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston

Ellen V. Futter, president, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY

Judy Aronson, co-chair of the Hanukat CAJE Committee and Education Director at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, CA, has received a Distinguished Educator Award, established by Simha Lainer and the late Sara Lainer,

from the Los Angeles Bureau of Jewish Education.

NATE has conferred honors on the following educators:

For 18 years of service:

Mark Baranek

Edna Coleman

David Levinsky

Ava Keenen

Kim Nathanson

Lori B. Sagarin

Sandra G. Segel

Michael J. Shire

Anne Stein

Karen Susman-Waldman

For 25 years of service:

Gail S. Kahn

Ossie Meisel

Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz

For 36 years of service:

Babette Maza

On their retirement:

Cantor Lawrence J. Ehrlich

Albert Loew

Rabbi Sander J. Mussman
Mona Senkfo

Robert Abramson, Director, Dept. of Education at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, was presented with the Behrman House/JEA award for Excellence in Jewish Education at the November JEA conference.

Jeff Lasday, executive director of the St. Louis Central Agency for Jewish Education, is serving as the Chair of ADCA (Association of Directors of Central Agencies).

Eliot G. Spack, CAJE executive director, has been invited to serve as a member of the National Education and curriculum Development Committee of the Friends of Touro Synagogue (Newport, RI).