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Judaic Inreach: Enhancing Shabbat Observance in a Suburban Congregation

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The Target Congregation

A Conservative synagogue in the midwestern United States received a grant from a philanthropist to institute a package of programs designed to enhance the level of Shabbat observance of its members. In findings that suggest a nuanced optimism for American Jewish life, in contrast to the gloom and doom forecast for American Jewry in the wake of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the "Enhancing Shabbat Observance" (ESO) programs did seem to demonstrably increase levels of Sabbath observance and suggest that inreach programs may complement outreach programs as a strategy for Jewish continuity.

The congregation in question is egalitarian and relatively new, created ten years earlier from a merger of existing congregations, and is located in a suburb of a major metropolitan area. It has about 350 families at present, and the current rabbi has been there almost from the start. The congregation is unusual when compared to most other Conservative congregations, with a 1991 survey of members revealing an unusually high degree of Judaic commitment.

The synagogue had for some time placed much effort in making Shabbat services attractive to families. Thus for several years prior to ESO, the congregation had been increasing its membership through a process of self-selection in which Jews eager for enhanced Shabbat

participation were attracted to join.

Program Objectives and Strategies

The long term objective of ESO was, in the words of the rabbi, to "give one the experiences and learning necessary to help enrich and internalize substantive and traditional Shabbat observances." This aim was, from a sociological perspective, extremely ambitious. It sought to extend Shabbat observance into the personal and familial space of congregants for a 24 hour cycle, but, as already indicated, it was building on strength.

The ESO objectives were not only to get non-Shabbat attenders to attend, but also to get attenders to increase their level of participation in the service, to share Shabbat dinner with friends, and to observe Shabbat through to Havdalah at the close. In short, ESO was to raise or enhance the enjoyment of Shabbat for all congregants, making them "delighters in Shabbat."

The ESO program consisted of a number of component strategies:

1. Shabbatonim, including Shabbat retreats and in-synagogue Shabbatonim.
2. Project Match, designed to link up host families with guest families in a formal pattern of exchanging Friday night dinner invitations.
3. Training sessions which would teach the elements of Friday night home Shabbat observance.
4. The preparation and dissemination of relevant learning materials such as booklets or audio tapes.
5. Geographic Outreach. All of the synagogue's efforts included a commitment to outreach toward Jews in smaller outlying communities, which range from 75 to 120 miles away.

Part of the ESO grant funds were used to hire an energetic program director who facilitated the implementation of ESO and other

synagogue programs.

Implementation of ESO

Two Shabbaton retreats were held at a local camp, the first with 99 adults and 80 children, and the second retreat a year later with 150 participants. About 35 families attended both retreats.

Four training sessions for Friday night dinner involving some 50 congregants were held at the synagogue in the first year. In the second year, training sessions focused on various aspects of Shabbat prayer.

The synagogue undertook one major effort at directed linkage for Friday night dinner invitations, resulting in more hosts than people looking for invitations. The synagogue then randomly approached congregants, particularly new members, to accept invitations. In addition, the synagogue set up a specific group for young couples interested in celebrating Shabbat, who met periodically for pot luck Shabbat dinners.

The synagogue produced a number of first rate learning materials as part of the ESO program. Of note is a booklet containing the various Friday night prayers, blessings, and songs, including the blessing after meals (*birkat hamazon*), in Hebrew, English, and English transliteration. In addition, there is a tape available of the same material, with explanations, in English and Russian. Other booklets have been produced, including one on Havdalah, and another explaining the Shabbat morning service to novices.

Interviews at the Shabbaton

The reactions of participants at the second Shabbaton retreat, and those phoned at home who had attended the first retreat, were strongly positive with regard to their general assessment of the various components of the ESO programs. One respondent described the Friday night training sessions as "fun." Though this person had already held a traditional Friday night dinner, he began to invite others

to his home, including one arranged guest via the synagogue, adding to his celebration of Shabbat. A couple from outside the suburb described how they came to the synagogue attracted by the personality of the rabbi, but, as a result of ESO, have deepened their Friday night ritual by incorporating the blessings for their children.

A woman from a small town attending the Shabbaton argued that the ESO program had a huge impact on Jewish life there, with a large increase in Shabbat observance. She noted (confirmed by others) that among the thirty households in her community, with the exception of two old-timers, only one of the remaining households consisted of two born Jews; all the others were couples involving a converted Jew, or a Jew and a gentile. The numbers of the town's participants at the two Shabbaton retreats ranged from 16 to 20. The rabbi who services the town's congregation bi-weekly has conducted 13 conversions over the past two years, some of which may well have been an indirect consequence of the ESO program.

One woman at the Shabbaton recounted how, as a result of the ESO program, she purchased and began wearing a *kippa* and *tallis* at Shabbat morning services. Another person spoke highly about the training sessions, and how they have led to several larger Friday night dinner gatherings. One person claimed that the previous Shabbaton had changed her life Jewishly, and that the intense experiences had made her friends for life.

Telephone interviews with random synagogue members from a list of those who had attended the first retreat also yielded positive comments. One person noted that they already kept Shabbat, but that the retreat had a deep impact on several of their friends. She called the Shabbaton "terrific" and was particularly enthusiastic about the Friday night cassette tape and booklet. This person attended one of the Friday night training sessions, which she claimed gave her new ideas about enhancing her Shabbat. Her only complaint was that the session was "too short!" Another respondent emphasized that as a young parent, the retreat gave her a chance to talk to other young parents and compare notes. This respondent became more comfortable with ritual, saying more prayers Friday night. There were no negative comments encountered from anyone regarding the various Shabbatonim and retreats, and the various ESO training

sessions.

Based on interviews with the rabbi, the program director, and congregants, it seems that the *formal* effort to link up experienced hosts and novice members seeking to experience a Friday night meal was unsuccessful. The attempt at rigorous networking probably ran up against the limits of social engineering and may have been too artificial. However, there clearly does seem to have been an increase in the *informal* process of exchanging invitations for Friday night dinner.

One of the other objectives was the attempt to extend Shabbat for a full 24 hours, through Saturday afternoon and into Havdalah. None of those interviewed mentioned any extension of their Shabbat celebration into afternoon study groups or Havdalah, though this may take place in a few households. It may be that this objective was overly ambitious, given the realities of a suburban Conservative congregation.

The Shabbaton-retreat was an integral part of the ESO program. The content of the second Shabbaton blended forms of traditional Shabbat worship and programming with "New Age" emphases (e.g., yoga and Torah) which appealed to a clear portion of those attending. This was a result of the input of the guest scholar in residence, who set the tone for the weekend. The first Shabbaton had involved more traditional text-based learning. The second placed more emphasis on the experiential. Both Shabbatonim had a minority of participants who might have preferred a different style. But observations of the various activities revealed a high degree of participation, indeed intense participation, in the activities by those involved.

For example, the Shabbat morning prayer session was remarkable. People were actually intent on "davening," and there was almost none of the chatter found in many other synagogues, whether Orthodox or otherwise. There was palpable *kavanah* (intention) in the praying. It is unclear how much of this is a product of the ESO program (as opposed to the self-selection described earlier), but in part it must be. Many of those at the retreat were clearly seeking moments of pure spirituality; based on observations at morning services, as well as other sessions, many found such moments.

One spiritual high point of the service was a healing circle formed by participants. Members were encouraged to exclaim their own personal prayer, and most did so, praying for help in health or relationships. These pleas were often moving experiences for the supplicants and others alike. Others prayed for more prosaic things, like an end to the baseball strike.

In the evaluation survey completed by 30 of those attending the retreat, 29 respondents indicated that they were either "satisfied or highly satisfied" - in equal proportion - with the "total Shabbaton experience." Those who had attended previous Shabbatonim, either elsewhere or at the camp, rated this one as "the same, better, or much better," again in equal proportion. None found it "worse or much worse."

The written comments from the evaluation were generally laudatory. A minority expressed some reservations with the style of the guest speaker, seeing it, for example, as "too oriented to getting in touch" or "too highly charged" or lacking in intellectual rigor. A few, even while commending the Shabbaton, worried about things ranging from inadequate tornado protection to complaints with the babysitting to suspicions about the level of *kashrut*. But the large majority expressed satisfaction with the direction of the Shabbaton. They used terms such as "wonderful," "great," "extraordinary," or "magical."

Synagogue Survey Results

A short questionnaire was mailed out to all the membership units in the congregation just before the Shabbaton, with 139 completed questionnaires returned directly to the researcher. It should be noted, however, that the responses would tend to favor those more involved members of the synagogue, and thus those with greater levels of participation, an unavoidable consequence with such mailed surveys. The results of the survey suggest that the ESO program enjoyed a high degree of success. Specifically, as may be seen from the following data, those synagogue members who participated in more ESO programs were more likely to demonstrate higher levels of Shabbat and Judaic observance.

About 96 percent of the respondents had heard of the program; 22

percent participated in the first Shabbaton; 55 percent had participated in at least one of the in-*shul* Shabbatonim; 33 percent had participated in some of the other ESO instructional programs. About 31 percent had participated in at least two of these three types of ESO activities.

The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether, in the past one or two years (the period of the ESO program), their involvement in one of fourteen activities had "decreased, stayed the same, or increased." Ten of the fourteen activities dealt specifically with Shabbat. The other four dealt with other Judaic activities. Some 70-85 percent of respondents indicated that their level of observance stayed the same. (Recall that these pre-existing levels were relatively high.) But wherever change occurred, it inevitably favored increases in observance over decreases, in some cases quite dramatically.

For lighting Shabbat candles on Friday night, saying Friday night *kiddush*, singing *zmirot* on Friday night, sharing a Friday night dinner with other families, attending services on Shabbat morning, participating in Shabbat morning services, participating in a Shabbat study group, observing Shabbat in some way Saturday afternoon, observing Havdalah, keeping kosher in the home, keeping kosher outside the home, providing Jewish education for children, and contributing to Jewish or Israeli charities, respondents who participated in two or more ESO programs were more likely to score higher than those who participated in none. However, the measure of attending services on Friday night did not attain statistical significance.

With specific reference to Shabbat practices, those showing the greatest increases for all respondents were having Friday night dinner with other families and attending Shabbat morning services. Those categories showing the least increases were participating in a Shabbat study group and observing Havdalah. Among the four non-Shabbat-specific observances, increases ranged from 9 percent for keeping kosher in and outside the home, to 36 percent indicating increased charitable contributions to Jewish and Israeli causes.

To better see the overall picture, a composite index was created which aggregated all the scores for the fourteen components. The scores were grouped into four categories: those who indicated on balance a decrease (12 percent), the same level (29 percent), a slight

increase (31 percent) and a large increase (29 percent). For those who participated in none of the ESO programs, only 8 percent registered a "large increase"; for those who participated in two or more, 56 percent did.

Of the various ESO components, the one with the highest aggregate impact seems to be participation in the first Shabbaton retreat, with 67 percent of those indicating a "large increase." Perhaps this reflects a greater experiential possibility associated with a Shabbaton retreat than with in-synagogue Shabbatonim or attending various courses.

Respondents were asked to assess directly the extent of the role of the ESO programs on their levels of involvement in those fourteen Shabbat/Judaic activities. Overall, 39 percent claimed "to no extent," 40 percent "some extent," 12 percent "a great extent," and 8 percent "a very great extent." Thus 60 percent of the respondents felt that ESO played some role. Moreover, those with more ESO participation felt that ESO played a greater role. Those who specifically attended the Shabbaton retreat, and those who participated in any two ESO programs, were far more likely to respond "very great or great extent" compared to those with no participation.

A note on causality. The assumption in the analysis is that the causal direction flows from participation in the ESO to the fourteen outcome measures. But in theory the causal direction could be reversed, or in fact be non-existent. For example, respondents who may have been in the process of increasing their levels of Shabbat/Judaic observance anyway, might have also decided to participate in the ESO programs.

Even were that true, one should note that ESO nevertheless would be invaluable. Most synagogues contain some members, albeit a minority, who might be receptive at any point in time to increasing their Shabbat observance. Chances are, if they approached their rabbi, he/she would be delighted to assist them. But how often does this occur? Those respondents seeking for other reasons to enhance their Shabbat observance might have been unable to do so without the handy presence of the ESO program. Thus for many respondents the ESO program may operate as a facilitating, enabling or catalytic agent, rather than as a singular causal factor. Moreover, the survey data, the fieldwork, and the qualitative comments indicate that for most of the respondents, it was participation in the ESO program that

played a role in increasing observance, rather than the other way around.

Another question which might arise is: which of the ESO components was most effective? Despite the finding for Shabbaton/retreats, one cannot draw a firm conclusion. One can also ask whether some other type of ESO programming might have been more effective still. Perhaps. But it is quite possible that *any* ESO-type programming might have had a similar effect, in producing higher levels of Shabbat observance by participants. The only way to draw any definitive conclusion about the generic effect of ESO, and its replicability, would be to compare ESO systematically with other efforts and outcomes for other congregations.

Participant Comments

Questionnaire respondents were given space to comment on the role that ESO programs might have played with regard to their level of Shabbat and Judaic commitment. Ten of the 70 respondents offered comments reflecting critically on the ESO program, or indicating that ESO and the synagogue did not meet their particular needs. One found it did not address feminist concerns. One found it too elementary. Another respondent felt it too advanced and intense, and not basic enough. One older respondent found the program too oriented to younger families, while a younger respondent found insufficient attention paid to families with babies and young children. One felt they were inadequately consulted in the formulation of the program. No program can please everyone.

Sixty respondents offered comments which were coded as reflecting positively on ESO and its role in determining their level of Judaic involvement. These responses were in turn divided into two groups. The first, involving 22 respondents, can be described as emphasizing "*maintenance*." These respondents had substantial pre-ESO observance of Shabbat, but indicated that the ESO program enabled them to maintain that level. Nine of this group of maintainers emphasized the positive effects of ESO on the observance of *others* in the congregation, which in turn added to *their* enjoyment of Shabbat. Some examples:

One older observant couple wrote: This program is outstanding in that many younger people whose "Yiddishkeit" is either minimal or non-existent have started doing rituals and attending Shabbat services.

I am a single male and am already quite active in synagogue life. For example I read Torah regularly so the ESO program doesn't help me directly but expands the community of people with whom I can share Shabbat.

Our synagogue experience has been enhanced by the number of new people who have begun to participate in services and sing along, etc. ESO is definitely a worthwhile program.

Our family has been celebrating Shabbat for a number of years now. What the program has done is extend our celebration to include families who otherwise may have felt uncomfortable, not in the loop, when it came to Friday night celebrations. We noticed more people at Saturday mornings. I notice more people not afraid to ask "where are we" in the *siddur*. It is clear that there is an opening for many people - for us there is a sense of validation.

What these respondents reveal is the interactive or synergistic effect of the Shabbat observance of others. Thus evaluation of positive impacts of any such programs ought not simply focus on the increases in observance for those so affected. Our quantitative analysis reported earlier missed the positive effect of ESO on those whose "levels" of observance might have remained the same.

The most interesting responses came from those 38 members (29 percent of the sample) who reported their own personal *increase* in or enhancement of observance. They offer perhaps the best testimony about the possibilities of increasing Shabbat and Judaic observance through deliberate program efforts.

Among those identifying specific rituals or facets of observance:

I learned to chant Torah one year ago.

...got us started blessing our child at Shabbat dinner.

We have made singing the *birkat hamazon* a regular occurrence in our home. Have increased saying Havdalah after attending

workshops. Have used our tape to learn *zmirot*.

The range of responses covered increases in both Shabbat and general Judaic observance.

Due partly to our involvement in the synagogue and the ESO program we keep kosher for the first time, and its going great.

I was bat mitzvah this year, influenced by the program!

I have increased my observance of Friday night Shabbat most definitely and my attendance of Saturday morning services. This is in large part due to the enthusiasm of the congregation and the programs it sponsors/holds.

Many respondents focused on the communal dimension of the ESO program.

The Shabbat activities with the congregation make it so much more meaningful to participate in Shabbat observances than doing these things just as a couple without children at home. It gives us a larger "family." The ESO program should be continued and expanded.

The ESO program has increased my awareness of the values of observing Shabbat, in maintaining a connection to Judaism, the Jewish community, my own Jewish identity, and in passing it on to my son.

Because of the program we think about Shabbat ahead of time - plan for it each week. We look forward to it immensely. The Shabbaton was really a very significant factor in the increase of our commitment and involvement. Shabbat with other people - in large groups - makes you aware of the possibilities - spiritual and otherwise - that it offers. Being at the Shabbaton expanded our community....The people we usually chatted with at the Shabbaton became friends - the people with whom we often have Erev Shabbat.

We are an Israeli family that never attended Shabbat services in Israel. ESO made a big difference for us.

Several responses touched on dilemmas facing Conservative Jews, and indeed most American Jews, as they attempt to reconcile the

ethos of individualism with the force of community so basic to Judaism. Thus, for some, the ESO program enabled them to elucidate their own approach to Shabbat, conformist or not, as they struggle to find a balance between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

The Enhancing Shabbat Observance program has clearly been a success. It reached a large number of *shul* members, as well as some people from outlying areas. Those whom it reached demonstrated, through their own testimony as well as reports on changes in religious practice, a link between their participation in ESO and greater levels of Shabbat and Judaic observance. For some Jews it helped maintain a previously high level of observance; for others it opened up new possibilities.

This program should not be confused with typical outreach programs. It is not focused at unaffiliated or marginal Jews, but at congregants in an atypically committed Conservative congregation. If anything, it could be called an "inreach" program. Thus Jewish communal efforts to promote "continuity" ought not neglect the already committed in the pursuit of the marginal and unaffiliated. This study documents clearly the potential for successful inreach strategies.

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