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Relationships at the Center: Practitioner Research on Relational Engagement

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BREAKING THE SCHMOOZE HABIT

by Wendy Verba

How do *you* enter the room?

The wine and cheese, the gala, the networking event, the opening reception, the mixer, the oneg.

You might pause at the entrance to plot your route, scanning for opportunities to jump in. People stand in tight clusters, glasses in hand, name tags affixed, forming and re-forming conversation groups like a mysterious algorithm.

Do you, like my extroverted friend Sarah, wade right in, buzzing happily from group to group, gathering conversations and introductions like nectar from flowers, never tiring of new people and repeated questions? Or like Michael, who knows half the people there, are you “working the room,” purposefully touching base with key people and making strategic introductions?

Are you more like my colleague Lynn, seeking the people you know, finding one cluster of comfort at a time, half-listening while scanning faces for your next leap, like hopping rocks over lava to safety and counting the minutes until you’re seated for dinner?

Or do you take one look, turn around and leave?

The schmooze-fest is such a default staple of Jewish life that we don’t notice the way it can undermine genuine connection for some attendees. We ignore the “Thirdnesses” that drive people to their corners: relational hierarchies and power structures; demographics like race, age, or socio-economic status; social norms and expectations; and even the way the room is set and the food is served.

Why Are We Here?

Let’s assume the last Jewish reception you attended – say the opening cocktail hour before a conference – was indeed designed with intention to achieve a specific outcome. Can we guess what was the goal and who was the intended audience?

Here’s what we might observe: The crowd looks homogenous within a narrow range of ethnicity, age, even dress. The wine is flowing, the noise level is high, lights are dim, there are a few cocktail tables but mostly just open space for mingling.

The most comfortable and engaged individuals in the room are those who already know a lot of people, who have established positions in the social hierarchy, and enjoy the chance to see, be seen, and connect with people they know or want to meet. A small number of full-blown

extroverts are in their element meeting strangers and building conversation circles.

The remaining attendees are either sticking with one person or a group they already know, nervously wandering the crowd looking for a group to attach to, or leaving as soon as they can.

From my own experience, I would posit the following social dynamics in this hypothetical room, not taking into account those who self-selected not to attend in the first place:

- 20% feel mostly comfortable, navigating the room with ease; 50% feel moderately uncomfortable and express difficulty breaking in; 30% feel extremely out of place, sticking with a small known group or leaving early.
- 80% of conversations are between people already acquainted; 20% are among new acquaintances.
- 90% of conversations could be characterized as “surface-level” topics (job or family updates, news about people in common, gossip and humorous stories, light discussion about current events); 10% of conversations feel deeply meaningful in which participants share authentically.
- 20% of attendees follow up after the event to build on a connection; 80% don’t.

Clearly, an event with these outcomes must have been targeted to people secure in their social status with many previous acquaintances in the room (insiders), plus a handful of extreme extroverts who thrive in open social settings. The goal could be stated as simply giving those 20% of attendees a space to fuel and expand their networks.

The Case for Design

You might ask, what’s wrong with that? We can’t have deep, meaningful conversation all the time; and we can’t help if some people don’t engage. Furthermore, people often request (notably in every post-conference survey ever) unstructured time to schmooze.

The point is to design for intentional outcomes. If strengthening the social networks of the “inner circle” is your intended outcome (and you aren’t concerned about the 80% who got little from this event), then your event was a success! I should say, there is, in fact, a time and place for unstructured, “un-designed” socializing: Once a group has already developed connections on which to build conversations. They should have either shared an interactive experience or over time have developed relationships and a sense of being part of a group.

But if you want a deeper or broader impact – so that, for example, you draw a more diverse crowd, everyone attending feels seen and leaves with at least one meaningful new connection -- you might design the experience differently, intentionally structuring it so the target audience has the tools to make deeper connections and to feel like they “belong.”

Most Jewish events, however, are designed by and for insiders, with an assumption that simply

being in a room together with some alcohol will magically result in bonding to the group or organization. We plan these events because that's the way it's always been done and because those of us on the inside truly enjoy them. But we don't often enough ask why, for what, and for whom?

We Jews can't afford to keep doing the same old things out of habit. We've seen the numbers and we know there are vast swaths of Jewish people (and their friends and families) who look, think, identify, and act differently from the "vibrant core" in the room. They won't show up or find their place in Jewish life unless we design with and for them, or empower them to create their own communal activities.

Moments of Joy

I'd been steeping myself for several years¹ in designing gatherings around explicit goals to make Jewish life more accessible, when I realized I was ignoring my own advice in planning my daughter's bat mitzvah.

Leah had already decided to forego a big party in exchange for a family trip, so we planned to celebrate with a simple "Kiddush" lunch in the social hall following the service.

B'nai mitzvah lunches follow a predictable formula at our Reform synagogue. Guests move from the sanctuary to the social hall slowly, stopping for a piece of frosted challah before getting in the buffet line and then wandering around to look for a seat with people they know at open tables.

The cousins from New Jersey sit with the cousins from New Jersey, mom's work friends find each other, the locals feel at home and the kids group off in their respective cliques. Those without a group sit quietly or try to make conversation with strangers at their table.

It's perfectly nice and it's just lunch, but I had to wonder: "What if we set an intention around our guests' experience and designed for that?"

So, we discussed what we wanted from the day, beyond the obvious goal of celebrating with people we love. Leah wanted all the kids to have fun and didn't care what the adults did, so my husband and I had free reign to articulate a goal for the adult experience.

Here's what we came up with:

Every adult attending will bring their own moments of joy as a gift to Leah, and connect with each other more deeply around their moments of joy. Everyone will make a new connection or deepen an old one around shared stories.

¹ Studying with Dr. Sarale Shadmi-Wortman, community building scholar from the Israel Association of Community Centers; participating in M²'s Relational Engagement Circle, reading Priya Parker's book *The Art of Gathering*; and building a Culture of Belonging initiative at the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund in the Bay Area.

Once we landed on this intention, figuring out the “how” was relatively easy. The trick was to provide just enough “structure” to break through social habits to encourage authentic interactions, while still honoring different socializing styles. We were inviting everyone in our lives, including non-Jewish co-workers and friends, and people from diverse socio-economic, geographic, and ethnic backgrounds, and we wanted to find a way for every single person to more deeply feel seen and see others.

Authentic Connection by Design

I was halfway through Priya Parker’s *The Art of Gathering* at that point and remembered a story about a Christmas party (ironically) in which guests brought photos to decorate the host’s tree and spent the party telling stories about their photos.

That sounded perfect. We asked every guest to send 1-3 digital “moments of joy” from their lives in advance. There was a fair amount of reminding and cajoling involved, but eventually the photos started pouring in: Lots of family vacation shots, an empty hammock on a beach at sunset, an old photo of a loved one no longer alive.

We eliminated the buffet line and random seating. Instead, we assigned guests to tables with a few people they knew and a few they didn’t, mixing the New Jersey cousins with my best friends or my husband’s work colleagues with school parents. Lunch was pre-set family style and the centerpiece of each table was a photo tree hanging with prints of all the pictures they’d sent.

Then we waited to see what would happen.

It was magical. People passed around platters of food, spun the photo trees pointing and telling their stories. Acquaintances learned things about each other they’d never known, while people who had never met learned something meaningful and joyful about someone new. There was a lot of laughter and a few tears.

Later I spoke to a friend who normally leaves directly after services because she doesn’t fit into the b’nai mitzvah social milieu as a single, younger woman with no kids.

“You literally gave me a seat at the table,” she reflected. “I had as much right to be there as everyone else I was seated with. You gave me permission and made it easy for me to connect. I learned surprising things about people and instead of feeling “different” I realized how much we all have in common.”

It was just lunch, but we built something extraordinary and unforgettable out of it, a way for each one of our guests to touch our joy with their own joy and to go beneath the surface with each other.

A Habit of “*Kavanah*” (Intention)

Social events and programs are really just platforms for achieving a set of goals or outcomes for participants – greater knowledge, expanded networks, increased commitment or funding, deeper belonging and meaning. They should never be treated as ends in themselves, or worse – as a perfunctory habit.

Instead, we must build a habit of intention, or “*kavanah*,” in designing gatherings that generate authentic, meaningful connection for more people. How?

1. **Start with Awareness.** What are the “Thirdnesses” (external influences) surrounding a group or event—norms, power structures, financial disparity, demographics? What differentiates the people you want to gather? How do YOU and your own assumptions, desires, and traits influence your approach?
2. **Set specific, or measurable goals.** Not how many attend, but who, how they interact, the authentic quality of those interactions, whether they follow up afterwards. Ask: What do we want participants to feel, learn, or do?
3. **Now design around your observations and goals.** Too many planners start with design and skip steps 1 and 2. First, decide if a one-time event is even the right vehicle for the goals you’ve set. If it is, make deliberate choices from location and room set-up to how people enter and leave, that support your goals and account for the “Thirdnesses” you’ve observed.
4. **Don’t leave connections to chance.** Give your event structure or rules of engagement (like pre-assigned seating or a probing question to discuss in pairs) that will level the playing field for everyone and help them connect in meaningful ways, and more.
5. **Involve participants in design and execution.** Shift the dynamic from a transactional service to an event by and for participants. Invite your target audience to create an experience that resonates, and then deploy them as connectors, table captains, or conversation starters.
6. **Measure success differently.** Measuring attendance or satisfaction treats participants like customers. Instead, pick metrics supporting your relational goals. For example: the people you designed for are in the room (diversity); everyone speaks at least once, meets someone new, or learns something meaningful about others; people step up to contribute, bring friends the next time, or build on their connections after the event.
7. **Design for what’s next.** A well-designed event can launch deeper connections over time. Leverage your event beyond that day by reaching out to those who couldn’t make it to tell them they were missed or by inviting attendees to help create something new together based on their interests.

Designing for belonging is a mindset shift that requires building new habits, discipline, and skills. It's like putting on "belonging glasses;" once you wear them, nothing will look the same. You'll notice the people left out, the missed opportunities for connection, the same people in the room talking to the same people in the room, the formulaic events that take up huge amounts of staff time but go nowhere. You'll start to tweak and experiment with gathering people in new ways, and you'll be shocked at the results, at how eager people are to belong and connect more authentically. You may decide, to great dismay from your "establishment," that a large event isn't the right strategy to deeply engage more people in Jewish life. And you will never plan or experience a Jewish gathering in the same way again.

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