

The Power of Belonging: Creating a Culture of Connection in the Bay Area Jewish World

ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-power-of-belonging-creating-a-culture-of-connection-in-the-bay-area-jewish-world/

June 23, 2017

June 23, 2017



By Wendy Verba

"In our generation, the struggle of whether we connect more, whether we achieve our biggest opportunities, comes down to this – your ability to build communities and create a world where every single person has a sense of purpose." – Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook Founder and CEO

As it happens, our story begins with a Facebook post. Four years ago, "Natalya" arrived in San Francisco with her husband and two small children from Moscow via Tel Aviv. She knew nobody. Like many Russian-speaking Jews, she had grown up with no Jewish education and only the vaguest notion of her Jewish roots. But she was alone and anxious to connect, so she went on Facebook.

There she found other local Russian-speaking Jewish moms, who all seemed to be going to a "Passover in the Desert" camping trip with the Russian-Speaking Jews (RSJ) program of the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. Despite knowing nothing about Passover and feeling like an outsider, Natalya signed her family up.

On the first night, instead of a *seder*, workshop or lecture, the adults were invited to sit in a circle and simply share their immigration stories. As each person talked, Natalya realized that her own story was both unique and universal. She moved from outsider to feeling like she belonged – that she mattered and was valued as a unique individual, yet part of something bigger.

By the end of the weekend, Natalya had signed up for [PJ Library](#) and made plans with families nearby for playdates and holiday celebrations. The event organizers noticed her talent for leading children's activities, and asked her to help run the next year's event, and the one after that. Last year, through a family engagement grant from the [Harold Grinspoon Foundation](#), the Federation hired Natalya as one of three "RSJ Connectors" to organize home-grown Jewish family activities, from "hike and learns" to museum visits that routinely attract 50-60 Russian-speaking Jews with young children.

Natalya's experience underscores the importance and power of what may seem like a small moment: one purposely designed for people to be seen and heard in a personal and authentic way before they engage with program content. These small moments are the whole point – the secret sauce to human belonging that will transform our Jewish world. Yet, surprisingly, they rarely happen without regular intention and planning.

Our Community Building Journey

The San Francisco-based Federation, along with a growing number of partner organizations and Jewish leaders in the Bay Area, has spent the last year on a learning journey to explore how intentional community building practices and mindsets can transform our organizations as we create opportunities for people to find belonging and purpose through Jewish life.

Our organization's journey began with one visionary leader of our community – Varda Rabin – who imagined a Jewish ecosystem organized around connecting and belonging, in which agency leaders actively collaborate with one another based on trust and personal relationships.

In 2016, Varda partnered with the Federation to bring leaders from 24 San Francisco Jewish organizations to Israel on the Irving Rabin Community Building Mission, with the guidance of Dr. Sarale Shadmi-Wortman, an Israeli community building scholar from Oranim College. The purpose of the trip was to explore Israel's many successful experiments in intentional community building while creating a bonded team of Bay Area Jewish leaders through community building practices.

The trip alone transformed the way organizations in our community work together. Camp and Hillel directors, day school heads, and rabbis are collaborating with organizations focused on Jewish diversity, outdoor Jewish experiences, arts and culture, public affairs, and social justice. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis are bringing their congregations together to connect and learn together. For example, following the Rabin mission, SF Hillel began facilitating student "road trips" to programs like [Urban Adamah](#) and [JIMENA](#) to give Jewish college students a connection to post-college Jewish communal life. There are new levels of trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose among organizations that have worked in silos for many years.

Structuring Belonging for Jewish Engagement

Our Federation is re-orienting everything we do around a single, unifying principle that we believe is the key to a vibrant Jewish future: ensuring that every person who chooses Jewish life experiences a sense of *purpose, belonging, safety, and commitment* within a Jewish community – whether that's through a synagogue, a Moishe House, a day school, a new mother's group, or any other gathering – formal or informal places where people congregate to do Jewish stuff.

When people feel an authentic sense of belonging, amazing things happen. They take care of each other, they act like owners instead of consumers, they give more money, they bring others, they lead and take responsibility, they trust each other. This is how we measure belonging and the success of community building practices.

"Membership" has become a bad word in the Bay Area, famous for record-breaking un-affiliation rates, aversion to traditional institutions, identity diversity, and "a la carte" approach to Jewish experiences. But that milieu has bred the most fertile environment for Jewish innovation in the country – ground zero for gamechangers like [Moishe House](#), [the Kitchen](#), [Urban Adamah](#), [Wilderness Torah](#), and [UpStart](#) (just to name a few). Here also, established institutions, from JCCs to synagogues, have gone far outside the box to meet people where they are, like the [Conservative synagogogue](#) (funded by a Federation Innovation grant) that is actually growing in numbers and dollars after throwing its traditional membership dues and tuition fees out the window and adopting a relationship-based, voluntary contribution model.

The problem with membership isn't that people don't want to belong. It's that the transactional nature of traditional Jewish membership structures can undermine community building and send a message: "You are consumers – you pay and we deliver a service."

The human desire to belong to a community is powerful and fundamental – whether you're young or old, rich or poor, inside or out. Creating a sense of belonging doesn't just happen when you bring people together, no matter how good the content or how welcoming the organizers. It requires a shift in the way we structure our goals and activities – from delivering programs and products for "consumption," to focus instead on practices that forge human connection and generate feelings of belonging, ownership, and responsibility.

These are not new concepts. The relational engagement model pioneered by [Hillel](#) and [Ron Wolfson](#), the Reform movement's "[Audacious Hospitality](#)" approach, and Chabad's success bringing diverse people together around welcoming *Shabbat* tables have all given us tools and mindsets to build authentic relationships with people who feel excluded from Jewish life.

Community Building picks up from there by establishing regular practices to ensure that belonging and connection are built into organizational life and group activities. How we do this is both deceptively simple and deeply complex. It's not about doing more things; it's about doing things differently.

Natalya needed that structured moment at the beginning of the Passover retreat, and she needed the right check-in question to help her connect to others and to her own story in order to feel like she belonged. Small, simple activities like this can profoundly alter the dynamics of a group as well as the personal investment of each member. But changing organizational habits, mindsets, and success measures to make such practices systematic is hard work, requiring commitment, training, and coaching.

Strengthening our Community Building "Muscles"

Our Federation has launched an effort to build "cultures of belonging" internally and among our partner organizations. With Varda Rabin's continued partnership, we are working with Dr. Shadmi-Wortman to offer workshops, coaching and training for a core of community building change agents. To date we have engaged over 40 organizations in the Bay Area in a range of community building workshops and customized consultations, with plans to launch a fellowship cohort for deeper learning for organizations further along the community building path.

To our surprise, some of the organizations most interested in learning community building practices are also the most successful at attracting new people to Jewish experiences. For example, The Kitchen, an innovative spiritual community that has no problem packing its programs with people new to Jewish life, saw an opportunity to focus on connecting people more deeply once they showed up through structured small groups.

"We are thinking of The Kitchen overall now in a different way, as a place where our role is to connect people to Torah and each other," said founder and Rabbi Noa Kushner.

Other examples of how community building approaches are changing the way we bring people together:

- Several organizations have introduced a "you were missed" practice at the end of each board meeting. Board members in attendance volunteer to call each member not there to share highlights of the meeting and let them know they were missed.
- A day school brought parents and staff together to pilot community building approaches in three targeted areas, including open parent coffees at drop-off facilitated by board members who introduce parents to each other.
- A synagogue canceled its order of *mishloach manot* (Purim baskets) for delivery to congregants, and instead turned the *mitzvah* into an afternoon community building activity, with group *hamantaschen* baking and volunteers assembling boxes while getting to know one another.
- An organization that cares for seniors is shifting its focus from asking clients what they need to what they can do for themselves and others.

What all these examples have in common is a change in mindset and organizational culture, and a focus on "belonging" as the primary goal. Instead of asking ourselves, "How can we distribute *mishloach manot* baskets as cheaply and efficiently as possible?" or "How do we ensure that all our clients' needs are met?," we now ask, "How can we structure this activity to ensure that everyone feels like they belong, that they matter and that they are part of something greater?"

As Varda Rabin says, "Judaism is a religion of connectivity. You can't be Jewish alone." Our tradition and our current Jewish ecosystem offer so many points of access for belonging and purpose, if only we learn to structure connection as intentionally and systematically as we do fundraising or event planning. The results will be stronger Jewish organizations, a vibrant Jewish community, and a path to belonging for every person in the Jewish world.

Wendy Verba is Senior Program Officer at the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund.

An earlier version of this article appeared on [Ideas in Jewish Education and Engagement](#).