

The Relational Revolution Challenge

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By Rachel Gildiner and Wendy Verba

[This is the second article in a series about relational engagement and learning written by M² Relational Engagement Circle participants.]

As solidly “Jewy Jews” in professional leadership roles, we thought we could fit in almost anywhere in the Jewish universe. Then one of us [Wendy] found herself sitting in a circle on a lawn in San Diego with 20 other Jewish colleagues (many of them rabbis), holding a tambourine and trying to figure out what planet she’d landed on. That planet turned out to be a *Rosh Chodesh* ritual called “Hallel.”

[Wendy recounts:] One by one, my colleagues launched into songs, played instruments and shared readings that were unfamiliar to me. Looking around the circle in dismay, I felt like an outsider, the only one who didn't know what was going on. After confessing to my neighbor, I discovered that he felt the same, as did another participant. That emboldened us to share our experience with the rest of the group, which led to a robust conversation about redesigning the *Hallel* by seeing and hearing who is there and providing access points for all.

Lesson learned: design every Jewish experience as if we were all strangers in the land of Judaism, not by “dumbing down” the content but by relating – listening, framing, inviting and acknowledging differences so all can feel they belong and find meaning in the experience.

Understanding each person's unique starting point with Judaism and meeting them there are key. While there's no magic recipe to engage everyone, there is one fundamental shift that few Jewish organizations have fully embraced: re-orienting everything we do around human connection and belonging to help people make meaning of Jewish wisdom and content, and feel seen, heard and valued in Jewish spaces.

Meeting people where they are does not mean abandoning serious Jewish knowledge. When done well, relational engagement is shaped, informed and infused by deep Jewish content and knowledgeable educators. As we know from our own tradition of *chevruta* learning, real meaning-making happens best in relationship. A wise teacher of ours once taught: if the content is not processed between people, it's as if the learning never happened. Relational infrastructure is therefore not only the most effective way to share Jewish learning, to make it “sticky” and relevant, it is also the best way to ensure that anyone can find belonging and shared purpose within a Jewish community.

“Relational Judaism” has been part of the Jewish vernacular for over a decade – books have been written, organizations have been transformed, practitioners have advanced the art on the ground, and educators are introducing new theories. Yet, a more zoomed-out picture shows that the majority of Jewish institutions and innovators continue to operate in a transactional, programmatic model, offering programs, services, classes, lectures and experiences for participants to attend as consumers. As a result, success is measured by participation or satisfaction, and the experience ends when it's over.

Relational work is not fluff; it's not touchy-feely icebreakers or schmoozing before the content. It's not a job assigned to one person or another program to manage. *It's a systemic approach to building human connection into everything we do.* It's the original Jewish infrastructure – the *minyan*, the *chevruta*, the *shtetl*, the tribe. It's about defining success differently, creating intentional experiences where authentic Jewish encounters can happen and deepen over time, and equipping organizations and people with the resources to build relationships, communities and cultures of belonging.

Think you already do this? We challenge you to take a closer look.

While your Jewish spaces may feel warm and welcoming to you, are you personally seeing everyone there (or not there) and constructing opportunities for all to connect and feel they belong? Even the most successful Jewish offerings – conferences, peer-based programs, immersive experiences and small learning groups – can be enhanced with deeper relationship-building before, during and after by shifting from

- Welcoming and greeting to inviting and bringing
- Icebreakers to soul stories
- Name tags to “storytags”
- Traditional meetings to participatory formats that connect people to each other
- A single dedicated engagement professional to “it’s part of everyone’s job”

Every year, thousands of young people move to the Washington, D.C., area. Inevitably, many of those who are Jewish will encounter someone from GatherDC, not necessarily by walking through our doors but through a chance encounter at yoga or happy hour where our staff spend their time. These encounters lead to coffee dates where we learn more about them, and then to a personal invitation for them to participate in a curated small group experience with Jewish content that speaks to an interest or need they expressed. We follow up personally after each of these stages, not with a request or recruitment message, but to say thank you and offer resources or introductions. This process for thousands of people takes time, but it has seen a high return on investment by deepening the connection of Jewish adults in their 20s and 30s to each other, to existing Jewish offerings and to meaningful adult Jewish life.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, the Federation gathers lay and professional changemakers from 30+ Jewish organizations to explore new tools for creating “cultures of belonging” that embrace more people. The results have been inspiring: the Jewish Coalition for Literacy has changed how they engage their volunteer tutors, creating drop-in coffee gatherings with structured opportunities for volunteers to support each other; Honeymoon Israel participants are using belonging tools to create micro-communities when they return from Israel; Peninsula Temple Sholom in Burlingame has empowered a Belonging and Engagement Team to overhaul practices and structures throughout the synagogue that prioritize connecting people to each other.

How can you spark your own relational revolution? Those who have seen the paradigm shift at your organization, from transactional to relational, know that this culture change takes time and requires a different mindset, reallocated resources and a willingness to do things differently. We offer some engagement hacks that can catalyze your relational revolution:

Take the Relational Challenge

#1. Deepen empathy: Find a Jewish space where you feel like an outsider, a place you might otherwise never find yourself. *What does it feel like when you have no idea what's going on or who anyone is?*

- Resist the “fight or flight” impulse – stay and notice how it feels and what goes through your head.
- Imagine how others encounter an unfamiliar Jewish experience: not feeling “Jewish enough,” labeling themselves a “bad Jew,” or simply finding Judaism irrelevant to their daily life.

#2. Reallocate time and space: Cancel your programs; leave your building. *Meet people where they are – we talk about it all the time, but do we know what it looks like?*

- Set aside at least one week per month with no events or programs (and all the logistical details that consume you), and instead, schedule individual or small group coffee dates and conversations away from your desk, ideally outside of your building with new faces.
- Create a culture and accountability structure that rewards people at all levels (lay and pro) for leaving their offices and comfort zones and interacting face-to-face with those they are trying to reach. Gather feedback and stories from these conversations and empower more grassroots-initiated activities.

#3. Listen and relate, don't sell: Bring your full self, but leave your agenda at home. *Don't come to conversations to recruit – come with a listening heart and your own authentic story.*

- Start with curiosity. Share your genuine self, wisdom and vulnerability, but mostly make space for others to tell their stories. Listen for clues that can lead to new connections and ideas.
- Don't fill your calendar with top-down programs: leave room (and a little money) for adaptation and creativity based on what you hear from those you meet.

#4. Design for belonging and connection: Create intentional opportunities for ongoing and deepening relationships in every aspect of your organization. *Ask: “How will this activity connect people to one another to co-create new understandings and experiences that didn't exist before?”*

- Intentionally structure gatherings and meetings as interactive opportunities for people to connect to each other in authentic and relevant ways, leading to deeper engagement. Co-create experiences with them, not for them.
- Don't measure attendance numbers alone. Develop deeper and more nuanced metrics of personal and Jewish growth, connectivity and group belonging (for example, track how often people create their own Jewish experiences, invite others to join them, report meaningful connections with a new person, or express feeling seen and heard in Jewish gatherings).

#5. Our final relational challenge: real transformation: *Let's invest in a radical reorientation of Jewish life and Jewish leadership – from programs for the few to relationships of meaning and belonging for the many.* It's time to step outside of our own walls and our own agendas and build authentic human connections across more segments of the Jewish population, to co-create a resonant and inspiring Judaism for the 21st century. After 10 years of advancing relationship-based engagement across our communities, let's commit to the full revolution!

So, why are a Federation program officer from San Francisco and the director of a D.C.-based young adult engagement start-up co-writing an article? We discovered our shared vision and language while participating in two networks that are currently building the field of relational engagement and learning: M²: Institute for Experiential Jewish Education's Relational Engagement Circle and the Kripke Center for Relational Judaism. And we realized we had something to say together that was more than we could say alone: that relationships are a powerful tool to build Jewish life, meaning and belonging, and that we can restructure organized Jewish life to ensure this happens on a massive scale – one person at a time.

Are relationships the lens through which you pursue your work, regardless of your role? Are you looking for a cohort of educators with whom you can delve deeply into relationships as central to creating meaning and learning? Learn more about the next cohort and M² at www.ieje.org.

Rachel Gildiner is the inaugural Executive Director of GatherDC, a relational start-up that helps ensure every Jewish 20- and 30-something finds connection to community and to a compelling adult Jewish life. She has over 12 years of experience developing relational models to connect more emerging adults more deeply to one another and to 21st-century Jewish community. rachelg@gatherdc.org.

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