

From the Rabbi's Desk

Engaging synagogue



From the desk of Rabbi Alex Greenbaum



Dear Friends,

Everyone wants to have a welcoming shul. Everyone thinks they have a welcoming shul. But, it's time for Beth El to no longer be a welcoming shul. It means nothing to be welcoming, if we are not engaging. Our goal, from now on, is to be more than welcoming. I want us to be known as an engaging shul.

To “engage”: To attract and hold, to cause to participate, and to connect with. More members are not enough. Having a bunch of names on a piece of paper does not make a synagogue. We could have the largest synagogue in the nation; but, if we don't engage our members, then that's all they are - some letters on a piece of paper.

What is the ideal Conservative synagogue? Not the largest one, but rather the Conservative synagogue in which its members are willing, learning, and striving Jews. The perfect Conservative Jew is not perfect. The ideal Conservative Jew is always a work in progress. The ideal Conservative synagogue is filled with not Jews who are perfect, but rather filled with Jews who are willing, learning, and striving. It is not about the numbers, but rather about the people and how we engage them. Joining Beth El is not success, success is what happens next.

We do not have an apathetic synagogue. We have a passionate synagogue, filled with passionate people. We are filled with willing, learning, and striving Jews. And that is our goal - not more members, but more passionate members. We have greeters at the doors, but do we have engagers in the seats? Every single member of Beth El must be an engager. Part of engaging in a Conservative shul is about outreach to our own membership. About 1/4 of our congregation has been members five years or less, 25% of our congregation is new. We have a responsibility to fulfill the needs of all congregants within the Conservative movement. The Conservative movement is not a special, secret club where you need a secret handshake to get in. It is a movement that respects all, the traditional, the observant, the liberal, the intermarried, and so on. Judaism is not a democracy, it is about pluralism, always has been, always will be. And, the Conservative movement is the place where pluralism is cultivated.

We are a lay led congregation. We are engaged. But, how can we teach engagement to others? How can we instill it? Motivate? Invigorate? Engagement is accomplished through participation over performance. Engagement is having a congregation where everyone has a say, where we recognize that being a good Jew has nothing to do with how kosher you are or how well you keep Shabbat, but rather how well you treat your fellow human being.

Judaism is a religion of action over belief, of deed over creed. Words are cheap. We engage by being

engaged. We walk the walk. We lead by example. We are one congregation, one community. We are a team. The question is not how do we get more members, but rather how do we get more members who care. How? By embracing our synagogue. If every single person in our shul is proud of being a member of our shul, then we will attract more caring members. All we need is a bunch of Jewish people who are happy where they are. (sounds easy) We must believe in ourselves. A synagogue only exists for its members, not the other way around. A synagogue cannot be engaging, only its membership can be. Beth El is no longer a welcoming synagogue. We are now an engaging synagogue. Watch out, because we're coming for you.

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