We Love It When A Plan Comes Together

A Case Study Synagogue Transformation through
Relational Judaism and creating a Culture of Philanthropy.

Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC Canada
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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At the end of just about every episode of the 1980's hit TV show The A-Team, the team's cigar-chomping leader Colonel John "Hannibal" Smith, played by actor George Peppard would often declare as explosions rippled in the distance or the team narrowing escaped disaster, "I love it when a plan comes together."

Such is the similar feeling at Temple Sholom in Vancouver BC, Canada as we enter the 5th year of an intentional effort to focus energy and resources on Relational Judaism in every aspect of our sacred work.

A transition of senior rabbinic leadership in 2013 was proceeded by a congregational listening campaign and focus groups to identify not only what the temple was looking for in its new Rabbi but also what it had found in itself as it entered its 50th year as the only Reform Congregation in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Time and again the membership recognized the power the community had played in fostering relationships for families and their children. As the congregation was aging many of those relationships continued to deepen, but few were growing beyond the original cohort of membership. New families would join the synagogue at a rate consistent with a rate of replacement for leaving through attrition but breaking through the generational divide was difficult. The supplementary religious school was under populated for the size of the congregation (600 families with 75 students). New members were largely coming from conversion courses that expected a year's membership upon successful conversion. The congregation was warm and welcoming, its doors were open but not enough of the progressive Jews in Vancouver were finding their way to Temple Sholom's doors.

As was well documented in the first edition of Relational Judaism, the arrival of a new Senior Rabbi (Dan Moskovitz) and the hiring of a full-time Associate Rabbi (Carey Brown) presented an opportunity to reach beyond the walls of the synagogue and also create new relationships with those already within.

During the course of those first two years the Rabbis made every effort to meet and truly know the membership, Dr Ron Wolfson was brought in to explain to the lay leadership, congregation and larger community the benefits of a relational approach to congregational life. An outreach program, called East Side Jews was created with the help of funding from the Jewish Community Foundation that enabled Rabbi Brown to lead monthly shabbat and holiday experiences open to the broader community in community centres and public spaces in an emerging but underserved Jewish neighborhood (East Vancouver).

A new Hebrew School model was created (Hebrew Club) that took mid-week Hebrew school and brought it into congregant homes in small groups on an adaptive schedule that was more accommodating to busy families.

The Temple's Award-winning sisterhood was asked to reimagine a sisterhood for the 21st century with an emphasis on relationship and connection. The same was done with a reconstituted Men's Club, its successful seniors' programs and adult education. The result was to identify where current structures were inadequate to meet those goals and new initiatives were launched to address those areas.

For example, the temple's senior's lunch program; '60 Plus' was much beloved by its participants. Most of whom had joined the group twenty years prior when its name was reflective of their age. Two decades later, it was many of the same people but it was not appealing to the next cohort of the newly retired. Again, with the help of a grant from the Jewish Community Foundation, Temple Sholom partnered with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and their successful Wise Aging Program, which was a relational based course on intentional aging. This program promoted sharing, reflection and personal story telling amongst a population of young seniors that found themselves at a crossroads in life and needing fellow travelers to help navigate the journey.

By 2017, three years after Rabbi Moskovitz' arrival the temple had grown by 100 households, the religious school had doubled in size and there was a buzz in the community. The challenge was that the temple was still lagging in revenue, a structural deficit of $200,000 existed and expenses involved in the increased needs for program and staffing were putting enormous pressure on a congregation that had always prided itself on not talking about money or being driven by large donors.

As an example, no room, building or program bears the name of any member or family in the congregation. This is a point of cultural pride and a communal value that the congregation was keen to maintain, while at the same time it meant that dues and school fees accounted for more than 80% of gross revenue.

The temple participated in the URJ Communities of Practice Cohort on creating a Culture of Philanthropy. This introduced the congregation to Rabbi Lou Feldstein, a former Federation Director and an expert consultant in the field. Rabbi Feldstein led a select committee of Temple leaders in a year long process to examine every aspect of the temple's revenue and donor process, from the thank you letters sent to the way the congregation talked about temple dues. The result was a detailed report with 50 recommendations on how to bring a Culture of Philanthropy to Temple Sholom consistent with its commitment to a Relational Judaism methodology.

Over the last two years the temple has been steadily and consistently implementing these recommendations, including better donor stewardship, developing a case for giving,

implementing a high participation, low dollar request High Holy Day Appeal and expanding its foundation funding for programs and initiatives to include family foundations and member families.

As an example, the temple had not previously had a regular High Holy Day appeal. However when time urgent requests had been made at the High Holy Days, particularly for social justice oriented projects like sponsoring Syrian Refugee Families the number and dollar amount of contributions exceed all expectations.

Based on this precedent a decision was made to create a “Half Shekel Campaign”, based on the biblical model of every Jewish adult giving a half shekel in support of the Temple in Jerusalem. Temple Sholom’s approach was to ask for $54 from every adult in the congregation to help provide for the kiddush, shabbat meals and other times when food, so essential to creating a warm and welcoming community, was used in the congregation. The goal was to offset the $50,000 annual expense to the operating budget for these functions with ‘half shekel’ gifts of the congregation’s collective good will. Now in its second year as an appeal, the campaign has met both its financial goal and also raised awareness of the value that these functions play in creating community and fostering relationships.

The core of creating a Culture of Philanthropy through a Relational Judaism model has been, “Temple Talks”, a systematic process to have one-on-one conversations between a temple leadership volunteer and Temple Sholom member households on a triannual basis. These conversations focus on the relationship the household has with the temple; the values that make Temple Sholom the right community for their family and how those values can be reflected in their involvement with the synagogue, including their financial commitment.

The program is in its first year of full implementation after a 6 month pilot project but already the results have been exceedingly positive, members have welcomed each other into their home for these conversations, report that they feel valued by the synagogue and more than 80% have agreed to making a long term financial commitment to the synagogue.

After five years fully immersed in the Relational Judaism model, Temple Sholom has grown from 600 family to 830+, the supplementary religious school is now over 160 students, the structural deficit has been erased and the congregation has been able to afford to hire more staff to expand programs and services. But perhaps the most telling evidence of this plan coming together is a recent survey of the first three words that come to mind when members think about Temple Sholom. Friendly, Welcoming and Warm led the survey, and they continue to lead and guide the Temple and its leadership in all they do. We do love it when a plan comes together!