



Rebooting Judaism

Do the Innovative Communities of the Jewish Emergent Network Hold a Key to the Jewish Future?

On a summer Shabbat in 2009, Rabbi David Ingber stood under a *chuppah* (canopy) with his son at a synagogue on New York City’s Upper West Side. The celebration was not a wedding, however; it was a naming ceremony for the rabbi’s newborn.

The baby was placed on a stack of prayer shawls inside the open Torah, and blessings were recited in a ceremony described by Rabbi Ingber as affirming that “each child—every human life—is as holy as one of the letters of the Torah.”

This rite, blending traditional Jewish practice with creative elements, has become a staple of Rabbi Ingber’s community. His congregation, Romemu (meaning “elevated” in Hebrew), began in 2008 with 75 people. Today, it boasts 600 member families.

Rabbi Ingber describes Romemu as a “laboratory for new things, a hybrid of the new and old.” In fact, it is one of a number of innovative new American congregations that are reimagining aspects of Judaism. Four years ago, the rabbis of seven of these unaffiliated communities joined in an alliance they call the Jewish Emergent Network. In addition to Romemu, the other Network communities are Sixth and I, in Washington, DC; Kavana, in Seattle; The Kitchen, in San Francisco; Lab/Shul, in New York;

Mishkan, in Chicago; and IKAR, in Los Angeles (IKAR’s Rabbi Sharon Brous is featured in the Museum’s *Only in America*® Gallery/Hall of Fame).

“We are taking an alternative approach and saying, ‘Let’s try an experiment and see how it goes,’” explains Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann of Mishkan, whose High Holiday services have grown from 600 to 1,700 participants over the past six years. “Building community around Shabbat and holidays, learning and justice—we’re not inventing these. This is Judaism. We’re just rebooting it in ways that [resonate] with a modern audience.”

Emergent, but Not a Movement

At a time when many congregations are shrinking, the Network communities’ combination of tradition and innovation is appealing to many disaffected and young—though not exclusively young—Jews.

“There is a real demand for the Jewish experiences and learning opportunities these communities provide,” says Jeff Tiell, a program officer at the Jim Joseph Foundation, which funds Jewish education initiatives, including the Network. “They’ve tapped into something across the age spectrum.”

That's not to say all seven congregations follow one path. "There are a lot of things in common and a lot that are different," says Jessica McCormick, the Network's program manager. The Network, she says, "is *not* trying to be a movement." Instead, McCormick contends, it is intended to "leverage the power of all seven communities to [reach] people on the fringes of Judaism."

Network leaders say they are reinventing spiritual practices to be more meaningful and accessible. Lab/Shul's weekly virtual Kaddish conference call is aimed at mourners who can't make it to synagogue for recitation. In 2012, Sixth & I's Rabbi Shira Stutman introduced Shabbasana, Jewish-inspired yoga and meditation, prior to Friday night services as preparation of the mind and body for Shabbat.

High Holiday services at Mishkan last year supplemented traditional prayers with a leader-produced guide to help members "get higher." The guide includes quotes from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi—plus the Dalai Lama, Steve Jobs, Saint Francis of Assisi, and even Glinda, the "good witch" from *The Wizard of Oz*. And all Network communities combine intensely musical services with a commitment to social justice.

Spreading Their Vision

The Jewish Emergent Network grew out of the community leaders' desire to share ideas and spread their vision of a dynamic 21st century Judaism. This can be most clearly seen in the Network's 2015 launch of a fellowship/training program for early-career rabbis.

"What's working well now is not necessarily going to work for the next generation," notes Jessica McCormick. "We want rabbis who have the skills to answer questions that we don't even know yet."

The Network and its fellowship program are backed by a number of organizations, including the Crown Family and the Charles H. Revson Foundation. The Jim Joseph Foundation in San Francisco awarded a \$3 million grant to pilot the program. The grant supports the salaries of 14 fellows over a four-year period and maintains the program's conferences, site visits, and cohort-based learning.

Is this network of communities doing something unprecedented? No, says Jonathan Sarna, PhD, chair of the Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program at Brandeis University. American Jewish history is filled with stories of reinvention, explains Dr. Sarna, who serves as the Museum's chief historian. The Museum features several examples of these stories, from that of the first reform liturgy published in the United States in 1820s Charleston, NC, to the story of Havurat Shalom (fellowship of peace) in 1960s Somerville, MA. He suggests that the Network is "the latest example of this phenomenon, and is particularly timely, since we know from surveys that young Jews (like their Christian counterparts) are abandoning established synagogues and institutions."

"The seeds of tomorrow's trends in Judaism are being sown by young rebellious Jews," Dr. Sarna adds, "finding new ways to express themselves as Jews in the American setting."

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This article is one in a series on issues in contemporary Judaism, intended to inform *Beacon* readers about important developments in the American Jewish community.

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— JESSICA MCCORMICK, PROGRAM MANAGER, JEWISH EMERGENT NETWORK



Above: The Mishkan Davening Team gather with community members for prayer at Get Higher 5777, Mishkan High Holidays.

Opposite page: Inaugural gathering of the leaders of the Jewish Emergent Network, including Mishkan's Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann (at right), August 2016.