

140th Anniversary Fund - Report #1

Our Core Purpose:

To nurture Jewish meaning, connection, continuity

Our Core Values:

Open Hearts, Kedusha (Holiness), Derech Eretz (Common Decency)

Our BHAG (Big Holy Awesome Goal):

Every congregant pursues an individualized Jewish path.
In so doing, the individual, the community, and the world become better.

Recently, I have been reading Steve Jobs' biography. In it, two quotes stood out: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." and "Form follows emotion." What does this have to do with Shared Vision and - especially - our 140th Anniversary Fund?

First, let's step back a moment and review where we have gone. Seven years ago, our congregation embarked on a grand experiment: to (re)discover who we were. It was a congregant-led process. Staff was involved but this was not about any individual's agenda. Our goal was to have the entire congregation articulate its "shared vision." Over the course of an 18-month period, we engaged almost 500 individuals in our communal conversation. A team of volunteers verbalized what folks were saying - and then asked if they heard it correctly. The result was a clearly articulated core purpose (what we do), core values (how we behave), and BHAG (Big Holy Awesome Goal - what inspires us and to what we have committed to achieve over a 5-10 year period. (See box above)

Two years ago, we observed our 140th anniversary. As part of that celebration, we raised \$400,000 in order to pursue our Shared Vision with a commitment to excellence. We focused on two aspects: bringing to fruition our BHAG and expanding informal Jewish learning opportunities for our children. We believed then - and still do - that these two pieces of our shared vision have the greatest potential for strengthening us as a community and as individuals.

Many gave generously to our 140th Anniversary Fund. In soliciting donations, I made a commitment to report regularly on our progress. My intention was to report yearly. However, that did not happen. So, as we finish our second year, I offer my personal

apologies for the delay and present this first report. In addition, two more reports will be forthcoming - in June 2013 and a final report in June 2014.

Now, back to Steve Jobs. In reading about what drove Jobs to create what he did, it is clear that two guiding principles served as foundation stones. First, to be great, something doesn't and shouldn't have to be complicated. Second, our emotions - our needs - will drive what that which we create will look like.

These are the same foundational principles for our two projects. In determining how to support each congregant to follow their own individual journey, we knew that each congregant's personal understanding and desire for Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity would drive how and when a journey would begin...and what it would look like. And the simpler we made the process, the more successful it would be. For informal Jewish learning, the same was true. What families "needed" would determine what we offered. And the "simple" approach would be the most successful.

Enclosed is a brief report on where we went, how we did, what we learned, and where we will go regarding both efforts and how your donation was spent. Anyone desiring more information is welcome to contact me or Rabbi Shuval-Weiner directly. Either of us will be delighted to engage in further dialogue.

Whether you read this report as donor, participant, or interested observer, I thank you for allowing us the privilege to take this congregational journey together these last few years. May the coming months be ones that further expand our Shared Vision...a vision of Jewish growth and support for each and every member of our B'nai Jehudah family.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff

Report on our Big Holy Awesome Goal (BHAG):

Based on information we heard from congregants, we recognized that each individual had a journey that s/he pursues. Sometimes it is a journey easily articulated. Oftentimes, it is not. Therefore, we verbalized what we heard with this statement: “Every congregant pursues an individualized Jewish path. In so doing, the individual, the community, and the world become better.”

We believed the most effective way to realize this goal was by using a tool, what we called an “IJP” (Individualized Jewish Path). In Fall, 2009, we engaged Amy Ravis Furey to develop and implement this process, utilizing IJP as our primary tool. With the support of Rabbi Shuval-Weiner, Amy engaged a group of volunteers, hired a rabbinic life-coach to train volunteers and to develop materials, and created the process by which congregants could begin pursuing their own individual Jewish passions.

The process was overwhelmingly successful for those who participated. However, because of the intense time commitment involved for both the congregant and the volunteer see’ah (guide), less than 100 individuals took advantage of this process.

By Spring, 2011, we recognized that we had not followed one of Steve Jobs’ admonitions: “Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” Our process was too complicated for mass appeal. The message was confusing and people felt that “IJP wasn’t for them.” Our work became developing mechanisms for enabling individuals to pursue their Jewish journeys, in ways easier to accomplish, simpler to understand, and more expandable to the many members of the B’nai Jehudah family.

Amy, working collaboratively with clergy, staff, and volunteers, began to offer “group IJP” experiences, to assist similar-minded and/or similar-situated groups to explore how they might pursue their Jewish journeys, with B’nai Jehudah’s assistance. Two successful implementations of this strategy have been our Kindergarten Jewish Journey program and our Confirmation Class IJP project. In both cases, many families/individuals explored their Jewish passions, interests, and hopes as ways by which they were able to grow Jewishly.

In December, 2011, we brought in Artie Isaac, who with more than two decades experience running his own successful advertising firm, has now dedicated his career to helping organizations better clarify their messaging. One important lesson he taught the staff and volunteers who worked with him was: “Maximized individualization drowns the individual in opportunity.” In other words, “simplicity is the ultimate sophistication (and success).”

As a result, we implemented a focus-group for our seniors, to understand what they wanted (Jobs’ “form follows emotion”). What emerged were several wonderful initiatives: a Lunch-n-Learn program, a single ladies’ Shabbat service and dinner initiative, and the re-introduction of Mix and Mingle. We also recognized that other groups – empty-nesters, B’nai Mitzvah families, new members and young adults all were groups that shared many needs/desires and whom we can support collectively as they travel along their own journeys at this particular stage of their lives.

Here are our successes:

- Our IJP process was recognized as Program of the Year, by the Jewish Federation of Greater Kansas City in 2011
- IJP was highlighted in Reform Judaism magazine, as a model for other congregations seeking innovative approaches for congregant engagement
- Over 360 individuals have connected with the congregation through IJP
- Another 150+ individuals have worked with our clergy on their own Jewish paths, through counseling, conversion, and marriage
- Some 150+ seniors have engaged in life at B’nai Jehudah through extended programming, improving themselves and our community in the process
- 45 Confirmation class students have enriched themselves through IJP projects

- Around 100 Kindergarten families have pursued their Jewish journeys
- About 30 young adults, many children of congregants, are engaged Jewishly through Kehillah KC: A Jewish Young Adult Community
- Over 200 individuals have had their lives changed through working in the KC Mitzvah Garden
- 3 havurot have formed, encompassing more than 30 “young families,” many of them interfaith
- **When we add to these numbers those programs that Amy has supported and are – in the purest sense – individual pathways for finding meaning, namely Social Justice, Mitzvah Meals, Havurah, and Chesed, more than 1200 congregants have pursued their own Jewish journeys, been touched, and their lives – and our community and our world – have become better. In this regard, we have been extraordinarily successful in the last three years.**

Here are our challenges:

- After three years, Amy Ravis Furey is moving to a part-time position with Federation, in order to better balance her home/career obligations. How and with whom do we move forward?
- IJP – as a name – continues to be misunderstood and stands in the way of successful engagement. How do we better communicate the value of & the ways in which folks can embrace our BHAG?
- Our marketing has focused on complexity and commitment instead of emotion and simplicity. How can we reframe our message to focus on engagement as a way of finding meaning?

Where we are going:

Our goal is to focus on the two principles mentioned – simplicity and emotion (need/desire). This will permit us to better refine the methodology by which we continue to pursue our BHAG. Towards that end, we intend to hire a new person to direct our Shared Vision efforts by October 31. This person’s responsibilities will be to engage the most number of congregants, in the most effective ways, and in a manner that supports them and us in our mutual Jewish journeys.

Within the next 6 months, we intend to create marketing materials that celebrate the growth our congregants experience, as a result of their involvement in our congregation. We believe that by inspiring others with stories of individual journeys, congregants will be encouraged to pursue their own paths through our congregational opportunities.

We will increasingly focus on shared journeys, groups of individuals who can discover their passions. By supporting them in their needs/desires, we will successfully engage them and bring further meaning to their affiliation with B’nai Jehudah. And, we will continue to offer “individual” IJP opportunities, but primarily through our clergy and professional staff, as we work with congregants through various life-experiences. In addition, we will – within the next year – begin to work with all new members to engage them in ways that are meaningful for them, our congregation, and our world.

We believe that our BHAG (Big Holy Awesome Goal) is achievable. While the notion of EVERY congregant pursuing a journey is BIG, when a child or an adult engages in activities that permit him/her to grow Jewishly, we know how AWESOME and HOLY that journey is. Our goal is to continue to touch each and every congregant, to engage him/her, and to make our world better in the process.

Report on Informal Jewish Education:

Our congregation has had a strong history of informal learning for our children, in addition to our formal educational program. From encouraging participation in Jewish summer camps to youth group activities to events such as Mitzvah Day and Mitzvah Marketplace, all of which reinforce Jewish values in non-traditional classroom settings.

Recognizing that as our lives change and become more complicated, there is an increasing desire for more options...in everything we do, including Jewish learning. Three years ago, we began a process of listening to congregants and exploring the possibility of an alternative (and informal) Jewish learning model for our students.

In Spring, 2011, we approached the Funders' Council (comprised of the Jewish Federation, the Jewish Community Foundation, the Jewish Heritage Foundation, and the Menorah Legacy Foundation) as asked them to support our goal for developing a new and informal model. They provided us with a planning grant, enabling us to engage the URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) as our planning partners, and a curriculum writer to implement what we developed.

What emerged from the process was Machane Jehudah (a play on our name, "machane" means "camp"). And in Summer, 2012, we launched the first phase of this informal learning experiment. 23 students, in grades 3-5, signed up for this program, as an alternative to our regular Religious School experience. The curriculum was framed around our core purpose and core values (see inset above), combined with an exposure to Hebrew, tefillah (prayer), and tarbut (Jewish culture).

Machane Jehudah has two components: "summer camp" and "family-learning modules."

Summer Camp: For two weeks this past summer, our 23 students participated in a program of learning, Jewish exploration, and play, led by Dayna Gershon and a very talented staff, selected from different congregations in our community. The result was nothing less than spectacular. We only need to quote some of the parental responses we received:

- [My daughter] absolutely loved it. She came home singing all the prayers and songs. She was always excited to go in the morning.
- Machane Jehudah was fantastic. He looked forward to going to camp everyday. This was quite the opposite of his behavior on Sunday mornings.
- My son had the best experience ever. I would pick him up at 4 pm and he always had a smile on his face and couldn't wait to share what they had done that day. This experience is one that I know he will never forget.
- My favorite memory of Machane Jehudah was the first Friday night. He got home from camp...and it was a little hectic. We were getting ready to go out for dinner. The family was all rushing around...to get out the door and [my son] said, "Wait...what about Shabbat!?" We all looked at each other and said, you're right – what about Shabbat!? So, we lit candles, said Kiddush and motzi, and ate the challah he had made. I am hoping it has started a new tradition for us of coming together on Friday nights and taking some "Shabbat time" in the middle of our busy lives."

Another indication of our success has been the requests from other families to extend the ages of eligible students for next year, so that their children might participate.

Family-Learning: This phase of Machane Jehudah is about to be launched. The families of our 23 students will participate in monthly family-learning experiences. Some will be on Shabbat, some on holidays, and some on Sundays. The goal will be to extend the learning begun during the summer, instilling the enduring values of our curriculum in both our students and their families.

Much of the credit for the success of this program goes to Rabbi Shuval-Weiner, who took the lead in developing this program. She was ably assisted by Dayna Gershon, Machane Jehudah's director (who will run the family-learning modules, as well). And their work was built upon the curriculum written by Rachel Margolis.

We anticipate that the success experienced during our summer phase will be replicated during the school year, with our family-learning modules. If it is and our results are supported in our evaluative process, we will proceed with a second year of Machane Jehudah. We will explore a) expanding the grade levels of the program beyond grades 3-5; b) offering more than one summer session; c) better coordinating the curriculum between our formal and informal learning opportunities; d) creating partnership opportunities with other congregations so their children might participate.

In Conclusion....

The money pledged towards our 140th Anniversary Fund totaled just around \$400,000. After expenses for the celebration, we retained about \$300,000 for programming.

The Board of Trustees has allotted \$50,000 a year, for up to four years, to help offset the costs in developing and implementing programs associated with our BHAG. In 20 months, that allocation will cease. The Board and congregation will need to determine how our efforts – toward envisioning this new future of congregant engagement and growth – have impacted our community. That will determine what our financial and programmatic commitment for the future will look like.

The funds for informal learning have just begun to be allocated. We are using these monies to support the Machane Jehudah infrastructure – salaries, program materials, marketing. If we continue to experience success, we anticipate requesting the remaining monies available in this portion of the 140th Anniversary Fund, in \$25,000 allotments for the next 2-3 years (depending on the balances available).

Some of the monies were used just after our fund was established, as Michael Klein encouraged us to support the use of Paul Mesner and his puppets during our High Holiday Family Services. These have been an unqualified success. We will be repeating their involvement again, for the third year. This, too, is “informal” Jewish learning. Michael has generously supported the Mesner involvement with his own financial resources for the last two years.

Your donations were generously given with faith that our two initiatives would help lift the work of our congregation – namely, to nurture Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity. We have been successful in that endeavor, while learning both through mistakes and through accomplishments. We continue to examine what we do, how we do it, and with which resources we access...in order to help as many members of our congregational family discover meaning in their lives and value in their association with B'nai Jehudah.

Thank you, again, for your support of wealth, wisdom, and work. All have been essential to B'nai Jehudah standing tall within our community, leading with innovation and with a strong sense of where our communal Jewish journey leads.