



What Are Federations Doing in the Engagement Business?

The day after the General Assembly, about 140 people—Federation volunteer leaders and professionals, expert educators and philanthropists, other educational leaders—got together to talk about relationship-based engagement and its implications for Federations.

Together, we defined what we mean by engagement and began to articulate the opportunities and challenges in the engagement agenda for Federation.

This longer piece is featured as blog posts at [the Jewish Education & Engagement blog](#). The piece has four parts: I. The Problem, II. The Goal, III. Federations' Role, and IV. Our Work as a Field. At two points, discussion questions accompany the text for use with volunteer leaders and other stakeholders.

And if you need a summary? (As they say these days: [TL;DR](#))

Q: What are Federations doing in the engagement business?

A: (Re)Designing a community for a new way of Jewish living, learning, and being.

For more information about any of the ideas here, contact [Beth Cousens](#) or [Rachel Shtern](#) @ JFNA.

I. The Problem: A Jewish Community Breakdown

Cleaning my grandmother's desk after she moved to a nursing home revealed the leftovers of her experiences as Temple Sisterhood president: plaques, pins, notecards from speeches, programs from events. But I was confused—why was it from two different congregations? Apparently, my mother explained, she was president of her Sisterhood not once, but twice: After they moved from their longtime Long Island synagogue to Detroit (to be with their grandkids), they joined and became similarly involved in a new congregation. What else to do but become Sisterhood president, again?

In addition to their synagogue involvement, my grandparents bowled, they had a supper club, my grandfather played cards with the guys (in New York, Detroit, and then Florida), they celebrated *seder* with my grandfather's entire extended family, about 75 people, in a rented hall in the Bronx. They showed up. They paid membership fees, they led, they found both formal (organizational) opportunities and informal community (my grandfather's card game). For my grandparents, like many of the [Greatest Generation](#), joining was the path to social activity, and institutional support the price that they paid for community; their friendships were launched and cemented through ritual activity.

Little of this reflects the experience of most North Americans today. For a variety of reasons, well-documented in the perfectly titled [Bowling Alone](#) by [Robert Putnam](#), North American society has shifted

to be more atomized, governed by the boundaries of households, with social engagement taking place virtually.

Still, on the one hand, my life is not that different. We have a small group of friends we make Shabbat with. I'm a room parent at my son's preschool; we just had a Havdallah and pizza playdate, 30ish people in our two bedroom apartment. We dance between congregations, the one down the street to which we pay dues and the one that has great toddler programming.

On the other hand, my husband and I are continually making this community for ourselves. We're collecting friends, stragglers, others who also don't have family in the Bay Area. We're combing calendars for organizational opportunities, going out of our way to integrate Shabbat and other Jewish opportunities into our lives. We're making invitations, trying to find the basis for that lifelong *havurah*, looking for Jewish toddler activities on-line for the sometimes motley crew that we gather.

And, most of what we're doing is part of a larger organizational structure—there's no existing, organic bowling groups or card games that we're joining. Moreover, we know how to build community, we're extroverts, we know where to find Jews (and the people who love them), and we're happy to lead Jewish ritual in our homes. What about the rest of North American Jewry? I mean, the ones who lack:

- Jewish self-confidence, a sense of comfort and security that they are good-enough Jews and can therefore experiment with ritual, try on different Jewish identities and practices, and otherwise enter unknown Jewish spaces;
- Genuine knowledge of how Judaism and Jewish community work, the ability and confidence to find Jewish organizational opportunities for themselves and their families;
- Jewish friendship networks; others to be Jewish with (play dreidel, make hamantaschen) and to echo and validate their Jewish decisions.

Many can't put together their own opportunities; they lack, even, a vision of what's possible, of *havdallah* in their living rooms or Jewish playgroups for their children. To them, Jewish life happens in institutions—and they're not terribly interested in institutions, and so they stay away. Jewish life and community happen in a parallel world that has little to do with them.

To be brutally honest about the manifestation of these trends in North American Jewish life, we should take this a step further. In this new environment, the very ways that we understand the concept of a Jew, of Jewish community (or "the" Jewish community), and even of Jewish institutions and leaders have shifted significantly. [Some have even argued](#) that these concepts no longer exist.

Meaning:

1. The word "**Jew**" is complicated. Many North Americans consider themselves Jewish *and*. Inter-marriage is a norm, not an exception. The children of inter-marriage are now raising children

without any religion or with multiple religions, *and they are the Jewish majority*, particularly of households with kids at home. All of these people are part of us.¹

2. **“The Jewish community”** refers to *institutional* Jewish life. But a majority of North American Jews do not engage with institutional Jewish life, or they engage briefly and not substantively. And they feel alienated from Jewish community—from institutions and from mainstream Jews. “The” Jewish community has, actually, many facets and pieces—but when we refer to it, we are often only talking about some of those pieces.
3. **Jewish institutions**, increasingly, work with non-Jews. JCCs dance between universal and particular values, for example; Jewish Family Service agencies act as significant social service resources for Jews and non-Jews alike. Even synagogues play their roles with increasingly expanded constituencies, leading early childhood programs and sponsoring neighborhood playgroups for all families. Moreover, more of the platforms that play a (Jewish) role in people’s lives are often not our traditional Jewish institutions. They are start-up organizations, or they are virtual communities, or they are grassroots projects.
4. **Jewish leaders** lead some Jews but not all Jews. They speak for those affiliated with their institution—which, as noted, is far from a majority of Jews in any city or area. And the increasing political polarization in our society can lead to fewer people hearing or listening to voices with which they don’t agree, including the voices of Jewish organizational leaders.

All of these concepts, then, once perhaps unquestioned in North American organized Jewish life, are anything but straightforward today.

These characterizations of our current reality get at the heart of what we do and they may be hard to hear. They are a story of broader North American institutional change and of societal change. Meaning, this is not a distinctly Jewish challenge—but it is a challenge that traditionally organized Jewish communities, institutions, and leaders are certainly facing. We, the insiders, need to recognize that for a majority of North American Jews, each of these more complicated understandings rings true in some way, our sense of “the Jewish community” is possibly irrelevant, and these shifts have great implications for our core business model. To summarize, [“what got us here, won’t get us there.”](#) The next chunk of our work is going to have to be different.

Because the thing is, community is craved. People want back the palpable feelings of ethnic belonging that dominated the 1950s and even 60s and 70s. But they don’t want these feelings in their traditional form, affiliated with large and anonymous institutions. They want friends, deep friendships, family traditions, and intimacy—the warmth that comes from real relationships and roots. Even—especially—if they live far from family. And they want that community to be easy to access, to bring people together.

¹ For this reason, when I say “Jews” in this essay, I mean many different categories: strongly identified Jews, and part-Jews, and the people who love Jews (and have married them), and other fellow travelers. Our language lacks a good word to talk about this.

That's where we come in—this is the point for Federations.

II. The Goal: A Framework to Put Jewish Life Back into People's Hands

Community isn't irrelevant; it just needs to change. We need a new set of "institutions" for the 21st century—new sisterhoods, bowling leagues, and supper clubs. A new framework or infrastructure for Jewish living, learning, and being.

Interestingly, Putnam suggests that the same kind of intentional design work that Federations need to embark on now, the conscious development of community engagement opportunities, once led to our community infrastructure today. Our current now are the hallmarks of the Progressive Era: Just over 100 years ago, a slew of civic organizations blossomed, some creating activity for their members (the Boy and Girl Scouts) and some caring for constituents (the YMCA movement). The same thing happened in Jewish communities: Jewish educational institutions as well as social service activities, the set of organizations we know of today as our Jewish community, was born. Individuals with vision and means (power and resources) developed the organizational framework with which we would engage as Jews over the next century.

These institutions of the past 100 years have had a certain profile: physical buildings, often grand testaments to our success in North America; leadership hierarchies; often, membership fees and boundaries. The 21st century is seeing a radical turn away from these institutional profiles toward living rooms as meeting spaces, DIY (do it yourself), egalitarianism, and the grassroots. **We now need a new kind of Jewish infrastructure, a series of opportunities that allows North American Jewry to engage with Jewish life not through big and anonymous institutions, but rather in intimacy and on their terms.**

This is not to say that our traditional institutions are unimportant. We have the great challenge of needing to manage two operating systems at once. We have to keep our mainstream organizations healthy and offering an excellent product so as to work with those who are looking for a more historically typical experience. And, we need to work with those whose connection to Jewish life and community may be more tentative or tenuous. This work is both/ and—rather than one or the other.

That being said, the new framework of the early 21st century will be shaped not by these older trends but by the moment we are in today, the Instagram/ Snapchat moment, that of virtual and ephemeral frameworks built around relationships. The framework will follow a different set of assumptions and goals than that of our traditional infrastructure. In this new era:

We can assume no loyalty to or even interest in our traditional institutions. And we cannot seek to help instill that loyalty, since it can't be taught. Rather, we will try to help people develop connections to and interest in their Jewishness, not in our organizations; we will organize around Judaism and the human beings we work with, not institutional boundaries. And [we will work together in new ways](#), helping to engage people broadly in Jewish life and exploration rather than competing for their attention to our institutional agendas.

We cannot assume that engagees have Jewish friends or resources, knowledge and confidence—the stuff they need to celebrate Jewish life on their own. And so, we will seek to help them develop Jewish friends and acquaintances, knowledge of how Judaism works, and knowledge of how to put together their own Jewish practice. Success will come when they sit at their dinner table with their new Jewish friends around it and when they feel welcomed and known when they are out and about in their community. It will come when they can put together Jewish activities for friends and families on their own. Their experiences of intimate Jewish community will comprise success. From this personal starting point, some may connect to our organizations eventually, their Jewish explorations leading them to synagogues and JCCs and Federations, because these institutions are (after all) still relevant and valuable.

In other words, **we will seek to help all develop their own Jewish communities, their own Jewish practices and rhythms for celebration in their own homes—a personally relevant Judaism** in which they may engage on their own terms, within the small sacred communities into which Jews have organized themselves throughout our history.

This new Jewish infrastructure revolves around our best Jewish communal resource: Jewish teachers and mentors who inspire, validate, support, and share ancient and relevant ideas. This manifests in two ways:

- Educators without organizational portfolio, who spend their time not planning programs but working with individuals on who they are as Jews. These educators should have profound and inspiring Torah, be excellent listeners and community organizers, who can continually dance between what they offer and where engagees are.
- Peer connectors—ambassadors, organizers—who embody [the definition of connector](#), who excel at building relationships. These peer connectors will not be trained Jewish educators but they will be on their own Jewish journey and will be comfortable sharing their experiences with others. Unlike the educators, they can use their peer experience to validate and support their peers as engagees embark on their own processes of Jewish discovery.

These educators and peer connectors should work within niches, in geographic areas and with specialized populations (LGBTQ Jews or single parents or empty nesters). They might even work within the boundaries of a workspace, a company or a field, not working for the organization but assigned that territory (campuses, hi-tech office complexes). They should define their populations, in other words, by social network (or potential social network) and not by organization, which gives opportunity for them to build natural connections among the people they are working with easily. And without organizational responsibilities, they will have time to focus on the people in front of them, on mentoring, on helping engagees to grow as human beings within the context of Jewish tradition.

Together, these senior educators and peer connectors constitute the framework we need to help proliferate and even become conventional, typical, in this new era.

Why Does the Personal Matter? Rebuilding Jewish Social Capital

“Social capital,” a concept brought into the mainstream by Robert Putnam in [Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community](#), implies 1) a social network (a group of people) in which individuals engage; 2) the norms, values, and expectations that make that network a network (versus just a random group of people); and 3) sanctions put on members of the network when they do not follow the network’s norms, values, or expectations. Norms keep people inside of social networks; sanctions push people away. Social capital is why we can play Jewish geography (because many of us have overlapping Jewish experiences), and it’s why we know what’s happening when someone kisses a prayerbook ([or we know to kiss the prayerbook when we drop it](#)). Without this capital, without the understanding of what’s happening in our communities and tradition, we feel ignorant and out of place.

Most North American Jews are stuck in a loop. They don’t know how to participate in Jewish life and when they do participate, they are sanctioned or embarrassed by their lack of knowledge. Because they don’t participate, they can’t learn more, and therefore change their social capital. (Scholar of ethno-religious social capital [Laurence Iannaccone argues](#), “Religious capital is both a prerequisite for and a consequence of most religious activity”; religious capital both enables participation and leads to participation. Without capital, one cannot participate and subsequently, through participation, develop more capital.)

Engagement is a project of rebuilding Jewish social capital. We are helping individuals to deepen their understanding of and comfort in Jewish communities. In our very first conversation, by being friendly and welcoming as a member of the Jewish establishment, we are beginning to change understandings of what Jewish community is and can be. When we build micro-communities—groups of individuals from like backgrounds, from similar relationships with Judaism—we start to give engagees a Jewish support system and their own community that can champion them. Peer connectors managing the communities help to validate but also lead, anchor the community by providing support for participants. And community Jewish educators help others start to practice Judaism in a lower-barrier, high-explanation kind of a way, non-threatening because they feel safe with us and safer with their new Jewish colleagues.

Engagement demands peers, it demands senior Jewish educators in an intimate conversation, it demands one-on-one work (or two-on-one work) because it is primarily through that intimacy, and not mass programs, that we can help engagees feel supported, as though (despite the sanctions they previously experienced) there is a place for them in Jewish life. The one-on-one allows slow undoing of previously held assumptions and ideas, the connection of engagees to their own Jewish social network, their own Jewish friendships and relationships that work uniquely for them, which—in turn—help engagees build their Jewish social capital, allowing them to enter, eventually, other Jewish spaces in order to build their Jewish lives.

For Discussion

- What rings true for you in this piece, particularly in the description of organizational engagement offered?
- What feels valuable in the overview of the engagement infrastructure offered? Does anything feel too foreign?

- We don't, actually, work with a binary population—engaged or unengaged. Even the simplest framework would understand people to be 1) highly engaged, in the core 2) peripherally engaged, on the margins, and 3) moderately engaged, somewhere in between, perhaps drifting in and out. Flesh out these profiles. Where do people in your community fall?
- How can we support Jews as they seek to build their social capital? What resources do we need to make available and through what platforms? And what is our particular job in engaging, in connecting, in encouraging others?

III. Federations' Role

Federations exist to mobilize resources toward high priority Jewish purposes—those purposes involving supporting Jews to live safe and engaged Jewish lives in deep Jewish community.

It takes tremendous resources just to raise these funds and it is easy to focus our time in that space. But most of our fundraising strategies rely on the idea that people are already committed to Jewish life—they simply need to be convinced to *give* philanthropically as Jews, not to *be* committed to Jewish life.

As we have seen, for increasing numbers of Jews today, this is simply no longer true. Those who believe in Jews, Jewish life, and Jewish community in the ways we used to understand these concepts are fewer and fewer, and so the audience from which we might find donors is smaller and smaller.

This engagement agenda must, therefore, be part of our work.

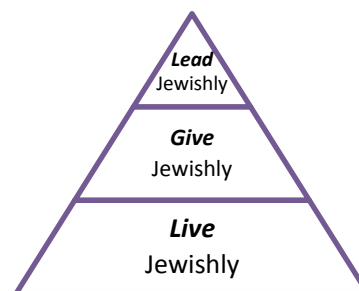
But why else Federation? Our work here is not driven by existential fear. We are positioned as platforms within a community to launch change. We uniquely take and advance a broad view of community and so we have the opportunity to shape community. This is what we do. This is what we've always done.

Moreover, we are supposed to put together the pieces, to make the whole greater than its parts. We convene and mobilize toward a given end. We are a vanguard.

We are, therefore, setting a tone for a network of institutions, setting a culture of a community. Typically, our work has been somewhat sliced, divided, campaign and engagement in Federation in one function, planning and allocations in another. To embark on a comprehensive engagement agenda, to redesign the frameworks and infrastructure in our community that engage Jews, we begin with a strategic vision of what we need in our community, of an engaging community. From that vision, we can support entrepreneurs to lead new models, incentivize mainstream organizations to add new initiatives, build capacity through new training across the landscape, and strategically award grants to catalyze and support new models. And sometimes, when a community lacks a partner to run with an idea, we might implement an initiative directly. **We can take responsibility for creating a landscape of opportunity—not institutions, but opportunity—that engages more North American Jews more deeply in building their lives Jewishly.** Programs, fundraising, grant making—all become tools toward a larger goal of helping more Jews engage more deeply in Jewish life.

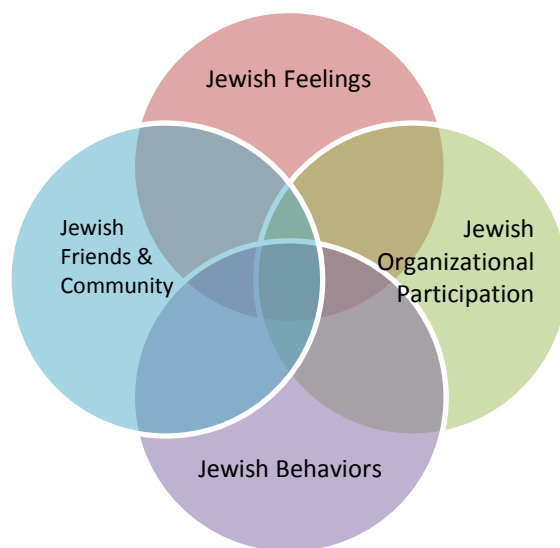
We seek to engage Jews in Jewish life, but we also do have a core responsibility to mobilize funds, to develop organizational leadership. How do we hold these multiple purposes of Federation in mind?

Since we are in this work to help Jews be Jews, we succeed when they live Jewishly. For some, part of **living Jewishly** will be **giving Jewishly**. For some, but not all. (This has actually always been true but the percentages have shifted, with fewer total donors now). Colorado and Detroit understand their jobs as following a pyramid, or a funnel of sorts. Many will live Jewishly, some will give Jewishly, and a few will lead Jewishly—and that’s a success. All of these are our jobs. This pyramid offers one framework for measurement.



Similarly, in the 1990s, the business world embraced the concept of the “[balanced scorecard](#),” acknowledging that revenue was not the only indicator of a healthy business. Instead, a healthy business needs future sources of revenue. It needs satisfied customers who will return and who will spread the word about the product. And it needs a healthy organization that can learn from mistakes and grow in order to strengthen its business processes. Only the larger picture of these metrics together can illustrate the organization that is strong now and will also be strong in the future.

Within the context of this agenda of engaging more Jews Jewishly, Federation needs a full set of metrics, not just one, its own balanced scorecard. Such a scorecard might have four dimensions: increasing the number of Jews who have positive Jewish feelings, who have their own intimate Jewish communities and Jewish friendships, who exhibit Jewish behaviors (including giving), and who are involved in Jewish organizations. We have multiple jobs before us; we aim to achieve in all of them, to be active in the intersecting space of these four dimensions. When we have the whole picture, that’s success. And in the meantime, when we only achieve part of the picture, that’s progress, and we can stay focused on what we need to do to achieve more on all fronts. We can invest thoughtfully in and with partners that perform in these areas and let these areas drive Federations’ strategies and organizational priorities.



Again, giving is a part of this. In the life of a Jew, it may be only one part. But *tzedakah* is a core Jewish value and part of getting more people to live more full Jewish lives includes getting them to embrace *tzedakah*.

Federations may deploy tremendous resources to stimulate giving—and that’s one of our unique value propositions within the infrastructure of Jewish life today. But it is not the totality of our work, and it is particularly not the totality of our success with every person with whom we might connect. We’re working on Jewishness, we’re not just working on connecting people to the campaign, or to Federation, or even to Jewish organizations. We wish for people that they will live authentically in dialogue with the Jewish narrative. And that will get them to so much more.

IV. Our Work as a Field

Within this context, as we make a tremendous adaptation to the current moment, there remains a bunch of stuff we need to figure out as a system:

- Cultivating those who will lead Jewish organizations and Jewish life in the future, and cultivating Jewish philanthropy, need to remain high Federation priorities. How do we implement these agendas and an engagement agenda simultaneously? As described earlier, JEWISHColorado describes this as a “Live/ Give/ Lead” mandate. What does that look like practically?
- While there is great work to be done in engaging more Jews in exploring Jewish life, a plethora of service providers, of partners, exist in the engagement space. How do we work with them, supporting them and cultivating their work? What piece of this is Federation’s and what pieces are not? How do we enable this work act as a true ecosystem?
- We have built our organizations as customer-centered, which has meant donor-centered. We have worked hard to make it as easy as possible for people to give. Our first message is about giving—and that is a problem if we are pivoting to also be about engaging people in Jewish life and community. Should we, and how do we, reorient our organizations to make every message an engaging, welcoming, low-barrier and inclusive message?
- And, as we work through these issues, how do we remain user-centered? We are currently a set of highly knowledgeable and engaged Jews designing opportunities to explore Jewish life for those who are, simply, not us. How do we open up to different voices, listen, and provide opportunity for them to create Jewish social networks, and ultimately organizations, for themselves?
- To understand our goals is one thing; to identify specific metrics by which we can track and evaluate our work, and to develop a system to collect and use data to focus on strategy and results is another. What are our metrics, can we develop metrics as a system toward which we can work, and how do we collect data?
- As we work through these sticky issues, and understand engagement from a Federation perspective more generally, how do we create opportunities for collaborative experimentation and learning within and outside of the Federation field? None of us has the monopoly on the best way to do this.

This is the work of our field going forward. The Jewish Education & Engagement office will do our best to convene us for these conversations, to make the best thinking of the larger engagement field available

to us to help us, together, develop ideas about these questions. This is our work and it is not any of ours alone.

What are Federations doing in the engagement business? We are helping to build a landscape of (Jewish) opportunity for Jews and those who love them to explore Jewish life. And we are designing a community infrastructure—even a grassroots infrastructure—for a new way of Jewish living, learning, and being. Fundraising is a way to get that work done, and for some, it will be part of how they live out their “Jewish doing,” just as it has been in the past. We are part of the 20th century legacy and, as such, we have what to do to become, truly, engagement organizations. Working together toward a rebooted vision of Jewish life and community, we can figure it out.

For Discussion:

- In our experience, where have we seen these engagement ideas “work”?
- How have we successfully embarked on building a new engagement framework of opportunities in our community?
- Who are our most valuable programmatic partners in this space? Where could we be cultivating new engagement opportunities (What entrepreneurs are working in this space in our community who might need our support)?
- What donors and other financial stakeholders can be our partners? How do we need to cultivate their involvement in building this agenda?