



Millennial Connection, Redefined by a Southern Jewish Community

By Baylee Less

“I didn't even know there were Jews in Memphis.”

Memphis is known as the home of Elvis, the Blues, mouth-watering barbeque, and even the National Civil Rights Museum – but a large Jewish community? Not really. Situated in the center of the Bible Belt, our 8,500-person Jewish community works with great intention and proven innovation to create and sustain a strong, vibrant Jewish heart in the South.

Memphis will never be a Manhattan of over 2 million Jews, and we aren't even close to our neighboring Atlanta's 150,000-member large Jewish community either. So why try to be?

ConnecTI, an organic community under the umbrella of Temple Israel's 165-year-old Reform congregation, is doing things differently. And, yes, we're doing things successfully.

In Memphis, where we balance the distinction of “third-poorest zip code in America” and “most generous city in America,” newcomers and natives both feel, almost immediately, the effects of putting their mark on the community. Millennials seek a connection deeper than one discovered through a social media platform or an office networking reception, and our peer-to-peer engagement provides the authentic relationships that many young professionals crave. ConnecTI and Temple Israel give them the outlet, the resources, and the relationships to do just that.

How do we do that, exactly?

Emphasis on partnered events

Millennials want to interact with the world in which they are living – the entire world. We exist as multiple identities within one body, and the more identities we can express at one time the better. That being said, interfaith and interracial programs are important to our members. As ConnectI, we actively pursue partnerships with our city's organizations, whether that be through social action or purely social events. If we're having a happy hour or dinner program, we always support a local brewery or restaurant. If we're hosting a social action panel on immigration, we don't discuss it on our own – we bring in our fellow Memphians who immigrated to our city.

Our people don't want to live in a separate Jewish bubble – they are actually determined to burst it.

Meeting our people where they are

While building our community, one challenge we faced was physical boundaries. Young people were (and still are) moving into Downtown, but our synagogue sits about 30 minutes away in East Memphis. We realized we needed to meet our members where they were, which led to the founding of our Temple space in Crosstown Concourse. Formerly a one-million square-foot Sears building which had been empty for decades, Crosstown is now a vertical urban village housing restaurants, retail shopping, and the offices of some of the most needle-moving organizations and nonprofits in our city.

The creation of our Midtown space not only enhances our ability to leverage partnerships with other city organizations within the building, but it also sends a message to the millennials of Memphis that our synagogue actively works to be accessible to them and innovates outside the traditional Jewish box.

Different approaches to Native and New People

Native people and new people should be treated differently, but not too differently. Moving back home and moving to a new city are entirely different experiences, thus our engagement strategies for the two categories should not look identical.

Our community is evenly divided between these two demographics, which differs from transplant-heavy cities such as DC, Chicago, or even our close neighbor, Nashville. Many times transplants need a doctor's office referral, a suggestion for a hair salon, or a Seder table to join! Although these are small moments in a fast-moving life, the fact that our community provides answers and support to all of these requests truly makes new Memphians feel like they're building a home with us.

On the other hand, with natives (myself being one of them) we don't want to fall back into our childhood habits; rather we are seeking new opportunities. The common denominator in all of my interactions with our "newbies" is that they want the same thing in the end: to build real and authentic relationships with people – especially Jewish people.

Sparking authentic connections

We average between 25-35 young adults at every ConnectI event, whether it's a panel on food deserts, a happy hour at a new bar, or a Friday night service in a Jewish Teach for America teacher's living room. It's the perfect size to learn everyone's name, spark a relationship that carries over to a dinner outing or beer later in the week, and to feel like a part of an intimate yet larger community. And though there's talk that our generation is steering away from spiritual affiliation, our Shabbat and holiday programs (not just the High Holidays) are among our highest attended events.

We work hard to earn each person's investment one-by-one, but our community members feel that difference from their first welcome dinner to their 33rd Shabbat potluck. They feel valued and empowered to build the Jewish life and community that they want to see.

In the end, it's all about balance. Millennials truly do want it all – but who's to blame us? We want the personal, individualized connections to clergy and community members, but we want to feel a we're part of something larger as well. We want vibrant, exciting Shabbat and holiday events, but we also want to support and converse with our neighbor who looks different than we do. We want a weekly email newsletter, but we also want a personal text from a friend to see if you're coming. We want social events, serious events, spiritual events, and more. We want to think, engage, and wrestle with the world and we want to do it Jewishly, but not always in a traditional Jewish mindset.

We are actively giving that balance to our ConnectI community and I can attest that its effects speak volumes. We've seen our average engagement numbers triple over the past three years, retained Jewish young adults in Memphis who initially planned to

stay temporarily, and actually increased our congregational membership. While our unique Southern-Jewish hospitality might give us a leg up, I think we all can contribute in a small way to collectively ensure our faith's future, and I encourage the larger congregational world to speak to and replicate our flexible approach.

Baylee Less serves as the Community Engagement Director for Temple Israel in Memphis. She oversees TI's satellite space at Crosstown Concourse as well as ConnectTI, their young professional community.

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