



## The Next Generation of Jews Doesn't Want Cheaper Dues, they Want to have Impact

### **The story behind our new model of synagogue giving for young adults**

By Rabbi Evan Schultz

When the daughter of one of our past synagogue presidents recently moved into town with her new husband, I did what any good rabbi would do: I called them to welcome them to the area, brought them a *challah* and ice cream for their first *Shabbat* in their new home, and invited them to consider membership in our synagogue community.

While the couple, Jaclyn and Asher, appreciated the invite, they kindly shared that they weren't sure if synagogue membership was for them at this stage in their lives. It wasn't about the cost of synagogue membership that prompted their decision. "Even if membership was only \$50 a year, it just wouldn't be for us right now," they shared. And then of course, like any good rabbi, I called them up and said, "I'd love to hear more. Would you be open to meeting up?" They were happy to accept the invitation.

The conversation that ensued over beers at our local pizzeria really challenged much of the conventional thinking on synagogue membership and outreach to individuals in their 20s and 30s, which is: if we only make synagogue membership cheaper, they will join our synagogues.

Asher and Jaclyn shared that they really do want to be part of the synagogue community – in certain ways. They want to attend High Holy Day services and attend the occasional *Shabbat* service, lecture or class. They want to focus their charitable giving, or *tzedakah*, on things that will have real impact in the world. In their eyes, in the traditional synagogue dues model, an individual or family writes their check and really has little knowledge or understanding how it is spent or where exactly their money goes. Asher and Jaclyn would have more of an interest in giving to the synagogue if they a) had a more intimate knowledge of how their dues would help the synagogue facility and community and b) if they had some say into where at least some of their money actually went and who it ultimately impacted.

“Let’s say for example,” shared Asher, “I care deeply about initiatives for our Jewish youth. Normally I would give my charitable donation to an organization dedicated to that cause or issue. But if I could earmark my money and give within the synagogue to our existing STREAM program, summer camp scholarships, or youth group, I would much rather do that. I could see where my money is going and the kids who are impacted by my donation. Right now, I can’t do that at our synagogue so I give my *tzedakah* money elsewhere.”

That initial conversation with Asher and Jaclyn led to a year-long series of gatherings with young adults in our community. With Asher and Jaclyn’s help, we created an open, honest space of dialogue where participants could speak both about their Jewish identity, opinions on synagogue life, and how they give their money. From those conversations we learned two important things:

1. Young adults care about their Jewish identity and want to be part of synagogue life, but not necessarily in the same way that their parents or grandparents were involved in synagogue life.
2. They do give to *tzedakah* and care deeply about the impact of their charitable dollars. They want to have some say into where their money goes and want to know who it benefits.

From these conversations, our synagogue created a new model of giving for individuals under forty years old, called Impact Giving. The Impact Giving model consists of two parts. The first piece is a monthly sustaining contribution per individual (We chose \$36 per month). This monthly contribution goes towards the operating budget of the synagogue. This is the money that helps “keep the lights on” and ensures that the synagogue runs smoothly.

The second piece of the Impact Giving model is the opportunity to annually direct a sum of money towards a specific, existing area within synagogue life (We suggest \$500 per year). In partnership with our synagogue president, treasurer, bookkeeper, membership chair, and board of trustees, we transformed ten budget line items into ten “impact giving” opportunities where the new congregant can direct their money. So for example, they can give to adult education, the preschool STREAM program, teen engagement, our *tikkun olam* work, and even help to cover synagogue security costs. Our model enables each person to direct their money to an area of the synagogue they care about and want to help support and impact. It also gives the individual a more intimate understanding of our synagogue structures and finances which they really did not have before.

The model is still in beta mode but the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

We have tried to really change the philosophy behind synagogue giving, one which speaks to the next generation of Jews who do want to connect to synagogue life and have an impact on our community. If this model proves successful, we hope that down the road we can expand this model to the entire synagogue community. And I am happy to say that when we launched our Impact Giving model this past year, Jaclyn and Asher were the first ones to join!

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