Social Justice and Activism in Our Synagogues

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My name is Jeannie Appleman. I'm an organizer with the Jewish Funds for Justice. My family and I daven at the modern orthodox synagogue near us in Long Island. I organize and train rabbinical and cantorial students, including from Chovevei Torah, and Rabbis, from all four movements in a particular approach to transforming our synagogues into "covenantal communities."

What do I mean by covenantal community? I mean a community whose members believe and act on a premise that each of our futures is inextricably intertwined, and that we have a stake in each others' future. I mean a community whose members truly partner with and act to improve our city with others across race, class and religious lines based on shared interests and common vision. I mean a community where congregants are engaged around their talents and dreams, not tasks; where developing people takes precedence over providing programs for every need; where private struggles are voiced, and change is achieved. Covenantal communities stand up for the collective good as well as our own synagogue's interests. Shearith Israel

’s history is full of this type of covenantal behavior.

I will begin by posing some questions and then laying out a new opportunity to engage in covenantal community – both within your synagogue and with your Manhattan neighbors, with whom you share a common fate.

Here are a few questions to consider: What is the current chapter of community engagement that you are writing as a congregation? What legacy, in the spirit of Emma Lazarus, a former congregant, will you leave to your grandchildren? In addition to this aesthetic structure, and the vibrant tefilla, Torah study, and chesed work, for what courageous community involvement will Shearith Israel be known, in this time and place? **What does it mean to be a covenantal community in Manhattan, in 2008?**

Just as particular events and experiences shaped Shearith Israel’s journey and choices in community involvement, so too my journey as an organizer and as a Jew has been shaped by a series of experiences. I grew up in a Catholic family in a racially-mixed, working class neighborhood in South Bend, Indiana. When I was 16, and I learned about the prophets, I thought they were talking to me and my family; I felt like WE were the widow and orphan that the prophets spoke of that the Almighty protected, when my father nearly lost his factory job -- the best of the three jobs he worked to put food on our table – because of the unbridled greed of the owner. That was the beginning of my journey to becoming an organizer. When I asked my religion teacher about Jews, he told me to go ask a Rabbi. So I looked in the yellow pages and picked one out – Rabbi Chaim Kuperman, straight out of YU doing kiruv at a traditional synagogue. I showed up at Sinai Synagogue in my school uniform – plaid skirt and navy jacket and bobbie socks - and he was kind enough to mentor me in my journey towards Judaism. I have found in modern orthodoxy an authentic and holistic way of life, where every act has meaning and purpose, and every occasion has a bracha. And I’m proud that our community has written the

book on caring for our own. And yet I struggle with how little impact we have had in the broader community.

In today's Parsha, Mishpatim, and later in Devarim, that in order to walk in the ways of Hashem (G-d), You shall love the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Some commentators broaden the commandment to include not only converts, but also all strangers . The Ramban contends that WE should learn from our Egyptian experience that the Almighty does not tolerate the mistreatment of strangers. When I read this passage, I am reminded that we have not yet reached our potential for acting powerfully in the public square on the full range of our community's interests or the collective good in our cities, including Manhattan. What are we doing right here in NYC, in 2008 to harness our people power to hold our public officials accountable for their commitments to make our city safer and cleaner, to create more affordable housing and quality education, and affordable health care options for every New Yorker?

What do I mean by power? Many of us believe that the access that our Rabbis and big donors have to decision-makers is power. But I would call this influence. It's easy to confuse the two. Power is what happens when we join together with our neighbors to voice our collective concerns to politicians and negotiate face-to-face and publicly, not just through back-room deal. It is what we need to do if we want public policy to address the needs of our community and the broader society.

Congregation Shearith Israel has a long and rich history of community involvement, of standing up for yourselves and for others. It seems to have begun from the very founding of SI! The pioneers who created this synagogue refused to be bystanders to their own struggle, and that of other Jews and non-Jews alike in their new country, America, particularly in this political powederkeg of an island, called Manhattan! It all started with 23 Jewish pioneers from Dutch Brazil standing up to the dictatorial Governor of

New York in 1654 – Peter Stuyvesant – who ran NY like his personal fiefdom, for the right to settle here.

The history includes initiating settlement houses for immigrants and Jewish poor; opening a homeless shelter and partnering with NY institutions to address homelessness; engaging armies of volunteers to mentor and guide troubled young people. In **Rabbi Marc Angel's <u>Remnant of Israel</u> book he writes** "Through one-to-one relationships, the 'big sisters' would help guide the 'little sisters' to lead constructive and fulfilling lives." These SI leaders knew how to build a covenantal community – one relationship at a time. Shearith Israel's history of being a "caring" community for its members, the Jewish community, and society at large, is an impressive one; this Congregation has a big heart. There is also a rich history of engaging in interfaith efforts with Lutherans, Episcopaleans and Catholics starting in the late 1600s.

I would propose to you, that in 2008, SI has the opportunity to EXPAND how it acts as a covenantal community by joining with other faith communities and communal organizations to create a truly "covenantal community" here in Manhattan. There is a congregation-based community organization that operates as a covenantal community – Manhattan Together -- that negotiates collectively and directly with the city's and state's "powers that be" on the matters that affect many of our lives. They're waiting for more synagogues who share this vision to join them.

There are nearly 100 synagogues nationally, who are employing this particular approach to creating covenantal community, within the context of multi-faith and multi-ethnic organizations, invented by Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation in the 1940s. The Jewish Funds for Justice has worked successfully over the last several years to connect synagogues to these organizations.

Let me describe one synagogue's experience, that a fellow organizer, Meir Lakein, is working with in Boston, called Temple Emanuel. They held 42 small group meetings where over 400 of its congregants met together in each other's living rooms, to tell stories of their concerns, and hopes and dreams. They didn't kvetch, they didn't argue ideology; they didn't even discuss a "social justice" issue. Instead they told stories about their experiences that helped their fellow congregants get a better sense of who they were, stories that surfaced some of their core interests and values. What emerged were stories of struggle as congregants attempted to navigate the long-term care systems that made it hard to age with dignity, or to care for their aging parents.

Then they held a synagogue-wide meeting of over 420 congregants at which they launched synagogue-wide chesed initiatives to not only expand chesed, but to make it the instinctive NORM of the community. They launched an organizing drive to press local and state legislators, to commit new resources and support for the long-term care system that would make it easier for seniors to stay in their homes, if they so chose. ***Shortly after, the synagogue joined a multi-ethnic, interfaith community organization, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) with several synagogue members, so they could build covenantal community across faith and ethnic lines.***

Many of us would find it hard to believe that synagogues and Haitian 7th Day Adventist churches would have anything in common. But as members of GBIO, several synagogues discovered that they did. Both communities needed to change nursing home care. Leaders at Temple Israel needed better nursing care for their parents and grandparents who were living in unsanitary and inexcusable conditions in the homes. The Haitians who staffed the nursing homes were mistreated, overworked and underpaid. When they heard each others' stories in small group meetings, these stories led to action. GBIO held a large community meeting and invited the Massachusetts

Attorney General to ask him to issue an unprecedented advisory enforced stricter monitoring of both nursing home care, and that would improve conditions for workers. The Attorney General came to the meeting prepared to decline this request. But he was so moved by the immigrant stories he heard and was impressed by the united power he saw, that he changed his mind. He was reminded of his own mother's story of exploitation and mistreatment as an Irish immigrant. When he committed to issue the advisory, he was nearly drowned out by the cheering.

As synagogues, we cannot pretend that our own members are immune from skyrocketing health care and housing costs, from unemployment, from the cost of aging, and the challenge of supporting aging parents while underwriting our children's escalating education costs. Unless we're willing to share our stories of struggle and hope with each other, and with other communities, I don't believe we will achieve the fullest possible covenantal community in the broader society either. If we park our own interests and stories at the door and hide our own struggles, we imply, that only people of other ethnicities and faiths struggle, and we're there just to fix them, instead of partnering with them to create a joint future for all our children.

My great-grandfather died when my grandmother was very young, leaving my great-grandmother penniless, and with five children to support. But since she had no means of support, the local authorities threatened to tear her and her siblings away from their mother, and dump them in an orphanage. The young priest at their church stood up to the authorities, and provided my great-grandmother with odd jobs at the Church, rent, and groceries.

While it saved my family, BY ITSELF, this approach of "meeting individual needs" of congregants, fell short. My family's shame about this experience kept them isolated from the rest of their congregation because no one ever spoke about "private" matters. Like many synagogues today, they attended each other's weddings and funerals, but never spoke to each other of their

struggles or dreams. If this had been a covenantal community that encouraged my great-grandmother to share her story, she would have met others who had also suffered under the crushing weight of abusive power, and they could have joined together and fought for laws that protected families. But my grandmother didn't belong to a covenantal community.

Achieving covenantal community requires taking big risks and trusting our fellow congregants and other community members from diverse backgrounds enough to share our stories. This kind of community calls us to be open to hearing their stories and being changed by them. It requires the courage to recognize ***that a shared covenant that ties our destinies is not cemented only with words – it is signed with action***. In the covenant we made with the Holy One, our ancestors committed, "We will do and we will hear." Can we really expect any less of ourselves, today?