



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

להתהלך בצדק  
Walking with Justice

Edited By  
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and Deborah Silver

דרכיה דרכי נעם

# CREATING COVENANTAL COMMUNITIES: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, DEVELOPING LEADERS, TAKING ACTION

JEANNIE APPLEMAN AND MEIR LAKEIN

This book has laid out several ways of thinking about and pursuing the path of walking with justice. We propose yet another path: to create synagogues that are covenantal communities.

In our context, a “covenantal community” is one in which members believe and act on the premise that each of our futures is inextricably intertwined. Members of a covenantal community have a stake in each other, and in their common mission. They experience a culture of “people before program.” The synagogue turns to its people and asks for stories, rather than marketing a series of programs. The community helps congregants develop as leaders, engaging them around their talent and passions. Leaders create community by knitting together a common story out of their individual stories which reflects a mission and its members’ values and shared interests. Equally important, the synagogue then uses that power to act in the public square on those values and interests, shoulder to shoulder with other faith communities. If we want to grow synagogues whose mission includes walking with justice, then we must engage congregants as leaders with a stake in the mission and vision of our institutions.

In short, covenantal communities have three central habits: building relationships through sharing stories, interests, values, and visions; identifying and developing leaders out of these stories; and then acting in every aspect of public life – from the synagogue itself to the public square – on their shared stories and interests, to make change.

The way we have chosen to help synagogues become covenantal communities by building relationships, developing leaders, and acting in public life, is through Congregation-based Community Organizing (CBCO), or “broad-based organizing” as it’s sometimes called, an organizing approach developed in the 1940s by Saul Alinsky, the founder of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the oldest and largest organizing and training network. This organizing and leadership development approach has played an important role in winning significant local, statewide, and regional victories, from better schools to expanded health insurance, from affordable housing to living wage jobs. It has also been a key part of efforts to create a more public role for religious and other community institutions, in which the voluntary sector has the power to negotiate for social change as equals with the public and private sectors. In effect, this approach revitalizes synagogue life and breathes new life into the value of repairing the world many of us tirelessly profess, yet too often fall short of achieving.

Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ) nationally, and the JCRC in Greater Boston, have been at the forefront of the recent massive expansion of Jewish involvement in CBCO. As this approach typically begins with the sharing of stories, perhaps the best way to illustrate its power is by telling the story of one congregation that transformed itself by using it.

Temple Emanuel, the largest Conservative synagogue in New England, has demonstrated that the relationships that bring new vitality to a community and develop new leaders are built around who we are, not what we do. Using this bottom up approach to synagogue life, Temple Emanuel hosted 42 house meetings where over 400 congregants met together, in each other’s living rooms, to share their stories. They didn’t kvetch, they didn’t argue ideology, they didn’t even discuss a “social justice” issue – they told stories that helped their fellows get a better sense of who they are and that taught what some of their core values and interests are. A constant story, told time and again in the house meetings, was people describing their private pains as they tried to navigate impermeable systems that made it hard to age with dignity, or fell constantly short as they acted as loyal caregivers for their elderly parents. There are countless programs that the synagogue could have created in response to these stories, and it has created a few exemplary ones. However, the leaders had a broader vision – to turn their private pain into public action.

At a synagogue-wide meeting of over 420 congregants, leaders and members committed to each other that they would:

- launch synagogue-wide *hesed* initiatives, not only to expand *hesed*, but to make it the instinctive norm of the community;
- recognize the struggles of caregivers and create new efforts to support them and help them help each other;



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- find new ways to honor seniors' experience by treating them as assets rather than as problems to be fixed;
- lead a community organizing campaign for changes in long-term care system that would make it easier for seniors to stay in their own homes, if they so chose.

Local legislators, who attended the public meeting, committed their support. Some congregants explained that they couldn't ask the public and private sector to do more if they weren't willing to do more in their own synagogue, if they wouldn't reject, as one put it, "subcontracting parts of our humanity to our rabbis by saying that we hire them to do *hesed*." Other congregants explained that the biggest *hesed* they needed was help keeping their elderly parents at home, and that the only help that could do that would be political systemic changes. This bottom-up effort was a united covenantal community, leading and acting to ensure that every aspect of it reflected the common values and interests identified in its own stories.

Temple Emanuel is using its power to benefit the entire community, including people very different than they are, some who they have met through the organizing, many whom they never will. Yet its work would not succeed if synagogue members refused to share their stories and only were interested in the stories of those "less fortunate." We have observed over the last few years that "social justice" has become the popular catch phrase for any effort that involves our community in "helping others," more often than not a nameless, faceless "other." While helping others must be a critical part of our community's mission, and central to *yiddishkeit*, we would argue that this trend often parks our own interests and stories at the door, as if only people of other ethnicities and faiths struggle. Our synagogues run the risk of silencing our own struggling members and becoming paternalistic to those other communities we wish to support, if we pretend that our own members are immune from skyrocketing health care and housing costs, from unemployment, and the challenge of respectfully supporting aging parents and raising good, grounded children. We cannot enter into a covenant with each other if we neglect these important parts of our lives. We have the opportunity to enter into covenant with other communities – not the religious, theological covenant within the Jewish community, but one based on the ethical values we share and the societal changes we seek. However we cannot enter into a social covenant with other communities if we hide our own struggles and tell lower-income communities that we are just here to fix them. This is not the stuff of relationship.

When we decide to be vulnerable with each other, to share our real stories and struggles with each other and accept our interconnectedness, amazing things can happen. Some years back the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO - a 70-institution broad-based organization affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation) held house meetings across synagogues and other middle and upper class congregations. People told their own stories about aging parents and friends and their nursing home care. At the same time, members of GBIO's working class and lower-middle class congregations, in particular Haitian churches, told the stories of nurse's aides, working long hours, wanting to be treated with respect and to be able to provide even better care for their charges. Suddenly, leaders looked at each other across the table and realized, "it's not just sloganeering – our futures really *are* wrapped up with each other."

Once again, these shared stories led to action. Months after members of these congregations told each other their stories, the Massachusetts Attorney General walked into a Haitian Seventh Day Adventist Church that once was a synagogue to a GBIO public action of hundreds of people from across the community. He had decided that he would have to let people know that he could not help them in their work around nursing home care and workers. During the action, as he was moved by the immigrant stories he heard and impressed by the united power he saw, something changed. He was reminded of his own mother's story of hardship as an Irish immigrant, who was exploited and treated disrespectfully. When he took the stage and was asked if he would commit to issuing an unprecedented advisory which would improve conditions for workers and thereby reduce turnover rates and improve care, he surprised everyone by saying yes. He was almost drowned out by the cheering.

As this story illustrates, relationship-building through sharing stories, and developing leaders, can lead to broader action in the public sphere. Once relationships are built, they must be tested in the wider public arena through public negotiation with those who make decisions. Leaders are developed through all phases of this process, and particularly through public action, where their Jewish values are most publicly expressed. Sometimes different communities'



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interests coincide, as they did in the nursing home campaign. Sometimes they are similar and complementary, as they were in GBIO's recent successful campaign to help hundreds of thousands of people gain access to health insurance. Sometimes, the interests of middle class synagogues and churches have nothing to do with the interests of lower-income churches. Nevertheless, they work together and support each other, because they have similar values and are partners in a committed relationship. Sometimes, different congregations completely disagree (as they have around same sex marriage), but even if they work on opposite sides of some issues, they still stay in relationship with each other and act together when they can. That's what communities in covenantal relationships do.

Covenantal communities are never one-sided. When members of Kol Shofar, a Conservative synagogue in Tiburon, CA, were first getting involved in CBCO through the Marin Organizing Committee (MOC), a broad-based, interfaith organization with IAF, they got a firsthand taste of what it means to be part of a covenantal community. The city's town council opposed Kol Shofar's expansion project. The antisemitic tone of the opposition at the planning commission hearings left the synagogue's members felt isolated and targeted.

But that feeling of isolation soon turned to a feeling of power, when a busload of 70 pastors and lay leaders from MOC's sister affiliated churches, PTAs, and unions from Los Angeles and other surrounding cities and towns came to stand with Kol Shofar at a town meeting. When this group of leaders, who were attending an organizing training in Marin County, heard that the town was deliberating about whether to approve the expansion project and were up against a practice of town officials counting the number of Jews in the Kol Shofar building at night because of town limits, they couldn't board the buses fast enough.

In the words of a Kol Shofar congregant, the prior planning commission meetings had "left me frustrated and distressed. Old feelings of isolation about being Jewish, a resurgence of the 'us against them' mentality bubbled up within me. It was *besheret* that the Town Council meeting occurred during the MOC training....we were from a diverse mix of cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds, clergy and non-clergy alike. ....I felt what it was to feel the power of community support."

Developing covenantal communities transforms the roles of synagogue leaders and congregants alike. Rabbis from all four movements have told us that they don't want to treat their members as customers. They have shared with us their desire to challenge their congregants to join them in walking with justice, not serve as CEOs who manage a religious corporation and market synagogue programs to "clients." Employing an approach to both synagogue revitalization and social change provides a way for them to engage congregants as leaders.

This approach to community doesn't focus on meeting individual needs of congregants. Rather, it equips the capacity of a whole congregation, and a group of congregations and other like-minded institutions like schools and PTAs, to develop its leaders to change their own circumstances, and to forge a collective future. It makes it possible for synagogue leaders to connect congregants who are struggling and have untapped potential to act in the public arena, to connect with other congregants and their struggles and talents. Then they can act on their own behalf with others who are acting on theirs, and experience the dignity and power that accompanies it. This approach tears down the walls of isolation that many congregants feel by engaging them as leaders with talent just waiting to be tapped.

Rashi cites a midrash that argues that while all the men of the generation of the Exodus died in the desert, many of the women made it all the way from Egypt into the Promised Land. Why? He explains that the men, faced with the lack of provisions and safety, said "We should turn back and return to Egypt," while the women said, "Give us a stake in this."

The women who spoke these daring words were the daughters of Tzelophad, a man who had died in the desert leaving no sons. To Tzelophad's male relatives, his daughters' audacity was a threat to their property rights. They asked



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Moses to limit his ruling, which allowed them to inherit property, by insisting that the daughters marry within their own tribe. Although Moses granted their request, this decision was rescinded after only one generation, and we celebrate its overturning every year, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month of Av. Perhaps this is because the women were demanding more than property; they demanded a membership stake.

Many men were “customers” of the Exodus. Their vision dulled by back-breaking slavery, they wanted certain things after the left Egypt. If they couldn’t get those things quickly or simply enough, they wanted out. By contrast, Tzelophad’s daughters were “untapped leaders” of the Exodus endeavor, willing to work to create a new free people devoted to following the living and omnipresent God. Women not only didn’t want to run away from the new covenant, they wanted to get more deeply into it. What parent wouldn’t choose to raise their children in a culture that treats us as potential leaders in a mission that includes achieving justice – a much larger mission than just ourselves?

In addition to being the center for meaningful *tefillah*, Torah study, lifecycle events and education, our synagogues and seminaries can be the vehicle through which we take action in the public square on our shared interests and values. We can take action arm in arm with our neighbors, because we recognize that we are bound up in each other’s futures and have an equal stake in the common good. In his essay “Rebuilding Civil Society: A Biblical Perspective,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, writes that the ideas behind covenant first appear when God says “It is not good for man to be alone.” He notes the intertwining of the words *ish* (man) and *isha* (woman) and writes:

Man must first pronounce the name of the other before he can know his own name. He must say “Thou” before he can say “I.” Relationship precedes identity. What, in this narrative, is the nature of this primary social bond? ... [This is a covenant] more accurately, of identity, as if to say, *This is part of who I am.*<sup>1</sup>

As organizers and as committed Jews, we strive and challenge ourselves every day to “walk with justice.” However, because we believe we are part of a potent approach to making change, and because we are dedicated not just to bringing new vitality to political life, but also to our own religious communities, we don’t consider our work to be, at its core, only about “justice.” We are wrapped up in the work of leadership and transformation. Transformation, though, requires taking big risks and trusting both in our fellows and in God that we can succeed. For this to happen, we must be vulnerable enough with our fellow congregants and with community members from diverse backgrounds to share our stories. We must be open to hearing their stories and being changed by them. We must be courageous enough 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?

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, taken from *The responsive community: a journal of the Communitarian network*, Winter, 1996



## CONTRIBUTORS

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# MUSICAL PLAYLIST TO ACCOMPANY EACH SESSION

Compiled by Noam Raucher

You can use any or all of the songs in the suggested sessions. They are listed in the order of title-artist-album, and all are available on iTunes. Please note that one or two have explicit lyrics – these are clearly marked.

## Introduction

How Come – Ray LaMontagne – Trouble  
For What It's Worth – Buffalo Springfield – Buffalo Springfield  
If I Had A Hammer – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary  
What's Going On – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On

## The Prophets and Social Justice

Fuel – Ani DiFranco – Little Plastic Castle  
Chimes of Freedom – Bob Dylan – Bob Dylan: The Collection  
Keep On Rockin' In The Free World – Neil Young – Greatest Hits

## The Ethical Impulse in Rabbinic Judaism

Talkin' Bout A Revolution – Tracy Chapman – Tracy Chapman  
Blowin' In The Wind – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter, Paul and Mary  
Down By The Riverside – Waste Deep In The Big Muddy And Other Love Songs

## A Torah of Justice – A View from the Right?

Hands – Jewel - Spirit  
The Times They Are A Changin' – Bob Dylan – The Essential Bob Dylan  
We Are One – Safam – Peace By Peace

## A Torah of Justice – A View from the Left?

He Was My Brother – Simon and Garfunkel – Wednesday Morning, 3AM  
Oxford Town – Bob Dylan – The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan  
A Change Is Gonna Come – Sam Cooke – Ain't That Good News

## Environment

The Horizon Has Been Defeated – Jack Johnson -On and On  
Holy Ground – The Klezmatics – Wonder Wheel  
Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology) – Marvin Gaye – What's Going On  
Big Yellow Taxi – Joni Mitchell - Dreamland

## Business Ethics

Working Class Hero – John Lennon – Working Class Hero: The Definitive Lennon  
Carpal Tunnel – John O' Conner – Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways  
We Do The Work – Jon Fromer - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

## International Economic Justice

We Are The World. – USA For Africa – We Are The World (Single)  
Outside A Small Circle of Friends – Phil Ochs – The Best of Phil Ochs  
El Salvador – Peter, Paul and Mary – The Best of Peter Paul and Mary

## Special Needs

What It's Like – Everlast – The Best of House of Pain and Everlast – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**  
Mr. Wendall – Arrested Development – 3 years, 5 months, and 2 days in the life Of...  
The Boy In The Bubble – Paul Simon – The Essential Paul Simon

## Kashrut

All You Can Eat – Ben Folds – Supersunnyspeedgraphic, The LP – **EXPLICIT LYRICS**  
Mr. Greed – John Fogerty - Centerfield  
We Just Come To Work Here, We Don't Come To Die –Anne Feeney - Classic Labor Songs From Smithsonian Folkways

## Israel

Hope: Pray On – Sweet Honey In The Rock - 25  
Yihyeh Tov – David Broza – Things Will Be Better, The Best Of David Broza  
Misplaced – Moshav Band

## Afterword

With My Own Two Hands – Ben Harper – Diamonds On The Inside  
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder – Number 1's  
Redemption Song – Bob Marley - Legend



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