

# Successful Components to Transforming a Synagogue Into an Agency of Service

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*This article presents five critical components to transforming an institution into an agency of service: create institutional support for social justice, invest in professional development, tie Jewish service-learning (JSL) to the institution's core mission and values, develop a spectrum of JSL opportunities, and recognize that transformation is a process. It demonstrates that connecting service to Jewish education and reflective spirituality engages the entire synagogue community in the pillars of Reform Judaism and creates awareness among participants about what it means to identify as a Jew.*

Transforming a Jewish communal organization into an effective agency of service requires institutional process-building and a carefully planned implementation program. Both can happen in tandem as an institution creates its own “buy-in” while continuing to meet the needs of its membership through a connection to social justice. Becoming an agency of service allows the institution to address the community's needs while adhering to its core values and mission. This article describes a synagogue's transformation, but the move to being an agency of service can happen at any Jewish communal institution.

Congregation Emanu-El, located in San Francisco, is the largest Reform synagogue in Northern California. Its 2,300 member households, clergy, 125 teachers, programming staff, and management all contribute to creating a rich environment of innovative Jewish opportunities. Our members reflect the diversity of the Bay Area, coming from all walks of life and many different religious backgrounds and ethnicities. We welcome Jewish individual members, single and Interfaith families, Jews of color, as well as LGBTQ couples with or without children. Our programs are designed to meet the diverse spiritual, religious, educational, and social needs of our members.

Before Congregation Emanu-El (CEE) went through a process of transformation that made it into an agency of service, service existed in isolation as “one-off” events with no integrated Jewish learning components and no designated staff person taking responsibility for social justice work done by the synagogue or by synagogue members. Four areas of social justice—hunger, environment, literacy, and poverty—were determined to be the focal points of our work as they encompass a broad spectrum of needs and interests in the community at large as well as in our synagogue community.<sup>1</sup> After four years of implementing Jewish

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<sup>1</sup>The congregation's Project H.E.L.P. won the 2007 Fain award, given by the Religious Action Center every two years to synagogues whose work in the area of social justice is considered exemplary.

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service-learning (JSL), Congregation Emanu-El is well on the way to the full integration of service into our operational culture. JSL is appreciated as a previously underutilized tool whose implementation does not require more work, but rather a new perspective about how to reach our community goals.

Transformation is a process that is never complete and is not perfect. Both the professional and lay leadership at CEE have made a commitment to engage in this process of transformation, to work together to create holistic approaches to Jewish identity based on the JSL model of *Learning–Action–Reflection*. Service, study, and worship are righteous acts that are intertwined, one wrapped around the next. Is it possible to truly understand the teachings of the Torah without feeling compelled to act on behalf of the powerless and the needy? Is it possible to witness the desperate need of the vulnerable among us without seeking strength and wisdom from beyond ourselves to respond? Is it possible to pray to God without looking into oneself and deciding to take action and make a difference in the world? “The combination of Torah (study), *avodah* (prayer), and *g’milut hasadim* (acts of loving-kindness) strengthens each individual value and leads one toward a fully realized Jewish life” (Hanna Klein, Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, personal communication).

Initially we offered service opportunities as an add-on to existing CEE programs, with the hope that after a congregant participated in a class offered at the synagogue or after a regular work day, members would also sign up to volunteer in synagogue-coordinated projects, such as working in a food pantry, tilling a vegetable garden to feed the hungry, cooking and serving meals to formerly homeless youth, or tutoring students. Participation was not significant, with approximately 300 volunteers each year in a synagogue with more than 2,300 households. Currently our social justice participation has tripled to almost 1,000 annual volunteers participating in more than 20 JSL programs.

The journey has met obstacles, but has also provided us with learning opportunities. By sharing them with you here, I hope to inspire and encourage other Jewish communal agencies to begin the process toward being an agency of service. Our transformation process required four steps: create institutional support for social justice, invest in professional development, tie JSL to the institution’s core values and mission, and develop a spectrum of JSL opportunities.

### **CREATE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Reform Judaism embraces social justice as a key component of Jewish living in the modern world, and JSL is a key strategy to bring this pillar of Judaism to life. “People think that to be just is a virtue, deserving honor and rewards; that in doing righteousness one confers a favor on society. No one expects to receive a reward for the habit of breathing. Justice is as much a necessity as breathing is, and a constant occupation” (Heschel, 2001).

In 2007, Congregation Emanu-El’s board, clergy, and senior staff realized that the synagogue was providing programming and staff resources for education and worship, but not for social justice. In contrast to the active participation of members in learning and prayer, there was an absence of communal involvement around issues and actions for social change. It became evident that the social justice pillar would not grow a following on its own, but needed dedicated and

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enthusiastic leadership to mobilize staff and members to prioritize social justice work as a strategy, enhancing the learning and prayer experiences already in place. To meet this identified need, in 2007 CEE leadership created a full-time position for a social justice coordinator, which I assumed. My main responsibility was to act as a “volunteer coordinator” and place congregational members in service opportunities that were already in existence. A secondary responsibility was to help CEE redefine “Judaism” as another word for “activism.” This required me to find ways to link the act of service to Jewish sources, values, and traditions.

I worked quickly to ensure support for my ideas from all levels of the synagogue’s leadership. When trying to implement structural change, it was imperative to determine the professional interests of CEE’s management team to ensure that the institutional changes would meet their perceived needs. To create the institutional buy-in necessary to move JSL into all of CEE’s offerings, I developed relationships with key decision makers: the clergy, board of directors, and other senior management at the synagogue. The time invested in garnering departmental leadership support along the way made it easier to work seamlessly from one department to another. Building these relationships took time and required many one-to-one conversations, which had two functions. First, they were an opportunity to educate decision makers about what JSL is and how it can be used in a synagogue setting. For example, several one-to-one meetings with a clergy member at Emanu-El led to the realization that using JSL as a pedagogical tool would enhance classroom experiences for students, which in turn led to the implementation of a blessing before such activities (see box).

Second, the conversations provided an opportunity to communicate that JSL work at the institution would advance the leadership’s professional interests by drawing in more participants to each activity. For example, when we chose to recognize global hunger, we did so through Shabbat sermons, classroom activities, and service projects. We turned what could have been a small social justice gathering into a fully incorporated synagogue event through learning, action, and prayer.

### INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Congregation Emanu-El’s emphasis moved from encouraging congregation members to volunteer once a year (the “Mitzvah Day” model) to creating an environment in which service became a normative part of members’ lives. We might insist that *Tikkun Olam* and social justice are central to our Jewish way of life, but they can become central only if service becomes a regular practice in our members’ Jewish identity. CEE’s first step toward making that happen was to subsidize my enrollment and that of the director of adolescent education in a yearlong Jewish Service Learning Certificate program offered by the Department of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University and the Bureau of Jewish Education in San Francisco (see the article by Jennifer Mangel in this issue). This program for Jewish communal professionals provided a comprehensive framework and training to build a sustainable model of service on all levels (e.g., institutional, programmatic, and curricular). It provided new skills and tools to create interdependence between learning and action. These professionals were immediately

*Barukh Atah Adonai Elohenu Melekh ha’olam asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu lirdof tzedek. Praised are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You hallow us with Your mitzvot, and command us to pursue tzedek.*

able to put their newfound skills to work simply by collaborating on what they were previously doing in isolation.

This professional development equipped synagogue staff to deal with a problem that they had identified: the temple was still not reaching those members whose Jewish identity had previously only been expressed through education classes and/or worship. In an urban environment such as San Francisco, our congregants have a myriad of choices as to how they spend their time. We wanted to capitalize on the time our congregants were already spending in synagogue-sponsored activities, even if they were not social justice activities. This is where the relationships that I developed with the clergy and senior staff, in particular the directors of the preschool and youth and family education, became critical. We began to ask questions like these: Could we ask that teachers seamlessly incorporate JSL into their curricula as a way to meet our members where they are? If students are coming to synagogue to learn, can we also make sure that part of their learning is about social justice and will lead to action? We concluded that the answer was a resounding “yes” and crafted a nonthreatening way to introduce these ideas to the educators who deliver Congregation Emanu-El’s educational programming. Although JSL terminology was new to them, the practice of integrating Jewish learning with action can be found in classical sources, which were often familiar to our teachers. For example, Rabbi Akiva taught, “Study is great because it leads to action” (Kiddushin 40b), whereas Shimon haTzaddik said, “The world stands on three pillars: Torah (study), Avodah (prayer), and Gemilut Hasadim (acts of loving-kindness)” (Pirkei Avot 1:2). Through the use of traditional Jewish sources such as these to support the integration of JSL pedagogy, the educators at CEE became receptive to learning this new method of education.

The director of adolescent education and I then created a JSL manual (pre-K to sixth grade) that included the basic information needed to integrate these elements into the classroom. For each Jewish value being taught, it included Jewish texts, societal implications of injustice that violated that value, references to books and websites discussing this injustice, and suggested actions for students. The manual also provided sample reflection questions, which connected the learning and action in a spiritual context. By making resources readily available to teachers, this ready-to-use resource has removed many obstacles and eased teacher resistance to embracing JSL. We also began building a youth education social justice library, to be used as an easy introduction to a classroom social justice topic. We encouraged teachers to build on their personal passions and reassured them that any support that they needed would be only a phone call away.

We demonstrated how to expose students to a Jewish framework surrounding an array of social justice issues in contemporary society and grounding it in ancient and modern Jewish texts. Reflecting on service within this Jewish framework enables students to go deeper in their work and associate that “work” with being an integral part of their Jewish identity. Students also go home and speak with their parents about what they are learning and experiencing, which encourages an entirely new layer of service as a family. With the introduction of JSL as a cutting-edge teaching strategy, the synagogue and our students no longer have to choose between education and service. They have access to both in an

integrated and meaningful way. Social justice and social action MUST grow out of, and lead into, study and prayer.

## **TIE JEWISH SERVICE-LEARNING TO THE INSTITUTION'S CORE MISSION AND VALUES**

Judaism is a communal faith, and as such, JSL opportunities are tied to our people's commitment to a communal definition of norms and practices that bind us as a people. Emanu-El strives to create a communal understanding that service is part of living a Jewish life only when buttressed by learning and reflection. Keeping our institutional mission in the forefront of everything we do has been a key component of our transformation, beginning with the education of the synagogue leadership and, ultimately, all volunteers/congregants. The JSL pedagogy is instilled in our institution's programs and culture through continuous teaching and consistent messaging. Incorporating JSL into a synagogue builds community and provides congregants with an opportunity to explore and strengthen their Jewish identities while empowering individuals to effect change. The Talmud (Baba Batra 9a) says: "Greater than one who does a *mitzvah*, is one who causes others to do a *mitzvah*." If you really want to be effective, wake others up to the problem, and mobilize their efforts.

Our website, which frames each opportunity by education–action–reflection, informs every visitor of our institution's philosophy. For example, clicking on "hunger" opportunities brings up this quote: *When you are asked in the world to come, "What was your work?" and you answer, "I fed the hungry," You will be told, "This is the gate to the Lord, enter into it, you who have fed the hungry"* (Midrash Psalms 118:17). This click also brings up this information: "In San Francisco, 1 in 4 children and 1 in 5 adults do not have enough food to regularly meet their nutritional needs. 15,962 families with children live with the daily threat of hunger." Congregants interested in volunteering can now use this accessible web resource to learn about the societal implications of an issue, Judaism's response, and what questions they might ask of themselves after performing service. As evidenced thus far in the growing numbers of congregants participating in service opportunities, we are filling a need felt by our membership. Rather than experiencing "push-back" from a holistic approach to social justice, our membership is embracing the opportunity of being exposed to other areas of Judaism while doing service, which allows for a deeper experience. Yet as shown in the 2008 report, *Jewish Service Learning What Is and What Could Be* (BTW Consulting, 2008), potential demand outpaces current participation.

## **DEVELOP A SPECTRUM OF JSL OPPORTUNITIES**

Emanu-El increased its social justice opportunities by incorporating JSL into a broad spectrum of synagogue activities. For example, the second-grade class giving tzedakah each Sunday morning at Religious School does much more than just put money in a *pushke*. As a class, the students decide where their money will go through curricular components including stories and research. These students also evaluate if the money was used well by learning about a particular community need; if not, they determine how the class can continue to take "action." For example, our second graders learned how animals can provide a sustained and necessary income to families living across the globe. Their teacher

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introduced them to Heifer International, which provides farm animals to families in the poorest areas of the world. Not only did the students raise enough money to purchase more than one animal but there was much thought and discussion about which animal would best help a family in need.

Another opportunity on this spectrum was the expansion of our Mitzvah Corps Program, a yearlong curriculum for seventh-grade students to participate in the full cycle of learning, action, and reflection before being called to the Torah as b'nei mitzvah. Students were highly motivated because the curriculum took them out of the classroom and allowed for youth choice in determining where they would spend their time and energy. Students focused on CEE's four areas of social justice: hunger, environment, literacy, and poverty. In their weekly classes, these students studied our ancient Jewish texts about the *mitzvot* they would be performing, gained a deeper understanding of the current social justice situation surrounding that *mitzvah*, went out into the community to do service, and then, on site, reflected on how all of these elements worked together and what their next social justice response would be.

Emanu-El also wanted to include indirect service in our congregational offerings; looking at advocacy through the JSL lens, it made a commitment to congregation-based community organizing (CBCO). The synagogue followed the Union of Reform Judaism's Just Congregations model of listening to our community, identifying our social justice issue based on personal stories and experiences, researching the issue, and moving the entire community toward action within the public sphere. CBCO is the epitome of JSL because it uses Jewish values to find answers to today's social justice ills while reflecting on our work as a community before beginning the cycle again. CBCO connects people and issues in holistic, meaningful, and impactful ways.

The full acceptance of CBCO took many meetings, trainings, and presentations with board, staff, and clergy. The CBCO model could only be successful if we transitioned from being a transactional business to being a relational, spiritual community, and to create this space, we needed buy-in and participation from all facets of the congregation's community. During the CBCO listening campaign with our congregants, issues were framed within a Jewish context of understanding our responsibility as a people and how our Jewish values guide us. We recruited a Local Organizing Committee (LOC) with 30 congregation members (the largest in the Bay Area), including an active CEE board member. Our LOC is responsible for shepherding the Emanu-El community through the process of listening to the issues our congregants are currently grappling with, researching an identified area of common concern (in our case this is quality public education for all), and hosting a public action where synagogue members ask public officials for a commitment to an "action" leading to systemic change. We hosted 30 meetings in congregants' homes attended by more than 400 members, and we had approximately 80 one-to-one conversations with other members. Within the second year of our participation in CBCO, we had doubled social justice participation and spawned a thoughtful dialogue regarding our need to connect with one another while we connect with the world.

**TRANSFORMATION IS A PROCESS**

Currently in year four of this process, we are proud of the accomplishments made thus far, although many challenges still remain. JSL is being incorporated into Emanu-El's preschool–12th grade education classes; however, it is not yet a fixture in our adult education offerings. Social justice reports have recently been added to monthly board meetings as a way to keep decision makers apprised of the cultural shifts in the institution, but it is yet unclear whether this amounts to a “report dump” or an active illustration of a shifting culture. Plans are underway for a section of the CEE website homepage to include weekly prompts for service, reflection, text study, and social justice happenings. We are seeking approval and addition of a “service brit” into the CEE membership package to reinforce that there is reciprocity in belonging to a synagogue, unlike belonging to a gym. The concept of covenant—brit—is central to Jewish life. At Mount Sinai the Jewish people entered into a covenant with God. To belong to a holy community requires obligations and responsibilities. To accept a covenant implies mutual obligations and responsibilities. Although most synagogues focus on dues as an expectation of membership, there is the potential to also expand the definition to include service to the temple through JSL offerings.

There remain many challenges, but Congregation Emanu-El is turning. It is turning to its congregants and asking them to identify being Jewish as a holistic endeavor in which learning, action, and spiritual reflection are inseparable. Transitioning to an “agency of service,” Congregation Emanu-El exemplifies institutional change through the application of Jewish service-learning as a practice throughout the entire organization.

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## Becoming a Community of Service: What Worked in the San Francisco Bay Area

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This case study presents key strategies used by the Bureau of Jewish Education in San Francisco to enable the San Francisco Bay Area to become a “community of service.” These strategies, which have made Jewish service-learning a normative term in our community, include educator professional development, partnership with a local university, and supporting institutional change.

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