



Synagogue Shalom's* Legacy Heritage Innovation Project Grant Evaluation

Assessment by Rabbi Erin Hirsh

The Legacy Heritage Innovation Project seeks to support synagogues that are creating new paradigms for congregational education, introducing systemic change through an integrated, family-based approach. It prioritizes projects which embed learning in the rhythm of Jewish living on *Shabbat* and *chagim*, engage parents and children in consistent learning and practice, link the different dimensions of Jewish living (*Torah, avodah, gemilut hasadim*), and foster collaboration and synergy within congregational life. Synagogue Shalom has implemented a series of programs that embody the values and priorities of Legacy Heritage, values that the congregation clearly shares.

In its initial Legacy Heritage Innovation Project application, Synagogue Shalom set out a series of specific goals. These included increasing the opportunities for families to study together. Synagogue Shalom wanted to provide support for families to experiment with deeper levels of appreciation and observance of *Shabbat* and families took advantage of those opportunities. Synagogue Shalom was determined to integrate the school and *davenning* congregational communities, including bringing non-parenting congregants into the lives of the school-age children as both teachers and learners. Synagogue Shalom wanted to enhance the overall spiritual experiences and opportunities of Synagogue Shalom

* This is a pseudonym.

members. Synagogue Shalom also sought to create programs with the potential to attract new members to the community.

Synagogue Shalom has effected systemic change with quantitative, qualitative and anecdotal evidence. Synagogue Shalom conducted a baseline survey of *Shabbat* practices and involvement in congregational educational programs. Evaluative information about the effectiveness of this program was compiled in several ways. Evaluation forms were distributed at the end of every session, which were then collated by volunteers. The congregation used the Board of Directors as a focus group. Board members serving as “*Shabbat* hosts,” contributed to the evaluation process by tracking attendance, collecting anecdotal information and making first hand observations. An end-of-year evaluation form for parents was expanded to include specific questions about the quality of the *Shabbat* attendance expectations. The Legacy Heritage Grant implementation team (comprised of rabbi, innovators –the upper and lower school teachers– parents, school committee members and board representatives) also reviewed monthly and year end evaluation forms on an ongoing basis and did effectively adapt to feedback as the program evolved. Individual faculty members’ and the rabbi’s performance evaluations were adapted to incorporate their roles in implementing *Shabbat B’yachad*. They also hired me to review the evaluations they had conducted and collected as well as to spend one morning observing a *Shabbat B’yachad*.

Prior to the implementation of *Shabbat B’yachad*, Synagogue Shalom’s Legacy Heritage Innovation sponsored-program, Synagogue Shalom’s religious school met in two shifts, for a maximum of four hours per week. Students also were expected to attend four *Shabbat* mornings per year. This expectation was honored begrudgingly at best. The congregation typically had approximately 15-25 Friday night attendees and 10-15 on *Shabbat* morning prior to the institution of the Legacy Heritage Innovation grant. The staff consisted of a very part time staff: the rabbi, upper and lower school

coordinators, and the teaching staff. Through the careful and strategic implementation of its Legacy grant, Synagogue Shalom has become a congregation whose communal and educational life is leveraged around its intergenerational *Shabbat* Programming.

The first level of *Shabbat* programming was *Shabbat B'yachad* in the first year of the grant. *Shabbat* morning programming for families with school age children was doubled to eight times a year (roughly monthly). Then the programming on each of those mornings was expanded. With *Shabbat B'yachad*, the morning begins with a series of optional electives taught by both volunteers and staff. The morning I experienced featured an array of electives suitable to multiple age groups and mixed age group. Actually, it began even before that with warm greetings to each individual by the rabbi or education director as the individual entered and considered the list of options. Adult members facilitated most of the electives, others participated wholeheartedly, and others schmoozed in the kitchen over coffee and helped set up lunch. The communal energy was bustling. The space limitations that necessitate having school in two distinct sessions were overcome very thoughtfully and strategically in the layout of activities.

The elective portion of *Shabbat B'yachad* (*Shabbat* morning version) is followed by three distinct services. In addition to the main service, there are two children's services led by the education director, cantor/associate educator and the rabbi. The children's services were both age appropriate and engaging. The adult service was enthusiastic and quite full. The service leaders rotate between the services from one *Shabbat B'yachad* to another, and the *Shabbat B'yachad* I witnessed was the beginning of this, and yet the timing of the services was quite close. It would be helpful to have a fourth person circulating between the three services to keep the leaders apprised of where the other two leaders were in terms of the progression of the service. After an hour, all these services come together for a

dynamic, shared *Torah* service in the main sanctuary. This features an intergenerational learning experience. The activity I happened to observe was designed to engage all ages but the questions were repetitive and geared too high for the youngest children, who had already been at synagogue for almost three hours. The rabbi shared my critique and Synagogue Shalom has documented a history of refining programs and learning from their mistakes, however small, as they go along. After the service, the entire community went into the social hall for lunch. Adults and children sat together at meals, and not just by family. The room was decorated with really bright, cheerful children's artwork, reinforcing the energy the program is designed to achieve and offsetting the space challenges that might otherwise be a drag on the program.

Shabbat B'yachad brought a critical mass of people from the congregation together on *Shabbat* on a regular basis who would not otherwise have been there. A typical *Shabbat B'yachad* saw an 80% student attendance rate (43 of 60 students). Of those students, 80-90% are accompanied by parents. An average of 70-75 adults and children came to the 9:00 *optional* electives, notably including many parents who came in rather than dropping off their children. Students who ordinarily attended school at Synagogue Shalom in shifts were in the building together at one time. Age-appropriate and intergenerational programming were both implemented. Teen *Madrichim* began *leyning* during the intergenerational *Torah* service on a regular basis. "Friday night regulars" began to attend *Shabbat B'yachad* programs. Adults with school-age children (74%) and without school-age children (18%) came together to learn, teach, and socialize with the students (70%). The lunches were noted for featuring "mixed" seating in that group of people from different facets of the community sat together. Twenty volunteers stepped forward or were successfully recruited to teach as well as to participate, bringing to life anew the mission statement of "Synagogue Shalom," that "every member a learner, every learner a teacher."

A school committee was revived and galvanized into action with the new energy and enthusiasm born of the *Shabbat B'yachad* program. A curriculum review and revisioning process was undertaken and completed. The curriculum, which I had the opportunity to study, is comprehensive and creative. In turn, the School Committee began working with the Adult Education committee for the first time. The Lower School Coordinator became the Education Director at this time and met with all the congregational committees, helping to further the integrative spirit of *Shabbat B'yachad* throughout the congregation.

An important goal established by Synagogue Shalom to complement the monthly *Shabbat B'yachad* gathering was an intergenerational retreat in June of 2007. The *Shabbaton* committee convened early in the fall of 2006 and was comprised of a diverse group of congregants, a majority of whom had never been involved in congregational work before. Eighty congregants eventually attended the *Shabbaton* and reported an overwhelmingly positive response. A second *Shabbaton* is planned for the Spring of 2009.

The next layer of programming that Synagogue Shalom introduced as a benefit of the Legacy Heritage Innovation multi-year funding included Fridays *B'yachad*, *Shabbat B'Bayit* and Pre-holiday Community Workshops. Fridays *B'yachad* is new iteration of a pre-existing program called "first Fridays," which featured a family service and a catered meal preceding "regular" *Shabbat* services, which themselves include a guest speaker and childcare. The program was decreased in frequency to once every other month, but deepened in terms of learning and experience. At dinner, each table was presented with "table topics" for discussion and ritual objects such as song sheets and *benschers*. The

most concrete reason to decrease the frequency of the special Friday night events was to increase the participation and thus the ruach associated with each experience.

Shabbat B'Bayit is designed to increase family's home-based Friday night *Shabbat* observances and celebration. These replaced a twice-yearly *Shabbat* exchange program where small groups met in members' homes in lieu of synagogue programming. On months when there is no Friday *B'yachad*, there will be *Shabbat B'Bayit* nights. Volunteers who are formally trained by the congregational leadership go to congregant homes on *Erev Shabbat* to teach and lead rituals, lead discussions and other educational activities. More than forty-five families participated in this program in its first year, and twenty-one families participated in just the first one in the second year of *Shabbat B'Bayit*. The congregation also produced and distributed quality materials for host homes and the general membership called, "Keys to Your Jewish Home." These are beautiful, multi-colored, laminated blessing sheets, *Shabbat* ritual items, special discussion guides and background information as well as web-based materials that can be downloaded easily before *Shabbat*). During regular Hebrew school hours, complementary adult workshops are also periodically offered to increase members' skill and comfort levels.

A series of intergenerational pre-Holiday Community Workshops were also added to the program. These are geared towards the entire congregation as well as the community at large. Co-sponsored by the Board of Directors as well as the following congregational committees: adult education, school, social action, programming and ritual committees. The workshops feature hands-on, practical and innovative activities designed to help members prepare for the holidays and feel prepared for them. The holidays initially selected included *Sukkot*, *Hanukah*, *Purim* and *Shavuot*. The reception to these programs has been very positive, with substantial attendance in a diverse set of substantial,

meaningful activities. Thirty-six people attended the pre-*Sukkot* festival, and eight families built *Sukkot* for the first time after that program.

This multi-pronged approach to intergenerational *Shabbat* and holiday programming was designed to reach out to congregants from many different vantage points in the community with different schedules, interests, knowledge and skills sets. By implementing these tactics, Synagogue Shalom comprehensively addressed Legacy Heritage Innovation's multi-year application goals of 1) significantly deepening and intensifying parental and children's engagement in Jewish living and learning on *Shabbat* and holidays 2) integrating Jewish learning and practice 3) fostering connection among diverse constituencies within the congregation and across different aspects of Jewish life, 4) promoting collaborative planning and action among congregational staff and lay leadership in an ongoing manner 5) aligning intentionally with or emerging from the congregation's core vision. Synagogue Shalom embraced these goals wholeheartedly, seeing their approach as a way to "continue our shift to a *Shabbat* and Holiday centered community, desilo-izing the congregation, and welcome new and potential members to the community for valuable learning and connection."

Year three further expanded these programs while the leadership simultaneously sought to address several challenges they had identified. The level of programming has increased dramatically with the implementation of all these new programs and the staff is spread very thin with the demands of so many programs. Similarly, the congregants are being asked to increase their investment in synagogue programming significantly, and the staff has to be concerned with overwhelming them or raising expectations too high too quickly. The staff also had to adjust to a significant staff change and yet has managed beautifully to integrate in a new "third leader" in the person of a cantor/associate educator. However, in the third year of the program, the "Keys to Your Jewish Home" program has been

expanded to include *mitzvot*. These *mitzvot* are tied into the themes of the *Shabbat B'yachad* mornings as well. Attendance and volunteerism at all programming this year remains high, and not only is a second spring *Shabbaton* in the works, but also a second congregational trip to Israel in the 2010.

Another hallmark of Synagogue Shalom's success is the extent to which it has been woven into the fabric of congregational life. There is every reason to expect that the programs initially launched under the auspices of the Legacy Heritage Innovation project will continue for years to come. Families take for granted that getting an education for their children at Synagogue Shalom includes attending *Shabbat B'yachad*. The School Committee whose re-ignition is a by-product of the Legacy Heritage program is not going to suddenly disappear, nor is the new curriculum. The professionalization of the staff as evidenced by the transition of a school coordinator to an Education Director has been completed. The material supplies, such as children's siddurim, purchased with the grant, are now a permanent part of the ritual life of the congregation. A congregant explicitly sat and explained to me how the congregation had once been a series of silos and was now much more of a cohesive entity. Indeed, the committees work together much more organically than they did prior to the beginning of the Legacy Heritage grant. But more importantly, the type of learning about congregational systems reflected by that person's comment, will not disappear with the completion of the grant. The same can obviously be said for the overwhelming increase in education about *Shabbat*, holidays, and Jewish values. It is ingrained in the hearts and minds of those who have opened themselves up to the experiences afforded by Synagogue Shalom and the Legacy Heritage Foundation. Programming is already underway for 2009-2010.

Synagogue Shalom has encompassed and transcended the overall goals of the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project and those it initially articulated for itself. Families are studying, *davenning*, celebrating and *schmoozing* together and with their Jewish community. Synagogue Shalom families

have taken advantage of the opportunities that the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project and the Synagogue Shalom staff offered them to experiment with deeper levels of appreciation and observance of *Shabbat*. The synagogue has become a place where parallel and intergenerational activities happen on a regular basis. Synagogue Shalom has successfully begun to integrate the school and *davenning* congregational communities, most notably bringing non-parenting congregants into the lives of the school-age children as both teachers and learners. Committees are also working together rather than maintaining narrow definitions of their Jewish domains within the synagogue community. The overall spiritual experiences and opportunities of Synagogue Shalom members have been enhanced. Synagogue Shalom has undoubtedly also created programs with the potential to attract new members to the community. However, this is the only goal of Synagogue Shalom's Legacy Heritage Innovation Project at which it has not been realized. It is unusual to create a substantial increase in quality programming and also substantially increase the energy among the congregants and not see a rise in membership.

Concrete Follow-Up Suggestions on Next Page.

Some Concrete Follow-up Considerations for “Synagogue Shalom:”

1. Synagogue Shalom’s lack of growth, understood in the context of the success of the *Shabbat B’yachad* programming, merits specific study and evaluation.
2. The amount of synagogue staffing and synagogue staff compensation should be reevaluated in light of the increase in programming. In particular, plans should be made now to continue the additional salary the Education Director has received as a benefit of the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project.
3. There is an implicit expectation that programming will keep deepening and even expanding (the Keys to Your Jewish Home, a second trip to Israel) and the staff and the community may need to seriously evaluate what is feasible for both staff and congregants without one constituency or another burning out.
 - a. A survey of the priorities of the congregants vis a vis the extensive new programming should be undertaken to help the staff prioritize their programming efforts in the years subsequent to the Legacy Heritage Innovation Project grant.
 - b. The community should begin to be educated about what is possible post LHIP.
4. A *Shabbat B’yachad* (Saturday morning) “runner” position should be created to help the three service leaders stay as synchronized as possible.
5. The rabbi should be involved in the planning of the intergenerational activity that follows the Torah service during *Shabbat B’yachad* (Saturday morning).
6. The materials are marketable and could be turned into a source of income for “Synagogue Shalom.”

