

Several local synagogues succeeding while others contending with challenges

The Jewish Advocate
November 6, 2015
By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate staff



Programs for young families are popular at Temple Aliyah in Needham.

News of synagogues shrinking, merging, or closing down are so frequent that they often overshadow congregations that are actually thriving. And while factors that contribute to a synagogue's demise, such as changing demographics and loss of interest in religious life are often to blame, reasons for a successful synagogue are more elusive.

"It's a combination of factors," said David Bernat, executive director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts. Among these are a charismatic rabbi; an inclusive attitude toward interfaith families, LGBT individuals, and people with disabilities; and innovative programming and a creative way to use the physical space of the synagogue. Overall, "a creative vision, looking-forward type of attitude," are important, he added.

The successful synagogues in the Boston area all seem to possess these variables, in addition to a unique program or special outreach effort that that attracts new members while keeping existing congregants.



Boston's Temple Israel taking Simchat Torah to the streets.

Temple Israel of Boston (TI), for instance, appeals to a large number of young professionals with their Riverway Project, which does not require membership at TI. The ticket-less High Holiday service on Kol Nidre drew 550 young professionals this year, which was the biggest number since the beginning of the Riverway Project. TI is a congregation of 1400 households and is the largest Reform synagogue in New England. Headed by Rabbi Ronne Friedman, the 160-year-old synagogue is also one of the oldest synagogues in the Boston area. In the last year, the synagogue's membership increased by five percent.

The synagogue also reaches out to families with infants and toddlers. For every Jewish baby born in Boston, TI sends the family a care package. The preschool at the congregation is considered one of the best in the Boston area, let alone in a synagogue. The synagogue's inclusion of LGBT and interfaith families is another factor in its favor. Christopher Noe, president of TI, is a Jew by choice and he joined the temple before his conversion. "We think that we provide a nice home for interfaith couples and I'm proof of that," he said. Temple Beth Elohim (TBE) in Wellesley, led by Rabbi Joel Sisenwine, is also growing by five percent every year and there are currently 1200 households at the Reform congregation. While Wellesley's Jewish population is growing, which is an advantage for TBE, the members come from nearly 30 towns.

Five years ago, the growth of TBE warranted the construction of a new 42,000 square foot building, which temple President Pam Forman emphasized as one of the contributing factors to TBE's success. "But it's the innovation that's happening inside because we have the structure to innovate," she said. "We have areas in our synagogue where we're able to teach small classes or large seminars."

Yet another Reform congregation, Temple Beth Shalom (TBS) in Needham, is in the process of building a new synagogue to accommodate the growing number of members. It is expected to be completed in the summer of 2016. Currently there are 820 households, up from 500 about 10 years ago.

While the cost of living in Newton is becoming out of reach for many young families, young

Jews are flocking to the next town over – Needham. “The demographics are helpful, certainly,” said Rabbi Jay Perlman. A new program for families with newborns and expectant mothers that TBS started a year ago has brought in many new members. But while families with young children make up many of the new members, Perlman said there is growth across the age spectrum, noting that many older adults join to reconnect with a Jewish community after being outside of synagogue life for some time.

While many Reform synagogues are steadily attracting new members, several Conservative synagogues are going through mergers or downsizing, including Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill, Temple Beth Emunah in Brockton and Temple Beth Am in Randolph. On the North Shore, however, the Conservative Congregation Shirat Hayam (CSH) is thriving.

CSH, located in Swampscott, grew out of a merger between two Conservative synagogues and under the leadership of a young rabbi, Baruch HaLevi, grew by 20 percent in its first two years. There are currently 500 households at CSH. HaLevi increased Shabbat services attendance from 30 to 400 people by requiring Hebrew school students to attend and by introducing practices such as yoga and meditation. HaLevi made aliyah last summer, and was succeeded by Rabbi Michael Ragozin in July of 2015. Ragozin previously led a congregation in Virginia, where he increased the membership by 32 percent and religious school enrollment by 80 percent.

Some have attributed Conservative synagogues’ struggles to the movement’s attitude to interfaith families, since Conservative rabbis do not perform marriages between Jews and non-Jews, unlike some Reform rabbis. Perhaps one of the factors of Ragozin’s success is his openness to interfaith couples. One-third of his congregation in Virginia was intermarried. He does not have the number of intermarried families at Shirat Hayam, “But whatever it is, we need more,” Ragozin said, to reflect the number of intermarried Jews in the U.S., which is more than half.

Similarly to other clergy and lay leaders of growing synagogues, Ragozin emphasized the importance of relationships and engagement to attract and keep members. “When a person walks through the door, we are supposed to engage him or her,” he said, so that congregants, especially those who have not belonged to a temple before, are not intimidated by synagogue life. He also credited HaLevi with innovative Shabbat services that contributed to CSH’s success. “I think that’s pretty unique to have a thriving Shabbat culture in a liberal congregation,” Ragozin said.

Another Conservative congregation, Temple Emanuel (TE) in Newton, is also flourishing. Less than two miles away from Congregation Mishkan Tefila, which sold its building after membership dropped to 300 households, TE, led by Senior Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz, is home to 1200 families.

TE President Stuart Cole emphasized the willingness to change as one of his temple’s success factors. “What worked 25 years ago does not work now,” he said. “The biggest reason for our success is we don’t take it for granted.” When new members join, they are invited to an evening at Gardenswartz’s house to talk about why they joined and what they’re looking for in

their temple. These conversations have often led to new programming and ideas. Cole noted that TE is welcoming to LGBT families and individuals, “as far as interfaith, that is one thing we’re working really hard on now.”

Temple Aliyah (TA) in Needham, also Conservative, may not have the numbers of TE, but is holding steady at more than 400 households. Rabbi Carl Perkins, spiritual leader of TA, said “congregations can only hope to succeed if they build and maintain strong, joyful communities within them.” He also stressed the importance of relationships and community engagement for the synagogue’s survival.

Perkins said while congregants leave due to moving to another city, leaving because they are unhappy with his synagogue is rare. He believes that what attracts members to his Conservative congregation, despite the movement’s contraction is the “opportunity to take their Judaism seriously and pursue Jewish learning and to daven [pray] in a traditional way.”