

# Organizational Collaboration and Millennial Engagement

*Jaclyn F. Cohen and Jason R. Levine*

## Introduction

What comes to mind when you think of Seattle? For many, it's coffee, rain, the Space Needle, and fish throwers at Pike Place Market. What probably wouldn't immediately come to mind—and, indeed it did not register with either of us back when we were fortunate to be offered rabbinic positions here—was Seattle's unprecedented Jewish communal growth. This city in the far northwest corner of the United States has seen a 70 percent increase in its Jewish population in the last thirteen years.<sup>1</sup> A booming economy continues to draw thousands to the region each month—many of them to work for Amazon, Microsoft, Starbucks, and Boeing, among others. Many are Jews of every color, denomination, and background, Jews in their twenties, thirties, and early forties, who have been recruited from leading colleges and graduate school programs from around the country and beyond.

Rapid population growth presents tremendous opportunities and unique challenges for any city. It has certainly been true of Seattle and, more broadly, the Puget Sound region. This is especially true of this area's religious communities. Washington State is consistently identified nationally as fertile ground for the “nones,” who do not identify with any religious community. In fact, fully one-third of Seattleites identify as “nones.” We are tied

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in our “none-ness” with San Francisco and only second to our neighbor to the south, Portland.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, we are a top destination for those who consider themselves unaffiliated, assimilated, or disconnected—including the self-identified “spiritual-but-not-religious” crowd. This extends far beyond Jewish circles: churches, mosques, and religious community centers largely struggle within this same milieu.

The reaction of greater Seattle’s Jewish organizations and institutions is probably what one might expect in such a situation. Different groups have sought to engage similar niches of the population. As the community has grown, so have the number of organizations and institutions actively engaged with the Jewish community. Yet these various groups continued to work independently. Indeed, like so many other North American cities that have a range of institutions working to serve the same population, we who serve Seattle’s Jewish community often find ourselves working parallel to others doing similar, if not identical, work. In that type of environment, a competitive, scarce-resources mentality could dominate.

Yet, within the specific niche of Seattle young adult engagement, there has emerged a powerful model for what is possible when organizations choose to look at one another as collaborators rather than competitors, as allies and fellows instead of opponents and rivals. Our model—the Engager Network—has been able to accomplish something meaningful within the most Jewishly unidentified age group.<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, it has managed to inspire and motivate a small group of Jewish professionals so that we can, in turn, create something inspiring and worthwhile for the next generation of involved, passionate, connected Jews.

### History and Formation

In the summer of 2014, leaders from Birthright: Next<sup>4</sup> convened an “Engager Network,” a term coined by the Jim Joseph Foundation. Its directive was to connect professionals and lay leaders responsible for Jewish millennial engagement and programming. The goals of the group were fourfold:

- Increasing trust, mutual respect, and transparency among local engagers

- Accelerating knowledge, skill-sharing, collaborations, and connectional intelligence
- Diving deep into the nuances and needs of Jewish millennials and engagement issues
- Serving as local platforms for professional development and peer mentoring and support<sup>5</sup>

The staff of Hillel at the University of Washington—then-Jconnect<sup>6</sup> Director Elise Peizner and Director of Strategy Josh Furman—first arranged for representatives of Seattle’s various young adult groups to come together one evening for nosh and discussion. The context offered was, “Let’s gather together for post-Birthright follow-up and general networking.” Neither one of us was present at that meeting, but we each received similar, disappointing feedback: those present weren’t sure what they were doing there. The largest presence in the room, Jconnect itself, was seen as dominating the conversation because they had so much to offer. Quite simply, the conversation stalled as quickly as it started and left quite the awkward impression.

It took about ten months before Jconnect convened the group once again—only this time the “call to action” was different. First, the only people included were professionals—this, to a certain degree, leveled the playing field of organizational knowledge. It also created a safe space for us to communicate with one another separate from our constituents.

Second, there was a clear, thoughtful agenda proposed by Elise Peizner. Knowing that Jconnect would still be perceived as having the largest presence and the most to contribute, Peizner proposed topics that would offer common ground for all organizations and professionals present. Among those topics were these universal questions:

- What does it mean to work as partners in young adult engagement?
- What does it mean to be co-sponsors of each other’s events?
- How can we communicate most effectively with one another and as a community?
- What are our goals for this specific network?
- How can we best serve one another, challenge one another to grow, and support one another?<sup>7</sup>

This was a tremendous act of redirection and humility on Peizner's and Jconnect's part, as well as a clear recognition that we all had something to offer and something to learn. Instead of the largest group in town dominating the discussion, Jconnect created space for all others to share, built a level playing field for all to succeed, and planted the seeds to develop a united community.

Finally, we decided that in order to create a consistent and lasting model, each meeting would be hosted in rotation at our various organizations. Through this, no one group "owned" or dominated the whole. It was, for many of us, a clear statement of collective ownership and participation. The foundational principles of this group were clear, and all felt heard. From that moment onward, the Engager Network truly began to form.

### **Our Work Together**

Our next meeting within this new structure took place in the spring of 2015. The primary goal was to shine a spotlight on ourselves and the organizations we serve. We created a chart featuring all the groups at the table and compiled the following information for each group:

- Name of organization/group
- Our target audience
- Where we're most successful
- What the community perceives is our greatest strength
- Where we'd like to grow

Together we methodically and eagerly analyzed our own work and were able to offer thoughtful feedback to others. It may sound overly simplistic or basic, but this was truly the first time any of us had ever participated in an exercise like this. Every group had great power. Every organization had a unique mission. Every group contributed something meaningful to the larger Seattle Jewish community. There was space for all, whether it was a focus on smaller segments of the wide millennial age range, such as immediately post-college or young families; groups that represented the range of Jewish ritual and practice; geographic distribution reaching out to all parts of town; or a programmatic attention on social justice, culture, nature, text study, and more. It was refreshing,

insightful, and it brought us to the collective realization that we each had something valuable to offer.

We continue to meet regularly every four to six weeks. Our meetings begin with a text study led by the host and continue with a discussion on topics ranging from current events to calendaring. We have discussed the week's *parashah* at a deep level, relevant dilemmas in our greater community, marking transitions in the life of a millennial, the role of social justice for overcommitted professionals, how to build and sustain boards and lay leaders, Tishah B'Av for modern Jews, employing the best methods for social media, and more. The host is responsible for setting an agenda, focusing the group on a clear theme for the day's discussion. All topics are valuable and all discussions fruitful. Sometimes we ruminate at the thirty-thousand-foot level. Sometimes we dig into the nitty-gritty details. Sometimes we just need a safe space to talk through frustrations and challenges.

We meet over lunch, intentionally carving out time in our workday. In a two-hour meeting, much of our time is dedicated to schmoozing, reflecting, and simply being together. Indeed, a community is not built by how many points are on the agenda but instead through relationships formed by everyone who sits at the table. Our relationships with colleagues are possibly the most meaningful rewards of our Engager Network.

### **Challenges and Opportunities: The Art of *Tzimtzum***

The philosophy for the approach and framework of our Engager Network is based on a powerful Jewish concept, one far older than our group or the millennials we serve. Isaac Luria and the Kabbalists speak of *tzimtzum*, God's act of contracting from the universe in order to inspire Creation itself. God performed this act willingly, teaching the crucial principle of humility and the need to pull oneself back to let others emerge, thereby unleashing their power and potential.

Dr. Eugene Borowitz, in his preeminent 1974 article, "*Tzimtzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership*,"<sup>8</sup> teaches God's act of *tzimtzum* to be one of "inculcating compassion in the possessors of power, that is, all of us . . . Rather than rely on a sovereign's goodwill we prefer to share [God's] power. So today almost every social arrangement we know is under pressure to transform itself in the direction of a more effective democracy."

These words have been intentionally or inadvertently embraced by the millennial generation, a group to which both of us belong. Our collective social arrangement is firmly built on a collaborative model, one where additional points of view can be helpful and working together is far more effective than working apart; where we acknowledge times to speak up and, equally as important, times to listen.

Borowitz's words ring true forty years later in the libraries, conference rooms, and meeting spaces of Jewish organizations of greater Seattle. The goal of our Engager Network is the creation of a greater community. We share our power, our knowledge, and our excitement. The larger, better-resourced organizations do not dictate and the smaller ones do not acquiesce. Everyone has a voice at the table and everyone makes an important contribution.

*Tzimtzum* is an art. It takes patience and requires trust in those around you. It is also a constantly evolving endeavor. Our Network shifts as professionals come and go. Our levels of participation within the Network shift as the demands of our full-time jobs ebb and flow. Participating in the work of *tzimtzum* means not only knowing when to step forward and when to encourage others to do so; it means being communicative and transparent with your colleagues. Only then can we move forward and grow.

There is the old trope that Jewish organizations can be deeply territorial; so concerned about numbers that they keep their best ideas close to the chest. This perpetuates the myth that Jewish engagement is a zero-sum game. While each of us certainly wants our organization to succeed, we know that one group's success does not forecast the fall of another. In fact, the opposite is true. As the old maxim goes, "A rising tide lifts all boats." Through our work with the Engager Network, each of our groups has grown, whether through attendance, increased funding, the nurturing of new programs, delivering richer content, or simply being recognized as "stronger, better, and more meaningful" by our participants.

The message we share with the greater young adult community is this: We as an Engager Network do not compete with one another, we work together so that everyone can succeed. We work hard so that all Seattle's Jewish young adults can access multiple opportunities to connect to Jewish life. We commit to

this so individuals can nurture a Jewish identity, create a Jewish home, seek Jewish outlets for themselves and their family, and participate in the meaningful journey of expanding an ever-evolving Jewish soul. We work hard, practicing the art of *tzimt-zum* and sharing the space of young adult engagement because it's the right thing to do.

As Borowitz's article implies, we contract ourselves to let others in. In this way, we end up creating far more and being infinitely more successful at engaging those whom we all collectively serve.

### In Closing

Why is the Seattle Engager Network a success? There is no magic formula or rubric. We follow a similar pattern and adjust or change as the need arises. We pick a date. The host picks the topic. And together we meet: all equals, regardless of years of experience, and all partners, regardless of our organization's size or success. We learn, create, and lead together. As a result of our shared efforts, we have seen a rise in participation and enthusiasm in our programs and organizations. Our promotional material is vastly stronger, as we are advertising for one another and reaching a larger number of millennials around the city. And more than the numbers and the data, our success is defined by a proud feeling that our organizations support one another and support the larger goal of millennial engagement. Frequently, those who attend our events comment on the refreshing attitude of inclusion, shared future, and cooperation that our Engager Network creates. This value supersedes all statistics in the world and yields so much more.

When we leave our Engager Network meetings we feel excited to try something new and continue collaborating with and learning from each other. We feel less alone in our work as Jewish professionals. The Engager Network is not just another meeting on our calendar. It is a sacred space of trust, respect, and sharing—a space to talk through each other's quandaries and celebrate each other's victories.

We believe our Network is a model adaptable for any city. We have no budget, though each one of us will often cover the cost of lunch or snacks for our peers to share. We have no one central leader or organizer. While Jconnect may have been the initial convener, the largest organization no longer needs to take the lead. We

have our philosophy of collaboration and we have one another. That's our recipe for success and it's worked for us.

As for adapting this model to other cities, we encourage each of you to start small but think big: Create and sustain a network of professionals from across the spectrum of organizations that exist in your area. Perhaps begin with a *b'rit*, laying out principles that suggest openness and support. We urge you to hold meetings regularly without fail, always with a flexible agenda. Keep an open seat for anyone willing to participate, and most importantly, move one another toward a broader shared goal for your work, both individual and collective. Remember that those who sit across the table from you are your greatest allies of all.

Just as we create and continue to create what is right for us, so too we hope you can create what is right for you. Who knows where our Engager Network will be in another year and a half? For now, we look forward to the next time we will all get together and work to build a place for Seattle Jewish millennials to call home.

### Notes

1. The 2014 Greater Seattle Jewish Community Study, sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle, research conducted by Matthew Boxer, Janet Krasner, Matthew A. Brown, and Leonard Saxe, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Steinhardt Research Institute, Brandeis University (2014), [https://www.jewishinseattle.org/sites/default/files/Community\\_Study\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.jewishinseattle.org/sites/default/files/Community_Study_FINAL.pdf).
2. Joanna Piacenza and Robert P. Jones, "The Top Two Religious Groups That Dominate American Cities," Public Religion Research Institute (August 3, 2015), <http://www.ppri.org/spotlight/the-top-two-religious-traditions-that-dominate-american-cities/#.Vb-2Z-1Viko%20-->.
3. "2013 Pew Research Center: A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center (October 1, 2013), <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.
4. Birthright Next has since ceased operations on June 30, 2015.
5. Dan Fast and Adam Pollack, "A 5-Point Plan to Build Your Local Engager Network," Jim Joseph Foundation (May 26, 2015), <https://jimjosephfoundation.org/a-5-point-plan-to-build-your-local-engager-network/>.
6. Jconnect Seattle (<http://www.jconnectseattle.org>) is a program of Hillel UW and has the mission of "[creating] a meaningful Jewish

life for 21–35 year olds through diverse communities and innovative experiences.”

7. These questions are attributed to Elise Peizner and Josh Furman, who distributed them at the original Engager meeting.
8. Eugene Borowitz, “Tzitzum: A Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership,” *Religious Education* 69, no. 6 (November–December 1974):687–700.