

Shawn Landres, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, is co-founder and CEO of Jumpstart, where he helps visionary philanthropic and nonprofit leaders of Jewish and interreligious causes find the perspective and connections they need to achieve impact, build stronger communities, and transform the world. This past summer, Landres' work was recognized by the White House, which featured him as a "spotlight innovator" and speaker at its forum for faith-based social innovators in July. Landres has also received recognition from the World Council for Jewish Communal Service and from the JCSA: Jewish Communal Service and JCSA: Jewish Communal Service Association of North America, which honored him with a 2012 Ted Comet Exemplar Award.

More Voices


"Jewish Renewal itself is having this exact conversation, essentially wondering if it will die when the original leadership does. Some argue that we MUST be sustainable and some argue that the movement has done what it needed to do." – Rabbi David Ingber, founder and spiritual director of Romemu in N.Y.

"The synagogue will have to demonstrate its ability to organize and meet the real spiritual and physical needs of a new generation that is practicing resilience and not just craving authenticity and meaning." – Rabbi Shoshana Leis, co-rabbi of Congregation Har Shalom in Fort Collins, Colo.

"20s and 30s"), and through national initiatives (Moishe House and Synagogue 3000's Next Dor) and local ones (Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington D.C.). Other self-organized and grassroots-funded efforts represent new cross-generational bundles of activities, especially those focused on the environment or food, such as Jewish urban farms and eco- and ethical kashrut. "For many of us who did not grow up in the 'establishment,' at Jewish summer camp, or Hillel," wrote Tel Aviv-based nonprofit strategist Marni Mandell, "our participation in these indie *minyanim* gave us the ability to go and establish communities of our own. Many have asked whether we are looking for funding and how we will ensure sustainability, and our response is that as long as we are relevant, we don't worry about either one."

"I'm not really interested in whether we

are a synagogue or not," declared the Kitchen's Kushner. "I like some synagogues plenty. What does interest me is trying to figure out what to call this new idea, so we can succinctly get across what is continuous with synagogues and where we overlap with independent *minyanim*, *havurot*, etc. We need a new term; we (many of us) have the ideas already."

Indeed, as my Facebook conversation confirmed, this most recent period of Jewish emergence generally has been less about the "what" — the articulation of substantive new ideologies — and more about the "how": the evolution of new organizing principles for spiritual communities and the integration of religious values and spiritual practices into individual lives. The emerging organizational models of 21st-century Jewish life continue to iterate and expand, drawing on one another's lessons of struggle and success. 

Envisioned Communities: A 'Sh'ma' Roundtable

We asked several rabbis, representing the spectrum of religious belief and practice, who have founded successful spiritual communities — most of which do not consider themselves "synagogues" — to talk about what distinguishes these groups. We wondered if indie minyanim and communities are having an impact on the expectations of what a more mainstream synagogue is supposed to be and do. And we wondered whether the impact goes both ways: Are these communities becoming part of the synagogue scene without the name?

Sharon Brous: *Each of us is working to build meaningful Jewish community, being very thoughtful and creative about Jewish education, and bringing people together in purposeful ways. But this is precisely what many of our colleagues in more conventional institutions are also striving to do. Is there a significant difference between what's happening inside the institutional world and our efforts on the outside? Is there a difference in substance, in form, or in both?*

Lizzi Heydemann: I would call Mishkan a spiritual community rather than a synagogue.

We don't offer the breadth of programs that typical synagogues offer, and we don't serve that population either. Our Friday night services are followed by dinner, where people stay late into the evening. We're suited to serve young adults, people without children; we start and end late. This is a population that feels alienated by synagogues that now focus primarily on families. Our community might look different in five years when our singles get married, have children, and ask for alternatives.

Zushe Greenberg: What is changing in the U.S. and around the world is that traditional

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rabbis used to sit in a synagogue and wait. Now, we have to go out to the people. We cannot wait for the community, for the Jewish people to come to us. We have to go out and search and look for every Jew and try to connect them to Judaism. That's a 360-degree change from 30 or 40 years ago. Fifty, maybe 60 years ago, the Lubavitcher Rebbe knew this and began to send his Chabad *schluchim* (emissaries) around the world. I have brothers who are Chabad rabbis in China and Alaska. It's not just that we meet Jews wherever they are physically, but spiritually; it's taking the person wherever he is, not demanding from him to change, not judging him. Whatever he takes from us is okay. And if he takes nothing, that's okay, too.

Lizzi Heydemann: Young adults aren't compelled by a language of commitment or membership or joining unless they're joining something that they have already bought into. We need to use a language of inspiration and creativity, of helping to build something amazing, instead of, "We expect you to become a member because that is what Jews do." The research shows us that this isn't what Jews do *anymore*. We don't use the language of membership: We invite people to help build the community, and people who do are considered "builders." That includes non-Jews, people who come every so often, and people who belong to other shuls but like what we're doing and want to support it.

Darren Levine: I imagine that to the typical outsider looking in, established institutions feel *complete* already. Seekers want to feel part of a process of change and building. This is essential to our generation. Opportunities to create provide an energy that is contagious.

Sharon Brous: *Some of what we have learned over the past decade is that for new Jewish communal efforts to be successful, we have to be willing to go out — both physically and spiritually — to meet people where they are. I'd like to hear stories about what you have found outside the boundaries of the community, and how you have helped people there take next steps on their journey.*

Rachel Nussbaum: Our organizations are driven by mission; they don't need to fit into a particular mold, so we have much more flexibility. This year, Kavana had its first b'nai mitzvah-age students. As a community, we've been preparing for bar and bat mitzvah for the

past three years, thinking about what it means and what it is going to look like to mark entry into Jewish adulthood in a way that is meaningful, intentional, and content rich, and that embodies all of the values of the community.

Many of our families are interfaith, which adds complexity; we have both Jewish and non-Jewish adults talking about what it means to become a Jewish adult. Some families choose very conventional-looking bar and bat mitzvah celebrations for their children. Other families, who explained that they weren't shulgoers, felt they needed to find some other way to define becoming a Jewish adult. Working individually with those children and their parents, we were able to forge some very creative alternatives that were still deeply Jewishly grounded. For example, one child spent a year studying the Haggadah and learning how to lead a Passover seder. She created her own "Maggid" section, which tells the Pesach story, and gained a life skill that may be better than having memorized a *haftarah*.

Lizzi Heydemann: In terms of meeting people where they are, Mishkan travels. We don't have a building. We meet all over the city. This is one of the reasons that many people who wouldn't have expected themselves to get involved in a Jewish spiritual community have found their way to Mishkan.

Sharon Brous: *Rachel, I love what you're describing about giving a child an opportunity to have a very powerful and personally meaningful educational experience, to learn a central aspect of Jewish liturgical and calendrical life like the seder. But I wonder: Are we going to create a generation of people who are extremely knowledgeable about Hoshanah Rabbah and know nothing about anything else during the year because they love beating willows on the ground? How can you establish a basic literacy, a common Jewish language, without pushing them beyond their comfort zones? Don't we have to compel them to engage in the tough stuff of Jewish life at the same time?*

Rachel Nussbaum: It depends on how we define Jewish literacy. I wouldn't agree with how literacy has been defined in the post-WWII synagogue era — a set of synagogue skills and the ability to phonetically read Hebrew without any understanding of what it means. There has been little effort made to work toward a

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Rabbi Lizzi Heydemann returned to Chicago, where she grew up, after receiving *smikha* from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies of the American Jewish University in 2010. She is the founder of Mishkan, a spiritual community modeled in some ways after IKAR, which employs an openness to both tradition and creativity.

Rabbi Darren Levine has lived in Manhattan for the past 15 years. He was ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 2002, served as rabbi at a large metropolitan congregation and then served for six years as rabbi at the Jewish Community Project, a community center in Lower Manhattan. In April, he and two other rabbis launched Tamid: The Downtown Synagogue.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum launched the Kavana Cooperative, oriented around Jewish community and identity building, six years ago in Seattle.

Rabbi Zushe Greenberg founded the Chabad Jewish Center of Solon in Solon, Ohio in 1992 with the blessing of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, the founding rabbi of IKAR in Los Angeles, moderated the conversation. Brous launched IKAR in 2004 with a commitment to deep and meaningful Jewish religious and spiritual practice as well as to social justice and transformation.

deeper understanding of Jewish history and Jewish text.

At Kavana, education is at the center. That's the common place for people of all backgrounds, levels of observance, and personal growth trajectories. Learning is the commonality of where we come together to explore how to belong to the Jewish people.

Lizzi Heydemann: When I interned at IKAR, I learned that meeting people where they are spiritually doesn't necessarily imply watering down the liturgical experience. It means delivering a liturgical experience in a way that is friendly, open, and accessible; giving people transliterations and a guide so they can follow along.

We all are in the position to be learners. If someone comes in knowing every word to every prayer, maybe he or she needs to learn to sit and be quiet for a while and connect to God in a completely different way. And someone who knows not a word of liturgy might teach that lesson.

Sharon Brous: *When I began IKAR, a group of Jewish and Christian emergent leaders — people who had started their own communities — was convened. I remember how struck I was when the Christian leaders asked me which major synagogue or movement was seeding IKAR. They explained that large successful churches will often pay the first seven years of the salary and expenses of young pastors who are dedicated to going out and bringing God's word to the far corners of the earth.*

I spend a lot of time talking to rabbis and community leaders around the country who are trying to build alternative experimental encounters with Jewish life, and the church sponsorship model seems to be the antithesis of how the Jewish community responds to innovation. Emergent organizations and minyanim are more often seen as rivals in a turf war. Is this new rabbi undermining the social fabric of the local Jewish community? Will she or he funnel attention and funding from ongoing worthwhile projects?

Could you each reflect on the relationships you've had — as an innovator — with well-established communities and leadership? How welcoming has the Jewish community been to your alternative models?

Lizzi Heydemann: Rabbi Michael Siegel at Anshe Emet Synagogue has been very supportive from the moment I arrived in Chicago. He recognized that the energy we were going to

create and the kind of people we were going to draw were not those who would be attracted to traditional synagogues. We reach out to the fringes of the Jewish community, so we need to partner with other institutions. I can create a "portal in" but I can't offer a religious school or other opportunities right now.

Rachel Nussbaum: I've felt a shift over the past few years. Seattle is a smaller community and some of the rabbis were concerned about what Kavana might do; they ascribed to the pie model that taking a slice of pie meant less for everyone else. As well, we were calling into question the relevance of the existing model of synagogue, which was quite threatening. I understand why our very existence was a problem. But over the past few years — and perhaps the downturn in the economy has contributed to this shift — the area synagogues are asking more fundamental questions about membership and staffing models, about the benefits of being organizationally nimble and owning less real estate. Some congregations are now looking to the flexibility of our model. We may now share lessons across a broader swath of community.

Sharon Brous: *Let's take a closer look at the ways we fund our efforts: the fee-for-service and cooperative models as well as alternative membership models. I noticed that the Tamid website suggests that even if an individual won't personally benefit from pastoral care, it's an expression of one's Jewish values to support the community. You also mention that individuals can pay Tamid for what they're going to use. Is there a philosophical tension between contributing time and money to support a community — regardless of what an individual gains from the experience — and paying the bills? How do we support and sustain our communities? What's working and what's challenging about bringing necessary funds into the organization and what does that say about membership — especially given the observation that many people no longer feel compelled by the notion of belonging?*

Darren Levine: We have two pathways: the standard membership model and what we're calling "neighbors and friends" — a pay-as-you-go-model that recognizes that some people are not going to become members. Some people feel that membership is what their parents did; they possess an independent spirit and a synagogue feels too hierarchical. But those same people

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may choose to send their children to some of our programs or attend holiday worship. The two pathways lessen the barriers to entry.

Of course funds are necessary. Our “neighbors and friends” and straight membership fees only account for about half of our budget. The other half comes through fundraising. And we’re running on a shoestring. We, like all institutions, experience a funding anxiety.

Zushe Greenberg: In 1966, the Rebbe decided that we shouldn’t begin with membership. The Rebbe used to say, “You know the letter *aleph*. Don’t wait until you know the letter *bet*. Go out and teach *aleph*. When you know *bet*, you’ll teach *bet*.” We don’t ask about membership or dues or commitment. It’s a voluntary partnership. People give what they can afford. And while we need money like every organization, it’s not the focus. The focus is on the people.

Sharon Brous: *Initially, at IKAR, I spoke about how we weren’t going to establish a traditional dues structure; instead we were going to build a community in which people gave from the heart. Instead of the fee-for-service model, we really wanted people to believe in our vision of*

the Jewish future and support it. It may have been the least successful appeal in synagogue history. We got a couple of \$18 checks and maybe one \$180. We quickly realized that people need to hear what the community expects of them — both spiritually and financially.

Rachel Nussbaum: When people sign on to be “partners” in the Kavana Cooperative, it works incredibly well. We’ve found that the more people put into the community — not only in a financial way but also their volunteer efforts, which is required of partners — the more they feel they get out of it. However, we’ve also seen how very reluctant some people are to join. For many, there is so much baggage associated with being a member of a Jewish community, cooperative or not. We’ve tried to create a very long entry ramp to the Jewish communal highway, with different tiers of involvement that allow people flexibility in choosing how involved they want to be and how much commitment they’re willing to take on at any point. For example, one can become a partner, or remain a participant and pay for a la carte programs. We have made these decisions for both ideological and pragmatic reasons. 

Our Members, Our Communities: A ‘Sh’ma’ Roundtable

In the following Sh’ma Roundtable, rabbinic leaders of the various movements as well as scholars of American Jewry speculate about the challenges and opportunities ahead for synagogues. They brought a thirst for honest, candid conversation as they pondered whether the synagogue is “beleaguered” and how American Jewry can work together beyond institutional boundaries to embolden and rethink a pillar of communal and spiritual life.

Riv-Ellen Prell: *To begin, please articulate who you imagine the members of synagogues are today, from the point of view of your movement. In responding, please consider issues of gender, age, religious affiliation, sexuality — any identity questions you understand to be critical to synagogue membership today.*

Rick Jacobs: The Reform movement has been quite successful at creating a big tent — opening the doors of our synagogues to interfaith families, to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) individuals and couples, and to spiritual seekers of diverse backgrounds. And many of our congregations, if not most, are multigenerational. Yet many who have tended to feel a bit tentative about their role within synagogues remain

uncertain. For example, single parents generally camp out on the margins of congregations; young people in their 20s and 30s wonder, when they look around, if they really belong; and non-Jewish partners still seek entry points into our communities.

But let’s take your question a bit deeper. Asking about our *members* is different than asking about our *communities*. What is our responsibility to those who live in our communities but who do not formally become members? When people participate in our programs at different moments in their lives, should the synagogue consider them part of the community? What would that look like? Our synagogues are challenged not just to open the tent

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Rabbi Kenneth Brander is the David Mitzner Dean of Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future, which sits at the nexus of Yeshiva University’s efforts to shape and effectively impact Jewish life and the Jewish future. Brander is rabbi emeritus of the Boca Raton Synagogue and founder of the Weinbaum Yeshiva High School of Florida’s Broward and Palm Beach counties.