

PUBLIC SPACE JUDAISM

by RABBI KERRY M. OLITZKY

ONLY A SMALL minority of Jews is deeply engaged with the organized community at any given time, yet almost all Jewish programming requires participants to walk through the doors of Jewish institutions before they are served. This represents one of many barriers to participation that outreach seeks to lower.

The notion of Public Space Judaism emerges from the fundamental concept of outreach as we at the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) understand it. Outreach is not about attracting a specific target population. Rather, it is a methodology. Outreach methodology brings Jewish life to a variety of traditionally underserved populations by going to where people are instead of waiting for them to come to us. This includes the metaphysical notion best described as “where people are at.”

Where most Jews are not at is inside the four walls of Jewish institutions. Only a small minority is deeply engaged with the organized community at any given time, yet almost all Jewish programming requires participants to walk through the doors of Jewish institutions before they are served. This represents one of many barriers to participation that outreach seeks to lower. The goal is not to water down Judaism but to remove the cultural obstacles that have developed around it. These obstacles may have had a purpose at one time, but now they repel more people than

they retain. Barriers include high costs; expectations of prior Jewish education; jargon-laden in-speak; cliquishness; demographic biases such as heterocentrism, Ashkenazi-centrism, and endogamy-centrism; as well as the location barrier.

The location barrier is arguably the most important, because even if all other barriers have been lowered, those folks who have been pushed away in the past are often too hesitant to enter Jewish institutions to see what has changed. Through our research, JOI has learned that free or low-cost Jewish programs held in secular venues attract more less-affiliated participants than the exact same programs held in Jewish venues like synagogues or JCCs. Our survey of over 700 participants in outreach programs earlier this decade helped us to group programs that attract the less engaged into a cohesive Public Space Judaism model.

While the model is based on location, it also addresses several additional barriers to participation and takes into consideration the best practices of outreach.

As illustrated in the adjacent diagram, the Public Space Judaism model places three layers of programming between deeper institutional involvement (in the center) and the non-participating majority of Jewish households. The outermost ring gives this model its name and is identified

by those events and programs that take place in public spaces. (It is important to note that we are advocating events in the public sphere, not in the public square, in order to avoid any confusion between Church and State issues.) These events allow for participants to stumble over them. They are low-barrier in that they are free and require no prior knowledge or commitment to participate. Chabad pioneered this notion of outreach 30 years ago, and while our approach in these spaces differs considerably, there is much to learn from Chabad's successes. JOI's Passover in the Matzah Aisle program in supermarkets, or our Color-Me Calendar for the Jewish New Year in back-to-school supply stores like Walmart and Staples, are examples of programs in this layer.

The second level of Public Space Judaism is what we call Destination Jewish Culture. These programs are also low barrier and held in secular spaces. However, they usually require some level of planned participation (a set start-time and dedicated location) and may charge a nominal fee (though no more than what would be charged at a secular equivalent). Good examples of programs that might fit in this ring are Jewish Film Festivals held in commercial theaters and Jewish musical events held in concert halls.

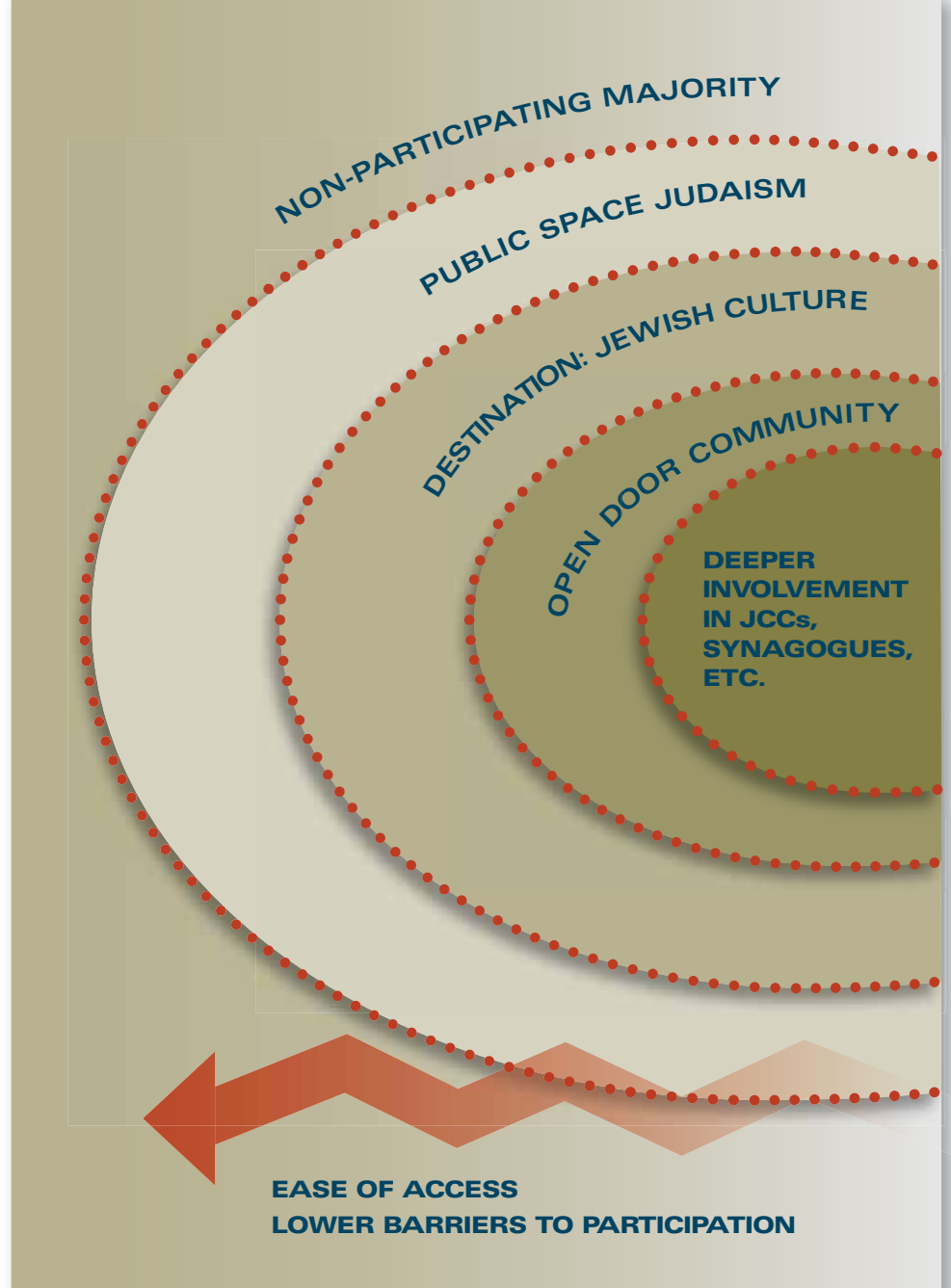
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The third level of Public Space Judaism is Open Door Community programs. These are often held within Jewish communal institutions, but acknowledge the location barrier by lowering all other barriers. A good example is the Reform movement's Taste of Judaism program (usually partnered across denominations), which is free, limits the commitment to three sessions, welcomes all participants regardless of background, and is geared specifically for adult beginner learners.

Taken together, the overall program model could represent an idealized route into deeper engagement with the community: An unaffiliated newcomer happens upon a Public Space Judaism event where she will enjoy participation and begin to feel more comfortable at Jewish community events. While there, she will also learn of an upcoming Destination Jewish Culture event that interests her. Attending destination events increases her interest, and alerts her to an Open Door Community event. Attending that event in turn excites her about the program's host institution. That takes her to core Jewish communal programs, where most of the community's efforts take place.

Through this idealized sequence of "next steps," newcomers are provided with fun, meaningful, multiple contacts with the community and gradually feel drawn deeper into Jewish communal life. In reality, the sequence is much more complex. All stages can serve as entry points and the progression is not necessarily linear. Some folks may hover in the Public Space ring for years, but if they previously had been doing nothing Jewish, this represents successful outreach because the goal is to increase engagement. They will go deeper when it's relevant for them. In many cases, increased engagement will lead to affiliation with an institution, but outreach is not a membership drive. It is the sharing of what we on the inside find beautiful about Judaism with those who might benefit from it, because there's inherent value in sharing it—and not because we have an ulterior motive of membership or campaign growth.

Of course, there already are Jewish programs in secular venues, such as the aforementioned film festivals, but most do not live up to their outreach potential because they do not incorporate outreach best practices, nor are they coordinated with other programs for the purposes of engagement. Public Space Judaism works best as a collaborative effort of a community or of numerous institutions. Multiple programs



on multiple levels should be offered during the same program year. In order for a community to realize the benefits of this effort, there needs to be in place communal professionals or volunteers who are trained in outreach and who can coordinate a name-sharing protocol so that newcomers are not inundated by solicitations from individual institutions. In addition, a name collection and follow-up strategy has to be in place before any program commences. And program B needs to be developed before program A has been implemented so that participants in program A can be invited to program B. Most important, newcomers must be met on a personal basis with their individual interests and needs satisfied, which is labor-intensive but represents the crux of effective outreach.

The Public Space Judaism methodology can be adapted for a small community or for an individual institution. If a local institution is sponsoring an author book reading, for example, it can be moved from the synagogue or JCC to a local Barnes & Noble in order to maximize its potential as an outreach program. And just as this idea transcends limiting programs to Jewish spaces, it also transcends the Jewish calendar and is informed by both the secular calendar and what we call the cultural calendar (which might include seasons such as back-to-school and local or regional events specific to individual locales). This is all just the tip of the Public Space iceberg. We invite you to learn more by joining JOI's free network of communal professionals and lay leaders at <http://joplin.joi.org>. ■