

From Rabbi Hammerman

Shortly after Chanukah last year, I read an article in the *New York Jewish Week* that continues to resonate with me. The piece identified a new trend in Jewish life, a “fluidity,” as they termed it, in Jews’ connections to Jewish bricks-and-mortar institutions (think: the synagogue). What they meant was that the spiritual lives of Twenty-First Century American Jews are less stable, perhaps, than the lives that our parents or grandparents led. While earlier generations might have joined a synagogue and never left – for decades – or remained just as traditional as they were when they first arrived in this country, younger generations of Jews are challenging synagogues and other Jewish institutions with their “fluidity.” Said another way, these Jews will not settle into one single synagogue or denomination during their lives; rather, they will be open, throughout their lives, to whichever movement, synagogue, Jewish organization or Jewish leader “speaks to them” at a particular time. As their – no, our – lives develop and change, our Jewish identity will change as well. Not only will “shul shopping” be something that many of us engage in multiple times during our lives as we move from place to place, there will also be periods when our Jewish engagement changes across denominational lines – or even takes a pause, in terms of institutional connection.

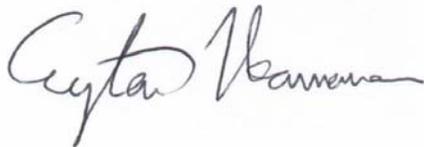
As the rabbi of a Conservative synagogue, I see this trend as both a tremendous challenge and an opportunity. Is it scary to think that just as we will, hopefully, continue to welcome many new families to our congregation, so, too, will others “cycle out” each year? Of course it is. But, that is part of our reality. I find myself saying sometimes – to my chagrin – that the largest group of Jews living in our area are those who were once affiliated at some point in their lives with a congregation. Indeed, this is the reason why we reached out this summer to three hundred (not a typo) families who, at some point in the last decade, had been connected to the JCCH. 300 of them! We are elated that some of these individuals are reading these words as JCCH members, once again, and others are contemplating a return to our community, to enrich themselves and to strengthen the shul. For others in our area, though, connecting with a synagogue may be quite a stretch; we have much work to do with these individuals to build stronger ties.

As challenging as this might be, however, this opportunity – to constantly reintroduce ourselves and our own changing “menu” of programmatic, spiritual and social offerings – is a gift. I often say that my grandparents’ synagogue looked nothing like what my children’s’ synagogue will look like. And, my grandchildren’s synagogue will look even more radically-different. Our synagogue – fortunately, with a “Jewish Community Center” name - is constantly evolving because, more than anything, we are on a constant quest to open additional “doorways” into the

community. We do this through programmatic and educational creativity, of course. But, even more than that, we do this by working as hard as we can to build relationships.

How? This past month saw our launch of “Guess Who is Coming To Shabbas?,” actively encouraging our members to have “Shabbat Dinner” on a Friday evening, rather than just “dinner.” Won’t you consider hosting next month or the month after? Host a family whom you don’t know well at your home one Friday evening -- and know that they will pay it forward to someone else the next month. Email jchrsvp@gmail.com to get involved. We also build relationships through our various Shabbat and weekday Minyan services. Each service includes a meal or snack thereafter. The nosh – and the accompanying conversation – are as important as the tefillah. Again, relationships. And finally, in our congregation, relationships are also built on our mahjong tables, through our House Band, on the basketball court in the gym and, in the Spring, on the softball field with our shul team. By constantly reinventing ourselves, we are preserving our relevance to new generations of Jews. This fluidity – “Generation F,” the Jewish week called us – presents an opportunity for each of us to constantly build new relationships with one another and with our individualized Judaism as we work to add deeper meaning to our lives.

May the light of your Chanukah menorah give you pause -- and an opportunity to focus on your own spiritual development as you seek greater enlightenment. Chag Urim Sameach – wishing you a Happy Festival of Lights. And, please let me know if you would like to read the full *Jewish Week* article – I think you will find it of interest.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Eytan Hammerman". The signature is written in dark ink on a light background.

Rabbi Eytan Hammerman