

The Need for Synagogues to Work With Not At Their Members

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eJP

By Allison Fine

The email from the older congregant read, “I was in the hospital last week, and no one called — even though I didn’t tell anyone I was sick.” This was just one of the litany of complaints by email I received as the new president of my congregation. “Dear Madam President: My parking spot was taken.” “The doors were locked when I arrived for my meeting.” “I didn’t get a timely thank-you note.” “My name was misspelled on a letter.” But this message, the one that said we should have intuited that this woman was in the hospital, stopped me in my tracks. What was going on here?

It wasn’t just the number of complaints but the intensity of them that took me aback. People were furious about relatively minor problems. And then I realized that these were all fundamentally the same complaint: *I want to believe that you care about me. But the things you are doing make me feel like I don’t matter.*

Matterness is what I call the intersection of people and organizations when they come together in a positive and mutually beneficial way Matterness is:

1. The willingness and ability of individuals to speak and be heard;
2. The willingness of organizations to listen and work *with* – not *at* – people, and to engage people on the inside and outside as creative problem solvers and ambassadors;
3. The smart use of social media to connect people online and on land in huge ecosystems of people and organizations that are filled with generosity and capital.

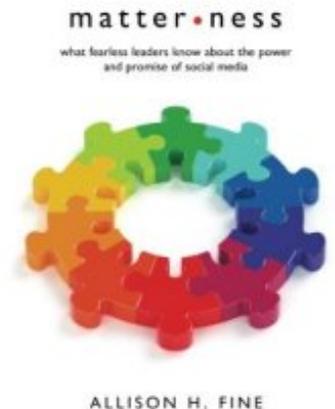
Too many organizations are failing to infuse their efforts with Matterness. Instead, organizations like synagogues continue to hide behind their fortress walls missing all of the good will, creativity and generosity available to them in their congregations. It takes fearless leadership to embrace Matterness.

Synagogues are failing to make their congregants matter for three reasons:

1. Outsized and unnecessary fear of the world;
2. Synagogue staff feeling unnecessary burdened to control conversations and generate all the new ideas;
3. An untapped set of skills for facilitating conversations with congregants that keeps synagogues guessing rather than knowing what congregants want.

Although synagogue leaders are well aware that congregants have lots of choices of where and how to be Jewish today, they continue to double down on broadcasting messages about upcoming programs that are of interest to a small handful of people. This is not the way to remake the relationship between congregants and synagogues. This is particularly egregious with a generation of Millennials, the largest living generation, who will need to *want* to be synagogue members, which means they are going to have to feel that they matter to as an individuals not just as check writers.

Here are the things that synagogues need to do right now to increase Matterness:



1. **Stop Confusing The Possibility With The Probability Of Something Going Wrong.** Far too much time and energy is spent talking and worrying about what *could* possibly go wrong. Anything could go wrong, but the probability of something going horribly wrong is very small. What is lost in all the hand wringing is that the most likely thing to happen is that most people won't care. Trying to do something new, trying to make people feel heard and appreciated, is much better than sitting back behind high walls afraid that something might go wrong.
2. **Find Ways to Show Congregants That They Matter.** Synagogues need to stop talking about being warm and welcoming and start demonstrating it. What can we do differently right now to make congregants know that they matter to us more than High Holiday seat fillers? Can we host free *Shabbat* dinners once a month for anyone who wants to come? Can we call congregants we haven't seen in a while and just check in with them? Can we ask individual congregants, unusual suspects, tell their own stories about what Judaism and our temple means to them in our weekly email?
3. **Getting In Conversation with Congregants.** It doesn't matter where conversations happen, they can be Sunday mornings at temple, on Facebook or LinkedIn, or on a blog, but they need to happen somewhere all the time. This means changing the dynamic from temple as the broadcaster of messages to a back-and-forth conversation about what it feels like to be a member and how it can be feel better. It means learning the essential skills of facilitating conversations on land and online and drawing more people into them.

Matterness means changing the synagogue's default settings from closed to open. Three years ago, my synagogue took a chance three years ago by live streaming services. Opening our services this way has been joyously and enthusiastically received by our community.

Maya Angelou wrote, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget the way you made them feel." Understanding and incorporating Matterness into synagogue life will ensure that people and organizations bring out the best in each other.

Allison Fine is among the pre-eminent guides to the social media revolution. Her gift is for converting uncertainty over rapid change into excitement over remaking organizations by the least expensive and most profitable means available: connecting with others. Her new book, "Matterness: What Fearless Leaders Know About the Power and Promise of Social Media" can be purchased through her website www.allisonfine.com or through [Amazon](#).