

The Keruv Papers #1

reating a
Language of
Inclusion

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Preface

The creation and implementation of a language of inclusion begins with the recognition that the use of vocabulary can make congregants feel either more welcome or less welcome in the community. The professional clergy and lay leaders of congregations must carefully compose their messages in order to connect with today's congregants, both as individuals and as members of families. The language used in written and spoken communications to the membership is an important component of the stated missions and goals of the congregation. This paper responds to specific questions raised in the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs lay and rabbinic keruv think tanks convened from 2001–2007. Keruv is understood as an umbrella term for both outreach and inreach.

The complete Keruv white paper series
can be downloaded at
www.fjmc.org/keruv.html

Creating a Language of Inclusion

The role of language and vocabulary in creating and sustaining Jewish institutions cannot be addressed without placing it in the context of the missions and goals of those institutions. It is within that context that the leaders address how to meet the needs of the members and how to articulate their vision for the congregation. Aspects of these missions and goals include the requirements for membership, the expectations for participation, the purpose of the programming and how to meet the religious, spiritual, educational, social and other needs of members, both as families and individuals. When the leaders communicate with the members about these and other subjects, the tone of the language and the specific vocabulary they use have an effect on how their messages are received, making the recipients of the communication feel more welcome or less welcome in the community.

In addition to overseeing the management of a physical facility, synagogue leaders have accepted the responsibility for providing a host of intangible services which includes stimulating people spiritually, attracting unaffiliated Jews and attempting to bring a community into a prolonged and serious involvement with the synagogue. The fulfillment of this mission is complex and needs to be re-enforced regularly because of a variety of factors, not the least of which is that the forces that bound our communities together a century ago have loosened and no longer serve to attract and involve people in the same manner. Partially in an effort to respond to this change, our communities have developed membership committees, welcoming committees, caring committees, and

outreach committees, all of which can have a positive role in making people feel more welcome in the congregation.

In order for our synagogues to re-position themselves to meet the challenge of changing motivations and demographics, our communities should also view themselves as being in competition with the leisure time market. It is within that context that we should develop specific phrasing to motivate people to desire their product, our product.

In order to successfully reach out to our membership and potential membership, each congregation needs to develop its own unique plan. A critical aspect of this plan is the articulation of a language that is specific to the community. While it is possible to attract and unite a group through the crafting of an exclusionary language, if the mission of a Conservative/Masorti community is to create ways to attract and involve people to a way of life that we envision, then a language that resonates, attracts, motivates and involves i.e., a language of inclusion, is preferable. A language of inclusion is a language guided by its mission that defines and unites a community.

How language is a key aspect of the Keruv Initiative

The development of a language of inclusion is a significant step in the development of a Keruv Initiative. It can stem the flow of adults who follow their intermarried children to Reform or other non-denominational synagogues, it can activate and motivate existing members, and it can provide a word of mouth “buzz” that can potentially attract new members to the synagogue. This language needs to be crafted carefully with the understanding that if properly introduced, it

could reduce much resistance to the establishing of a Keruv initiative or any other initiative that might encounter resistance at the outset.

Community leadership needs to begin this process with a realistic understanding of the nature, habits and characteristics of their membership. An honest acknowledgement that many of our members and potential members don’t understand that writing or using a phone on Shabbat (in the synagogue) has historically been considered a violation of our culture. A language of inclusion needs to find a way to transform that which is not considered acceptable behavior in the community, into an environment where those who are not sensitive become sensitized. By acknowledging that a majority of our members are very similar to the majority of those whom we wish to attract, the language that is crafted can emphasize that our communities encourage the sensitivity and observance of specific behaviors because these behaviors enrich our lives.

If, for example, synagogue leadership decided to broaden the way they view the ritual committee and challenged them to develop a plan designed to educate members who enter the building on Shabbat; the committee would be forced to ask the following question: Can a committee create a more effective venue for educating its members than placing signs on the wall that read, “Don’t use the phone on Shabbat!” or “Turn off your cell phones!” In order to address that question the committee would need to create a specialized language to communicate its message. For example one sign could point to a “cell phone-free area, while another with an appropriate graphic could state, “Enhance the mood, put it on vibrate”.

One should anticipate that some might ask whether or not words like “halakhic,” “kosher,” or “commanded” should be integrated into this language. These are good questions and

the answers depend upon the way the committee views the existing and potential community. Some traditionally-oriented Jews might be attracted by a term like “a kosher community.” The word, “kosher” can be used in a number of engaging ways and could be viewed as a draw provided that the language was communicated in a well thought out manner and utilized all available vehicles for communication in the synagogue.

How to Create a Language of Inclusion

The manner and language with which a synagogue community describes itself is an important first step in the development of a plan that provides a reason for people to affiliate and to become involved. The committee should include at least one professional clergy member and senior officer of the congregation. Once articulated, this vocabulary of phrases and statements must be accepted by the congregational rabbi and other professional staff, as well as the board of trustees, in order for the plan to succeed. Teachers and youth workers will likely make modifications that reflect the specific characteristics of their students and their families’ backgrounds. The language needs to be welcoming, supportive, and inspiring; and it needs to distinguish the uniqueness of your synagogue from another.

It is important to develop key words that describe the environment the synagogue hopes to create. The language needs to reflect denominational differences and be modified accordingly. Congregations should seriously consider including a denominational label, like Conservative/Masorti, or Masorti but with the understanding that defining adjectives or adverbs will need to be added. Because the Movement now includes a wider spectrum of practices, we do ourselves a disservice if

the brand on our stationary simply says, “A Conservative” or “A Conservative/Masorti synagogue” or even if it says “A United Synagogue congregation”. Those words, important as they might be, require additional descriptive language. For example, many now describe themselves as Conservative Egalitarian congregations. Our synagogues can call themselves “the comfortable shul” or the “nurturing community,” or utilize concepts that more specifically reflect Conservative/Masorti values like “a Learning community” or “a community that studies the past to enhance meaning in the present”.

An important example of how language and vocabulary affect the community pertains to people who become Jewish. Twenty-five years ago when people chose to become Jews they were called “converts”. Today, the accepted descriptive term is “Jew-by-Choice.” The substitution of this phrase for “convert” happened in a few short years. Hardly anyone refers to a Jew-by-Choice as a “convert” these days.

Getting Started

The process of creating a language of inclusion begins with the rabbi and a few key people asking the following questions and developing a series of suggested responses.

1. What does Conservative or Masorti mean?
2. What does the community stand for?
3. What will this community offer me?
4. Does a language of inclusion include non-Jews?

These questions will help a community define who they are, who they would like to be and how they would like to be perceived. Engagement in this exercise will challenge

committee and/or staff members to employ words like ethical, committed authentic, center/Masorti, engaged, meaningful, vibrant, holy/spiritual, passionate, dynamic, egalitarian/traditional, halakhic and Zionist, and will result in the development of a vision that describes the type of community that could be created.

The responses to these questions will vary and need to be written, transmitted and distributed in a question-and-answer format from the initial group to a larger group using a “gateway approach,” i.e., the question and answer process needs to be approved by each group prior to expanding the process to a larger group. The questions need to be presented to professional staff, office staff, teachers, committees and the boards of directors as well as being placed in the various publications (both printed and electronic) that the synagogue produces. This initial stage is important because the participants in each of these focus groups will assimilate the messages that are being created and subconsciously begin to formulate and articulate a necessary vocabulary.

Listed on the facing page are questions and suggested responses that could/should be discussed at the initial meeting. Depending upon the responses received the questions need to be raised in a series of different committee forums with the understanding that the specific answers are not necessarily the desired result. The process of raising and discussing these issues with lay and professional leaders expands the educated and enlightened base and positions them as people who will be able to transmit the language of the intended community.

Sample Questions and Answers for a Committee

Question 1: What is Masorti?

Answer: Masorti means traditional. We use it because it’s more appropriate than the word “Conservative” especially in Europe. We are progressive in our thinking but adhere to traditional Jewish values and observance. This also helps diffuse the notion that it is “right wing” politically, the common understanding of Conservative in the US today.

Question 2: What does this community stand for?

Answer: We are a (challenging) (passionate) (curious) (caring) (stimulating) (socially conscious) etc. Masorti community in which

- a. Everyone can feel welcome?
- b. We strive to understand one another?
- c. One can be intellectually, spiritually, challenged or fulfilled?
- d. Attempts to help all of us find meaning and value in Jewish living?

Question 3: What can this community offer me?

Answer: The opportunity to give and get . . .

(A committee could list suggested responses here.)

Question 4: Does a language of inclusion include non-Jews?

Answer: The National Jewish Populations Survey of 2000 indicates that almost every Jewish family has non-Jewish family members. The question shouldn’t be should a language of inclusion include non-Jews but in what context may non-Jewish family members be included. The extent to which each congregation feels comfortable will determine the context.

Suggested Phrases for Discussion

- The synagogue involves me and challenges me to make my life more meaningful.
- The synagogue provides me with the opportunity to share my joys and sorrows.
- My synagogue stimulates me to be a better person.
- It brings the past into my life and it makes my heritage meaningful

Prior to the committee embarking on its journey toward self-definition, it is important for the clergy to agree on the usage of specific phrases that if continuously heard will become part of the common language of synagogue leadership. Key phrases suggest an answer to how Jews should behave in the 21st century. A language of inclusion should employ words, like “holy,” “sacred,” “spiritual balance”, “love for all of God’s creatures” under a rubric of a more general statement like “we perform these acts because it is the way we further appreciate the dignity of all peoples”.

Many of us have witnessed congregants wincing when they hear the rabbi use words that have spiritual connotations, but the distance between rabbi and congregant can be bridged if lay leaders also used similar language. Too often our failure to utilize a language which embodies the “holy,” results in our failure to successfully motivate. The language being utilized must be phrased positively and scrupulously avoid offensive, morally imposing, or guilt inducing verbiage. Phrases like, “what God wants you to do,” or “chosen people” can have a negative impact upon those whom we are hoping to motivate. Certainly using phrases like “the plague of intermarriage” would not create opportunities for counseling. On the other hand, if one substitutes “light unto nations” for “chosen people,” the playing field might be successfully changed.

An excellent example of how to create positive language can be learned from our colleague Rabbi Harold Schulweis who recognized that the connection to Yom Ha Shoah and to “never-forget” was less profound to those born after 1960, and that in spite of the abundance of new Holocaust centers the connection to our National tragedy was becoming increasingly less secure. He understood that Yom Ha Shoah commemoration could be viewed as an opportunity to build bridges with peoples who have also experienced national tragedies (such as Darfur) and modified the language in his congregation to that effect. The language of inclusion provided the opportunity to attract and involve young adults and at the same time re-enforce the importance of Holocaust remembrance. The community that creates a language that embraces our modern concerns from a Jewish perspective has successfully employed a language of inclusion.

Opportunities for Change

Don’t say:

“Excuse me but writing is forbidden on the Shabbat

Or

“I’m sorry, I know your child is behaving but it’s inappropriate for him to color in the sanctuary on the Sabbath. Could you kindly ask him to stop or leave the room?”

Good intentions but wrong answers.

How many times have synagogue representatives, while attempting to be sensitive, offended guests or even members?

Well intended but inappropriately phrased requests to cease a specific behavior in many cases results in causing more damage than intended. “But how else should we respond? After all, these people are violating the Sabbath!” It is easy to assume that these incidents, or accidents, are a result of our guests or members’ ignorance. To some extent that is correct; however we do ourselves a disservice if we assume that the problem is solely a result of their ignorance and not at least in part the inadequacy of our responses. We need to understand such behavior as a result of the mingling of the secular and synagogue culture. If the situation in question is a result of a culture clash, then it might be possible to craft a language and to create opportunities that will explain synagogue behavior in a positive manner. A more effective response can involve the parties in question who lacked the appropriate knowledge, and involve them rather than chastise them, for their ignorance. Surely a better language exists than, “We don’t do this on the Sabbath,” or, “That is forbidden on the Sabbath!”

It is becoming more common for synagogues to publish brochures for b’nai mitzvah families that attempt to explain what happens in the synagogue during the service. These brochures offer significant value to Jews and non-Jews alike. Brochures of this type are excellent venues to explain what the community is and how it strives to attain its goals in addition to explaining the ceremonies, the key prayers and something about synagogue customs. They are opportunities to describe and create feelings of resonance with those attending so that our cultural behaviors can more effectively be understood and viewed as filled with meaning and desirable. Most importantly, these brochures provide an opportunity to foster a language of inclusion, a language that is, of course, repeated in different forms from the bima, by the ushers, synagogue leaders and active community members.

The experience of visiting many Conservative/Masorti congregations in the past two decades has taught me that our colleagues have superb skills and are engaged in doing creative and meaningful work. But we are challenged by demographics. We see many of our synagogues shrinking, while synagogues in other denominations are growing; we think it’s because they accept this or do that. I don’t believe that to be the case. We need to do what we do more effectively. It begins with language. A particular language: A language of inclusion.



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