

Space

So imagine this ... you've just moved to New Jersey from Manhattan. You're married, in your late 30's and there's a kid on the way. You're proud to be Jewish but you're not religious. And you don't feel the need to join anything right now. Besides, all the Jewish stuff you've seen is faraway and just seems to be asking for money. Anyway, it's date night, and you're out in downtown Westfield walking off a great meal and looking at the nice shops, and suddenly, you walk past a storefront that you've never seen before.

A Jewish community 'storefront.'

It's unique. It's warm, it's welcoming and it's right in front of you.

Here's why it's unique

We've known for some time now that our major challenge is reaching out to the large numbers of 30-50 year olds who are moving in to our communities. Even without a full statistical review and community survey we know enough about ourselves to make the following statements:

- (1) Most of our 18 year olds in the Jewish community leave. We're the largest non-city Jewish community in North America and we basically lack a 20-35 year old crowd. That's one of the reasons why we drastically cut back on the traditional "young leadership" focus that we had previously maintained because it needed a complete rethink. This, in turn, led to us creating our Outreach & Engagement Department, NextDor (aimed at the 35+ crowd), and the GMW Hillel (to cover the campuses in our community in which we do have a concentration of a younger crowd).
- (2) At the same time, we know that there's a large number of returning and new 35-45 year olds who move here. We have a lot of touch points through Partnership programs, working with the OU Fairs, many personal contacts and discussions with communal leaders, realtors, and others, who are all pointing to the same demographic and geographic shift: they move from Manhattan, and frequently end up, depending on income/interest/background

in one of the following areas: (a) Westfield/Scotch Plains (b) Randolph/Mendham/Morristown (c) Livingston/South Orange/Maplewood.

(3) We know from the Pew Survey that over 90% of all Jews in North America are extremely proud to be Jewish. But that doesn't mean that they want to necessarily join existing structures, programs and even step foot inside Jewish buildings. In fact, in New Jersey (and most other places), the opposite seems to be the case – walking in to a synagogue, a JCC, a Federation building, is an intimidating and somewhat alienating prospect. We're nowhere near as welcoming as we claim to be, and even when we are, we're not on the same wavelength as those who haven't drunk the Kool-Aid. The solution isn't to keep trying the same thing and trying to force people to come into our huge structures, however ...

(4) ... it's to go hyper-local. To be up close and personal in people's communities. Remember – if you've just moved to Livingston, or Randolph, or any one of the 60+ towns in our community, and you hear about a vague “Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest” in a faraway town, it's not going to be a meaningful concept for you. But your town, and something that you see where you live, stand a better chance. That's why we launched the parlor meetings initiative last year, because a community message is much more direct and personal when it's close-by.

So, those are the basic assumptions that we have. Here's the background so you understand where we want to go. For the last few years we've held the upper space of the JCC in Scotch Plains for Federation offices. It's minimally staffed, and we barely use it even though we pay good money for it. We even pulled out from half of the space while keeping our rent payments stable and deliberately high so that we could support the JCC when it built a beautiful early-childhood center downstairs and move their offices up to where we sit.

But even when we sit there, there's absolutely no practical impact. No one really sees us there, no one comes up to the JCC second-floor offices to stroll around, and no one has ever remarked that it's a positive signal that Federation has a presence in Union County because of our presence upstairs in the JCC.

We do know one thing, however ...

Our GMW counties are sprawled and suburban. Most of us drive, we don't have a lot of places in which we all meet, and there are few locations that can afford real exposure to what a community can offer.

Three locations, in fact, that have good foot-traffic, where we know lots of GMW Jews go: the Short Hills Mall, downtown Morristown, and downtown Westfield. We've been in contact with the Short Hills Mall for a while now and they don't seem to be amenable to us. We've not yet seen a viable coalition for the Jewish community to work in aggregate in Morristown.

But Westfield is a whole other matter.

For the past few months we've been discussing the concept of a shared space for Federation, the JCC, JFS, other Jewish agencies, synagogues and more in downtown Westfield. Westfield is unique in that it has a 'real' downtown, a significant and affluent Jewish population which disproportionately does not join local Jewish institutions, is bordered by several other towns with significant Jewish populations who come to Westfield for its shops and restaurants (Scotch Plains, Fanwood, Springfield, Cranford, etc).

What would this space look like? Here are the main components:

- (1) A **rented open storefront** on one of the main business-center roads in downtown Westfield (Broad-Prospect-Elm-Central, which form an "M" shape and have parking lots around them). We'd work with an architect for a simple but attractive design.
- (2) We'd work with local agencies to have a **basic kosher coffee and pastries café**, based on the model in the DC Federation (which partners with their local equivalent of JESPY/JSDD to have community members with disabilities run a small storefront in their Federation). There's a similar contract concept in the JCC-CNJ downstairs too. Westfield has one Starbucks and there's a BoxCar on the way, but for a town like Westfield there's a huge demand for coffee and seating.

(3) In the **main space** we can work with all our local partners, including synagogues, to have events, meetings, groups and more at a minimal cost with high exposure. Federation would hold the ownership of the space and we'd sign all participating agencies to a contract so that their fees would be extremely minimal. We would pay for the furniture and catering equipment. Imagine walking past a store that every day has something Jewish, communal and uplifting. Synagogues can have book clubs, speakers, the JCC can create new programming, JFS can have programs for groups. Federation can host Chanukah preparations and mini-fairs. The list is endless.

(4) We'd take the **security filter model** from the JCC in Manhattan, and others, to ensure local security and safety.

Here's where we are in this discussion so far: we've had a series of discussions internally in Federation, and with our colleagues in some of the local agencies. We've discussed with local lay leaders in the area and more.

The next proposed steps are as follows:

(1) We need a sense from leadership that this is a positive direction and one in which we're interested.

(2) We'll check some of the vacant properties in downtown Westfield for us. There are several that may meet our needs well. Based on what we pay now for rent at JCC-CNJ, we may save funds on a downtown property – though we would end up paying for security, utilities and the like. We'd aim for revenue-neutral, however, and we'd approach our donors and supporters for furniture and other equipment.

(3) We would meet with a local architect for a rendering and program cost. One architect, in particular, is a friend of the community and did a wonderful job for JFS-CNJ's new food pantry. We feel he may be amenable to this discussion and to working with us at low cost with high quality.

(4) We meet with leadership from Union County synagogues, Jewish organizations and other interested parties and walk them through the plan.

Respectfully submitted,
Dov Ben-Shimon

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