

I'm a goody two-shoes," Fran Godine tells me, and she looks the part. At 5'0" with a wiry frame and a tuft of curly grey hair that juts from her head like a pompon, she comes across as exuberant but harmless. It's hard to picture her demanding \$100 million of investment in affordable housing from the legislature of Massachusetts or leading a statewide campaign for universal health-care policy in the nation. Yet, backed by her synagogue, Temple Israel, and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), Godine has negotiated with CEOs, mayors, and governors—and won.

At Temple Israel and other Reform synagogues throughout the country, congregants like Fran Godine are engaged in a radical rethinking of social action. In addition to collecting food on the High Holidays or sponsoring temple-wide *mitzvah* days, they want to take action that will have long-term societal impact. "Many synagogue members feel that bringing a can to *shul* is not sufficient in fulfilling the Jewish mandate to do justice," explains Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism director Rabbi David Saperstein. "They understand that to address root issues and be part of real change, they need to be organizing."

Rabbi Jonah Pesner came to the same conclusion in 2002 when he was associate rabbi of Temple Israel in Boston. To encourage social action participation, he constructed a *mitzvah* chart, a thermometer that rose a notch with every *mitzvah* performed by a congregant. As he tells it, "a GBIO organizer, Rebecca Gifford, inquired as to why I was making the chart, and I responded, 'to enact meaningful justice in the world.' 'And tell me how this is meaningful justice?' she asked. And I realized that the world would look the same after our *mitzvah* thermometer had reached its peak, and so would our temple."

Today, as founding director of the Union's Just Congregations program, Rabbi Pesner encourages congregants to tackle the root causes of poverty, hunger, and homelessness through congregation-based community organizing, a grass-

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roots approach to social activism originated by Saul Alinsky. In the 1960s Alinsky brought together low income churches and other community groups to leverage their political power. Until the late 1990s, his organizing network, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF)—the same group that trained President Barack Obama (see sidebar)—worked almost exclusively with Christian churches. IAF spawned several church-based networks, including DART (Direct Action Research and Training), Gamaliel, and PICO (the People in Communities Organizing).

In 2000, fewer than a dozen congregations were working with community organizing groups. Today, more than 100 Reform congregations participate—due in large measure to Just Congregations, the Jewish Funds for Justice (a national foundation instrumental in encouraging synagogues to explore organizing), and the various organizing networks' recruitment of Jewish groups.

Community-based organizing generally begins with a congregation or other group joining an organizing structure network, such as GBIO in Boston. The organization meets with the clergy and some lay leaders and training follows. The congregation is now ready for a series of one-on-one or small group conversations (house meetings) about the most influen-

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tial people in members' lives and the experiences that have shaped their values, hopes, aspirations, and fears. What emerges from these conversations eventually leads to targeted political action.

Rabbi John Linder of Temple Solel in Paradise Valley, Arizona believes these encounters have had a profound impact on members of his previous congregation, B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Glenview, Illinois. "People would tell me, 'I've been a member of this community for thirty-five years and nobody ever

asked me these kinds of questions—what I hoped for my family, who were the most important people in my life, what did I worry about when I couldn't sleep.' They had never had someone approach them to share a part of their soul."

"It's a myth that [as Jews] we're all comfortable," says Temple Israel's Fran Godine. "From our conversations, we discovered that many people are worried about their parents' healthcare, their children's housing, and their own debt." "One of the profound impacts of these meetings," adds Rabbi Linder, "is the recognition that members of a middle-class suburban congregation share common concerns with people who live in the working-class neighborhoods of South Chicago. Both have families without healthcare."

Congregation-based organizing represents a paradigm shift, explains Rabbi Pesner. "Instead of asking, 'what can we do to help?' we ask, 'who has the power to change the situation?' Rather than asking, 'how much money can we raise to help adult children of congregants who don't have health insurance?' we ask, 'who has the power to make sure these young people are insured, why aren't they exercising this power now, and what can we do to convince them

that change is necessary?'"

At Temple Israel, "we kept hearing people talk about how nervous they were about whether their children could afford a home in Boston," Godine says, so affordable housing became their first community-action issue. At a Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (an IAF affiliate) community assembly hosted at the synagogue, seven city and state officials listened as congregants from churches and synagogues across the city told their stories. In the end, each official