

## Partners in Power

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Rabbi Lezak says. “And everyone loved it.” Rodef Sholom now holds house meetings weekly before Friday night services, the synagogue providing wine and cheese. “This new Shabbat initiative has caught fire,” Rabbi Lezak says. “Today we have anywhere from 300 to 600 people coming to Friday night services. Without the house meetings, we never would have been thinking about the Shabbat service as an opportunity to build relationships.”

Last May, the Marin County Organizing Committee (MOC) held its first public action. Members of twenty-five interfaith congregations, including Congregation Rodef Sholom, joined with Latino, Portuguese, and Vietnamese service workers in demanding affordable housing, adequate funding of mental health services, and higher environmental standards. The 750-person assembly (including 100 from Congregation Rodef Sholom) was the largest political gathering in Marin County any congregant could remember. “That meeting was the first time that the visible community of Marin County stood together with the invisible community—those who wash dishes, who mow lawns, who provide the services we take for granted,” says Rabbi Lezak. “We said to our elected officials: there is a new voice here, unlike anything that has come before, and we are here to stay.”

Since that initial meeting, Rodef Sholom congregants, along with other MOC leaders, have met with every county supervisor in order to craft a budget to ensure mental health services and additional emergency shelter beds. “Voting isn’t the end of the exercise of citizenship; it is just the beginning,” Rabbi Lezak says. “We’re changing the political landscape of our community.”

In Beverly Hills, Temple Emanuel’s community organizing effort has changed the social climate. After identifying elder care as a key issue of concern, the temple worked with other member congregations of One LA–IAF, the Industrial Areas Affiliate in Los Angeles, to move two bills through the state legislature mandating greater oversight of and more rapid responses to complaints about abuses in state nursing homes. The bills received

wide support in both houses of the state legislature, but Governor Schwarzenegger later vetoed them, citing the high costs in a difficult budget climate. The campaign, however, had a transformative effect on the congregation. “Temple Emanuel is now a place where people talk to each other,” says Rabbi Laura Geller. “This past year, we invited congregants to sign up to either attend a seder at the temple or to invite guests to their family seder. Dozens of people opened their homes, which never would have happened before. We’ve become a place where it is not unusual to invite strangers into your home.”

Rabbi Donald Goor at Temple Judea in Tarzana, California describes a similar shift: “When people know each other and share stories, the consumer-based service model shifts to one of relationship. In a relationship you can’t say, ‘I got what I came for’ and close the book on it. The relationship is ongoing.” Now the temple is making the leap from relationship-centered social justice to relationship-centered temple life. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, for example, Rabbi Goor devotes part of his sermon to

one-on-one meetings designed so congregants can get to know each other. “The effect has been profound,” he says. “People who’ve seen each other for years are learning new things about one another, and those who come infrequently are engaging with consistent members. This is how we create community.”

“At its best, organizing raises up the moment of interaction to the most sacred thing that we can do as human beings,” says Rabbi Stephanie Kolin of Boston’s Temple Israel. “It teaches us that relationship is *tikkun*—it repairs brokenness because it addresses isolation. It encourages us to recognize the person, and the moment, as sacred.” In so doing, she says, it draws upon Martin Buber’s teaching that our full humanness is best expressed in “I-Thou” encounters with others who we see as full human beings experiencing the same breadth of emotion, confusion, and passion as we possess.

“I was interested in organizing to make a political difference in our community,” says Rabbi Goor. “And I still do. I just didn’t realize that the community we first needed to transform was our own.” □

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