

cups at the *oneg* so that members can identify them and extend a special welcome.

But at Congregation Ner Tamid in Henderson, Nevada, this practice was discontinued. "It was a problem," says Rabbi Sanford Akselrad. "Either members would take a blue cup by mistake, or a new person wouldn't take one and then no one would talk to him/her. And no matter how often you remind your board, people still talk to their friends."

Now, instead, every Friday night newcomers are encouraged from the *bimah* to join the congregation for a warm and welcoming *oneg* and to introduce themselves to a board member or staff person at Ner Tamid's membership table. "A sign that says 'Ask Me How to Join CNT' shows them the way to the table, a gathering place where prospective members can hear about all the benefits of membership and talk to representatives from our Board," says Executive Director Nancy C. Weinberger.

"This handles the situation of people saying, 'I came to the *oneg* and no one talked to me,'" Rabbi Akselrad says. "All they have to do is walk over to the table, and a friendly person is there, ready to talk to them."

In some congregations, a rabbi will ask newcomers to stand and identify themselves at the end of services, allowing clergy and board members, as well as other congregants, to offer them a warm greeting minutes later.

While such gestures are often appreciated and contribute to a friendly, welcoming atmosphere, Ron Wolfson cautions that sometimes they can backfire by making strangers feel self-conscious. "It's tricky," he says, "because some people don't want to be identified. The

most successful mega-churches [whose techniques are sometimes emulated by Reform synagogues] never ask first-time visitors to stand and declare themselves."

The Clergy's Role

CLERGY MEMBERS CAN BE EMISSARIES, greeting and engaging people in conversation at the *oneg*.

Rabbi Ken Brickman, for example, has long been serving up the cake and cookies to everyone at Temple Beth-El in Jersey City, New Jersey.

"It's been a chance for me as the rabbi to meet new people who might be temple shopping," he says. "I love entertaining in my own home. Doing it in the congregation is an extension of that pleasure."

At Beth-El's *oneg* people sit at tables covered with tablecloths. That, says Rabbi Brickman, "encourages people to stay for a while and really get to know each other. And no one gets in or out without us [meaning long-time members and himself] finding out who they are, where they're from, and why they're here." He explains that there's no formal policy to welcome newcomers; doing so has simply become part of the *shul's* culture.

Rabbi Richard Birnholz at Congregation Schaarai Zedek in Tampa, Florida used to host "*oneg* chats" in his office one Friday a month, concurrent with the regular *oneg* in the social hall. New members or prospective members from the previous month were invited to join him after services to chat over coffee, tea, and snacks. In the rabbi's study, the same food was available

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8 Ways To Greet a Stranger in Synagogue

By Marcia Nichols

The commandment to "Remember the stranger, for you were once strangers in a strange land" (Deuteronomy 10:19) reminds us that connecting with strangers in creating community can be difficult, especially if we tend to be shy, but is nonetheless a Jewish imperative. Here are eight ways to help you get past your "I don't know what to say" stumbling block and greet a stranger on Shabbat.

1 Introduce yourself before the service. "Let me introduce myself. I am ___ and I have been a member here for ___ years. I am happy to meet you.... Shabbat Shalom."

2 Choose your words carefully to avoid embarrassment in the case that "the stranger" is new to you but not to the synagogue. "I have been a member here for ___ years, and don't know if we've ever met, but let me introduce myself."

3 Show your interest in the newcomer by asking a question, such as, "Hi! How are you?" or "What brings you here tonight?" followed by an introduction. "Let me introduce myself. I am ___."

4 Offer a genuine compliment after the service. "Hi, I am ___. You really read Hebrew well," or "I enjoyed listening to your singing," or "You didn't fall asleep once" (humor can be effective)....

5 Mention areas of commonality. "Hello. My name is ___. We sat in the same aisle. May I accompany you to the *oneg*?"

6 Refer to the service. "I hope you enjoyed the service," or "Did you enjoy the service?"

7 Make eye contact. Looking someone in the eye is a critical first step in initiating a conversation.

8 Smile. Communicating with friendly gestures and actions count as much as welcoming words.

The power to be an inviting presence rests fully within each of us. It is not beyond us; it is an emotional muscle we should exercise often. In putting aside our fears to welcome a newcomer, we remember that we, too, have been strangers in a strange land. And as we cultivate the habit of genuinely welcoming others, the strangers we encounter today may well become our new friends of tomorrow. □

Marcia Nichols, longtime member of Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, Texas, is active in the synagogue's Ambassador program, which matches established congregants with new members to foster a welcoming and caring congregational community.