

FOREWORD

FROM THE RABBIS OF B'NAI JESHURUN

In the 180 years of B'nai Jeshurun's existence, champions of social justice have served as the spiritual leaders of the congregation. Great leaders such as Rabbis Stephen S. Wise, Israel Goldstein, and Marshall T. Meyer gave voice to the needy, the disenfranchised, the poor, and the strangers in our midst over these many generations.

As we entered the 21st century, we asked ourselves: how does a community embody social justice? How does a community not only engage in essential service work, but also advocate to eradicate the root causes that necessitate our homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and tutoring programs? It was not enough to preach social justice or go to rallies, not enough to demonstrate, not enough to pray that our social service programs could fully respond to the immense deprivation in our midst. We needed a new way, a new method.

Panim el Panim, BJ's community organizing and advocacy initiative, came into being as a way to fulfill the dream of engaging a wider spectrum of our community in our passion for social action and social justice. It came as a response to the need to mobilize our community to take action around advocacy work that could make a difference not only on the individual level, but also at the level of the systems and structures, laws and policies, that create suffering and injustice. It came as a response to seeing ourselves as a force of power and faith in our city, state, and country.

Are community organizing and advocacy really possible in a synagogue in 21st century America? The answer is yes, and the possibilities have only continued to expand. The answer is yes, not only for a large, urban synagogue like BJ, but for any congregation willing to open up its reservoirs of faith, passion, and courage. Without a doubt, each congregation will want to adapt its efforts to its own circumstances. Equally doubtless, BJ has made mistakes and struggled along the way.

For these reasons, we are not publishing a "how-to" manual; we have chosen to create instead a "how-we-did-it" manual. It covers the development of Panim el Panim from its inception in early 2003 through its first round of successful actions, concluding in the Summer of 2005. As we develop our second round of action in 2006, we know that we are still learning how to do it, day by day.

We hope that this manual will help other congregations to learn from and adapt our experience, and to become powerful forces for social change and vibrant, vital communities — for in fact, this kind of organizing has had a revitalizing effect on our congregational community as a whole.

Panim el Panim—in Hebrew, face to face—has brought hundreds of our community members together to have serious conversations about what moves us personally to pursue social justice. Through these conversations, we tell each other our stories. Memories are awakened and passions are expressed. We are moved by each other to become more involved and to take ownership of our responsibility. We become accountable to each other to not just sit on the sidelines, but to become actively engaged. We build trust that enables us to act together, and with each and every person who engages in communal action, we grow our capacity to make change, and we become a movement of power. By giving voice to our deepest values and hopes for justice in our world, for ourselves and for others, we become able to act together to move toward that prophetic, redemptive vision. We walk farther along our spiritual path of becoming a kehillah kedoshah, a holy community.

For thousands of years, we as a Jewish people have been telling the story of our liberation from Mitzrayim/Egypt. The tradition teaches, “behold, it is praiseworthy” to expound on that story at the seder, the ritual meal of Passover. Why is it praiseworthy to retell and expand the story of this liberation from bondage? We believe that the story awakens us, so that we grasp the blessing of freedom and recognize that so many in the world are yet to be free. We will tell and retell our stories over and over again, with the hope that they will awaken our passion not just to speak, but to act, as a community in partnership with each other and God to create a more just world.

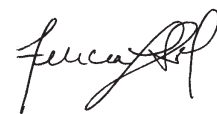
As rabbis, we are blessed to lead a community that has taken this challenge of speaking to each other panim el panim, face to face, and then acting together for justice. In this way, each face that we encounter reveals a story that we can understand more deeply, and which stirs our desire to cry out, as individuals and as a congregation, “justice, justice we shall pursue.”



Rabbi J. Rolando Matalon



Rabbi Marcelo R. Bronstein



Rabbi Felicia L. Sol

I. SOCIAL ACTION AT B'NAI JESHURUN: FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

“Religious freedom and political equality, broadminded neighborliness and economic opportunity, these ideals which have become American traditions are ingredients which have gone into the building of B’nai Jeshurun, even as they have entered into the building of American Israel altogether.” — Rabbi Israel Goldstein

As people of faith, we are given the great responsibility of caring for one another. We are also given the opportunity to unite and mobilize our community for social change that will strengthen our congregation and the society in which we live.

B’nai Jeshurun (BJ) is a congregation committed to social justice and social action. We are inspired by our teachers, past and present, and by the power of each of our stories.

In 1825, a group of Ashkenazi Jews founded B’nai Jeshurun, the oldest Ashkenazi congregation in New York City, on Elm Street on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. From the beginning, BJ has been a leading force in New York Jewry: forging new paths, standing up for justice, and helping those in need, both within and outside of our community.

In 1848, our congregants helped found the Jewish Home and Hospital. Over a century later, we welcomed visionary activists and leaders such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela to speak out for justice and freedom before our congregation.

In the 1980s, our own Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, joined by his student, Rabbi J. Rolando Matalon, became a fierce advocate against homelessness and hunger, using our synagogue space for a homeless shelter and a hot lunch program. BJ also hosted spiritual gatherings for people with AIDS, as well as speakers on human rights struggles around the world. Under its current leadership of Rabbis J. Rolando Matalon, Marcelo R. Bronstein, and Felicia L. Sol, and Hazzan Ari Priven, the congregation and its 4,000 members continue that legacy of prophetic vision and dedicated direct service today.

WHAT IS YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH SOCIAL ACTION/SOCIAL JUSTICE? HOW DOES THAT EXPERIENCE AFFECT YOU NOW?

“I was friends with James, a homeless alcoholic. We met almost daily on the street and had intense conversation about politics, religion, and coping with life’s issues. Then he disappeared. I ran into him two years later. He told me he had been in rehab and had pulled his life together; he had become a support group counselor. “Tell my story,” he said. “Thanks to people like you, who took the time to notice me and acknowledge my worth, I am now able to help my brothers and sisters.” “Thank you, James,” I said, “for your strength and hard work, and coming back to help our community.” This experience will forever be close to my heart.

Direct Service and Crisis Response

In 1991, the roof caved in on our current home on West 88th Street on the Upper West Side, and our building closed for five years. What could have been a tragedy became a blessing: we developed a strong interfaith relationship with the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, whose members immediately opened their doors to us. In addition to hosting our services in their sanctuary, SPSA partnered with BJ to help us maintain our homeless shelter. Together, congregants of both institutions created a large banner with the words of Psalm 133: "How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony," which still hangs at the front of the church sanctuary today.

The shelter is open five nights a week, and the lunch program serves up to 150 guests once a week. These programs are part of local coalitions such as the West Side Campaign Against Hunger and the Partnership for the Homeless. We have created two new service programs that tutor young students in reading at two Manhattan public schools. BJ members also mobilize to respond to local and global crises, such as Hurricane Katrina and the genocide in Darfur, and we participate enthusiastically in one-day events such as the AIDS Walk, the Breast Cancer Race for the Cure, blood donation drives, and much more.

B'nai Jeshurun is immensely proud of our consistently outstanding service work, which meets

“In 1964 when I was a graduate student in Chicago, a friend called from the South to say that she was pregnant and wanted an abortion. Could we help her? We asked around, and found the name of a doctor who would do the abortion. She arrived at our house, and Paul took her to the doctor the next day. He waited while she had an abortion lying on a kitchen table, with no anesthesia. The next day she woke up with a high fever and horrible cramps. She was bleeding badly. I called my gynecologist, who told me to take her to the emergency room, and to tell the doctors there that she had attempted an abortion herself. They took her into a cubicle, and as she lay there naked, waiting for the doctor to see her, two policemen stood over her, demanding that she tell them who had done the abortion. We took her home several hours later. It took her a week to recover physically. I doubt she ever really recovered emotionally. It's 40 years later, and I can't be silent while a woman's right to choose is, once again, in danger of being taken away.

the immediate needs of people who cannot wait for legislatures and lawyers, cultural paradigm shifts, or economic trends. This work also involves hundreds of our members in close-knit volunteer committees who listen to and learn from the daily stories of the needy and the neighbors among us.

Advocacy and Organizing

In a famous paradox, the Torah offers us two apparently contradictory verses in Deuteronomy 15. In verse 4, the Torah prophesies, "There shall be no needy among you, since the Lord your God will bless you in the land...." Yet the text goes on to proclaim in verse 11: "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land."

One way to resolve the paradox is to understand the first verse as an ideal, and the second as a reality. Each prediction obliges us in different but complementary ways: we must always strive for a society to come in which there will be no needy; meanwhile, we must continue to meet the daily needs of the poor. To only, endlessly, provide direct service would

be to limit ourselves to hopelessness and fatalism. To advocate for just laws while stepping over the homeless person in the street would be arrogant, hypocritical, and abstract.

B'nai Jeshurun recognized that our commitments lay mainly in the day-to-day realm of social action, and we decided to develop a capacity to change society's future—not only to ease the injustice and suffering of today, but also to try to prevent the injustice and suffering of tomorrow. This kind of change means looking past symptoms and identifying systems. It seeks social justice and requires advocacy.

Advocacy is an attempt to influence laws, public policy, and resource allocation within political, economic, and social systems and institutions—structures that directly and powerfully affect people's lives. Advocacy consists of organized efforts and actions based on the reality of “what is” and on thoughtful, concrete proposals for coming one step closer to “what ought to be,” a just and decent society. Human rights—political, economic, and social—are an overarching framework for these visions.

Advocacy enables social justice advocates to gain access to, and a voice in, the decision-making processes of institutions. It can change the relationships of power between these institutions and the people affected by their decisions, thereby changing the institutions themselves and revitalizing the culture of healthy democracy and civic participation. Indeed, advocacy organizations draw their strength not from the institutions of society, but from their own people. They must always strive to be accountable to people: their members, their constituents, and the members of other groups affected by the issues.

Because advocacy depends on people, advocacy depends on community organizing. Organizing can be defined as the process of bringing people together to build relationships, identify problems, and develop the capacity—the power—to change the decisions and processes of institutions that contribute to those problems. Organizing leads to action that is planned and carried out through campaigns: periods of intense and focused effort, with a beginning and an end, designed to lead to a specific goal that makes a positive, incremental impact on a problem.

In 2003, a group of twenty BJ congregants created Panim el Panim, BJ's community organizing and advocacy initiative. We have not completed the task, but by embracing the challenge to work together, face to face, we have made, and continue to make, a real impact on the world around us.

II. PANIM EL PANIM: AN OVERVIEW

“If we love ourselves, if we love our young, if we love our country and the earth—and we do—then that same motivation must move us to create not only the words but the actions to remove the great divide between rich and poor.” — *Bella Abzug*

■ GOALS:

- To transform social action and social justice at BJ and to build a community deeply engaged in and centered on tikkun olam, the repair of the world—a community that prays, studies, and acts together for social justice within a Jewish framework and creates lasting and meaningful social change in our community and our world.

■ OBJECTIVES:

- To foster new relationships and connections between members of B’nai Jeshurun
- To discover the shared issues, values and social concerns that motivate and inspire us as congregants
- To engage members in social action based on their shared vision
- To facilitate deeper relationships between the B’nai Jeshurun community and our local, national, and global world through partnerships for tikkun olam

■ ACTIONS:

- One-on-one community conversations
- House gatherings
- Leadership development trainings
- Strategic campaign development
- Working in coalition with community organizations and faith-based groups

In three years, we engaged close to one thousand congregants in meaningful conversations centered on our personal visions of social justice. We organized and implemented several major action campaigns in the areas of health care, economic hardship, women’s rights, children at risk, and environmental justice.

Our work began in earnest in early 2003, when B’nai Jeshurun hired its first full-time staff organizer. BJ’s rabbis and Board of Trustees understood that we had to allocate our resources according to the ancient formula of Pirkei Avot 1:2: “The world stands on three things: on Torah (study), on worship (prayer), and on acts of lovingkindness (social action).” If we needed an education director and clergy to guide our study and prayer, we also needed a staff director of social action—and our budget needed to reflect that.

Amanda Silver joined BJ as Director of Social Action/Social Justice and created the Panim el Panim Task Force. This group, chaired by Rabbi Rachel Cowan and Kathleen Peratis, comprised people from across the various communities within our congregation, seeking to be a representative body of authentic leaders. The Task Force researched potential models for deepening our commitment to and capacity for tikkun olam. We turned for guidance, inspiration, and instruction to the Jewish Fund for Justice, Upper Manhattan Together, New York Jobs with Justice, and Temple Israel of Boston.

With support from BJ's rabbis, the Task Force recommended that a model known as faith-based or congregation-based community organizing held the greatest potential to transform our synagogue's social action work. This model is based on cultivating relationships among congregants in order to inspire deep commitment, strengthen community, and develop many new leaders from within the congregation. These leaders would then be able to sustain focused work over a period of time without becoming exhausted, and without losing their authentic connection to the congregation as a whole.

In contrast to some social modes that stress action as a way to build relationship, congregation-based community-organizing sees relationship as a way to build action. Action stems from the mutual regard and respect developed as we discover what values, concerns, and experiences we hold in common. Through the process of uncovering those stories, visions, and passions, we were able to weave together a common narrative, a common set of problems that we as BJ congregants wanted to tackle. The process was so inclusive and collective that the board and rabbis trusted that the issues chosen had broad support in the congregation, and that we could legitimately take positions on those issues as a congregation and advocate for our positions publicly.

Moreover, identifying the reasons *why* we cared about what we cared about allowed us to approach our social justice work with our own self-interest—not in the sense of selfishness, but in the sense of knowing what was at stake for us, personally and as a community. On the one hand, congregants felt drawn to focus on our own Jewish needy or other “Jewish issues.” On the other hand, people felt an altruistic, moral, and religious obligation to help others. Identifying our self-interest—whether material, spiritual, or otherwise—allowed us to find a healthy and powerful balance. We could see that partnering with other communities across barriers of race, class, and religion, on issues that both they and we cared about, would ultimately benefit us all.

“My father was a Holocaust survivor whose life's work was helping those who suffer the injustices and inequalities in our society. He was a social worker for the NYC welfare system. When I was 13 years old, I was shopping in a department store near his office. I remember walking past rows and rows of people, mostly black and Hispanic welfare clients who were waiting to talk to my father. And there I was, a white middle-class girl carrying shopping bags full of newly purchased clothes. I was struck by the blatant inequalities right there in my own little world. I've never gotten that image out of my mind. I don't consider myself an activist, but I am blessed that my father instilled in me a strong social conscience and a sense of responsibility to my community.”

After training more than one hundred congregants in community organizing techniques and engaging hundreds of congregants in one-on-one conversations and house meetings, Panim el Panim identified six problem areas with broad concern among our members. For each area, we sought to develop a working committee called a hevra, or friendship group. Each of the four hevras that developed spent time recruiting members and researching coalitions to join and specific issues to take on.

By the end of 2005, our community had played an influential role in passing historic and groundbreaking local legislation and a City Council resolution, sent dozens of congregants to register voters, created a dynamic partnership with a local public school, and built new collaborations with labor unions, community groups, and faith congregations throughout the city. Our advocacy work has helped improve the lives of thousands of New Yorkers—including our own.

III. PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

“A Jew is asked to take a *leap of action* rather than a *leap of thought*. He is asked to surpass his needs, to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.”
— *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel*

The creation of Panim el Panim required our community and its leadership to set out on a long journey without knowing what the destination would look like. We realized that we should not expect sudden results or flashy successes. Rather, we settled in for many months of relationship building, training, research, and planning. We were rewarded by the fact that when we took action, we were in a strong position to succeed.

The four phases below are matched by the four tabbed sections that follow, each of which compiles archival materials—flyers, handouts, meeting agendas, training materials, photographs, and more—from each phase.

It should be stressed that these documents are intended as examples, not actual instructional materials. We strongly encourage any congregation hoping to embark on a similar organizing campaign to seek guidance and training from local partner organizations. Such partners can provide not only expertise, but also the necessary relationships to grassroots, interfaith, inter-racial communities that are jointly working to address local justice issues.

■ INITIAL PHASE: IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP

Objectives:

- Identify core group of 15 people to be on the organizing team.
- Have one-on-one conversations with a majority, if not all, board members, clergy, staff members, and important lay leaders in the community—120 meetings total.
- Develop a clear vision and description of what the relationship-building campaign will look like.
- Identify 30-50 new leaders to help conduct the campaign in the second phase.

The Task Force co-chairs worked with BJ’s Director of Social Action and a core team of 10-15 people to develop the campaign, clarifying and strengthening its goals. Using community conversations (one-on-one meetings), the group strategically reached out to a diverse cross-section of key congregational members, rabbis, and staff. Through outreach, the group identified a wider circle of committed synagogue leaders and potential leaders who care about

social action, trained them in the techniques of community conversations, and supported them in becoming a part of the larger organizing campaign.

The Task Force was created to stand for the whole and to act as community organizers who would take Panim el Panim toward the action phase. Members of this group may have had interest in a particular issue, but were committed, first and foremost, to the bigger picture beyond each action group. They were responsible for establishing, refining, and implementing the overall vision and goals for the action phase of Panim el Panim. They were responsible for paying attention to and developing existing and new leadership for the overall initiative, as well as identifying opportunities for skill building, training, and leadership development. This group conducted overall evaluations of the entire initiative and planned next steps accordingly. It was intended to consist of at least one co-chair from each action hevra.

The support and commitment of B'nai Jeshurun's rabbis were crucial in this initial phase. Their passionate advocacy for this new direction in BJ's life was heard from the bimah during the High Holidays and in many other settings. They set a tone that helped congregants and the board feel good about the work from Jewish, political, and organizational perspectives.

At one point, Amanda Silver and three lay leaders traveled to Boston to attend a synagogue social action conference and to meet with leaders of Temple Israel, which was the pioneer of the current trend in synagogue organizing and a great source of inspiration and advice to Panim el Panim. At the conference, listening to representatives of many other congregations, we discovered that one of our greatest assets and keys to our success, and one that clearly made BJ stand out among our peers, was the complete buy-in of our rabbis. This did not mean that the activists from other congregations were giving up or unable to proceed, but it did mean that they lacked a powerful ally, and that their organizing strategies had to accomplish the extra objective of winning their rabbis' support.

■ SECOND PHASE: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Objectives:

- Develop 30-50 new leaders, i.e., people invested in BJ's future who are committed to building relationships and taking action.
- Create 613 new relationships and help congregants reflect on their relationship to social justice.
- Identify and uncover the social justice concerns, issues, and stories within our own congregation that will direct the community toward taking action.

From October through early December 2003, an expanded core team of 50 members led a 10-week campaign to engage members in hundreds of community conversations and house meetings. We exceeded our goal of 613 conversations (the number of mitzvot, or commandments,

“We met at Starbucks on 76th Street and Broadway. We instantly recognized each other from Shabbat services, but had never been introduced. This is the story of one intimate, intentional conversation: a conversation with kavanah, intention, between two BJ members.

Since that conversation we have:

- Actively participated in a community-wide campaign for tikkun olam
- Visited places we had never been or even considered visiting
- Learned about New York City politics
- Participated in leadership and lobby training
- Addressed NYC Council Speaker Gifford Miller before an audience of 700 people

in the Torah, according to traditional counting). Thirty-one congregants opened their homes to host Panim el Panim gatherings.

In addition, a Sukkot kickoff event and a December Hanukkah celebration were each attended by over 200 congregants, and more than 90 congregants attended two “community check-back” sessions in between to hear about what issues were uncovered. These achievements were made possible by the efforts of an expanding core team of members who came forward (many through one-on-one community conversations) to participate in a shared vision for social justice. The meetings created new relationships and helped our members to discover their shared visions for social justice. They also enabled a significant number of people to deepen their sense of belonging and

connection within our large congregation, and this connectedness motivated them to stay involved with the project and the congregation.

The early house meetings were notable for the dazzling array of individual voices, visions, and passions, as well as for the excitement of communal conversation and the promise of collective action. But many participants struggled with frustration at the process; some seemed to want just to be told what to do and what issue to work on, to have an impact on the world as soon as possible. Others had never done any form of social action other than writing a check for a good cause. Even so, the leaders at this early stage, and enough of the other participants, had faith in the process despite our incomplete understanding of it. The understanding developed over time. As we saw how our conversations propelled us from the building of relationships toward meaningful and effective social change work, we learned that those good works would not have been possible without the process.

Thanks to everyone who invested time in the early stages of Panim el Panim, the Task Force was able to discover what social justice issues our community cares passionately about, how Judaism influences our relationship with social justice, and what social justice issues we would like the BJ community to engage in. We identified six broad areas of concern for which there appeared to be both widespread support as well as a core group of congregants ready to lead: women’s rights, children at risk, health care, the environment, economic hardship, and seniors’ issues. The Task Force attempted to identify leaders to chair “action hevras” (friendship groups, or working committees) for each area, which would seek to develop a critical mass of members and to select actionable campaigns.

■ THIRD PHASE: PREPARING FOR ACTION

Objectives:

- Foster the growth and development of each action hevra through the continued use of one-on-one community conversations, house meetings, leadership development, and community organizing trainings.
- Facilitate deeper relationships between B'nai Jeshurun and local, national, and global organizations in the pursuit of justice.
- Connect our work to the B'nai Jeshurun vision for Jewish spiritual engagement through our commitment to social justice.

For a month, Task Force members and 60 hevra members participated in a series of trainings to educate themselves on how to create effective and sustainable campaigns that have the power to shape social change. We learned how to analyze the political landscape and power dynamics in which social injustices exist, and how to separate problems (e.g., hunger, homelessness, poverty) from issues that were opportunities for social change (e.g., campaigns for policy initiatives at the city and state levels in which BJ could have an active voice). During this training series, we put our newly honed skills into practice by engaging, as a group, in an issue selection process. The leaders in each hevra, those ready to invest time and energy, narrowed the issue(s), using common criteria and skills cultivated during community organizing trainings. In the interest of maximizing our effectiveness and being realistic about our capacity, we agreed to launch two of the campaigns in the spring, while the others would continue to incubate - receiving further thought and research. Through this process, we transformed ourselves from isolated individuals into a community of activists working together for social change on issues of significance to us.

After a few months, the Health Care and Economic Hardship Hevras merged as they developed a focus on health care access for low-income workers. The Seniors' Hevra failed to retain a stable core of committed activists and therefore could not proceed. This resulted in four hevras: the Health Care/Economic Hardship Hevra, the Environmental Action Hevra, the Children at Risk Hevra, and the Women's Rights Hevra. Most of the co-chairs of these hevras became members of the Task Force, if they were not already.

The Task Force and hevras, along with newly identified leaders, called on outside resources to train themselves in community organizing and strategic campaign planning. They met with many community groups, and each hevra researched campaigns that were developing among the city's numerous coalitions and neighborhoods, applying a set of criteria to evaluate whether to join: Would the campaign be viable, even winnable? Would it fit with our values? Would it build our power to sustain our work and move on to future campaigns? Would it build the leadership skills of our members? Would it create opportunities to involve more people? Would it shift the relations of power between the decision makers and the people affected by those decisions?

The hevras also strove to draw guidance from Jewish tradition. For example, meetings always included a D'var Torah or other words of prayer or meditation that sought to give intention or direction to our work. A committee on spirituality was formed to focus on ways to keep us connected to and learning from Jewish texts and values, as well as suffused with the Jewish spiritual engagement and seeking that are so much a part of B'nai Jeshurun's community and culture.

■ FOURTH PHASE: ACTING FOR JUSTICE

Objective:

- Take strategic and measured action, utilizing a community organizing framework, on issues and social concerns that motivate and inspire us as congregants.

Each of the four action hevras sought to develop a campaign to channel its social justice concerns from a broad "problem area" to a specific campaign on a specific issue. The hevras went on to pursue the efforts they had chosen and to win an impressive string of victories, in partnership with local coalitions of religious congregations, labor unions, and community groups.

Children's Action Hevra

The Children at Risk Hevra began brainstorming ideas for a focus and possible initiative in late 2003 and early 2004. The group coalesced in favor of a focus on education with outreach to a school in need. A subcommittee researched underserved schools on the Upper West Side and, guided by a BJ member and former assistant district superintendent, approached the Ralph Bunche School, P.S. 125, with an offer of support in Spring 2004.

Principal Lauvia Sherman responded with the idea of a partnership focusing on reading and one-on-one attention for students. Together, we embraced the idea of a Reading Partners Program and a shared goal of strengthening intercultural understanding between our communities.

The hevra's proposal was approved by the Panim el Panim Task Force with the suggestion that the service project be implemented immediately and an advocacy piece around public education be added at a future date. An Open House at the school attended by the rabbis and over 50 BJ members, as well as an address to the BJ community by the school principal at a Shabbat morning service, brought the initiative to the attention of the community and drew volunteers to the hevra. The Reading Partners Program began in October 2004 and grew throughout the course of the year. By the end of the school year, some two dozen volunteers were reading weekly with 44 children in Grades 1 and 3. The program met twice weekly, and each volunteer met one-on-one weekly with two children, spending 45 minutes with each.

A spiritual component grew increasingly important to the hevra, which opened each meeting with a D'var Torah prepared and delivered by a member of the group, followed by a related one-on-one or check-in question that served to bring the group together in a focused way. A prayer, composed by one of the members, concluded each meeting. These activities reinforced the spiritual underpinnings of the work while deepening the connection to Judaism, BJ, and fellow members.

As the year progressed, a majority of the renamed Children's Action Hevra became increasingly committed to direct service. Meanwhile, the Task Force was solidifying its focus on advocacy. By the end of June 2005, several original members of the hevra departed, and by the end of the year the hevra withdrew from the framework of Panim el Panim. This rupture was challenging. Fortunately, the hevra members had fallen in love with the children and were experiencing the gratification of the one-on-one relationship with their reading partners. With dedication and strong leadership, the B'nai Jeshurun/Ralph Bunche School Partnership was firmly established. Informal comments from parents, teachers, and school administrators were virtually universal in expressing strong support for the program.

Partnered activities with the school in addition to the Reading Partners Program included a Teachers' Wish List initiative in which the hevra raised some \$2,000 for teachers to purchase necessary supplies. BJ volunteers read to RBS classes during a Valentine's Day Read-a-Thon and took part in a Career Awareness Week at the school. Principal Lauvia Sherman spoke in favor of the Health Care Security Act at a BJ forum with City Council Speaker Gifford Miller in April 2005, sharing the platform with the rabbis and speakers from the four other hevras.

Environmental Action Hevra

In its introductory sessions, the hevra debated a wide array of issues that we might address, from bus-exhaust pollution in the South Bronx to shutting down the Indian Point nuclear power plant. Eventually, it settled on promoting the availability and consumption of Fair Trade Certified (FTC) coffee on the Upper West Side, because it had impacts on both the protection of fragile tropical environments where coffee is grown and on economic justice for the poor, often exploited, farmers who grow it. The hevra also felt that it could produce concrete, measurable results in a relatively short time, and that B'nai Jeshurun could take a leading role on an issue that was not being addressed elsewhere.

The initial objectives of the campaign were to persuade the congregation to purchase and serve only FTC coffee (and tea) for all synagogue functions; to promote consumption of FTC coffee by BJ members in their homes and businesses; and to expand the availability of FTC coffee in food stores and restaurants on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

The first objective was easily achieved. The synagogue's administrators readily agreed to make the switch. The second objective's success has been harder to measure, since the hevra did not

survey congregants' coffee consumption before and after the campaign. The third objective proved more elusive, largely because many hevra members were unwilling to go door-to-door on the Upper West Side in an organized campaign to speak to store managers and restaurant managers. Nevertheless, individual hevra members, in a less-organized fashion, did approach other merchants, restaurants, synagogues, and other institutions with some success—including the UJA, New York's Jewish Federation.

The greatest success of the hevra, however, was an achievement that had not even envisioned when the project was launched. Arising out of a casual conversation with hevra members who were tabling for FTC at a street fair, Councilwoman Gale Brewer offered to introduce a resolution in which the City Council would endorse the practice of Fair Trade and call upon the city government to purchase only fair trade coffee for municipal use. She then challenged BJ to mobilize the necessary support from the community.

Hevra members organized outreach to other religious institutions around the city, which lobbied their council members in favor of the resolution. Lobbying efforts focused on council members who were on the committee with jurisdiction, and the real challenge was getting that committee to hold a hearing. The committee chairman represented a district in south Brooklyn, far from the Upper West Side, where BJ had virtually no members. One important step occurred when BJ held an enormous community meeting in April 2005 with City Council Speaker Gifford Miller, where he committed to support the FTC resolution. The committee chairman held a hearing on June 10, and BJ mobilized four high-powered witnesses to testify (including a labor union spokesman, a small-business owner, and Ruth Messinger, former Manhattan Borough President and current Executive Director of American Jewish World Service). The committee passed the resolution unanimously, and two weeks later the full City Council unanimously adopted Resolution 762-2005.

In the course of the campaign, the hevra attracted quite a few activists from outside the congregation. At the conclusion of the campaign, the large and diverse coalition of people and organizations that BJ had brought together reconstituted itself as the New York City Fair Trade Coalition, which would go on to attempt to get the city to implement the council's resolution.

“When I was 12, my 7th grade teacher brought us to the trial of the “Harlem 6,” young men who had been arrested for murder eight years earlier. One successful appeal, two hung juries, and eight full years later, they were still languishing in jail, unable to afford the exorbitant bail. While it was impossible to be unaware of the Civil Rights Movement or the struggle against the War in Viet Nam, this case struck me as most unfair and unjust. Here they were, in jail without being proven guilty, while Lieutenant Calley had been convicted of the Mai Lai Massacre, yet thanks to President Nixon's intervention was out of jail free!

I struggled to make my upcoming Bar Mitzvah meaningful and relevant. I read in my parasha, Vayikra, that no man was a law unto himself. In my Bar Mitzvah speech, I added “Not even presidents, generals or lieutenants.” I didn't yet know who Abraham Joshua Heschel was, or how to “pray with my feet.” Yet I knew then and there that Judaism, social justice, and social action were inseparable—and would have to be, in order for my religion to have any meaning at all for me.

Health Care/Economic Hardship Hevra

The Health Care Hevra and the Economic Hardship Hevra merged when it became clear that they would focus on passing the Health Care Security Act, a bill in City Council that would extend or secure health care coverage for tens of thousands of low-income workers in several local industries. The bill mandated that companies in targeted industries that were providing health care benefits below the industry norm would need to match the level of coverage provided by the industry's more responsible employers—who were forced to compete with those businesses that imposed their rising health care costs onto employees and taxpayers.

The campaign was launched by New York Jobs with Justice, a labor-community-religion coalition, in Fall 2004. BJ took a seat on the organizing committee alongside community groups and union representatives. The hevra members in attendance understood how exceptional it was to be the sole representative of New York's faith communities, and had to wonder whether the other coalition members understood their perspective.

One hevra member recalls going on her first City Council lobby visit, together with Jobs with Justice leaders and labor organizers. As they entered the building, someone suggested, "Maybe you could say something about God?" From then on, BJ became clear that its role was to take the issue beyond the bottom line and the legal debates, and to speak to the moral imperative of equal access to health care.

On a subsequent visit to a City Council member, this BJ leader said, "Let's face it, if the Bible were written today, where it commands us to care for the widow, the orphan, and the sick, it would definitely say 'Get them health insurance!'" Within days, the council member signed on to the bill.

On September 8, 2004, BJ hosted a forum titled, "Health and the City," which drew over 150 people. This event was an important stepping stone for our campaign. It educated the congregation while helping us to build our coalition relationships and gain practical experience in putting on a large event.

The crescendo peaked on April 7, 2005, when 700 people swelled the BJ sanctuary for a community forum with City Council Speaker Gifford Miller. Titled, "From the Soup Kitchen to City Hall," the event focused on the Health Care Security Act but showcased all of Panim el Panim's campaigns and demonstrated the power of B'nai Jeshurun to mobilize its members and place a moral demand upon its elected officials. Union members in their union T-shirts filled the balcony and swayed together as Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein led the community in a beautiful niggun, a melody in search of words.

This forum was something quite different from a typical panel discussion or educational evening. Based on an organizing tactic known as an "accountability session," the event was a powerful and well-rehearsed ritual in which a politician was called to account before the com-

munity and was presented respectfully and repeatedly with requests for specific action. When Miller waffled and wavered, the crowd booed gently, and when he said the right things, he got the applause and cheers he craved. Though Miller was aware of the nature of this ritual, it had a strong effect on him, as the packed and pulsing audience demonstrated its strength, breadth, and moral clarity. There in our sanctuary, for the first time in public, he agreed to support the bill “in fact and in principle.”

It was the largest turnout to an event at BJ since Nelson Mandela spoke there 10 years before. And it would not have been possible without many months of organizing. The event itself required many members to do extensive logistical work, outreach, and a series of meticulous rehearsals.

In early August, City Council passed the New York City Health Care Security Act (HCSA). Unfortunately, strong business lobbies eliminated all the industries except the grocers from the targets of the bill. But 6,000 grocery workers received expanded health benefits from the bill, and another 20,000 had their benefits secured.

BJ’s impact on the campaign could be seen in hundreds of small ways: lobbying members of the City Council, attending rallies on the City Hall steps, testifying at hearings, and building relationships with and reaching out to other faith-based institutions. BJ members even tracked down Miller at his public appearances over the summer, finding every opportunity to remind him to fulfill his promise. By the time Mayor Michael Bloomberg vetoed the legislation, support in the City Council was strong enough to override and pass the legislation, which has become a model for other cities and for a bill in the New York state legislature.

Women’s Rights Hevra

At its initial meetings in Winter and early Spring 2004, the hevra decided that its first focus would be on protecting reproductive rights. Given that it was a presidential election year, the members determined that the most important thing they could do related to the right to choose was to educate and register voters, particularly in swing states. In June 2004, the hevra, in conjunction with Citizen Action of New York, chartered a bus to Pennsylvania, where about 60 BJ members went door to door, registering people to vote and asking them what were the most important issues to them in the upcoming election.

Plans to charter a second bus, a few months later, were unfortunately thwarted when the bus did not show up as scheduled. Nonetheless, on various other weekends throughout the fall, a number of BJ members joined other groups in voter registration and education, including Citizen Action of New York, NARAL Pro-Choice, and others. In these efforts, the hevra was not advocating for particular candidates. Rather, it sought to educate voters about reproductive rights issues and to increase the registration and turnout of voters who cared about these issues.

To further its goal of educating people around the importance of choice, the hevra invited Gloria Feldt, who was at that time the president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, to speak at B'nai Jeshurun in July 2004. More than 100 people attended an informative and energizing discussion of the issue.

The Women's Rights Hevra did not, in this first action phase, attempt to pass any legislation or other structural policy initiatives. Its efforts focused on using the "teaching moment" of the elections to build its membership and to learn by doing. It also spent time exploring possible campaigns around the issue of availability of emergency contraception, before turning its attention to an emerging campaign in partnership with Planned Parenthood of New York City and a large coalition of health and community groups. This campaign would later advocate for passage, at the state level, of the Healthy Teens Act, a bill to create a state-level funding stream for comprehensive, medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education programs.

IV. CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

“Vision looks inward and becomes duty. Vision looks outward and becomes aspiration. Vision looks upward and becomes faith.” — Rabbi Stephen S. Wise

Synagogue Culture

From before the beginning of Panim el Panim, and all through its existence, many people—including some of the leading activists—have had doubts and uncertainties about it. Would it be worth the effort and resources poured into it? Could we take “political” stands on issues and retain our wholeness as a spiritual community? Could we really make a positive difference in the arena of politicians, laws, and institutional policies? We have learned a great deal about ourselves, and about this type of work, its challenges and rewards.

Yet the entire process and mission of Panim el Panim, particularly when first introduced, seemed countercultural to many in our community.

For some people, it felt inappropriate for a synagogue, as a spiritual community, to take positions on the issues and advocate for structural change. Some members preferred the congregation to be a spiritual refuge from the injustices of the world. In this regard, as in many others, our rabbis had an indispensable role. They exhorted the community—as they had done for years—to see that Judaism demands action and justice in the world, and that a Judaism without social action is no Judaism worthy of the name. This message was conveyed not only through rhetoric, but also by example, and by serious text study and education.

Ironically, other people were more than ready to take action and chafed at the deliberate and intimate organizing process. Some people resisted what they saw as the “talky” or “touchy-feely” aspects of a process built on personal relationships, storytelling, and participatory decision-making. In our fast-paced urban culture, with its priority on “results,” some of our congregants found that they lacked the patience for community organizing, and we were sorry to lose the benefit of their talents. But we are sure that without the process, we would not have succeeded. The process allowed us to identify and develop many new leaders in our congregation, and gave us broad support and a strong foundation for taking positions and taking action.

Service and Advocacy

Certainly, many members did agree that a synagogue should be a vehicle for social action, but some felt that a synagogue's role was appropriately limited to direct service. For some, it was difficult even to envision advocacy. It was hard to imagine what we could actually do: with social problems so vast, congregants were tempted to give up hope of making a difference or, alternately, to rage passionately that we needed to "do something." We learned to distinguish between *problems*, which are broad areas of concern, such as poverty or health care, and *issues*, which are specific and addressable pieces of the problem, such as the need to raise the minimum wage, or the need to make prescription drugs more affordable. But many congregants continued to prefer to address problems through direct service, citing its concrete, obvious impact on people's lives.

“I didn't grow up in a family that was involved in social action. My parents are Holocaust survivors, and their own wounding limited their ability to give in that way. Through their experience, though, I became sensitized to the devastating ripple effect of hate, intolerance, and injustice. For all of my adult life, I have been active in projects that support the less fortunate and more vulnerable. I am proud to be part of the BJ community which exalts tikkun olam as a Jewish imperative.”

At times, leaders of BJ's service programs felt slighted by the high visibility and cachet that this new initiative achieved in the community. They also at times felt condescended to by some leaders of our advocacy work, who in trying to persuade the community of this new direction, sometimes implied that service work was inadequate or simplistic. These tensions created opportunities for dialogue and learning among our members. In the best cases, leaders of both our service and advocacy efforts were able to appreciate one another's work as necessary parts of a holistic approach to tikkun olam, the repair of the world.

Related to this disconnect, though not necessarily caused by it, was the fact that the advocacy campaigns chosen by the *hevras* did not directly relate to our existing service programs. We had long operated a homeless shelter, a hot lunch program, and another literacy program; yet we did not take on campaigns seeking structural remedies for housing, hunger, or public education. An alignment of service and advocacy efforts could have provided opportunities for individual congregants to choose the way in which they wanted to take action, and to see clearly the relationship between the two strategies.

Joining a Coalition

One of our core principles was that we would pursue justice not on our own, but in partnership with other communities and organizations. We sought partners willing to invest in our relationship and to engage us on a deep level. The choice of campaign partners also affected our choice of campaigns. For example, we built a strong relationship with New York Jobs with Justice, a coalition of labor, community, religious, and student organizations building power around issues of economic justice. This relationship began with training for our members and led to our participation in one of Jobs with Justice's priority campaigns: an effort to pass local legislation guaranteeing health insurance for low-income workers in certain industries. All of

our hevras entered into partnerships; the Environmental Action Hevra even built a new coalition around itself.

B'nai Jeshurun chose not to join another coalition that provided some of our early training: Upper Manhattan Together, an interfaith organizing network of local congregations which is an affiliate of the national Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). As more synagogues across the country get involved with what is called "faith-based community organizing," or "congregation-based community organizing," many have found a home in IAF or the similar networks PICO, DART, and Gamaliel. These networks meet several essential needs for a synagogue involved in organizing: training and guidance throughout the organizing process; close partnerships with diverse communities; and a set of viable campaigns to work on.

Ultimately, BJ decided that joining Upper Manhattan Together was not the right option for us at the time. BJ was fortunate to have another partner in Jobs with Justice that helped us meet these same needs, but we would not rule out joining a network affiliate in the future. We were also fortunate that our visionary rabbinic and board leadership was willing and able to realign our budget and hire a staff organizer at the synagogue. Having a staff organizer gave our synagogue the full attention of a professional familiar with our community, and it allowed us to enter coalitions with a strong internal base and sense of purpose. It also gave us the capacity to build multiple partnerships, projects, and campaigns through all of our hevras.

The Culture of Meetings

Many participants have remarked that Panim el Panim meetings contradict their typical negative expectations of meetings. Panim el Panim has made a great effort to create meetings that are both spiritually fulfilling and highly effective—two qualities which, of course, can strongly reinforce each other. All meetings begin with a D'var Torah, meditation, or other intention-setting exercise. They also include "mini one-on-ones," sometimes based on the D'var Torah, in which participants break into pairs and take turns answering a question that requires them to tell a part of their personal story. For example, a D'var Torah about the ancient priesthood might be followed by a one-to-one question about a time in participants' lives when they felt challenged to provide leadership.

Meetings are also built around well-planned agendas and proposals, distributed ahead of time when possible. Members rotate tasks such as taking notes and keeping time, learn to facilitate and participate effectively, and always ask each other to commit to concrete actions and next steps in order to implement our decisions and be accountable to each other. Nothing would have happened without planning and accountability. Major events were approached in the same way. Phone banking, flyers, press releases, rehearsals, and all the necessary nuts and bolts were rigorously attended to; but so were the rituals, the decoration, the music, and the joy. We have made a point of stopping every so often to celebrate and appreciate our successes and our members. Burnout has still afflicted some of our most active leaders, but we are

learning to recognize our limits and to support each other in setting them. Recruiting, developing, and retaining member leaders has been an ongoing challenge and a rewarding process.

Evaluation and Inclusion

We have found it essential to build in a continuous questioning of and reflection on our work, in order to improve it. On a small scale, each meeting or event is evaluated with a “plus/delta” exercise—the participants make a list of what worked well, and what could be changed for the better next time. On a broader scale, we have periodically paused to conduct more in-depth evaluations of major events, campaigns, training series, and action phases. We have instituted a one-day annual retreat for the Task Force to conduct evaluation and strategic planning.

The alternating rhythm of action and reflection has been a wonderful way to keep our work growing and flourishing, while also providing opportunities for dissenting opinions to be heard and included. We have found it necessary to go back to the congregation at large as often as possible with information and opportunities for renewed support and input into the work of Panim el Panim.

The Task Force and the hevras, as leadership bodies, need ways to maintain the authenticity of their connection to the congregation and the legitimacy of taking action in the synagogue’s name. Otherwise, they would fall into patterns of some unsuccessful social action committees, which may be small, unrepresentative, and cliquish, inventing projects and then trying to convince the congregation to work on them. The goal of the organizing model is the reverse: for the congregation to identify and prioritize problems and then charge the committees with doing what is needed to make an impact.

V. IMPACT ON THE BJ COMMUNITY

“Are we willing to fight for our right to be vitally involved in efforts to improve our society, and to develop more fully our sense of civic consciousness and responsibility; to become less envious of our neighbors, and more willing to confide in and help one another? In a word, it means to become individuals able to love, willing to love.”

— Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer

Panim el Panim’s ongoing work has been responsible for strengthening our community on several levels:

As individuals, by cultivating congregants as strong lay leaders empowered to make change on issues that they care about, and by deepening our spiritual practice as many of us explore the roots of justice work in Jewish scripture. Members of Panim el Panim have gone on to join the synagogue board, to learn to read Torah, and to seek out new careers.

As a congregation, by bringing us into conversation with one another and making familiar the faces and stories of our congregants. We often heard: “Really? We’ve been sitting together at services for years, but I never knew that about you!” The culture of deeply listening to one another also began to permeate the ethos of the congregation. For example, the BJ Shabbat Task Force used one-on-one conversations and house meetings to hear what congregants wanted Shabbat at BJ to be like in the 21st century. Panim el Panim’s model of grassroots, participatory decision-making has also provided an important complement to our strong rabbinic leadership, creating a valuable balance in our congregational culture.

As part of the larger community in which we live, by building coalitions with our neighborhood faith institutions, immigrant and community groups around the city, schools, social justice organizations, labor unions, and community-minded businesses. In addition, we have contributed our Judaism and our Jewish organizing culture to the larger social justice movement in New York.

Community brings mutual support. In contrast to the social isolation that characterizes many neighborhoods today, residents of healthy communities can and do turn to each other for help when the going gets rough. This kind of help is a safety net that we all need at one time or another in our lives.

A community-building effort draws the participants into relationships of mutual respect. As in all relationships, the coming together is not without conflict over differences. However, community-building efforts bring the best skills of organizational development and conflict resolution to bear so that *solution*, rather than *blame*, is the focus. This enables parties to see their

differences as assets they can contribute toward the common endeavor. A strong point of community building is that it focuses on concrete outcomes.

Community commitment to righting a social injustice and/or the establishment of a safety net draws participants beyond conventional barriers. Community building promotes productive working arrangements among community members in all their glorious diversity and differences.

Each of us has many stories to tell, stories that enlighten and inspire us and help us to identify what's important in our lives. Our Panim el Panim conversations have been transformative, both personally and for the community as a whole. They've enabled us to build relationships; we're learning about one another by asking questions we don't normally ask, and by telling stories we don't normally tell. And in this process, we have learned how, together, we can work on issues that are meaningful to us and, in turn, create a better world both inside and outside our community.