

# THE Inclusive

JOURNAL OF THE JEWISH OUTREACH INSTITUTE

## Introducing the Big Tent Judaism Coalition

“ The stranger that lives  
with you shall be to you  
like the native, and you shall  
love him or her as yourself. ”

(Leviticus 19:34)

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- Ten Principles of Big Tent Judaism
- “Welcoming our Newest ‘Joint Proprietors’” by Rabbi Larry Bach, Temple Mount Sinai, El Paso, TX
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- Media Coverage; Advocacy Think-Pieces; and More!



[www.JOI.org](http://www.JOI.org)

A photograph of a green door with a sign that says "All Are Welcome". The sign is white with blue text. The door is set in a white frame. The background is a blurred image of a building facade.

All Are  
Welcome

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## JEWISH OUTREACH INSTITUTE

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## THE INCLUSIVE

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## Vision Statement:

*The future of the North American Jewish community will be determined by the care, warmth, and wisdom with which we welcome and engage intermarried families and unengaged Jews into our midst.*

## Mission Statement:

*The Jewish Outreach Institute honors Jewish values by promoting a more welcoming and inclusive North American Jewish community that embraces intermarried families and unengaged Jews, and encourages their increased participation in Jewish life.*

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## An Invitation from the Executive Director



## Welcome!

There's a buzz in the Jewish community, and it's getting louder. I'm sure you've noticed. The debate has dissipated and in its place is a rising chorus, demanding that we find ways to welcome more newcomers into our community. This edition of *The Inclusive* is about giving a unified voice to that rising chorus, through a new initiative called Big Tent Judaism.

More than that, this is **an invitation for you to join your voice with ours**. The Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) is the founding member of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition, but it's not just a JOI project. Big Tent Judaism is *ours*, all of ours, and we need your help if it is to be a success.

If you are a communal professional or lay leader who finds resonance in these pages, please take the time to have your organization join the Big Tent Judaism Coalition at **[www.BigTentJudaism.org](http://www.BigTentJudaism.org)**. It's free for participating organizations and we believe it will provide great reward. If you want to get more involved, there are planning and steering opportunities as well.

If you are a funder, please consider supporting this initiative. Currently, Big Tent Judaism is funded by the generous philanthropists who provide general support to the Jewish Outreach Institute. We believe in Big Tent Judaism enough to commit our general funds, and we launched it because there is a need for it. However, our dreams, our big vision for Big Tent Judaism, can only come to fruition through the direct financial support of generous and engaged philanthropists who share our vision of a welcoming and inclusive Jewish community.

As always, we are happy to talk to anyone and everyone about the things we believe in passionately like the Big Tent Judaism Coalition, so please don't hesitate to be in touch by phone or email. Thank you for your interest, and for helping to build a more inclusive Jewish community,

## Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky

Executive Director

[KOlitzky@JOI.org](mailto:KOlitzky@JOI.org)

## Opening our Tent: What is the Big Tent Judaism Coalition?

*"[Abraham] was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, 'Friends, if it is alright with you, do not go rush ahead and pass me by. Let me bring you some water; bathe your feet and rest under the tree. And let me get you something to eat so that you may refresh yourselves....'*

*"Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Quick, grab three [measures] of our best flour! Knead it and bake some bread!' Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant, who rushed to prepare it. He took cheese and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on [the visitors] under the tree as they ate....The visitors set out from there and looked down toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off."  
(Gen 18:1-8, 16)*

The Torah doesn't waste words, and every word is sacred. So why is there so much detail about Abraham and Sarah's hospitality? Why did countless generations of scholars and scribes painstakingly preserve all that verbiage over thousands of years, rather than simply abbreviating it to: "Abraham fed his guests"?

Do we really need to know that the calf was "tender and choice," that the flour was their "best," and that Abraham "hastened" to serve it? The answer is yes, yes, and yes. Creating a welcoming environment is all about attention to detail, with the sole focus being on how comfortable our guests feel.



It is this very message — of *proactive hospitality* as we at the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) call it — that underlies a new movement in the organized Jewish community. Institutions including synagogues, JCCs and federations are seeking ways to welcome more newcomers and better serve those who have already crossed our threshold. There is a growing understanding that to deliver the ancient wisdom of our tradition to today's generations, we must become more "user friendly."

To better advocate for such a welcoming Jewish community, JOI has launched the Big Tent Judaism Coalition, inviting all Jewish organizations to join.

Big Tent Judaism uses the welcoming provided by Abraham and Sarah as a model for how to make people feel more welcome in our community. What we practice in our homes should be mimicked in our synagogues and community institutions. Abraham didn't wait. He rushed to greet his visitors. He made sure that they were comfortable and satiated. The volunteers and professionals in our Jewish institutions must follow the same methods for welcoming people into our communal "home".

Some will argue that creating a welcoming community is not enough. And we would agree. But we believe hospitality is the right place to start.

*Continued on pg. 4*

Continued from pg. 3: *Opening Our Tent*

If people don't feel comfortable inside the community, then they won't be there long enough to enjoy the additional riches that we have to offer.

## One Voice for Inclusivity

The Big Tent Judaism Coalition is the first time that Jewish organizations have joined together across national, denominational, and institutional lines to state their collective support for a more inclusive Jewish community. And it needs to be stated, over and over.

**Thus the FIRST of the Coalition's dual goals is to:** Provide professionals and lay leaders at Jewish institutions a unified voice across organizational and denominational lines to advocate for greater inclusiveness, while disseminating the skills and sensitivities needed to become a more welcoming community.

**"The Big Tent Judaism Coalition is the first time that Jewish organizations have joined together across national, denominational, and institutional lines to state their collective support for a more inclusive Jewish community."**

The Coalition will serve as a loud and constant reminder—as much for its own members as for everyone else—that at any given time there are more people on the "outside" of the organized Jewish community than on the "inside." We must welcome and serve them all. It's not about increasing membership levels or fundraising campaigns. It's about providing Jewish meaning and peoplehood to those who may not currently be involved as well as those who are already among us.

To join the Big Tent Judaism Coalition, organizations simply agree with a broad set of principles about how we can better welcome newcomers [see page 6]. While some organizations might not be practicing all the principles yet, they all aspire to do so.

Membership in the Big Tent Judaism Coalition has a number of benefits. Member organizations will be posted in a national, online directory of inclusive and welcoming Jewish organizations to attract newcomers (more on that below). Member organizations will also have the opportunity to network and join with other organizations that support the goals of Big Tent Judaism and are committed to advocating for an inclusive Jewish community.

Professionals from Big Tent Judaism Coalition organizations will be eligible for one free outreach consultation, and members will have access to outreach resources, including best practices and fundraising assistance for inclusive programming from JOI. A Big Tent Judaism "All Are Welcome" decal is given to new Coalition members to post at the entrance to their institution, and other useful giveaways are in the works.

As we reach a critical mass of Coalition members, the Big Tent Judaism Coalition will embark on advocacy campaigns and high-profile events to disseminate a message of welcoming. Together, the members of the Coalition will promote the ideals behind the Principles of Big Tent Judaism—lowering barriers to participation, providing quality "customer service," welcoming all newcomers, celebrating diversity, and so on.

*Rabbi Olitzky displays the Big Tent Judaism "All Are Welcome" window decal.*



The Big Tent Judaism Coalition was launched at JOI's national conference in Washington, DC, on October 14, 2007 [see page 9]. Afterwards, the immediate first priority was to invite organizations to join. Those that have joined so far are listed on the website directory at [www.BigTentJudaism.org](http://www.BigTentJudaism.org). [see back cover]

## Coming Together in One (Virtual) Location

The website directory is an important part of **the SECOND of the Coalition's dual goals, to:** Connect individuals and households not currently engaging with the organized Jewish community to local institutions that will be welcoming toward them through inclusive and meaningful programs.

The tagline for Big Tent Judaism is "All Are Welcome," and the organizations listed on the Big Tent Judaism website try their best to mean it.

### Statistics tell us that, as a generalization:

- Intermarried families tend to be less involved in the organized Jewish community than in-married families
- Single parents tend to be less involved than married parents
- Jews without children tend to be less involved than those with children
- Jewish adults who did not benefit from Jewish education as a child tend to be less involved than those who went to Hebrew school, Jewish summer camp, or on Israel trips
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people tend to be less involved than straight Jews
- Jews-of-color and multiracial families tend to be less involved than Ashkenazi Jews
- Those with physical or mental disabilities tend to be less involved than those who are currently well
- And so on, and so on.

All these examples speak to inadvertent barriers created when Jewish organizations overlook the truly diverse nature of our community. In contrast, the organizations in the Big Tent Judaism Coalition strive to serve *all* Jews, without an "ideal" type in mind.



Attendees at the launch of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition.

The website and additional future Big Tent Judaism initiatives will let all who would join us know that we want them to be a part of our community, and that we are here to help them find value and meaning in their Jewish heritage. (And if one particular organization doesn't have something that speaks to them, we'll help them find another Jewish organization that does, because we also acknowledge that each Jewish organization can't be all things to all people.)

The great challenge facing the organized Jewish community in the 21st Century is to create a warm home for all Jewish individuals and families, serving their unique needs and interests while at the same time also bringing everyone together as a community. We hope that the Big Tent Judaism Coalition will serve as an important vehicle through which we rise to meet this challenge. In doing so, we can expand Abraham and Sarah's tent to cover all those who would join us. ■



**Paul Golin** is Associate Executive Director of the Jewish Outreach Institute. To learn more about JOI's work, please email him at [PGolin@JOI.org](mailto:PGolin@JOI.org) or call (212) 760-1440.



# Ten Principles

## OF BIG TENT JUDAISM

Big Tent Judaism takes its lead from the values and vision of biblical forebearers Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was open on four sides to welcome all who approach.

### Coalition for an Inclusive Jewish Community

Individuals and organizations that practice Big Tent Judaism seek to engage, support and advocate for all those who would cast their lot with the Jewish people, regardless of prior knowledge or background.

The Big Tent Judaism Coalition is a group of Jewish communal institutions who strive to fulfill the principles of Big Tent Judaism in order to better create an inclusive and welcoming Jewish community, and who are willing to work toward the Coalition's goals through partnership, communication, and advocacy.

### Big Tent Judaism goals:

**CONNECT** individuals and households not currently engaging with the organized Jewish community to local institutions that will be welcoming toward them through inclusive and meaningful programs;

**PROVIDE** professionals and lay leaders at Jewish institutions a unified voice across organizational and denominational lines to advocate for greater inclusiveness, while disseminating the skills and sensitivities needed to become a more welcoming community.

### Membership Benefits:

Member organizations will be posted in a national, online directory of welcoming Jewish organizations to help newcomers find you. They will also have the opportunity to network and join with other organizations that support the goals of Big Tent Judaism and are committed to advocating for an inclusive Jewish community.

Professionals from your organization will be eligible for free outreach consultation and national networking through the Jewish Outreach Institute.

Members will have access to outreach resources, including best practices and fundraising assistance for inclusive programming from the Jewish Outreach Institute.

There is no cost to become a member organization of the Coalition.

### If you have questions, please contact:

**Liz Marcovitz**, program officer  
at the Jewish Outreach Institute  
212.760.1440 • [LMarcovitz@JOI.org](mailto:LMarcovitz@JOI.org)  
[www.BigTentJudaism.org](http://www.BigTentJudaism.org).

To reach and serve *all* Jewish individuals and households—including the majority who are not currently engaging in Jewish communal life—organizations in the Big Tent Judaism Coalition strive to...

## **1 Welcome All Newcomers**

Welcome everyone interested in finding Jewish meaning and community, including those from intermarried households, the unaffiliated, and other underserved populations;

## **2 Celebrate Diversity**

Celebrate the diversity of today's Jewish individuals and households; Leave behind assumptions about what Jews "look like" or how families are configured;

## **3 Offer "Free Samples"**

Recognize that outreach is not a membership drive but rather the providing of free and open access to a portion of Jewish communal activities; Increase the number of freely available Jewish activities, with no strings attached;

## **4 Deepen Jewish Engagement**

Deepen the Jewish engagement and identity of all Jewish individuals and households, regardless of their institutional affiliation (or lack thereof), by meeting them on an individual level; learning where they are in their "Jewish journey"; and offering them enticing relevant choices from the entire gamut of Jewish life;

## **5 Provide Quality "Customer Service"**

Acknowledge that Jewish communal professionals at all levels not only build community but also provide services, and therefore work in a "service industry"; As such, provide the same high quality of "customer service" that people expect from all other venues in which they spend their time and money;

## **6 Lower Barriers to Participation**

Identify and lower the "barriers to participation" in Jewish communal life that may be keeping away the less engaged, including but not limited to: cost, language, and expectation of Jewish literacy;

## **7 Increase Points of Access**

Increase access to our community not just by being available when people approach us, but also by going out to where people already are rather than waiting for them to come to us; Hold programs in secular venues, place advertisements in secular media, and partner with secular organizations;

## **8 Create Partnerships**

Collaborate with other Jewish organizations across institutional and denominational lines, because individual organizations cannot be all things to all people; Outreach works best as a community-wide endeavor;

## **9 Enlist Active Members for Outreach**

Energize the "inside" for the mission of outreach by training and sensitizing our most active members to create a warmer and friendlier community for those on the "outside"; Bridge the growing divide between engaged and unengaged Jewish individuals and households;

## **10 Better Best Practices**

Develop, share, and implement outreach best practices to help our communal professionals and volunteer leaders achieve these goals.

## Big Tent Judaism Principle 4: Deepen Jewish Engagement

### Making More Friends

By Dr. Misha Galperin



This past fall, I was honored to speak at the JOI Conference held in the nation's capital, where I serve as CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. I made a case then that I would like to affirm now about the importance of federations nationally taking on the issue of expanding the tent, of welcoming and inviting thousands of unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews into a rich and vibrant Jewish life and culture.

As the central agency in 155 cities across North America, few organizations are better equipped to reach out and create dynamic programs and a meaningful sense of belonging than federations. And, yet, not enough federations have taken this role seriously. Here in Washington, we do, and I want to share our thinking and planning with you.

In 2003, The Charles I. & Mary Kaplan Family Foundation commissioned a demographic study of our region which includes Washington DC, parts of Maryland and Northern Virginia. Not only is our community divided by denominations and different political affiliations, we are also geographically diverse. What we found was an unhappy statistic that I wake up to every day as the clarion call of my work. Fifty-two percent of area Jews do not affiliate with any Jewish institution. About one half of our community does not regard itself as part of our community – they say that they do not FEEL themselves to be a part of the Jewish community. That's not a statistic that I was prepared to live with – not today and not tomorrow, when the number if neglected would surely rise.

JOI came to Washington the following year and conducted an important scan for us, assessing the kind of accessibility and welcoming we do. Our institutions did not do well. We commissioned a marketing firm to help us identify opportunities to

reach a broader swath of the community. We asked noted sociologist, Dr. Steven Cohen, to compare the findings of our demographic study with the national figures to provide broader guidance. Our Board President David Butler appointed a Commission on Jewish Engagement to study the disenfranchisement that many Jews of our area experience. This Commission was tasked with writing a report of their findings, including practical recommendations for next steps. We had a community-wide summit for both lay leaders and Jewish communal professionals where Paul Golin of JOI and Steven Cohen addressed our participants about the challenges. We created a professional advisory committee that meets regularly to share best practices, and we developed a fundraising plan to jump-start and support engagement initiatives.

**“Significantly, the only definition of ‘connectedness’ we will require...is the subjective one: does the activity result in more people feeling connected to a part of the Jewish community and the Jewish People?”**

Our strategy has been multi-fold. We have tried to identify key populations to target, while raising the awareness among our agencies of the need to engage more area Jews in better, more meaningful ways. We have taken responsibility as the central community agency to be the catalyst for change, and we've tried to raise the money to match our raising of awareness so that institutions can experiment with new and creative programming.

Most importantly, we set a numerical goal. We attached a number to the challenge of engagement, just as we do to any financial campaign. We want to make a noticeable and perceptible change in the percentage of Jews who are Jewishly engaged in the Washington area. We want the 51% of Jews who currently feel connected to become 65% by the year 2016. In people terms, that amounts to at least 40,000 more Jewish individuals “doing Jewish” and feeling themselves as part of the community.

Significantly, the only definition of “connectedness” we will require programs we fund to demonstrate progress toward is the subjective one: does the activity result in more people feeling connected to a part of the Jewish community and the Jewish People?

Numbers can be a game, but they can also be a goal. If we want to make a difference and create the widest possible tent, then we have to show it in real and tangible ways. We have to be more loving, more open, more welcoming and more exciting. Our programs have to reflect that. Our marketing has to reflect that. Our agencies have to reflect that, and our leadership has to reflect that.

Our plan is ambitious. We believe it is also realistic. We are committed to making the numbers speak—maybe even sing—about a change in approach both dramatic and incremental that will make our community look vastly different within ten years from today. ■

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**Dr. Misha Galperin** is Executive Vice President and CEO of The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, which can be found online at [www.ShalomDC.org](http://www.ShalomDC.org).

*Announcing the 10 Principles of Big Tent Judaism.*



## Big Tent Judaism Principle 10: Better Best Practices

### Launch of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition

The Big Tent Judaism Coalition officially launched on October 14, 2007 in Washington, DC at the Jewish Outreach Institute’s National Conference, “Opening the Tent: Visions and Practices for a More Inclusive Jewish Community.”

During the ceremonies, each one of the 10 Principles of Big Tent Judaism [see page 6] was read by a Jewish communal professional or volunteer leader representing as wide a range of the Jewish community as possible: from JCCs, federations, JFCS, independent organizations, and synagogues of various movements, as well as individuals representing the in-married, intermarried, singles, Jews of color, and GLBT communities.

After announcing the 10 Principles, JOI executive director Rabbi Kerry Olitzky explained the goals of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition and invited everyone in attendance to join. He then introduced the 50-person choir from Congregation Temple Beth’El for a powerful musical performance that rocked the room to its foundations.

Congregation Temple Beth’El is a primarily African-American community from Philadelphia who describes their practice of Judaism as “Conservadox” and whose inspirational gospel-style reinterpretation of traditional Jewish liturgy will forever change our understanding of “Jewish music.” Afterwards, they shared dinner with the conference attendees and inspired a greater desire in us toward a more inclusive and spiritual Jewish community.

The rest of the conference, however, was as much about perspiration as inspiration, as we dug into the nuts-and-bolts of Jewish outreach—which is really hard work! **On the following two pages, the Washington Jewish Week provides a taste of the sessions offered during the conference, which included all aspects of outreach methodology and best practices.** ■

# Washington Jewish Week

Friday, October 19, 2007

## **Building the Jewish big top: Parley focuses on the art; science of outreach**

By Richard Greenberg  
*Associate Editor*

### **Imagine a refashioned American Jewish landscape.**

No more us versus them. No more insiders versus outsiders. Almost anyone could be an insider if he or she wanted to be, and it wouldn't matter whether the individual were intermarried or gay or situated elsewhere on what is now known as the periphery of American Jewish life. Everyone would be welcome in the big tent of Judaism.

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Translating that ideal of inclusivity into reality was the theme of the third annual conference of the Jewish Outreach Institute, which drew an estimated 350 participants – from rabbis to lay leaders to Jewish professionals – to Washington, D.C., earlier this week.

In fact, the three-day conference marked the launch of what JOI calls the "Big Tent Judaism National Campaign," which will explore an array of programs and strategies aimed at making the Jewish community a more welcoming and nurturing place.

"This is a conference for optimists and those who are willing to work hard to give wings to that optimism," JOI executive director Rabbi Kerry Olitzky told an appreciative audience on Sunday, the opening day of the conference.

The conference agenda included everything from nuts-and-bolts discussions of successful outreach initiatives to a presentation on "the outreach potential of popular entertainment" to personal vignettes from those who have lived life on the outskirts of American Judaism.

That group includes Olitzky, who told the listeners that he grew up "in a small Jewish community in the South. There were 1,000 kids in my high school grad-



The Congregation Temple Beth'El Choir sang with power and majesty to launch the Big Tent Judaism Coalition.

uation class. Two Jews, and I was one of them. So Christmastime was particularly challenging for me."

Keynote speaker Adam Bronfman, conference co-chair, has experienced life on both sides of the inclusion divide. Raised in a completely secular household, Bronfman married his high school sweetheart, who was not Jewish at the time, but later converted after raising their four children as Jews.

"My kids live in an identified Jewish home, yet when they go out, sometimes they're told they're not Jewish," Bronfman, managing director of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation, said in his Sunday night talk. "My story is not unique." In fact, he said the "issue of outsiders and insiders" is mulled over each day at his foundation.

"Rejection has unintended consequences, he added. "I think anyone who identifies as a Jew is a Jew; I don't have a threshold." Bronfman, however, conceded that perhaps because of his high-profile

name, he and his wife have encountered fewer obstacles than other intermarried couples. "I want that for everyone," he added.

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Longtime outreach activist Dottie Bennett of Falls Church led a workshop on laying the groundwork for successful engagement efforts. For example, Bennett said overtures to the area's Jewish gay and lesbian community have been noteworthy.

But even the most ambitious and sophisticated programming can be undermined, she warned, by poor customer service, such as curt or pro forma responses from Jewish agencies to inquiries from outsiders.



Rabbis Kerry Olitzky of the Jewish Outreach Institute (JOI) and Debra Bowen of Congregation Temple Beth'El of Philadelphia.

Some Washington-area institutions exhibited just such off-putting behavior, according to Bennett, until JOI was engaged by the federation in 2005 to conduct sensitivity training and help develop an out-

reach strategy.

"There has been a marked change in the community; it's wonderful now," added Bennett, who is national chair of Project Interchange Seminars in Israel, an institute of the American Jewish Committee.

Otherwise, the federation's 10-year blueprint (2007-2016) for fostering outreach focuses on four "markets" that it feels hold "the greatest opportunities for increasing engagement." They are: Jews in their 20s and 30s without children, Jews with young children, interfaith families and Jews in "under-engaged suburban areas."

Bennett told the listeners that although "it will take a huge amount of money" to reach these and other target groups, it will have been worth the effort.

"Once they're in the tent," she said, "I truly believe that miracles can happen." Michelle Weiss said she was drawn to the conference even though her synagogue, Conservative Congregation Etz Hayim of Arlington, is already very inclusive. For example, it offers English transliterations in its prayer books and has organized "ask the rabbi" sessions for parents of the synagogue's religious school students.

"I'm here because I wanted to learn how to open our doors even further," said Weiss, 28, the religious education director at Etz Hayim, which has about 170 families.

Institutions interested in joining the Big Tent coalition can sign up online to receive free outreach consultation, training and other resources. They will also be listed in an online directory of "welcoming organizations" to make it easier for newcomers to find them, according to Olitzky. ■

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JTA's **Sue Fishkoff** contributed to this article. Excerpts reprinted with permission of the *Washington Jewish Week* ([www.washingtonjewishweek.com](http://www.washingtonjewishweek.com)).

## Big Tent Judaism Principle 5: Providing Quality “Customer Service”

### Putting Out the Welcome Mat

By Michael D. Wise

*Hachnasat orchim;*  
Welcoming guests is a  
mitzvah (commandment).



Jewish folklore has it that Abraham and Sarah’s tent was kept open on all four sides in order to welcome and usher in all who passed by. Strangers—or the more accepted term, newcomers—were immediately welcomed as friends. Those who did accept the hospitality of Abraham’s family were cared for both physically and spiritually and made to feel as if part of the family. The concept of Abraham’s welcoming tent should be omnipresent throughout JCCs: our doors are open to everyone regardless of race or religious affiliation and all are welcome here.

**“This culture change is  
rooted firmly in the belief  
that our customers are  
our most important asset.”**

Since my tenure as executive director of the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, I have had the opportunity to expand and enhance this important value of Jewish welcoming by adopting one of the world’s most successful models of customer service, the Disney approach to quality service. To implement this agency-wide culture change, a senior member of our management team was sent to the Disney Institute in Orlando, Florida where he completed a comprehensive training in the Disney model of customer service.

This culture change is rooted firmly in the belief that our customers are our most important asset. Our JCC should be the central gathering place for every member of our community. Here, individuals and families of multiple faiths will find a warm and

welcoming home where social networking, the exchange of ideas, continuing education, and both physical and spiritual engagement are essential components of their JCC experience. Above all, our customers are given the utmost respect. It is simply not good enough to meet their expectations; we must, as an agency, exceed them.

The first step in knowing how to exceed expectations is understanding what our members want. How do we know what they want? We asked them.

### Creating Amazing Experiences

We chose to interpret the Disney model of quality service into four critical categories: training, “bumping the lamp,” policies and procedures, and setting.

We immediately implemented mandatory customer service training for all employees. Within three months, all employees had attended and successfully completed a two-hour training course. Staff name tags were created that included the birthplace of each employee in addition to a “service theme or statement”—“*Creating Amazing Experiences*”—informing our customers and our employees of the service we intend to deliver.

Beginning January 1, 2008, all new employees are required to attend a new-hire orientation week that includes working or spending time in every department—from support services to security—in order to better understand the inner workings of the agency. Additionally, all staff members are required to complete five hours of continuing education during a fiscal year. These hour-long classes include computer, sales and customer service offerings as well as supervisory and Judaic courses.

### “Bumping the Lamp”

The easiest way to exceed customer expectations is through what the Disney Institute calls “bumping the lamp.” “Bumping the lamp” is simply another way of saying “raising the bar”; it’s that extra special something that makes your customer say, “ah!” For example, the director of one of our after-school programs, Club J, is calling a different parent each week to discuss their child’s activities. This little added value goes a long way to developing



Stacey Lasky, an employee of the Marcus JCC, welcomes a newcomer and provides friendly assistance. (Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta)

enduring partnerships with our families at no additional monetary cost to the agency.

**“Shalom! Thanks for Calling the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. This is Rachel; How May I Help You?”**

Consistent messaging is critical to offering the ultimate customer experience. Today, all of our front desk staff is instructed to answer their phones with a warm tone and the added personalization of their name. External e-mail correspondence concludes with a professional “signature,” and staff who will be out of the office for more than 24 hours are instructed to leave voice mail messaging offering alternative personnel assistance.

**Setting the Stage**

Nothing is more important to exceeding customer expectations than setting the stage. While our campus is already aesthetically pleasing, we have added customer-friendly elements such as electronic totem signage; moved our membership and customer service office to a highly visible location next to the front door; and recently updated our fitness center facilities with new carpet and fresh paint. Of course, more physical plant improvements are slated for the future.

Throughout the Torah, there is no mitzvah mentioned more frequently than the mitzvah of “welcoming strangers or newcomers.” It is critical that we put out the welcome mat for every member of the community. Customer service is about the culture of our organization. It is the conveyor of our Jewish Values that cut to the core of our mission. As Walt Disney said, “You don’t build it for yourself. You know what the people want and you build it for them.” ■

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**Michael D. Wise** is CEO/Executive Director of the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta, which can be found online at [www.AtlantaJCC.org](http://www.AtlantaJCC.org).

## Big Tent Judaism Principle 9: Enlist Active Members for Outreach

### Welcoming Our Newest “Joint Proprietors”

By Rabbi Larry Bach



*The following d'var Torah was delivered on October 19, 2007 during a special Shabbat service celebrating new members.*

A coalition was born on Sunday afternoon in Washington DC. It wasn't a new alliance of Republicans or Democrats, nor was it a gathering of interests seeking to influence domestic policy. It was a group of Jews – rabbis, cantors, other professionals, and laypeople – coming together in common cause. “Big Tent Judaism” is what it's called.

Big Tent Judaism is an effort to “engage, support and advocate for all those who would cast their lot with the Jewish people.” The coalition is “a group of Jewish communal institutions who strive to create an inclusive and welcoming Jewish community.” It's got its own website, BigTentJudaism.org. It has held its first conference, and I'm so glad that our Outreach Director, Susan Jaffee, chose to be at that founding moment in Washington DC.

But more than websites and conference, the benchmark of authenticity in the Jewish world is the weekly *parashah*, and Big Tent Judaism has not one, but two of those as well. We read them this week and next, for Big Tent Judaism is a return to the Judaism of our very first ancestors, Abraham and Sarah.

Next week, when we read from *parashat Vayera*, we will be more fully and directly introduced to Abraham and Sarah's Big Tent, but the values described in its chapters imbue this week's portion, *Lech L'cha*, as well. Abraham and Sarah move from their home to the Land of Israel, bringing with them strong values and a new and renewing faith in God.

We are told that the journey is made by them, their nephew, and the “souls that they had made” in Haran. Our Tradition asks, “What does it mean to say ‘the souls they had made’?” and deduces that it refers to their outreach efforts. They shared their faith with those around them, and many people joined them in embracing the God of Israel.

A few key verses in the story of Abraham and Sarah tell us what we know about their Big Tent Judaism, and those verses are expanded and embellished in later Rabbinic tradition. We know from Torah that Abraham ran to welcome guests to his tent on a hot day in the desert, inviting them in for a little meal (which turned out to be a big meal!), washing their feet, and letting them rest. Tradition tells us that the three men were not human guests at all, but messengers of the Holy One. We know from Torah that Abraham planted a tamarisk tree near Be'er Sheva. Tradition tells us that the tamarisk – *eshel*, in Hebrew – was chosen because the letters of its name form the phrase *achilah, shtiyah, leinah*: “food, drink and lodging.” Abraham and Sarah were innkeepers, gathering in the passersby, feeding their bodies and their souls, giving them a place to rest.

**“Nowhere in the Torah does it say that Abraham and Sarah asked their guests to join the synagogue. For hospitality to be genuine, it must be offered without condition.”**

Nowhere in the Torah does it say that Abraham and Sarah asked their guests to join the synagogue. For hospitality to be genuine, it must be offered without condition. We, who are so used to the idea that “there's no such thing as a free lunch,” are sometimes confused by such hospitality. A year doesn't pass that I don't hear from some newcomer these words: “No, really Rabbi, how much are your High Holiday tickets?”

I am so proud that this synagogue has maintained the practice of offering its High Holiday services to all who choose to enter. I am proud of our partnership with the Jewish Federation which allows us to present Youth and Family programming to the entire Jewish

community. I am proud of our special outreach to soldiers and their families. I am proud of our efforts to welcome Jews-by-choice, intermarried families, and Jews from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. At Temple Mount Sinai we know that there isn't merely one way that Jewish families look, or act.

Could our tent be even bigger? Of course, and I imagine that Susan will challenge us all in the coming weeks and months to think about big and little fixes that will bring us closer to the ideal. But as we read from the *parshiot* that bring us the stories of Abraham and Sarah, let us celebrate the many ways in which we *have* gone into the family business, planting an *eshel* in this desert, providing food for the body and the soul, and rest for the weary.

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Preparing these remarks, I was struck by a certain contradiction in the message of my *d'var torah* and its place in a service celebrating new members. Let me quote myself: "Nowhere in the Torah does it say that Abraham and Sarah asked their guests to join the synagogue. For hospitality to be genuine, it must be offered without condition." A strange thing to say on

the night when we celebrate our new members! If the Big Tent people are right – and I think they are – synagogues that remain stuck in the mindset that "dues-paying membership" is the marker of Jewish commitment are going to dry up and die in the next few decades, as fewer and fewer Jews choose to enter tents whose flaps are zipped shut.

But the people we welcome tonight have made the extraordinary step of becoming not *guests* at the inn, but *joint proprietors*. They could have come to the inn on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur anyway, and we would have welcomed them. They have chosen to commit themselves to the work of this congregation with their dollars, and even more importantly, with their time and energy. They are our newest fellow innkeepers, and we welcome them to the team. May they find fulfillment through their connection to Temple Mount Sinai, and may their presence bless us all for many years to come. ■

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**Larry Bach** is Rabbi of Temple Mount Sinai in El Paso, Texas, which can be found online at [www.TempleMountSinai.com](http://www.TempleMountSinai.com).



Illustration by  
Ivana Bradanovic

# Jewish Telegraphic Agency

October 8, 2007



## Like Abraham and Sarah, Jewish world should welcome all into a “Big Tent”

**BY RABBI ELLIOT DORFF  
AND RABBI KERRY M. OLITZKY**

Imagine you are trekking through town on a scorching summer day when you pass a man sitting at the entrance to his home, which happens to have all its doors open. The man and his wife, whom you have never met, invite you into their home, provide you with water to drink, food to eat, a refreshing shower and even rest in their den or guest room.

While this may not seem plausible to most of us — city dweller or suburbanite — it is familiar to Bible readers. It is an updated version of the well-known story of Abraham and Sarah, Jewish ancestors who modeled a variety of important values and behaviors for us.

Long before the rabbis began to codify actions in Jewish law, Abraham and Sarah innocently modeled simple welcoming Jewish behavior. They did not just invite guests into their home; they served them. They offered them water with which to wash. And they provided them with physical and spiritual sustenance. Their actions actively communicated one message to their guests: All are welcome in our tent.

Certainly this story of Abraham and Sarah’s tent — as described in Genesis 18 and explicated in the midrash — is particularly timely as we begin the yearly cycle of Torah readings. Even more so, the story of Abraham and Sarah is directly relevant to what the Jewish community has become and where it wants to be.

The community today has the opportunity to realize its potential as one “Big Tent.” Like Abraham and Sarah, we can open our doors on all

sides to welcome, include and serve all who would enter, regardless of where they may be on their religious journeys, their choices of life partners, their race and anything else that has the potential to contribute to the beautiful diversity that has become the Jewish community.

“But rabbis,” some may respond, “my Jewish institution already is welcoming.”

We have no doubt your institution is welcoming — to you. For those of us on the “inside” — and we happily count ourselves among them — it is difficult to imagine our beloved Jewish homes, synagogues and organizations as potentially cold and unwelcoming places.

But we are insiders. Those who have not yet ventured into our homes, synagogues and community centers may not have experienced that sense of community. Perhaps they’ve never been invited. Or maybe they ventured in but we insiders did not rush to greet an unfamiliar face, instead expecting that job to fall to someone else.

The tension between how we feel about our institutions and how newcomers perceive them is one with which we must grapple.

It is why we have chosen to issue a challenge to everyone involved in the Jewish community: We must look at our institutions from the outside. We need to evaluate how our institutions can best welcome all newcomers, those who have not yet stepped over the threshold.

It’s time to put out our welcome mats. Let’s post signs that say “All are Welcome,” and state it in the marketing materials and on the Web sites of

our institutions.

To truly welcome all, we must look at why newcomers are choosing not to engage with the Jewish community and address those reasons head on. For example, the cost of membership and programming can often stand in the way of those who would like to engage in our institutions.

By giving newcomers “free samples” of our offerings, we can lower their barriers to participation and provide access to Jewish community programming.

We can make our institutions more welcoming by posting signs outside and within our buildings clearly indicating entrances and program locations. Let’s station greeters at our entrances before all events, like services at synagogue or book fairs at JCCs. We can even enlist active members in the mitzvah of outreach by encouraging them to invite newcomers to meals after such events or establishing a “buddy system” simply by introducing those with common interests to create more of a social connection.

We can offer a personal welcome by providing names of contact people in our organizations—and being responsive—rather than a general information number or “info@” e-mail address. And let’s make sure we have some basic yet enticing information available about what our organizations offer to newcomers, so the onus is not on them to navigate their way in by themselves.

Rabbis and lay leaders can lower literacy barriers by being more aware of their diverse populations; we should create a supportive environment for Hebrew and Yiddish translation and avoid other forms of “in-speak.” We must have programs specifically directed to different populations, including young adults, single parents, empty nesters and young couples with and without children.

Lay leaders and Jewish professionals can work together to plan programming outside of their institutional buildings to expand their reach to those who are not yet comfortable entering a

Jewish building.

The fear of a shrinking and increasingly unengaged Jewish population seems to pervade the thoughts of Jewish community leaders and philanthropists, and provides the motivation for many of our current communal programs and structures. But the Big Tent Judaism we are advocating emerges from the foundational value system of Judaism, which is not based in fear but rather in the joy of sharing what we find so wonderful about being Jewish.

It is time for the Jewish community to rally together around the issue of welcoming newcomers. No mitzvah is repeated more often in the Torah than to “welcome the stranger.” (“Stranger” is not our preferred translation because of its sometimes negative connotations in English, so we say “newcomer.”)

Welcoming newcomers is not the domain of just one movement or institution. We must coordinate across denominational and organizational lines to determine what works best in finding and reaching people, how we on the inside can engage those still on the outside, and what are the messages of meaning and value that will draw them in.

If we are to carry Abraham and Sarah’s message forward, we are obligated to join our voices together to advocate for a more welcoming and inclusive Jewish community. Together we can form a tent like Abraham and Sarah, and grow an inclusive and welcoming Jewish community. Together we can transform the Jewish community into a “Big Tent.” ■

**Rabbi Elliot Dorff** is the rector, Sol & Anne Dorff Distinguished Service Professor in Philosophy and the co-chair of the Bioethics Department at the American Jewish University and is on the Big Tent Judaism advisory board.

**Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky** is the executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, which will launch the Big Tent Judaism coalition ([www.BigTentJudaism.org](http://www.BigTentJudaism.org)) at its annual conference in Washington on Oct. 14, 2007.

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# The Forward

September 19, 2007



## Let's Put Out A Community Welcome Mat

**BY ADAM BRONFMAN**

I am both an insider and an outsider in the Jewish world. Because of my last name, Jews accept me warmly around the world and across the Jewish spectrum. But I am also an outsider. My Jewish education was limited as a child. I did not participate in communal or institutional Jewish life. The concept that I would need to marry-in to be accepted was never discussed.

I married the non-Jewish woman I fell in love with as a teenager, and we have raised four wonderful children. We have enjoyed an exclusively Jewish home for the better part of the last 18 years.

If not for my status as a "Bronfman," my connection to the Jewish world would be much more tenuous. Where do I fit in? What is my place in the Jewish world and in my Jewish community?

In speaking with young Jews around the country, I am convinced that my status as both "Jew" and "outsider" is not unique but increasingly the norm. How do we embrace this growing population? What benefits will accrue to both the institutions and those they might embrace who are currently uninvolved in Jewish life but also craving deeper spiritual meaning and communal involvement?

Our institutions must cease placing conditions on our acceptance of our people. Welcoming and embracing intermarried and unengaged Jews will strengthen and enrich Jewish life. Diversity of people and the ideas that naturally follow

allow for the greatest and most open of Jewish communities.

Jews with differing ideas can and should engage in an exploration of learning and exchange ideas and ideologies. The result of such a dialogue surely will be a greater respect and acceptance of all our people.

For too long, Jewish institutions have treated the intermarried, the less educated and the less observant as "less than." We have created outsiders and insiders, an "us" and a "them," and risk a catastrophic exodus from our people.

Our classic texts teach that we all have a place

**"I believe in the concept of big-tent Judaism, one in which anyone interested in learning about and expressing Judaism is welcome."**

at Sinai, that we are all equal in the eyes of our Creator. This group includes my wife, who was not born a Jew and who had not yet converted when our own children were born. Still, we found rabbis and communities that

welcomed us, and we were able to learn about Jewish life and how to raise our children as Jews.

I believe in the concept of big-tent Judaism, one in which anyone interested in learning about and expressing Judaism is welcome. I also believe that a majority of Jewish communal professionals

**“We must provide compelling answers for our next generations, not with a single answer — because there isn’t just one — but with a plurality of articulations.”**

Jewish community has been built up over many years and cannot be changed overnight.

Many of the institutions that feel the warmest to those already on the inside are the chilliest to new-

and lay leaders share this vision.

The challenge is to put this ideal into practical application across a wider segment of the community. Like a corporate culture, the insular nature of much of the

Adam Broffman delivered the rousing keynote address at the launch of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition during JOI’s national conference in Washington ,DC, on October 14, 2007.



comers, without the insiders ever realizing. Yet each of those insiders has friends and relatives that are not connecting to the Jewish community.

We must therefore be much more vocal about wanting an inclusive Jewish community. The conversation must be amplified, and more stakeholders involved. A number of high-level conferences have already taken place, including one hosted by the Samuel Bronfman Foundation this past summer to grapple with the question of “Why be Jewish?”

We must provide compelling answers for our next generations, not with a single answer — because there isn’t just one — but with a plurality of articulations. It won’t come from one conference of great thinkers, or even from 10. We must instead foster an ongoing dialogue to address this, as it is the great challenge facing American Judaism in the 21st century.

The goal is not to bring Judaism down to the lowest common denominator, but rather to build gradual ramps up into Judaism and Jewish meaning for newcomers at every age, regardless of background or Jewish literacy levels.

But the chorus must get louder. We must put out welcome mats and post signs that read, “All Are Welcome” — and we must mean it.

Because my wife and I were embraced, our children also have the distinction of being at Sinai. They are proud and engaged Jews.

If we exclude those who would invigorate and make us greater, what are we? If we embrace them, open our doors and lower our thresholds, we may find our greatest era is yet ahead of us. ■

**Adam Bronfman**, *managing director of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation, is a co-chair of the Jewish Outreach Institute’s 2007 annual conference.*

*This article originally appeared in the Forward (www.Forward.com), the National Jewish Newspaper. Reprinted with permission.*

# Get listed on the BIG TENT JUDAISM Website!

The Big Tent Judaism website is now live and full of helpful features in two separate sections to serve those who wish to **“Open Your Tent”** (Jewish lay leaders and professionals) and **“Find a Community”** (newcomers who wish to learn more about Judaism and the Jewish community).

Organizations that join the Big Tent Judaism Coalition are listed in an international **Directory of Welcoming Jewish Organizations** to help those interested in Judaism connect with their local communities.

## Additional features at BigTentJudaism.org include:

Resources to make Jewish organizations more welcoming including **tip sheets** and **holiday specific models for welcoming** (*coming soon*); Jewish holiday resources for newcomers to the Jewish community (*coming soon*); and an **“Ask a Rabbi”** feature. Check back frequently for updated directory information and resources for member organizations of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition and for newcomers to the Jewish community.



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