

Outreach Advocates Unveil Coalition at Confab, Set to Launch New Initiatives

By Sue Fishkoff

[Originally published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA.org) on October 16, 2007]

WASHINGTON — Rabbi Kerry Olitzky has been urging the Jewish community to be more welcoming to intermarried and unaffiliated families for the past 20 years.

Now the executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute and his New York-based organization seem poised for a major breakthrough.

At its oversubscribed conference in Washington last weekend, the institute launched a new national outreach advocacy coalition. This comes on the heels of a big growth spurt in outreach programming throughout the country.

"I'd like to believe we've reached the tipping point," said Olitzky, looking around at the 250 rabbis, Jewish educators, lay leaders and professionals who gathered for the three-day confab.

They were there to learn how to make their institutions more accessible and engaging—and, not coincidentally, to grow their memberships.

"We're sitting on top of something incredible here," said Rabbi Alvin Sugarman, rabbi emeritus of The Temple in Atlanta. "Two hundred and fifty this year, 2,500 next year. If Jewish continuity was the watchword for the past 10 years, now it's this."

The highlight of the get-together was Olitzky's announcement of the Big Tent Judaism Coalition, an online directory of Jewish institutions committed to inclusiveness and an open-door policy.

Anyone can sign onto the coalition at www.BigTentJudaism.org, Olitzky said, and become part of a national network that will share outreach resources, receive free training from institute staff and spread the message of inclusiveness—code for welcoming those not traditionally part of the Jewish community, particularly the intermarried, converts, and gays and lesbians.

"We will help those institutions that sign up to become more welcoming, and people looking can come to us and we'll put them in touch with these welcoming institutions," Olitzky said.

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Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, executive director of JOI, opens JOI's third annual national conference with the theme of creating a "Big Tent Judaism."



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Highlights: An Update on JOI Programming

Big Tent Judaism

JOI launched the Big Tent Judaism coalition and advocacy campaign at its recent conference in Washington, DC (see previous article).

Big Tent Judaism is an approach to Jewish community that takes its lead from the values and vision of our Biblical

forbearers Abraham and Sarah's tent, which was open on four sides to welcome all who approach. 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 JOI staff is currently signing up Jewish organizations for listing on the website directory, at www.BigTentJudaism.org, which also contains additional information about the initiative.



The Congregation Temple Beth-El choir helped launch the Big Tent Judaism initiative at JOI's National Conference, October 14, 2007.

The Grandparents Circle

A five-session program for Jewish grandparents whose adult children have intermarried, the Grandparents Circle will begin in late 2007 in Los Angeles and expand nationally in early 2008. The program was inspired by JOI executive director Rabbi Kerry Olitzky and associate executive director Paul Golin's book *Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do (And Not Do) to Nurture Jewish Identity in Their Grandchildren*. In addition to the course there is a national listserv, also providing grandparents with techniques for teaching their grandchildren about their Jewish heritage. To learn more about the program, please contact Liz Marcovitz at LMarcovitz@JOI.org or 212.760.1440, and visit www.GrandparentsCircle.org.

Call Synagogue Home

As part of JOI's partnership with STAR (Synagogues: Transformation And Renewal), JOI completed five training manuals for synagogues on reaching out and nurturing relationships with interfaith families during key lifecycle events such as weddings and bar/bat mitzvahs. Kerry Olitzky (along with STAR and additional JOI staff members) traveled to Atlanta, Philadelphia and Los Angeles to provide training on these methods to synagogue professionals and lay leaders in our pilot cohorts.

JOI's Outreach Toolkit for Hillel

Eva Stern and Kerry Olitzky participated in a Hillel Regional Staff Training conference at the Pearlstone Retreat Center in Reisterstown, MD, to present one of JOI's latest projects: a toolkit for Hillel Professionals. This emerged from the extensive work with Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life over the past 18 months and includes Public Space JudaismSM program implementation guides as well as JOI's Outreach Best Practices (including how to use welcoming language and proper name collection and follow-up) for the college campus.

Public Space Judaism

Eva Stern hosted a teleconference seminar for Jewish professionals from around North America to discuss ideas for creative programs that can turn summer and fall activities into opportunities for Jewish engagement—such as tying together back-to-school shopping with the High Holidays in JOI's "Color-Me Calendar for the Jewish New Year" program.

The Mothers Circle

JOI's program for women of other religious backgrounds raising Jewish children continues to grow and is now offered in over 25 cities across the country. New communities include: Allentown, PA; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA;





Charlotte, NC; Essex-Union County, NJ; Phoenix, AZ; San Francisco, CA; Sarasota, FL; and Springfield, MA. For a complete list of course locations and additional information about The Mothers Circle, please visit www.TheMothersCircle.org.



Over 25 local facilitators and coordinators of The Mothers Circle gathered for training and networking as part of an integrated track within JOI's recent national conference.

Community Transformation Initiative

JOI's initiative to show communities how their institutions appear to people on the outside—while providing them with ideas for becoming more inclusive and welcoming to all, especially the intermarried and unaffiliated—is in various stages in a number of communities. A sampling of our work over the last few months includes:

Kerry Olitzky served as the featured speaker and discussed the Community Transformation Initiative at the Jewish Federation of Portland's Annual Meeting and its Leadership Council.

After conducting a Community Outreach Scan and working with the community of MetroWest, New Jersey, Eva Stern and Kerry Olitzky returned to present a day of training to communal professionals and volunteer leaders in Morris County. JOI also conducted an in-depth Website Scan for the United Jewish Communities of MetroWest, which included tips and suggestions for making the site more welcoming for all users.

Speaking to area professionals as well as the Valley Alliance's Executive Committee and Women's Committee (Los Angeles), Eva Stern gave a presentation on the importance of employing effective, welcoming "gatekeepers" at Jewish communal institutions in order to transform new contacts into opportunities for outreach.

Conference in a Box

JOI published and is currently distributing a unique CD-Rom that serves as a "Do-It-Yourself Starters Kit to Jewish Outreach for Communal Professionals and Volunteer Leaders." The Conference in a Box includes program implementation guides and hundreds of outreach best-practices, with "sessions" on Lowering Barriers to Participation, Outreach Marketing, and Follow-Up for Deeper Engagement.

Empowering Ruth

Empowering Ruth, JOI's education and support experience for women Jews-by-choice that was piloted in New York in 2005, will be expanding nationally this spring, beginning in Atlanta. The course includes hands-on learning experiences including fieldtrips and Jewish cooking, all in an environment conducive to sharing and support. There is also a lively national listserve discussion already underway. Please visit www.EmpoweringRuth.org to learn more about the program and listserve.

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The institute has made a big push in the past two years to get outreach on top of the Jewish agenda.

Its Mothers Circle, a support group for non-Jewish women who are raising Jewish children, has exploded since late 2005 from one city to 26.

This year, with funding from the Samuel Bronfman Foundation, the institute began working with Hillel on 10 college campuses. This summer it began piloting a synagogue outreach program for intermarried families in Atlanta, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

The Grandparents Circle, a support group for grandparents with intermarried children, is set to kick off in Los Angeles, and in the spring the institute hopes to offer Empowering Ruth, a multi-week course to teach new women converts the practical details of building Jewish homes.

These projects require funders who believe in outreach, Olitzky noted, as well as communal organizations willing to give up their private fiefdoms and work together.

More and more Jewish communities have bought into the outreach agenda. "Outreach and engagement are the No. 1 priority for our federation today," said Dottie Bennett, a lay leader at the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, echoing



Conference co-chair Adam Bronfman, managing director of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation, delivers the keynote address and speaks about how his own interfaith family was warmly welcomed into the Jewish community—and how that must become the norm for all intermarried households that would join us.

sentiments shared by many of her colleagues.

While there was a good cross-section of liberal rabbis at the conference, the Orthodox buy-in is still negligible. Rabbi David Rebibo of Phoenix was one of just two Orthodox rabbis there.



Although cautious about opening Jewish doors too wide, Rebibo said the Orthodox world shares the same concerns about dwindling Jewish engagement.

“Outreach and engagement are the No. 1 priority for our federation today.”

—Dottie Bennett, Jewish Federation of Greater Washington

"We can't be blind to what's going on," he said. "The concept of being welcoming is important. So is education. What, do I want a little club of just Orthodox?"

Even rabbis from the liberal denominations said that outreach always involves setting boundaries.

Rabbi Brigitte Rosenberg, spiritual leader of the United Hebrew Congregation in St. Louis, noted that she is a Reform rabbi who does not officiate at interfaith weddings.

"To some people, that means I'm not welcoming," she said.

Rosenberg said she appreciated having the chance to hear from Jewish leaders outside her own movement.

"What's the goal of outreach?" she asked rhetorically. "Is the tent open to everybody, or are there standards? What maintains the validity of a Jewish community?"

You Can Help!

We believe "outreach" is about the organized Jewish community giving, not asking, so all JOI programming is free to participants. However, these programs still require resources to operate. If you are already engaged in the community and consider it important to share what's great about being Jewish with those on the periphery, please consider making a financial contribution to support our work.

Thank you for your generosity and commitment.

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QUESTIONS?

Please contact Paul Golin, associate executive director, at: PGolin@JOI.org or call (212) 760-1440.