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Prophetic Voices

JFSJ's national congregation-based community organizing e-newsletter

A Conversation with Rabbi Eric Gurvis

In this issue of Prophetic Voices, we are pleased to share a conversation with Rabbi Eric Gurvis, a leader in Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO) in the Greater Boston area.

We at JFSJ hear stories from around the country about how organizing engages synagogue members who otherwise may never have become leaders in their congregations. We hear stories of how the work of organizing has woven a fabric of deep and lasting relationships between members of congregations large and small.

Rabbi Gurvis exemplifies exactly that sort of success. He and the lay leaders at Temple Shalom of Newton have been pursuing this work for nearly four years through their local Industrial Areas Foundation Affiliate, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). We hope you find his story as inspiring as we did.

*L'shalom,
Rachel Feldman, Associate Director of Organizing
Shuli Passow, Director of Community Initiatives*

JFSJ: How did your congregation first become involved with organizing? What were you hoping to get out of it?

Rabbi Gurvis: About five years ago, I knew of other congregations in the area who were involved and started talking with staff. At first, there was some push-back from folks who thought we weren't ready - but also eagerness from congregants who wanted to get engaged. We came to a point of transition and I said, "If we wait until we're ready we'll never be ready. If it doesn't work then it doesn't work." If you don't take some risks you don't grow - not in terms of numbers, but as people and communities. I called [Rabbi] Jonah [Pesner] and said, it's time for us to have lunch. Jonah said I ought to meet with Larry Gordon, the organizer from Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). Within a week Larry and I were at breakfast.

After several conversations, we cooked up a plan to get rabbis from a whole bunch of congregations together to talk and learn about organizing. For a year and half, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist rabbis met every six weeks or so I did the logistics, Larry did the training. Six months into it, several of us agreed we'd bring together a group of lay leaders.

On a Thursday night in the middle of July we packed the room at a synagogue in Brookline. There were [leaders from] five or six synagogues, and a large group from my shul, including key leaders. I came back in the fall and preached a sermon on Yom Kippur Morning 2006 called "We've Got to Get Organized." I called a meeting for people who were interested in being involved and a slew of people came out.

Some of the people who have gotten involved were regulars, but also people who were minimally involved in anything in congregational life. This opportunity really got people's attention.

With some fits and starts we got the congregational leadership to commit to joining GBIO. We were welcomed as members of GBIO at its 10th Anniversary Action and had 25 to 30 people there. New people who are interested in becoming involved seem to pop-up every time there's a GBIO assembly.

In what ways have you seen individuals grow as leaders through organizing?

The lay leaders in my congregation have been incredible. The whole process has fostered communication and relationship building within the congregation. People have been intrigued and have stepped forward and said "I'd like to be part of this." People who previously were not seen as leaders have taken on leadership roles through this process. People who were nervous to lead their first house meetings went ahead and then they'd come back saying "that was amazing." And that's not unique to Temple Shalom.

There is a different energy within the congregation. There's a strong sense of: "We're very proud of ourselves for the role we now play in this community." When I came here 11 years ago, the congregation was a great congregation programmatically and systems-wise - however, there was something of a wall around the congregation. We were not involved in the Reform movement, not involved in the greater Boston Jewish community, and not involved in greater Boston interfaith work. I don't think anyone would question now that Temple Shalom is a player in the community on all levels.

How has organizing impacted you and your rabbinate?

The organizing has really pushed me. After the first event I went to, Jonah asked me if I wanted to come to a meeting with a candidate running for governor. I ended up in a room with a group of clergy from GBIO including Reverend Hurman Hamilton, President of GBIO. Soon enough, the gubernatorial candidate arrived and ended up sitting right next to me. I left that meeting so energized.

Here it is three and a half years later; Hurman is one of my closest friends. We led an interfaith clergy mission to Israel together. I have clergy colleagues all over Boston with whom I regularly meet. The way I view the work I do whether it's with *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* students, or families - there's a different way I approach those meetings now.

I was at the last K'hilot K'doshot conference [*JFSJ's second national gathering for synagogues engaged in CBCO, held in February 2007*]. It was one of the best conferences I've ever attended. I think that might have been the moment when I said: I can't hand this off to someone else. I love this.

Beyond all the good social action we do, now we're involved in social justice work. Our 8th and 9th grade curriculum have become based on this. Everything I'm doing, everywhere I look, I'm trying to make meetings relational and not task meetings. This has profoundly impacted my vision and my work as a rabbi. Some seem to think I've become the poster child for pushing and pulling my colleagues, and, specifically in the case of congregations where the assistant has been doing the work, for them to see they have the support of the senior.


Also, it's been fun!

Is there any advice you'd give to other congregations?

Get connected. None of us can do this alone, and you can't do it from reading a book. Get some people to a training. It's the type of thing you learn from doing. If you really want to build your *k'hillah*, organizing is the way to do it. It gets people talking about things in their lives that are real. It is an amazing process for vitalizing a congregation.

Rabbi Eric Gurvis is Senior Rabbi of Temple Shalom in Newton, Massachusetts and a leader in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation. His rabbinic career spans more than 25 years, and included synagogues in New York City, Jackson, Mississippi, and Teaneck, New Jersey, before coming to Temple Shalom.

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