

BUILDING SYNAGOGUES THAT RELATE

Turning a shul from an edifice into a welcoming centre of learning and friendship is Dr Ron Wolfson's specialty. The US educator, who will be the scholar-in-residence at this year's Union for Progressive Judaism (UPJ) conference, chats with Peter Kohn.

Dr Ron Wolfson is set to speak at the UPJ Biennial Conference in Perth in November.

Attendees of the UPJ conference in Sydney in 2012 were fascinated by your approach to what you call "relational Judaism" and the need for synagogues to offer not just programs but relationships with and between congregants. Four years on, what's new in your teaching in this field?

Since I saw you last, my book *Relational Judaism* came out in 2013 and has been very well received among synagogue leaders, which is exciting. I look forward to bringing that follow-up work to the conference in November.

How does the new book connect with your original work, *The Spirituality of Welcoming*?

In the first book, I expounded on what we'd learned in Synagogue 2000 [an initiative, later upgraded as Synagogue 3000, in which Wolfson and co-founder Rabbi Laurence Hoffman visited hundreds of North American synagogues – Reform, Conservative and Orthodox – to see how they could become better at attracting, engaging and retaining congregants]. In the latest book, I look far deeper at exactly how we can build that synagogue of relationship, and that's what I hope to talk about in Perth.

How can synagogues attract, engage and retain members?

The first issue [attracting people] is one of recruitment and marketing. How do we offer something unique to people who are very busy in their lives and have other mechanisms for connecting? Let me ask you, how is synagogue membership different from being on Facebook? There's no question that many people find a social connection through social media. How do we offer a community of spirituality and sacred relationships – face to face – in the era of Facebook?

How do synagogues attract new people?

People need not just a warm welcome, which is what I talked about at the UPJ conference four years ago, they need an opportunity for their stories to be heard. That's how new members of a synagogue can be engaged,

that is, integrated into the life of their new community.

How do new members find "engagement"?

They need to find something after they've volunteered for committees. They will ask themselves: "Do I have a relationship with the rabbi and with the synagogue leadership?" But they also need relationships with each other. Do they have a group of friends within the congregation?

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What's "transactional Judaism"?

In North America, a fair number of people still consider their relationship with the synagogue to be "transactional". Along the lines of, "You give me a rabbi on call, some High Holy Days seats and a bar mitzvah for my child and when I'm done with you, I'm out of here." Those people haven't really engaged, they haven't found friends in that synagogue community. And how does that individual become linked to Judaism itself, how do we help them become more informed, connected Jews? That's the ultimate mission of a synagogue – everything else is just a methodology to get there.

And how do synagogues retain their members?

That's the important third area. In the North American Reform movement, about 70-80 per cent of members disappear after their children are bar and bat mitzvah. That's troubling, it means we're not retaining people. Millennials and gen-Xers are generally distrustful of anything organised, including religious organisations. These demographics are now marrying later, which means it is years later that they have children and feel the need for religious education for their kids. At the other end, you have the empty nesters and baby

boomers who may not want to stay involved if they see only families and young children. So you have two gaps, and a much smaller base in between.

How did you initially become interested in the dynamism of synagogues?

I grew up as a "shul kid" at Beth El, a Conservative synagogue in Omaha, Nebraska. We'd walk to shul on Shabbat and my mother sang in the choir. I worked in synagogues as a Jewish educator during college, and when I completed my PhD, I moved to California to do a postdoctoral masters degree in Jewish studies. [He is now the Fingerhut Professor of Education in the Graduate Centre for Education at the American Jewish University in California.] I've always believed that Judaism rests on three pillars – family, synagogue and community, and I've dealt with each of these aspects at various stages of my teaching career.

You're particularly interested in how Chabad has become successful. In your opinion, what is it they do so well?

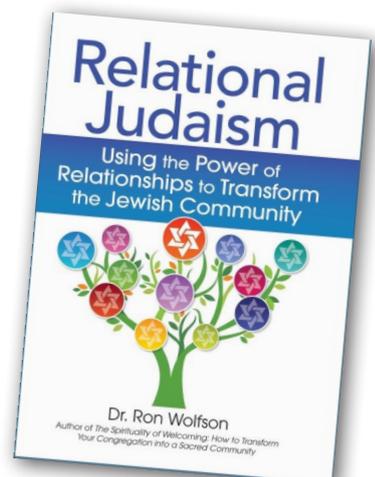
They focus their energy on going to meet people, in order to engage them, and also to raise funds. I interviewed some of the top fundraisers in the North American Jewish community and they all said that fundraising is really "friend raising". People generally give to those they know and trust. That's relationships, and you only have relationships when you know people – their stories, their passions, their talents, their families. Then you know them and they know you. That's the hard work of relationship building, and Chabad does it as well as any organisation I know. It's rare to meet a Chabad rabbi who won't invite you to a Shabbat meal or a shul service or a study session.

In Australia we have every size of synagogue from large congregations in major cities to some tiny congregations in regional areas. In which kind are relationships easier to form?

There are similar and different challenges. In smaller congregations, even if there are

financial challenges due to a small member base, it's harder for individuals to "disappear" [not be noticed and acknowledged] and it's easier to build relationships. Good ideas that work in small places, such as voluntary synagogue dues, may not work in large places, and vice versa. It's more challenging to build relationships in a large synagogue, and a rabbi only has so much time, but some of the larger Reform congregations in North America have created the role of "engagement directors". Their task is to build small groups within the synagogue community and find each congregant a place of connection and meaning.

Dr Ron Wolfson will be the scholar-in-residence at the Union for Progressive Judaism biennial conference in Perth, November 17-20. The registration deadline is November 1. For more information, email jocelyn@upj.org.au; To register, visit www.upj.org.au.



Dr Ron Wolfson's most recent book.