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by Jane Herman

"God has sent you to help the needy," says the Leover Hassidic Rebbe, "not to refer the poor back to God."

Indeed. Since the economy began its freefall, Reform Jews, congregations, and institutions are responding with compassionate and useful initiatives to support their communities and beyond.

One year ago, Rabbi Don Weber, spiritual leader of **Temple Rodeph Torah in Marlboro, New Jersey**, issued a Rosh Hashanah call to action to a congregation overflowing with attorneys, physicians, and accountants, as well as human resource, mental health, and real estate professionals: Let's join together to help those in need. The result is TRTCares, an all-volunteer enterprise offering no-cost, confidential, one-on-one legal, financial, and real estate expertise as well as career counseling, a job bank, and stress-related health support. Co-chairs David Levy, a real estate developer, and Mindy Rubin, a financial professional, oversee the dozen volunteers who refer incoming calls to the program's cadre of professional advisors, maintain more than thirty client relationships, and manage public relations as well as the volunteers.



Levy is proud of "the benefit TRTCares has brought to those in need." Experts have helped with such complex issues as debt restructuring and small business survivability, and offered emotional counseling, too.

Also he cites "the overwhelming volunteer response, both from within and outside our congregation." As of May 2009 some 120 volunteers provide one-on-one services and/or career counseling workshops.

While Rubin and Levy acknowledge that the program took considerable start-up time, requiring the congregation to ensure everything was done correctly in a legal sense before it officially got underway (for example, all TRTCares volunteers and seekers of services must sign a liability waiver to protect the temple before entering the program), they also believe it would not be difficult for other congregations to establish a similar initiative. TRTCares costs the congregation a total of \$25 per month for the cellphone subscription. Furthermore, by design, no one advisor contributes more than two hours of time each month. "Don't hesitate to ask us for advice!" Levy says. "We'd be thrilled to share our success story with others."



A "Jewish Spiritual Stimulus Package" is **Calabasas, California Congregation Or Ami's** response to turbulent economic times. For three weeks last December, 26 Or Ami Caring Callers—board members, other synagogue leaders, veteran members, and new ones—contacted every one of the synagogue's 350 families to check in, listen, and offer support as needed. Congregant Kim Gubner, who spearheaded the Caring Callers initiative, told the volunteer callers: "Think of yourself as a cheerleader, rallying the troops and being a leader in an act of raising someone's spirits. Think of yourself as an extension of Rabbi Paul Kipnes' caring.... You are helping to be his eyes and ears as you touch base with people... [and] say, 'Or Ami is here for you.'

"People were thrilled," she says, "that we were not calling to raise money, but rather to make sure they were doing OK." And Gubner regularly updated the rabbi about families needing employment, financial, and/or emotional support.

These days, unemployed congregants receive free resumé preparation, job search, and networking seminars as well as individual job coaching sessions, thanks to congregant and management consultant Steve Keleman and other volunteers from Or Ami, working in conjunction with management coach Deborah Galant from Temple Adat Elohim in Thousand Oaks, California and Jewish Vocational Service in Los Angeles. An Or Ami committee initiates contact with members who have fallen behind in their membership dues, as well as with other families believed to be in need. Rabbi Kipnes offers emotional and spiritual counsel, as well as frequent referrals to Jewish Family Service and local therapists. "I try to remind people that, similar to the Israelites in the Torah, we are wandering in the wilderness," he says. "We know the fear of the unknown. We recognize that the wandering may go on a while—hopefully not 40 years—but we will

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find our way to a better situation, to a land filled with promise.”

Other Jewish Spiritual Stimulus Package benefits include “Parents’ Night Out,” allowing moms and dads an evening out while adults or specially trained temple youth provide no-cost childcare that includes cupcake baking, board games, and other kid-friendly activities; a monthly nature walk in the local mountains led by Or Ami President Sue Gould and congregant Donald Goldsobel, offering support within the congregational family in beautiful surroundings; and “Hang Out at the Synagogue,” a day when members help with synagogue projects, kibbitz, and snack on leftover one-g cookies. These activities, Gould says, provide participants with purpose and structure, and have resulted in new friendships.



At **Temple Jeremiah in Northfield, Illinois**, new friendships, increased attendance, and stronger member connections are added benefits of the congregation’s online job bank and weekly accountability networking group. “When I had a period of unemployment some years ago, people in my synagogue were incredibly helpful, and [this is] a way to pass that along,” says temple member and human resource professional Charles Gurian, who co-facilitates the group with two other congregants, human resources professionals Jody Haas-Wolfson and Ross Wolfson. Wolfson feels compelled to help because he has “the expertise to offer, and that is what our temple community is all about.”

Participant Julie Kosarin credits the meetings with offering “practical and imaginative suggestions as well as a familial type of ‘kick in the pants’ when it comes to pursuing leads and creating opportunities.” She acknowledges that “in the past, I never thought of shul as a place to deal with my work or career. My spiritual life was focused on my relationship with God as well as the usual aspects of holidays, rituals, celebrations, and occasional sorrows. This experience has revealed yet another aspect of what it means to be part of a caring Jewish community.”



During the recession that hit the dot-com industry in the early 2000s, **Temple Sinai in Oakland** developed an employment networking group and job bank. While that group disbanded when the economy improved, a similar group of 25 congregants reformed last year, facilitated by congregant and licensed psychologist Sherry Sherman.

Approximately half of each get-together is devoted to helping members deal with the isolation, anxiety, and helplessness they face as job seekers. “They need to hear that others are in the same situation,” she says. Group member Stuart Koplowitz agrees. “Job loss is a very traumatic thing, and sometimes you just get down,” he says. “It’s comforting to know that others understand what you’re going through.” Members then work in small groups on topics of interest, such as how to continue unemployment benefits, develop an “elevator speech” for prospective employers, and overcome feeling stuck in the job search process. Approximately once a month, they hear from other professionals: an inhouse recruiter, meditation instructor, executive coach. Between sessions, members communicate through a Yahoo group, and, in an effort to reach out to others, recently volunteered together at a local food bank.



In Weston, Florida, **Congregation Dor Dorim** member Perry Horn gratefully acknowledges her community’s support as she seeks employment in the accounting field. Once a month at the temple, congregants who are human resources and recruitment professionals offer job workshops to the wider community. The resume preparation tips were especially useful to Horn, who, with help, was able to make hers stand out. “The congregation is like a family,” Horn says. “They are always there for you unconditionally.”

Since the employment workshops’ official beginning in December, its organizer and leader Steve Karp, a human resource firm president, estimates that “we have helped approximately 50 individuals from around Broward County [acquire] the tools to compete for jobs, and at least three have credited us with helping them attain offers and employment.”

Karp notes that lack of employment “is sometimes viewed as a stigma” and that it can be “tough to get people to attend job support workshops.” He advises other congregations to “communicate, communicate, communicate...and don’t limit your participants to temple members. Helping any person, wherever he/she lives and regardless of religious affiliation, is the most important objective.”



Other programs abound. A job transition team at **Bet Shalom Congregation in Minnetonka, Minnesota** offers monthly job support sessions; a recent one on the professional networking site LinkedIn, open to the community-at-large, led to useful connections for a number of participants. At **Congregation B’nai Israel in Boca Raton**, congregants provide career and job transition services, financial planning, legal advice, stress management techniques, and more to the B’nai Israel family as part of the “People Helping People” initiative. And both **Congregation Shir Hadash in Los Gatos, California** and **Temple Beth El in Aptos, California** offer facilitator-led job support groups concentrating on interviewing skills, resume preparation,

alternative career options, and online tools, including the job banks found on many synagogue websites.



The Union for Reform Judaism is also providing congregations with **the resources to help them support their members**: "How To Create a Synagogue Support Group," "How To Create a Job Bank," "Talking with People Affected by the Economic Downturn," "A Prayer for Times of Financial Uncertainty," "How To Talk to Children During Tough Economic Times," and more. In addition, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism offers temples road-tested ideas for job search programming. **Search "job banks" at the RAC website.**

Throughout North America, Reform Jews are stepping up to sustain those adversely affected by the economy.

—*Jane E. Herman, writer and assistant to Union for Reform Judaism President Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie and contributor (as JanetheWriter) to the [rj.org](http://rj.org) blog.*

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