

It had been a time of suffering in my life. I had been feeling alone, wondering where the loving Presence who'd hummed within me for years had vanished in my pain.

Can I explain this? Looking out at these women—I beheld.

No roaring thunder. No flaming glory. God: in the faces of women registering anguish, pulled involuntarily towards another's pain.

Years later, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel re-gifted me this moment in poetry and theology.

For Heschel, God is first and foremost the One who suffers with us.

Heschel builds on rabbinic and Kabbalistic portrayals of God's empathic identification with our distress. A midrash teaches that God speaks to Moses from within the burning thorns, as "a companion in our anguish." Another, that God enters into exile with us weeping, resonating with our pain like a twin, crying out: "When your arm is heavy, my arm is heavy."

The Kabbalah weaves an entire cosmology around this concept: the celestial Bride separates from her Husband to accompany us into exile. Human pain (continued on page 62)

Congregation-Based Organizing BY BENJAMIN ROSS

Synagogue. Organizing. Until recently, these words rarely appeared in the same paragraph, much less the same sentence.

Yet since Jewish FundS for Justice (JFSJ) began its support for synagogue organizing five years ago, the number of congregations engaged in this work has increased from thirty to eighty. Two years ago, a conference designed to bring together synagogues interested in engaging in community-based organizing drew 130 synagogue leaders. (There is still time to sign up for this year's conference, Feb 11–13 in Santa Clara, California: www.jewishjustice.org). This past summer the Reform movement created Just Congregations, its own program to advance synagogue organizing. With as many as thirty congregations exploring membership in their local interfaith organizing network in 2007 alone, we may be approaching a tipping point.

So, what is synagogue organizing, or congregation-based community organizing, as it is often called?

Congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) was a social change strategy developed by Saul Alinsky, an organizer from Chicago, who was Jewish. Alinsky founded the Industrial Areas Foundation in the 1950s, which over time became a national organization with local networks made up almost exclusively of neighborhood churches. The foundation of synagogue organizing is built around hundreds of one-to-one conversations where congregants connect, stories emerge, and leaders are identified. People talk about what keeps them up at night and why *tzedek*, or justice, is important to them. The result of these conversations is the emergence of common concerns within the congregation. These concerns become the basis for action.

Today there are several major national CBCO networks. They have been involved in some of the most successful local organizing efforts, spearheading the living wage movement, expanding health insurance, and building affordable housing, among others.

Although the organizing groups have always been ecumenical, they have rarely been interfaith, with limited participation from synagogues.

Yet through a concerted effort by JFSJ, open-minded synagogues, and the networks themselves, that has begun to change. The goal of synagogue organizing is to address the lack of sustained engagement in social justice activities beyond direct service programs in the Jewish world. The aim is to challenge congregations to address systemic issues relating to poverty and social injustice. Additionally, as Rabbi Toba Spitzer of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek notes, organizing "has also been an important learning about how to begin to think about social justice organizing in a predominantly middle/upper-middle class community by getting folks to take their own struggles seriously as social problems."

All across the United States, lay leaders and clergy are launching grassroots organizing campaigns inside their synagogues, joining interfaith coalitions and fighting for structural change. What this looks like depends on the community: healthcare for all (Boston), immigrant worker rights (Omaha), language access at hospitals (Bay Area), truancy (Columbus, Ohio), and access to affordable housing (Chicago, and many other cities), to name a few of the recent campaigns. Traditional and critical synagogue service projects—the soup kitchens and shelters—long the cornerstone of our community's justice work, are now informing and being complemented by this new wave of justice.

Rabbi Janet Marder summarizes one of the key cultural shifts that CBCO enables: moving justice to the core of the congregation. "I was troubled by the very idea of a social action committee—a small group of people performing social justice work on behalf of others—as if this work was marginal to the life of a synagogue, rather than central to everything we do. CBCO has helped bring social justice from the periphery into the center, into the forefront of our consciousness, so that it is integrated into all aspects of congregational life."

Moving social justice to the center of Jewish life: that is the essence of congregation-based community organizing.

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