

Why Jewish Organizations Should Rent Space to 12-Step Meetings

Imagine a situation in which thousands of Jews all over the world are sitting in churches every week. Every kind of Jew, sitting in every kind of church. Many of them are wishing they could be sitting in a synagogue instead, but they can't. It is hard to think of another situation for which the organized Jewish community wasn't actively seeking a solution so those Jews could come into synagogue instead of church.

So who are these Jews? These are Jews in recovery from addiction of every sort: alcohol and other drugs, compulsive overeating, gambling ...the list goes on. These are also Jews whose loved ones are struggling with addiction, because addiction is devastating to the family system. These are all Jews attending 12-Step meetings.

They sit in church basements and classrooms, church libraries and studies. To some it doesn't matter, and to others it matters a great deal. Yet they all understand *Pikuach haNefesh*, even if they don't know it as a Jewish concept. The belief that saving a life...in this case their own...is more important than any restrictions on or discomfort in entering a church. And make no mistake, these meetings can and do save lives. Hundreds of thousands of lives, many thousands of Jewish lives among them. These Jews know that meetings are saving their lives and they had no Jewish alternative to the church because so few Jewishly-affiliated sites rent space to 12-Step and other peer-support recovery meetings.

12-Step meetings take place in many venues. The two most common locations are churches and Alano clubs, which are public spaces rented exclusively for meetings of 12-Step fellowships. Meetings also take place in hospitals and homes, community centers and treatment programs, schools and offices...any space where two or more individuals who want to be free of addiction can talk confidentially together.

JCFS Chicago applauds those forward-thinking synagogues and other communal organizations that rent space to 12-Step meetings. Yet despite the heroin crisis among our community's Jewish suburban youth, Narcotics Anonymous, Heroin Anonymous, and Nar-Anon meetings are nonexistent in Jewish locations. Other 12-Step fellowships such as Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, or Marijuana Anonymous are rarely held in Jewish locations despite the community-wide impact of overeating, gambling and cannabis misuse. We are not aware of any SMART Recovery meetings, a CBT-based peer support recovery program, in Jewish locations.

Historic and current reasons exist for this trend away from synagogues and other Jewish spaces renting to 12-step meetings. The misperception that addiction does not exist in the Jewish community is certainly chief among them. There is a longstanding myth that Jews are somehow immune to addictive behavior. Remember "a shikker is a goy"? If only that was true. Our best understanding is that the Jewish population is affected by addiction at roughly the same rate as the general population, about 10%. For example, the total Jewish population of Chicagoland is approximately 250,000. There could be upwards of 25,000 Jews struggling with addiction in the Greater Chicago area, and four times more who are impacted by the addiction of a family member.

Safety concerns are also prominent; the worldwide Jewish community is well aware of the threat of violence against us. Will being open to public meetings compromise our security measures, making us more vulnerable to attack? Beyond the general concern regarding anti-Semitic violence, there is fear of the participants themselves. Are those who need 12-Step meetings inherently dangerous to others in the building? Concern for children's safety is most commonly mentioned.

There are responses to and resolutions for such concerns. Some responses are easy, some are more challenging. Yet all concerns have been overcome by Jewish organizations that are committed to addressing this community need. As a first step, educating Jewish communal leadership is crucial. Many Jewishly-affiliated sites are unfamiliar with the dynamics that surround addiction and recovery. For example, one often hears of a congregation choosing not to rent space to recovery meetings in the belief that its members would not attend. Through education it can be explained that welcoming 12-Step meetings is not necessarily for the benefit of one's own membership. Rather, doing so provides a Jewishly-identified meeting site for Jews from other congregations or areas. Some individuals do not want to attend meetings in their own neighborhood due to confidentiality concerns but do want to be in a Jewish space. Since anonymity and confidentiality are common concerns in a tight-knit community like ours, Jews can and do travel to more distant congregations to attend recovery meetings. Therefore, any Jewish site that welcomes addiction recovery meetings is doing so for the greater good of the Jewish community, not necessarily or exclusively for their own members.

Additionally, each congregation or organization that welcomes peer support meetings is helping to spread the word that addiction is a Jewish issue and recovery is a Jewish value and priority. The more such Jewish sites there are, the less shame and stigma this issue will have. Reducing shame and stigma has a direct impact on the likelihood that Jews who are impacted by addictive behavior will come out of isolation and look for support. Addiction is a chronic, progressive, ultimately fatal disease unless treated, and like other such illnesses, early detection and treatment can make the difference between a life saved and a life lost.

Finally, welcoming a peer support recovery meeting into one's building sends a message to current *and* prospective members. There is meaning in making this decision. Taking such action says that this congregation or organization is willing to do something new for the wellbeing of its members and the Jewish community as a whole. This congregation or organization is thinking creatively about what the Jewish community needs. This congregation or organization understands the very real challenges Jews face today. This congregation or organization takes the *mitzvah* of *tikkun olam* seriously. This congregation or organization cares...and wants to attract members who share these values.

Together we can encourage more Jewishly-affiliated sites to welcome recovery with open arms and for the right reasons. If you are active in a congregation or Jewish organization, please consider approaching your administrators or clergy about renting space to a 12-Step or other peer support meeting. If you are one of the decision makers, take action. Contact one of your local recovery program service offices to let them know you are interested in renting space to a recovery meeting. JCFS addiction services staff can help get the process started; contact me at bethfishman@jcfs.org. Please help increase the number of Jewish organizations that are ready to say "Yes, we want to be part of the solution to addiction within the Jewish community."

--- Beth Fishman, PhD

Director, Jewish Center for Addiction, JCFS Chicago

Published eJewishPhilanthropy.org

January 2016