



Jewish Organizations Should Rent Space to Mutual Support 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 and other addiction recovery 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 Nefesh*, whether or not they know it as a Jewish concept. *Pikuach Nefesh* teaches 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 spaces in which to attend because so few Jewishly affiliated sites rent space to 12-Step and other mutual-support recovery meetings.

Mutual support 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. Mutual support 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 mutual support meetings. Yet despite the severe impact of opioid use, problematic gambling and sports betting, and cannabis misuse on Jewish individuals and families, mutual support meetings that address these concerns are also virtually unknown in Jewish locations.

Historic and current reasons exist for this trend away from synagogues and other Jewish spaces renting to mutual support 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 antisemitic violence, there is fear of the participants themselves. Are those who attend mutual support 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 addiction recovery 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 organizations to attend recovery meetings. Therefore, any Jewish site that welcomes mutual support 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 mutual 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 considered 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 mutual 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 realistically about what the Jewish community needs. This congregation or organization understands the very real challenges Jews face today. This congregation or organization takes the *teachings of pikuach nefesh* and *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. If you are active in a congregation or Jewish organization, please consider approaching your leadership renting space to mutual support meetings. 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 or [contact me](#) for assistance. Let's all say "Yes, we want to be part of the solution to addiction within the Jewish community."

Note: As a service to the Jewish community, JCFS Chicago addiction services maintains and distributes a [list of recovery meetings](#), both mutual support meetings in Jewish spaces in the Chicago area and Zoom meetings created by the North American Jewish community for Jews worldwide.

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