



The Power that Makes for Righteousness: CBCO as a Reconstructionist approach to living a Godly life

“Jewish civilization is a means to greater ends—the fulfillment of the individual, the responsibility of individuals to treat others as reflections of the divine image, and the responsibility of each community to seek global justice and peace among all communities.”

—Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach*

Today, increasing numbers of synagogues are engaging in interfaith campaigns on vital issues of local concern, from expanding health coverage for low income workers to building affordable housing. In 2002, JFSJ launched a national initiative to encourage and support synagogues as they deepen their social justice efforts through congregation-based community organizing (CBCO). The CBCO model of activism unites a diverse range of people, primarily through religious congregations, in the shared goal of building a civic power base capable of making change to promote the public good.

In 2006, The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation began partnering with JFSJ and received a grant to help begin developing a network and resources for Reconstructionist communities in CBCO work. As well, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College began offering training in the model of CBCO activism beginning in the winter of 2007.

Jewish values-based decision making based on maximal participation in our communities is at the core of a Reconstructionist approach to Jewish life and sustainable co-existence for all people (s) on this planet.

For Reconstructionists, CBCO is a natural extension of our commitment to tikkun hanefesh (leading a healthy, meaningful individual life) and tikkun olam (rebalancing and repairing the world we are part of). This implies involving individual and communal energy and resources in the area of social justice and community organizing across the religious and cultural spectrum.

What is congregation-based community organizing?

Three core components of the synagogue organizing model are essential to the process:

- Congregants engage in one-to-one conversations (called “one-to-ones”) within their synagogue, and often with other congregations, about their social justice passions.
- Leaders engage in extensive clergy and lay leadership training and development.
- Synagogue leaders work side-by-side with dozens of faith institutions and progressive organizations in their community, across lines of race, class, and faith.

What is its impact?

Each of these components strengthens lay leaders, is a vehicle for congregational development, and builds strong bridges between Jews and other community leaders and institutions. Eventually, as this model grows deeper roots in synagogues across North America, we hope it will create a strong synagogue-based voice for creating healthier communities. Examples of this work could include calling for universal health care, a higher minimum wage, or more affordable housing.

Lisa Schneier, Dorshei Tzedek, Newton, MA:

“One-to-ones are counter-cultural in our society. These interactions create a deep sense of connection. We become aware of each other on another level, leading to internal actions. We become able to create structures in our community that can respond to people’s stated needs. The level of contact with one another transforms the community and deepens people’s level of connection to the community.”

Karen Greenberg-Perkus, Society for the Advancement of Judaism, New York, NY:

“I did a number of one-to-ones with SAJ members and found them to be very rewarding. But before that, I was interviewed by a member of our congregation who made me feel very comfortable by taking a keen interest in everything I had to say my Jewish background and my commitment to social action. I was then able to approach other people in the same manner, and I learned a lot about who they were, what really mattered to them, why they were members of our synagogue, and what their aspirations were. I think the one-on-ones are a wonderful way to bind people together and make them feel like they’re a community and important to one another, which merely labeling the membership “a community” cannot do. I would recommend that all synagogues do it.”

Rabbi Toba Spitzer, Dorshei Tzedek, Newton, MA:

“Especially in regards to our efforts fighting for affordable healthcare, we discovered that there are really no issues that Dorshei Tzedek is going to “win” by itself. Taking a bus to Washington D.C., is nice but won’t be enough to pass a bill. But we passed a health care bill through GBIO. It’s hard to imagine any other type of activism that would have the same type of concrete actual results. At Dorshei Tzedek, this is our main Tikkun Olam activity right now. It isn’t displacing other initiatives.”

Rabbi Elliott Tepperman, Bnai Keshet, Montclair, NJ:

“At our best, Reconstructionists are willing to experiment and to act. If we immerse ourselves in this work we will be better Reconstructionists. Our critiques/perspectives will be a “gift” to the CBCO network- so that every single Reconstructionist shul will be involved in doing this work.”

Rabbi Brant Rosen, JRC, Evanston , IL:

“I’m thinking of the term “organic community” which was coined by Mordecai Kaplan, which defines Jewish identity and self through belonging and connections with other people. CBCO reflects a new way of harnessing this energy. It is very Reconstructionist.”

Rabbi Shawn Israel Zevit, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Jenkintown, PA:

“CBCO parallels a Reconstructionist approach to Jewish communal life, melding the aspects of Tikkun Olam, the balance of the world with Tikkun Hanefesh, the aspect of interpersonal relationship healing as well. Powerful actions that are derived from a connection to justice, faith and communitarian values, make congregation-based community organizing and the work of JFSJ a natural partnership for us.”



(Left to Right) Rabbis Shawn Zevit, Jonah Pesner, and Elliott Tepperman at a CBCO action in California

For more information on CBCO work and the variety of other tikkun olam programs and resources available through JRF visit <http://www.jrf.org/cbco>, or contact Rabbi Shawn Zevit at SZevit@jrf.org, 215-885-5601, #24