



## JEWISH LEADERSHIP CASE SERIES

No. 1

# A CHARISMATIC COMMUNITY: CONGREGATION B'NAI JESHURUN

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### INTRODUCTION: LINING UP ON BROADWAY

UNLESS Congregation B'nai Jeshurun shut its doors to keep out Jews seeking to worship, the standing-room only crowd it drew regularly to Friday night services would place it in violation of New York City fire codes. The Church of Saint Paul and Saint Andrew which housed the services following the collapse of the synagogue's roof was no small edifice. But even the 1,200-seat cathedral could not accommodate B'nai Jeshurun's ever-growing crowd of worshipers

In January 1996, B'nai Jeshurun decided that rather than turn people away, it would hold Shabbat services in shifts, first at 5:30 and again at 7:00. The hiring of Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein the previous summer facilitated this move, allowing Rabbi J. Rolando "Roly" Matalon to divide the shifts with him. The employment of a country-western musician-turned-rabbinic student spared *Chazan* Ari Priven from having to provide music for both services.

The solution had an unintended consequence. With the cathedral in use for the early service, those waiting to enter for the late shift took to lining up outside the main doors. As the weeks passed and attendance continued to climb, the line grew ever longer, stretching an entire city block until it reached Broadway. Once on Broadway, it was only a matter of time before *The New York Times* picked up the story, which it did in a December 1996 article prominently placed on the front page of the Metro section. If B'nai Jeshurun was already popular among young Jews, the line on Broadway and the *Times* coverage conferred quasi-official status as a "New York phenomenon."

The *Times*, curious visitors, and Jewish communities around the world began asking the same question: What is going on behind those doors that is worth lining up outside in the winter for? To which the Jewish communities added another question: Can we do this in our synagogues?

This case study addresses these questions. It is the product of ethnographic participant-observation, in-depth interviews with community leaders, and documentary analysis conducted over a two-and-a-half year period. The ethnographic method takes account of the official philosophies, approaches and strategies as articulated by the rabbis and lay leadership of the congregation, but it does not rely on stated policy alone. Oftentimes, the essence of a social group cannot be found in official policies and strategies, but must be sought in the actual behavior of the group itself.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Congregation B'nai Jeshurun is a growing synagogue community on Manhattan's Upper West Side. A spirit of informal familiarity reigns, and members refer to it simply as "BJ." In this spirit, the rabbis and cantor eschew titles and are known simply by their first names.

Though established in 1825 as the first Ashkenazi congregation in the United States, its current incarnation can be dated to August 1985 when Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer was installed as rabbi. Prior to Marshall's arrival, membership had declined to about 40 families and the congregation faced extinction. Searching for a rabbi who might revive the congregation, board member Judy Stern Peck found Marshall Meyer, a charismatic American rabbi who had spent the past 25 years in Argentina.<sup>1</sup>

Marshall had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1959, freshly-minted from the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was greatly influenced by his teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel. He spent three years as the junior rabbi at the prestigious Congregacion Israelita Argentina. Marshall quickly emerged as the head of a younger, more change-oriented faction of the synagogue, and broke away to form Comunidad Bet El in 1962. Bet El quickly became known among younger Jews for its spiritually-uplifting, intellectually-provocative services. Within a year, Bet El had grown to about 500 members, and soon surpassed Congregacion Israelita Argentina as the largest congregation in Buenos Aires. In addition to his congregational duties, Marshall initiated a program of institution-building for Latin American Jewry including a South American Camp Ramah, and a seminary for the training of rabbis, the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano.

In 1976, the Argentine military seized power. Endangering his life and the lives of his family, Marshall became an outspoken critic of the regime's human rights abuses. His personal encounter with fascism and his courageous stance against the junta's atrocities not only shaped his philosophy, but endowed Marshall with a rare moral authority that further enhanced his stature as a charismatic leader.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Yael Ridberg, "Congregation B'nai Jeshurun: The Revival of a *Kehilla Kedosha*," Unpublished paper (1996).

<sup>2</sup>Gerdy Trachtman, "Marshall T. Meyer: The Rabbi Who Changed the Face of Latin American Jewry," Unpublished paper (1996).

After coming to B'nai Jeshurun, Marshall hand-picked Roly and Ari, his former students in Argentina, to serve as co-rabbi and musical director. Ari's keyboard-playing during services was a departure from the norm in the Conservative movement, with which B'nai Jeshurun was formally affiliated. BJ later severed its ties with the movement's congregational union, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. Initial disputes over dues evolved into disagreements over matters of principle—specifically, over the USCJ's refusal to renew the contract of a gay man due to his sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup> BJ is currently an independent congregation, with rabbis and rabbinic interns from the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements.

B'nai Jeshurun was well on the road to recovery when tragedy struck twice. First, in May 1991, the ceiling of the 73-year-old sanctuary collapsed, forcing the congregation to seek shelter elsewhere. The Church of Saint Paul and Saint Andrew (SPSA) provided BJ a temporary home in its cathedral. Then, in 1993, the community was stunned by Marshall's sudden illness and death.

Roly and Ari led the still-growing congregation, which then numbered over 1,100 families. The congregation was becoming well-known in Jewish communities around the world, was attracting more young adults to its Friday evening services at SPSA, and was expanding the amount and breadth of its programming. In 1995, the congregation hired Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein from Congregation Or Shalom in Santiago, Chile to join Roly as rabbi of B'nai Jeshurun. Marcelo, too, was Marshall's student in Argentina—a not insignificant fact to the congregation.

In 1996, at Chanukah, BJ rededicated its synagogue. Having repaired the ceiling, it took the opportunity to redesign the physical space to allow for the informality and egalitarianism which had come to characterize the congregation in its new incarnation. It replaced the pews with movable chairs and lowered the imposing *bimah*<sup>4</sup> onto a small wheeled-platform, level with the congregation.

Having grown too large for the synagogue, BJ continues to maintain SPSA as part of its "campus," and now holds the late Friday night service and Shabbat morning services there. Above the pulpit hangs a large banner that reads, "How good it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in harmony." The banner was hung jointly by BJ and SPSA soon after the synagogue moved into the space. Contrary to popular belief, the banner was not hung to hide a cross. The Methodist church had removed all crucifixes from the sanctuary out of respect for the sensitivities of the Jewish worshipers.

BJ currently has a membership of over 1,700 families, and attracts weekly to its Shabbat eve worship services approximately 2,000 adults, mostly singles and couples aged 22-50, many of whom are not members. Although the laity commonly refers to the

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<sup>3</sup>Ridberg, 7.

<sup>4</sup>Pulpit

early service at the synagogue as the "family service," as opposed to the later "singles' service" at SPSA, the demographic distinctions between the two are no longer as pronounced as they had once been.

### **THE SHABBAT SERVICE**

The service is most visible to outsiders . . . and we've been successful in making a service people can connect to. It's definitely the main entrance to the community, but there are other things to support that structure. – Chazan Ari Priven

In spite of its broad range of programs and activities, B'nai Jeshurun's 2000-person Friday night service captures most of the attention. Attempts to bring some of BJ's energy to other communities, through the national Synagogue 2000 program, or Philadelphia's "Friday Night Alive!" have generally sought to learn from the "BJ-style service" to the exclusion of other elements that give B'nai Jeshurun its vitality.

The focus is understandable, considering how different the service is from conventional American Jewish modes of prayer. Music plays an essential role—in setting a mood, in welcoming newcomers, in enabling ecstasy, and in non-verbally communicating instructions to the congregation.

The skilled use of musical accompaniment gives the rabbis and *chazan* greater power to create a musical ambience than would exist were they to follow the traditional practice of worshipping *a cappella*. The keyboard's booming organ setting is reserved primarily for the rare moments of solo cantorial singing. A lighter, electric piano setting is often used to play bouncy tunes that highlight rhythm and repetition—elements which encourage singing along. Although the service is almost entirely in Hebrew, hasidic style *nigunim*, or wordless melodies, are common. These allow people who know no Hebrew and choose not to use the transliterations to join in singing *lai-dai-dai* to the tunes used for the prayers, and are important in helping newcomers feel welcome and part of the service.

As rhythm and repetition become more prominent in a song, participation levels increase, and people become swept away. Clapping, swaying, and even dancing, unheard of in most synagogue services, are regular features of the Friday night service at BJ. Of course, different sub-communities of B'nai Jeshurun probably take different attitudes to the desirability of ecstasy in worship. But those who view it as desirable have set the tone for the congregation. In part, this is because they form a critical mass. In part, it is because many of these people are insiders. In part, it is because they have articulated this norm.

The role of these congregants should not be underestimated. When BJ has taken its service on the road, to Philadelphia or Synagogue 2000, it has taken steps to ensure that in the congregation would be people already familiar with the service who could

help create an environment in which ecstatic worship was acceptable. One can imagine how the experiment could fail if the congregation were too self-conscious to let go. In this regard, the great numbers at BJ's services provide a sense of anonymity that allows even newcomers to let themselves be swept away without the degree of self-consciousness that might occur to someone entering a smaller, more intimate community.

Ecstatic worship is also legitimized through leadership by example. It is not uncommon to see Roly and Marcelo lead prayers with their eyes tightly closed in a look of deep concentration, fists clenched and thrusting to emphasize certain words in the prayers, or pounding the pulpit to keep beat with the music. Extended meditative silence is also a regular feature of the worship service.

But perhaps the most emphatic indicator of the enthusiasm generated during services is the much-talked-about dancing. Dancing is a regular feature of the Shabbat eve service, occurring during the singing of the *L'cha Dodi* prayer. Its roots lie in the congregation's history. Legend has it that when the ceiling collapsed between Friday night and Saturday morning, Marshall admonished his distraught congregants for mourning a building. Had it occurred only a few hours earlier or later, people could have been killed. They should be dancing, he said.

The transition from prayer to dance is a smooth one. No rabbi interrupts to announce that congregation will now dance. Rather, a trademark musical phrase cues the congregation that the time has come. On rare occasions when the musical cue is not played, confusion is evident among congregants who do not know whether to dance or remain seated.

Devotional fervor, even though evidenced and encouraged, is thus kept firmly under control by those at the pulpit and piano. Music serves as a key form of non-verbal communication that the clergy use to focus the expression of ecstatic worship. By guiding the congregation through an ecstatic religious experience, Roly, Marcelo and Ari make such an experience accessible to more people than might otherwise have it if left to their own devices. Through their leadership and with the congregation's support, devotional fervor is not haphazard and individual, but rather communal, organized and accessible to many.

## **CORE VALUES**

Is B'nai Jeshurun's emergence as a "phenomenon" merely the result of this innovative use of music in the service? Ask congregants why they are drawn to B'nai Jeshurun and often you will hear that BJ articulates a message that resonates. To be sure, that message includes the value of authentic prayer, emotionally experienced. But this is only one element of a vision that emphasizes the search for personal meaning through study, meditation, worship and community, and is uncompromising in its advocacy of social action on behalf of a liberal political agenda.

Rabbi Yael Ridberg, a former Marshall T. Meyer Rabbinic Fellow at B'nai Jeshurun, emphasized the *combination* of elements, describing BJ's philosophy as

"holistic Judaism." Writing in *Conservative Judaism*<sup>5</sup>, Rabbi Eugene Weiner, a friend of Marshall's who was instrumental in bringing him to BJ, suggests that Marshall created "an institutional model" characterized by a combination of aesthetics, theatrical sophistication, and a "definite political and social stand." Marshall, he says, combined these in a way that addresses the "deepest concerns and commitments" of young Jews who "delighted to the aesthetic artistry of a spiritual quest for meaning."

Even with Marshall gone, the rabbis continue to speak passionately from the pulpit, endowing with religious significance participation in the annual walk to raise money for AIDS research, and support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And on the Shabbat prior to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day the congregation traditionally concludes services singing "We Shall Overcome."

Marshall and Roly's 1993 mission statement for the congregation sets forth a vision of an intimate, inclusive community, in which spirituality, aesthetics, study, and social action inspire people with a sense of purpose and holiness. According to the statement, the congregation is based on the following principles:

- To provide "friendship, caring and sharing in an atmosphere of intimacy"
- To be "inclusive, progressive . . . [and] egalitarian;" to "welcome and respect all Jews regardless of their sexual orientation, race or ethnic background;" and to "welcome all Jews in interfaith marriages."
- To "discover the relevance of our tradition" through studying sacred texts "regularly, seriously and committedly."
- To "create a liturgical expression that reflects our need to praise, to thank; to question, to wrestle with God" and to encourage "other aesthetic expressions of the search to encounter God."
- "We do not want to create ghetto Jews, nor do we want to have rootless children who believe in a vacuous universalism without specific identity. They must learn to respond to the Jewish world and to all humanity from a Jewish ethical stance. . . ."

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<sup>5</sup>Eugene Weiner, "The Challenge of Engaging Post-Assimilationist Jews," *Conservative Judaism* (Fall 1996): 3-13.

"We believe that our community has a unique message for New York Jewry today, and, beyond that, for the strife-ridden, poverty-beaten, vulnerable and alienated citizens of our city. . . . To this end we plan to educate ourselves so that we may better understand the burning issues of metropolitan New York; to influence and advocate public policy, and to offer direct service."

B'nai Jeshurun deliberately attempts to construct meaning through an intimate, religious, holistic community. If life in New York City is characterized by isolation, secularity and fragmentation, then BJ's ideal is resistance through the creation of a religious community in the heart of the metropolis. It demands that the blas\_urban attitude be replaced by a passionate caring for others, both for fellow congregant and downtrodden stranger. It demands that cosmopolitan intellectualism be suspended to allow the mystery of God to be experienced and felt. It demands that the impersonal and superficial relationships of the city-dweller be refocused into a network of synagogue-centered primary contacts. It demands that alienated individualism give way to "a deep sense of responsibility" to a community. And it demands that the community, in turn, provide for the "spiritual, social, economic, and intellectual needs" of the individual.

## **SACRED HISTORY**

The election of Marcelo as associate rabbi in 1995, and the rededication of the synagogue building in December 1996 were both times when the congregation retold its history. In both cases, it became clear that the congregation constructed a mythologized account of its history. B'nai Jeshurun's "creation myth" not only conveyed historical facts, but also assigned to these facts transcendent meanings. The retelling of the congregation's history imparted to the new members B'nai Jeshurun's collective memories and the meanings associated with them.

Despite the fact that B'nai Jeshurun is 174 years old, the "creation myth" begins in the years immediately preceding 1985. The story celebrates a charismatic leader whose message resurrected a dead congregation, sustained it and inspired it to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. In the process, the congregation repeatedly turned adversity into opportunity. Under the guidance of the charismatic leader's charismatic disciples, the congregation remained faithful to the message of its beloved leader, and so ensured its continued success.

Here, gleaned from the congregations' newsletters, commemorative books, sermons and speeches from these two occasions, is BJ's sacred history in the words of its rabbis and members.

***Marshall brings a synagogue back from the dead:***

In the 1970's, "B'nai Jeshurun experienced a devastating decline which continued until 1985, when Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer arrived from Buenos Aires, and B'nai Jeshurun began to flourish."

"In 1985, the year before Marshall came to BJ, the congregation had dwindled to 100 families. Assembling a *minyan*<sup>6</sup> for Shabbat services was a never ending challenge. . . . BJ was in danger of closing its doors forever."

"'Then Marshall came' [Mary Gross] recalls. 'He was wonderful. A very special man.' At that time there were only twenty-five members of the congregation. 'He brought the place, all of us, back to life.'"

"Anxiety was high that summer for the handful of leaders who had committed to rebuilding the community. Marshall's first Shabbat was attended by eight people (he and Naomi [his wife] completed the *minyan*.) With the High Holy Days just weeks away, there was great concern that the sanctuary would be empty for Rosh Hashanah. Instead, it was full and has been ever since."

***Its temple destroyed, B'nai Jeshurun wanders in exile and grows from the experience:***

"Eight o'clock in the morning, Saturday, May 18, 1991. Opening the 88th Street building to set up for Shabbat services, the custodian discovers a large section of the sanctuary ceiling—a half ton of plaster—smashed to bits on the *bimah*. What seems at the time to be a disaster, what surely would have been a catastrophe had it happened a few hours earlier or later, instead will open extraordinary new vistas for B'nai Jeshurun."

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<sup>6</sup>Quorum of ten required for prayer.



"None of us who was privileged to be there that Shabbat morning will ever forget that service in the ballroom/gym of the Heschel School. The *kavannah*<sup>7</sup>, the singing, the tears and the dancing (that was the first time we danced during services!) transported our souls to a higher realm of devotion."

"In that instant, the congregation was freed from the constraints imposed by the 88th Street sanctuary's original theater-style design. . . . First in the Heschel School Gym, and for the past five years at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, we have experienced physical spaces which allow the rabbis to be part of the congregation rather than raised above it as performers. We have been able to add dancing as an expression of our joy on Shabbat."

"Instead of the crisis that could have followed our move from our beloved and beautiful Sanctuary we have experienced spiritual elation, unprecedented growth and vigor, and a rededication to true Jewish and humanistic values."

"When we moved out of that building, on 88th Street, because of the ceiling, the congregation started a . . . rapid growth. . . . When we came to this building [SPSA], some of you will remember, on Friday nights, not even the downstairs was full. . . . And then we started growing very rapidly."

***B'nai Jeshurun forges a lasting interfaith bond:***

"When the ceiling caved in five and a half years ago, our neighbors at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew opened the doors of their sanctuary to us, and we were and are profoundly grateful. But as BJ members crossed the threshold of the SPSA sanctuary, our communities together opened a door of a far greater magnitude than any of us could have imagined: a door to a mutually respectful, caring and supportive interfaith partnership."

***B'nai Jeshurun is stunned by the loss of its beloved leader:***

"I felt pangs of Marshall's absence. . . . At political meetings I yearned for his spiritual clarity; at *shul* I missed his fiery outbursts—about the disenfranchisement of Native Americans, racism in our own community, hunger on our streets. It's impossible to imagine that his absence has become permanent, a devastation for all those fortunate to have known him—and, no less, for the city, which so desperately needs his vision, his leadership, his colossal commitment to cooperation among divided communities."

***After a year of mourning, B'nai Jeshurun hires a new rabbi to continue***

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<sup>7</sup>Concentration in prayer.

***Marshall's legacy:***

"With the election of Marcelo Bronstein as associate rabbi of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, the legacy of our beloved Marshall T. Meyer lives on. Marcelo . . . like Roly, was a student of Marshall's . . . Marcelo's commitment to the social action that Marshall embraced is unmistakable and unwavering. . . . In commenting recently about Marshall's legacy and its continuation Roly said: 'Marcelo and I both sat and learned from him. We are both steeped in that tradition. This means that Marshall's approach did not end with his death.'"

"It carries on the legacy of Marshall. . . . We now have a relationship similar to the one enjoyed by Marshall and Roly. . . ."

***B'nai Jeshurun returns home in triumph:***

"More than 50% of the congregation of B'nai Jeshurun came after the ceiling collapsed. . . . So the question is . . . not how we are going to fit into 88th<sup>8</sup>, but how is 88th going to fit into *us*?"

"The sanctuary we rededicate today is, in a sense, a physical manifestation of the spirit of B'nai Jeshurun: striving to preserve that which is meaningful and beautiful in our tradition, but never fearing to adapt and change in order to contribute to the building of a sacred community."

**CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP**

Charisma is often confused with good looks, charm or an ability to inspire hero-worship. But it is better viewed as a style of leadership in which an individual claims authority on the basis of some extraordinary personal quality that gives him or her a unique ability to lead. This stands in sharp contrast to claims to authority based on tradition or law. "Charisma is self-determined and sets its own limits. Its bearer seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission."<sup>9</sup> Time-honored traditions which might constrain a lesser leader crumble

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<sup>8</sup>The synagogue on 88th Street, which had become too small to hold the entire congregation.

<sup>9</sup>*Max Weber, Economy and Society*. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) p. 1112.

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in the face of the charismatic assertion. In this sense, "charisma is *the* great revolutionary force."<sup>10</sup> The extraordinary qualities that imbue charisma are many, including physical prowess, military skill, or, as in Marshall's case, acute moral sensitivity. In a charismatic community, the charismatic leader becomes the ultimate source of *legitimacy* and *authority*.

Although charisma alone cannot account for B'nai Jeshurun's success, there is no denying that it plays a major part. Marshall Meyer proclaimed the message which created B'nai Jeshurun. Its spiritual and lay leaders invoke him regularly, and he remains a key source of legitimacy for the congregation's decisions. The hiring of Marcelo is a case in point. In the passages quoted above, taken from the synagogue newsletter, the authors implicitly assert Marcelo's claim to legitimately exercise rabbinic authority over B'nai Jeshurun by connecting him with the charismatic leader. The board's decision does not stand on its own as a source of legitimacy. Another article traces this connection to its first day: "Marcelo was just 9 years old when he first met Marshall. . . . It was in fact, Purim, and Marshall was dressed as a nun. . . . And so, Marcelo, who was very reluctant to go to synagogue at first, decided he liked it." Not only does the anecdote highlight the length of Marcelo's connection with Marshall, it also implies that from the very first time he met Marshall, Marcelo was inspired by the beloved rabbi. In this, Marcelo implicitly is likened to the congregants of B'nai Jeshurun. Moreover, the anecdote not only tells us something about Marcelo, it offers a humorous picture of a revered leader, humanizing and immortalizing him at the same time.

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<sup>10</sup>Weber, p. 245.

Marshall's wife is also quoted. Empowered (at least in this article) to represent Marshall's will, she gives the congregation Marshall's blessing, legitimizing its decision to hire Marcelo as rabbi of B'nai Jeshurun. "We have known Marcelo for a long time—Marshall officiated at his Bar Mitzvah. A very close and dear friend, he was a student, friend and *hasid*<sup>11</sup> of Marshall's. . . . Marshall always said that he . . . dreamed of working together with Marcelo and Roly."

References to Marshall's message, work, mission, and charge pepper B'nai Jeshurun's literature and its members' discourse. A passage in the president's column in one of the newsletters is typical: "As the year winds its course towards the summer months our thoughts turn back to August 1985, the time when our beloved Marshall came to BJ and the work that many of us [are] engaged in today began. . . ." Why their thoughts turn back especially to 1985 and not some other year, is suggestive of the place Marshall holds in the congregations collective memory.

Indeed, as the community rededicated its synagogue, Marshall's words were even transformed into a prayer.

The continued success of B'nai Jeshurun after Marshall's passing signifies not that charisma is irrelevant, but that it can be sustained even in the physical absence of the leader. As Marshall's "disciples," Roly and Marcelo provide continuity and have attained a measure of charisma in their own right. But the ultimate source of their authority still rests in their connection with Marshall Meyer. Five years after his death, he and his message remain at the center of the congregation.

## **SPREADING THE WORD**

To be sure, elements of the BJ experience can be adapted to other settings. B'nai Jeshurun itself can be seen as a variation on a theme which Marshall Meyer successfully implemented in Argentina a quarter-century earlier. Marcelo describes similar success with his congregation in Santiago:

I went to Chile and I started a new congregation in an upper middle class neighborhood of Santiago, where people lived in houses with their own swimming pools, where social action was as far from their minds as the stars in the sky. And if you went to my congregation in Chile, you would feel at home—BJ. . . . Things were different—people in Chile would not clap, they would not dance—but the essence of the message and the spirit was the same, — la Chile. Out of nothing. Basically I received an empty building . . . and after I left—I feel a bit uncomfortable to say, but this is true—it became the most attended congregation in Chile.

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<sup>11</sup>Disciple.

In Buenos Aires, Santiago and New York, Marshall and his students built communities from the ground up. Efforts to replicate the "BJ-style service" often ignore this, hoping that skilled application of music and dance can produce a similar energy in other settings. No surprise that efforts such Synagogue 2000 and "Friday Night Alive!" have often left B'nai Jeshurun's leadership feeling that something has been lost along the way. Even though the first "Friday Night Alive!" drew close to 1,000 people, BJ's Rabbinic Fellow Yael Ridberg left disappointed. "I did not see my mission *per se* as just getting 900 people in a *shul*. I saw my mission as getting people to be part of a community that has something to offer."

While B'nai Jeshurun continues to participate in such efforts, it now focuses its energies on developing a cadre of young rabbinic students who will carry its spirit forth to the congregations they will one day lead. The Marshall T. Meyer Rabbinic Fellowship brings promising rabbinic students to B'nai Jeshurun for a two-year internship. The model attempts to replicate the experience Roly, Marcelo and Ari had learning from their teacher Marshall. In Marcelo's words,

There's something essential that those of us who have had the blessing of being disciples of Marshall received from him, working and studying together. If you would create it enough to understand what is the focal energy, you could . . . create your own metamorphosis, a midrash<sup>12</sup> on the place. The essence of the song is the same. That's exactly what happened with BJ.

The comparison with a *rebbe* and his *hasidim*<sup>13</sup> is apt. The rabbinic fellows are third-generation disciples of Marshall's, students of the students.

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<sup>12</sup>A term referring literally to rabbinic stories based on Biblical text, here used colloquially to mean "a creative adaptation."

<sup>13</sup>Disciples.

### A HOLISTIC COMMUNITY

BJ's success rests not only in the charismatic message of a questing, religious community engaged in the world. Key to the congregation's emergence as a "phenomenon" is the manner in which the message is articulated. In developing a mythologized account of the congregation's history, B'nai Jeshurun imbues the community with transcendent meaning. Through participation in the sanctified group, the individual congregants partake of that transcendence and imbue their own lives with it. *They become a part of something larger than themselves.* It is not only identification with the broad religious categories of Judaism or the Jewish people that confers a sense of meaning. Rather, the feeling of participation in something of ultimate significance emerges from the immediate encounter with the community.

Central to that community's self-understanding is the notion that the group's mission was, in a sense, *revealed* by a man of extraordinary moral sensitivity. The revelation was not of a previously unknown truth. The congregation is well aware that Marshall's philosophy was profoundly influenced by that of his mentor, the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. Moreover, both Heschel and Marshall were rabbis engaged in a dialogue with thousands of years of Jewish thought. Neither were creating something *ex nihilo*, but were translating Jewish tradition into a contemporary idiom. To say that Marshall *revealed* the message is to say that he inspired a community to adopt his message as its own. So, it is not uncommon to find statements like the introduction to the 88th Street Rededication Journal, which reads, "This book's pages represent the life and depth of our community—the creative, spiritual and intellectual processes that our beloved Marshall inspired in us." In B'nai Jeshurun's public presentation of self, the message and its messenger become one. Marshall Meyer continues to serve as the personification of B'nai Jeshurun's mission.

While elements of B'nai Jeshurun may be amenable to adaptation in other congregations, there remain irreducible elements. *Foremost among them is the fusion of the congregation's identity, history, mission and leader into a single whole. Each element evokes the others.* Together, they imbue the congregation with a sense of wholeness and holiness. Charismatic leadership in the person of Marshall and his disciples Roly, Marcelo and Ari has communicated this sense of sacredness to a mass audience through music, language, action and prayer. In this way, B'nai Jeshurun has touched people's lives and made them feel that their participation in this community is

itself an act of transcendent meaning.

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**Questions for discussion:**

1. How much of BJ's success is due to its location on Manhattan's Upper West Side, with its large population of Jewish yuppies?
2. Can synagogues without B'nai Jeshurun's history themselves become endowed with sacred character by preaching BJ's message and applying its approach to worship?
3. How can your community look to its own history as a sacred history that can inspire devotion and commitment?
4. What distinguishes charismatic leadership from other forms of leadership? Why might people follow a charismatic leader? How can the message survive the charismatic leader's death?
5. Can a sense of sacredness, once achieved, be communicated to large audiences by means other than charismatic leadership?
6. What are the challenges of implementing this model in an existing congregation as opposed to a moribund or new one?
7. BJ, with its 2,000 people at services, offers anonymity to newcomers who just want to "check things out" without committing themselves. How can smaller congregations make newcomers feel welcome without making them feel pressured?

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This case study was prepared by Shaul Kelner, a Wexner Graduate Fellow who is in the Ph.D. program in Sociology at the City University of New York.

Shaul Kelner's appreciation goes to Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein, Chazan Ari Priven and Rabbi Yael Ridberg for agreeing to be interviewed for this research, and to the members of B'nai Jeshurun for opening their community to him.

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