

Demanding More of Community

RACHEL NUSSBAUM

Nearly four years ago, I set out to create a new Jewish community in Seattle that would appeal to young adults and families. As founders of the Kavana Cooperative, we quickly found ourselves grappling with the fundamental question of what organizational model to use. Over the last few decades, Jewish religious communities have been organized around one of two paradigms: a conventional synagogue model (oriented around formal worship, rabbinic leadership, and a physical space) or the do-it-yourself model of havurot and (more recently) independent minyanim.

Each of these models had serious limitations for our community in Seattle. The synagogue model felt too top-down; the do-it-yourself models either relied on a cadre of very knowledgeable lay leaders or risked compromising quality and content. How could we create a community that coupled the sense of engagement sparked by local, grass-roots communities with the professional support and infrastructure provided by synagogue communities? Drawing on preschool and grocery store co-ops for inspiration, we decided to build our Jewish community around a cooperative model.

The Kavana Cooperative has emerged as a dynamic community that reflects the interests, expertise, and commitments of its constituents. People who join become “partners” in the cooperative and commit to attending on a regular basis, making a significant financial contribution each year and taking on a volunteer role/job. Kavana’s programming is creative because it is generated by partners, and, in the co-op spirit, participants are often called upon to pitch in at events.

Our success suggests a paradoxical phenomenon critical for re-engaging a younger generation of Jews. Demanding more, rather than less, of participants is a key ingredient for engaging those who feel alienated from existing Jewish communities. The cooperative model empowers partners to become “producers” rather than “consumers” of their own Jewish life. In order for this model to work, leaders must be willing to relinquish some control over the community’s religious orientation and embrace a pluralistic spirit. But it is precisely the promise of nourishing our partners’ diverse journeys so they can take ownership of their Jewish lives that makes the cooperative model so compelling.

Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum is religious leader and executive director of the Kavana Cooperative in Seattle, Wash. She was recently awarded an Avi Chai Fellowship for her innovative approach to Jewish community building.