

Making Welcoming Shuls

By Stephen J. Savitsky



With assimilation and intermarriage threatening to destroy the fabric of the Jewish people, it's time to be proactive. What's necessary is a large-scale *kiruv* (outreach) effort in which a welcoming hand is extended to those who have little or no background in Judaism and Jewish life, and who may be lost to us if we don't make the effort.

Given that the Orthodox Union (OU) has been involved in *kiruv* for more than fifty years through the work of NCSY, we are particularly sensitive to this need and are adept at responding to it. We are proud that NCSY is the largest teen outreach program in North America, with some 25,000 teens participating every year; we can now look back after half a century at the thou-

sands of Jewish leaders who have grown up through our ranks.

To supplement our NCSY programs, which reach yeshivah and some public school students, the OU recently introduced Jewish Student Union (JSU), which deals exclusively with public high school students with minimal involvement in Jewish life. Attendance at our 165 JSU clubs across North America numbers in the thousands. While pizza may be the initial draw, the students' growing interest in Judaism is what keeps them coming back, week after week.

And yet, at this time, when so much needs to get done, we cannot rely on professional outreach alone. We have embarked on a campaign, therefore, to make OU shuls the center of outreach in their respective communities. The responsibility to engage in outreach will not just fall upon the rabbi and shul president, but upon each and every shul member as well.

What will this campaign entail? Firstly, we encourage every OU shul to become much more accessible to those in our communities who know little about Judaism. Picture yourself as someone without a Jewish background but interested in finding out more. What happens when you walk into a shul? Does someone greet you? Is there a box with *kippot* or a rack of *tallitot*? Can you easily find a *siddur* or Chumash? Do you find your visit to be a spiritually

uplifting experience? In many cases, the answer to the questions above is, unfortunately, no.

Secondly, we believe every OU shul should institute a beginners' minyan that deals exclusively with outreach. The minyan could either be led by a professional hired for this purpose, or by volunteers from the congre-

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gation who make themselves available on a rotating basis to spend an hour leading services, teaching Torah and demonstrating the type of hospitality that would make any Jew feel comfortable in the shul and anxious to return. (College students and recent graduates are particularly well suited to lead such minyanim.)

Thirdly, we encourage shuls to advertise in local papers assuring all Jews that they are welcome in an Orthodox synagogue. Newcomers to a shul often feel awkward and sometimes even looked down upon; it is extremely important to ensure that every visitor feels welcomed. The Orthodox synagogue should be a focal point where lectures, classes and events are held; this will help encourage all Jewish community members, not just the Orthodox, to walk in.

Frank Buchweitz, national director of community services and special projects, has already traveled to four major communities to conduct outreach workshops for synagogue leadership. He is available to meet with any other community that would like his expertise. (Call 212.613.8188 or e-mail Frank@ou.org.)

As many of you know, last year the OU provided Program Initiative Awards of up to \$20,000 to a number of shuls for programming ideas in a variety of areas. As part of the overall effort to raise outreach awareness, this year we conducted a similar competition for outstanding *kiruv* initiatives. The winners,

announced at the end of March, are to receive a total of \$47,500 to implement their creative outreach programs. The winning shuls are Congregation Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner in Overland Park, Kansas; the Young Israel of New Rochelle in suburban New York City and Baron Hirsch Congregation in Memphis, Tennessee. Details of each shul's *kiruv* proposal are available to the OU synagogue network so that the programs can be replicated across the country.



The OU's new "Welcome to Our Shul" poster helps make shuls more inviting to newcomers.

Additionally, before Purim, we sent out specially designed cards explaining the holiday in an intelligent and inspirational way. We encouraged OU shul members to distribute the cards in *mishloach manot* packages to those with little or no Jewish education. We plan on creating similar such initiatives for other holidays throughout the year.

We also sent cards to a number of OU shuls across the country with the following message: "Build Your Community Through Synagogue Outreach." All OU synagogues also received a beautiful "Welcome to Our Shul!" poster that announces, "Join us in greeting everyone with warmth and friendliness," and features an appropriate quote from *Pirkei Avot* (1:15). We hope the shuls will hang these posters on their doors or prominently in their lobbies.

While we realize that many of our members don't have all of the skills necessary to teach a Torah class, everyone has the ability to provide a spark that will ignite the *neshamah* of a fellow Jew. The OU is responding to the dire need for intense and ongoing outreach. I am confident that our shuls and their individual members will rise to the occasion and join us in this vital effort. **IA**

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