



BRINGING OUR COMMUNITIES BACK TO SHUL

A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

IN EVERY JEWISH COMMUNITY, the Beit Kneset is central to both communal infrastructure and experience. And when we were unable to participate in Shul life, it became clear perhaps more than ever in our lifetimes just how much we need it. For many, the passion for tefillah ignited their souls during the darkest of days. Some missed the Shul terribly and sought to find their way back as quickly as possible. Others discovered new meaning in their private, individual prayer or were energized by the novel dynamics of small outdoor minyanim. Over these challenging weeks and months, many Shul leaders rose to the occasion, demonstrating incredible innovation and determination.

Now, as, Baruch Hashem, Shuls have opened and, in many places, are nearly back to normal, Shuls have the opportunity to incorporate all that we have learned throughout this time, reinvigorating the Shul experience while drawing back those congregants for whom life without the Shul has sadly become the norm. The pandemic must prove a catalyst for growth. The Shul must always be the true home of our communal tefillot, and must generate an irreplicable sense of community. Now is the time to step up and convey this message to our communities. Shul leaders across the country are discovering new ways to bring back our communities stronger than ever — our families, our singles, our seniors and our youth. So much of communal, spiritual and social life can only be experienced in its ideal sense through the medium of our “Mikdash Me’at.” Our mandate at this crucial hour is to ensure that the broad Jewish community returns to live through that deep and fulfilling environment in Shul, the only place it can truly reach its potential.

THE INITIATIVE

In search of innovative and replicable solutions that could be adopted in Shuls of all shapes and sizes, the OU created the “Back to Shul Grant” program, awarding unique and replicable proposals between \$2,000-\$5,000 to bring their ideas to fruition. We were energized when we received over 300 submissions from 34 states, from tiny shteibels to large community Shuls. Many ideas, though worthy, were similar to one another — a “welcome back” kiddush or Shabbaton, scholar or chazzan in residence, hosting in-person shiurim and events, and otherwise reinstating pre-pandemic programming. The 35 grantees chosen by the OU grant committee represented both out-of-the-box thinking and opportunities that are more likely to rebuild and reaffirm the



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value of Shul and community and therefore encourage congregants to return regularly to Shul for the long term.

We learned something important from our many applicants: Everyone wants to use this opportunity to improve; to focus on growth, refinement and rejuvenation. We did not see a trend of radical reinvention of the Shul experience; praying in Shul is one of our eternal values, and Shul remains an unchanging halachic part of our communal infrastructure and the spiritual home of the Jewish people. What is clear is that Shul must meet and reflect the diverse needs of all of Klal Yisrael. Shuls are seizing the opportunity to re-engage our community in the essential experience that Shul offers. What follows are a number of general principles and specific ideas, gleaned from our hundreds of submissions, which can be incorporated into the Shul experience.

The full list of awarded submissions can be found at ou.org/grant21 with additional details about each program.

BIG PICTURE CONCLUSIONS

BIG SHUL VS. SMALL SHUL

The pandemic was responsible for a whole new type of “Shul” — the backyard minyan. Reflected in many proposals the OU received is just how many congregants appreciated the feeling of these more intimate minyanim. People felt seen, important, and cared about, and their roles and contributions were appreciated.

Larger Shuls are finding ways to give congregants these positive aspects of a smaller group experience, to find ways to connect and engage individuals so that they do not get lost in the crowd. Some communities are going as far as to offer such minyanim spaces on the Shul campus, while others are looking to involve more members in the Shul based tefilla in order to bring some of that broader involvement into the established communal institutions. We encourage Shuls to address this phenomenon with the members of such minyanim to celebrate their passion for tefilla while ensuring their integration into the Shul community.



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EFFICIENCY VS. EXPERIENCE

During COVID - whether in backyards or in Shuls - minyanim were shorter. Many enjoyed a quicker davening and the opportunity to get home earlier. This can and should lead Shuls to consider efficiencies that can be maintained for the long term. At the same time, two notes of caution have to

be considered in this regard. First, that valuable “Minhagim” that were appropriately passed over during the *שעת הדחק* -time of crisis - should not be eliminated for the long term. Shuls should use the relaxation of Covid restrictions as an opportunity to get input from poskim to determine what tweaks to the tefilla can remain for the longer term. Second, we must recognize that Shul and davening can be an experience. Efficiency is the prevailing value when you need to get something done, but it is one of many values when we aim to have an uplifting experience.

CREATING CONNECTION

Many submissions emphasized the need to increase social bonds and connections within the Shul community, whether via onsite or offsite events, building the sense of physical community where congregants come to connect to a larger communal family and be a part of something greater than themselves.

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IDEAS INCLUDED:

- A program where multiple Shuls joined together for an educational program that brought in members of each Shul as well as broader community members.
- A citywide Shabbaton that engaged speakers and participants for a Shabbat of coordinated programming across an entire area.
- A meet-and-greet program where Shul members proactively reconnected with their fellow members who had been distanced over the course of the pandemic.
- A program that targeted individual Shul demographics and provided niche educational content to spur social interaction within naturally connected groups.

NICHE DEMOGRAPHICS: ENDING ISOLATION

Throughout the pandemic, a variety of different segments of the community spent many days, including Shabbatot and Yomim Tovim, alone. Many proposals addressed the needs of these populations, looking for ways to help them to reconnect to each other and to the community at large. In addition, Shuls reimagined creative uses of their space to engage members on the Shul campus in a variety of ways over and above tefilla.

IDEAS INCLUDED:

- Hosting a singles Shabbaton and a matchmaking initiative geared toward making singles feel comfortable in the Shul.
- Hosting a Shul based “volunteer day” for Shul members to engage in chessed activities through the Shul.
- Hosting a Shabbaton for the single population to simply welcome them back.
- Engaging a social worker to engage seniors in the Shul and creating specific shiurim and programs geared toward ensuring seniors will feel comfortable in the Shul environment.
- Transforming the Shul into a temporary soup kitchen to provide food for the needy within the community and social engagement opportunities for Shul members.
- Building a communal sukkah to attract college students.

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FAMILY TIME

Many young families also struggled significantly during the pandemic, with two working parents (or parents out of work) and multiple kids on Zoom. The ongoing stress stretched the nerves and capabilities of even the most adaptable parents. Many proposals addressed these families, creating programs that would support and welcome back young parents as well as recognize the family milestones that were missed over this time.

IDEAS INCLUDED:

- Creating a “Back-to-Shul fair” which includes booths and stands highlighting the unique opportunities Shuls provide and allowing members to experience the reopening in a fun, family-oriented environment.
- The Notenet Girls Chessed program is an initiative that involved engaging girls from the Shuls in a chessed project that expanded connection to the entire family.
- Several Shuls offered programming and incentives to get kids excited about the Shul experience while also bringing their parents back to connect to Shul as a family.
- Shabbatonim targeting specific age groups and themes that appealed to a variety of demographics.
- Multiple Shuls suggested a variety of forms of the “make-up kiddush” where Shuls arrange a kiddush or similar event celebrating milestones or other events that occurred during the pandemic and missed a traditional celebration.



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SHUL AND SHIRA

Historically and halachically, the Shul is a place of communal song, a מקום רנה. Song and music create a welcoming, positive, inspiring atmosphere. Recognizing this, a number of Shuls proposed incorporating events and davening that bring the music back.

IDEAS INCLUDE:

- Many Shuls suggested programs that brought song into tefilla including bringing in a “Chazan in residence” to have a soulful and beautiful davening that would remind people of the beauty of tefilla in their Beit Knesset.

- One submission suggested a multi-Shul initiative to have choirs or acapella groups visit multiple Shuls and create a sense of camaraderie and connection through music and tefilla.
- A back-to-Shul concert, either on the Shul campus or “under the stars” to create a unique ambiance to jump-start the excitement of tefilla in Shul.

IMPORTANT LESSON LEARNED

Since the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the Shul has – and continues to be – the epicenter of the Jewish community. Throughout the pandemic our communities large and small experienced challenging and unexpected road blocks in our Shul participation. Undoubtably there will need to be significant planning to not only return to where we were prior to Covid, but to grow and strengthen ourselves from this experience.

Now, as our Shuls and communities continue to reopen, we have the opportunity to explore these concerns. One clear takeaway from the OU Challenge Grant process is that our Shuls recognize that simply going back to the status quo is not enough.

The OU has discovered that a worthwhile strategy is in investing in long-term programs and initiatives that can be sustained over weeks and months. Our goal is to reestablish Shul-going habits among individuals and families, to reinvigorate all the members of our community by having them experience just how necessary, relevant, and supportive the Shul can be, and showing them that this is where the Jewish people belong.

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