

Biennial 2015

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More than 5,000 attendees at the URJ Biennial gathered in an Orlando Hotel for 4 days to learn, explore, pray and connect around Reform Judaism and Jewish life and I was fortunate to be among them.

I will focus on just four (among many) aspects here.

I. Communities of practice:

1. As part of the B'nai Mitzvah Revolution Innovators Lab, we are a part of the Communities of Practice. Communities of Practice (CoP) convene cohorts of congregational leaders for long-term, innovative learning about a topic of shared interest. Participants learn from experts, including opportunities to ask big questions, and share ideas and best principles. The curriculum includes face-to-face and virtual gatherings, e-learning, and coaching from URJ staff.
2. First, we focused in small groups on one of our innovations. CSR piloted this fall a B'nai Mitzvah mentoring program where older teens mentor 7th graders. We talked about this innovation with other congregations who are involved in similar projects around B'nai Mitzvah in their home congregations.
3. We met with the larger CoP cohort and learned the importance of Adaptive Leadership. Adaptive Leadership is a practical leadership framework that helps individuals and organizations adapt and thrive in challenging environments. It is being able, both individually and collectively, to take on the gradual but meaningful process of change.

II. Audacious Hospitality:

Audacious Hospitality is the URJ's focused effort to engage Jews who are unaffiliated, under-engaged and uninspired. We seek to eliminate the barriers, and instead create safe spaces for those who have been on the fringes, on the outside of Judaism in order to bring them in. We embrace interfaith families, Jews of color and gay, lesbian, transgender, and gender non-conforming people.

This welcoming spirit is a step toward becoming a more whole, compassionate and just movement.

III. Measuring Success in the Synagogue:

Most congregations fall into measuring the success of a program based on how full the room is and if there was enough food/seating/how happy people seemed. I attended a session that suggested something very different. The measure of success should be the relationships that developed, connections that were made and the impact that the program had on participants and connection to Jewish life and each other. The impact that we have cannot exist without building the relationships. We create stronger congregations when we help people develop and nurture relationships with CSR clergy/staff and with each other.

IV. Music:

The music was incredibly energizing and participatory. From the way we sang in services, to the song-sessions with dancing (Kumsitz), to late night concerts, I fully experienced the variety that biennial had to offer. I heard Jewish musicians: Dan Nichols, Michelle Citrin, Chana Rothman, Noah Aronson, Galeet Dardashti, Elana Arian, Peri Smilow, Beth Schafer, Ellen Allard and Jacob “Spike” Kraus. I bought CDs and songbooks in order to bring home new, fun, engaging, and meaningful music back to CSR.