

The Story of CoHere

Ari Moffic

CoHere began with the recognition that joining a synagogue is not an automatic decision for many Jewish families but that many families who do not join a synagogue still seek spiritual meaning in their lives. Let us begin this essay with the factors that shape whether a family will join a congregation.

- Do they have friends and family in the congregation who have personally encouraged them to join?
- Do they feel they have the time and ability to get children there for weekly Sunday School and Hebrew school? Although empty nesters do join or rejoin, I am speaking here about joining mainly as a way for children to receive a Jewish education.
- Do they think they will be able to get their children to go without too much of a fight, and will their children fit in, make friends, like it, and be successful in the classrooms?
- Are they drawn to being part of a Jewish community? Do they think they would want to participate in Shabbat and holiday services and committees or classes?
- Can they afford the membership dues, or are they willing to discuss a financial arrangement that could work for their family?
- Do they want a relationship with a rabbi? Is it important to them that a rabbi know their family?

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If parents answer these questions in the affirmative and feel they are important, they are likely to visit a congregation and become members. What factors need to align for this to happen? It depends on how the parents were raised, what practices they grew up with, and how involved their parents are now in encouraging them to be part of a congregation. It matters who their friends are and whether they know people at a synagogue. Do they feel “religious” enough, and do they feel the culture of the congregation is the right fit?

Many families who end up joining feel the synagogue is a second home. They have smiles on their faces when they walk in. They are greeted by clergy and staff by name and feel a sense of belonging. Their children have friends in their classes, bond with the teenage helpers, and like the singing and projects. For many families, the clergy have been there for them in a time of need or joy, and they are happy to pay the fees because the congregation helps them live values that are important to them.

However, there are also many Jewish families, including many of our neighbors and friends, who don’t affirm the above statements that make joining a congregation feasible, interesting, or valuable to them. Therefore, when asking the question of whether congregational affiliation is meaningful, we have a “yes, and” situation. “Yes, and” is a theater improvisational technique to keep scenes running and moving forward. *Yes*, congregational affiliation is meaningful to many, *and* most will need and want alternatives to accessing Jewish education for their children and themselves for a variety of reasons (note that the majority of American Jews are not members of congregations).

Since I care about synagogues and believe they are set up to provide a structure for people to practice a Judaism that adds meaning to their lives and helps the world, I feel a call and responsibility to support congregations. If I can help people check “yes” to the factors listed above that would make joining a congregation desirable, I have partly succeeded.

At the same time, I have spent the last two years offering an alternative for people who are not ready to join a synagogue now and may never be. With the help of a generous grant, I launched CoHere on July 1, 2017. I call the program CoHere because I am “coming here” to people’s homes to meet them on their time and in their space. I call it CoHere because I want it to feel coherent and smooth and not a Jewish education that is out of context and irrelevant. I call it CoHere because it is cooperative.

The first year, each family paid CoHere \$400, and I came about nine times to their home (about once a month from September to May, to follow the school year) and spent an hour with the family around the table. I would introduce a major Jewish concept or holiday content, and we would do a hands-on project that could be enjoyed whether a person was four or forty. I arrived with a smile and a big Mary Poppins-esque bag full of crafting supplies and lots of stickers. Our sessions were about love, joy, support, and content. I was reinforcing major concepts so that children and adults had a connection to Judaism and a feeling of being part of something big. I was driving all over Chicagoland and working many days a month from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. and on weekends. I have an entrepreneurial spirit. I love working one on one. I love people on the margins and in the fringes. I'm not a rules follower. But, admittedly, this schedule was not conducive to my being a present mom to my own children. It did, however, enable me to meet families at the times that worked for them.

The second year of my grant, I asked families to pay \$600 for these sessions, as that is closer to covering the actual time I am providing and the cost of supplies. The grant still offsets the real costs. Since I am just one person, I am able to work with about thirty families in this way. I have built deep relationships with the families of CoHere. I am their rabbi and teacher and friend.

Making CoHere work financially, especially for a full-time rabbi, is still challenging. I have not been able to create a business model that works, but other teachers and organizations are making this model work. For example, see the websites of Abby Eisenberg (<https://abbyeisenberg.com/>) and Hebrew Helpers (<http://www.hebrewhelpers.com/>).

Now, what about the elephant in the room—community? Very occasionally, we offer a CoHere experience for all of the families, such as a meet-up to volunteer together. Because schedules are hard to synchronize and because Chicagoland is big and prone to terrible traffic, group gatherings have proved hard to arrange. But more importantly, the families we work with are not seeking more friends or more things to add to their schedules. They want a Jewish education that is easy, affordable, and enjoyable.

It is possible for me to teach a Jewish prayer at a Starbucks table or a kitchen table, but that *isn't* the same as chanting it in communal prayer. It is possible for me to teach about a synagogue-based holiday like Simchat Torah, when we start reading from the beginning of the whole scroll again and carry the Torah

around and around, but this *isn't* the same as being in a communal gathering with the full sensory experience of the holiday. To address this difference, I provide lessons and knowledge so that any door to Jewish life can be open for this child and family and they will have more confidence knocking on that door or even walking through.

Is there a binary difference between synagogues and private study? In other words, is synagogue membership good and anything else bad, less than, and only worthy if it is a stepping stone to membership? No. I view a relationship-based, individualized, personalized Jewish learning program as old *and* new and always needed because not everyone will thrive in a communal, institutional setting. Teachers and tutors are doing impactful, important work person by person by person. It can be lonely, isolating work that is taxing on work/life balance and the psyche as the consensus of clergy is that people *should* just join a synagogue and that people like me are undermining this necessity. If we can support each other, though, and let people move in and out of communal settings in an organic way, we will reach more people. And, more people will see Jewish organizations as modern, realistic, and appealing.