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***Just What IS a New Model for Jewish Community?
Reflections on the First Year of Makom NY, a New Kind of Jewish Community***

There is a strong and vibrant Jewish community here on Long Island, NY, possibly THE original and quintessential suburban Jewish outpost since post-WWII. There are many synagogues of varying denominations, committed clergy and many people in lay and professional leadership who do great work and are passionate and committed to this community.

So what's the issue?

We all know that the Jewish landscape has changed and continues to evolve; however, many of the synagogues and other traditional institutions are simply not set up to address these changes as rapidly as needed. Local demographics have changed, most especially over the past 10 years. Every year, there are synagogues that merge with others or have had to close their doors completely. While there are notable exceptions in this area, most synagogues report diminished numbers of students in their religious schools, reduced membership rosters and lower of levels of engagement in general.

Recent studies tell us that there are more than 200,000 Jewish residents of Nassau County alone. Nearly 80% of the Jewish population on Long Island (Nassau and Suffolk Counties) are no longer or have never affiliated with any synagogue or other traditional Jewish institution. We hear from many Jews who belong to the category of 'used to' - as in 'used to' belong or 'used to' be involved, yet are no longer.

Why?

There are many reasons. Each individual and family has their own personal stories, and we, the leadership of Makom NY, a new model for Jewish community on Long Island, have heard many of them. Several general truths have emerged:

- 1 – Synagogue membership has become a financial burden for some.
- 2 – People feel disconnected from their synagogue and its leadership.
- 3 – The traditional synagogue no longer meets their needs.
- 4 – People do not feel they 'belong' to a particular movement.

We know that a number of individuals and families have either left synagogues or have never belonged at all. But have they left Judaism? Absolutely not! They may no longer want a traditional model of Jewish connection, but they certainly want to feel connected, and to be a part of a Jewish community. They are seeking something new, something different.

Enter Makom NY: A New Kind of Jewish Community.

In the Spring of 2015 a group of individuals from neighboring towns in the center of Long Island, representing both Nassau and Suffolk Counties, came together in a series of parlor meetings to explore what a new model for Jewish community in this geographic area might look like. People spoke eloquently and passionately about seeking a different kind of Jewish community for their family, not necessarily like the one of their parents' or grandparents' generations. We were looking to create a model that is completely open and welcoming, and goes far beyond a single building; a model that removes barriers, real or perceived. We are creating an intergenerational model that meets suburban Jews where they are by igniting meaningful experiences and intentional relationships.

Our group looked at new models of engagement that had been established in other areas of the country; currently, those models are almost exclusively in urban areas and generally target singles and couples in their 20's and 30's. The question then became: "Could our small group really create an entirely new model for an intentional Jewish community on Long Island – the first of its kind in a suburban area?"

The answer is an unqualified YES.

Under the guidance and spiritual leadership of Rabbi Deborah Bravo, Makom NY launched on July 1, 2015. Makom NY (*makom* is the Hebrew word for 'place') understands that Judaism happens in varied places and spaces. We are successfully breaking down financial, social and denominational barriers so that all people feel welcome. There are no traditional membership dues nor building fund structures at Makom NY. All individuals and families are welcome to attend worship services and participate in our programming; once you have interacted with any aspect of Makom NY, you become '*Chevrei Makom*' ('friends of Makom') and part of the Makom family. Financial support is encouraged and suggested yet voluntary.

Within the first six months, it became clear that Makom NY had struck a very positive chord. There was enormous excitement and energy in all areas, and our initial goals were rapidly being reached. People were coming to Makom NY with varied Jewish backgrounds and with no Jewish backgrounds. In ongoing parlor meetings and intimate Shabbat dinners in the Rabbi's home, there was a contagious manner by which people were connecting to Makom NY's vision and mission, and helping to further elaborate on what and who the group should and could become.

It is clear that people are seeking meaningful worship, intentional learning and finding community that they could truly embrace - driven by dynamic, accessible, visionary and knowledgeable leadership. The emerging and evolving needs of the community drive all our

programming – and it is exciting and gratifying to see the progress. We work hard to reach out to every participant in our community to listen to their stories. We regularly solicit feedback through ongoing conversations and relationship building. We regularly ask: “What are you looking for? How can we meet your needs?”

Our mission is to initiate and innovate a new Jewish landscape that ignites a new Jewish community, one based not on a single building but on warm and intimate relationships in multiple sacred spaces. Reflecting on our first year out, we see that this is a mission that rings true for many people. We have successfully met our ongoing goal of meeting people where they are. We strive to remove all barriers to engagement. No judgments. All are welcome. We are intergenerational, pluralistic and liberal yet traditional, removing the denominational labels that now seem to push some people away.

We have experienced an exhilarating inaugural year. We began last September with 25 children learning in the K-7 Children’s *Moadon* (Hebrew for ‘lounge’), our unique version of religious school. We ended the year with 55 students and anticipate enrolling 80 plus for the coming school year. Small classes, a warm, fun and relaxed environment with the Rabbi and master Jewish educators are a good recipe for success. Families with young children meet monthly for holiday-related family engagement. There are monthly Rosh Chodesh study groups for women in various homes. We offer joyful musical Shabbat services in beautiful rental spaces and casual weekly Shabbat dinners in our Rabbi’s home. We at Makom NY have clearly made a commitment to make Judaism and Jewish life and learning available outside of the traditional institutions – just ask the growing group of people who study Torah with us at a local diner on Shabbat mornings!

While it can be argued in the negative that Makom NY might foster a kind of ‘boutique Judaism’ where people pick and choose and therefore only engage in limited areas, we can state unequivocally that this is indeed the exact way that people do want to engage – in what interests them and meets their needs. We have participants who only want worship experiences, or only want learning for their children, or only want to be involved with mitzvah opportunities, et al. They are grateful for the opportunity to engage as they wish, and we support them in every area of engagement. We also have a number of participants who are members of traditional synagogues, yet come to Makom NY for something different, or unique, or what they believe may be lacking in their own synagogue experience.

The popular notion about new start-ups is that people are looking for an inexpensive way to engage – that they want something for nothing or an ‘easy way’ that is not overly expensive. This has not been our initial experience. Our participants are not looking to engage without any financial commitment to the community. In fact, we have a number of participants who engage at the ‘Shorashim’ level (planting roots), meaning supporting the community with a minimum annual donation of \$1800. We have many others who regularly donate to support the community, and others who pay only for the programs and classes they attend. We know that a major focus for the upcoming year is to educate Chevrei Makom about our financial model. We envision that, as people come to appreciate both the model and our

programming, those who are able will voluntarily engage financially to support our endeavors. We have already seen the beginnings of this process.

Of course, with a new and different model of engagement, there are significant financial challenges, as we do not rely on membership or dues to sustain us, let alone to grow the community. We know this will be a struggle. We readily acknowledge and understand that it will take several years for this new model to become completely financially viable and sustainable. Yet our experience in our inaugural year shows that we are on our way, and that this is the right path. This is a new reality that is worth it. And the Jewish community deserves it. We are speaking with and seeking support from foundations and other grant-making entities who are willing to support new Jewish intentional communities in their initial stages.

What is Makom NY's vision for the coming year? Taking the lessons learned from our inaugural year and putting them into practice for the coming year, we aim to further grow our burgeoning community to attract more of the 80% on Long Island who are no longer or were never affiliated. Equally important is to establish solid and positive partnerships with the surrounding established Jewish institutions. As a start-up, we should not be viewed as competition that is 'taking away' from traditional institutions. Rather, we are a new entity that is engaging people in new ways, creating community and access to Jewish life and learning in an already vibrant local Jewish landscape.

More information about Makom NY can be found on their website at: www.makomny.org and on their Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/makomnewyork/>