

2009 Irving J. Fain Social Action Award Application

God's To-Do List

Congregation of Temple Israel (750 families)

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Clergy: Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, Rabbi Eric Linder, Cantor Wendy Shermet

Region: Midwest Council

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Temple Israel Omaha, Nebraska received a Fain Award Honorable Mention in 1999

GOALS

1. A comprehensive, meaningful, challenging, fun and engaging social action program for the year.
2. A program to converge with the themes of our High Holidays, and to create a culture that connects the BEING of Jewish to the DOING of social action.
3. To create a set of tools to identify our shared goals, identify community partners, schedule and implement projects based on local economic, demographic, community resources, and relationships to mobilize our congregants to service.

TARGET POPULATION God's To-Do List has a local, state, national and global reach.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS 1000+

BUDGET \$12,500

FREQUENCY OF PROGRAM – 30+ opportunities between *Yom Kippur*, 2008 and April 24, 2009

If God made a To-Do List for you, tailored to your God-given talents and skills that could be used to make a difference in the world, what would be on the list?

--Dr Ron Wolfson, God's To Do List

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Briefly describe the overall program. How did the idea for the program develop? How does it fulfill Fain Award criteria?

God's To-Do List is the catalyst between our theological ideals and the opportunities for action in our daily lives. Community organizing principles taught us to “hear” the voice of our congregation in order to be effective by connecting the **BEING** of Jewish to the **DOING** of social action.

God's To-Do List is a means of engaging and teaching our congregation about social problems and Jewish values while building powerful, meaningful alliances. **God's To-Do List** creatively promotes social and economic justice, fosters constructive human relations and holistically infuses social action into the life of our congregation.

The idea transformed through our six months of planning and preparation. At its inception, our vision was to challenge people to match the spiritual and theological messages of the High Holidays with social action. This idea eventually turned into **God's To-Do List**.

PREPARATION

Who were the key players in launching this effort? Who were your partners in planning the event? What work was done in the days leading up to the event? Describe your marketing strategy.

The key players are Rabbi Eric Linder, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, Social Justice Committee members Patrick Jensen, Mimi Silverman, Gary Kaplan and Shari Hess. Each plays an invaluable role in inspiration and enzyme support in moving the project forward. Our Board of Trustees, professional and support staff contribute in the allocation of budget, communication tools, and human resources. Ultimately, the congregants and community partners prove to be the most valuable asset of **God's To Do List**.

Dr. Ron Wolfson, a native Omahan, helped launched this year's social justice initiative. His *D'var Torah*, entitled "God's To Do List: How to be an Angel and Do God's Work on Earth," enthused and warmed the hearts of our congregation as we swayed arm in arm singing *Shalom Alechem*, reminding ourselves that we can partner with angels to do God's work; **God's To Do List**.

Rabbi Eric Linder and Dr. Ron Wolfson worked together to craft the introduction of the project. Rabbi Linder delivered the D'var Torah on the night of Rosh Hashanah, connect Judaism's call for justice with our project. The next morning, Dr. Wolfson continued the message inspiring us to fully participate in the project.

Our community partnerships are extensive. We identified local organizations built relationship with their leadership and explored opportunities for alliances. Our partners include:

Omaha Food Bank, Jewish Family Service, Omaha Public Schools, local political figures and religious institutions, University of Nebraska Medical Center, YWCA, Creighton University, Nebraska Organ Donors, Urban League, Stephen's Center Homeless Shelter, Children's Hospital, Omaha Community Bike Shop, Rabbis for Human Rights - North America (RHR-NA), URJ, Nothing But Nets, Trifaiht of Omaha (Temple Israel, The American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture and The Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska).

Borrowing from the Just Congregation model our strategy included gathering and analyzing information, enabling us to successfully set criteria to prioritize programming goals. The marketing strategy began by creating interest via a survey in which we mentioned that a larger

project was coming. The initiative was cleverly packaged combining a inspirational letters, Wolfson's book, and the To Do List. The effort to get the word out was supported using phone calls, word of mouth, direct mail, sermons, newsletters, e-newsletters, a website, community newspaper and a blog.

Project Implementation

Describe your program from start to finish. What were the key components? Where and when was your program held? What role did volunteers play?

In the summer of 2007, we tried to organize our congregation using the model of Just Congregations. One goal, among others, was to get a better pulse of the congregation. At the time, our congregation's annual adult education theme was "*Sh'ma* – Listening to our stories." We thought that congregational organizing tied in beautifully with this theme, and we hoped a benefit to organizing would be a boost in our social action participation. Tom Hollar, the head organizer for IAF in our region, along with Rabbi Eric Linder, facilitated a relational meeting training session. In the weeks that followed, about fifteen (15) people engaged in forty (40) or so 1-1 relational meetings, but the excitement died down and interest waned.

Going forward, the social action committee reviewed we learned from this process. Community organizing principles taught us that we needed to somehow "hear" the voices of our congregation so that we could more effectively facilitate *tzedakah* experiences.

This year, we wanted:

1. Our congregation to intentionally engage in *tzedakah* in diverse ways. (Volunteer, Attend, Donate)
2. Our congregation to connect with other members of the congregation as well as non-Jewish community.

We surveyed the congregation (Attached). We mailed print copies to our members without email addresses. In total, we received close to 150 responses.

We then analyzed the results using the statistical analysis tools provided by surveymonkey.com. Three focus areas were identified: healthcare, poverty, racial diversity & religious diversity. These results became the basis for our program, **God's To-Do List**. The next step was to identify project in the community that aligned with these areas.

Go/No Go List

In creating our **To-Do** list, Patrick Jensen devised what we came to call a "Go/No Go" (attached) list which helped us make some hard choices regarding given opportunities.

Whereas any *tzedakah* opportunity is worthwhile, we needed to prioritize. The Go/No Go helped us filter based on questions such as:

- Does the project directly address one or more of our focus areas: healthcare, poverty, racial diversity, and religious diversity?
- Is this something the congregation will get behind?
- Does it have the possibility of growing into something larger?
- Is it fun?
- Does it involve other community members besides Temple?

The month before *Rosh Hashanah*, the social action committee worked extremely hard to get all of this information to the congregation in a format that would be understandable, accessible and interesting. Each social action committee member took responsibility for a set of projects arranging partnerships, identifying additional leadership, and coordinating programming. We realize that justice comes in many forms, whether it be lobbying Congress, serving at a homeless shelter, or donating money. Thus, intentionally we broke down our final To-Do list into three categories: Volunteer, Attend, Donate. We planned to challenge congregants to pick at least three (3) items from the list, and hopefully mark at least one that is attend, one that is participate and one that is donate.

A few weeks before *Rosh Hashanah*, the project was explained to our Temple's Board of Trustees. They were asked to provide feedback and consider taking a leadership role in the project. Magda Peck, a member of our Board and a representative to the Commission on

Social Action had the idea of playing on the idea of Temple “Dues.” Lots of congregations ask for money during the High Holidays. This year decided to ask our congregation to give **Do’s** as part of their **Dues**, thus putting our theology into action. We started employing the language of spiritual **Do’s**. We decided that for us to measure the success of our efforts, we would want to keep track of what people check off on their **To-Do** lists.

God’s To-Do List

Launched on *Rosh Hashanah* of this year, the program is a “menu” of social action opportunities during the period of *Yom Kippur* through the end of April, 2009. There are over thirty (30) “menu items” on our list. The packet of informational materials (attached) along with Dr. Ron Wolfson’s book and perforated sheets of God’s To-Do List, was sent to every congregational family just before *Rosh Hashanah*. The congregants were asked to read the book during the High Holidays and to complete the To-Do List and return a copy to Temple Israel on *Yom Kippur*. The staff and the committee set up a system to communicate specific event information and follow up with congregants as the programming began.

Evaluation

Friday, April 24 Dr. Wolfson returns to Temple Israel for *Shabbat* services. His theme, "Calling All Temple Israel Angels," will help to evaluate progress of our **To-Do Lists**. Everyone will have an opportunity to share experiences and hear how all of us have been involved in repairing the world. Wolfson will lead a weekend *Shabbaton* on the theme.

Results

In what ways did this program fill a need in the community? How did it impact the congregation and the larger community? What barriers did you have to overcome? If this was a fundraiser, how much money was raised? Can this program be replicated?

Our congregants do wonderful work in the community. However, we want to challenge our congregants to do *mitzvot* as congregants of Temple Israel. **God’s To-Do List** is an intentional approach to our social action, providing a necessary menu of interesting, informative, creative,

challenging, engaging and fun opportunities focused on three theme areas identified by the results of our survey thus reflecting the congregations' interests, passions, and willingness.

This has impacted our congregation. Once we identified common goals we realized we improved our communication while implementing those goals. We faced challenges by directly addressing areas of struggle and growth, another skill we learned from principles of community organizing.

Our alliances with community organizations helped teach the congregation about social problems and Jewish values. As a result of **God's To-Do List**, congregants are more willing to participate in programs and activities that they might not have otherwise. We have provided a vehicle by which congregants can challenge themselves to grow spiritually while also engaging in the important work of social action.

In actualizing this project, we have struggled to overcome several barriers:

- Many congregants already engage in personally meaningful *tzedakah* opportunities. A key focus of God's To-Do List is to navigate the tension between honoring the existing commitments while also challenging ourselves to participate in Temple's institutionally sponsored activities.
- As we strive to change the culture of social action there is an imperative need for transparent mutual communication with staff, lay leadership, the congregation and the greater community.

God's To-Do List enabled us to create a set of tools to identify our shared goals, identify community partners, schedule and implement projects based on local economic, demographic, and community resources, while fostering relationships.

Additional information

God's To-Do List continues to create a "buzz" within our Temple including many exciting surprises that we did not expect!

The discovery of new leadership and participation

There are many congregants who have helped organize some of our **To-Do List** items who have never before been active in Temple related Social Action programming. As we start talking about 'next year' they will serve as a base for new leadership and ideas.

Youth participation

Several Bar/Bat Mitzvah students have mentioned **God's To-Do List** in their personal *Divrei Torah*. Our High School Youth Group (OTYG) has taken it upon themselves to create their own **God's To-Do List**, centering on creating a "greener" environment, both at Temple and out in the community. Before Rosh Hashanah, OTYG were able to get approximately 1,000 cloth bags donated to Temple. The congregation used those cloth bags to collect over 5,000 pounds of canned items for our local Food Bank. At several times during the year, members of OTYG have spoken from the *bima* about *Tikkun Olam* and their part in fulfilling **God's To-Do List**.

Religious School

Our religious school has worked with the Social Justice Committee in creating opportunities that help compliment some of those on the To-Do List. As an example, a month after Rosh Hashanah the 5th grade religious school class visited the food bank and experientially grasped the impact and meaning of Temple's donations.

Energy

In addition to the tangible successes of the program, there is an excitement that has been built up around **God's To-Do List**. We are confident and hopeful that this excitement will lead to further growth and success as we go forward into next year and beyond.

Team of Rivals

One of the strengths of our Social Justice Committee is that it is made up of a “team of rivals.” From the inception of the program, we have always tried to create programs that aren’t based on our personal priorities and interests, but the congregation’s. The diversity of the Social Justice Committee is definitely an aid to achieving this goal.

Community Event

On April 19, we are partnering with our local JCC to sponsor a community benefit 3 on 3 Basketball Tournament for Nothing But Nets. The projected expense for this event is \$8000. Expenses and proceeds will be shared equally with the JCC. Our portion of the proceeds will go to URJ’s Nothing but Nets campaign. We hope to raise at least \$3000 for the fight against Malaria. This event showcases the diversity of partnerships we have made combining all four of our focus topics (healthcare, poverty, racial diversity, religious diversity).