

# From Woodrow Avenue to Woodrow Avenue: The Path of an Organizer and a Jewish Community

BY ARI LIPMAN

There are times at work when the thought flashes through my mind, “What is a nice suburban Jewish boy like myself doing here at this Haitian Seventh Day Adventist prayer group meeting?”

Let me offer a bit of background. For the past three years, I have worked as an organizer with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), a coalition of 80 religious congregations and community organizations representing approximately 55,000 people from the diverse religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds that make up Greater Boston: Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Muslim; White, African-American, Latino, Haitian, Cape Verdean, Vietnamese, Brazilian, Ethiopian, and Nigerian.

GBIO is part of a national network called the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), founded in 1940 by famous Jewish radical Saul Alinsky. Alinsky was more noted for his organizing work

with Catholics, labor unions, and the African-American church than for setting foot in a synagogue, but increasingly, synagogues of all denominations are joining IAF organizations in cities around the country as a way to strengthen their congregations and to act powerfully on their mandate to seek justice.

## Acting in the Public Arena

Ultimately, the purpose of our organizations is to develop the ability to act powerfully in the public arena. This power — without which our talk of *tikkun olam* and *gemilut hasadim* is just talk — originates from two sources: organized people and organized money. Each congregation that is part of GBIO possesses this power in abundance. Congregations pull together regular budgets to sustain their operations, and gather as a community every Saturday or Sunday, in numbers ranging from

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50 to 5000, to fulfill their collective purpose.

In many congregations, this power is organized exclusively for the literal praise and worship of God. In GBIO, we challenge our congregations to take this power in a new direction: to act for justice. With the collective power of 80 diverse congregations working together, the potential for social and spiritual transformation is enormous.

### **Common Characteristics**

Although each IAF organization has a structure and culture indigenous to the city in which it is born, there are several common characteristics:

- **Broad-based, diverse institutional membership:** IAF organizations build their power by developing a multi-religious, multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual coalition.
- **Multi-issue platform:** In order to serve the varied interests of the diverse constituencies that comprise IAF organizations, we organize simultaneously on multiple issues of concern to the families in our congregations — housing, education, jobs, health care, recreation, transportation, immigration, etc.
- **Relational culture:** The first emphasis in our organizations is to build relationships, one on one, among clergy and lay leaders, both within congregations and across our membership. These relationships, forged in common action, become the glue that holds our organizations together.
- **Leadership development:** IAF organizations become congregation-based

institutes for the development of the public arts of relationship building, strategic planning, power analysis, negotiation, compromise, public speaking, and political judgment.

The Jewish Fund for Justice recently produced an excellent publication entitled “Faith-Based Community Organizing: A Unique Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Synagogue Life,” which argues persuasively how Jewish congregations can benefit from participation in broad-based organizations like GBIO.

### **Meeting a Community**

In this article, I would like to add the perspective of an organizer whose life — both personal and professional — has been transformed through this work. Two years ago, I was given the assignment of organizing in Boston’s sizeable Haitian community. I knew nothing of Haitian language, culture or political experience, or of the Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods where the immigrant community had settled. After dozens of individual meetings with church and community leaders, I slowly gained my bearings and started visiting some of the most vibrant centers of community life.

In listening to the stories of the Haitian men and women at worship services and the aforementioned prayer group meeting — the oppression they suffered in their home country, the discrimination they face on these shores, the trials they endure in their workplace, their struggle to find adequate housing and health care, their hopes and

dreams for their children in America — I learned not just about the present reality for hundreds of thousands of my neighbors in this city, but also about my own family and community.

## **222 Woodrow Avenue**

When Abraham Lipman, my great-grandfather, arrived in Boston from his native Lithuania in 1910, he settled with his family in a densely packed neighborhood of triple-decker houses on the border of Dorchester and Matapan. He and his neighbors on Woodrow Avenue shared three characteristics: They were Jewish, they were immigrants and they were dirt poor.

With little formal education and a need to support his wife and six children, my great-grandfather took a menial job offered by a tailor friend and slowly developed a skill as a presser. He made his living steaming suits in a poorly ventilated shop that broiled in the summer and stank in the winter.

Two institutions supported my great-grandfather's family in this difficult time: his shul and his union. Congregation Agudas Israel, a stately red brick building at 222 Woodrow Avenue in Dorchester, was more than just a center for prayer. It was the primary entry point, for my great-grandfather and many others, into the broader world of American civic and social life.

## **Mutual Aid**

In the era before Social Security and health insurance, synagogue-based mutual aid societies supported families in

times of crisis. *Shul* members who were locked out of downtown banks started their own credit unions. Any politician who wanted to get elected in Boston's Ward 14 paid a visit to the congregation's rabbi, and it was in these meetings that resources for the community were negotiated.

Perhaps most importantly for my family, meetings for the local presser's union convened in the synagogue's basement. Abraham Lipman played a leading role in the formation of the presser's union, served as its local president, and was elected to serve as chairman of the board of the Massachusetts Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Worker's Union. It was because of the organizing taking place in both his synagogue and his workplace that my great-grandfather was able to save enough to buy a single-family home in Revere and provide his children with the opportunity for a college education.

My grandfather, Henry Lipman, worked at my great-grandfather's pressing shop during the day while attending the Harvard Extension School in the evening. He left Boston, completed a master's degree, and fought in World War II. After the war, he purchased a home in an affluent New York suburb where he raised my father, who grew up to become a Harvard-educated physician. I grew up in Montgomery County, Maryland, attended some of the nation's best public schools, and followed the footsteps of my father and grandfather to Harvard.

My grandfather, who grew up in poverty on Woodrow Avenue and secured for his family a firm position

among this country's economic and intellectual elite, passed away this summer at age 87. With him died my family's firsthand knowledge of poverty and the immigrant experience.

## Changing Neighborhoods

During this span, the Mattapan and Dorchester neighborhoods were transformed just as dramatically as the Lipman family. For thirty-five years after my great-grandfather moved to Revere, the neighborhood survived steady attrition to the suburbs and remained a center of Jewish life in Boston. Suddenly, in the two years between 1968 and 1970, Mattapan changed radically from majority Jewish to majority African-American. Synagogues sold their buildings, moved or died. The center of Boston's Jewish community relocated to the suburbs of Brookline and Newton, while Dorchester and Mattapan suffered from abandonment, disinvestment and crime. (This rapid change, a consequence of poorly conceived urban renewal programs, discriminatory lending, anti-Semitism, Jewish racism, panic selling, blockbusting, and unscrupulous real estate practices, is meticulously documented in the book *The Death of an American Jewish Community* by Lawrence Harmon and Hillel Levine.)

Mattapan experienced a second transformation in the 1980s and 1990s, as waves of Caribbean immigrants, primarily from Haiti, settled into what was by then the most affordable, and most decrepit, neighborhood in Boston.

This was not the Jewish history, fam-

ily history, or American urban history I learned growing up. I was in complete ignorance of my family's roots in this neighborhood when I first knocked on the door of 222 Woodrow Avenue to meet the senior pastor of a flourishing 1200-member Haitian Seventh Day Adventist church that owns the building once occupied by Agudas Israel, my great-grandfather's shul.

## How to "Build Community" Without Really Trying

I tell the much-forgotten story of my great-grandfather and the neighborhood that received him because I believe that the sharing of our collective history in America is critical as we search for a meaningful civic and spiritual life in our synagogues.

The contemporary synagogue revitalization movement emphasizes the values of "social justice" and "community building" in order to attract Jews who have been alienated by the anti-septic suburban synagogue centers of their parents' generation. This well-intentioned push has led to a rash of canned food drives, walk-a-thons, potluck dinners, email list-serves, name-tags and designated greeters. All of these may contribute to a synagogue's life, but they are insufficient in and of themselves to create either justice or a cohesive community.

The phrases "social justice" and "community-building" would have been foreign to my great-grandfather's generation, who instead of worrying about such things spent their civic and religious energies bringing together

their members to form credit partnerships, mutual-aid societies and trade unions. Yet by pursuing those self-interests, they achieved both the community building and the social justice that modern congregations seek.

### **Acting Out of Common Interest**

What Jews of that first generation knew instinctively was that social justice happens not out of the work of a committee but when a community comes together to act powerfully on a common interest. Community happens not out of email lists and *onegs*, but when people invest in relationships and common action. In a sense, community is like happiness – it cannot be found by searching for it. Rather, it appears in the process of common pursuit.

I also tell my family story so that we do not forget how American Jewish history is intertwined with that of African-Americans and the more recent African, Caribbean, Latin American, and Asian immigrants whose present speaks very much of our past. Jews on the whole are no longer the urban creatures that we were eighty years ago.

However, if the Jewish community falls out of relationship with the waves of immigrants and African-Americans who occupy the neighborhoods we left behind, we will lose touch with our past reality, their present reality, and the similarities and differences between the two.

Broad-based, interfaith organizing like that taking place within GBIO provides the best opportunity for Jew-

ish congregations to fulfill their justice mandate while also connecting in a meaningful, sustainable, reciprocal way with contemporary urban communities outside the synagogue walls.

“Ideally, a synagogue should be of the world,” explains Ashley Adams, the past president of GBIO Reconstructionist congregation Temple Hillel B’nai Torah and a GBIO board member. “GBIO, and other IAF groups like it across the United States, give Jews an entry into the world in which we live. We get to act on our values alongside others who share them. Perhaps most important, membership in GBIO has been good for us because our synagogue has become more attractive to Jewish families interested in a shul that’s involved in its neighborhood. It’s helped our membership grow. And it’s been good because it has helped serve as a training ground for leaders who can help us with the many tasks that a vibrant shul needs.”

### **Talking About Money**

Synagogues that are considering membership in an IAF organization usually hit two stumbling blocks: 1) the financial cost of membership; and 2) concerns about involving the congregation in public action. I would like to address these two issues head on.

IAF organizations rely on membership dues for 50 to 75 percent of their operating budgets. There is no other way to sustain a vibrant, independent organization with a talented organizing staff; government money comes with too many strings, and foundation

money is unreliable. Each IAF organization has a different way of assessing dues, but most have a structure similar to that of GBIO. Each GBIO member congregation contributes 1 percent of its yearly operating budget for dues, with a minimum payment of \$250 and a maximum payment of \$10,000.

My experience is that both church and synagogue leaders alike get squeamish when the talk turns to money. Money is profane, they insist, and has nothing to do with the spiritual work of the congregation. This, of course, could not be further from the truth. Money is a statement of value, and the true values of a congregation are made quite explicit in the organizational budget.

### Contrasting Priorities

I attended pre-school, became a bar mitzvah and completed confirmation in a large Conservative suburban synagogue with many of the features spurring the synagogue revitalization movement: an anonymous membership (with the exception of several Washington-area celebrities, whom the synagogue kept far from anonymous), empty ritual, and an emphasis on couture over action. I remember the synagogue board pitching a \$2 million capital campaign to renovate the sanctuary so that it might be more pleasing to the eyes of the fashionable membership.

Five years later, I served as director of a small homeless shelter for twenty-three men and women located in the basement of a Lutheran church in Harvard Square. This congregation decided that its basement facilities were

not adequate for the shelter. Its board launched a \$1.5 million capital campaign to renovate the basement to better serve the homeless men and women who called their church home. Throughout the renovation, the drab concrete-and-cinder-block sanctuary remained untouched. (As a side note, this Lutheran church also realized that none of the homeless men and women we served would be able to move out of the church basement unless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts committed more resources to the creation of affordable housing, so the congregation joined GBIO to expand the scope of its social action ministries.)

Although both the synagogue of my youth and this Lutheran church gave equal lip service to the idea of social justice at the pulpit, the difference in the true values and commitment of the two congregations could not have been starker. Jewish congregations that are committed to *tikkun olam* and *gemilut hasadim* write those priorities into their budgets, and those that are not write them into their sermons.

### Addressing Systems, Not Symptoms

Most congregations that do have active social justice programming are used to collecting cans of food for the hungry or organizing volunteers for a local soup kitchen. They are not used to negotiating with a local mayor or governor for increased budget expenditures on nutrition programs or permanent housing for homeless people. The former is unanimously acclaimed in the congregation, though it does little to actually solve the

problems of poor people. The latter addresses the systemic causes of hunger and homelessness, but may create tension within the congregation. Many synagogues choose the route of zero tension over the route of effective justice.

The reality is that the major issues we care about in our communities — housing, education, jobs, health care, transportation, the environment, recreation, etc. — cannot be solved exclusively through volunteerism, no matter how well-intentioned or organized. Those serious about social change must enter the realm of public policy, and IAF organizations at their best can be a powerful democratic vehicle for the advancement of a meaningful policy agenda that can improve the lives of thousands of families in our communities. This type of serious engagement is not possible without taking firm stands on policy issues, negotiating with public officials on those issues, and bringing the power of the thousands of families in our congregations to bear through the democratic process.

IAF organizations are never partisan, but they are always political in the sense that the decisions involving the allocation of public resources — the very decisions we seek to influence for justice — are political decisions.

### **Moving Into Action**

How does an IAF organization work in practice? Let us return to Dorchester and Mattapan, once the heart of a vibrant Jewish community and now the heart of a vibrant Haitian community. GBIO has eight member congregations

and allies in this neighborhood, which collectively represent approximately 6,000 Haitians.

Much as Jewish immigrants settled in the garment industry 100 years ago, Haitian workers have concentrated in nursing homes. Approximately 80 percent of low-wage nursing home workers (certified nursing assistants, dietary and environmental staff) in Greater Boston are Haitian. In many of the congregations, up to 50 percent of the women work in this industry. These are the workers who clean bedpans, lift and bathe patients, change diapers, mop the floors, prepare the meals, and perform most of the dirty grunt work that makes quality nursing home care possible. Like Jews in the early waves of immigration, these workers are largely unorganized, and consequently face tremendous difficulty in the workplace.

With wages as low as \$8 per hour, most women work a total of 60 to 90 hours per week, including second and third jobs, in order to provide for their families. Employers deduct from their paychecks \$100 to \$150 per week for family health insurance. Despite federal regulations that suggest that each worker should be assigned to only five to seven patients, often, nursing assistants must care for up to fifteen at a time. This chronic understaffing leads to workplace injuries, stress, exhaustion and poor patient care. Many homes target their Haitian workers with humiliating policies, including prohibitions against speaking Haitian Creole or making telephone calls in the workplace, even in the break room.

## **The Problem of Continuing Injustice**

These stresses can be crippling, and if you are ever privileged with the opportunity to talk with Haitian women at their Wednesday evening prayer meeting after a long day, you will begin to get a sense both of the injustices that take place daily in our community as well as a taste of what life might have been like for our own prior generations.

Although we can draw many parallels to the experiences of Jewish immigrants one hundred years ago and contemporary Haitian immigrants, there are also significant differences that make life for immigrants today more challenging. My great-grandfather rode the boat from Lithuania to Montreal, and then illegally crossed the border into Maine. His undocumented status did not prevent him from getting a job or establishing a life for himself in the United States.

However, Haitian immigrants without proper documentation today are unable to work, study or even obtain drivers licenses. If they are caught, they are deported. After years of hard work, and with the help of his congregation and his union, my great-grandfather was able to buy a single-family home in the working class suburb of Revere. Today, the average single-family home in Revere costs more than \$300,000 — completely unaffordable to a nursing home worker supporting a family on an \$8-per-hour salary.

The treatment of nursing home workers is not just an issue of concern

to the Haitian community, which makes up a key part of the nursing home work force, but is also of significance to anyone who has a loved one in a nursing facility. Upon hearing the stories from these Haitian workers, the Jewish members of GBIO quickly recognized that, in their synagogues packed with baby boomers whose parents are aging, anxiety about the quality of nursing home care was widespread. The connection between the treatment of workers and the quality of care given in nursing homes became clear: Nursing homes cannot provide decent care to patients if the caregivers themselves are abused.

## **New Relationships for Advocacy**

Thus, a campaign based in mutual interest and a desire to create new relationships was formed. At summer training sessions, Jewish and Haitian leaders studied together the organization of Massachusetts' nursing home industry. They learned that much of the power to set wages, benefits and work conditions in nursing homes rests in the arms of state budget writers and law enforcers.

This fall, a team of leaders from Reconstructionist synagogue Dorshei Tzedek and two GBIO Haitian churches met with the Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services to discuss the administration's plans for improving nursing home care and to put our common concerns on the administration's agenda. In the next two months, groups of Haitian nurs-

ing home workers will meet with Jewish nursing home patients and their families to share their stories with each other and commit to a common plan of action. Before the end of the year, GBIO will bring together more than 2500 people from all of our congregations to engage the Governor of Massachusetts, the Attorney General, owners of nursing home chains and other decision-makers around a concrete agenda to improve nursing home care.

If this campaign is successful, it will mean a significant improvement in the quality of life for thousands of nursing home workers and thousands of patients in nursing care. It will also mean the creation of new, meaningful relationships, rooted in mutual interest and respect, between the Jewish community and the Haitian community.

“Interfaith breakfasts and Thanksgiving services are fine — but they seem often to be artificial constructs where we all get to nod our heads at the pious words of our brethren of other faiths,” concludes Ashley Adams of Temple Hillel B’nai Torah. “GBIO is an arena where we get to build the truly strong bonds that are forged in action. GBIO is that crucible that Jews need to really bond with others in our community.”

### **Reveille for Reconstructionists**

The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization has been blessed with the most substantial Jewish participation

of any IAF organization nationwide. Thanks to the active support and membership of Boston’s Jewish Community Relations Council, GBIO has five member synagogues (including my own, Temple Israel of Boston) with several others pursuing membership. The talented leadership, organized people, and organized money of our Jewish congregations have increased the power of GBIO to tackle the critical social issues affecting our region.

Through GBIO, Jewish clergy and lay people have stood up alongside African-Americans, Haitians and others to initiate a prophetic vision of justice for our community. These relationships are deep and lasting, and provide for a richer civic and religious life. Thanks to the work of GBIO, Jews are returning to Mattapan for the first time in thirty years — not yet to live, but to build bridges between communities and across time.

It is humbling for me to work in the space where my great-grandfather worshiped ninety years ago, and with the people who are following in his footsteps. The improbability of this connection has provided me with the strongest sense of divine purpose and guidance I have experienced in my 25 years.

It is my sincerest hope that Jewish leaders in Reconstructionist congregations across the country will initiate discoveries like this for themselves, and will repair the world in the process.