Small Communities: Making More from Less
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Bible, Talitot and skis. These are the main ingredients for the three day Shabbaton that Congregation Beth Sholom organizes every other year. The retreat is held in a beautiful alpine ski lodge where participants enjoy classes, workshops, and services hosted by visiting scholars, artists, and rabbis from the United States and Israel. Adults, the youth group and children enjoy their own separate learning tracks tailored to a theme, such as Jewish travel. In the evenings, they come together to enjoy Jewish music and Israeli dancing. All of this takes place with the resources of a 200 family synagogue in Anchorage, Alaska.

Moving south to a small town in Northwest Oregon, we meet Jews who have decided to turn their group into a cohesive and engaging Jewish community. Calling themselves Congregation Beit Salmon, they decided to take their Judaism seriously, without taking themselves too seriously. They held High Holy Day services at a member's home to avoid a two hour drive to Portland. They borrowed a Torah scroll and found the resources to hire a rabbi, and are planning more Jewish experiences and programming. This group of Jews, who meets around kitchen tables and in living rooms of their members' homes, are discovering what a successful, building-less Jewish community can be.

These communities are just two examples of the over 600 Jewish communities that exist in small American towns or isolated areas. American Judaism, a once an exclusively urban religion, turned suburban, has branched out to almost every place of American geography from Alaska to the Deep South. These congregations are not instances of Jews living on the edge of Jewish civilization where Judaism is barely surviving, but are thriving small Jewish communities. Even more impressive,
these communities serve as incubators of Jewish creativity and alternative communities for all congregations, of any size.

However, these communities are often dismissed by the rest of the Jewish world as places where serious Judaism happens. Larger or more conventional Jewish institutions and organizations tend to ignore these communities as places to find fresh ideas for Jewish life and living. Indeed, there is very limited academic scholarship about small Jewish communities. Moreover, Jewish publications rarely focus on these communities, their members, or their innovations.

In fact, any data concerning small Jewish communities is limited. The sparse body of literature that does exist, contains a couple of histories on how small Jewish communities began, some articles recognizing that small Jewish communities are happening, a few personal anecdotes, and a survey done back in 2001. The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) conducted in 2000-01 did have one section dedicated to small communities. It found that 802,000 Jews live in small communities, fewer than 200 families, which represent 15% of the Jewish community\(^1\). That’s just under a fifth of all American Jews, and a population that could contribute to the larger Jewish world, if the rest of the Jewish world would pay attention.

We need more information about these communities, about what these communities are doing well, and how they manage to thrive. The literature tends to focus on issues of survival such as how Jews in small communities access kosher meat or how long their commute is to the closest synagogue. What we really need is information about how these communities are \textit{thriving}. These communities have learned to make use of limited resources and turn them into powerful Jewish programs. They live

and work in almost completely non-Jewish environments and yet still find ways to create meaningful Jewish bonds with each other. For example, a small Jewish community in central Washington decided they wanted more events that brought the community together, which were separate from a Jewish prayer service. They started a program called The Community Speaking Series, where members of the community shared or taught something of interest to other members. Congregants learned how tzitzit were dyed blue, listened to famous Spanish guitar songs, witnessed the photo journal of a member’s heart transplant, and learned about the Jewish history of their city from their own community members. These Jews are developing Jewish life in new directions with barely any resources, and many of us are missing it.

To be sure, there are a few organizations who see the benefits of small communities and work hard to support them. The Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) has made it its mission to provide a Jewish experience to all Jews living in the South. In 13 southern states, the ISJL designs curriculum, hires Jewish educators and rabbis, and develops education programs to serve the Jews who live in these small communities. The Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning (WSJL) is another organization that invests heavily in the University of Wisconsin to ensure they provide Jewish and biblical classes. Furthermore, WSJL funds scholarships, libraries, research, and publications that further our understanding of Jews in America. It has also taken on a project to expand the awareness of small Jewish communities through a program called The Wisconsin Small Jewish Communities History Project. Looking globally, there is an organization in the United Kingdom called the Jewish Small Communities Network (JSCN) that indexes small communities in the UK, offers a news digest, and provides resources for Jews who live in small communities or isolated areas.

I believe that Jews in small, isolated Jewish communities have much to offer each other. These
communities have learned not only to survive, but to *thrive* with limited resources available to them. For example, the congregation in Alaska manages a Jewish preschool. The preschool decided to try a fundraiser in order to purchase more supplies. They decided they wanted to create fundraiser unlike any other and “Crafter’s Smackdown” was born. A competition where teams with limited time and resources made works of art to be judged by leaders of the community. Teams could buy better materials for themselves, buy awful materials to sabotage other teams, or even bribe the judges. Each year the event drew more people and more leaders and the Jewish preschool was not only enhanced by the funds it raised, it became famous for its fundraiser. Imagine what Jewish communities such as these could do if more organizations invested in their ideas, their programs, and their community members. Imagine what could be discovered if more academic research, publications, and surveys focused on these small communities. A community that wanted to grow, start a Jewish program, or enhance their worship services, could easily find resources and help from other similar communities and easily connect with the greater Jewish world. There is so much the Jewish world and these isolated communities can do for each other. The future of Judaism may rest in some small isolated town, where Jewish community building is an art, not just a survival mechanism.