FROM THE RABBI
BUILDING A COMMUNITY WITH KAVANA

DEAR FRIENDS,

Just over seven years ago, chatting with a group of friends, Suzi LeVine (my Kavana co-founder) and I had a vision for a new Jewish community that we wanted to create in Seattle, and the project needed a name. We were imagining a Jewish community that would encourage its participants to think purposefully about the role that Judaism played in their lives. We also wanted this new group to be reflective, thoughtful, and focused in its decision-making. My friend Jessica, a Hebrew translator by profession, suggested the Hebrew word “Kavana,” meaning “intention.” Obviously the name has stuck, as has our commitment to operating with “kavana” in all that we do!

For Kavana’s first six years, staff and volunteers worked hard to build an organization that has managed to engage nearly a thousand people in Jewish life annually in a wide variety of meaningful ways. Along the way, we have built relationships and community, created programs, and built a solid operating platform (board, staff, budget) — all with the same high degree of kavana/intention with which we began!

Finally, this year — our seventh or sabbatical year — we have taken a thoughtful step back to consider what we have achieved and where we are headed.  I am proud to report that we have just completed Kavana’s first large-scale evaluation project, and you can back to consider what we have achieved and where we are headed.  I am proud to report that we have just completed Kavana’s first large-scale evaluation project, and you can back to consider what we have achieved and where we are headed.

We invite you to join us in our important work, as we continue to build a vibrant and able to make strategic, data-driven decisions, our evaluation work is also a testament to the community’s ongoing commitment to operate from a place of

The survey data confirmed that Kavana’s population is relatively young, religiously diverse, and includes households both with and without children.

REFLECTION, EVALUATION & PLANNING

We have always been big believers in the power of data-based decision making. This year, we carried out Kavana’s first large-scale evaluation project, gleaning feedback from 200 people in a comprehensive community survey. We explored the demographics, backgrounds and Jewish involvement of our partners and participants, and sought to better understand the impact Kavana is having in order to make smart planning decisions as we move forward and grow. Here are some highlights:

HIGH ENGAGEMENT
• 95% of partners report a moderate or high level of participation in Kavana activities
• 93% have referred friends to Kavana more than once

POWERFUL IMPACT
• 70% of partners have significantly increased their overall Jewish activity as a result of their Kavana involvement
• 81% have increased their Jewish activity at home; 95% have increased their Jewish knowledge and skills

INFORMAL TIES MATTER
• Partners and participants who socialize with each other outside of Kavana are much more likely to be actively engaged with Kavana itself and the Jewish community in general
• Newer community members are much less likely to have these informal ties, and more likely to live in less Jewishly dense neighborhoods

At our 2013 Annual Partner Meeting, Kavana volunteer Lori Smith presented these and other key findings, and we began a series of communal discussions about the important takeaway messages. As one example, we discussed how to build stronger informal social ties among the Kavana community, and this summer we launched neighborhood picnics in four core areas of the city. Stay tuned for a full evaluation report!

VISION
Kavana is a cooperative that empowers participants to create a meaningful Jewish life and a positive Jewish identity.

MISSION
Kavana welcomes individuals and families with many approaches to Judaism, offers a variety of ways to engage in Jewish life, and demands participation in our community.

NATIONAL IMPACT
The first-ever gathering of a new national network of peer “emergent Jewish” communities was co-organized and facilitated in April 2013 by Rabbi Nussbaum. The work we are doing in Seattle is part of a broader effort to build collaborative, risk-taking, pioneering communities that can foster meaningful Jewish life everywhere.

DID YOU KNOW...
Kavana has been featured in the Slingshot Guide (a top-50 list of innovative Jewish organizations) five times during our seven year existence!

RABBI RACHEL NUSSBAUM
Executive Director

PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREW ALHSTROM

We express our gratitude to Dr. Steven M. Cohen, noted sociologist of the American Jewish community, who worked with Kavana to design and implement our Evaluation Survey.

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KAVANA
One of the things we have learned from the Evaluation Project is that Kavana’s strength lies in its emphasis on creating a strong web of community, not just offering programs and services. This has translated into a renewed focus on informal social gatherings, with the explicit goal of networking and building relationships.

For us, joining Kavana was very intentional. We were eager to become involved in a Jewish community that would fit our distinct traditions. Jessica grew up in a Conservative community, while David was raised in a Reform congregation and now identifies with Reconstructionist philosophy. Kavana’s pluralism provides the perfect way for us to explore the other’s traditions while maintaining our own. We are also inspired by all the other partners who have the opportunity to learn about Judaism and to build new friendships in a Jewish community context.

One area where we’ve had great success is our whole-language approach to teaching Hebrew. Taught by native Hebrew speakers, our Gan/preschool operates five days a week, offering young children the opportunity for full language immersion. Through games, stories, play, and a high staff-to-child ratio, we are building the foundation for each student’s life-long connection to Jewish culture and identity as a global Jewish citizen.

When it comes to Jewish supplemental education, it is no secret that traditional delivery mechanisms like Sunday schools and Hebrew schools are failing to reach a broad swath of the American Jewish community. Kavana is tackling this problem head-on. Seven years ago, we began an experiment to dismantle and rebuild a Jewish educational model in order to most effectively reach children, parents and whole families.

One of the things I love about working for Kavana is how intentional we are about our programming. We have had countless conversations about what we want families to learn and why that learning is relevant and important to those in the Kavana community. One of the best examples of this is our approach to teaching Hebrew. We want children to have access to Hebrew, as the language that allows entry into Jewish prayer, Israeli culture, and so much of Jewish history. Therefore, we teach Hebrew as a living language, in a hands-on manner, where children can develop fluency and a love of the language.

“Sam (age 9) looks forward every week to his trip to Queen Anne and the Hebrew immersion class, Moadon Yeladim. He is really interested in learning the language and culture of his heritage. He loves the teachers, his classmates, and the enrichment he gets by being active in the Jewish community.”

—Kim Lawson, Kavana Partner

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APPLYING INTENTIONALITY (KAVANA) TO OUR PROGRAMMING

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Moadon Yeladim (our after-school program for grades K-5) features the same whole-language approach to Hebrew described above. In addition, the children who attend our “Kids’ Club” have the opportunity to learn about Judaism and to build new friendships in a Jewish community context.

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—Maxine Alloway, Kavana Educator

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AN INTENTIONAL APPROACH TO FINANCES AND OPERATIONS

At Kavana, we are proud that we apply the same kind of intentional thinking to fundraising and budgeting that we do to our community building and programming.

Over the last few years, our board has engaged in a thoughtful and reflective conversation around Kavana’s financial model. Our goal is to ensure that the ways in which we attain resources always match how we think about building our community. While institutions helped us get off the ground (with several large foundation grants in our “start-up” years), we know that it is our closest stakeholders — the people who participate in our local community, understand the importance of our work to the greater Jewish community, and share our values — who we will rely on the most to partner with us in the years to come.

We look forward to working with you to shape the future of this vibrant Jewish community!
VALUES
Cooperative
Connected
Innovative
Inspiring
Fun
Welcoming
Local
Thought-Provoking
Experiential

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