

Gesher HaHar: Bridging the Mountains

A Pilot Project of Collaboration

Beth Tzedec Congregation &

Okanagan Jewish Community Centre

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Every Jewish community regardless of size or locale serves as an important thread woven into the tapestry of the Jewish People. The diversity of the Jewish experience enriches Jewish religious and cultural practices as it expands the Jewish capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Beth Tzedec on the east side of the Canadian Rockies and the Okanagan Jewish Community Centre (OJCC) on the western side share a common Jewish milieu in the setting of the independent and individualist spirit of Western Canada.

What represents the greatest challenge for small Jewish communities is their need for rabbinic and Jewish professional services along with their desire to connect to mainstream centres of Jewish life. In addition, the diversity of Jewish affiliations and practices within a small Jewish community can become an opportunity for solidarity or a source of divisiveness and tension.

When the prospect of attracting a full or part-time rabbinic presence is dim, a small community can fend for itself or it can consider a new model of obtaining the necessary resources to renew and revitalize it. This “*Gesher HaHar: Pilot Project of Collaboration*” represents such a model which is designed to harness the human and technological resources of an established congregation to infuse new life into a smaller, isolated congregation in order to energize and sustain it for the future.

Beth Tzedec Congregation is the largest synagogue serving the Province of Alberta as well as an area reaching out 800 km in every direction. Over the past 25 years, Beth Tzedec has grown to a membership of 650 families and is staffed by a rabbi, a cantor at times, a ritual director, a coordinator of family education, an executive director and an active and experienced Board of Directors. An appreciable portion

of its members own second homes in the Okanagan Valley while many others regularly vacation in the area.

The OJCC was established in October 18th 1992.

In the proposed *Gesher HaHar*: Pilot Project of Collaboration, each synagogue would commit to the following:

Beth Tzedec will:

- Offer rabbinic and professional staff weekend visits to the OJCC up to six times a year. During these visits, the Beth Tzedec clergy would lead Shabbat services, teach adult and family education classes, present programs for the religious school on Sunday, and offer counseling where appropriate.
- Provide consultation and guidance regarding religious practices and matters of ritual and liturgy.
- Provide consultation and guidance regarding educational and cultural programming including generating ideas and program planning. This would include inviting OJCC members to join Beth Tzedec educational classes through long distance learning technology.
- Offer administrative and leadership advice and guidance to strengthen OJCC Board effectiveness and to insure the efficient operation of the OJCC office.
- Offer suggestions to rebrand and market the OJCC with an enhanced public relations strategy.
- Offer program resources as they become available to Beth Tzedec such as speakers, films and educational materials.
- Encourage Beth Tzedec members in the Okanagan region to participate in OJCC worship services and activities and to consider financial support of the OJCC.
- Welcome OJCC members to participate in Beth Tzedec activities when visiting Calgary.

OJCC:

- Affiliate with United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to create the foundation for the relationship between the OJCC and Beth Tzedec (To be voted on by membership at June 2013 AGM).
- Provide funds to pay travel and hospitality expenses for the Beth Tzedec visits along with a to-be-determined fee for the long distance learning programs, consultative and other services.
- Publicize in OJCC publications its collaborative relationship with Beth Tzedec.
- Extend invitations to Beth Tzedec members to participate in OJCC events throughout the year. This could be accomplished through notices in the Beth Tzedec publications.

Lofty goals are never easy to achieve. They require a viable vision, committed and dedicated leaders, and the resources to turn those goals into realities. It has become increasingly more difficult for small Jewish communities to be self-sufficient as Jews continue to assimilate in these geographically isolated areas and subsequently drift away from Jewish institutional life. The benefits of *Gesher HaHar*: Pilot Project of Collaboration is that it enhances the resources of the smaller community so that it can create a viable setting for the celebration of Jewish life while it challenges the established congregation to act on the important mitzvah of sustaining *Klal Yisrael*- Jewish Peoplehood.