

13 Attributes of Congregation Or Ami's Spiritual Success

By Rabbi Paul J. Kipnes

What makes Congregation Or Ami unique? We identify at least thirteen Jewish values that permeate Congregation Or Ami, creating an environment that touches souls and affects lives.

1. *Henaynu* (we are here): Ever since Adam and Moses answered God's question "where are you?" by saying "hineini" (*I am here*), Jews have attempted to be present for each other. While many congregations have caring community committees, Or Ami's actually functions because it deputizes every synagogue member with three core responsibilities: seeking out those who are struggling physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually; informing the congregation and rabbi; and being prepared to deliver food, make supportive calls, help drive carpools, or otherwise support those in need. Or Ami recognizes and acts upon the notion that a caring community relies upon itself – not its clergy alone – for support and uplift.
2. *Achen Yeish Adonai Bamakom Haze* (Wow, God is in this place too!): Ever since Jacob woke up after his ladder dream, exclaiming in wonder that God existed even in the middle of the wilderness, Jews have recognized that God could be found everywhere. Some congregations, by focusing their spiritual activities solely within the synagogue walls, teach that God is found primarily within the synagogue. Or Ami teaches by example that God can be found everywhere: we celebrate in congregants' backyards, enjoy Shabbat around campfire circles, observe *Tashlich* at the beach, celebrate Passover in Malibu Creek State Park, and hold services in school buildings and community center gymnasiums. While our home sanctuary offers special comfort as a gathering place, it remains for us only

one special location in which to encounter the Holy One. Similarly, several times a year, congregants who live nearby one another gather for a Shabbat service and *Oneg* in the neighborhood. Our rabbi trains members to be *sh'lichay tzibur* (service leaders). Our ritual committee finds hosts; each guest brings tasty desserts for the *oneg*. One year, ten homes hosted Neighborhood Shabbat Bayit services. We teach that anyone can make pray to God, without needing a rabbi or cantor to lead you.

3. *Mishloach Manot* (Delivering Tasty Treats): In the *Megillat* (Scroll) of Esther, Jews delivered tasty treats to friends and family. Our ritual committee recognized early on that bringing Judaism into lives and homes of congregants helps create participating Jews. And so we began to deliver packages of *hamantashen* to every congregant home. Soon after, delivering *sufganiot* (a Crispy Crème donut four-pack, no less) on Hanukkah became a new twist on that traditional home-based holiday. Each delivery – organized by volunteers – includes a description of the central *mitzvot* of the holidays (sharing sweets, giving *tzedakah*, telling the story) as well as an invitation to come by the synagogue for our wild Purim and Hanukkah celebrations. Blessings flow from our home to your home.
4. *Torah Orah* (Torah is the Light): Or Ami shines the light of Torah through the darkness that sometimes descends. Its wisdom, its rituals and its lessons offer a pathway through the challenges of life. At Or Ami, we investigate everything in Torah, and its surrounding commentaries; no question is too foolish to ask. As such, our adult study groups are impassioned gatherings, deeply moving to the participants.
5. *Hoda'ah* (Giving Thanks): One congregant remarked that in all her years of synagogue memberships (at multiple synagogues), she did not recall being thanked so much for so many big and small things. At Or Ami, we take pride in all the gifts our members bestow upon the community, especially their gifts of time and effort. The longest column in our bulletin thanks those who offer their time and energy. Carrying the Torah during our High Holy Day is reserved for those who offered significant volunteer hours, not those who offered significant

dollars. While we appreciate the latter, it is the former that transforms community.

6. *Schepping Nachas* (sharing the joy): Every stage of life offers opportunities to find joy. A potential convert once asked me why we Jews were so focused on death and suffering. After explaining the historical basis (Holocaust, pogroms, etc.), I explained to him that at Or Ami, while we commemorate the past, we focus on the present and future. We celebrate every moment of joy about which we are aware. Yes, *bris* and *brit bat* (covenant ceremonies for a daughter), but also graduations, new jobs, new homes and more. Our services are not complete unless we find a moments to celebrate *s'machot* (joyous moments) and to sing *shehecheyanu*, a prayer thanking God for the joy of our congregants' sacred moments.
7. *Mishpacha* (Family Learning): The family that learns together deepens their Jewish commitments and their communal connections. Our two-year old *Mishpacha* Family Alternative Learning program gathers parents and children together in the synagogue twice monthly for interactive learning. At the start of each session parents learn with the rabbi about the same themes and texts that their children are exploring in multi-grade groupings at the same time. Later, parents and children come together to learn through plays, cooking, games and crafts activities. Over 30% of our children learn in the *Mishpacha* program, thereby deepening the family commitment to learning within the community.
8. *The Noshery* (Meeting in the Kitchen): We joke, "What nine words describe all Jewish holidays?" "*They killed us, but we survived, now let's eat!*" At Or Ami, in practice if not by design, most meetings (and adult classes) take place in the kitchen. A wide open room with a freezer full of noshes, the *Noshery* (as we call it) provides a common area to gather, shmooze, discuss, and raid the refrigerator. People do not seem to argue as much with their mouths full and their hunger sated. Additionally, in the coming year we will return to a once-monthly pot luck oneg, allowing our congregants to share baked delicacies with one another on Shabbat.

9. *Shiru L'Adonai Shir Chadash* (Sing unto God a new song): Our singing repertoire combines traditional favorites with new songs composed by our Cantor Doug Cotler, our Chorale Director Judith Berman, and a host of congregant-composers. We highly value participatory music, especially when our incomparable Or Ami Chorale leads us. All songs and prayers are transliterated to encourage participation. Sometimes the Cantor refuses to move forward in the service until everyone joins in singing. At Congregation Or Ami, worship is not a spectator sport; it is a full contact team activity!
10. *Tzedakah* (Righteous Giving): Helping those in need is central to being a Jew. We seek creative ways to encourage people to give. Our award-winning "Making Our Tzedakah Grow" project deputizes random congregants as "*Tzedakah* agents" by giving them \$100 each, and instructing them to grow this money and use it to make the world better. Our *Chaver l'Chaver* (friend to friend) fund encourages congregants to support synagogue membership for other community members experiencing severe illness, disability or economic instability within the family. Our social action program is developing a regular, holiday-based collections program so that we can share our holiday joy with others through the mitzvah of giving.
11. *B'nai Mitzvah*: When Rabbi Kipnes joined the congregation, he informed them that two things were non-negotiable: (1) that he taught Confirmation class, and (2) that the rabbi would work for 5-8 weeks with each *B'nai Mitzvah* student. Should the rabbi's responsibilities grow too large, these two duties may not be changed. Our rabbi relishes moments learning with the students. As in his "rap with the rabbi" sessions at religious school, the rabbi strives to develop relationships with our students so that upon ascending the *bimah* (all 9 inches of it) for a final blessing, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah student receives from the rabbi a personal blessing based in a deep relationship.
12. *Hachnasat Orchim* (Welcoming Guests): By choosing the word "congregation" for inclusion in our name, we trumpeted our goal: to create a community. Walk into the synagogue on Shabbat and you are asked to put on a name tag so that no one feels at a loss for greeting others by name. Guests at services are invited to

stand, introduce themselves, and often find themselves the last to leave after being warmly greeted and chatted up around the *Oneg* table. Want to have a connection with your rabbi? Call or email and you will find yourself schmoozing over coffee or ice cream at the local coffee shop. At Or Ami, we seek out ways of making everyone feel welcome and connected.

13. *Shhhh?...Sha!*: At Or Ami, we work diligently at breaking down walls of silence surrounding once taboo issues. In a weekly *D'var refuah* (comment on illness and healing) at services, Rabbi Kipnes openly discusses (with prior permission) congregants struggling with life-threatening issues, the disability of their children as well as issues of separation and divorce, miscarriage, addiction and more. Our community welcomes, and tries to fully integrate all our community members – Jewish singles, blended families, single parents, gay and lesbian couples, interfaith couples, bi-racial families, seniors and two parent families – by talking openly and honestly about the challenges for each member unit. Our rabbi's Yom Kippur sermon offering blessings for families struggling with mental illness lifted the veil on this once whispered-about challenge. We teach that we all have our “stuff;” as a community we help each other through our struggles.

There are so many more ways that Or Ami is uniquely special. I'd love to hear what you think. Please call or email (Facebook or Tweet) me to share your thoughts.