

Growing a Masorti Community

A blueprint for leaders

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Starting a new Masorti community might be an option for you if:

- you have just moved to a new neighbourhood and there is no conveniently located synagogue,
- your area has had a sudden increase in the number of Jewish families,
- your synagogue is not Jewishly comfortable for you and there are no nearby alternatives,
- you would like to experience an approach to Judaism which is grounded in traditional practice and strives towards equality and inclusivity,
- you would like to experience a meaningful Judaism that isn't frightened to address all difficult questions,
- you would like to be part of a Jewish experience that deals with heart and soul as well as keen intellect,
- you would like to feel welcomed and valued in a non-judgmental way,
- you would like to feel you are accepted as yourself without the need to put on a show or dress up, OR
- you would like to find other people who think like you.

Starting a new community is a long-term responsibility and a holy endeavour. We at Masorti Judaism can help to make the process less daunting for you, as we have a wealth of experience to offer you on your journey.

This booklet outlines the steps you'll need to take to get started. It explains how to go about setting up a new community group and provides a route-map for growing your new group into a fully functioning Masorti community and synagogue.

There are now 14 Masorti communities across the UK. Over the next few pages, you can read some of their stories and find out: how did they get started? How did they manage the most important transitions and stages of development? And what was the secret of their success?

Case study 1: New North London Synagogue (Finchley)

By founder member Michael Rose

The New Highgate and North London Synagogue, as NNLS was called for the first few years of its life, was formed at a meeting at Heath Winds, Highgate on 3rd November 1974 and its first service was held there on 14th December, Shabbat Hanukah, which we still celebrate as the shul's birthday. An old sideboard covered with a newly embroidered red cloth served as a *bima* and we read from a little Sefer Torah borrowed from the New London Synagogue.

Ivor Jacobs had first come up with the idea of forming a new shul as a ‘daughter’ synagogue to the New London in 1972. After mulling it over for a couple of years and getting together a few like-minded people, Ivor and I wrote to the Jewish Chronicle announcing our plan. Those who responded were invited to a coffee evening, to be followed by a formal meeting to constitute the synagogue.

The coffee evening was a magical moment, when the embryonic congregation took on a life of its own and began kicking vigorously. Here was a room full of young couples in their twenties and thirties - now in their sixties and seventies - and an atmosphere buzzing with excitement. It was an extraordinary moment: a collection of strangers from a wide range of religious backgrounds suddenly became a group with a common purpose.

Rabbi Jacobs climbed onto a chair to make himself heard and quoted John Stuart Mill: “Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come”.

Why did we need to form a synagogue at all? What brought together this “congregation of misfits?” - 35 or so families from the United Synagogue, the New London, the Reform and Liberal movements and the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations?

As we wrote in our statement of aims when the shul came into being, “our objectives are to create a Synagogue which will be a real community, where traditional Judaism is taught and practised in a way which is intellectually honest and satisfying to its members; which is independent of outside control; and which will in due course provide all communal necessities, including education, study groups, communal welfare, marriages and a burial scheme.”

We strove to fulfil all these aims from the outset: we were not to know that it would be seven years before we found a permanent home or that our inspirational future rabbi was then still at school!

New North London Synagogue celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2014. It is now the largest community in the Masorti movement with over 2000 adult members.

Case study 2: St Albans Masorti Synagogue (SAMS)

By founder member Jackie Gess

When frustration grows to the extent that it is clear that whatever is happening now is no longer viable, it is time for change. A new approach is needed, and a line has to be crossed.

This is the point at which three families decided that the provision for Jewish Community life in St Albans was not sufficient for their needs and despite efforts to bring about change from within, something radical was needed. This involved a mindset of commitment, determination and a deep inner understanding that there was no going back, and no halfway house. This strong intent led directly to the success of St Albans Masorti Synagogue or SAMS as it is now known.

Organisation is the relatively easy part. However, without the people within the community who are driven to succeed, plans, structure and organisation will come to very little.

Here is an account of our beginnings and early days.

We visited the original Edgware Masorti and gained enormous help from Jacky Chernetz (now an ordained Chazan) who found us a Sefer Torah and enabled us to plan for our first services. She also found us the rabbinical advice we needed, and support from Rabbi Chaim Pearl, Rabbi Louis Jacobs and the wider Masorti community in the UK and USA.

We advertised in the local press and held a social evening for those who might be interested in joining a new community. Members of the group took it upon themselves to learn liturgy and leyning and also to improve the synagogue skills they had. We held a meeting to decide on the nature of our services, for example the role of women in the synagogue. We organised and held our first services on Sukkot 1990. We started regular services in peoples' homes every Shabbat morning and one a month on Friday night (now every Friday night)"

As well as holding services, SAMS realised that a community needs to educate its children. We decided to train two members as cheder teachers, sending them to courses run by the Centre for Jewish education at Leo Baeck College. We also used Edgware Masorti Synagogue's cheder, where our own children studied until we were ready to open our own cheder which was established within the year. We also set up weekly Noam clubs in St Albans. The first youth worker was Sara Levan who later went on to be the Mazkira and then the professional youth director of Noam.

Within the local secular and faith communities we established ourselves as a dynamic and friendly group. Our numbers grew through word of mouth, involvement in the Masorti movement and wider established Jewish organisations (for example, the Board of Deputies and Jewish charities) and the Jewish press.

We set up a committee structure, with strict guidelines for the length of time people can serve, engendered a culture of volunteering and had the regular support of visiting rabbis and student rabbis from the Conservative movement in the USA.

We began working with our first wonderful, part-time rabbis in the 1990s. In 2011, we appointed Rabbi Rafi Kaiserblueth, our first full-time religious leader, and in 2012 we opened our own, purpose-built synagogue.

SAMS is now one of the most active Jewish communities in Hertfordshire and has almost 350 adult members.

Case study 3: New Stoke Newington Shul (NSNS)

By founder member Jonathan Freedland

New Stoke Newington Shul was formed when a handful of N16 Jews gathered around a kitchen table in 2007 to discuss what they saw as their ‘Goldilocks’ problem. There was no shortage of services in the area: in Stamford Hill alone, there were an estimated 70 synagogues and shtiebels and also a thriving Liberal community. The former offer tradition and authenticity, the latter egalitarianism and inclusion. What was missing was something that combined both: not too hot, not too cold but just right.

That year we organised services for Kol Nidre and Rosh Hashana, spread the word and greeted dozens of families who clearly felt the same need. Without a building, with no rabbi, no Sefer Torah – everything was rented, borrowed and improvised. People who had never davened or leyned before filled the gap.

The same group organised gatherings for the major festivals – havdala in a sukkah here, a matza ramble there – without anything so formal as a mailing list, membership fees or even a name. The one thing we knew was that we wanted to be a Masorti community. When we organised their first shiur – again around a kitchen table – it was led by Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg.

By 2013, things had become more established. We still borrow and improvise a fair deal, but now meet for a morning service on the first Shabbat of each month, regularly filling the basement room of two of our most generous members.

Update: NSNS has launched dues-paying membership, has its own rabbi – Roni Tabick, and participated successfully in Masorti Judaism’s community growth programme. It now has over 100 members, meets for services, Jewish learning and activities on a weekly basis in a rented hall and members’ homes.

Taking the steps

We believe that all the above can be achieved by any committed group of people. However, without the internal commitment, this could remain a dream.

Most new communities move through three clearly defined phases:

1. The pre-establishment stage – focuses on bringing together a core group of leaders and participants, launching religious, educational and social activities – probably in members' homes, building relationships, agreeing on your ethos, values and aspirations, and creating a connection with Masorti Judaism.

After the first year or two of operation, the community will move into...

2. The small community stage – establishing regular, weekly services and activities in rented premises, creating an organisational structure (including a board and/or committees, an administrator and some form of constitution), recruiting dues-paying members, affiliating to a burial society, registering as a charity, and becoming a constituent community of Masorti Judaism.

Finally, sometimes after several years, a new community may enter...

3. The transitional stage – in which it begins to outgrow its 'small community' status as it has over 150 adult members. At this point you will be running a range of regular activities, working with student or part-time rabbis and chazanim, and be ready to start thinking about recruiting a permanent rabbi and looking for your own premises.

Masorti Judaism's purpose is to assist you through all these stages in your development. We do this in two different ways.

First, we can **provide you directly with the services** you need: leadership training, legal and financial advice, visiting rabbis and chazanim, access to rabbinic recruitment services, Noam youth provision, Bet Din services, and community development advice.

Second, we can **connect you with other Masorti communities** for peer-to-peer advice and support and for practical resource sharing. We are encouraging our existing synagogues to adopt nearby new communities as 'satellites,' giving them access to services such as burial, cheder, pastoral care and administrative support without having to re-invent the wheel, while enabling them to hold their own independent, local services and other activities. These satellites might go on to become independent synagogues in their own right, or they might choose to maintain a permanent relationship with their parent synagogue, thereby creating a multi-location community hub.

On the following pages, you can read more about what the establishment phase involves and what support Masorti Judaism can offer you. If you'd like to find out more please contact our office.

The Pre-Establishment Stage

A pre-establishment community comes into existence when a group of people get together to run communal Jewish activities and contact Masorti Judaism to express an interest in being part of the movement.

At this stage, your focus will be on bringing together a core group of leaders and participants, launching religious, educational and social activities – probably in members' homes, building relationships, agreeing on your ethos, values and aspirations, and creating a connection with Masorti Judaism.

The pre-establishment stage usually lasts between one and two years.

Here are some important steps to take and issues to think about during this stage.

a. Building relationships

Any community is a network of relationships – and the stronger the relationships, the stronger the community. When we ask people what they get out of their membership in a Masorti community, the most common answer is about friendship and a connection with other people. As such, the most important ingredient for a new community is a committed core group of people who are in relationship with each other and who are committed to the project. Ensuring that this group is in place needs to come before planning any particular programme or activity. Every meeting and activity of the new group should include relationship-building activities, at the very least an opportunity for people to introduce themselves, meet each other and talk.

b. Developing leadership

The first thing you'll need is a group of leaders. We suggest starting out by building a core group of no less than five – ideally ten – committed people. These are the people who will plan and organise your initial events, make provisional decisions about your goals and ethos, and - most importantly – take responsibility for reaching out, bringing new people in, building relationships with them and getting them involved. While a formal structure is probably not necessary at this stage, it is important for each person to have a clear sense of their role and responsibilities as part of the leadership group – and you may want to choose one or two people to chair the meetings and act as coordinators.

c. Launch events

Your first event could take several forms: it could be a Shabbat morning or Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat service, with or without a potluck meal. It could be a talk, class or

discussion with a Masorti rabbi. Or it could be an event specifically aimed at families with children – a picnic or tea. There's no right or wrong event, beyond one simple criterion: what will attract people in and enable them to begin building relationships with each other?

The launch event should be preceded by two important steps. First, a planning meeting involving as many members of your core group as possible: this sets the tone of a collaborative, group effort, rather than an individual initiative. And second, each member of the core group having one-to-one conversations with potentially interested friends and issuing personal invitations. Personal, word-of-mouth outreach is far more effective at this stage than any form of marketing – flyers and emails can be used to get the message out further but are not a substitute for personal relationships.

d. Identifying needs

Before planning a programme of events, you'll need to understand what your potential members are looking for in a community. What's important to them and what kind of activities will attract them? The best way of finding this out is by talking to them. Ideally this will take the form of a series of one-to-one conversations in which members of your leadership team can get to know other potential members and assess their needs. It can also be done as a group discussion. Either way, it's a good idea to begin carrying this out as part of your launch activity – you could go round, do introductions and ask each person to say something about what brought them to the event. Or break into pairs, carry out the same conversation and report back to the group. As a follow-up, you could ask participants what kind of services and activities they'd like to see in the future.

e. Planning a programme

Following your first event, you should have a sense of your potential members, what they want from the group, and who might potentially like to take on a leadership role. At this point, it's a good idea to convene a planning meeting, inviting anyone you think has something to contribute and would like to be involved. You might want to sketch out a 6- or 12-month programme of activities, in line with the needs of the group. This could be regular Shabbat services, study and discussion sessions, family activities, meals and social events, or a mixture. To some extent your plan will depend on the skills you have in your leadership group (if you want to run services, for example, does anyone know how to lead?) but you can also call on Masorti Judaism for support. Your plan should include not only content but also times, locations (people's houses?) and roles/responsibilities for each activity.

f. Spreading the word

Again, the best publicity is word of mouth. If you have 10 committed people and each one brings a friend or two, you'll have no problem ensuring good attendance. The most common mistake new community groups make at this stage is relying on traditional or online marketing. On the other hand, email, posters in Jewish shops and other venues, flyers delivered through local Jewish schools or in Jewish neighbourhoods, social media

and local papers are all good ways to supplement your core one-to-one recruitment process. Creating a contact list and taking people's details is crucial as a basis for sharing information and publicising future events. This can then be used to create email lists, Facebook groups and so on.

g. Money

While you probably won't need much in the way of funding to run an initial programme of activities, it's worth creating a budget for the things you will need. This might include refreshments, room rental (if you decide not to host in members' homes), photocopying, resources for children's activities and so on. At a later stage, you may want to consider budgeting more significant sums for visiting rabbis and chazanim, for example if you choose to run Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur services. Rather than collecting membership fees at this early stage, many new communities have preferred to charge a fee for each event.

h. Relationships with nearby communities

Relationships with neighbouring Masorti communities is one of your most important assets. It's important to contact any such communities at an early stage of your planning to see what support they might be able to give you and – just importantly – to allay any concerns they might have about your new group adversely affecting their attendance and membership. Masorti Judaism is encouraging new groups to enter into 'satellite' relationships with existing communities which are too far away to meet their needs. In this scheme, people become members of the 'parent' synagogue, have access to centrally provided services like burial, pastoral care and education, but get to run their own activities and services in their local area. We can help put you in touch with your nearest synagogue and help broker a relationship.

i. Jewish ethos – Shabbat and Kashrut

Masorti communities operate within the framework of Halacha (Jewish law). As such, it will be important that your activities are kashrut- and Shabbat-compliant. You'll want to avoid doing art activities or showing films on Shabbat, for example, or having people bring non-kosher dishes as part of a potluck meal. For more guidance on this please contact Masorti Judaism.

During the pre-establishment stage, Masorti Judaism can help you in the following ways:

- Rabbis, chazanim and educators for one-off or regular placements as well as to provide advice
- Youth leaders – for occasional youth sessions and services, via our youth movement, Noam; we can also support you to ensure adequate safeguarding/child protection procedures
- Books and resources – for example loaning siddurim (prayer books)

- Advice and training – your leaders will be welcome to join movement-wide leadership training courses and we can also provide bespoke training and advice for your group
- Networking with other communities – via our community chairs’ forum; we are also happy to set up mentoring relationships with experienced lay leaders from other communities
- Marketing and branding – a community page on the Masorti website plus advice and support on newsletters and social media