Reach Out and Touch Someone
By Rabbi Susan Grossman

My first experience with the organized Jewish community was in college. The local Federation sponsored a Jewish Student Union advisor. He believed there was something for everyone in Judaism. He spent his days talking with students on lunch lines and at the gym. He would ask what they were interested in and then connect them with an activity or organization in the Jewish community that spoke to that their passion. I am one of many SUNY-Binghamton students who went on to become active in the Jewish community as a result of his outreach.

Our JSU advisor was following the principles laid down by our ancient sage Hillel, “Be like the disciples of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace, love your fellow creatures and bring them close to Torah.” Torah refers not just to the first Five Books of Moses, of course, but to all of Jewish learning. I believe Hillel was also referring to all Jewish engagement.

Thanks to the support of our Howard County Federation, we have a Jewish Student Union at our local college, HCC. However, the need for outreach is not limited to campus. The majority of Howard County Jews are not affiliated with any Jewish congregation or organization.

It does not take a rabbi or a JSU advisor to bring someone close to the community. A discussion on line at the supermarket, or in the kosher aisle, may reveal a couple looking for learning opportunities. Our Federation jGroup and congregational adult education lectures offer the perfect connection. A discussion around the gym’s water fountain may reveal a young parent looking to meet other young Jewish families. Our Federation’s Shabbat circle or one of our congregation’s Tot programs might be the perfect place to connect them. Back to school night might reveal Jewish parents whose kids are not yet in Religious School. Our congregations offer choices in schools, youth activities, social action projects, parent support programs. There is something for everyone. Bringing Jews closer to their own identities is as easy as opening the door to a conversation and then following through: take the person’s name and phone number to share with Federation and the congregations or organizations (like Hadassah) that might offer a good connection for them. Invite them for Shabbat dinner or offer to meet that person at an appropriate Federation or congregational event.

These are just some of the many ways we can show our love of our fellow Jews: by helping them find their way into the community that is the rich legacy of us all.

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