

COVENANT GRANT PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

Statement of Need

Vermont faces a “perfect storm” of challenges outlined in the [article](#) New American Judaism and other sources. We have a relatively small Jewish population (15,000-25,000), only a small percentage of whom are synagogue members. Even among members, many infrequently attend synagogue events. Vermont is among the least religious states in the US, and, like for other religions, the population of congregants is aging. Many younger Jewish Vermonters have little or no affiliation with their Jewish heritage, sometimes choosing to move to Vermont to be distanced from some aspect of their Jewish upbringing. The level of Jewish learning is highly varied, and many Jewish Vermonters are creating their own spiritual and cultural pathways, not necessarily tied to their local synagogue. The recent Pew [study](#) on American Jewish life reflects these trends and the changing nature of Jewish identity in the US and Vermont.

The demands on clergy at small congregations are unique and extensive. The roles of clergy and lay leadership go well beyond conducting services and ministering to parishioners. Our small congregations offer an incredible array of programming trying to serve all ages while appealing to those from the most to least Jewishly oriented. Often lacking administrative staff, the leadership becomes responsible for tasks from office management to tech administration to fundraising and financial oversight. Congregations have a limited number of wealthy donors in Vermont so they work with finite budgets that limit resources for staffing and programming.

The primary needs for an active, engaged, vibrant Jewish community in Vermont are:

- Engaging a diverse range of Jewish individuals where they are, both geographically and spiritually.

- Providing a reliable and predictable schedule of dynamic, inspiring, and diverse programming to expand engagement and education for Jewish Vermonters.
- Developing a united collaborative network among Jewish organizations in Vermont that can expand programming opportunities and support for the Jewish community while reducing demands on any individual congregation or leader.

Description of the Project:

JCVT proposes a multi-faceted statewide effort to coalesce the Jewish community of Vermont and to engage Jewish individuals throughout the state.

Shmita: JCVT kicked off this effort with a Shmita planning event on Earth Day and three follow-up workshops in May to explore issues of climate, racial, and economic justice. Each congregation committed to a Shmita project that will guide them in the coming Shmita year. JCVT will facilitate this process in bi-monthly meetings with clergy and board leadership, who will lead the planning for their own institutions. Examples of proposed Shmita programming throughout the state include a mindfulness course: Jewish Teaching on Divine Providence; a class on Regenerative Agriculture and Judaism; a peer study chevruta on Shmita from different angles; a speaker series on racial justice; programming on socially conscious agricultural practices in collaboration with the Northeast Organic Farming Association; and piloting small group “Makloket” discussion groups to open conversation across difference related to Israel.

Summit: JCVT will reconnect Vermonters by restarting our annual statewide learning summit and adding two smaller, one-day regional gatherings, one in the northern part of the state and one in the south. The summit will include a variety of experiences, including: religious services led by different clergy, shared meals, evening music entertainment, and Shmita related

workshops on Jewish spirituality, rituals, and Torah study and also on more “culturally oriented” topics such as food, nature, agriculture, mindfulness, and Tikkun Olam. The one-day gatherings will begin with community building activities and then focus on facilitated conversations on topics such as rural Jewish life, Jewish parenting, and Jewish orientations in our daily life. One goal in these collective experiences is to tap into the talent and interests of laypeople to lead much of the programming to empower individuals and more widely spread feelings of leadership and ownership. Likewise, facilitated conversations are intended to expand participation and broaden feelings of inclusion as widely as possible. From these gatherings we hope Jewish Vermonters build relationships between each other and to the Jewish community.

Virtual Jewish Life Class: JCVT will also use virtual programming to create a year-long course on Jewish life taught by clergy leaders. Participants can drop in on one class or attend all. Programming proposals include: exploring a parsha or holiday, Tikkun Olam, meditation and prayer, and Israel, Zionism, Peace and Security. JCVT will manage the course and the technology, with clergy and educators from across the state each facilitating one of the classes. In year two, JCVT will offer a two-day “Limmud-like” virtual learning fair in collaboration with partner organizations in Maine and New Hampshire to create a tri-state festival of workshops on Jewish learning. JCVT, along with The Center for Small Town Jewish Life and the NH Federation will recruit workshop facilitators and promote the event across the three states to generate enthusiasm for this entry point for Jewish connection and learning.

Music: In partnership with Next Stage Arts, JCVT will offer music programming as an alternative connection to Jewish life. Next Stage has visions for Jewish art beyond the typical Klezmer genre and synagogue service music. Programming will also include regional concerts

that will explore the diversity of Jewish music through a cultural lens with from-the-stage learning about the music being presented.

Speaker Series: The JCVT speakers series will offer four presentations in different areas of the state on Shmita related themes. Shmita experts, such as Nati Schwartz and Psachyah Lichtenstein, will teach about Shmita and the connection to rest, renewal, and rethinking and how that relates to social justice. Speakers will present at synagogues and college campuses in an effort to reach a diverse audience of individuals with wide-ranging connections to Judaism.

Recreation and Travel: JCVT will offer a Virtual Israel tour organized by JNF that focuses on Shmita themes and service organizations in Israel to bring together people across Vermont to learn more about Israel and the many service organizations there working for a better world. JCVT will also collaborate with a Vermont ski family on “Ski-Ride Purim,” a Jewish engagement program to bring Jewish skiers and snowboarders together from throughout the region that seeks to celebrate the joy of Judaism in a festive outdoor environment. Activities will include Megilah reading, education about Purim, costume contests, and festivities.

Shabbat: With the goal of connecting with less affiliated Jewish Vermonters, JCVT will promote Shabbat Across Vermont to encourage people to invite others into their homes, especially focusing on Jewish college students to make them feel welcome and supported even if far from their home.

Timeline: The Shmita projects will begin with the Jewish New Year and are designed to continue for seven-year cycles, with this first year being one of study, reflection, rethinking and planning for action. JCVT expects each congregation to expand their activities around their focus and evolve their learning and action over the years.

The regional one-day gatherings will be in the spring, the larger statewide summit in the fall. The Jewish Life class will begin in September to align with the school calendar, with Limmud programming beginning in year two. Music programming will be spread throughout the year and held in different regions of the state. Ski-Ride Purim is scheduled for March 18, 2022. Shabbat Vermont is planned to begin before the grant begins, in particular to help Jewish college students feel welcome in the state and connected to the larger community beyond their campus.

Outputs:

The outputs expected include:

- One day regional gatherings with 100-200 participants
- Shmita involvement from up to 13 congregations, several Chabads, Hillel at UVM and Middlebury, and several other Jewish organizational partners, as well as unaffiliated individuals, totalling 1000 participants from the various sites.
- Assuming 15-20 in each biweekly class, the Jewish life class would involve 300-400 unique participants each year.
- Arts/music events need 80-150 attendees to be financially viable. Four events would net at least 400 participants.
- The Limmud will include 400-500 participants based on offering 15 workshops each day and estimated 15 people per workshop.
- JNF Virtual Israel tours are designed for 25.
- Ski-Ride Purim has a conservative goal of 300 participants but hopes to grow over the years to be bigger in Vermont, at multiple locations and spread to other states.
- Perhaps most importantly, this work will necessitate bimonthly meetings of the clergy and quarterly meetings of the board leaders. The clergy are already engaged together

discussing their ideas for Shmita projects. JCVT will create a shared site such as Google drive to engender more sharing of resources, materials and ideas. The sharing of Shmita projects on the JCVT website will encourage more use of the website as a statewide resource. These structural changes are essential to bringing a more unified and collaborative orientation to the work of congregational leaders in the state.

Outcomes:

· **Educational attention in congregations to learning about Shmita and applying the concept to social action.** This is an immediate goal. JCVT will measure the success of this outcome by the programming at each congregation, involvement, and project(s) undertaken, as reported in the mini-grant process to provide funding for congregations from the Covenant grant.

· **Developing entry points for less affiliated Jewish Vermonters to connect with Jewish life and learning.** This short and long term goal will be measured by both contacts added (through communications vehicles such as social media, newsletter sign-ups, and website visits) and event attendance.

· **Increasing collaboration among Jewish leaders and organizations across the state.** This is an immediate goal, measured by frequency of collaborative meetings and attendance, as well as collaborative programming undertaken among congregations.

· **Elevate the capacity of JCVT as a centralized, coordinating force to engage with the Jewish community of Vermont.** This is a long term goal reflected in structural enhancements such as shared resources and documentation for congregations (such as Google drive and a shared statewide calendar), crowd-sourced contributions to JCVT content (such as blogs,

newsletters, and social media), development of a predictable annual schedule of statewide events, and increased fundraising (including direct financial support from congregations).

Innovation. This project is innovative in several ways, not least of which is the attempt to organize a statewide effort to unite Jewish organizations and individuals across affiliations. The Vermont Jewish community is unusually welcoming of the diversity of Jewish identity; JCVT feels this can be a model for collaboration among different denominations that others can learn from. Likewise, this stronger statewide collaboration among congregations and clergy can be a model for other regions of the country with smaller Jewish populations.

This project's multi-layered approach to give entry points for all levels of affiliation and a pathway for further involvement is also innovative. For those already engaged with synagogues, there is room for further growth as well as leadership opportunities to help others learn. For those less affiliated, there are programs to enable initial engagement and then opportunities for further involvement and learning over time.

Challenges/Pitfalls. The biggest challenge is coordinating different organizations that are geographically distant and who don't have a history of working together. These challenges are mitigated by the following: 1) The clergy throughout the state are relatively new, having all arrived in the last decade, partly drawn to Vermont for the opportunity to support Jewish life here in new ways and open to valuing working together. 2) The covid experience allowed congregations to explore new ways of engaging congregants as well as working collaboratively. No one wants to go back to "normal." Congregational leaders see this time as one of opportunity to create new models to connect with the diverse constituencies they serve.

Another potential challenge is organizational capacity and the role of JCVT in the state. JCVT has been in existence for 7 years and the founding director retired this year. This

leadership transition has encouraged the organization to re-establish trust with the varied constituencies and demonstrate a sense of reliability and quality that is appreciated by all in the state. Providing leadership for this project will benefit from the relationships built between JCVT's new leadership and the Jewish community in Vermont. Much work has already been done on this front, symbolized visually by the organization's new website, logo, and newsletter format and more substantively by recent initiatives including the Shmita planning, an artists' series, and the application for this grant.

Contribution to the Field. One contribution this project will make is demonstrating a teaching and learning model that includes a wide range of teachers/clergy each contributing their own energy. JCVT believes this "all star team," "greatest hits" cooperative effort will increase participation and learning, and demonstrate the value of collaboration. Engaging less affiliated Jewish individuals seems a holy grail for Jewish education. This project's multi-tiered programs will help non- or reluctantly-affiliated individuals reimagine their Jewish identity and help others in the field benefit from our successes.

Partners

Partnering Institutions will be all the Jewish organizations in Vermont, including 12 congregations, UVM and Middlebury Hillel, The Living Tree Alliance, and Chabad leaders from 4 communities. We also have 2 partner congregations from NH who are close to the Vermont border. Keith Marks, Executive Director of Next Stage Arts will help organize the music events and arts programming included in the summit gatherings. Lisa Glass Kornstein is leading Ski-Ride Purim and partnering with JCVT. We hope to evolve our partnership over time with The Center for Small Town Jewish Life in Maine and the New Hampshire Federation and expect they will be connected in some ways to this project.

Mission Relevance

This project is intrinsic to the mission of JCVT and is a concrete manifestation of the conceptual purpose in our new mission statement below. Over its relatively short history, JCVT has moved from a catalytic identity to more directly identifying and coordinating statewide programming opportunities. This project would promote a more consistent and clearly defined role for JCVT as leading the state in line with its mission of supporting a vibrant Jewish community in Vermont.

Mission Statement: Jewish Communities of Vermont develops connections to support a thriving Jewish community and to promote a vision of “One Jewish Vermont.” JCVT weaves together the statewide community--creating connections, promoting common ground, celebrating stories, and supporting organizational enhancement.