

# STAR Program to Be Born in Atlanta

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The Jewish Times

**A** New York-based outreach organization has chosen Atlanta as one of three pilot sites for a program aimed at making the growing number of interfaith families feel welcome in synagogues.

STAR, or Synagogues: Transformation And Renewal, intends to select six synagogues in greater Atlanta, six in the San Diego-Los Angeles corridor and six in the Philadelphia area to test the Call Synagogue Home program, whose goal is increase interfaith participation in synagogue life.

STAR ([www.starsynagogue.org](http://www.starsynagogue.org)) is the organization that has produced such synagogue renewal programs as Synaplex, which The Temple uses to create a buffet Friday-night options one Shabbat per month.

Synaplex provides a framework for reaching out to people who want something other than a traditional Shabbat service at synagogue. Call Synagogue Home intends to be the next step, drilling deeper to keep people engaged in synagogue life after they feel the touch of outreach, said Rabbi Hayim Herring, the executive director of STAR.

Participating synagogues will receive tools and communications training to reach out to interfaith families during key lifecycle events and ritual celebrations, including the start of preschool or religious school, a brit milah or baby naming, and even divorce and death.

“Most people are more receptive to synagogue involvement during these lifecycle events,” Rabbi Herring said. “These potential entry points are emotionally charged under any circumstance and carry extra voltage for interfaith couples and families. When handled lovingly, these moments can help people form positive lifelong bonds with a synagogue community.”

He said the exact tools and training are still in development because the project represents groundbreaking work. He said STAR will look beyond the good materials and resources that are already available.

“We’re trying to embed the notion of welcoming more deeply into congregations,” Rabbi Herring said. “Some of the tools will get congregations to reflect on the experience of a couple during lifecycle events. Messages are sent verbally and in writing. Do people in the congregation reach out to those experiencing the synagogue for the first time? What kind of language is used in talking about interfaith couples and families?”

For instance, “if you call people a problem, why would they want to be a part of what you’re doing?”

Rabbi Herring said a false dichotomy exists in Jewish communal thinking between outreach and inreach because there is a fine line between those who are inside and those who are outside. Many people join synagogues for a time, then drop out.

“If you do excellence in programming,” he said, “the community should be large enough for all people to find a place in it.”

Rabbi Herring said STAR selected Atlanta for the pilot project because of its explosive growth the past decade, the need to develop a Jewish infrastructure to accommodate that growth, the presence of several rabbis here who have worked with STAR and the knowledge gained from the Jewish Outreach Institute’s study of Jewish Atlanta in November 2005.

JOI is helping STAR develop Call Synagogue Home, and the Samuel Bronfman Foundation is financing the pilot project.

In addition to bringing Synaplex to Temple, STAR has worked with Rabbi Joshua Heller at Congregation B’nai Torah and Rabbi Fred Greene of Temple Beth Tikvah when he was still in the Northeast.

“We really think we can leverage the investment we’ve made in this congregation and these people,” Rabbi Herring said.

He said the goal is to select the congregations by the end of April, conduct training in May and June, spend the summer ironing out any issues, then roll out the program full force in September. The pilot program then will run for six to eight months before an initial evaluation. Rabbi Herring said he expects that the 18 synagogues will largely be self-selecting as congregations with particular interest in interfaith outreach step forward. He said STAR has received a lot of interest in the program just from spreading the word within its Synaplex network.

“We think that we can contribute something to the vitality of each of the communities we’re in,” Rabbi Herring said. “We picked communities we thought would be receptive. We hope to be able to take this learning and put it into all the synagogues we’re working with.” ■