



The Micah Storefront Project:

Who We Are, What We've Done, and What's Next

Creating a home for all people who seek to build meaning through the Jewish story.

The Temple Micah Storefront Project expands the definition of the American synagogue by creating Jewish encounters that cohere with the lived experiences of real people, Jewish and beyond. We move the Jewish conversation from inside the walls of the synagogue into the public square, and remove physical, social, and psychological barriers to participation.

What is Storefront?

Storefront—as a project of the Innovation Fund—contributes to the recreation and the reorientation of the American synagogue. We are an ideas center, a place to experiment and stretch what constitutes the American synagogue today. The ideas born and developed through Storefront will help our institution stay relevant, in order that we may long endure and continue to spread our understanding of transcendence, ethics, covenantal purpose, and the promise of hope, to those who do not think to look to synagogues where that message lives daily. Storefront invites the unchurched and rootless into our centuries old conversation on what it means to create an artful life. In this way, Storefront is an opportunity to affirmatively expand the reach of our great inheritance.

We are animated by a desire to expand what Jewish life can look like and where it can take place.

For many, the synagogue can be seen as a barrier to participation in Jewish life. The proof is in the numbers. In our own region (the greater Washington, D.C. area), only one-quarter of Jewish households are synagogue members. Among interfaith families, a mere 14% decide to affiliate. And yet, we know that these very same people express their Judaism still, just not by joining a synagogue.

The brand “synagogue” has become a turn off for many who believe that the concerns or structure of the synagogue are irrelevant to the lives they are living. Despite the best intentions of most synagogues, including Micah, to be warm and welcoming, in ways we do not fully realize, synagogues can still feel like a club for people who do not know the “rules.”

Storefront seeks to forge a new tributary, still connected to the synagogue, but flowing outward, toward the people and the lives they live. Jewish life can live outside the walls of the synagogue. And so we gather in diverse settings, from coffee shops to ice cream parlors, museums to living rooms. Where people find joy and meaning and want to be, we meet them there. This is more than a “strategy” to *seem* accessible; Storefront *is* accessible, both in location and content. **We believe that Judaism must cohere with the lived life, meeting people where they are, both physically and spiritually.**

But Storefront does more than meet people where they are— it seeks to meet the moment where it is, and start a conversation. We ask: How do we translate Judaism into the language of our day, in light of our own conditions? What matters to us in our lives? How should we live? Everything we learn and discuss through Storefront is part of an attempt

to help people make sense of the world, and to find meaning amongst a marketplace of surface level, flashy, and faddish alternatives. Storefront is not drinking in a big room, learning something that has been branded “hip.” It is about finding the sacred in the secular, and giving language to what is beautiful and holy about life. Storefront is about exploring and reconnecting with our humanity. It is about uncovering the wisdom of Judaism, and the wisdom of each other. Storefront is a vehicle for moving ourselves, our community, our city, and our wider world toward a future of love and compassion.

What makes Storefront different?

A New Kind of Welcoming Space

Newcomers to a synagogue often carry baggage from a religious upbringing. They bring with them into the space feelings of guilt or negative views of religious institutions. All of this amounts to not feeling right, or, in their words, “not knowing how to behave” in a synagogue setting. This is even truer for non-Jews who have never attended a synagogue service. Everyone at Storefront is equal because there is no membership. Everyone is in the in-group.

What Storefront does is create a new kind of Jewish space, in a space already familiar to most people. To be in a familiar place is to reduce people’s nervousness and skepticism. For the modern American Jewish family, it is comfortable to walk into a secular place like a coffee shop because they’ve done it hundreds of times. But it is not just about comfort - it is also about shifting the secular space into a sacred space, and transforming an occurrence that could be mundane (getting coffee on a Saturday morning, for example) into a moment of meaning. In doing this, **Storefront infuses the religious into the secular, which makes the religious experience accessible.**

Storefront is Affiliated with a Synagogue

There are a vast amount of Jewish start-ups, but almost none are born of legacy institutions or synagogue communities. Institutions create lasting change. While start-ups and movements emanate excitement and newness, it is institutions that have staying power, and have contributed most to our country’s soundness and vibrancy. But not all institutions are equal. Most stable, long standing organizations concern themselves with their own narrow interests. Micah is different. We strive to see beyond ourselves and to direct attention to our broader mission, rather than to perpetuate the organization itself. This is why Storefront is a project of Temple Micah and not an

independent start-up. It gains strength from the mothership while simultaneously helping it to evolve.

Storefront is led by two of Micah's rabbis, which shows the congregation's dedication to turning outward. We are serious about this project, and the resources we commit to it show just that. Micah's support of Storefront also enables its rabbis to be invited into spaces otherwise reserved for flashy, unaffiliated start-ups, and into those spaces, Storefront brings an institutional gravitas combined with an outward-facing posture.

Elevated, not Elementary Judaism

Shabbat services that cater to families with young children often feel pediatric. They include songs that cater to toddlers, like "The Dinosaur Song." Storefront services for families with young children strive to offer *all* participants something of substance. This does not mean that we switch back and forth from child focused to grown-up focused, but that we create an experience that strives to elevate everyone.

The people who join Storefront events are highly educated, curious, thoughtful people, but people who do not feel Jewishly literate. **Our gatherings and learning sessions are designed to be accessible *and* substantial.**

Storefront is One Part of the Collage of Modern Meaning-Making

As previously stated, the most rapidly growing "religious" groups in the United States are made up of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious," or "nothing." These individuals find outlets for their spirituality in everywhere but a synagogue, a place they see as "religious" (and not in a positive way). They assemble their spiritual life much like a collage. In sum, participants in Storefront are people who are eager to discover deep sources of meaning for their lives, and are looking in many different places for it. We do not seek to replace their yoga studio or book group, *but to live alongside it*. We want people to know that Storefront is a place where people can go for deep wisdom, and more than that, that Storefront does not have a commercial agenda. Storefront should be a place where people can bring all of themselves and life with them.

Storefront is Intimate

In an environment that values mass production and large events in big rooms, Storefront aims to be small. We prioritize intimacy, connection, and relationship, a space where people can talk and get to know each other. Parents can have a moment with their child that lifts both of them out of the mundane. People can bring their stories, beautiful and hard moments, and see that others (even if they are only convened for three hours on a Thursday night) care about who they are as a person.

Who is Storefront For?

Storefront has a broad reach, from heretics to zealots, from unbelievers to the eternally committed; anyone who seeks the wisdom and complexity of Jewish tradition is welcome. Our community is primarily made up of young families and folks in their 20s and 30s. In particular, seekers who crave serious learning and a Judaism that mirrors their modern American experience, but have yet to find a stable place in the vast Jewish ecosystem of Washington D.C., will find a welcoming, easy going environment through our many offerings.

Looking Back: What have we done?

Storefront began in earnest in August 2019. From August 2019-March 2020, we moved from pilot to full program. We launched a website, added 20s30s programming, held eight pop-up Young Family Shabbat services in bars, ice-cream parlors, coffee shops, and other urban community gathering spaces. We began leading services in partnership with Sixth & I and planning for future collaborations. When the pandemic hit seven months into our first year, we immediately pivoted.

For the first several months of being online, we sought to *maintain* what we had built. We moved already scheduled classes online, recorded YouTube videos for young families, made holiday themed playlists, reached out to our community members, and tried to plan for an unknown future.

By Fall 2020, we began thinking about how to *grow* the Storefront Project, using the online space to find new ways to create access points into Jewish life. We continued our online programming, and added Shabbat Sh'Zoom gatherings (cute, right?) and learning experiences. In all that we did, we continued to implement various tools to make them co-creative and interactive, with at-home components of the gathering in order to create buy-in and deeper engagement with what could otherwise be a more passive online "viewing" experience.

Beginning in Spring 2021, we were able to start gathering again in person. There was great excitement, and all of our gatherings since moving back in person have been at capacity.

Storefront by the Numbers (August 2019 - Present)

● i. Young Families

- Hosted 26 *in-person* gatherings (average 50 people/event)
- Hosted 4 *in-person* High Holiday services (average 200 people/service)
- Produced 27 videos of Shabbat singing (average 175-225 views each)

- Contributed 4 videos to 6th & I community videos
 - Hosted 3 *live* Shabbat gatherings on Zoom
 - Hosted 4 *live* Shabbat story time gatherings on Zoom
 - Worked in collaboration with 14 local venues (Jeni's Ice Cream, Pleasant Pops, The Lemon Collection, Doubles, (formerly Colony Club), The Potter's House, The Outrage, Capitol Cider House, 6th & I Historic Synagogue, Big Bear Cafe, National Cathedral Amphitheater, City-State Brewing Co., Rock Creek Park, National Building Museum)
 - Partnered with 6 local catering companies (Little Sesame, Call Your Mother, Pearls Bagels, Shouk, Buredo, District Doughnuts)
 - Engaged a total of 165 families, 71 who have been to two or more in-person gatherings
 - Two and a half years worth of regular coffee meetings with families who have been to a Storefront service
- **ii. 20s30s(ish) Adult Learning and Gatherings**
 - Hosted 20 gatherings, workshops, and classes (average 10-20/event), encompassing 25 evenings
 - Held High Holy Day Services pre-pandemic, with approximately 275 total participants
 - Partnered with artists, mindfulness experts, mental health professionals, and other Jewish organizations
 - Created small group learning cohorts for those exploring Judaism
 - Experimented with social media through regular Instagram posts with accessible, reflective, Jewish content
 - Curated 8 Spotify playlists themed around the Jewish holidays
 - Developed relationships with Honeymoon Israel participants and alumni
 - Engaged nearly 400 unique individuals through all programming
 - Of the individuals who attended a class or gathering, 30% returned for one or more than one event
 - Two and a half years worth of regular coffee meetings with individuals and couples who are interested in Storefront or who have been to a Storefront event
- **iii. Miscellaneous**
 - Built a website which has had 4.5K unique visitors
 - Established a database of 350+ people, with an email open rate of 67%
 - Held our first development campaign, raising nearly \$4,000
 - Produced a testimonial video from past participants

What We've Learned:

- People prefer smaller, intimate gatherings.
 - People want to meet other people and have conversations that go beyond surface-level interactions. They want to have moments with their children and partners that transcend the day-to-day.
- When they are seeking connection/meaning, people feel more comfortable walking into spaces that are not a synagogue (“Synagogue” is a bad brand.)
 - As noted above, we are only beginning to experience this, but it is still what many express when they share why they have chosen to attend a Storefront event.
- There is power in liberating Jewish ritual from the synagogue setting and moving it into the public square.
 - Several Storefront participants have expressed how powerful it is to express their Judaism in a public way. For many who grew up with “Jewish” as something you only did at home or in the synagogue, this creates a sense of a cohesive life and identity.
- A diverse range of people are hungry for Jewish learning, but often do not feel equipped to find a comfortable, inviting space.
 - As noted in earlier sections, different kinds of people, with different Jewish backgrounds, are interested in learning in a way that is relevant and accessible.
- Tot-shabbat doesn't need to be pediatric and can appeal to people of all ages.
 - Parents frequently share with us that they love how elevated the services feel, and that they appreciate that they can have a shared meaningful prayer experience with their children.
- 20s/30s work has been slower and harder to develop. It is a crowded space in DC, but we are committed to intimate gatherings that are different from much of what happens in the rest of the DC ecosystem.
- Reaching people on the margins of Jewish life is challenging - we are still trying to figure out who these people are and how to be in conversation with them

Looking Ahead: What's next?

On paper, Storefront has achieved a great deal. We have created joyous, deep, accessible services and gatherings. We have shared the wisdom and beauty of Judaism with over 1,000 people. We have developed partnerships with Jewish organizations and local businesses. **And yet, we have not been able to build the Storefront that we dreamt of more than three years ago.**

But we haven't stopped experimenting and learning, and we have developed a number of questions that we will spend the next year exploring:

- Is Storefront a community, or are there many one-off touch points?
 - Do people form relationships with each other that live outside of Storefront?
 - Is Storefront an on-ramp to any other kind of Jewish participation?
- Does Storefront change the way people think about themselves? Does it help them live their lives more consciously? Does it help them think about who they are and make sense of their existence?
 - What are metrics that measure this? How might we measure our success in things like: how many people laughed? How many people cried? How many people learned something that changed them?
- What is the impact that Storefront has on Temple Micah? What does the future of our relationship look like?
- How does Storefront reach financial sustainability?
 - At the moment, we are generously supported by the Innovation Fund, private donors, and the Jewish Federation, which allows us to experiment with different models of funding. Although we frequently break even through event fees, our current model of fee-for-service does not cover the full budget requirements, particularly in the area of personnel.
- Who is Storefront attracting? Is it the "remixers" or those who identify as "Spiritual But Not Religious?" How are we meeting new kinds of people?
- How does Storefront grow into something that exists beyond a project of the current rabbinic team?
- Do we actually have enough time to devote? Is the work achievable given what we can give?
- What does it take for Storefront to become an ongoing project of Temple Micah? What time? What resources? How does it impact Temple Micah?

In order to answer these questions and to build the Storefront we dreamed of more than three years ago, we need another year to experiment. But moving forward, integrating the growth and what we learned in the past 2.5 years, we are confident that over the next year, we will:

- Host 1-2 Young Family gatherings/month
- Follow-up from gatherings (identify 2-3 families/individuals from each event - one newcomer and one regular, to take out for coffee)
- Host conversations and gatherings for young families who are part of Sixth & I, in collaboration with EDCJCC.
- Create an expanded calendar of classes and gatherings for 20s/30s

- Stay in close conversation with stakeholders (Temple Micah Board, donors, funders, and emergent leadership) sharing learning, questions, and collaborating during the planning process
- Experiment with different funding models (flat fee; per person)
- Continue relationship with Beloved Builders
- Experiment with how Rabbis Beraha and Crawley can devote dedicated time to Storefront

Onward!

It is our hope that this year of experimentation (February 2022- 2023) will give Rabbis Beraha and Crawley the knowledge and information they need to make a longer term plan for Storefront, which will address Storefront's relationship with Temple Micah, its success as a space of deep connection and learning, and questions of financial sustainability. Our intention is to continue this experiment for at least 3 more years (through June 2025), and to set up Storefront to be an enduring project of the Temple Micah Innovation Fund. This requires a substantial financial contribution, as well as a commitment for Rabbis Beraha and Crawley to spend a significant portion of time *away* from Temple Micah, approximately 1/3 of each of their time, in order to focus on Storefront. As this will include both Shabbat and weekday time, we anticipate that this may require some funding to go towards supplementary pulpit coverage.

We estimate that the total cost to run Storefront, including salary allocations, operations, and rental fees is approximately \$185,000/year.

Our first three years of Storefront were primarily funded by the Temple Micah Innovation Fund (including funds raised specifically for Storefront), a private donor, and the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington. We have applied for three more years of funding from the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, and are actively exploring other paths to funding. Our hope is that the Federation will fund us at the same level as in the past years (\$60,000).