kol tzedek

Sustainability House Meetings

House Meeting Overview

In the fall of 2017, the Sustainability Task Force offered five house meetings, each attended by 5 to 12 members, to discuss our transition to a new dues model. This document shares both the content from that meeting, and answers to FAQs generated by members from that meeting. The meeting goals were to:

- Educate about the Sustaining Shares dues model (which the board approved in 5777 and we began using in Spring 5778)
- Provide a safe space for talking about money and the actual cost of running KT
- Gain feedback about how to implement the Sustaining Shares model

What are our values around finances?

- ***Accessibility:*** Goal of making KT accessible to everyone, regardless of financial status. No one turned away!
- ***More than one way to give:*** Valuing all of the contributions that people bring to the community, including time, talents, care, ritual leadership, etc.
- ***Transparency:*** Fostering conversations about how much it actually costs to maintain Kol Tzedek
- ***Torah of money:*** looking to Jewish tradition and peer congregations because we're not the first people to try and figure this out
- ***Abundance***: We know that as a community, we can sustain KT (despite what late capitalism teaches us about scarcity!)

What's Not Currently Working?

- Insufficient staffing and benefits to meet our congregation's basic needs
- Our old model of giving 1.2% of income doesn't acknowledge people's complex financial situations, involvement with multiple faith organizations, or actual abilities to give.
- Our dues are some of the lowest of any established synagogue, and many members could give more.
- We have been growing steadily and need to support that growth!

Where are we going?

- Hiring staff to meet the needs of our growing community
- Paying more staff benefits
- Prioritizing physical and financial accessibility for everything we do
- Providing more support for our existing programs
- Launching awesome new programs!

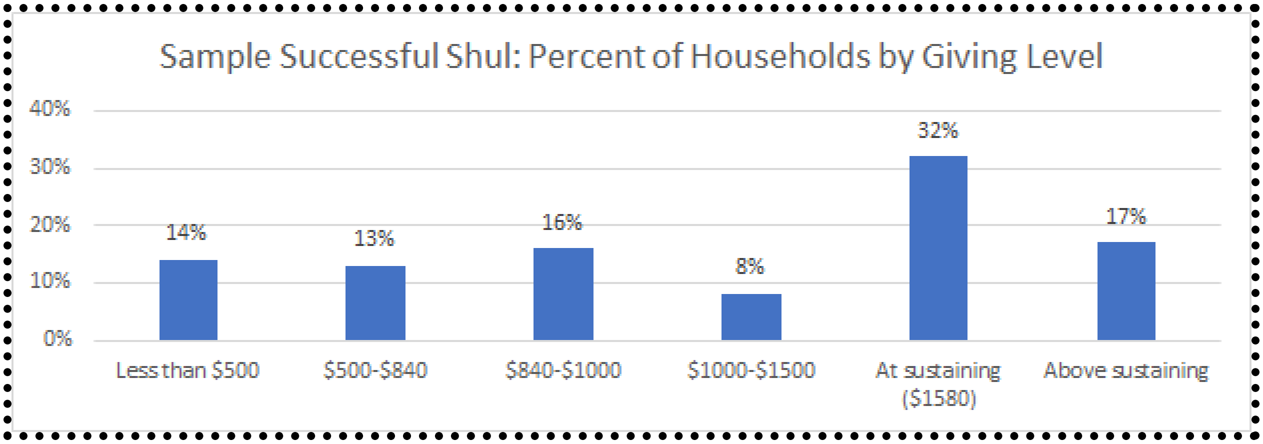
What is the Sustaining Shares model?

- The Sustaining Shares model gives members informations about the cost per household of actually running the synagogue (total budget ÷ number of households).
- Each household will use the sustaining share information, along with their personal values and individual financial situation, to decide how much they want to contribute.
- KT will continue to be "sliding scale" with no one turned away. We expect a range of donations that are below, at, or above the sustaining share amount.
- KT will switch over to a sustaining shares model in Spring 2018.

Does it work?

According to two studies by the UJA Federation[1]...

- There are about 60 synagogues in the U.S. currently using this model.
- Synagogues report higher income and higher levels of commitment (volunteering, attendance, membership, etc.) after switching to a sustaining shares model.
- Synagogues do **not** report a "free rider" problem in which families give only a token amount when they could easily donate more
- On average, 38% of members should give at or above the sustaining level. Based on our current membership donations, this seems very possible for KT.
- The graph below shows the breakdown of membership donations by household at a real (anonymous) successful synagogue. Their sustaining share was $1580 per household.



- We are still calculating the sustaining share for KT, but it will probably be between $1,350 and $1,550 per household. (For most synagogues in the study, the sustaining share was $2,000 to $4,000, so we are still much lower!)

[1] Reisner, L. L., Rabbi Judson, D. (2017) Connection, cultivation, and commitment: New insights on voluntary dues. Synergy: Innovations and strategies for synagogues of tomorrow, Vol. 14. UJA Federation, NY.
Chernov, B.P., Joseph, D.,, Rabbi Judson, D. (2015) Are voluntary dues right for your synagogue?. Synergy: Innovations and strategies for synagogues of tomorrow, Vol. 8. UJA Federation, NY.

Frequently Asked Questions from the House Meetings
During the House Meetings, we asked members to share their questions, opinions, concerns, and ideas. The results from these discussions are shared below.

Q: How will the sustaining share amount be calculated?

A: The sustaining share will be **one simple number, derived from the annual KT budget and the number of households**. We recognize and we value that there are many different kinds of households at KT: single individuals, group houses, parents with kids, people taking care of older adults, single parents, people with chronic illness and disabilities, people from diverse class backgrounds, students, people with assets and many other types. We don't want to dictate how much any kind of household costs Kol Tzedek, as there is nearly infinite variation. So after a lot of discussion, we advise going forward with one number that approximately represents the cost to Kol Tzedek per household of running the shul. Each household can make their own decisions about how much to pay in dues. Households are invited to go beyond income and factor in other forms of wealth, inheritance and assets, as well as debts and other financial obligations, when calculating their dues payments.

Q: How do we know the model will work?

A: We have a lot of evidence from other congregations that this model works, but we will only know once we try it at KT. We are a bunch of volunteers, learning as we go! The Board will revisit the model and assess how we are doing, as well as adjusting the sustaining shares amount annually. What we learned from last year's financial crisis is that the old system did not work, and this system preserves our commitment to voluntary dues while providing more transparency about what it takes to run the synagogue. It is not necessary for all, or even most, households to pay the sustaining share or above. Based upon the experience of other synagogues using this model, **if 38% of households pay the sustaining share or above, the model is projected to work**. That means that 62% can still pay below the sustaining share, though we will have to work to make sure the overall curve works to help us meet our obligations.

Q: Will there be a low income membership dues rate?

A: Yes, and no. Households can give any amount, whether it's $54 or $5400 per year, based on a careful assessment of their financial abilities and constraints. We know that financial circumstances change from year to year, and do not want to publicize an official minimum or maximum. The sustaining shares model is designed to support a larger range of contributions.

Q: Will there be an intro rate for new members?

A: No. For new members, like all other members, the sustaining share is a reference point regarding the cost of running Kol Tzedek. All members will decide appropriate dues based on this reference point, their own finances, and their relationship to Kol Tzedek.

Q: Will we continue to fundraise throughout the year, over and above dues?

A: Under the sustaining shares model, households are encouraged to pay the amount they can truly afford, and reflects the depth of their commitment to the synagogue. Therefore, we will limit the amount of fundraising we do from the membership throughout the year. We will continue to ask for donations through registration at High Holidays and some other events that attract a large group of non-members. The Fundraising committee will also still work to attract other donors and friends of Kol Tzedek to maximize our vision and capacity.

Q: Will Torah School and Adult Education programs still have a fee for members?

A: Yes. Torah School is partially paid for by the Kol Tzedek budget (as it is at most other synagogues), but it will still be a separate payment for the families who enroll. Adult education programs will also have a separate fee, but the fee will be discounted for members.

Voices from our Members
We asked several members to share their personal thoughts about membership dues under the Sustaining Shares model.

> “ Our family's income is pretty low, with a full-time student, a part-time student, and a young child. We quality for food stamps and usually get scholarships for joining organizations or events. Every year we've paid the 1.2%, and I've been surprised by how much it was even with our low income status--why didn't KT take our family size into account, I wondered? But when we stopped thinking about the amount we *had* to give and started thinking about the amount we *wanted* to give, we decided to nearly double our membership donation (even though it will still be less than a sustaining share). We can arrange our finances to afford it, and for the amount of KT's programs and services that we use, and how much they mean to us, it feels right to give more.

“ My family has two incomes, but we struggle to make ends meet with two kids, a mortgage, a car, etc. We have spent down our savings year after year since the kids were born and money is not a constant stress, but a background concern that flares up a few times a year when things get tight. When we decide what to give to KT, we do it intuitively, and the 1.2% has never really felt like a useful guide. We just give what we feel we can afford based on our current confidence in our finances.

“ Our family of four is financially comfortable due to two fine salaries along with the good fortune of a relatively low mortgage and free public schools (yea!). I am a rule follower by nature and believe in a progressive dues policy so at first I was happy that KT had a 1.2% dues rate rather than a flat rate for everybody. However, I quickly ran into confusion about how to calculate that amount. Using the Adjusted Gross Income from my tax forms would be easiest. But should I add back in my pre-tax 401K deductions? Are others using just their salaries and not investment income as well? The number I came up with seemed higher than I would have expected to pay for dues. Unfortunately, without knowing what it truly takes to run a functioning synagogue I was left with the (grumpy) feeling that I was overpaying for what I was receiving in return. I am now looking forward to having the knowledge of what the sustaining dues levels will be. I will likely pay more than this level, but at least will be doing so consciously.

“ We are financially comfortable because we have family wealth. We've always paid 1.2% even though our income understates our resources because it was easiest to just follow the guidelines. Since we learned how much it costs to run the shul, we've increased our membership to a sustaining share, and would likely contribute more if we were giving less time and one-off gifts to KT. Increasing our membership contribution; I love our community, and playing a role in helping it to run is fulfilling.

“ When I first joined KT I read the fair share due policy carefully and gave the 1.2% of our family's combined gross income. I liked that it was percentage of income as opposed to a flat fee like at my last shul. I have some savings, and 3 dependents so I realized it wasn't a true reflection of capacity. My household income was significantly reduced this year with a lot of fixed expenses. I haven't renewed yet because I'm torn between feeling that supporting my shul is a great investment in my and my family's spiritual, social, political, and physical health and feeling stressed about money in general. I'll probably just renew at the 1.2% - since I like the simplicity of it - once I start worrying about something else.

“ I am a single person with a comfortable income for one but have some high monthly expenses including a mortgage and student loans that often stretch my budget. I have savings and access to family resources as a cushion/safety net if needed. When I first joined KT in my 20s, 1.2% of my gross income felt really high and I ended up giving 1% and was left feeling somewhat guilty about not giving the full 1.2%. As my income (and other expenses) have risen, I have adjusted to higher KT dues and have been giving the 1.2%. When I consider the annual amount on a monthly or quarterly payment, it feels more manageable than the lump annual sum. And once I framed it less as a fee like other bills, and more as an investment in a community that I value, it feels like less of a burden and more like a contribution.

“ As a "young professional," KT was the first time I ever made an independent decision to join a synagogue and I didn’t know much about the “norms” with paying dues or the “running rate” at other shuls, so I just went with the approximate 1.2%. As my income modestly increased, I didn't go back and increase my dues payment to KT. I felt surprised and a tiny bit guilty when a KT member told me "I got [unexpected income] so now I am going to tithe a portion of it to KT" because I hadn't done the same. While I am financially comfortable (especially compared to my peers), I have sometimes felt financially "behind" KT families. I know this isn't always healthy, but it's the truth! My career trajectory is to earn substantially more than what I am making now and I aspire to contribute at least a sustaining share.

“ My wife and I are not wealthy; but since we have two incomes, we are comfortable. With our children grown, we have enough money to afford vacations, eating out, and some of the simple pleasures of life. On the other hand, we are nearing retirement, which means that we have to be somewhat careful with our money. Still, we recognize that our well being and the well being of our children and grandchildren are intimately tied up with our immediate and wider community. That is why we are happy to give our fair share to Kol Tzedek and make additional donations beyond that. Rather than thinking of donations as "dues" that will gain us membership benefits, we think of ourselves as contributing to support an organization that will make the world a better place for us and others.