



PROFILES IN SCIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

Geoff MITELMAN

Geoff Mitelman is a rabbi and the founder of Sinai and Synapses. We spoke with him about Jewish perspectives on science and religion, creating community science conversations in synagogues, and building interfaith relationships. All photos courtesy G. Mitelman.

Tell us about yourself and your public science engagement projects with religious communities.

I am the Founding Director of Sinai and Synapses, which bridges the worlds of religion and science. We're housed at Clal, which is The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Our mission is to elevate the public conversation surrounding science and religion. In public discourse right now, there's this false but common perception that there are two sides and you can pick only one of those sides. One perceived side is scientific and educated and liberal, and the other is deemed as religious and uneducated and conservative, and if you pick anything from either of those columns, you've got to pick everything in that column. And I was realizing that that was not only false, but it was also really unproductive. So, in 2011, I called Dr. Jennifer Wiseman of the AAAS DoSER program and said, "I've got this idea: what do you think about trying to bring some scientists and

some religious leaders together in a variety of different ways, both in an interfaith setting and also in a Jewish setting?” And she very graciously talked to me for close to an hour.

From that conversation and some other discussions with some other thinkers, in 2013, I launched Sinai and Synapses. Our first project that we did is an interfaith fellowship where we bring together a select group of about 10 to 15 clergy, scientists, and writers, and they make a commitment to come to New York in person, three times a year for two years. The goal is to create cross-pollination, and ideas, and break down misconceptions, and to be able to explore some deep questions like genetic engineering, or artificial intelligence, or climate change, and really try to reach different audiences that they wouldn't have reached otherwise. Through 2020, we've had four cohorts, with over 50 fellows from all over North America.

The other project very much came out of DoSER's Perceptions Project. The Perceptions Project was running these different conversations in different faith communities—in the Evangelical community, and in the Catholic community—and they reached out to us to be their partner in the Jewish community. We realized that there are some incredibly brilliant scientists who are members of synagogues, and they don't get to shine in their professional capacity when they get to talk on a Shabbat morning service, or a Friday night, or an adult education class.

So we worked with DoSER as their consultants on this project, a project called Scientists in Synagogues. It highlights scientists who are members of their communities, of their congregations, working on really fascinating, interesting stuff, and they enter into conversation with a religious leader start to explore how their scientific work can intersect with their Jewish living. We've completed two full rounds of this project, with a third running through December 2021.

One thing that we've realized in the Jewish world, and this is a line that we often say, is that in the Evangelical Christian community, the challenge is, “How do we get Christians to embrace science?” In the Jewish world, it's actually the reverse. Jews love science; the challenge is, “How do we get Jews excited about Judaism?” How can we use science as an entry point to be able to engage in some really fascinating questions with some really, really smart people?

How have you measured success for these projects?

In the first round of Scientists in Synagogues, we were hoping we would get 25 applications; we ended up getting 40. The next round we were hoping we would get 50 applications, and we got 55. With our fellowship, it started by me calling 12 of my friends. The next round, we were hoping we'd get 12 applications, and we got 43, and the next rounds we got about 60 each time.

So, there's clearly a lot of interest in building these kinds of relationships and these conversations. The synagogues and the fellows are reaching, between the two projects, somewhere between 5,000 to 10,000 people live per year, and around 200,000 to 300,000 online through blogs and podcasts and things along those lines.

But one piece that's been very successful for us is something that was just repeated to me the other day. I was doing a site visit, and one of the members of the synagogue came up to me and said, “You know what's so exciting to me about this? I don't know half the people here.” That's a very common refrain, that in synagogues very often there are the same 25, 30 people who will come to adult education events. Which is great, and you want the learning for that group there as well. But when you're talking about, “Is God a particle physicist?” or, “What is consciousness?” or, “Will artificial intelligence develop morality?” all of a sudden you're getting a whole new crop of people of a much wider age range and connection and relationship. So a real metric for us is that almost across the board, the synagogues are getting twice as many people as usual for their programs, both because people are so interested in the topics, and because there are relationships that have been built in the synagogue itself.

How did you bring the projects from ideas to implementation?

I have a little bit of a background in community organizing, and I worked in the pulpit role for seven years, so I learned how to do a little bit of cat herding, which is nice. I've also learned to see, “What are some of the issues that real people are grappling with?”

What we discovered in a lot of our projects is that we want to ask the kinds of questions that will give us the answers we need. We ask everybody to outline their project and

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say very clearly who’s going to be in the leadership, what is going to be their role, what is your action plan, who is your audience, how are you going to reach them? Because there are some really wonderful ideas out there, but I’ve seen so often in synagogues, in churches, and in scientific places, where there’s a great idea, but they don’t know how to execute it. We really try to make sure that we select individuals and organizations that will know how to execute.

We score all the applications, and then we interview about twice as many people as we’re actually going to ultimately select, about hour-long interviews, and we see what our gut has to say about how effective the proposed program is going to be. That’s one thing that we’ve found to be an indicator of success. We don’t always get it right, but we’ve hit quite a few out of the park. There’s always a risk when you’re trying to select, because you don’t know how something’s actually going to play itself out, but we really try to make sure that there is strong buy-in from as much of the leadership as possible, and a clear vision, and a very doable project.

Tell us about some recent events that you thought went well.

A fantastic one was at a synagogue in Wilmington, Delaware, where everyone used to work for DuPont, so they all worked in material sciences. They did a whole piece about the natural and the man-made, and they brought in a Nobel laureate to be able to speak about how he sees the relationship of chemistry to the natural world, and how does material science and the chemistry of material science play into it? And then that led into a three-week conversation of just the congregants talking among themselves, and that was a very successful adult education project.

Another time, we talked about artificial intelligence and the role of self-driving cars, and how that mirrored a text from the Babylonian Talmud, which is probably the backbone of Jewish law. There’s a whole piece in Jewish law about what happens if an ox that you own gores somebody, and who is responsible? So, are there learnings from the story of the goring ox and the Jewish law surrounding that to parallel a self-driving car? Who is going to be responsible for saving the passenger when a self-driving car flies over

a cliff to avoid hitting a pedestrian? Who’s actually responsible? Where does the brain of that thing live?

One of our synagogues is the Princeton Jewish Center, which is right near Princeton University, and many of the congregants are connected with the University. We did a program there on astrophysics and reading the origins of the Bible and the origin story as described in Genesis in conversation with an astrophysicist. And just recently they did one on, “What is consciousness and how do we think?” that included a rabbi who’s a professor at a seminary, in conversation with a professor at Princeton. There was another event where someone talked who was the president of his synagogue, but was also one of the discoverers of the Higgs Boson, so he talked about, “Is God a particle physicist?” in conversation with the rabbi there.

These are some of the different conversations that we’re having, and all of these are drawing a huge, huge number of people. And usually, these are not the kinds of conversations that are happening in synagogues.

If someone else wanted to do something similar in their own community, what advice would you give them?

Relationship, relationship, relationship, just like, “Location, location, location.” One thing that we discovered with Scientists in Synagogues is that we needed buy-in from both the scientist and the rabbi. Because if the rabbi says, “I’ve got this great idea, I want to bring this in,” people will be like, “Yeah, but it’s another pet project the rabbi has,” and that’ll be that. But if there’s a relationship where the scientist and the rabbi are in conversation and saying, “Here’s what we’re trying to do,” that’s the most effective place to start.

They need to be able to think about who is their audience and why do they want to talk about this? What’s a live issue? If it’s just the scientists talking about their work, that may be interesting or not. But if it’s a scientist who is able to either bring in something about the awe and the majesty of the natural world, or a very complicated ethical issue, or talk with the rabbi or some of the leadership to be able to say, “What are some ways to explore these questions from multiple perspectives?” then that’s much better. When there are panels of

two or three people looking at the same kind of question from a few angles, that's really interesting and exciting.

How do you get scientists who aren't already members of the Jewish community to buy in to the project and participate?

A lot of it is pounding the pavement and doing a lot of social media. We do a little bit of Facebook advertising. I will send personalized emails to friends and colleagues. Most of our applications, though, come organically through social media. Social media is an incredibly powerful tool.

Tell us a bit more about your interfaith Fellowship.

Depending on funding and timing and things like that, it's about 10 to 15 people, a mix of scientists, clergy, doctoral students, and writers. And, again, it's a competitive application process. They come together three times a year for two years to build relationships, because so many conversations are either in the echo chamber or totally siloed. If there's a scientist who's grappling with their work, sometimes talking with an Episcopal priest makes them say, "Wow, right, this is what I needed to do. Now I can talk about this in a way that a lay person can understand." And that helps them crystallize a little bit about their work. Or a UCC minister will learn something from a professor of biology, and that's now their sermon in a couple of weeks. They spend time both learning from experts and learning from each other.

We also held an alumni meeting where we had all three cohorts come together, and we did a big public event at the 92nd Street Y talking about when good science goes bad in the relationship between religion and science. And from that meeting, a few fellows launched their own podcast entitled "Down the Wormhole."

Do you have a different approach to working with an interfaith community versus a solely Jewish community?

Yes and no. Scientists in Synagogues is designed to be fairly focused on one topic and programmatic in their community. The Fellowship is designed to be more of a network, and the focus there is predominantly the relationships that come out of it. So, in Scientists in Synagogues, the relationships are built inside the community, whereas the Fellowship is designed to build the relationships across the fellows. But ultimately, we use very similar methodology. Basically, it's, "Let's look at live issues and build relationships and explore questions in a constructive way," and that's how we approach everything that we do.

Any last tips for someone hoping to build this kind of communication and dialogue?

Know who your audience is going to be. Know why you're talking about this subject in this particular way, because you talk differently to the public than you do to colleagues. Practice what you're going to say; make sure that everything is being understood.

At least in terms of public engagement and conversations and communication, the absolute best book I've ever read on this is a book called *Made to Stick* by Chip and Dan Heath. It's basically asking the question, "Why is it that you can remember every detail of every urban legend you've ever heard, but can't remember the last PowerPoint presentation you saw?" They talk about, "How do you tell a story so that it sticks in someone's mind?" So, think through what you are trying to say, know who you'll be talking to, and use some of these methodologies so that your conversations are going to stick. ~

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Sinai and Synapses Fellowship alumni.

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