

CHAPTER 2: PLANNING THE TRIP

Planning the trip involves picking a location, picking a week to schedule the trip, deciding how to promote the trip to people who may be interested in joining in, and getting the group together at least a few times during the year to get to know each other and perhaps do a little fundraising together for supplies that you would like to pay for when you arrive at the work site. Obviously, in some cases, you may already know each other if you all go to the same school or synagogue together. Some trips may be made up of people from different surrounding communities who don't know each other before the trip. This can be a wonderful way to meet new friends, but does require a little more planning to get to know each other before the trip (perhaps a barbecue or other get-together).

How Do We Learn About Possible Host Organizations And Their Locations?

With a little creativity and digging (where would we be without Google?), it turns out that there are many resources available on the Internet to obtain this information. There are two primary sources where you can identify available organizations and locations. First, many colleges have established alternative spring break programs where they send students to various locations to do tikkun olam (they sometimes call it "Service Learning"). The Internet is full of information about where students have gone and what their experiences have been like. This information is invaluable in gaining ideas for your own trips.

Second, many church organizations publish extensive lists for their members to use to identify possible host organizations to contact. These lists are often available on the Internet and provide a great source of information. Of course, some of the identified host organizations are specifically aimed at a non-Jewish mission (for example, fixing up a New Testament bible camp), but many are ecumenical and perfectly willing to welcome a Jewish group. However, don't be surprised if they never had a Jewish group before. That's fine -- you're now going to change that!

At the end of this manual is a sample of a few Internet search results for both religious mission trip directories and college alternative spring break information (Appendix A). These examples may give you some good ideas about how to go about your Google search and what opportunities are out there to get you going.

What Should We Do Once We've Identified A Few Possible Host Organizations?

Give them a call and ask them for information about the program. Let them know who you are, the size of your group, the age range of your group, and what special talents, if any, you have to offer as a group. Find out if they will provide supervisors or instructors that are familiar with the work that will be assigned to the group and if they will be able to instruct the group members about the use of tools and techniques to accomplish the mission.

Let them know that you are a Jewish group and see how they react. Chances are this will not be a problem, but I think it's better to find out earlier than later if it will not be a good fit. Find out what weeks they have available to sign up and see if your week is free. Ask them about the accommodations provided, the food, showering, transportation, the type of work your group would be doing and the age requirements. How much will it cost each person and what cancellation policy do they have? Is there a nonrefundable deposit? If so, how much and by what date do they need to receive it? If you've gotten this far, and you are still interested, check them out on the Internet by doing a web search on Google and see what more you can learn. The more information you can find out the better prepared you will be to make a final selection.

Locking In A Host Organization And A Specific Week

Eventually you'll select your host organization and agree on a week and will want to book the group and make the plans final. After calling the organization to arrange this, it is a good idea to send them an email asking them to confirm the date and expected size of your group. If you don't yet know how many people will be coming, let them know a ballpark figure of what your target number is and that you will keep them informed as the number firms up. Ask the host organization to give you a minimum number of people that would be acceptable if you run into problems assembling as large a group as you expected.

Publicity, Publicity, Publicity!

Once you have a specific week picked out and a host organization that is waiting for your group to arrive, it's time to get the word out and start looking for participants (assuming you don't already have a group on board). The sky is the limit here, including word of mouth, articles in the local Jewish newspaper, flyers at local synagogues and Hebrew schools, Internet sites, bulletin boards, rabbis, community service organizations (you get the picture). Create a flyer for the trip that explains what the group is proposing to do, the dates and details, and try to pick a date and time for the first meeting of the group that is included in the flyer (with a contact phone number) to let people know how to ask more questions. An example of the flyer we used for the Cumberland trip is included as Appendix B.

If you don't already have a group, this part of the planning can be the most exhaustive because you will have to be somewhat relentless in your pursuit of new group members. Lots of phone calls and emails later you will get the word out, but it may take a few weeks (or more) to gather sufficient publicity and interest to develop a core group of volunteers. Don't get discouraged, it just takes time.

Use the first half dozen people you get to sign up to help you find the rest of your group. Chances are that these first volunteers have friends, neighbors and relatives who share a similar interest in this type of social action and may want to join in once they know their sister or neighbor is also going. Have existing

volunteers talk up the group to everyone they know as often as possible. Their enthusiasm will be infectious!

Maintain Contact With the Host Organization

It's important to assign one (or at most two) people to act as the group's primary contact with the host organization so that they are receiving phone calls from a small number of people in the group who will relay new information back to the rest of the group. As the group begins to take shape, you will have a better idea of the skills your group has to offer and this information should be communicated back to the host organization. This will maximize the chances that the group's skills will be properly matched with the host organization's objectives for the group.

It's also a good idea to keep the host organization updated on the number of people coming so that they can plan for enough work to keep everyone busy and productive. The group members will be fired up and ready to get to work when they arrive, so it's important that the host organization has sufficient knowledge of the size and capabilities of your group as this information changes over the months before the trip.

Fundraising For The Trip

The group will have to decide if they would like to hold one or more fundraising events to help pay for building supplies or other aspects of the trip like

transportation, a donation to the host organization, a donation to the host church or synagogue that will be housing the group, or other expenses. This is not a requirement if the group members are each able to pay for the trip, but in some cases, the host organization may be so needy that you will need (or want) to contribute money towards the building supplies you will be using while you are there. In other cases the per-person charge will include a designated contribution towards the host organization and the necessary building supplies, so that any additional contribution is beyond the expected outlay. If you find your group in this situation, fundraising will be a less critical component, but you will still want to make a donation to the church or synagogue that housed you for the week, so try to factor some amount of money in for this “thank you” courtesy.

Building a Sense of Team

Even after you have your group members signed up you will want to get the group together periodically to plan for the trip, get to know each other better and talk about any issues that may be on peoples’ minds. If the group size is manageable, try to pick a date that everyone has clear on the calendar so that all will be included (this can be a tough one). If the weather allows, you may want to do a pot-luck meal outside, or just gather in someone’s living room to go over trip details and answer questions. In many cases, the group leaders will not have the answers to questions that get raised, but can call or email the host organization to follow-up and send out new information later to the rest of the group.

Planning Transportation

Transportation to the host organization's community can be as basic as carpooling among group members to flying to a distant city and renting vans or cars once you get there. Having access to at least a few vehicles once you get there will be enormously helpful for running errands, buying supplies, and allowing the group to take off in separate directions when there is free time to explore. If you're going for a week, you probably don't want to spend more than a day getting to and returning from the site, so keep that in mind when you pick your location if the cost of airfare will make the trip too expensive for some of your group members.

It also may be possible in some cases to take public transportation -- this option should be considered because it will save money on gasoline, wear and tear on your cars, and can be lots of fun to travel together in the same vehicle. This idea may be more viable if you are traveling to a more urban environment that will allow the group to explore the area by using public transportation once you arrive.