



Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

From the Mitzvah Day Manual

Getting Started: A Step by Step Guide

Getting the Congregation on Board

It is essential to get the support of the staff and the board of your synagogue before proceeding with Mitzvah Day, as you will need their help and support throughout the planning process.

Developing a Mitzvah Day Committee

The Size of the Committee - In order to create a successful Mitzvah Day, it is important to identify people who will serve on the Mitzvah Day Committee. You might choose to draw heavily from an existing Social Action Committee, or to bring new people on board. The Mitzvah Day Committee should be large enough to handle the many details that go into planning, but small enough to ensure that group discussion and debate are reasonable in length, and that decision-making is democratic and timely. You may want to have a small steering committee for decision-making and a larger coordinating team of people with designated responsibilities such as Project Captains. The more projects you include in your Mitzvah Day, the larger corps of leaders you will need.

Committee Positions and Structure – Once you have identified who will serve on the Mitzvah Day Committee, the next step is to assign each person to a position on the committee. Key positions include:

1. Mitzvah Day Chairperson – The Chairperson is responsible for all aspects of planning and execution of Mitzvah Day.
2. Project Captains – Each Project Captain is responsible for one Mitzvah Day Project. They will be the contact person for the agency and the volunteers for that project and will need to make sure all supplies, directions and transportation are arranged in advance.
3. Publicity Chair – The Publicity Chair is responsible for informing as many people in the congregation about the event as possible, as well as media and community leaders who may want to support your efforts (other faith leaders, elected officials, coalition partners, local foundations).

4. Administration and Registration Chair – This chair is responsible for the various administrative tasks associated with planning Mitzvah Day.
5. Additional Committee Positions – At the initial planning meetings, the committee should also think through the support efforts that will be necessary to run Mitzvah Day, and assign the various responsibilities to committee members or enlist support from additional congregants. For example, you may want a “hospitality” chair to arrange breakfast or lunch before the event, or a “worship” chair for services before breaking into groups.

Choosing Your Mitzvah Date

Before you set a date for Mitzvah Day, make sure to check the congregation’s calendar and find out if any major community events are taking place that would prevent congregants from participating. Keep in mind that your Mitzvah Day will be more enjoyable if you hold it during comfortable weather. Despite weather concerns and vacation schedules, some congregations hold their Mitzvah Days on Christmas Day to relieve Christian workers who want to spend the holiday with family. Be sure, however, that you are not replacing employees who would prefer to work and receive overtime pay. Also note that members of your congregation might be out of town during the summer.

Creating a Time Line for Planning

The amount of time your congregation needs to plan and execute a Mitzvah Day will depend on a number of variables: the number and complexity of your projects, the size of your congregation, the number of people involved in planning. Congregations might spend anywhere from six months to a year planning their Mitzvah Day. Once the date of Mitzvah Day has been set, the chairperson should establish a planning calendar that includes the following important events:

- Mitzvah Day Committee meetings and Project Captain trainings
- Project information deadlines
- Logo development deadlines
- Brochure design and printing deadlines
- Brochure mailing
- Participant registration deadlines
- Project assignment deadlines
- PR deadlines for bulletin articles, congregational mailings, and media alerts

Creating a Budget

Possible costs you will incur in planning and implementing your Mitzvah Day include publicity, phone and mail costs, photocopying, food, transportation, project materials, and items such as buttons, hats, and T-shirts. Once you have

projected the costs for Mitzvah Day, create a plan to raise money and/or secure donated materials. Funding may come from synagogue budgets, individuals, companies, or fund-raising events. If you decide to ask for donations from the congregation, make sure to get authorization from the appropriate person.

Selecting Projects

Because the projects selected by the committee will form the backbone of what congregants experience during Mitzvah Day, it is crucial that they be selected with care. The entire Mitzvah Day Committee should meet with the Project Captains to brainstorm project ideas. Each Project Captain should chair only one project. The following criteria should be considered in selecting projects:

- Location*: Convenience and proximity are important.
- Quality of Agency*: Be sure you are dealing with a reputable agency that can manage your volunteers and help them have a positive experience.
- Oversight*: Make sure to think through the staffing and supervisory requirements for a project.
- Money/Resources/Equipment required*: Make sure that you have the necessary money, resources, and equipment before confirming a project.
- Visibility in the community*: Think about whether you want to work only for “well-known” agencies, those less known, or the neediest.
- Constituency mix*: Consider whether you want to concentrate on helping one segment of the community or offer a wide range of project types.
- Number and size of projects*: If you expect a large number of participants, it will be helpful to line up projects suitable for many people. To offer a greater variety to your congregation, you might want to organize several smaller projects. If you want to accommodate last minute volunteers, you might want to have an appropriate number of volunteer-intensive projects to which you can continue to add people. Keep in mind that too many volunteers for a project can lead to people standing around with nothing to do, and this will not be a good experience for them.
- Which congregants can participate*: Make sure that there are a variety of project types, so that people of all ages and abilities can participate. Many congregants will welcome projects in which parents and children can participate together.

Publicity

Logo: Many congregations have found the use of a logo to be a good way to attract attention and interest in Mitzvah Day. Some have contests for youth to design a logo; others use existing graphics for the congregation.

Brochure: The brochure should be designed by a small number of people working under the direction of the Publicity Chair and should be mailed to the entire congregation. Brochures should include the following:

- The Mitzvah Day logo
- Date, time, and meeting location of Mitzvah Day
- A list and brief description of the projects, by project number, including time, location, age constraints, and the name and contact information of the Project Captain
- A list of donors (if applicable) with thanks
- List of committee members and chair
- List of items needed for donation
- Sign up forms for projects

Sign-Up Form: Include your sign-up form with or in the brochure. Participants will use this form to indicate their preferred projects. Volunteers should choose several projects in order of preference to allow for flexibility in assignments. The sign-up form should allow participants to:

- Order Mitzvah Day T-shirts or other memorabilia (if applicable), indicating size options
- Enroll children in childcare
- Make donations (if this has been cleared with appropriate synagogue staff)
- Sign-up, in order of preference, for projects. Make clear that projects will be assigned on a first-come first-serve basis
- Donate materials and goods not only for Mitzvah Day projects, but for community agencies as well

Make sure to include a space for a return address and phone number (particularly a cell phone number for that day), as well as a deadline for registration. Keep in mind that many people may register late, so set your initial date early enough to collect needed information.

Congregational Publicity: Only a percentage of those who know about Mitzvah Day will participate, so make sure the pool of those who know about it is as wide as possible. Additionally, the more that people hear about Mitzvah Day, the more they will want to participate. In order to publicize your Mitzvah Day, you can:

- Run regular advertisements and articles in your temple bulletin
- Hang posters and banners throughout the synagogue
- Make announcements in religious school classes
- Have brochures available at the synagogue

- Ask your Rabbi to make announcements from the pulpit
- Ask your Rabbi to give a sermon on the topic of *mitzvot* or *tikkun olam*
- Send emails through various congregational lists, including affiliates (sisterhood, brotherhood, youth group), religious school, social action committee, etc.
- Do a congregational mailing with the brochure and registration form
- If your budget allows, consider doing a second mailing of brochures or letters to people who have not registered

Community Publicity: You might want to publicize Mitzvah Day by drafting a press release for the local mainstream and Jewish media.

Assignment of Projects

Make sure to keep track of which volunteers are assigned to which projects. If you anticipate a lot of volunteers for many projects, consider creating a computerized database to keep track of everything. Assigning registrants on a first come, first served basis is the most sensible way to fill projects. Once assignments are made, the Registration Chair should give the information to the appropriate Project Captain. The Project Captain then contacts the volunteers to inform them of their assignments and any necessary details. By the end of this process, each Project Captain should have a complete file consisting of volunteer information sheets listing every person assigned to his or her project.

Tasks to be done during Mitzvah Day

Most synagogues have all Mitzvah Day participants gather at the synagogue for a kick-off program and breakfast or lunch, depending on the start time. Synagogues often hold short services, either during opening or closing sessions. Some congregations also invite local dignitaries such as a city council member, the mayor, or a local social activist to address the volunteers and thank them for their participation. Setting the tone for the day is critical. While providing "closure" is also desirable, keep in mind that projects may be of different lengths and may not end at the same time.

On the morning of Mitzvah Day, you will need volunteers to:

- Greet Mitzvah Day participants as they arrive
- Register participants
- Distribute or sell T-shirts
- Help carry supplies and donations in from volunteers' cars
- Help with traffic control in the parking lot
- Serve breakfast or lunch
- Clean up
- Help distribute supplies and make sure each Project Captain gets the materials he or she needs
- Take pictures throughout the day
- Coordinate childcare

Each of the Project Captains should be sure to have all of their supplies and the following materials:

- A final list of volunteers for the project
- Extra name tags
- List of key cell phone numbers of organizers to handle last minute changes during the day
- Volunteer evaluation forms to be filled out at the end of the day
- A sign-up sheet for volunteers that want to continue working with their project after Mitzvah Day

Evaluation and Follow-Up

A key goal is to use the opportunity to motivate participants to make a more extensive commitment to social justice activities. Before the enthusiasm from Mitzvah Day dissipates, encourage volunteers to sign up for additional social action activities. Other things you might want to do after Mitzvah Day include:

- Collect photos and videos from Mitzvah Day to use for post-event publicity and for publicity for next year's program
- Write a bulletin article to let the congregation know that the event was successful
- Send thank-you letters to all who helped plan and run Mitzvah Day
- Distribute and collect evaluation forms.
- Hold a follow-up meeting with committee members to thank them for their participation and to review evaluations
- Make notes for the next Mitzvah Day