

THE KITCHEN

**WHY**

**and**

**HOW**

So, you're new here. Hi!

Or, you've been around a while and just picked this up. That's great.

Some people say to me, "You know, The Kitchen is really just a synagogue." That doesn't bother me, I like synagogues. And we certainly do many of the same things that synagogues do. And also we do things that ChaBaD does. And also Jewish Camps and Day Schools. However, I have come to believe that the reasons we do these things and the ways we do them may mark the difference between us and other communities. So we wanted to explain those reasons (WHY) and those ways (HOW).

In the early days, when there were just a few of us, it was easy to teach this one on one. Now that we've grown so much, I realized more and more people were feeling confused. So, consider this your guide to the language of The Kitchen. Likely it will change with us, but it's a start.

**WHY**

**WE**

**EXIST**



We exist

to translate Torah by making

religion modern and relevant

with those who want to

do jewish

in order to change lives and

invest in the world.

1

Torah is the heart of everything we do.  
We translate it into the here and now through  
tools and experiences that foster intimacy,  
expression, and commitment.

2

We believe it's not who you are but what you do.  
If you want to do Jewish, c'mon in.

3

The Kitchen pushes us to do what's necessary  
to transform the world and ourselves.

**WHY** (RABBI KUSHNER TELLS ALL)

My story of The Kitchen begins in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

My father, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, served an alternative shul in the 1970's. Services were egalitarian, the davening was participatory, people learned serious torah, and we fought for progressive politics.

I didn't know my Jewish upbringing was rare. I didn't know those things barely existed anywhere during that time. This was my normal.

Fast forward. Rabbinic school. I moved to the West Coast. I worked in Hillel. My husband and I had three girls in five years. While there were many lovely and good options in the Bay Area, I could not find the shabbat I needed.

There is no shortage of hours dedicated to the Jewish people in our house. My husband and I are both rabbis. The irony that I could not give my own kids the Jewish life I had, let alone iterate on it for them, was more than I could take.

I started asking questions. “If these experiences are a major disconnect for me, what is it like for other people? And then, “Is it any wonder they do not show up? “What would it take to reach more of us?” It turns out these questions were the beginning of The Kitchen.

I did not realize it at the time but I was seeing what the Pew Research Group would come to validate. 90% of Gen Xers were unaffiliated in San Francisco (this was in 2004).

Yes, I had a strong personal motivation but this was a problem that went far beyond my own needs. What would it look like to deliver substantial Torah, a connection to meaning through religious Jewish experiences, to many more people in San Francisco in this time?

The earliest series of ideas were simply about removing the barriers (cultural, financial), real or perceived, so that more people could get at the experience. We then moved toward making that experience as powerful and current as we possibly could.

From my early Jewish experiences—my Dad’s synagogue, Jewish summer camps, experiences in Jerusalem—I had a feeling for the direction. I kept saying, “We have these models of what’s working, let’s do something like that.” Not to mention, when I looked around online, I realized that in the seven or so years I had been busy with my babies, the Jewish world had changed. I saw what IKAR was doing in LA, and Kavana in Seattle, and thought, “These people are speaking my language. They see what I see.”

I cold called and then got on a plane to meet Rabbis Sharon Brous at IKAR and Rachel Nussbaum at Kavana to ask them how to start. At The Kitchen’s first Shabbat, the minute we opened our doors for Jewish experiences in San Francisco, we had 150 people. Seven years in, it has only grown. We now count 300+ paying households and many, many more Kitchen-ites who come regularly. This is miraculous. Everyone said we could never succeed: “No one practices Religion in San Francisco.” Now, we serve thousands a year. More importantly, I can’t imagine where else our people would go.

We started with four premises. Looking back now, they are really the why and how of The Kitchen.

**PREMISE 1**



**JEWISH LIFE IS  
TRANSFORMATIONAL**

This is so foundational but it cannot be said enough.

The Kitchen started with the belief that Jewish religious experience can transform. It can change the trajectory of people's lives, it can build communities and countries, it can be a great force for tikkun (repair).

We do not sit shiva (mourning custom) or argue over the meaning of torah or light hannukah candles or give tzedakah (righteous obligation to share) because it makes our parents happy or because we're giving into religious pressure (which is, to be honest, non existent in San Francisco). We don't pray or respond to our community because we want to be accepted or polite. We do these things because it is literally a matter of making our lives and the lives around us mean something. It is how we cultivate an Eden for ourselves and for our cities. It is our way of leaving Egypt, or discovering Sinai. Religion, Jewish life is our way of trying to figure out how to respond to the gift of our lives with responsibility and integrity.

**PREMISE 2**



**RELIGION HAS  
TO BE  
EXPERIENTIAL**

One of our earliest thoughts was that no one would ever connect to the heart of Jewish life unless they began to practice it. You can't learn how to enjoy eating by only talking about it. Same with religion. There was and is too much talk about how to save Jewish life and not enough people doing things together in real time. We simply just wanted to get more people to do more of it more of the time. Learn, practice, do.

So at the Kitchen, on a basic level, we create and help other people create Jewish religious experiences—some communal and some personal.

In the experiential model, teachers (mentors, models) are critical. No website, no building, nothing can take the place of teachers. For us to experience living Torah means someone needs to show us how it is done or to set the stage for us to try.

I want to offer here the image of Moshe approaching the burning bush. Moshe experiences something and undergoes a transformation. Before, he is concerned with others but sporadically. After this moment, he will consider himself a leader.

What does Moshe do in this passage? He stops and sees the bush burning, not being consumed. He reflects. He is self aware. He says to himself, “I will turn aside.”

Tanhuma teaches that even the stopping is enough for God! (We wonder, how many fires did God light before someone noticed?)

And then Moshe does something else. Moshe asks “Maduah?” / “Why?” (“Why doesn’t the bush burn up?”)

And as soon as Moshe asks, “Why?” “Why is it this way?” I believe Moshe implicitly allows that it could be another way. “Why is it this way and not another, the usual way?” I call this moment God’s one question interview. But the catch is that God has to get Moshe to ask the question.

As soon as Moshe asks, “Why is it this way?” God says, “You’re hired!” God was looking for the one who could conceive that things could be another way.

I think God is looking for the ones who will be ready to ask the biggest questions.

I think Americans (especially here in San Francisco, in Silicon Valley) are like Moshe in the mindset of the Pharaoh's Palace, before he ventured out. We live in a distracting, self referential place and time. It is easy not to see out of our house of mirrors.

So at The Kitchen, we are trying to remind ourselves that there is possibility beyond our current reality. We want to move away from the question, "What will I get out of this Jewish thing?" to each person's version of "Madua?" / "Why?" Could there really be another way? And what is my role in making that way come into the world?

**PREMISE 3**



**DOING  
JEWISH**

As the larger Jewish community continues to emphasize pedigree (who “is” Jewish), literacy (who “does” Jewish) has become secondary. If you or your partner are not allowed to do things, how can you learn? At The Kitchen, we’ve inverted this equation. We are primarily interested in who wants to “do” Jewish; those who want to become more literate, more involved, and more active.

This was something we put out to our community early. I think it’s even more relevant today.

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“What if I’m not Jewish?”

Let’s put it this way.

You can be a direct  
descendant of Moses and  
if you don’t want to do

anything Jewish, we can't really do much with you. By the same token, you can be Santa Claus and if you are willing to get on this Jewish train and see where it goes, by all means, hop on.

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This statement stemmed from a core belief that a willingness to participate and experience is ground floor, we cannot be Jewish on the sidelines or by definition only. Also, by shifting the conversation away from "Are you really Jewish?" as the entry question, I think we allow for more interesting conversations:

“What are you willing to do? What are you interested in doing? Where do you want to go?”

Finally, we love and respect people who want to convert or who have converted. To convert is a huge commitment at The Kitchen, and one of our favorite things to help people do.

**PREMISE 4**



**CONNECTING  
HEAVEN  
AND EARTH**

We (and I would argue, all good teachers of Torah) are translators. Bringing heaven to earth and earth to heaven is our job.

So if we speak to the people but don't bring anyone torah, if we don't help someone to see their role in the world, we are not doing our job. As well, if we speak a lot of torah but no one can relate to it we are not doing our job. Our job must be to do, to live both.

Sometimes, people prize innovation or an alternative approach to building Jewish life so much, they forget that people have been 'innovating' for a very long time. So I don't like the word 'innovation' for our work, I like 'adaptation.' Or even better, 'translation.'

Too many Jewish places are either rich in content but feel like guarded fortresses to the uninitiated, or welcoming, but once you're in, there is nothing to be found. It is hard to do both but we have to try.

When people vote against Jewish institutions with their feet, I believe they are not against Torah or Jewish experience. In fact, I believe they are

voting against the outdated culture and formality they find there. To say that the empty seats mean that people don't want Torah would be like noting that people don't wear hats and gloves any longer and concluding that we don't want clothes.

As well, too often, Jewish institutions refuse to stake a claim on how teachings of Torah can be a shot of truth in a dark world. Fearing donors or political repercussions, Rabbis and leaders stay quiet. At The Kitchen, we feel that if Torah does not apply to our lives, our streets, our cities and countries, we have silenced the Torah. That does not mean we always agree, and that does not mean our opinions cannot change. It means we risk ourselves in conversations, classes and from the bimah to stake a claim in what we believe to be true. This, too, is part of connecting heaven to earth.

Early on someone asked me what my 200 year plan was for The Kitchen. I told him that I only had one plan: to make Torah and God and Religion compelling, relevant, and pliant enough now so that the next generation would not be able to imagine living without these things, and so could have a chance at translating them for themselves.

— R. NOA KUSHNER, ROSH HASHANA, 5779

**HOW**

**WE**

**DO IT**

(In general)

1

## WE TAKE IT SERIOUSLY

### WHAT WE MEAN

Torah is the reason for what we do. Discipline, rigor, and tradition allow us to access, deepen, and connect with a meaningful Jewish life.

### WHAT WE DO

We prioritize content and curate concentrated experiences of Torah. Everything else comes second.

2

## WE DESIGN EXPERIENCES

### WHAT WE MEAN

The way someone experiences something Jewish matters.

### WHAT WE DO

No community touch-point is created without thought and purpose. Everything we do is designed to make opportunities for meaning and appeal.

3

## WE EXPERIMENT

### WHAT WE MEAN

We seek new ways to make jewish life real for more people. The work is never finished and we can always get better.

### WHAT WE DO

Whether its location, people, format or message, we are open to new ideas. If it works, great. If not, we learned something for the next experiment.

### WHAT WE MEAN

We believe it's not who you are but what you do. Everyone who wants to do jewish should feel welcome.

### WHAT WE DO

We start with "yes." In ways small and large we strive to welcome everyone who shows up.

4

## WE VALUE ACCESS

**HOW**

**WE**

**DO IT**

(In real life)



PRESIDIO

EMBARCADERO

Grace Cathedral

FINANCIAL DISTRICT

each

PRESIDIO HEIGHTS

101

LAUREL HEIGHTS

The Fillmore

The Mosser Ho

CHMOND DISTRICT

Painted Ladies

SOUTH OF MARKET

SOUTH E

HAIGHT-ASHBURY

COLE VALLEY

Mission Dolores Park

MISSION D

16th Avenue Tiled Steps

MISSION DISTRICT

DOGPA

Twin Peaks

NOE VALLEY

101

FOREST HILL

Billy Goat Hill

Bernal Heights Park

WEST PORTAL

Glen Canyon Park

BERNAL HEIGHTS

gmund Stern Recreation Grove

City College of San Francisco

280

PORTOLA

MERCED

INGLESIDE

EXCELSIOR

101

OUTER MISSION

VISITACION VALLEY

CROCKER-AMAZON

Cow Palace

# We Don't Have a Building

And we don't plan to get one. This allows us to keep our costs lower (even upkeep on old SF buildings runs into the millions) and the percentage of our budget on rabbis, mentors, and teachers higher. We think we can build more Jewish life with people rather than with bricks.

We move around, especially on holidays. You'll even find us in secular spaces like The Presidio (Sukkot 2016), Golden Gate Park (Sukkot 2015), and Chinatown (Purim 2014). Our space might change all the time but we always try to make sure it feels like "The Kitchen."

Worth noting: Not having a building means we are not overly dependent on a small group of people who could fund such a building which, in turn, allows us the freedom to say what we mean.



# THE KITCHEN

600 MONTGOMERY STREET, SUITE 2400

SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94111

[KITCHENSF.ORG](http://KITCHENSF.ORG)

# Our Name

A slightly subversive name (kinda the opposite of a cathedral, no?) challenges unspoken notions about religious experiences.

We wanted to show that religion is not only imposing, it is also familiar. The Kitchen is where real conversations happens. It is where we roll up our sleeves and work together. And it's where everyone wants to be when there's a party.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a clear plastic bag. The bag is crinkled and appears to contain some items. A circular logo is affixed to the front of the bag. The logo contains the text 'jew up' in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font, with 'thekitchensf.org' in a smaller, lowercase sans-serif font directly below it. The background is dark and out of focus.

**jew up**  
thekitchensf.org

# Chocolate Chip Cookies

On shabbat, R. Lezak (R. Kushner's husband) will often make the best chocolate chip cookies. Why should hotels be the only ones to have tasty treats when you check in?

Religion should be loving and spontaneous, sweet and personal.

Hello  
my name is

HOLY ☺

# No Name-Tags

Name-tags connote a conference, they assume that no one remembers each other. (Note: This is purely the founding rabbi's bias. She has been overruled specifically in the case of retreats).

We are aiming less for “ice breaker” and more for the kind of connection that almost never happens anymore but often happens here. It probably is not solely dependent on the lack of name-tags but don't tell R. Kushner.



# Our Board

Our board members were probably never on a Jewish board before.

This allows for a more even playing field in cultivating our leaders, bringing in more leaders (maybe even you!), and new ideas. We are interested in the traditional and the new. We saw that many Jewish boards were filled with the same people and the same tired arguments. We wanted a generative board, one that was ready to experiment and build and argue in a new way. We are lucky to have such a board.



# Our Prayer Books

We designed our siddur (prayer book) and machzor (high holiday prayer book) and redesign them every couple of years.

Let us count the features: (1) Transliteration for every word and all the prayers we want (2) Poetry by Kitchen-ite writers who study the prayers and write responses over 12 months (3) Designed to create more intersection points with pull out images (Machzor 2.0), stickers (Machzor 1.0), and infographics (siddur 2.0).

We do it this way so more people can find their way into prayer.

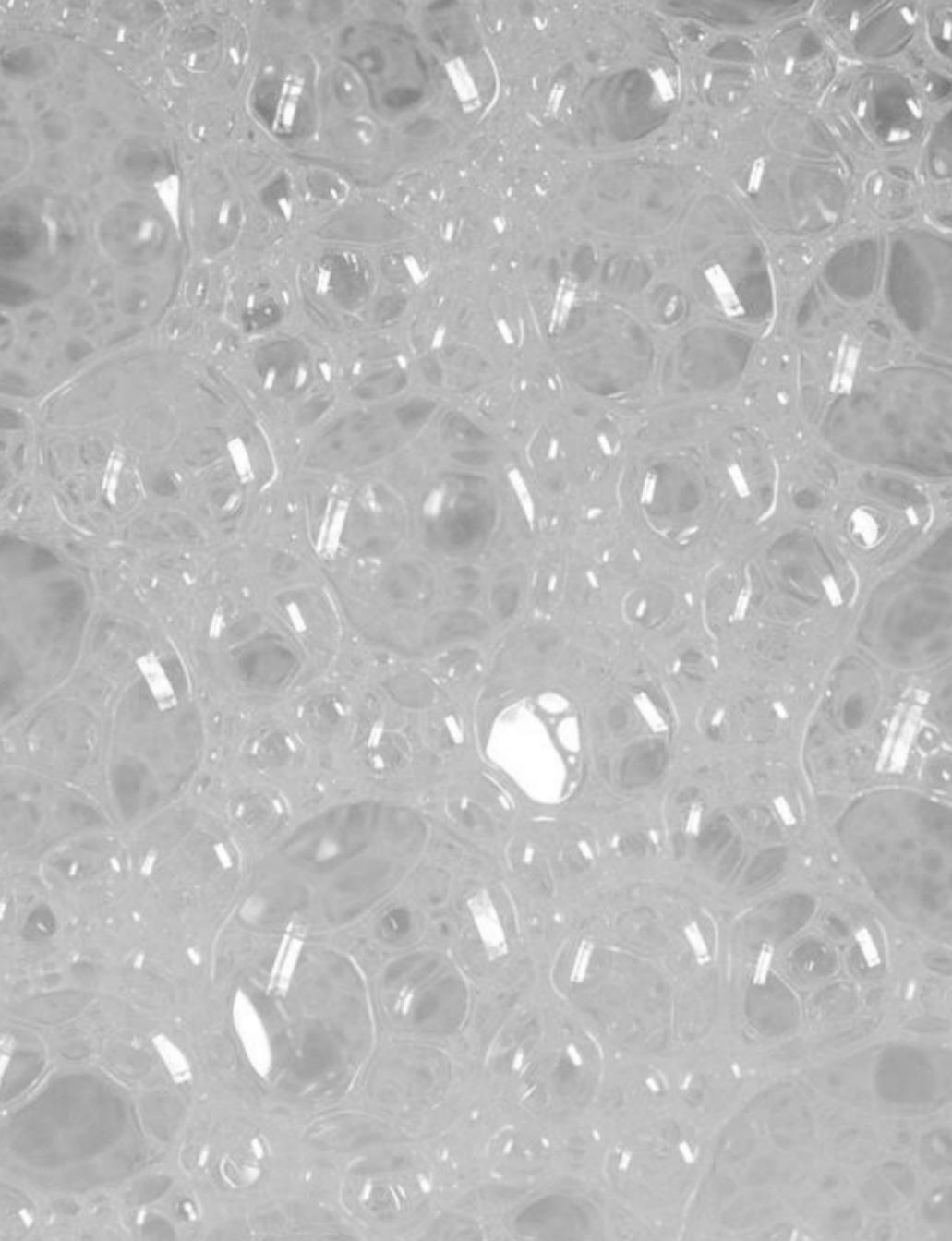


# Davening Team

The Davening (loosely translated, praying) Team is a group of 8 to 10 committed Kitchen-ites and rabbis who lead Kitchen shabbatot and holidays from the middle of the room. Melodies are designed for participation. Many of our prayers are recorded on Soundcloud for you. Search for “TheKitchenSF.”

We build community when we open our hearts and our mouths and s i n g. It doesn't matter if you are an opera star or if your 2nd grade teacher told you to ‘mouth the words’ for fear of mucking up the harmony. The prayer lifts and the community deepens when each of us adds our voice.

We don't want a “front” and “back” of the room. We want as many people as possible to be able to access something holy.



# Washing Dishes after Shabbat Dinner

In all things Kitchen, we don't have much in the way of staff. We all help. We're not interested in outsourcing our Jewish lives, whether it is the momentous decisions (can I have a Jewish wedding?) or the mundane acts (time to clean up).

*\*Pro tip: If you want to get to know insiders, wash dishes on shabbat. Extra wine and dessert for those who step up!*



# Our Partnership With GLIDE

Whether it's our collective trip to Alabama (The Legacy Museum from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration), our connection to the Tenderloin, or our core of challah baking and breakfast serving volunteers, our partnership allows us to begin to walk the walk.

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and widely acclaimed public interest lawyer, says we need to act in four ways: (1) Get approximate, (2) Change the Narrative, (3) Tether ourselves to Hope, (4) Do Uncomfortable Things. This partnership invites us into these four steps.



# Kitchen Israel / Palestine Trip

We believe Israel is the material expression of Torah, it is the place where Torah is lived most completely. We believe we should relish in its successes and invest in its weaknesses.

Going to Israel, meeting Israelis + Palestinians is the only way to connect and understand with any nuance what that society and the people are like. We believe conversation and relationship are the only ways to bridge the growing divide between Israelis and Jewish communities in the world. That's why we invite as many scholars, artists and activists to Israel as we can. That's why we're planning on going again this summer.



# Drash

The word drash means “to expound” and refers to a teaching based in Torah and it’s what we do on shabbat. We speak to the issues of the day and to issues of the heart. We try not to say things you could hear everywhere else. We try not to say what you already know. We’re going for depth.

Even if it is unintuitive or controversial, we want our shabbat community to be a place where minds can get changed and exchanges can begin.



# Spiritual Fitness

Even though we bring in world-renowned teachers (R. Yitz Greenberg, R. Ed Feinstein, R. Avivah Zornberg, R. Lawrence Hoffman, Peter Beinart, Melilah Helman, Donniel Hartman, R. Bradley Arston, to name a few) we almost always cap our group at 50, reserve access for members, and meet in small spaces. Why? Because we prioritize access and conversation.

We want to be exposed to the luminaries of today in order to be inspired to learn more. Small communal settings allow for cross pollination, ongoing conversations, and risk taking. In short, growth.

*\*Pro tip: Sign up for the 3 day classes with Avivah Zornberg (one evening, one full day and one morning) for the most intensive learning experience.*



# Freedom School

Families of all stripes who opt to learn together on shabbat are of a special sort. We're looking for just those kinds of families for our family shabbat school.

Honestly, there's only so much Jewish life happening Tuesdays after school. But, no matter your age, we can teach you a whole lot in real time if you are part of our shabbat mornings.



NO PARKING  
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM  
MON - FRI

NO PARKING  
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM  
MON - FRI

384  
Via San Pablo

# Neighborhoods

The Kitchen is starting to see groups of people in neighborhoods, specifically Cole Valley, gather on their own for havdallot (end of shabbat), shabbatot, to take care of one another. It's excellent.

Because there is nothing like being able to go to your neighbor / friend / comrade / community member's house for babysitting / talking about the election / wondering if you need a sweater for the sukkah party / mourning / celebrating a baby. Nothing.

We believe Kitchen is here to support and build Jews and Jewish life, not the other way around.

Bread Plate

Red Wine

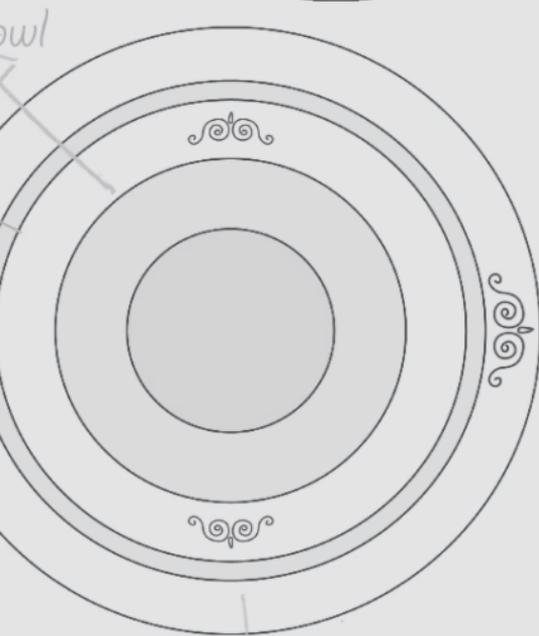
Champagne

Water

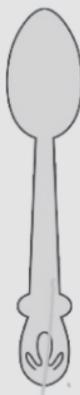
Dessert



White Wine



Dinner Plate



Dinner Knife

Dinner Spoon

Soup

# Shabbat Dinners in Homes

Precisely not a once-a-year commitment (we hope), but a loose group of people who get together with some regularity.

Kitchen is, at its best, powered by large communal and smaller, easier to move, personal gears. They are meant to work together and support one another.

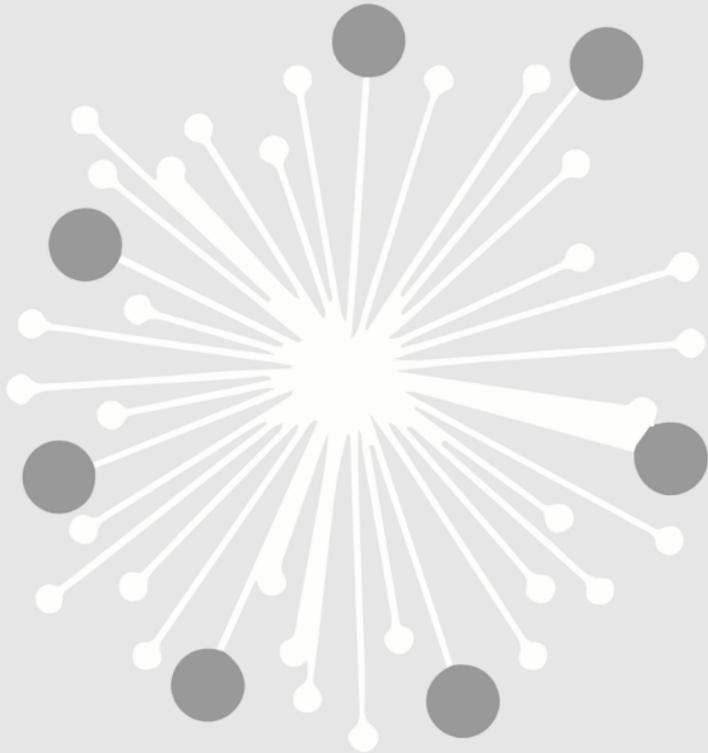
Shabbat belongs, most of the time, at home, with other good people, in the ways you shape. It is the most holy basic building block we know and we want to do everything to help you and yours access it personally and with joy.



# Kitchen-ites and Yet-to-be Kitchen-ites

We are very porous community, on purpose.  
There are always THAT many new people hanging  
around and we like it that way.

The idea that a person is “in” or “out” of a given  
community isn’t working, so we’re trying to  
find as many ways to include as many people as  
possible. We like the ideas of layers of people, each  
being a different part of what we are doing adds to  
our Kitchen spirit and energy.



# Jewish Emergent Network

J.E.N. a group of seven communities: Romemu in NY, Lab/Shul in NY, 6th & i in DC, Mishkan in Chicago, Kavana in Seattle, IKAR in LA, and The Kitchen in SF.

We consider this network to be a great national resource of some of the best in the field. We're honored to be a part of it.\*

\* Thanks to: Jim Joseph Foundation, The Crown Family, Charles H. Revson Foundation, The William Davidson Foundation, The Righteous Persons Foundation, Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, Natan, Maimonides Fund, An anonymous foundation

# Kitchen lingo

## 24/7

Our group for 20 and 30 somethings

## Kitchen playground

For kids ages 0-5 and their caregivers

## 1/60th

Support for those in mourning

## SF Friends

Our usual space for shabbat on 250 Valencia

## Noe Valley Ministry

Our not as usual place for shabbat

## Jewish Emergent Network Fellow

JEN Rabbinic two year fellowship

## The Firehouse

An incredibly special donated home in Cole Valley that we use for classes and Shabbat AM (experimental edition)