



the Synagogue: a Time for Tearing Down & a Time for Building Up

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After a remarkable expansion of synagogues in the forties, fifties and early sixties, the past three decades have been a bear market for shuls. Membership and participation rates have dropped significantly. Complaints of boredom and irrelevance fill the air. Shul life has been criticized for excessive factionalism and small-mindedness; many in young leadership seceded to Federations and alternative organizations. Denominational fighting polarized Jewish life. Rabbis complained that they were shoved aside by the emergent lay leadership and blamed it all on “checkbox Judaism,” i.e. Jewish life run by money instead of values. Yet the lay leaders complained that rabbis were uninspiring, acting like politicians but neglecting their constituents’—and their own—spiritual lives. The Havurot groups, which first emerged in the sixties, had kind words for alternate religions and seekers but blamed the soulless institutional synagogues and their Hebrew schools for the traumas which scarred their Jewish souls and turned off so many of their peers.

What went wrong? The synagogue always drew its strength from meeting the spiritual and value needs of Jewry. When Jews went into exile and lived as a minority, the synagogue offered decentralized communities, guided by

a shared set of distinctive values which were stronger and more compelling than those of the majority environment. To a powerless people, shul became the place where one could do something to find help in troubles, i.e. where one could pray. Over the years the services grew longer and longer as the desperate need for help grew.

In this century, Jewry went from powerlessness to power, yet the prayers continued (in length or in content) to express helplessness. Worldwide, all cultural shelters and ethnic ghettos were breaking down as the explosion of media and communications brought religious groups into open contact with each other. In such circumstances, loyalty must be won anew. Fundamentalism (traditionalism now radicalized and chosen rather than copied) does better than mere continuation of the past. Yet synagogues did not respond properly; even liberal synagogues were heavily traditional and “residual.” One might say that they kept less of the tradition rather than renewed its functions.

These errors were compounded by the synagogue’s role as the vehicle of Americanization and suburbanization. The large institutional synagogue infrastructure that was built (to proclaim that Jewry had arrived in the United States) needed to be supported financially. This led to an emphasis on social events (which expressed the family’s material success). But the Hebrew schools and B’nei Mitzvah focus crippled learning for both children and adults. And the cold, impersonal proceedings (with a weekly changing audience of guests unconnected to each

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other or to congregants) choked the service. Nevertheless, the emotional dynamics of making it and being accepted in America supplied social gratification and emotional thrills to the parent generation. But the children who grew up taking this acceptance and success for granted were bored by the process and turned off by the display.

The crisis of confidence has led the Federations and foundation world to invest proportionately less of the continuity budget in improving the synagogues. Yet it is a serious mistake

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to write off an historical powerhouse of Jewry. This is especially true now, because in recent years important new experiments have brought exciting life to individual synagogues in all the movements. These vital centers should be cloned, not abandoned.

Synagogue renewal is not a matter of restoring the synagogue to its old-time centrality. We will have to “tear down” many of the errors in structure and culture to free energy for a religious renaissance. Nor can rabbis be proclaimed the true leaders of Jewry. Authority must be earned the new-fashioned way—by relevance and meeting the deepest needs of Jews more effectively than the alternatives. Competition today comes from the general culture and other media of values and self-expression rather than the Federations or secular Jewish organizations that are regularly denounced for neglecting spirituality.

We are living through one of the great cultural transformations of human history—the arrival of societies marked by a much higher degree of freedom, affluence and power for the masses. With status increasingly achieved rather than ascribed, with identity chosen and confirmed rather than given by birth, the emphasis must be on preparing people to choose to be Jewish. We believe that Judaism’s unique emphasis on covenant—on divine-human partnership—always pointed toward the emergence of a mature, voluntary relationship to one’s God and people. The Torah’s focus on

living the good life in the here and now also lends itself to giving meaning and direction in a more consumer oriented, worldly culture. Yet, Judaism never succeeded as a “me too” religion. A minority dissolves into the majority once it loses its edge.

The synagogue (and any institution that will play a vital role in Jewry’s future) must communicate its purpose and offer the advantage in being different. American Jewry—or at least that fraction that seriously wants to be Jewish—is ready to be different

even as it is integrated into general culture. For a generation, the decision makers picked their religious heads to lead the charge for Americanization and to represent Jews to others (rather than teach Judaism to Jews). Now the bulk of Jewish leadership is ready for rabbis as spiritual masters, teachers of the Torah, community organizers and role models for values.

The initial synagogue experiments point strongly to where the synagogue can be renewed. Freedom means that people must be equipped with the knowledge and experiences that enable them to choose to be distinctively Jewish. Vital forms of learning—adult as much as youth—are central goals. Given that 90% of Jews go to university, the average level of synagogue teaching must be drastically improved. Necessary changes include that the selection of rabbis be intellectually upgraded; rabbis’ time be freed up for learning and teaching; cooperative study ventures be willingly used; and outstanding talents be recruited for synagogue adult education. This implies that synagogues must stop treating each other as rivals and the Federations and other organizations as the enemy.

American Jews are seeking a vital sense of community because individualism alone cannot meet the deepest needs of individuals. The creation of powerful communities is the main challenge of synagogue renewal. Orthodox standards of visiting the sick, comforting mourners, rejoicing with the bride and groom, can be inculcated in the entire population and centrally structured into syna-

gogue life. Already there are liberal shuls that have set new higher norms in these areas—which all types of groups should strive to emulate. A true community extends hospitality to all—from the way the phone is answered to the invitation to lunch to reaching out and touching whomever comes into its orbit.

In this expressive society, music, song and dance engage people and suffuse their lives. That is why the leading synagogue pace-setters are typically marked by liturgy filled with joy and celebration. Used intelligently, the liberal advantage (the ability to use musical instruments where the Orthodox cannot) deepens the impact. But the key is creating participants, not spectators, and here the Orthodox have every equal opportunity.

We do not wish to list all aspects of synagogue renewal. One of the community’s first tasks is to identify the key characteristics of vital shuls, to establish how these can be transmitted—and to offer aid in developing and spreading them everywhere. We are confident that these transforming characteristics can be incorporated into many synagogues—given the will to do so by informed lay and religious leadership. They will need help for the additional costs and efforts involved. Here is where philanthropy can step in and make a real difference.

Michael Steinhardt has argued the case for not tackling all synagogues simultaneously and diluting the impact of innovation but rather striving to create a visible ‘chain’ of revitalized synagogues (of every denomination), backing them with investment sufficient for complete transformation. In the past year, the Schusterman Foundation has explored the possibility of leading a serious philanthropic partnership in this area. The Cummings Foundation, Whizin and others have done important pioneering work with Synagogue 2000. Time is of the essence, however, as more and more Jews lose contact altogether.

The synagogue has been the central institution of Jewish life for more than 1500 years. Yet in Biblical times, Judaism functioned without synagogues at all. What will be the *Beit Haknesset’s* place in Jewish life in the next millennium? Our actions now will determine the answer. 🌸