The Retreat As Spa, Education Center, & Camp for Grown-ups

by AMY L. SALES

Three metaphors — the spa, the education center and camp for grown-ups — elucidate the purpose and power of retreats and the challenges they face in realizing these.

THE RETREAT AS SPA

Retreats are like spas that refresh and renew. In our fast-paced, media-saturated lives of unending to-do lists and deadlines, we need a break to replenish ourselves. Most people, of course, do take breaks — an hour at the gym, an evening out, a weekend away, a family vacation. But for the most part, these are not total breaks, as the connection to back home remains via the ever-present cell phone, blackberry and laptop.

The need for the total break was understood by our ancestors from earliest times. It was so important that it was deemed to be commanded by God and built into creation itself. The problem is that for most American Jews, the environment does not support complete rest on Shabbat. Thus is born the need for the contemporary retreat.

The purpose of retreats is literally to remove oneself from the everyday and to live, for a brief time, in a clear and free environment. The power of retreats lies precisely in this disconnection from home. In an isolated location, there is a sense of being in a world apart. There is little awareness of the outside world, and, therefore, the focus of attention is necessarily on the inner world — the immediate self, group and community.

Such a setting forces participants to live in the here-and-now. Without the cues of everyday life, time plays like an accordion. The days of the retreat stretch out endlessly but then seem to pass in a moment.

Effective retreats thus create what is called a “total environment.” They work hard to avoid seepage of the outside world into the retreat center. When participants feel free to drive their cars into town or to use the computer in the lounge to check email, the bubble is punctured and the power of the retreat is diminished.

THE RETREAT AS EDUCATION CENTER

Retreats can be educational settings that attempt to change behaviors and attitudes. Kurt Lewin, the father of modern social psychology, posited that our social and physical environments serve as scaffolding that keeps us acting and thinking in essentially the same way, day after day. In order for us to change, this scaffolding needs to be removed. Without the environmental presses holding them in place, old behaviors and attitudes can be set aside while we try on new ones. The more isolated the retreat and the stronger its culture, Lewin wrote, the more it will minimize participants’ resistance to change (Kurt Lewin, “Frontiers in group dynamics,” Human Relations, 1, 1947).

Effective retreats thus create what Lewin referred to as a “cultural island,” a total environment with an intentional and strong culture. They know how to establish unique language, norms, values, customs and symbols for the retreat experience. They are thoughtful about community and group building. They are savvy about interpersonal relations and group dynamics and use individual and group work to provide new experiences, feedback and support for change. They foster an environment that encourages personal risk-taking, exploration, and discovery.

THE RETREAT AS CAMP FOR GROWN-UPS

Consideration of retreats as spas and as education centers is based on studies we have done at Brandeis University on how summer camps work to socialize youth into Jewish life and community (Amy Sales and Len Saxe, “How goodly are thy tents”: Summer camps as Jewish socializing experiences). Although instructive parallels exist between youth camps and adult retreats, challenges to retreats arise where the two diverge.

The first challenge is the difficulty of getting adults to attend a retreat. Youth camping is normative. Many American Jewish children go to a summer camp of one type or another (whether day camp or residential, whether Jewish or non-Jewish). When a child says, “I went to camp this summer,” no one is surprised. Retreats are not normative for adults but rather seem to be the activity of a fringe minority. When an adult says, “I went to a retreat this weekend,” arched eyebrows may be part of the response.

Children have the summer off and there is a need to fill the time. Adults face the opposite problem of never having enough time. It has long been recognized by meditation centers that those who most need it are the ones who are least likely to find the time for it.

Moreover, camps are able to think longitudinally; retreats generally cannot. It is not unusual for a child to attend camp for five or even ten years. As a result, camp is part of that child’s experience through childhood, into the teenage years, and sometimes into young adulthood, annually influencing each stage of development. High return rates not only extend the potential of camp to influence a child’s Jewishness but also simplify the task of recruitment. If done well, the upper bunks are filled with returning campers, and the camp’s effort can be focused on bringing in the youngest groups who, it is hoped, will grow up at camp.

Most adult retreats do not work this way. They are often one-shot affairs or annual events that lapse after a few years. In cases where they have managed to continue over a number of years, their participants do not move along through stages or age out as campers do. Rather, these retreats have had difficulty attracting new people as the founding generation comes to be seen as an impenetrable clique of “groupies.”

The final challenge concerns impact. The research literature is clear that retreats have a powerful immediate effect on participants, but there is little evidence that the effect is lasting. Because personal change is dependent on the environmental scaffolding and because retreats are short-lived and do not have the year-after-year opportunity of summer camp, new behaviors are not maintained after participants leave the cultural island and return back home.

The solution to this challenge may be found in a medical metaphor: Change requires a powerful inoculation, followed by periodic booster shots. If retreats are to have an enduring effect on how people live their lives back home, they must be conceived of not as single events but as ongoing programs. Such a model is our best chance for gaining the benefit of the retreat as spa, education center and, yes, as summer camp for grown-ups.

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Open your eyes and you will see a Jewish “Big Bang” — the genesis of new, historic Jewish institutions. Why this new creation? Jewish institutions reflect Jewish history and they change as Jewish history changes. Every core institution reflects three key factors: the historical condition of the Jewish people, their primary religious/theological worldview and their type of leadership. While these factors are ever-changing, only a few times in Jewish history have they changed so drastically that old institutions were no longer adequate and new institutions were born. We are living in such a time.

In the Biblical period, Jewish peoplehood was organized around a religious vision and mission commanded by God. God led the Israelites from Egyptian slavery to freedom in the Promised Land and intervened in their history constantly. The way to reach the Deity was through sacrifices (hence priests supplied religious leadership) and/or through prophets (who brought instructions and channeled a direct word from God). When individual tribes in Israel could no longer adequately defend against invaders, a central monarchy emerged to replace the tribal chieftains. As the Israelites settled down, a permanent Holy Temple became the centralized point for sacrifice and communication/advice-seeking from God (as experienced in the High Priest’s Urim and Thummim Oracles). The cosmic Lord was so manifest in the Temple that there could hardly be any other efficacious place to serve or address God. In the Sixth Century BCE, the Babylonian Exile temporarily led to the creation of local synagogues for study and community observance. But within a century the Israelites returned and rebuilt a central Temple; the synagogue remained a minor institution.

The Destruction of the Second Temple and exile led to a fundamental change in the Jewish condition and brought with it new religious understanding. With the loss of sovereignty, Kingship disappeared. Without a Temple, the priests’ role shrank. The rabbinic understanding was that God had self-limited and “allowed” the destruction in order to call humans to greater responsibility in the covenant. God would no longer intervene visibly, and humans would need to uncover God’s word. Prophecy disappeared as direct messages from God lost their credibility. The more hidden God — no longer “visible” or concentrated in Jerusalem — could be approached all over the world, although through prayer, not sacrifices. Thus synagogues spread. The people had to be educated; only in this way could they internalize Jewish values and live them even as a minority in a foreign land. Shabbat and Talmud Torah became central to Jewish life.

Over a period of centuries, the Rabbis became the new leadership; synagogues (which were prayer, study and assembly centers) and academies emerged as the core institutions. The liturgy and many new rituals told the story of exile and destruction alongside the narratives of Creation, Exodus and future redemption. In the medieval period, lay communal leadership allied with the Rabbis. These institutions proved adequate to carry the Jewish people through two millennia.

Modernity initiated drastic changes in the Jewish condition. As modern secular culture spread among Jews, lay leadership and secular institutions (such as community centers and federations) emerged. The Holocaust and the creation of Israel supplied the decisive transformational thrust to Jewish life. God again self-limited (not intervening to stop the attempted total genocide), calling humans to a higher level of responsibility in the covenant. This development was expressed in the secular leadership — generals, pioneers, politicians — who led in the creation of the Jewish state.

In this secular age of divine hiddenness, for many secularized Jews, the Rabbis come across as speaking on a frequency to which they are no longer tuned. The synagogue space is too “visibly sacred” for them. Similarly, Jews totally integrated in contemporary cultures often experience existing Jewish leadership and institutions as too parochial, and as telling stories too distant from their own experiences. New institutions, secular and universal, yet with a much higher level of Jewish content and experience, are needed to win loyalty in the free marketplace of ideas and identities. One such institution has already come into existence: the Holocaust Memorial Center. Given the tremendous emotional impact and the challenging intellectual/spiritual/ethical force of the Shoah, established institutions alone could not communicate the event adequately. The Holocaust Memorial Center (such as Yad Vashem) emerged as a total environment in which the story could be told intellectually and experientially as one. The concept is so powerful that it works even in the form of a universal, secular, American institution — the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum — which becomes a “Jewish” institution. The Holocaust Memorial Center is barely six decades old, but it has spread to just about every major Jewish community.

The Retreat Center is the next new central institution struggling to be born. Retreat Center programs transform people’s lives. The power of the retreat is the outgrowth of the same characteristics which make day schools, camps and Israel travel and study so impactful. The Retreat Center provides a total Jewish environment. This distinctive world makes the Jewish message central and natural, rather than marginal and abnormal, as it is in the majority society setting. The program brings together charismatic Jewish role models and inspiring peers with whom one bonds and forms a living community.

Research in various fields has shown that when people are in community and in a total environment, they absorb messages much more intensely and deeply. When good, life-enriching Jewish substance is communicated through intellectual and experiential learning, the effect is electrifying. People are open to changing their life directions and priorities.

The Center does not have the inherited aura of sacredness that the synagogue does. Therefore, secular and/or distanced Jews can more easily come there and be more open to hearing messages of instruction. The well-done retreat experience has the power to create community for such people as well; the experience often raises the priority of one’s Jewish identity dramatically. Retreats can be tailored to address specific audiences (ranging from highly knowledgeable and observant to the least educated and involved), offering them unique experiences. Since the Center is a trans-denominational (or post-denominational) setting and not any one group’s turf, all types of Jews can meet there on an equal basis, which opens them up to bonding and mutual influence. Paradoxically, since the Center is not associated with inherited religious messages, it can communicate the presence of the hidden God and transmit a more universal Jewish vision with less resistance from secularized Jews.

Historically, the Jewish people successfully created the institutions it needed to transmit its values and continue its historical mission. While there are probably less than twenty dedicated Jewish retreat centers in the world, I would wager that within the century, there will be one in every major Jewish community. This generation has a once-in-a-millennia opportunity to create the new infrastructure of Jewish life, starting with the National Jewish Retreat Center.

NEW INSTITUTIONS FOR A NEW ERA OF JEWISH HISTORY

by YITZ GREENBERG

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