Synagogue Transformation: The View from 2009  
Dru Greenwood

Functional and Visionary Congregations  
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Future of the Synagogue

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The 1939 World’s Fair offered to the public the World of Tomorrow. Ironically, the exhibit did not accurately predict the future but it did say much about the present at that time, and correctly suggested that “familiarity with today is the best preparation for the future.” In similar fashion, we cannot know the synagogue of the future, but we can imagine the possibilities by understanding the present trends that are pushing on the institution.

The one certitude is that the future will be different from the present. The history of the American synagogue—the immigrant shul giving way to the urban synagogue and then the suburban “shul with a pool”—illustrates the constancy of change.\(^1\) The story of the havurah movement or Moshe House demonstrates that new organizational forms can be created for worship, study, and action.

The question about the future of the synagogue is not just about its form but its vitality. From a sociological perspective, vitality rests on the capacity of the institution to engage “twenty- and thirty-somethings.”\(^2\) They are the next generation and ipso facto it is they who will comprise the future that we are trying to predict today.

Form is a characteristic of the synagogue, a term that refers to the organization’s structure—its physical plant, professional staff, programs, governance, and all the concerns that come under the rubric of the business of the synagogue. Vitality is a characteristic of the congregation, a term that refers to the human system—the people who inhabit this place and their connections to one another.\(^3\) Along with the rabbinate, these components comprise the institution we commonly refer to as “the synagogue.” The premise here is that the future will be determined by the environmental factors affecting the

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synagogue, the socio-demographic factors affecting the congregation, and the rabbinic responses to these. Although every synagogue is subject in one way or another to these same forces, we focus here primarily on American Reform congregations.

The Changing Synagogue

Although they have been slow to recognize themselves as such, synagogues are part of the nonprofit sector. In recent years, this sector has been marked by an increasing emphasis on professionalism, efficiency, fund-raising, and competition, and these trends are unlikely to diminish in the coming years.

Faced with growing technical, legal, and operational complexity, nonprofit agencies have embraced business methods and professional management. Increasingly, they are turning from lay volunteers to professionals to direct core functions. Key among these functions is fund-raising. Pressured by organizational growth, rising costs, and cuts in public funding, nonprofits have come to appreciate the need for greater effectiveness in fund-raising and financial resource development. Their attention is turning, as well, to increased efficiency, for example, by greening the organization (both as a cost savings and as an appeal to public sentiments), establishing collaborations among smaller nonprofits, and outsourcing functions handled more efficiently elsewhere.

Within this climate, the role of lay leadership is necessarily changing. More attention is being paid to good governance, fiscal stewardship, and strategy. Importantly, board members are being asked to shift their focus from day-to-day operations to the future of the agency and its strategic direction. This shift has not come easily to synagogue boards where the organization is often seen more as “extended family” and less as not-for-profit agency. Nonetheless, the conversations suggested by this journal are exactly the kinds of conversations that smart boards are having.

Not including congregations, there are over 3.5 million charitable nonprofits in the United States and this number is growing annually. The result is increased competition in the search for professional talent, top lay leadership, and donors—all of whom have ample opportunity to give their gifts elsewhere. Difficulties in finding a qualified development director or administrator are not reflective of an inept or unlucky synagogue but of the reality affecting the entire not-for-profit sector.
Within the synagogue world we can therefore expect to see shifting lay and professional roles and expectations, increasing fundraising needs, and growing competition for talent and dollars. The successful synagogue will need to respond to these trends with good organizational and business sense.

The Changing Congregation

The synagogue is not just an operational system. It is also a deeply human system whose primary concern is its members; their Jewish lives, learning, and aspirations; and their connections to one another. Over the course of the past two generations, liberal American Jewry has become more secular and individualist in its orientation. This trend, often accompanied by low levels of Jewish education, has left young American Jews with a poor understanding of religious beliefs and ideology. Weak Judaic knowledge, values, and beliefs challenge the future vitality of the synagogue and raise the question of whether or not the rising generation will join synagogues and, if so, what kind of institution they will require.

The Knowledge Challenge

Demographic shifts over the past generation have resulted in large numbers of children being raised in intermarried families. This experience does not determine adult choices but the consequent Jewish social networks and education do. The Jewish density of an individual’s high school social network and the level of Jewish education received growing up are both strong predictors of the importance that an individual will place on being Jewish as an adult. Jewish education growing up also predicts adult Jewish behaviors, including ritual practice and synagogue affiliation.4

The greater the education through the teenage years, the greater the likelihood of joining a congregation in adulthood. The level of Jewish education among Reform-raised young adults, however, is low, both absolutely and relative to other groups. They tend to end their formal education at a young age and do not necessarily recommence Judaic learning in college. Indeed, our study of American college students found that those who consider themselves Reform Jews were the least Jewishly engaged of any group, including those with no denominational identity.5

The link between education and affiliation suggests that, unchecked, the rising generation is likely to eschew synagogue
membership and those who do join may be less ready to contribute to the Judaic richness of the congregation. This prediction is heightened by expected changes in denomination switching. Over the past generation, many raised in the Conservative movement switched into Reform congregations, adding to the membership a cadre with more intensive Jewish educational backgrounds. Given the shrinkage in the Conservative movement, this inflow is likely to slow in the future. The Reform movement will therefore need to rely even more heavily on its “homegrown” population to build its congregations.

The Values and Belief Challenge

Although much has been written about the rising generation, there is little systematic data about Jewish 20- and 30-somethings. The general rule is that Jews are just like other Americans only more secular. Whatever our analysis, we must take a strong dose of secularity as a given.

Moreover, today’s Jewish young adults are accustomed to life in a mixed society. Most grew up in religiously integrated neighborhoods and many were raised in households comprised of Jews and non-Jews. This trend is likely to continue as Jewish young adults generally have little regard for endogamy. Our research consistently finds low importance placed on marrying a Jew and even less on dating Jews. These data are consistent with the blurring we see in the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish life spaces and in the diminishing appeal of the particularistic argument of the Jewish community. When we ask young Jews what is important to them as Jews, we regularly find universalistic concerns (e.g., leading a moral and ethical life) at the top of the list and particularistic ones (e.g., engaging in Jewish prayer and study) at the bottom.

American Jewish identity today is characterized by American individualism, the “sovereign self,” and freedom of choice. For today’s young adults, “Jewish” is just one of many identities and, like the others, it moves from foreground to background as the situation dictates. The Jewish community has never been monolithic, but divisions today are not caused by splinter groups as much as by each individual designing his or her own approach to Judaism and attaching personal meaning to chosen Jewish practices.

This personalism is magnified by the fact that religious and spiritual understanding are generally very weak. People, young and old, are not doctrinaire and, indeed, they are hard pressed to articulate their beliefs, a condition common to both Jews and Americans
of other faith traditions. For the most part, discussion of denomination among Jewish young adults is as unsophisticated as their discussion of belief. They commonly conflate style with substance: No instruments means Conservative; a guitar means Reform. If denomination is a matter of style, then the lines among synagogues are surely blurring. Blurring is also seen in the creation of non-denominational minyanim on college campuses and in urban settings. Jewish summer camps often create worship services that represent a camp experience more than they do a denominational style of worship or expression of belief. Community day schools and Hebrew high schools are also creating their own hybridized brands of t’fillot. All these are signs of an awakening of new creation and a lessening of the denominations’ hold.

Given the above challenges, we can expect to see synagogues seeking ways to convince young adults that they need an institutional setting in which to enact their Judaism. Beyond attracting membership, the successful synagogue will discover how to maintain a strong Jewish core in its purpose, practice, and teaching, while at the same time integrating a young cohort that comes to the community without these same strengths.

The Successful Synagogue of the Future

The context in which synagogues operate is changing, both at the broader societal level and within American Jewry. I have indicated here a few of the trends affecting synagogue and congregation:

Synagogue
- Shifting lay and professional roles and expectations
- Increased fund-raising needs
- High competition for talent and dollars

Congregation
- Dominant values: secularism, universalism, individualism, relativism
- Low levels of education
- Weak understanding of beliefs and ideology

The leadership of the successful synagogue of the future will understand these trends and respond proactively. Its aim will be to modernize and upgrade its synagogue operations and to revitalize the congregation. These are not set goals to be achieved with a three-
year plan but are continuous efforts that define the successful synagogue.

The successful synagogue will embrace best practices in the nonprofit world and it will keep pace with these as they change. It will implement advanced systems with cutting-edge tools for budgeting, tracking donors, managing membership services, and providing accountability on all aspects of synagogue operations. It may experiment with new models of efficiency and effectiveness. For example, rather than running its own school, it might outsource education to local colleges or private vendors who can provide congregation-based educational programs. It might cooperate with other synagogues in the community, bundling program, service, and operational needs to achieve greater cost efficiency. It will raise its budget line for salaries in order to compete for the managerial talent needed to upgrade the workings of the synagogue.

The successful synagogue will take fund-raising seriously. It will figure out how to “make the case” for support and it will engage professional and lay leadership in carrying the message. And it will reset the rules and expectations for board membership. Most importantly, board meetings will no longer be dominated by committee reports of work done, but will focus largely on the future direction of the organization. The discussions suggested by this volume will be taking place in the synagogue boardroom.

The successful synagogue will respond to the shifting values of American Jewry without relinquishing its own values. For example, it may respond to pervasive personalism by offering services that suit the individual needs of its members. To do so, it might engage life coaches, educational counselors, tutors, and others to fill yet-to-be-invented positions. Importantly, the work of these service providers will be grounded in Jewish understanding and purpose. In order to maintain its own core value of community, the synagogue might reconceptualize itself not as a singular congregation that gathers together a few times a year but as a network in which members attach to and connect with their own niche group in the organization (i.e., network node) on a regular basis.

The synagogue’s greatest challenge, perhaps, will be to steer the waters of particularism and universalism. Jewish organizations, most of which are no longer 100% Jewish, are expected to be sensitive to and inclusive of a diverse population. The successful synagogue will be a place where everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike, feels comfortable and at home. It will have a message that it is relevant to
the concerns of its members, not just as Jews but as citizens. American Jews understand that today’s problems will not be repaired by the Jews alone and that mere articulation of Jewish values is an inadequate response to social needs. The model may come from the synagogue. It may adopt the model of the Jewish advocacy organizations that have long understood the importance of supporting other groups’ interests as they promote their own Jewish interests.

The successful synagogue will understand the proclivities of Jewish young adults and will invest wisely in efforts to draw the rising generation into synagogue life. In his study of 20- and 30-somethings, Wuthnow attempts to prognosticate the future of the church by considering the preferences of young adults. He finds no evidence of a preference for mini- or mega-churches but does find a desire for a sense of community. He also finds no special attraction to alternative, contemporary services, which seem to appeal more to 40-somethings than to this younger cohort. If his findings extend to young Jews, then the future synagogue will not necessarily be of a certain size nor will it necessarily be an extension of current experimentation in worship services. The successful synagogue will, however, confront the inarticulateness of belief and ideology. It will reinvent its worship, drawing material and inspiration from different denominations or from no denomination at all. And it will certainly build relationships within the congregational network that ward off what Wuthnow refers to as the “fear of sitting alone.”

There are two premises underlying these predictions. One is that the movements, the educational institutions, and the philanthropists who support the work of the Jewish community will renew their efforts to make serious Jewish education a normative part of the upbringing of liberal American Jews. Our analysis makes clear that level of education growing up is a critical ingredient for adult engagement in synagogue life. The synagogues alone cannot readdress the current situation.

The second premise is that rabbis will be ready to lead the synagogue into the future. In the past generation, the role of the rabbi has become more complex and the seminaries are now creating new curricula to respond to a changing world. A multiple skill set that covers the concerns of both synagogue and congregation—the organization and the people—is now mandatory for success. The new requirements are likely to affect who is attracted to rabbinical school and who of the ordained chooses pulpit positions. They will also
affect what synagogues are looking for in their rabbi and how the relationship grows between the rabbi and his/her congregation.

Synagogues most certainly will change over the next generation. Their strength will reside in how they deal with the issues of synagogue and their vitality will reside in how they respond to the challenges of congregation. Success rests on the capacity of synagogue leadership to step back from daily operations in order to take a thoughtful and creative look at the future that will soon arrive.

Notes


