THE SYNAGOGUE'S EVOLVING MISSION

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less influential in most communities. The loss of central place cannot be minimized. Neighborhood encompasses a concept that includes family, friends, institutions, stores, and both formal and informal interactions between people. Jewish communities have defined and reinforced themselves in spatial relationships. The Jewish neighborhood of the past, both real and mythical, tended to bind Jews more than the contemporary distribution of suburban sprawl, intercity anonymity, or the general dispersion of Jews among multiple enclaves within a metropolitan area. While Jews are not distributed at random in metropolitan areas and tend to cluster somewhat, the nature of the ways that cities are now constituted and the distribution of Jews within those cities inhibits a sense of community that comes from greater density within a Jewish neighborhood. Neighbors also help to define social contacts. These contacts include both adults and children and can be largely, or almost entirely, Jewish or non-Jewish.

Not only do more Jews no longer live in a Jewish neighborhood, fewer and fewer have ties to old world traditions and memories. Yiddishkeit, a sense of old world “soul,” has all but vanished for most third- and fourth-generation Jews. Contemporary Jews are more likely to have common bonds with individuals in similar occupational or regional settings than with fellow Jews. Their memory of Yiddishkeit comes mainly through film and historical accounts rather than from first-hand experiences.

There are now few commonly practiced rituals. For example, most Jews do not keep kosher or light Shabbat candles. Religion has become more episodic; a seasonal attendance at synagogue, and more intense attention when children are bar/bat mitzvah. While most Jews still receive some formal Jewish education, still attend synagogue occasionally, and still are likely to observe Passover and Hanukkah, religion may be part of, but not a way of, life for most American Jews.

There have been a number of cultural factors that have affected affiliation as well. A growing trend to consumerism where individuals shop for congregations as they shop for other consumer goods, including organizations and institutions, affects synagogue affiliation and loyalty to the institution. Individuals are more likely to drop or join the synagogue depending on their own particular needs or the needs of their family. The institution is viewed as a service to the individual rather than a communal obligation. Cultural consumerism is combined with an overall movement among Jews as well as other Americans away from organizations. Other studies have shown that congregations in general, especially when they are larger and seem more corporate in nature, tend to discourage a number of individuals from affiliating or participating. The overall loss of authority of organized religion also has some cultural influence. Individuals may feel no particular need to join the synagogue and it may have no legitimacy or authority in their everyday lives. This lack of authority and legitimacy may also encourage individuals to drop their membership at any given time. They may feel no communal or other sanctions from their decision to disaffiliate.

These contextual changes have also been accompanied by an evolution in the composition of the Jewish family. Jews marry later, and are single longer. Jewish singles are far less likely to participate in synagogue life. Jewish women are far more likely to be labor force participants and less likely to have time to volunteer. Divorce and remarriage are commonplace. Families are in constant transition, and blended families, those where remarriage has taken place, comprise a more common family type. The extended family, along with the nuclear family, has been scattered as people migrate from one community to another, and Florida and other Sunbelt communities burgeon with retirees from the Midwest, the Northeast, and other parts of the Northern United States. Not only are these migrants snowbirds, they are also absentee grandparents.
Compared to other religious groups, American Jews tend to be “unchurched.”

A minority of Jewish households are affiliated with a synagogue; however, six out of ten Jewish adults have been members of Jewish religious congregations at some point in their adult lives.³ This implies that 21 percent of Jewish adults have been members of synagogues at some point in their adult lives, but have dropped out from synagogue life. Put another way, 35 percent of people who ever affiliated with Jewish congregations became synagogue dropouts. In sum, four out of ten Jewish adults say that they currently belong to a synagogue, two out of ten have previously been members of synagogues during their adult life, and four out of ten have never been members of Jewish religious congregations as adults.

Some factors that are negatively associated with synagogue affiliation are becoming more widespread. For example, current synagogue affiliation is considerably lower in the South and West than the Midwest and Northeast. Jews have experienced a regional shift, as have other Americans, with increasing proportions of Jews living in the South and West as opposed to the Midwest and Northeast. As Jews continue to relocate from the Northeast and Midwest, the dropout rate should continue to increase if the institutional status quo is maintained.

In terms of attendance at organized Jewish religious services, American Jews can be divided into four groups: 19 percent say that they never attend religious services, 23 percent claim that they only attend on special occasions related to ri–als of passage — bar/bat mitzvah, wedding, etc. — or once or twice a year, 33 percent attend on the High Holidays or a few times a year, and another 25 percent attend at least once a month or more often.

Studies show that NRReligion is a relatively low priority for American Jews, who lag behind the general population in membership in a congregation, worship attendance and the importance —ey place on religion in their lives.”⁴ National polls conducted in 1986-1988 indicated that while 55 percent of all Americans say that religion is “very important” in their lives, only 30 percent of American Jews make this statement. Conversely, one-third of American Jews (35 percent) say that religion is not very important in their lives, compared to only 14 percent of the general population.

THE PURPOSES OF THE SYNAGOGUE

The building of Jewish community of the future requires redefinition of community and how the synagogue relates to this new community. To rethink community, the mission of the synagogue must be reexamined, as well as the institutional and social structure of the synagogue, the kinds of activities within and outside the synagogue, and the way that the synagogue conducts its activities.

Redefinitions have to take place within the context of the synagogue’s weakened bonds

³ The NJPS included the following question: “Aside from membership your parents may have had, since you have been grown have you ever belonged to a synagogue or temple?”
they can express Jewish values as well as learn about them.

Fifth, the synagogue should play the role of either an extended or a nuclear family for many Jews. Since Jews are now dispersed all over North America — their families are often broken or they have not even begun to build their own families — the synagogue should serve the function of the family. Passover seders, communal holidays, making sure that congregants visit people who are hospitalized, and the other essential roles of the family need to be fulfilled in part by the synagogue. It needs to be a warm and nurturing institution that helps people, especially in the transitional times of their lives.

Sixth, the synagogue must be a place of worship where Jews can feel their connection to God. It must provide a spiritual setting and atmosphere where Jews can express themselves and think about their relationship with God; a comfortable place for them to pray. It cannot be assumed that because the synagogue has a sanctuary, Jews necessarily feel it is a place of worship. Developing a greater sense of the synagogue as a place of prayer is critical for its future.

While the synagogue serves communal, educational and group-building functions, its most important function remains communal worship. The intrinsic value of the synagogue as a gathering place for Jews to engage in communal worship cannot be substituted by any other Jewish institution. While religious services may be held in other locations, or communal worship may take place in individuals’ homes or in other settings, the organizational structure of the synagogue remains central to the communal worship of the Jewish community. Aside from whatever benefits derive from the organizational and institutional structure of the synagogue, a gathering place where Jews find unique collective expression in their relationship to God reinforces the importance of synagogue affiliation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Many synagogues may serve some of the purposes outlined above, and many may serve some of the functions outlined as well. These functions, if fulfilled to some extent, need to be expanded. It must be remembered that the vast majority of Jews do not belong to a synagogue, and most do not actively participate. Therefore, synagogues are far from achieving community goals.

Perhaps the position of the synagogue would be improved if the synagogue attempted more to influence contextual factors. The synagogue might be a place, for example, where single Jews would meet to find marriage partners. If the synagogue could serve this function of creating new Jewish families, then in some sense it would create future constituencies. Perhaps the synagogue should adapt its education curriculum and aim to increase the number of 18 to 30-year-olds who attend. Such individuals would then be more likely to have active involvement in the Jewish community as a whole and in the synagogue in particular. Synagogues can facilitate trips to Israel, improve the quality of Jewish education, and provide programs for Jews to meet other Jews. Perhaps the strategic location of satellite synagogues in locations in low density suburbs could provide an institution around which Jews could make locational decisions. Perhaps synagogues can, as in the Orthodox community, anchor particular communities. Serving as a communal-based institution can strengthen the vitality of the Jewish family.

All of these ultimately are contextual factors that are not outside the institutional power of the synagogue. Altogether, the internal restructuring of the synagogue can influence the immediate membership and have a long-term positive effect on the contextual factors as a whole. Given affiliation as a vital and intrinsic value to the
Many professional roles have to evolve differently. It means that the rabbis reassert their role as teachers. They become the great facilitators for all of the laity to become theologians. It means that if the clergy are the teachers and the laity are the theologians, that lay/professional roles begin to shift, how services are conducted. To have rabbis playing traditional, pastoral, ministerial roles in a model that is outmoded in 1993 limits the ability of the institution to change.

The sense of congregant control and the level of democracy in the synagogue also is an institutional factor that may attract or deter potential affiliation. With the growing culture of individual empowerment and greater levels of participation, individuals may or may not join a synagogue depending on whether they feel integrated into its decision-making processes and part of the overall decision-making process to guide the synagogue. Others, of course, may want no part in these processes. The synagogue must provide a sense of control to some subgroups who otherwise may not want to be part of the institution.

The board and committee structures of the synagogue need to have a much more creative purpose and to be learning experiences in themselves. The board and committee structures generally serve the institution, and not well, and not the community of Jews as they should. Boards are far more likely to spend inordinate amounts of time debating whether or not to fix the roof or the heating system than they are about the essential mission of the synagogue. Utilizing intellectual and spiritual resources in that way is wasteful, and leaves the synagogue's progress to non-deliberative processes.

The same may be said for whether or not the synagogue is family oriented or presents a family feeling. Since one of the central roles of the institution is to provide support beyond family or clan, or in addition to family and clan, the extent to which the institution serves the individual or the family may have a great deal to do with its stability or growth.

Given the essential mission of the synagogue as a place of worship, a very critical examination of worship services is necessary at both the national and local level. If the synagogue holds the unique place in the constellation of Jewish organizations and agencies and institutions as a house of worship, and this purpose is to be a primary reason for people to join and a primary reason for people to stay affiliated, then worship services must be interesting, fulfilling, or provide some personal meaning or purpose or gratification that is not likely to be achieved elsewhere. If worship services do not meet the expectations and needs of many Jews, then the ability of the synagogue to fulfill its central mission is limited. While liturgies undergo change, a more radical examination of how services are conducted, the content, and whether or not they are a primary motivator for synagogue membership needs to be explored.

The synagogue needs to be decentralized. The larger the synagogue the greater the need for decentralization. The synagogue should be the sponsoring institution for using knowledgeable congregants and rotating them among other congregants to teach them how to observe Shabbat in their homes. The synagogue should be the institution that takes Jewish education into a variety of venues for those who cannot or will not come to the synagogue itself.

Decentralizing the synagogue also means disaggregating services. Disaggregating services means that on any given Shabbat, multiple services should be taking place. As the laity becomes theologians and becomes empowered to conduct their own services, ten services of 30 people each in services designed for specific needs and purposes, rather than with one service of a hundred. People meet and operate better in small groups, and they have a variety of needs and worship services must reflect those different needs.

If worship services are decentralized, it will involve developing different liturgies, and
to reach most other constituencies may be limited.

Jews almost exclusively define outreach as meaning Jews reaching out to non-Jews who are married to Jews. Other religious groups define outreach as evangelism, witnessing the Gospel, expanding the role of the church in helping others find God. Outreach is often defined as meeting the human needs of the community surrounding the church, reaching out to the community to minister to the poor. Outreach is defined as reaching solidarity with the disadvantaged, or recruitment to become a full congregational member.

Synagogues define congregational growth as more dues-paying members to the congregation. Growth can also mean an increase in the spiritual life of the congregation, or an increase in the rate of the people who join worship services. An increase in the human resources available to the congregation to serve the community, or an increase in the number of members who have a deeper faith in God, an increase in the number of programs that serve the congregation and the general community, an increase in the number of members who have a deeper faith in God, an increase in the number of programs that serve the congregation and the general community, an increase in the understanding of the meaning of faith, an increase in the number who study and learn at the church. All are other possible definitions.

Synagogues classify the unaffiliated the same way they classify non-membership. The unaffiliated are those who do not pay dues to a congregation. The unaffiliated, for some other religious groups in America, is defined as those who have no faith or whose denominational allegiance lapsed, those who participate in the organization but are not members. Someone is unaffiliated if they have not worshipped in the past two years, or who claims no allegiance to a distinctive denomination.

Jews may perceive themselves as being "not religious, " and therefore potentially inappropriate for membership in a religious institution. Although many such self-proclaimed secularists may in fact have highly developed moral codes and spiritual sensibilities, they may not perceive the synagogue as providing a forum for the expression of their spirituality and morality. They may not consider themselves to be non-members.

Social factors also may play an extremely important role. Non-members may have perceptions of cliquishness or unfriendliness in synagogues. Persons who do not join synagogues sometimes perceive the religious institution as being a closed social circle. What can be done to create an image of synagogues as more warm, welcoming, and socially supportive places to gather.

CONCLUSION

The synagogue cannot be separated from the community. Synagogues must abandon their rigid definition of membership. The synagogue cannot look at everybody "out there" as the non participants, the unaffiliated, the non-member, the non-belonger, not paying their dues, not supporting the institution. The majority of Jews do not belong to a synagogue. For the synagogue to be differentiated from the community of Jews as a whole connotes an "us and them" mentality that keeps the synagogue from being a true communal institution.

To redefine community, the synagogue's purpose is to be the central institutional presence in Jewish life. The synagogue's duty is to build community whether or not people pay dues. Every Jew in the community is a member of the synagogue. The task is to determine how to increase participation, how to increase and identify as active participants, and how to eventually also elicit financial support, volunteering, and
supporting the community. Rethinking membership is a first step to building the community and breaking down the artificial walls that are built between the synagogue and the community.

The synagogue must address these complex issues. If the synagogue is genuinely a place where Jews can experience Judaism, develop, and learn about Jewish life, they can make the synagogue experience a center for tzedakah, the performance of mitzvot, and a place to commune with God. Affiliation and participation in synagogues will then likely grow, and with it the quality of Jewish life. The synagogue must be a place where faith is transmitted, where Jews grapple with the concept of goodness, and where they contemplate life and death. Only then can the synagogue fulfill its essential mission in Jewish life. If the synagogue fails to fulfill its mission, then the quality of Jewish life is in doubt. A revitalized and vibrant synagogue community must be at the core of a genuine, creative expansion of American Judaism.