

Synagogues, True and False: Thoughts for Parashat Aharei Mot, April 12, 2014

[View PDF](#)

By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In writing about the sin of Nadav and Avihu which led to their tragic deaths, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila of the Sephardic Education Center offered these comments:

“Synagogues that are desperate to ‘draw in the big crowd’ will resort to anything these days. In recent months, I have seen advertisements for "Buddhist Shabbat Meditation Services" and "Gospel Shabbat Concerts...." What can we say about this growing - and in my opinion disturbing -- phenomenon in the Jewish world? Perhaps we have, in fact, failed to make a compelling case for ‘old school’ Jewish tradition; but are these wild, quick fix alternatives really the answer to our problems? Is the introduction of Buddhism, Gospel choirs... or any other ‘esh zara’ into our services the only way to infuse new meaning into tradition? Do those who lead or attend such spins on Jewish spirituality actually feel that they are participating in something with Jewish meaning?”

Except among the religiously observant Orthodox Jews, participation in synagogue services has shown steady decline. Jews are among the least likely Americans to attend religious services at least once a week. The only group scoring lower consists of those who identify as atheists. (And I suspect that some of these are also Jews!)

In order to attract Jews back into synagogues, different strategies have been proposed. Rabbi Bouskila describes some of the most outlandish attempts to pander to the crowd. But there are so many less egregious examples of bringing “strange fires” into synagogue life. The common denominator of these strategies is that they seek external popularity rather than Torah holiness; glitz rather than sanctity; superficiality rather than Jewish authenticity. Even if such strategies appear to work in the short run by attracting a few more people into synagogues, they are ultimately self-destructive. You can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool most people most of the time. People will realize that synagogues are offering substitutions for Judaism, and not Judaism itself. If they want entertainment, they can find better entertainment elsewhere. If they’re

looking for comedy shows, they can find comedy clubs elsewhere. If they want Buddhist or Gospel experiences, they can find these more authentically in other precincts.

Synagogues exist in order to serve as spiritual homes for Jews. Their primary function must be to enhance spirituality, holiness, communal righteousness. Prayer services should be inspiring; we should all walk out of a prayer service feeling elevated. Study sessions should be intellectually vibrant, generating discussion and honest interaction among participants. After attending a sermon, shiur or class, we should feel wiser than we were before we attended. We need serious content, real learning, thought-provoking discussion.

While these goals may seem too high for the “masses,” they are not too high at all. Everyone who enters the synagogue for prayer or study will know in advance that this is an institution that believes in its message, that offers authenticity rather than superficiality. If synagogues have integrity as bastions of Jewish tradition, they have the possibility of touching people’s souls, minds and hearts. If they lack integrity as Jewish religious centers, they are forsaking their *raison d’etre*.

I am not a follower of Chabad Hassidism but I cannot help but be impressed with their outreach work. Chabad emissaries are present throughout the world, in large and small Jewish communities. Chabad centers are found on nearly 200 American college campuses. Chabad houses provide prayer, classes, nursery schools, social services...and more. This Hassidic movement raises huge sums of money and reaches vast numbers of Jews.

What is the secret of their success? Why does this Hassidic group—seemingly so removed from the modern lifestyles of most Jews—enjoy so much support and participation?

I think the answer is: Chabad has a clear mission and a clear focus. Its goal is to bring Torah to as many Jews as possible. While Chabad offers a range of programs, it does not dilute its message or its mission. It never forgets its identity.

There is a lesson to be learned from Chabad: there is no substitute for passionate, self-sacrificing commitment to Torah and mitzvot. While Chabad promotes Judaism according to its vision of Judaism, the rest of the Jewish community needs to promote their visions of Judaism with equal passion, self-sacrifice and authenticity. If synagogues lose their own sense of identity and mission, they will

also continue to lose members. Introducing “strange fires” is a recipe for failure. Only the most gullible and superficial people will be attracted to inauthentic religion; and even they will eventually grow tired of spiritual mediocrity.

It would be desirable—essential—for each congregation to do serious soul-searching. What is its mission? What kind of services and programming are true to its mission, and what are diversions from its mission? What creative ideas can be implemented that will attract more participation and more meaningful participation—without diluting the Jewish character of the congregation?

Judaism has thousands of years of history, tradition and wisdom. Each congregation can surely find sources of strength and blessing within a Jewish religious framework. If we can bring energy and enthusiasm to our mission, we can progress. If we remain devoted to our core mission, we can attract others. If we take our synagogues seriously as houses of prayer, study and righteousness, we can move ahead.

“Strange fires” are self-destructive. The fire of authentic religious commitment brings warmth and light.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)