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By

Rabbi Marc D. Angel

National polls conducted by the Gallup Organization report that, of all religious groupings in the United States, Jews are least likely to attend public worship at least once a week. The only group scoring lower than Jews consists of atheists, agnostics or those with no religious affiliation!

Less than 15 percent of the Jewish community attends synagogue services weekly. When the Gallup poll is adjusted to exclude Orthodox Jews who attend synagogue more regularly, it turns out that less than 5 percent of all other Jews attend weekly synagogue services.

Many reasons are offered to explain this disturbing alienation of American Jews from their synagogues: increasing secularization; decreasing religious observance; the high cost of synagogue affiliation; low levels of Hebrew proficiency among most American Jews; the lack of spirituality in many synagogues...and many other such explanations.

People who do not attend synagogue seem to feel no lack in their lives. Indeed, a recent Gallup poll found that Jews have the greatest sense of personal wellbeing among all American religious denominations. Masses of Jews do not connect to weekly worship—and yet they feel good about their lives.

Yet, a significant and growing number of Jews is attending synagogue more often, more enthusiastically, and more meaningfully. Many of these are Orthodox Jews, for whom religious worship is a basic necessity of spiritual life. It would be unthinkable for observant Jews to absent themselves from public prayer. Others are spiritual seekers who want religious fellowship in their confrontation with the Almighty. They may or may not be Orthodox Jews, but they have a religious craving that seeks to flourish within a community. It’s not enough to have private moments of spiritual reflection; a communal structure provides a strong, steady framework for spiritual growth.

While we certainly must address reasons why so many Jews are disconnected from regular worship, we should pay attention to why so many Jews are increasingly seeking communal settings in which to express their religious devotion.

A good synagogue is not merely a place to recite one's prayers. A good synagogue is a community. It brings together like-minded people who want to come before God as a Jewish community; who want to study Torah together; who want to share their lives with others; who want to strengthen, console, help each other. A good synagogue is a community that includes old and young, men and women--that engages the minds, hearts and souls of congregants. A good synagogue is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, and deeply committed to the Jewish future.

Dr. David Pelcovitz recently lectured at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. He reported on something he had learned about growing date trees! A farmer explained that a date tree that grows alone generally does not produce sweet dates. Rather, date trees do best when in a grove. The root systems of the trees form a network that strengthens each tree. Date trees that grow in groves, near other date trees, produce sweet dates. The trees are healthier and more productive.

The Psalmist wrote: "a righteous person flourishes like a date tree." The analogy is clear: a righteous person—like a date tree—is able to flourish when one has a network, when one is strengthened by and gives strength to others. An individual's spirituality is enhanced and sweetened by ongoing interrelationships with a community of spiritual seekers.

The Torah portion of the week focuses on the rituals and worship in the Mishkan among the ancient Israelites. It underscores the value of personal spiritual development within the context of a communal setting. We come before God not merely as lone individuals, but as members of a community. We are concerned not merely with our own personal spirituality, but with being part of a religious community that draws on its traditions, that serves all its members, that creates a healthy and meaningful framework for future generations.

So many Jews—for so many reasons—have disconnected themselves from regular synagogue worship. Our hope is that they find their way back to the synagogue. Our responsibility is to invite them back, listen to them, share with them. By re-connecting with synagogue communities, they not only strengthen and sweeten their own lives, but they add strength and sweetness to our synagogues and to our future generations.

Angel for Shabbat