The Ins and Outs of Synagogue Life: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash, December 31, 2011

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In their fascinating book, “American Grace,” Professors David Campbell and Robert Putnam report on the state of religion in America. Based on comprehensive surveys and interviews across the country, they found that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe in God and identify themselves with a religious tradition. For religious Americans, this is pleasing news.

Yet, the book also includes some unsettling information. The number of Americans who list themselves as “Nones”—i.e. those who do not identify with any religion—has become the fastest-growing religious demographic. Roughly 12% of Americans claim that they have no religious affiliation. Among younger Americans, that number rises to about 25%.Only a small percentage of those who list themselves as “Nones” are actually atheists. Most consider themselves to be spiritual human beings who believe in God or in some higher power, with only a small percentage who claim to be atheists.

The question arises: why have these “Nones” dropped out of formal religious affiliation?

Campbell and Putnam suggest that public discourse in America has mixed politics and religion so thoroughly, that many choose to opt out of both. Others have suggested that the secularized intelligentsia of America constantly speak disparagingly of religion and of God; this impacts especially on university students who are subject to indoctrination by left-leaning, anti-establishment, anti-religious professors.

Other factors may play a role in the alienation of a growing number of Americans from religious institutions: corruption of religious leaders; hypocrisy of religious spokespeople; self-righteous attitudes by this or that religious denomination; the bureaucracy of religious movements/institutions; church/synagogue politics and infighting; the expense of formal affiliation; the spiritual irrelevance of various forms of worship; etc.

The issue of “Nones” relates to the Jewish community as to other religious groupings. We need to examine why Jews would willingly abandon their synagogues. Aside from reasons offered above for general disaffiliation, perhaps we can derive some insight from a rabbinic teaching relating to this week’s Torah reading.

When Jacob and family began their sojourn to Egypt, the Torah reports that Jacob sent his son Judah ahead. The Midrash (Bereishith Rabba 95:3) suggests that Judah was tasked with setting up a meeting place where the family could gather to study Torah.

According to this Midrash, Jacob knew that the destiny of his family did not only depend on the food to be obtained in Egypt, but on the spiritual sustenance of the family’s religious traditions. He sent Judah ahead, so that when the family arrived in Egypt they would immediately find a framework for the continuation of their spiritual lives.
The meeting place established by Judah was to provide the family with constant religious guidance. The purpose of that meeting place was to inspire, to encourage, to console—to bring people into a closer relationship with the Almighty. Those who gathered there would gain spiritual strength; they would maintain good morale and proper morals.

This model continues to be relevant today. We build synagogues as meeting places where we can all come together for Torah instruction and inspiration, for prayer and spiritual elevation. We want—and desperately need—our synagogues to be powerful bastions of religious ideas and values. We want our synagogues to raise our spirits and raise our understanding; we want our synagogues to inspire us to righteous living and social justice.

If a synagogue (or any religious institution) loses sight of its raison d’etre, it becomes an artificial construct. Religious institutions can become so involved in the mundane aspects of running a “business” that their core ideas and mission are marginalized. People seem more concerned with the perpetuation of the synagogue organization than on the teachings for which the synagogue was established in the first place. When “organized” religion becomes overly “organized”—it runs the risk of losing its soul. When it loses its soul, it should not be surprised if people will opt out—and will become “Nones”.

Each Jewish congregation would do well to think very carefully about its mission, its traditions, its responsibilities, its challenges. While it is highly important to have meetings about repairing the synagogue’s roof and planning the annual

dinner, it is also highly important to have meetings to explore why we exist in the first place. How can we transform our synagogue by focusing on its role as a meeting place for Torah study and meaningful prayer? How can we transform our lives by engaging in acts of kindness, charity and social justice? How can the synagogue be that central place where we can come to find enlightenment, inspiration, communal belonging?

For most of us, synagogue affiliation is rightly an important part of our lives. But for a growing number of “Nones”, the synagogue is increasingly irrelevant. The vast majority of “Nones” seem to be spiritually alive and in search of religious meaning. If synagogues can re-focus on their core missions and can communicate their ideas and ideals to the wider community, we can hope that our synagogues will not only serve us better, but will also attract seekers who are looking for something authentic and meaningful.

Our forefather Jacob understood that his family needed a meeting place in order to maintain and enhance their spiritual lives. We need to understand the need for our synagogues to play this role in our lives today.

Synagogues don’t exist merely to perpetuate themselves; they exist to fill our spiritual needs, to foster our religious aspirations, to make us better human beings.

Angel for Shabbat