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By

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My dear and respected friend, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo, recently wrote an article about the "relocation" of God. Here is an excerpt from that article.

"Synagogues – whether Orthodox, Conservative or Reform – are no longer His primary residence. Surely some of the worshippers are pious people who try to communicate with their Creator, but overall, the majority of these places have become religiously sterile and spiritually empty. So God is moving to unconventional minyanim and places such as Israeli cafes, debating clubs, community centers, unaffiliated religious gatherings, and atypical batei midrash. The reason is obvious. In some of those places people are actually looking for Him. And that is what He loves; not those who have already found Him and take Him for granted. He is moving in with the young people who have a sense that He is there but cannot yet find Him."

While I believe that mainstream synagogues continue to be "God's residence" and continue to play a vital role in contemporary religious life, I think Rabbi Cardozo touches on an important reality.

Why have growing numbers of thoughtful and spiritual people turned away from "establishment" synagogues?

Here are some possible reasons.

Mainstream synagogues are often perceived as being run by a small clique of wealthy "machers", more interested in promoting their egotistical aims than in worrying about the spiritual needs of the community. Synagogues seem, to many, to have turned into businesses--mainly concerned with meeting budgets, increasing memberships, and fundraising. While these are certainly important concerns, what about the synagogue's soul? Why does the synagogue exist in the first place? What is the spiritual agenda? While budgetary goals are spelled out, spiritual goals are generally neglected. So why would spiritually sensitive people want to be swallowed up in this "business"?

Mainstream synagogues often measure success or failure in terms of quantity rather than quality. A synagogue is deemed "successful" if it fills seats at services and events, even if these services and events are religiously sterile. Yet, spiritual souls are often most comfortable in services and classes that allow them to

transcend themselves, to learn, to grow. Why would thoughtful, spiritual people be attracted to an institution that focuses so much energy on quantity, and so little energy on real quality?

Mainstream synagogues often want rabbis who can raise money and get new members. The rabbis are, in effect, salesmen--whose success or failure is measured by how many dollars they produce and how many seats they can fill. What spiritually sensitive person wants such a rabbi? What self-respecting rabbi would allow himself to be marketed in this way?

Vaclav Havel wisely advised: "Seek the company of those who are searching for the truth, and avoid those who have found it." The "establishment" seems to be composed of those who have found the truth, or who don't really care much about the truth. The synagogues run services like clockwork, sometimes more meaningfully conducted, sometimes less so. People who are spiritually alive are looking for religious vitality, for a sense of striving. In many synagogues, though, they get services by hazzanim interested in showing off their voices; or by laymen whose mastery and understanding of the liturgy is less than scintillating.

I have been a rabbi in a mainstream Orthodox synagogue for nearly 44 years. I can testify to the tremendous impact of such synagogues on the lives of so many people. I can testify to the beautiful souls who really pray, who really study Torah with purity. I can testify to the sense of communal solidarity that is formed among religiously-alive congregants.

But I can also testify, based on my years of interaction with many rabbis and synagogues, that the "establishment" is indeed at risk of losing its soul, its raison d'etre. Rabbi Cardozo is not wrong when he points to synagogues as being religiously sterile and spiritually empty.

When concluding this week’s Torah portion, which completes the reading of the book of Bemidbar, many congregations have the custom of calling out: Hazak Ve-Nithazak. Let us be strong and let us strengthen each other. We have completed one cycle of Torah readings, and now we want to encourage ourselves to continue to study Torah and to grow in our religious wisdom and sensitivity. Is this chant of Hazak Ve-Nithazak merely a rote recital, or do we mean it?

Will our mainstream synagogues revitalize themselves by once again becoming spiritual centers for those searching for authentic Jewish religiosity? Will they once again focus on quality of spiritual experience rather than on quantity of dollars? Will they once again become the gathering place for Jews who are

searching for truth, for God?

Or has the soul of our synagogues already been sold away? Are the p.r. oriented "machers" going to continue to drive spiritually sensitive people away?

Hazak Ve-Nithazak. Let us be strong and let us strengthen each other. Our synagogues are too important for us to allow them to self-destruct.

Angel for Shabbat