Paying to Pray? An Ongoing Dilemma for Synagogues

View PDF



Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and editor of its journal, Conversations. He is Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Manhattan, where he began serving in September 1969

Over the years, I have received bitter notes from people who strongly object to synagogues charging high prices for seats during the High Holy Days. They have also expressed displeasure with the high cost of synagogue membership dues.

Shouldn't all Jews who wish to pray be allowed to do so without having to pay premium prices? Does it seem ethical for synagogues to "sell seats" for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? Doesn't this process diminish the sanctity and idealism of synagogues?

Yes, these criticisms certainly seem valid. In an ideal world, synagogues would not "sell tickets" or charge expensive dues for membership.

But we do not live in an ideal world, at least not yet.

Synagogues need funds in order to maintain their buildings; to pay their rabbis and synagogue staff; to provide services to members and the community at large. Synagogues invariably operate with deficits, often very severe deficits. They depend almost entirely on the voluntary dues and contributions of members, but these dues and contributions fall short of the synagogues' expenses.

How are synagogues to exist if they lack adequate financial support?

They can cut down on services; they can cut down on staff; they can cut salaries. Yes, but then they will be unable to be of maximum service to their constituents.

People will complain that their synagogues do not provide them with enough services to warrant their support; so the synagogues will have even less income and provide even less services.

Synagogues can (and often do) depend on the generosity of a few wealthy individuals who contribute large amounts. Because of these generous contributions, people with lesser means are able to be members or attend services at relatively low cost to themselves. But synagogues cannot forever depend on a few philanthropists; they need a larger constituency of people who contribute as generously as their means allow.

Many people expect synagogues and rabbis to be available to them, but are not willing or able to contribute to maintain the synagogues. They expect that other people will do this for them.

I know from personal experience that many synagogues are quite sympathetic to those who are in financial straits; they provide membership at greatly reduced, or at no cost; they provide seats for the Holy Days at low, or no, cost.

I also know from personal experience that many synagogues are unhappy with those who have financial means, but who do not share in supporting synagogues through their membership dues and contributions. Some people will have no problem spending several hundred dollars for an evening out at a restaurant or for theater tickets, but will complain bitterly if the synagogue asks them for a few hundred dollars for a seat in the sanctuary for the holidays. Some people will spend thousands of dollars on vacations, summer homes etc.; but are offended if synagogues charge a few thousand dollars for dues.

In an ideal world, all Jews would support synagogues to the best of their ability. If this happened, there would be no synagogue deficits, no “selling tickets” for the Holy Days, and no expensive membership dues.

But we do not live in such an ideal world. Synagogues need financial solvency, and they spend a good deal of time and energy coming up with fund-raising strategies. It is a real pity that synagogues need to conduct “appeals,” and “seat sales” and other events to raise funds. It would be so much nicer if they simply had enough support from the community without needing such fund-raising tactics.

There are synagogues that provide free or low cost services for the High Holy Days. Most synagogues will make accommodations for those who cannot afford the cost of tickets. No one should feel precluded from praying in a synagogue on

the High Holy Days, or any day of the year due to financial considerations.

As long as synagogues need to “sell tickets” for the High Holy Days, we know that the Messiah has not yet arrived. We know that our system is imperfect, even unpleasant. But the only way to move closer to the ideal is for each Jew to take personal responsibility for the maintenance and flourishing of our synagogues.