Letting God In

View PDF



Dr. Adena K. Berkowitz is the co-author, together with Rivka Haut of Shaarei Simcha, Gates of Joy, a mini-siddur and the first liturgical work written in the modern era by Orthodox women. Adena is co-founder and co-director of Kol HaNeshamah: The Center for Jewish Life and Enrichment, which is dedicated to re-energizing the spiritual life of both affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. A visiting lecturer at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, she lives in New York with her husband and five children. This article appears in issue 19 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In responding to Rabbi Cardozo's provocative and thoughtful piece, I keep coming back to an old joke: Yankel moves to a new neighborhood. He starts going to the largest and richest synagogue in town and soon wants to join. However every time he tries to become a member, he is told he hasn't been in town long enough; he won't fit in; he won't feel comfortable. Finally in desperation he cries out to God. Dear God, I have been trying for so long to join that synagogue and they won't let me in. To which God replies, don't feel bad, they don't let me in either!

That joke must be at least 60 years old and goes back to a time when in American Jewish history everyone was banging down the door to become synagogue members. Whether because Jews in newly formed suburbs saw their Christian neighbors going to church and felt synagogue going would make them fit into the American milieu; whether they were returning veterans reconnecting with their "*pintele yid*" after seeing the devastation of the Holocaust; or the pride of being Jewish in the aftermath of the establishment of a Jewish state—joining synagogues (in particular Reform and Conservative) was the "in" thing to do. From Alabama to Washington State, Jewish belonging was on the upswing, and it looked like a revival of Jewish life would prove those who called America the "*treifa medina*" so wrong.

So here we are, three generations later in America, and the sense of hubris is gone. Reform and Conservative Synagogues across the country are closing or merging. Recent graduates of rabbinical schools tell tales of lower salaries and layoffs. Day schools are shutting their doors, and Jewish nonprofits are downplaying their Jewish connections and trying to universalize their mission. The Pew survey of October 2013 shows a more-than70 percent intermarriage rate among non-Orthodox Jews.

In the 1950s, sociologists predicted the demise of Orthodoxy in America, and within the past 50 years, the opposite has occurred. The highest birthrate and negligible amount of intermarriage is among the

Orthodox. But even with that good news comes sobering reality.

Some question the future of Modern Orthodoxy if the cost of yeshiva education keeps going up. All the gains of Jewish education will be lost if large numbers of families are forced to return to public schools. A large percentage of Orthodox singles cannot find their *bashert*, and if they end up not marrying, what impact will that have on Orthodox Judaism? In addition, given the high cost of Jewish living in the United States, even Yeshivish and Hassidic Jews might start to limit the number of children they have. (Unlike in Israel, many of the American Hareidi Orthodox work but often in jobs that don't yield high salaries). Furthermore, with a secular society that even objective observers will agree has become more coarsened and less modest, more and more Orthodox Jews seek to wall themselves off because of actual and perceived lack of secular moral standards. But there has always been one strength of Orthodoxy in comparison to much of the non-Orthodox world: We show up. Whether you are Yeshivish, Hassidic, Modern Orthodox, Open Orthodox, *daven* in a synagogue with a high *mehitsa* or a low *mehitza*, or attend a partnership *minyan* (which some argue is outside the pale of Orthodoxy), we have always shown up. Whether out of a sense of *hiyyuv*, obligation, or a desire to catch up on the latest news, enjoy the Kiddush, or show off a new outfit, for the Orthodox world, we seemed to embrace what Woody Allen once said: that 95 percent of life is showing up. We have shown up.

But of late several things have been happening that raise the concern about whether people are actually present when they show up! Do they have mindfulness when they are in *shul*? And, as Rabbi Cardozo explains, in essence most people have deposited their bodies but left their souls at home. Those who really care, he says, have left the building, now with God in tow. Thus, those who still cling to religious institutions (i.e., synagogues) are suffering from a spiritual malaise. It is to this point I would like to respond in particular. And here I think the dynamics in America are different from what he sees in Israel. In the United States, so many Jews have left the building both physically and metaphysically, yet I don't see synagogues going silently away.

A series of attempts to re-infuse energy and spirituality in the synagogue have been attempted in order to wake everyone out of their lethargy. Multiple services are geared to different ages, constituencies, and backgrounds: Jewish renewal services, learners' services, beginner services, *hashkama* services. In the non-Orthodox world, one can find a "synaplex" approach with Shabbat morning Torah Yoga and nature walks. Musical services, once only found primarily in Reform synagogues, have become more common now in Conservative synagogues. In many Orthodox synagogues, Carlebach-style *davening* has been introduced as a means of attracting people to a more user-friendly and emotionally moving service. The rise of independent *minyanim* across the country calls to mind the rise of the Havurah movement in the 1960s, which many saw as an attempt to build internal Jewish identity as a response to the external Jewish building of synagogues with the suburban sprawl and a perception of sterile religious institutions. The secular "free to be you and me movement," the rise of do-it-yourself Judaism a la *The Jewish Catalogue*, saw separate *havurot* being established. Many young Reform and Conservative teenagers and twenty-somethings who experienced the joy of *davening* with guitars at camp and outdoors in small settings with likeminded people led by the late Debbie Friedman and others led them to lament to their rabbis why their *shul* couldn't be more like camp. Fast forward to today where in the non-Orthodox world, *havurot* have been incorporated into *shuls* or have become *shuls*, organs have been replaced with guitars and keyboards, and frontal-oriented services with cantorial numbers have been replaced with more accessible music as well as cantors and rabbis getting down on their hands and knees at Tot Shabbat services. This is a big difference from the synagogue experiences of decades ago. The landscape had changed, and synagogues have adapted. So does that mean that in the non-Orthodox world synagogues are bulging with people? No! Although so many synagogues within all the movements have worked to make synagogues more user-friendly and emotionally fulfilling, it appears that it is not enough. In the United States, there may be pockets of dynamic energy at some synagogues that regularly attract large numbers of worshippers on Shabbat.

(On the High Holidays there still is an across-the-board demand.) There may be exciting programs at JCCs (for example, *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* programming that attracts so many who normally would not be caught dead in a synagogue), but tragically the majority of the people who have left the building are not later *davening* in an independent *minyan* or experimental *minyan* or a Jewish renewal *minyan* or *ba'al teshuva minyan*. Instead they are *shukkeling* Shabbos morning over to the appetizing counter at Zabar's or are deeply absorbed in the "*shakla v'tarya*" of a menu at the hottest brunch spot in the East Village or Williamsburg. The sad truth is that in the non-Orthodox world vast numbers of people, in particular "millennials," who have left the building, have done so, not because they were alienated or turned off. They have primarily left because they were never in the building in the first place. With one-third of Jews identifying as "nones" (latest Pew survey), God is crying because so many have yet to be reached. Vast numbers never even stepped into a *shul*, had a bar or bat mitzvah, or even fasted on Yom Kippur.

In Israel, the zeitgeist is an altogether different matter. There is one shared language with a civil religion that reminds you that you are a part of the Jewish people and connected to the land. Eating in a restaurant on Rehov Hillel and Shammai already makes the average secular Israeli one step ahead of his or her American secular Jewish counterpart who has never even heard of Hillel and Shammai. Hearing the television announcer wish everyone Shabbat Shalom automatically reminds everyone that Shabbat is coming, whether they observe it or not. The high percentage of people who share a Friday night dinner with candles and Kiddush even if they head later to a disco or travel to a movie would make them appear deeply committed in so much of the non-Orthodox world of America. And the basic Jewish education curriculum in Israel in the *mamlakhti* school system, as deeply flawed or shallow as it may be, still gives a modicum of textual knowledge to those enrolled. In Israel, the Elul program to reconnect secular youth with Jewish texts is an exciting development. Knesset member Ruth Calderon defines herself as secular? In America she could be a rabbi of a major non-Orthodox synagogue! In Israel, Judaism is in the air, and there is a wonderful trend to connect to it. What the early kibbutzniks sought to discard of their eastern European yeshivot, their great-grandchildren are attempting to reclaim, albeit in a new way. The obstacles created unfortunately by so much of the rabbinic establishment in Israel has made Israelis wary of synagogues. Ironically it is many young American *olim* in Tel Aviv who are the ones repopulating old synagogues that were once devoid of young people.

And so what of our Orthodox world? If I had to define our current circumstance I would say we are a cholent on the verge of drying out (as opposed to the non-Orthodox world, which is on the verge of dying out). As an Orthodox woman serving in a spiritual leadership role at an Orthodox outreach *minyan*, I regularly encounter Jews with no background to Jews from fervent backgrounds who share a common desire to connect. Thousands of people have come through the doors of Kol HaNeshamah, and more and more I am witnessing a new phenomenon within our Orthodox community. Although many of the people are *hozrim beTeshuva* or just Jews reconnecting at holiday time with their heritage, many are *hozrim beShe-eilah.* Jews raised in fervent background but due to a heavy-handed approach, physical or sexual or emotional abuse, or being told the questions they asked were deemed too *treif* to answer; they responded by leaving the community; and now some seek to come back. The disparate journeys have convinced me that these are just the tip of the iceberg. Yes, ours is an independent *minyan*, but I have emphasized "*al tifrosh min haTsibbur.*" We have worked with neighboring synagogues to create a sense of unity among institutions and Jews from disparate backgrounds. By creating safe harbors in traditional settings such as synagogues, as opposed to beer halls or jazz bars, we too can meet people where they are, and seek to transform them. How? First by remembering that although Judaism needs rigor and reason, Judaism also needs *ru'ah*. It needs joy. We have to remind ourselves of the beauty of our shared faith or what Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach used to say—to teach people the 'Yeses" of Judaism and not just the 'No's."

As to the rest who remain in the traditional synagogue environment? The ones who trudge in extreme heat or blinding snowstorms to help make up a daily *minyan* but have limited *kavannah*? The ones who come to *shul* on Shabbos but seem disconnected? I still say to them *Kol haKavod*. You have shown up whether out of a sense of obligation, rote, or conditioning. It is then up to us to seek to transform their experience. My late father, Rabbi William Berkowitz, used to say that sometimes people would criticize his pulpit sermons as being above the heads of his congregants. His answer? Those people need to sit up! We institutionally need to remind people that they do need to sit up. They do need to strive for more. But we have to give them the tools to do so. We need to work on encouraging our institutions to insist on more spiritually from our Orthodox community by willingly raising the soulfulness of our institutions. It can be done.

At the same time we need to remember that what drives out so many people and leads to a feeling of malaise is not necessarily complacency. Often it is a real lack of understanding what is being said that leads to boredom. It is a lacuna of understanding that it is okay to talk about God as a spiritual connection and not just law giver. It is trying to connect people to specific meaningful ideas in our *tefillot* that often get caught in a blur of prayers upon prayers. Even English translations don't work unless the context is also explained. Often in our Orthodox world, what has driven God out is not only the emptiness but anger. In Israel much of the religious establishment has done an excellent job of turning off Israelis from religion. The greater interest being shown by *sabras* raised in a *hiloni* environment to reconnect with *moreshet Yisrael* is heartening and needs to be supported across the ideological spectrum. But here in the United States, in our Orthodox world, rather than seeing it as God leaving the space, I see it as people having left and being reunited with Hashem where Hashem is at. And where is that? In Shemot we read the command from God to make a tabernacle and God will dwell within; meaning within us—*veShakhanti betokham*. There is no question that within Orthodoxy we too are in the midst of a spiritual crisis. Some institutions are grappling with trying to meet the spiritual needs of people and to help foster a sense that God can dwell within us and our traditional institutions. How can we make tefillah more invigorating? How can we deal with the *kavannah* crisis? But the first way of responding to a crisis is to acknowledge that we are in the middle of one and Rabbi Cardozo's article should be that wakeup call that we need to bring God back into our spiritual lives.

We saved Soviet Jewry. We saved Syrian Jewry. We saved Ethiopian Jewry. Now we have to save our spiritual selves or else we will just be empty shells with God having left along with *Am Yisrael*. How to do it? Ironically, I think the first step is that each of us needs to reach out to others. We have to show care and concern when people don't show up. We have to invite people to our homes and reach out to those who might fall through the cracks. How many people do I encounter who tell me being invited to a Shabbat dinner or our meaningful service can transform their lives? A few years ago a young woman at our post-Yom Kippur break-fast came over to me and told me that this was the first time since she left home for college that she was at High Holy Day services. She shared with me that every year on Erev Rosh Hashanah her mother would call her and tell her to go to temple. She would reply I am going to temple tomorrow—my temple is Bloomingdale's. She recounted that a friend had dragged her to come to High Holy Day services and she was expecting the worst. But the service reached her spiritually and she came back through Yom Kippur. She related that the day after Rosh Hashanah she called her mother to tell her she was in synagogue. And her mother said: Let me guess? Bloomingdales? Her mother cried tears of joy when she heard her daughter had been in an actual synagogue. The way to combat malaise, the feeling that God has departed, is to remember that God does dwell within each of us.

But we were not only created *beTselem Elokim*; we have the capacity to act at times like God with an outstretched arm. We need to reach those who are seeking spiritual resuscitation and this adds more oxygen to our lives as well. The Kotzker Rebbe commented that when Moshe was to get the *luhot,* God commanded him to go to the top of the mountain and *veyihye sham*. And be there. It wasn't enough to show up physically. He had to be emotionally present. There is no question that we need to

be present. God wants our heart.

We have worked on our heads. We focus on texts. We observe halakha. We have seen the source sheets. We have read the music. Now we need the *niggun*. Now we need the *neshamah*. Now we need to let God not only into our institutions, not only our homes but as the Kotzker Rebbe also answered the question as to where God is: God is wherever we let God in, especially into our hearts.