Re-empowering the Synagogue: A Maslovian Perspective

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How can we best re-design synagogues today to fit changing Jewish needs? In an era when social institutions everywhere are undergoing transformation, it is a key question-—and current economic strains make it more urgent. Especially concerning the growing impact of millennials on American-Jewish culture with their heavy usage of smartphones and social media, we must first decide: what do we really want contemporary synagogues to be? What is our guiding vision?

In this light, Jewish tradition provides a valuable perspective, for according to diverse *midrashic* sources, our patriarch Abraham's tent was no ordinary structure. It had a doorway on all four sides, so that visitors could feel comfortable entering whatever their point of origin. The ideal synagogue, our sages have therefore explained, is one like Abraham's appealing tent--that welcomes all Jews.

In modern-day America, another Abraham has given the world many worthy ideas for social improvement: psychologist "Abe" Maslow. Born in New York City, in 1908, to economically struggling Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine, he became one of our country's most influential psychological thinkers. First as a charismatic professor at Brooklyn College from 1937-1951, and then as a founding faculty leader at Brandeis University until his death in 1970, Maslow significantly impacted such fields as counseling and psychotherapy, management theory and organizational psychology, education--and even health care, particularly nursing, in its emphasis on treating the "whole patient" rather than simply disease symptoms. As Maslow's biographer, I was impressed to

discover that traditional Jewish thought influenced many aspects of his psychological system--such as the provocative Talmudic (and later Hasidic folkloric notion) of the “lamed-vov”: the thirty-six hidden righteous persons in every generation who quietly sustain humanity with their altruism and good deeds. In Maslow’s view, this notion offered an inspiring model for self-actualization in men and women.

In 1955, Maslow received the first of several invitations to head the psychology department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but declined due to his recently-hired status and commitment to Brandeis University. A few years later, Maslow became the first major American psychologist to promote the work of Viktor Frankl, the Austrian-Jewish psychiatrist and Auschwitz concentration camp survivor whose memoir *Man’s Search for Meaning* eventually became a worldwide bestseller. As Frankl told me in a phone-interview, he considered Maslow his friend as well as his intellectual colleague because they both sought to infuse spirituality into psychology theory and practice.

Maslow popularized such terms as *self-actualization, peak-experience,* and *synergy*, but undoubtedly, his most famous concept is the “hierarchy of inborn needs.” In essence, he argued that basic to all humans everywhere are six sets of psychological needs, for: 1) physical safety; 2) belongingness; 3) self-esteem; 4) respect; 5) love; and, 6) spiritual fulfillment, which he called *self-actualization*. Virtually everyone who has taken Introductory Psychology in the past half-century remembers this hierarchy, typically depicted in the shape of a colorful pyramid.

“It’s quite true that man lives by bread alone—-when there is no bread,” Maslow asserted in a famous article published in *The Psychological Review* during World War II. “But what happens when there {is} plenty of bread and when [our] belly is chronically fed? At once, other and `higher’ needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate {us.} And when these, in turn, are satisfied, again new and still `higher’ needs emerge, and so on. This is what we mean by saying that human basic needs are arranged in a hierarchy.”

Though committed to the well-being of Jewish life in post-World War II America, Maslow never worked directly with synagogues (or any other social institutions besides Brandeis University), preferring to advance organizational theory rather than engage in consulting practice. Nevertheless, Maslow’s psychological system is highly relevant for the re-empowerment of American synagogues. That is, by examining each of our key six psychological needs in Maslow’s hierarchy, we can identify how synagogues can be improved and best re-designed today.

A Hierarchy of Synagogue Needs

1)Physical safety. Unfortunately, for perhaps the first time in our nation's history, American Jews can no longer ignore this fundamental need. The recent murderous assaults on synagogues in Pittsburgh and suburban San Diego, as well as several thwarted planned attacks, and most recently, a rampage at a rabbinic home in Monsey, New York, make this unmistakably clear. However, a variety of governmental and private programs, with relatively ample funding, are enabling American synagogues to initiate appropriate action. For example, in January 2020, ten New York State members of Congress urged synagogues to vamp up security with the help of $90 million in federal funds. Of course, in many other countries during the past dozen years, including France, Germany, and India, Jews have likewise experienced lethal terrorism when gathered en masse to pray or just socialize; they cannot take life-and-limb for granted.

From Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs perspective, we can therefore affirm: synagogues must actively address our most basic need as Jews everywhere on this globe-—for sheer physical safety. How can this safeguarding be accomplished? Many means are possible. For example, each synagogue could establish a committee responsible for such activities, such as inviting guest speakers involved with global Jewish security, publicizing relevant news items in their newsletter or blog, and assisting in broad fund-raising to combat antisemitism and related "hate mongering" involving all Jewish communities.

2) *Belongingness*. In our world increasingly dominated by smartphone usage and social media, especially among millennials, traditional face-to-face communities are vanishing. Whether we're residing in new or old suburbs, city cores or small towns, we all yearn for a greater sense of connectedness with others. In 1970, sociologist Dr. Philip Slater authored the influential book *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, and fifty years later, our society is far more fragmented and lonely. If American synagogues are to thrive in coming years, they will be obliged to fulfill our innate need for belongingness which Maslow aptly identified.

How can this be accomplished? The free-spirited *chavurot* of the 1960s and 1970s offered one model, but its lasting impact on American-Jewish life has been modest. Perhaps the *chavurot* were too influenced by the "hippy" counterculture of that era to catalyze long-term appeal. But other ways exist to gratify our need for belongingness. Nearly everyone agrees that the most successful synagogues today are those that provide genuine warmth and camaraderie. Thanks to Maslow's seminal work, organizational psychologists have developed techniques to build empathy and trust among individuals.

How can synagogues satisfy Jewishly our need for belongingess? The over-riding goal should be to lessen anonymity and isolation, so that each member feels a valued part of a friendly group. In this

regard, it is essential that that religious services—-under rabbinic guidance-—become more participatory and less passively spectator-like. To encourage discussions based on sermons is similarly beneficial. Periodic “Shabbaton” retreats can also help strengthen the sense of synagogue as true community.

3) *Self-esteem and 4) respect.* According to Maslow’s hierarchy, we all need to feel valued as individuals for our interests, skills, and talents. As the Baal Shem Tov aptly observed, everyone yearns for the recognition that “For my sake, the entire world was created.” Unfortunately, this inspiring teaching influences few synagogues today, for generally members receive minimal attention for their skills and talents-—and even less so for their hobbies and leisure interests. Strikingly, recent psychological research is revealing the importance of hobbies for individual mental and even physical well-being--beginning as early as adolescence (Shin & You, 2013) and continuing through midlife and beyond (Paggi, Jopp & Herzog, 2016).

Maslow pioneered the technique of human assets accounting for organizations: that is, drawing up a “balance sheet” or inventory to identify each employee’s specific interests, training, and skills. By then deliberately cultivating these qualities, enlightened managers have found that employee motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity dramatically improve.

Synagogues can do likewise. Upon joining a synagogue, all new members would be invited to list their particular skills, hobbies, and interests: for example, “Jason Kaplan, accounting/fund-raising, playing acoustic guitar; “Ayelet Rabinyan, journalism/travel-writing, knitting and reading Sephardic literature.” Teenagers would also be included in the list, and this information would become part of an online directory made available to members and updated annually. Such an inventory could serve as a springboard for a variety of projects reflecting the unique composition of each synagogue’s members. Remember, as Maslow emphasized, we all want to feel liked and respected for our personal interests, knowledge, and competencies.

5) *Love*. Positioned higher on Maslow’s hierarchy is the basic human need to give and receive love. Traditionally, the closely-knit family was the center of Jewish life in virtually all countries on the globe. To be a Jew somehow apart from one’s spouse, children, parents, siblings, and extended family members was almost unthinkable.

Today, matters are very different. In the United States, it’s hardly unusual for adult siblings or parents/children to live in separate states or even separate geographic regions. The type of extended Jewish families once celebrated by writers like Amos Oz or Sholom Aleichem are rare indeed, yet our need for close companionship remains as strong as ever. As social scientists have documented, the

ideology of individualism has not only undermined Jewish family life in the United States but in Israel as well; see, for example, Orit Rozin's illuminating book *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel.*

Until recently, American synagogues did little to satisfy this inborn desire. But much can be accomplished to nurture friendships and love. One encouraging, relatively new trend is the family-centered approach to Jewish learning, which is directly strengthening ties among parents and children by joint religious study and activity. Another method is the time-honored Talmudic technique of collaborating with a study partner for mutual enhancement of Jewish learning. The more that synagogues can foster friendships and close family life (not just communal belongingness), the greater their appeal in coming years.

6) *Self-Actualization.* Consistent with Torah insights, Maslow asserted that everyone has an innate need for spiritual fulfillment—-and thereby to become all that one is capable of becoming. Through empirical investigations, Maslow found that people experience transcendence in a variety of ways, such as aesthetics, creativity, justice, nature, mentoring, or helping others altruistically--besides, of course, engagement in family life. Maslow's research also revealed that people differ in the particular domain that provides the greatest sense of spirituality. As the Hasidic leader Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav observed, "Each one reaches God through the gates of his own heart."

Synagogues can become an important force for self-actualization. For instance, the creative arts-—including music, literature, and drama-—scarcely receive the attention they deserve. Much more can be done to promote their role in childhood, adolescent, and adult education, as well as in holiday and life-cycle events. Aside from arts-and-crafts activities for young children, how often is our aesthetic need recognized at all?

Similarly, we often hear about the prophetic call for helping to make a better world, but few synagogues take the challenge seriously. At the very least, each synagogue should coordinate links with other local voluntary groups serving those in need of economic, medical, or legal help. If American Jews begin to see the synagogue as a place of inspiring spiritual growth, it will certainly attract those with energy and commitment.

Abe Maslow's psychological system has brought much benefit to the world. In this year that marks the 50th anniversary of his death, it is time for the American-Jewish community to apply his insights to the unique task of synagogue re-empowerment.

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