Synagogue Affiliation Among Younger Jews: Some Responses

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We asked for your responses about synagogue affiliation (or lack thereof) among younger Jews. Here are some of the responses we received. It would be important for committees within each synagogue to deliberate about how best to maximize affiliation and attendance among Jews in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

Below are some of the responses we received.

I

1) General demographics in the neighborhood

Some locations are attractive to younger people for a variety of reasons: availability of Jewish resources and institutions, availability of general resources and cultural institutions, security, jobs that young people can actually get and commute to, etc.

2) Affordability

For a variety of reasons, neighborhoods around some synagogues that have all the above factors going for them are simply unaffordable, be it to singles or young couples. Sometimes the neighborhood near the synagogue is expensive and also nice - this could still attract young people with access to money. One of the even harder combinations is when a neighborhood is expensive and not particularly nice. This the reason that I lived 44 blocks from my chosen synagogue when I lived in NYC. I recall seeing an apartment 4 blocks away that wanted almost $2k a month for 250 square feet with a microscopic oven, a mini-fridge, and a closet-like bedroom that was barely large enough to fit a single twin bed. When I lived in LA, the cheapest 1-bed 1-bath condos within 2 miles in any direction of my synagogue *started at half a million dollars. As a young father in my 30s, I counted myself lucky to find a rental apartment that cost $3,500 a month. In four years there I paid almost $170,000 with nothing to show for it other than that I wasn't homeless.

3) Culture of the synagogue

My current synagogue is regarded as young, growing, and attractive. People are moving here in droves for a friendly job market, and are settling down for the long term despite rapidly rising costs of living.

But the thing is that there is no singles culture here. Almost everyone who comes is already married, and the 18-30 set has almost no reason to come to us. The biggest complaint I get from young people who visit us is that they can't find a match in a place where such a high percentage of the opposite sex is married. Due to the demographics of the neighborhood, our model still works, but it basically requires that young people come to us only after having taken care of their own religious affiliation between high school and marriage.

4) Capacity of the synagogue

Most synagogues I know, even successful ones, operate on a shoestring budget and wishful thinking. After the mortgage, program costs, and salaries for even just a rabbi, administrator, and light custodial work, there is nothing left, or even a deficit. Synagogues that by size ought to have many more staff members still operate with a skeleton crew. Typically they are at or beyond their organizational capacity with just the daily grind, and they can't really absorb the cost and effort of the kinds of outreach and inreach that it takes to make a perceptionally recalcitrant demographic group show up.

5) Challenges faced by the young people themselves

This is a demanding time of life for young people. They are pursuing education, and have limited access to religious life that is distant from college campuses. They are trying to find a mate, and need to be in places where they can find one. They are trying to start out professionally, and are under high pressure with the lowest resources to deal with that pressure. Most Jewish resources are geared at people who are older or younger than they are. Pursuing and nourishing their religious life in this situation requires a lot of drive and commitment.

6) Support for this transitional period from their home community

Young people retain their commitment to Jewish life the best when they are able to become Jewishly literate and build up a deep deck of positive religious experiences before graduating high school. Communities who do not invest in this but still expect the young people to affiliate need to reallocate their resources.

7) Nationally, there aren't many resources available to the young people

In the time between college education and settling down with kids, there is poor communal investment and programmatic development. This reflects in part that the demographic is in a high state of flux, so they're harder to serve. It also reflects a broad failure of the Jewish community to imagine how to invest in them and devote money to that end. Despite knowing full well that their own organizational health requires new people to affiliate, they are much better at complaining about the young people's absence than they are about proactively attracting them to fill the gap.

This is based on my own anecdotal observations, and is the best judgment I can reach from my own experience,

II

There are several issues that repel many below the age of 50 or so. A few of these are: 1. Hypocrisy--it's obvious that much of the service is rote reading from the siddur and even the torah. It seems that the purpose of this mouthing of syllables iis superstition-- those syllables must be said or bad things may happen. For example, I have a grandson on active combat duty in the IDF. It's an extreme turn off to listen to a rapid fire prayer for the State of Israel and the IDF seemingly just to 'get through it.' 2. Having to sit through superstitious content such as 'Women may die in childbirth for various failures such as improper handling of the

halla. Scare tactics alienate younger people. 3. Sermons full of midrashic content taken literally a dn contrary to science. Last shabbat, for example, the rabbinic speaker held as true that even pails of water throughout the world split at the same time as did the Red Sea and that God brought down the sun to discomfit the following Egyptian army. He also noted the importance of believing in miracles such as the sun standing still. Even a 1st grader knows that the sun doesn't revolve around the earth and pass each night underground. 4. The length of services is also a negative consideration. 5. The lack of seriousness on the part of congregants and, way too often, synagogue leaders as evidenced by the persistent talking and gossiping during services. 6. The absence of explanations for doing what we do. For example, almost no one seems to pay attention to the haftarah readings-- what's the connection between the parasha and the readings? 7. Related to the foregoing, when younger people are told that we do or say something just because that's the way we do it or that's the way it was done in the old country, doesn't cut it for educated younger people.

III

While I can't speak to Orthodoxy in specific, I will say that COVID had an impact on many programs and institutions, and we are all still experiencing this effect today. People found other routes to daven and have community...perhaps informal gatherings in their neighborhoods. I know that for some people, large synagogues are impersonal. And therefore, within a congregation, havurot have been formed to create tighter bonds. Women also want to have an active role and can where there are partnership and/or women's minyans but without them, women may not feel the same pull to come shul.

IV

Whether or not they are coming to synagogue, perhaps it is important to understand how young people are identifying and expressing their Judaism through organizations, institutions and other activities. There is also the enormous influence of Chabad and perhaps many mainstream daveners are to be found there...with innovative programming and strong outreach. I'm not sure that people are less involved in Judaism, just involved differently than past generations.

V

I would recommend sitting down with those who do not attend and ask them.

My ideas may not be accurate, but I imagine those in the age groups of interest will express openly their thoughts as to their lack of involvement.

Perhaps a third party could do interviews on your behalf to allow a possible more open dialogue on the matter.

VI

.I noticed not just this but an absence in daily life. Intermarriage is a large but not the only reason. I attribute a lot of this to the absence of attending Hebrew school where one can form a collective identity among peers. One learns the songs, the history and the traditions. I was born in the 1950s when these things “didn’t exist on any level” in public life so Hebrew schools/synagogue were a safe zone. Parents and grandparents were embedded in these traditions and history. Now, Hebrew school is a nuisance for many parents.