When Bigger is Better, by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein

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Rabbi Haskel Lookstein of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun is one of the outstanding Modern Orthodox rabbis of the American Jewish community. As head of the Ramaz schools, he has had a profound impact in Jewish education. He has been a leading figure in many communal organizations and is widely recognized for his constructive leadership and activism on behalf of the entire Jewish people. This article appears in issue 19 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo has penned a powerful critique that justifies a vigorous response. The critique: Establishment synagogues are on the way out. Most are “religiously sterile and spiritually empty.” God has abandoned them and moved to smaller unconventional locations where people are thinking about Him and searching for Him.

I can’t comment on God’s interest in these unconventional minyanim in places I know little about, but I know something about large, mainstream synagogues, having spent eight decades in one of them, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan—known usually as KJ. I worry about a trend toward “smaller is better,” whether in the form of informal minyanim, specialized services such as partnership minyanim, or what is becoming increasingly prevalent: the breaking up of a large congregation into smaller davening groups.

On the other hand, I also worry about Rabbi Cardozo’s critique—somewhat justified in my opinion—about the religious sterility and spiritual emptiness in

large synagogues and, for that matter, in many of the smaller venues as well. I will divide my response to Rabbi Cardozo into three parts. First, I will offer an analysis of what the large, establishment synagogue offers that smaller minyanim do not. Second, I will discuss the shortcomings of the small or breakaway services. Third, I will present the deficiencies in the large synagogue service and how one might correct them. In all of this, I am indebted to Rabbi Cardozo for raising very important questions and critiques, and getting me sufficiently exorcized so that I had to organize my thoughts on a subject of passionate concern to me and offer them to the reading public for, hopefully, the endorsement of many and, inevitably, the objections of some. I hope to learn as much from the latter as from the former.

I

What does the large, establishment synagogue provide that smaller minyanim do not? First, a large congregation fulfills the principle first enunciated in Proverbs, 14:28 “B’rov am hadrat Melekh”—A large gathering is a glory to the King. Objectively, there is strength in numbers; there is a greater sense of Kiddush haShem; we feel we are part of something much bigger and more important than ourselves. The halakha tells us that although one might prefer to make Kiddush for oneself, when one is in a group, it is a greater mitzvah to have one recite it for everybody. The reason: B’rov am hadrat Melekh. On Purim, there is a specific ruling that it is preferable to hear the Megilla in a large gathering rather than in a smaller one, because of pirsum haNes—the publicizing of the miracle. One might extrapolate from this that, in general, the larger the congregation, the greater the service of God.

But the advantages of size go far beyond the objective ones. We are a people who pride ourselves on community. We do not advocate a Robinson Crusoe existence. We want to share in the experience of the larger community. We do not seek to be poresh min haTsibbur—to divorce ourselves from the community. When we pray in a large congregation, we share all the joys and celebrations of fellow congregants. We mourn with them, and we are reminded to go and comfort them; we are made aware of the concerns of Kelal Yisrael—the entire community of Israel.

We live in the Galut, but at KJ, the holiest moment of the service is when the rabbi reads with special gravitas the prayer for the soldiers of Israel preceded by the announcement of the names of the M.I.A’s, and then the announcement of the names and ages of the American soldiers who were killed that week fighting for our country. We follow that with a prayer for the well-being and safety of the

members of the American armed forces. Subsequently, at a different point in the service, the rabbi reads the Prayer for the Government of Israel—with a partial, embellished translation—and then a brief English prayer for the leaders of the United States of America. These readings are done without a sound in the sanctuary. We all know that this is the deepest concern of the community. It is consciousness-raising for all of us, that in our prayers we are deeply involved in the security and well-being of our brothers and sisters in Medinat Yisrael and our fellow citizens in the United States of America.

During the reading of the Torah, we celebrate engagements, weddings, and significant milestones in the lives of men and women in the congregation. We make a Mi Shebeirakh (special blessing) for each; then we sing an appropriate song—a different one for each kind of simha; and then the rabbi congratulates each celebrant. This all takes time, but this is what creates community and joy and mutual love among us. Rabbi Isaac Luria, the mystic and pietist of sixteenth-century Safed, taught that before every morning's prayer one should say, "I am now preparing to fulfill the mitzvah of love thy neighbor as thyself." Prayer in our large synagogue is formulated and structured to fulfill that mitzvah. But there is something else that happens in the large, establishment synagogue.

We summon our members to the task of building the institutions without which Kelal Yisrael cannot thrive. There would be no eruv in Manhattan but for the large, establishment synagogues who paid to build it and who contribute to maintain it. Similarly, when we had a Midtown Board of Kashruth, it was maintained by the same synagogues. The original mikveh and those which have been added are supported through the large synagogues. There would never have been a Ramaz without KJ, or a Manhattan Day School without the large West Side synagogues. Yeshiva Day Schools across the country have been created and are sustained by major synagogues in their communities. The needs of the community are conveyed to the worshippers in large synagogues. Massive rallies for Soviet Jews in the 1970s and 1980s were promoted through these synagogues. United Jewish Appeal and Israel Bonds reach the religious community—of all denominations—through them. Appeals for Passover relief (for Met Council) bring a response. When Hurricane Sandy struck, we made an appeal at KJ, and we were able to give massive aid to two communities in Brooklyn and Long Island because we could reach people in shul who had a sense of communal responsibility.

In short, the large establishment synagogue is more than a place where many people come to pray; it is more than b'rov am; it is a place where a community is created and nurtured, where we all celebrate our semahot, where, inevitably, we

also mourn our losses, where we are aroused to meet the needs of the Jewish community here and in Israel, to build and support institutions and further causes that are vital to the community, to identify with the struggles of the Jewish people in Israel and in America, and to learn from scholars in the congregation and outside of it. All of this and much more is not only a fulfillment of “b’rav am”—bringing glory to God—but it also provides vibrancy and great meaning to the life of every member of the community.

II

Now, let us turn to the purpose and function of smaller minyanim and analyze their shortcomings. These minyanim usually focus on the needs of worshippers. Sometimes, those needs are for an important, individual expression, as in the case of partnership minyanim, where women have more of an active role in the ritual. More often, the need is for a “no-nonsense davening”—short, to-the-point—usually with a full Kiddush following (time is not much of a factor there!)—less talking, no sermon (or a greatly reduced one); no celebrations (which take time); no appeals; and no announcements of a communal nature. It is a davening and a Torah reading with no frills and it fulfills a real need—do it right; do it fast; have a nice Kiddush; enjoy the camaraderie of a select group and go home with a big chunk of the day left. This is the standard hashkama minyan. It follows the Israeli pattern, where there is only one day “off” and when, therefore, leisure time is at a premium. In Israel, however, the communal functions are served in other ways, and, therefore, many feel that there is less of a need for a congregation—although this absence of community and congregation is actually a very serious problem, one that is beyond the scope of this article.

Sometimes, this small minyan is not hashkama. Sometimes it begins an hour before the main minyan, or a half-hour after the main minyan starts, or it is a break-away in another place. The common denominator is that they are a substitute for the main service of a community synagogue, and they fulfill the needs of a certain group of worshippers. Aside from all that is missing in these small minyanim, there is a fundamental flaw here from a Jewish perspective. The small minyan is ultimately all about the participant—call it “all about me”—my needs, my convenience, my time, my davening comfort, my Kiddush, my camaraderie. It should be remembered, however, that Judaism is not concerned primarily with “my” needs, but rather with “my” mitzvoth, my obligations, my duties to serve God, to enhance the community, to love others like myself, which means, among other things, to celebrate with others, mourn with others, visit the sick, support the needy, and respond to communal causes. None of these plays a

major role in the smaller, needs-oriented, minyan. Worshippers in the smaller minyanim are not in shul for an Israel Bonds Appeal; they don't hear an impassioned plea for the personal philanthropy to help sustain friends of theirs who might be seated next to them and who used to be generous donors, but who now need the community's support; and, for the most part, they do not respond in the manner in which the congregants in the main service do. And if there were a rally for Israel, they wouldn't hear our fervent call to action. They are out of touch because they simply are not there. It is sad, but true. In the Rambam's term, they are, unintentionally, poresh min haTsibbur—separated from the efforts, experiences, joys, and struggles of the community. It is terribly sad that they are not full participants in the community's life.

Consider: Why should one care if it takes another 30 to 45 minutes to hear a bar mitzvah boy read the Torah and listen to the rabbi's speech to him; or listen to the Mi Shebeirakh for a hatan v'kalla; or hear a berakha, sing a song, and listen to a pulpit announcement on the occasion of the birthday of a 90-year-old man who never misses a daily minyan? Shouldn't the whole congregational family celebrate such moments? The worshippers in the small, high-speed, minyanim miss all of this. In fact, to some extent, they want to miss it. That's a good part of why they are not in the main service. They have no patience for all that "stuff." Is it really right to get through davening in one to two hours rather than two to three hours and miss these communal joys? They are not the joys of some individual. They are our semahot, the semahot of the community. They are our past, our present, and our future, too!

I was recently worshipping in a large, established synagogue with more than 500 member families. They have four or five minyanim in addition to the main service. Each service fills a unique need of the participants. The main service, of course, suffers in attendance because of all the options. There was an outstanding woman scholar on that Shabbat who spoke after the conclusion of the main service. I looked around and saw fewer than 100 listeners. Everyone else had long ago enjoyed Kiddush and left for home. I thought to myself, what a shame! The shul provided for its members a gifted scholar, a role model for women and teenage girls, and only a fraction of the congregation benefited from her exceptional discourse. Such is part of the cost of each going his or her own way and losing the sense of belonging to a community.

III

Finally, a word about Rabbi Cardozo's critique that the services in large establishment synagogues are "religiously sterile and spiritually empty." Although

his critique may be somewhat overstated, there is no doubt that large congregations need to recognize that tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis—times change, and we (must) change with them. In my father, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein's—z"tl—day, the Shabbat morning service ran from 9:00 to 12:00 sharp. The sermon was 30 minutes long. Nobody moved until after the benediction that coincided with the 12 gongs on the clock in the nunnery next door. Well, the nunnery is long gone and the clock left with it—and so did the attention span of the congregation. We now try to end by 11:30—and when I'm not there the service somehow ends by around 11:15! The sermon lasts 10 to 15 minutes. The cantor knows that the age of cantorial virtuosity is essentially over, and he davens beautifully as a ba'al tefilla with a major emphasis on congregational participation. We have to streamline the service even more, recognizing the lower P.Q. (patience quotient) of twenty-first-century adults and children, but without sacrificing the family nature of a davening community.

We should continue to focus on welcoming beginners in our community; in fact we have a Learners' service and Intermediate minyan for just that purpose. This effort not only supports those who are new to traditional Jewish prayer; it also energizes the entire congregation. It keeps us new and fresh and reminds us that, in a way, we are all beginners. That alone should dispel the "religiously sterile and spiritually empty" feeling that Rabbi Cardozo finds in the large congregations. Five hundred participants in a Friday Night Shabbat Across America davening and dinner can provide inspiration, too! That also is the natural task and opportunity of the large mainstream synagogue.

There is, of course, more that we need to do. From my perspective, however, the most important task is to keep the congregation together and emphasize that prayer in shul is not an exercise in meeting our own individual needs; it should be an effort to meet the needs of our total community and to reinforce our duties and obligations toward Kelal Yisrael. That will not only bring glory to God; it will also provide holiness to our lives.