Don’t Give Up the Shul: Reorienting Our Synagogues

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The question is whether we move our synagogues to where God is now dwelling. Will we, the religious, live up to the expectations of the young people in cafes and discussions groups who have preceded us? Will we apologize to them and join in their discussions, creating a real religious experience out of our synagogue service? Or will we, as usual, stay put, fight the truth, and then be put to shame? —Rabbi Nathan Lopez Cordozo

Rabbi Cordozo is correct that unless we, Jewish leaders and institutions, are able to understand and relate to the current culture and weltanschauung of the Jewish people and the society that nurtures them, we will not be able to serve, educate, or engage them in religious community. But we would do well to avoid seeing this situation as one of us and them, the establishment versus the innovators, young versus old. We are one family. It is our job as leaders to know what the Jewish people need as individuals and as a group. This cannot just be a matter of gesturing, or catering to some societal perturbation in order to serve a financial or survival agenda; it must be about how to function as a Jewish community together. It must be genuine and organic.

I believe that no other Jewish institution can serve the role of building strong, encompassing, spiritual community than a shul can. Shuls educate, create community, care for people, guide them on their journey, and can, if navigated with a wide vision, make a difference in our world far beyond their own members. Shuls can be the vehicles that enable us, the Jewish people, to gather in our

brethren and be a light unto the nations.

I think I speak for many younger and mid-career rabbis, when I say that although stolidness may seem to be the rule in synagogues, it is by no means ubiquitous or necessary. I will use my own synagogue, Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis, Missouri as one example of utilizing creativity and open mindedness in the service of generating a more vibrant community.

Spiritual Tools

It takes a large spiritual tool box to encounter an infinite God, but most of these tools and approaches are not foreign to Judaism; most are not even new to us, but were born within our tradition. For me personally, even innovation itself has its roots in the hareidi yeshivot of my youth where nothing was valued more than hiddush, the truly new idea in Torah. Let me share one example of the ways in which we are utilizing Judaism's plethora of spiritual approaches and tools in invigorating and renewing our community.

When I was a young adult I came across a book on Jewish meditation. This was a foreign concept to me at the time, having grown up Orthodox. I was quite surprised to discover in its pages that the Talmud’s Hassidim haRishonim, Ancient Pious ones, took an hour to prepare for prayer, an hour to pray and an hour to come down from their prayer, and that the Ariza”l and many Hassidic rebbes taught methods of visualization and mantra meditation. I was struck by how none of this sounded like the “chopping of a minha,” that I often witnessed, and was even considered virtuous in some Orthodox circles. Years later I studied Jewish meditation in a more formal capacity. This is one of the many Jewish tools that has fallen by the wayside, and that we are bringing once again to our prayers and religious life. I must stress that it is not difficult to learn meditation but something that anyone with sensitivity and a bit of training can learn well enough in a short time to utilize and teach.

I have actualized this through a weekly meditative service on Shabbat mornings. Many people in shul do not really know what they are saying when they pray and do not really know how to utilize kavvanah, prayerful intent. Each Shabbat morning at the end of the Torah reading, I go to another room in the synagogue to lead a meditative kavvanah-oriented service, really a class about prayer with some guided meditation. About 20 percent of the shul follows me. We take just a few prayers and first read them to understand their meaning, then look at the themes of the prayer, and then I direct a guided meditation to focus us more deeply and personally on those themes. This I think is what we mean by the very

traditionally Jewish notion of, “having kavaanah,” deeper intent. Some of these methods might borrow techniques from more Eastern practices but the medium of the meditation and its content is wholly Jewish, indeed it may be indispensable for real traditional tefillah itself.

Creating Community

Many Orthodox shuls are places people come to pray; they need a minyan for daily halakhic reasons or for holidays or a yortzeit. At Bais Abraham, the vast majority of attendees did not grow up Orthodox and so do not always know how to daven; it is rather a desire for community that brings them. And so we put a great deal of effort into community programming. Although davening is very hard for many, most Jews really do want the experience of an embracing community. Shuls today must function a bit like Jewish Community Centers, engaging lay leaders in creating social, intellectual, and educational programming for all ages and demographics.

Shuls must also be wider communal institutions. By communal I do not just mean the Orthodox community, but a vital part of our neighborhoods, cities, and country. Shuls must feel a deep sense of obligation not only to their members but to, as a community, turn outward toward the rest of the Jewish community and the general communities in which a shul finds itself. One important way to do this is as a shul to volunteer in the larger community.

Bais Abraham has an ongoing partnership with one of the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in St. Louis, which is located less than a mile from our shul. Once a month we spend an evening studying about an aspect of hessed from a Jewish point of view. Later that week we put this into practice as a community painting a house, serving food to the elderly, and so forth.

A Culture of Welcoming

Many shuls see themselves as welcoming, but often this is limited. Many are welcoming on their own terms to those who can fit in. I believe that to be truly welcoming, a shul’s culture must be so embracing that it draws almost no boundaries to entry at all. To be welcoming to Jews that one hopes to influence is a very limited way of welcoming, and usually people see it for what it is. Only a narrow range of seekers will come to such a place. In a truly welcoming culture all are welcomed because there is no other way to be.

Rabbi Abraham Magence, my teacher and the rabbi who preceded me in my shul, made the point that when Avraham welcomed the three men walking in the

desert, for all Avraham knew, as Rashi points out, they were idol worshipers. It was three idolatrous nomads that Avraham left God’s presence to run to greet and serve. What if we had a culture within Orthodox shuls like Avraham’s? If a homeless person comes in on Shabbat to our synagogue building he or she is welcomed and included fully in the kiddush or seudah shelishith, and welcome to be in the services with us.

I remember a certain non-Jewish homeless man in an electric wheelchair who would come on Shabbat morning, charge his chair and spend the entire day eating at and interacting with people in the shul. We must not just welcome people into shul, but transform our shuls into places in which the culture of welcoming is deeply ingrained, almost without limits. It is only then that the wide array of Jews who do not imagine themselves in shul will feel comfortable.

Alternative Venues

Alternative venues outside of the synagogue are a good way to engage a population of non-Orthodox, younger people who may find it hard to enter the synagogue space. Although an old standby, barbecues outside of the shul building for various holidays such as Lag B’omer, Tu B’Av and Sukkot are always worth doing. They bring a sense of fun and are good ways to bring together shul families with new people who may not be affiliated. Alternative venues also serve to disrupt a congregation's tendency toward monotony and to inject a sense that Judaism and community can suffuse the surrounding environment outside the shul’s walls; that Jewish community extends outside the bounds of the synagogue space.

Years ago, during the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, I began leading a once-a-year hike in the woods as a way to prepare for the Yamim Noraim, the High Holidays. We typically begin in a circle near the woods, sharing some thoughts about the upcoming work of teshuvah, repentance. I focus the group on the New Year and on teshuvah between us and others and between us and God. Then together we take a silent hike through the woods. No talking is allowed so that though we are together as a community, everyone is at the same time allowed and encouraged to be alone in their thoughts. The hike concludes with another circle in which we reflect upon the time spent in silence, and a sharing of plans for teshuvah.

As a shul, we also use alternative venues for Torah study. We hold a class called “Torah on Tap,” which meets in a bar. It is a discussion that is sometimes a text study, sometimes topical, and sometimes just asking questions. In engaging the

wider Jewish people, atmosphere is just as important as content. Many Jews might not know how to pray or might feel they are not “religious enough,” but a bar has very few barriers to entry. This not only brings Judaism to the people who are hesitant to enter the shul, but it brings the community outward, facilitating a strong feeling that we are more than a shul; we are a community within the world. This makes for much stronger communal bonds because people are not living one identity outside of shul and another inside, rather the two sometimes bifurcated worlds begin to merge.

Several years ago, we spent the year creating an emphasis on seeing Judaism through art. Among the many classes, hands-on art explorations, and Orthodox rabbinic scholars-in-residence who were exploring Rav Kook’s and others ideas about art, we spent an interesting day at the local art museum taking a tour that I guided along with one of the docents at the museum who was also an Orthodox Jew. I focused the tour on the many paintings that drew on the Torah for their subject matter. We looked not only at each painting against its biblical background but also at the painting or work as a work of art in itself. What did the colors the artist used, and the emotive quality of the painting in turn, teach us about the biblical story from which it had emerged? This was a good example of opening our eyes to the cultural resources around us outside of our shul that can help to expand what we do to a wider audience and a wider Torah vision.

Flexibility

In this age of online shopping and instant messaging, synagogues must be flexible enough to meet the varied needs of the Jewish people with quality and speed, even if it involves creating services and products to which we are unaccustomed. Several years ago a secular Israeli family approached us with an observation. There were a growing number of secular Israelis in St. Louis whose children attend secular public schools and have no Jewish education. These children speak some Hebrew, which they learned at home but cannot read or write Hebrew. Secular Israelis who move outside of Israel quickly find themselves without the Jewish influence of Israeli society upon which they relied for connection to Jewish holidays, culture, and even religious moments. They find themselves in a larger society that is largely under Christian influence, and feel disoriented and bereft of their Jewish identity. Their children have no knowledge at all of the Jewish people and its land, its religion, its language, or its culture.

With the guidance of one or two Israeli families, we immediately took steps to establish a weekly Hebrew school that would focus on reading and writing Hebrew, thus serving the needs of this population on their own terms. Our goal

was ultimately not just to teach Hebrew but primarily to teach Judaism in a way that would be acceptable to these families and ultimately to engage them in the Jewish community. Three years later, 15 families attend this Hebrew school, have a strong connection to the Bais Abraham community, and are even asking for additional religious instruction for their children. Had Bais Abraham been a place of much bureaucratic procedure I doubt it would have been able to be flexible enough, quickly enough, to engage a new population with such specific needs so unexpectedly.

Innovation

If Jews are not fully connecting to the prevalent model of community, then we must be willing, within the bounds of halakha and with its sage guidance, to tweak the model. Tradition and the status quo are important values with great benefits, but they must be weighed against their costs. I am not recommending that we compromise halakha, but I am saying that within halakha we should be willing to perhaps go against parts of prevalent Orthodox culture. As the talmudic statement often quoted by halakhic decisors goes: Lo ra'inu ayno ra'ayah: Just because we have not seen something before, does not mean it is automatically forbidden.

One example that comes to mind today is the increase of female Orthodox religious leadership within Orthodox synagogues. Programs at Yeshiva University, Drisha Institute, Nishmat, and Yeshivat Maharat are training Orthodox women to be guides, teachers, and halakhic decisors within Orthodox communities. This has fallen under some attack of late often with the caveat I have heard over and over: "It is not halakhically forbidden, but we should not do it."

This fear of change even when something is halakhically permitted and increasingly practiced in centrist Orthodox communities stops us from being flexible enough to speak to the needs of the moment. This does not mean the halakhic answer is always yes, nor does it mean we should not sacrifice for halakha, or keep the halakha even when it flies in the face of current notions of morality. However, there is a limit to unduly sanctifying the status quo and the current Orthodox culture. The color of one's clothes or hat or the language one uses should not necessarily be seen as holy or required just because they are the Orthodox culture of the moment.

Thus, Bais Abraham has this year hired a soon-to-graduate student of Yeshivat Maharat. We do not call her rabbi since she is not one, nor would it be a good idea to push her into a rabbinic box. I believe that Orthodox women today in positions

of leadership will help to define this role as a new one within the long list of Jewish female historical leadership typologies. The shofetet, the neviah, the song leader, all of these roles were held by famous Jewish women in other eras and I think that the Jewish Orthodox women leaders of today are on the verge of helping to define a new and much needed leadership role for the Jewish people which will help Jewish Orthodox life, values, and Torah to speak more clearly to the current Jewish community with a more vibrant and innovative shul makeup.

If we are willing, within the bounds of halakha, to open ourselves and our communities to embrace a wider and more varied range of Jewish ideas, Jewish spiritual tools and Jewish people, our synagogues will quickly become the beverage of choice, once again, for even the younger generation of Jews who are so thirsty for the word of God.