PEOPLE ARE IRREPLACEABLE

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A. Inspiration for Prayer

One of the classic debates in the Talmud concerns the basis for the three daily prayers of Shacharit, Mincha and Arbit. [1] According to Rabbi Yossi the son of Rabbi Chanina, these prayers were instituted by our Patriarchs, whereas according to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi, they were instituted by the Men of the Great Assembly in order to correspond with the daily tamid offerings.

While - taken at face value - Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Yehoshua are discussing the origin of the three daily prayers; I believe that the fundamental issue being discussed is the inspiration for the three daily prayers. According to Rabbi Yossi, we pray at these times because we wish to emulate our greatest Jewish role models - the Patriarchs; whereas according to Rabbi Yehoshua, we pray at these times because we wish to model our worship on the greatest Jewish institution - the Temple.[2] Thus, for Rabbi Yossi, inspiration comes from holy people, whereas for Rabbi Yeshoshua, inspiration comes from holy places.

Following the destruction of the First Temple, the synagogue was established as ‘a miniature sanctuary’[3] and consequently, in the modern era, this debate concerning the inspiration for prayer can be rephrased as follows: are we to find inspiration for prayer from people who pray, or from places for prayer?

The Talmud concludes its debate by stating that the prayers were instituted by our Patriarchs, but the Rabbis subsequently associated the three daily prayers with the tamid offerings to teach us that these prayers are considered obligatory. This suggests that while synagogues may support us with our prayer obligation, people teach us about prayer inspiration. Without inspiring people of prayer, we cannot have inspiring places of prayer.

B. People make synagogues

This concept of the centrality of people as the inspiration for prayer is supported by a different discussion in the Talmud [4] which addresses the following question: when does a synagogue become a holy place? The answer, which is subsequently cited in the classic halakhic codes,[5] is that a synagogue becomes holy from the moment people pray in the synagogue, because it is the holiness of people that creates the holiness of the synagogue. In fact, an extension of this concept is expressed by the verse 'in the multitude of people is the king's glory', [6] which suggests that not only do people convey holiness onto a synagogue, but in fact, the more people that pray in a synagogue, the more holiness there is in a synagogue. [7]

C. Synagogues as democracies?

In order to maintain a synagogue where everyone is considered to contribute spiritual value, the synagogue must value the principle of democracy. As Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen explains, 'the Kneset Ha-Gedolah …were committed to making the democratic institution of the synagogue a worthy competitor – and ultimate successor – of the priestly aristocracy which governed the Temple.' [8] Thus, as Rabbi Joseph Hertz explained, 'the sacred word, and not any sacramental or ritual act, was now the centre of worship; and that Sacred Word was the seat of religious authority and the source of religious instruction.' [9] This meant that 'the synagogue proved of incalculable importance' because through it, 'the Torah became the common property of the entire people, ..the synagogue became the "home" of the Jew.' [10]

However, at some moment in time, it seems that we forgot that it is people that make synagogues holy, and not the other way around. We have incorrectly adopted the position of Rabbi Yehoshua who claims that it is the place of prayer that attracts the people to prayer. The seat of authority, previously held by the Sacred Word, has been replaced by the 'Sacred President', and the synagogue is only "home" to those who can afford the fees. How did this transformation occur? What has led to this profound misrepresentation of Jewish values in the places of

Jewish worship?

D. The decline of Jewish fellowship

Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen has noted that ‘the Orthodox synagogue has truly preserved the spirit of the ancient Temple, from which it developed. The Temple was a bustling centre’[11] and ‘a noisy place, with people chattering excitedly, priests called ritual instructions to each other as animals were being dispatched and prepared for the altar, with oxen lowing, sheep bleating, children crying, Levites singing, vendors advertising their souvenirs, beggars importuning, and witnesses and litigants arguing loudly as they made their way to the Chamber of Hewn Stones to present their case to the Sanhedrin.’[12] He continues to observe that ‘it is that informal, and mildly irreverent, spirit which has determined and moulded the ethos of the traditional synagogue to this day.’[13] In the synagogue, ‘we have to feel “at home”. We have to be relaxed, natural, without inhibition. In synagogue, the dignity and decorum – even the dialogue – are of secondary consequence. It is the experience of Jewish fellowship underlying the concept of minyan, and the keen awareness of the Being before whom we are “appearing” and “assembling” …that are the primary considerations and preconditions of Jewish prayer.’[14]

This concept of ‘Jewish fellowship’ as the key factor in the synagogue atmosphere is explored further by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his essay on ‘The Community’. He writes:

Quite often a man finds himself in a crowd among strangers. He feels lonely. No one knows him, no one cares for him, no one is concerned for him… He begins to doubt his ontological worth. This leads to alienation from the crowd surrounding him. Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder and says: “Aren’t you Mr. So-and-so? I have heard so much about you.” In a fraction of a second his awareness changes. An alien being turns into a fellow member of an existential community (the crowd). What brought about the change? The recognition by somebody, the word![15]

This is a beautiful description of what is means to reach out to another and a perfect illustration of what Rabbi Cohen refers to as ‘Jewish fellowship’. However, as the small synagogues of the towns and villages have transferred to being large synagogues of the cities, there has been a measured decrease in such interactions in which a stranger is identified both physically and existentially, and consequently, coupled with a significant increase in alienation amongst Jews who visit synagogues but who subsequently leave as much a stranger as they were

when they arrived. Many Jews no longer feel at home in the synagogue. Why?

E. The rigid structure of the synagogue

Running parallel to the decline in Jewish fellowship has been the trend towards the institutionalization and rigidity of the synagogue as a response to the Reform movement. Judith Bleich has observed that, ‘the earliest stirrings of Reform centred on improvement of the worship service’[16] and ‘in keeping with the desire to present an appealing religious service, new emphasis was also placed upon beautifying the synagogue building.’[17]

In Germany, synagogue reform was expressed by the desire to play organs as part of the service; in England, it was expressed by the desire to establish mixed choirs, and in America, synagogue reform concerned itself with mixed seating. However, in Hungary, it was the location of the bimah which was ‘elevated to a question of ideology that became symbolic of the entire struggle for and against Reform,’ [18] and ‘it was in connection with his unequivocal ruling on the impermissibility of shifting the bimah from its central position that Hatam Sofer applied his oft-quoted aphorism, “Hadash asur min ha-Torah – innovation, ie. departure from accepted practice, is forbidden by the Torah.”’ [19]

In explaining the rationale for maintaining the place of the bimah in the centre of the synagogue, Lord Jakobovits [20] lists three reasons, each of which are found in the rulings of Rambam:
a) We place the bimah in the centre of the synagogue so that all those in the synagogue can hear the reader of the Torah. [21]
b) At the national convocation in Jerusalem every seven years [22] - known as Hakhel - a bimah was placed in the centre of the women’s part of the Temple court. The king would sit upon it and the men, women and children heard his reading whose purpose was to encourage them to perform mitzvot and strengthen them in the true faith. [23]
c) Each day during the festival of Sukkot, people made a circuit around the altar, and nowadays, we make a circuit around the bimah where a Sefer Torah is held, in memory of the Temple. [24]

Yet, while not all poskim viewed the removal of the bimah from its central position as a fundamental issue ,[25] this controversy demonstrated how ‘a comparatively minor halakhic matter assumed exaggerated significance,’ [26] and it led many Jews to conclude that it was the holiness of the synagogue that created the holiness of the people (which was why the synagogue could not undergo any change without it having an adverse effect on the community).

Moreso, it was from this controversy that the synagogue's halakhic integrity became associated with its halakhic inflexibility. Yet, while many synagogues still maintain a bimah in the centre of the sanctuary, many Jews no longer feel a part of the synagogue community.

In my humble opinion, while the three reasons cited above may infer that a synagogue may not move its bimah, they also infer that a synagogue must provide a wide range of services to maintain and engage its community, and while numerous communities 'won the battle' for the bimah, they are currently 'losing the war' against alienation from the synagogue.

F. The duties of a synagogue

I have previously noted that one reason offered for maintaining the bimah in the centre of the synagogue is so that all those in the synagogue can hear the reader of the Torah. While Rabbi Cohen speaks of the 'informal, and mildly irreverent, spirit which has determined and moulded the ethos of the traditional synagogue to this day,' [27] this should never come at the cost of being able to hear the Torah reading, and therefore, it is incumbent on a synagogue to maintain a respectful amount of decorum. Moreso, while a bimah may be placed in the centre of the synagogue, if a ladies gallery is placed in the rear of the synagogue it is highly unlikely that the women will be able to hear the Torah reading at all. Therefore, a synagogue should ensure that the Torah is read in the middle of where the community is, rather than in the middle of the men's section.

A second reason offered the central position of the bimah was so that the men, women and children could listen to the Hakhel reading whose function was to encourage them to perform mitzvot and strengthen them in the true faith. This teaches us that every synagogue should establish education programmes that speak to both the hearts and minds of all men, women and children, and not just the most knowledgeable.

The third reason provided for keeping the bimah at the centre of the synagogue refers to the hakafot which are recited on Sukkot when we walk in a circular movement around the bimah on which there is a Sefer Torah. This ritual, which is a 'homage to Torah,' [28] is understood by Rabbi Soloveitchik [29] to teach us that since 'all marchers are equidistant from the centre,' all Jews have equal access to Torah. Therefore, all communities should ensure that they are wheelchair accessible to allow 'all marchers' to be equidistant from the centre,[30] and in communities where women would wish for a greater involvement with Torah, the Sefer Torah should be passed to the women prior to

its reading and made available to women who wish to dance with a Sefer Torah on Simchat Torah. [31]

G. Concluding thoughts

Rabbi Soloveitchik writes that ‘to recognise a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person means to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him,’ and the fact that many young Jews are no longer found in our synagogues is a clear message that they think that we do not need them. We claim that the synagogue is the home of the Jew, but we ask people to move when they are sitting in our seat. We talk about Jewish fellowship, but do not welcome strangers; and whereas the synagogue was previously guided by the sacred word, we often do not even say a word to those who are visiting.

Synagogues should do more too. The Torah should be able to be heard and accessed by all, and family education should be a priority, but most importantly, a synagogue should regard every Jew as irreplaceable, because without people of prayer, we cannot have places of prayer.

[1] see BT Berachot 26b
[2] In fact, it may be possible to find further support for such a thesis from other teachings of Rabbi Yossi and Rabbi Yehoshua throughout the Talmud. Rabbi Yossi’s philosophy of prayer is person-centric and he emphasises that the power of prayer comes from the moment when people pray together rather than the place where people pray together (see BT Berachot 8a, see also BT Berachot 10b where many of the teachings he cites from his mentor, Rabbi Eliezer Ben Yaakov, also reflect this attitude. However, Rabbi Yehoshua’s philosophy of prayer is synagogue-centric and he often emphasised the importance of attending and praying in a synagogue (see BT Berachot 8a, 8b) and arriving early when attending synagogue (se BT Berachot 47b).
[3] Ezekiel 11:16
[4] JT Megillah 3:1
[5] see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 153
[6] Mishlei 14:28
[7] See BT Berachot 53a, Pesachim 64b, Rosh Hashanah 32b, Yoma 26a, Yoma 70a, Sukkah 52b, Megillah 27b, Menachot 62a
[8] Jeffrey M. Cohen Horizons of Jewish Prayer (London: The United Synagogue, 1986) p. 41
[9] Joseph H. Hertz The Authorized Daily Prayer Book (London: Soncino Press, 1976) p. xvi
[10] Ibid. p. xvii

[11] Jeffrey M. Cohen Horizons of Jewish Prayer pp. 143-144
[12] Ibid. pp. 144-145
[13] Ibid. p. 145
[14] Ibid. p. 146
[15] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 'The Community' Tradition 17:2 (Spring, 1978) p. 16
[16] Judith Bleich, 'Liturgical Innovation and Spirituality: Trends and Trendiness' in A. Mintz & L. Schiffman (ed.) Jewish Spirituality and Divine Law (New Jersey: Yeshiva University Press/KTAV, 2005) p. 319
[17] Judith Bleich, 'Liturgical Innovation and Spirituality: Trends and Trendiness' p. 362
[18] Ibid. p. 364
[19] Ibid. pp. 364-5
[20] Immanuel Jakobovits Jewish Law Faces Modern Problems (New York: Balshon Printing, 1965) p. 43
[21] See MT Hilkhot Tefillah 1:3
[22] See Devarim 31:10-12
[23] See MT Hilkhot Hagigah 3:1-4
[24] See MT Hilkhot Lulav 7:23
[25] See for example Iggerot Mosheh, Orach Chayim Vol. 2 (New York: 1963) no.'s 41& 42
[26] Judith Bleich, 'Liturgical Innovation and Spirituality: Trends and Trendiness' p. 366
[27] Jeffrey M. Cohen Horizons of Jewish Prayer p. 145
[28] Abraham R. Besdin Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav Volume Two – adapted from the lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (New Jersey: Ktav, 1989) p. 154
[29] While Rabbi Soloveitchik is talking about Shmini Atzeret & Simchat Torah where the Sifrei Torah circle the bimah, I have adapted these insights to the Hakafot of Sukkot
[30] Abraham R. Besdin Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav Volume Two – adapted from the lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik pp. 155-156
[31] See Nachum Rabinovitch Responsa Siach Nachum (Maaleh Adumim, 2008) No. 40
[32] Joseph B. Soloveitchik, 'The Community' p. 16