Voices in Baltimore

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Within a three-mile radius of my home, there are about 60 Orthodox synagogue options. Sixty. It's a staggering number—and even more staggering that despite this number, new synagogues and minyanim are being formed on a fairly regular basis. In fact, not that long ago, I and my husband, along with about 20 other families, created a new synagogue in Baltimore: Netivot Shalom.

Why would we feel the need, in such a strong Orthodox community, to "break away" from other synagogues?

I cannot speak for other minyanim and synagogues that may form for a variety of reasons—from convenience to rallying around a particular rabbi. But for us, not starting a new synagogue would have meant that we probably would have skipped town to find what we now have at Netivot Shalom. Synagogue life has always been central to me—and I simply did not find an Orthodox community where members were heard—and encouraged to speak, learn, and grow. Particularly as a woman in a more right-leaning community, my voice was silenced; literally, I was regularly shushed when praying too loudly, or was told, "not in our synagogue" when I asked about creating more opportunities for women in synagogue life.

Netivot Shalom was founded to fill a void in the community, and create a space where everyone has a voice and an active role.

What is wrong with “mainstream” synagogues? Inherently, nothing. Mainstream synagogues have for generations inspired thousands of Jews to engage religiously, socially, ethically. So what has changed? I want to focus on the three main reasons we started Netivot Shalom, all of which comment to some extent on what may be amiss in many Orthodox synagogues.

1. Size Matters.

Many synagogues have become a little “too successful” in the numbers department. More members means more funds for programming, and more people with whom to pray and connect in meaningful ways. It also means that people can get lost if they are not part of established cliques; they don’t always have opportunities to participate in services and programs; they don’t feel like their presence matters. Whether or not they show up, the show will go on.

Another issue that arises from huge congregations is the divisions into separate services: Within one synagogue, there may be a hashkama (early) minyan, a teen minyan, the “regular” minyan, the beginner’s minyan, the young families’ minyan, the Sephardic minyan, and the Kiddush club. These groups may or may not interact with each other. The multiple-minyanim within one roof leads to two problems:

a. Families and friends are separated for prayer, and the synagogue experience becomes a factionalized, rather than bonding experience.
b. One of the beauties of the synagogue experience is the opportunity to interact and grow with people with varied interests, people of multiple generations, people whose life experiences and perspectives are different than our own. When given the option, people are more likely to gravitate toward minyanim where the social community is more homogeneous in terms of age, stage in life, or interests.

Having only one minyan enforces diversity—diversity of thought, background, and religious ideology. Shiv’im panim la-Torah, the idea that Torah has 70 facets, becomes real in a diverse minyan.

Although our community is still small, drawing about 70 people on any given Shabbat, social and religious heterogeneity is a given. In our services, although our minhag is set, different tunes and voices are heard from people of all backgrounds and ages: In any given week, Spanish and Portuguese, Syrian, and Ashkenazic ta’amim are used for Torah and Haftarah readings; women’s voices are heard for the Prayers for the Government and Army, shiurim, and/or Kiddush; children’s voices are heard for An’im Zemirot and the concluding prayers. Our

weekly sermons are delivered by a large rotation of members—men, women, and sometimes children—who represent a wide range of ideologies and backgrounds.

2. Who Runs the Show?

Who is responsible for running the synagogue? The board of directors? The rabbi? The members? I have been a member of synagogues with different political systems. In some, the board controls everything—including some decisions that would be better left to a halakhic authority with a sensitivity to the needs of the community. In these synagogues, it is often a rule of egos; any dissent was quashed, and members were regularly discredited and pushed aside, told “You’re the only one who feels this way.” This is no way to run a community organization.

On the other hand, for a few years, our family was part of a synagogue where the rabbi held all of the power, threatening to quit if the board/membership didn’t vote a certain way on big issues. This authoritarian model didn’t work for us either.
Most successful synagogues have the rabbi-board work as a system of checks and balanaces; this seems to work practically—but can be disenfranchising to members who may want more information about ritual, financial, and other decisions. Where are the voices of the members? And how should they be incorporated into the runnings of the synagogue?

At Netivot Shalom, it’s been rather easy, since to date, we have no rabbi (although we are currently in the throes of a rabbinic search). All board members are elected by the membership, and all members have a voice in ALL issues that affect the community. Halakhic decisions are made by a committee, made up of men and women from different demographic groups, with the advice of an Orthodox rabbi. This rabbi presents the range of acceptable halakhic options, and after studying and deliberating on the different views, the committee makes a recommendation to the board. If it is an issue that affects everyone, such as the height and design of the mehitza, or women saying Kiddush for everyone, the entire community votes—after a series of classes in which everyone can learn the basis of the halakhic options and explore the positions that both permit and forbid the recommendations. Thus, having a voice in synagogue decision-making is not only an opportunity for transparency and empowerment; it’s an opportunity for everyone to learn and grow in our knowledge of Jewish texts.

3. Inertia Rules.

People often find comfort in the familiar, in the status quo. Yes, Netivot Shalom is a comfortable, haimish place. The service is standard nussah Ashkenaz, and the structure of the prayers echoes that of most Orthodox synagogues. But innovation, with sensitivity to all members, is a driving force in our community. We are not driven by inertia, but by intentionality and opportunities for growth. For example, on Purim, we studied the halakhot around women reading Megillat Esther for men and women, and concluded that there are no halakhic barriers to this practice. However, some members were simply uncomfortable with the change; so we opted to have two simultaneous readings—one only read by men, and one read by men and women. Similarly, when the community elected to have women say Kiddush for the community, it was with the caveat that we announce (whether a man or a woman is saying Kiddush), something to the extent of "So-and-so will now make Kiddush. If you would like to be yotzei, listen and answer Amen. If you would like to make your own Kiddush, grape juice is available at the drinks table." Any change in ritual practice can cause angst, and thus must be approached slowly and deliberately, with sensitivity to the needs—halakhic and extra-halakhic—of the community members.

Regarding mainstream synagogues, Rabbbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo writes, "… God is relocating. He doesn't want to live in a place where His ongoing creation is unappreciated and even denied."

I am honored to be a part of a community where God's ongoing creation is appreciated, studied, and explored. I am honored to be a part of a community where everyone has a voice. I am honored to be a part of a community where our tagline defines us as a community that is "committed to learning and living God's Torah. Through this engagement we seek to perpetuate the values of respecting the Tselem Elokim in each person, of Ahavat Yisrael, and of Kavod haBeriyot." For more information, please visit our website at www.netivotshalom.net.