

ESSAY CONTEST: Making Orthodox Synagogues More Meaningful

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We thank all those who shared their ideas on how to make Orthodox synagogues more meaningful. We've chosen SEVEN winners. Their suggestions can help our synagogues and communities be stronger, more creative, more engaging. The winning essays are from Pam Ehrenkranz (Stamford, Connecticut); Yael Kassorla (Atlanta, Georgia); Dr. Alan Krinsky (Providence, Rhode Island); Rabbi Arnold Samlan (West Hempstead, New York); Barbara Mendes (Los Angeles, California); Leonard Stein (Beer Sheva, Israel); and Hinda Bramnick (Boca Raton, Florida).

We hope that you discuss these suggestions among friends and congregants.

Let us work together for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.

Enhancing the Role of Women

By

Pam Ehrenkranz (Stamford, Connecticut)

I keep asking Orthodox rabbis, “How would Shabbat morning services be any different if every woman in the community stayed home?” Interestingly, the responses are uniform: “We would feel bad, but in practice, nothing would change.”

Being told that your presence is irrelevant will ultimately have an effect. It did on me. I began to wonder: If I am not necessary, and I can pray alone, and many rabbis believe that I have no obligation to be at communal prayer, why go? Why

get dressed, walk in the freezing cold or the unbearable heat, to a place, where, for all intents and purposes, my presence is superfluous?

To be clear, I am observant and respectful of traditional approaches to halacha. I am also respectful of innovative, as well as simple, ways to be more inclusive, to make women relevant, without crossing the boundaries of halacha. Some of those ways are already being implemented in minyanim around the world and the Modern Orthodox world needs to broaden the discussion about women and the synagogue.

Granted, many women are quite happy to be shul spectators; & so are many men. Yet everything an organization does speaks about its values, right down to how the phone is answered. As of now, we are not only signaling that women do not count in a minyan, but that they don't count at all. So here are some thoughts about what we might institute as a way of saying that women are very much counted in the community; that their scholarship is admired; that their presence is critical. None of these concepts are new in the marketplace of ideas; they have been talked and written about in so many places that I cannot credit them to anyone in particular, only to a growing climate of opinion:

1. Don't start davening until 10 men and at least 2 women are present. At partnership minyanim, it is often the case that the group waits for both ten men and ten women. For our purposes, it is not the critical mass that is at issue—it is the message that without women, we do not constitute a Kehillah.
2. Invite women scholars to deliver divreitorah from the bimah and to be scholars in residence. Thanks to places like Drisha, Nishmat, Matan, Pardes, and Yeshiva University's graduate programs for women, we have a dynamic group of women who are inspirational, knowledgeable and worthy of our attention.
3. Have a woman read the prayer for the Agunah. The agunah issue needs to be on the minds of the congregation and this is an appropriate way to accomplish that.
4. Offer equal education for boys and girls. In places where the boys are learning separately, the girls' curriculum should be the same. There is no danger in teaching girls to leyn. Hopefully, they will be able to join women's tefillah groups if they want to, or help their children in the future, when they learn for their own bar and bat mitzvahs. To borrow a slogan, educated Jews are our best customers. They come back, they engage, they lead and they are the future.

5. Eliminate the language of "women's" and "men's" learning. It's adult learning and like wine and a good meal, it is better when it's shared.
6. Encourage women to fill leadership roles in the synagogue. As women are no longer illiterate, they can no longer be lumped into the category of slave or minor when it comes to education, status and ability. It is no longer reasonable to bar them from the boardroom. It would seem to reason that if a woman can make decisions as president of an Ivy League university, a judge, or a surgeon, she can handle the synagogue board meetings.
7. Invite new moms to recite BirkatHagomel in their own voices.
8. Welcome and promote women's tefillah groups. Many have been meeting for over thirty years, some inside and some outside of synagogues. It not only promotes Jewish literacy, it helps find a way to include young girls and women actively in the service.

So to the rabbis who have the power to make changes in their shuls, I say, it is not enough to just feel bad about women staying home from shul. Take a step and welcome women in.

Using New Technologies for Teaching and Learning Torah

By

Yael Kassorla (Atlanta, Georgia)

There are two conflicting pressures for the religious Jew in today's society: the need to deeply connect with Hashem, and the lack of time to do so.

Although most of the emphasis has been on getting people through the door for Minyanim and other synagogue-centric events, I think it is also important to connect with members through electronic means as well.

I know how important a religious Jewish discussion group was to me when I needed to more deeply understand the parasha or some issue of halacha; but unfortunately, those discussion groups are not usually synagogue affiliated. Instead, they are loose affiliations of every type of observance level and minhag, which can become both frustrating and confusing. We need to contain this enthusiasm for learning within our own Kehillah.

Our rabbis and lay-people need to stop using the internet as a podium, and start using it as a point of discussion, bringing the probing questions of the study-hall to everyone with access to a computer or smart phone.

Through the use of a moderated Facebook page, for example, or a Diigo<<http://www.diigo.com>> group (which affords the ability to not only bookmark websites, but highlight and comment upon them) synagogue-affiliated rabbis can conduct asynchronous discussion weekly with groups of synagogue members who find themselves unable to attend the usual lunch-and-learn or study sessions with the rabbi, but who hunger for intellectual stimulation and deeper understanding of Torah and Talmud.

Then, instead of technology working to alienate our membership, technology can, instead, cement them. Those who feel disconnected can reconnect and, when they do get back through those synagogue doors, they can feel like they haven't really been away.

It's time to stop ignoring the internet and start embracing it. Our rabbis must be educated in this new medium in order to reach, especially, our youth and young adults.

Synagogue Citizenship

by

Alan Krinsky (Providence, Rhode Island)

A common lament heard during the last decade or two draws attention to the commoditization of virtually all aspects of our lives. This process has infiltrated education and healthcare, despite the fact that knowledge and health are, in some regards, priceless values. And such consumerism has even reached religion.

Following the example of "Cafeteria Catholicism," many people now view their religious lives from a consumer perspective: I purchase what meets my needs and discard the rest. This trend has even impacted Modern Orthodox synagogues, where commitment to minyan and behavior in synagogue can be lax.

We require a different model—not consumerism, but rather something akin to citizenship. We ought to reconceptualize our very notion of synagogue membership. Members should not be seen as consumers, whose needs and desires must be satisfied. Instead, as with citizenship, membership should be experienced as a privilege with important responsibilities, with the synagogue

community as a sort of polity in which members have a stake.

In many Hareidi synagogues, meaningfulness is evident. Yet it is the meaningfulness neither of consumers nor citizens, but rather of subjects. And although the Modern Orthodox too recognize that, ultimately, we are servants of the Holy One, this need not be reflected in an apparent conformity and obeisance to an unchallengeable Daat Torah reminiscent of the doctrine of Papal Infallibility.

By contrast, we ought to build places of meaning with a more engaged, activist bent, where new people are given citizenship — not membership — applications and welcomed as citizens, not merely members. If we cater to and treat our members as consumers because we fear them leaving, then we will get consumers; but if we raise our expectations and ask our members to be committed citizens, we will find such citizens and together build attractive and meaningful institutions.

Rethinking the Modern Orthodox Synagogue Model

by

Rabbi Arnold Samlan (West Hempstead, New York)

·Rabbinic Leadership – Rabbis must move from being sole authorities to being facilitators, connecting pods of knowledge and knowledge holders.

·Women's Contributions - Orthodox synagogues that do not allow women to lead or speak publicly lose out on their knowledge, leadership and insights. Orthodox synagogues must fully benefit from the potential contributions of women. The commitment, through concrete actions, must permeate Orthodox Jewish communities everywhere.

·Relevance - Orthodox synagogues' values must integrate into the real lives of their members. The synagogue must communicate the values that add to the broader society in which its members live, and empower its members to bring those values to bear on a multi-cultural, democratic society.

·Increasing meaningful access - It's time for every Orthodox synagogues to be fully handicapped accessible (including the *bima*). Synagogues need new

siddurim that have modern translations, do away with inexplicable Kabbalistic ramblings, and challenge pray-ers to explore prayers' meanings rather than spoon feeding pre-digested answers. Rabbis and those who teach Torah have to be honest and open to the fluidity of traditional practice and beliefs that has been true throughout Jewish history, and allow openness to acceptable alternatives in so many areas of *halacha* and practice.

- Language - Orthodox synagogues must stop, and encourage members to stop, using the word "religious" to equal "traditionally observant" or "Orthodox." I have friends in each Jewish movement (as well as those outside of movements) who are deeply religious. Spiritual superiority complexes do not have a place today

- Expand *chesed* -Orthodox synagogues should lead in bringing *chesed* to the world. Synagogues should work in food kitchens, volunteer in homeless shelters, run blood drives.

- Move towards spirituality - Synagogues need to help Jews to recognize the connection between the practice, services, and broader spiritual goals.

Orthodox Synagogues Need Leaders of Women

by

Barbara Mendes (Los Angeles, California)

Women are half the Jewish people. In today's congregations, the women in attendance may be wage-earners in need of blessings for success . Today's full-time Moms are educated and sophisticated members of society. Women function on the highest levels of the global society in which we live. Can't we harness more of their power by making the synagogue a place that stimulates and inspires them without insulting their sense of worth?

Women who are intellectually and spiritually engaged in prayer services enrich a congregation with power and spirit.

I suggest creating a post called Rosh ha Nashim, or Eim ha Nashim, or some Hebrew title designating the Leader of Women. It should be a post of honor. The Leader of Women would be available to guide newcomers who need help, and would inspire and strengthen all the women. The Leader of Women would know which women need special blessings. She would know which members of the congregation need special help. How would she know? Women communicate with one another, and become aware of issues in a natural way.

Modern women can fall in love with our beautiful prayer services. Devotion and attention to prayer is one of the great powers of Judaism; I believe the women of today's world have as much need for these magical prayers as do men. Having a leader of their own will inspire and guide women to be more engaged in communal prayer, putting mystic rewards in their reach. I am the first to see that women don't need the communal prayers the way men do, but this call was for ways to strengthen the Orthodox Synagogue, so I am addressing the prayer services held in that setting.

Ha KadoshBarukh Hu looks and sits on both sides of the mehitzah. The Holy One sees the power and passion on the women's side. Only Ha KadoshBarukh Hu could have created the human trajectory which led to the powerful women of today's world.

I believe Orthodox women would be empowered, strengthened, educated, and inspired by having a leader of their own. I believe that inspired women strengthen and inspire the congregation, even if they are not counted in the minyan. The very fact that it's not an endless obligation for them can add zest and excitement to women's participation in formal prayer services.

Let us join forces to call out to God. Let a Leader of Women be appointed to focus and harness the spiritual strength of women, which in turn will strengthen the entire congregation.

Making Synagogue Real

By

Leonard Stein (Beer Sheva, Israel)

If the creative voice of the Jewish people flourishes, Orthodox synagogues will become more meaningful and attractive.

Here's a simple method to avoid prayer as a heavy burden: slow down. A prayer leader whoraces through an Amidah does not allow the community to reach out to their Creator. Fast praying is a developed habit. If the synagogue changes the rate of words spoken to even a normal speaking pace, the community will strengthen. Creativity in prayer occurs not only when finding ourselves praying the Amidah honestly, but when we are given the room to provide our own supplications. It doesn't have to take an hour in the fashion of the early sages; even 10 minutes of prayer with a personal supplication will affect the meaning of

the synagogue.

Furthermore, a synagogue should hear their members' voices. Allow anyone, including women, the opportunity to give a *devar Torah* on Friday night. People who give *divrei Torah* know how enriching it feels to study the *parashah*, struggle through contradictions, and search the soul for a personal *pidush*. Why not give this opportunity to the folk? Signing up for this week's 5 minute *devar Torah*, which necessitates learning and public speaking, will awaken everyone. A synagogue should sign people up to read a portion of the week's *parashah*. What was once common practice has been relegated to the *hazan*. Those who haven't learned or forgot the *ta'amim* (trop) can learn from volunteers, and Torah will literally flow from the mouths of the people each week.

Offer creative learning opportunities that break stereotypes. How about learning *piyutim* on Tuesdays or learning agricultural *halakhot* through planting the synagogue's organic garden? Tying the passions of this generation with tradition has always strengthened a community.

When such creative outlets open, more people will love going to synagogue.

Making Orthodox Synagogues More Meaningful

By

Hinda Bramnick (Boca Raton, Florida)

Many people perceive that Orthodoxy is turning to the right. Those on the right feel that staying right of center is only way that traditional Judaism will survive. Jews in the center or left of center are becoming demoralized.

The question of how to make Orthodox shuls more meaningful can be answered by examining how things are done in Boca Raton, Florida. The Boca Raton Synagogue has employed very ordinary tactics to get to where it currently is.

There are three basic components that make a synagogue the kind of place that congregants want to attend. They are diversity, expansion, and pride.

Boca Raton Synagogue (BRS) has been consistently growing its membership for over 20 years. Our rabbi proposed that Orthodox ideologies and practices could be expanded to meet the needs of the community. His motto was "today's drivers are tomorrow's walkers". That forethought not only opened the doors to prospective congregants, but it succeeded in changing the mentality of the frum

community.

Diversity became apparent when smaller groups within the congregation asked for their own minyan, and it was granted to them. Women asked for inclusiveness in education and religious rites. Some were permitted immediately, such as Hakafot. Educational opportunities for women to learn and teach were also embraced. We have not yet arrived at full access for women in religious life, but it is a work in progress.

Expansion of our membership became the bi-product of our diversity. We became a multi-cultural shul. We were encouraged from the pulpit to welcome our fellow Jews who had not experienced a spiritual way of life. It had the effect of making us more tolerant of each other.

We became a proud congregation. When a new rabbi was appointed, we knew that his big tent philosophy would continue to benefit us.

We are an evolving congregation, ever in a state of change. If we dialogue with our rabbis and express our wishes for a more vibrant Jewish experience we can affect the shifts we would like to see in our synagogues.