What do we expect from our synagogues?

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In light of the new Pew study on Jewish affiliation, there will be a lot of hand-wringing about what the Jewish community can do to get people more engaged. My revolutionary suggestion? Get to synagogue.

People are always telling me that they'd love to come to shul more often, but they're just not as religious as I am. Its one of the hazards of being married to a rabbi. Strangers think they know my exact level of religiosity, whatever that means. So here's what I'll say. You have no idea what goes on inside my head. And I have no idea what you're thinking, either. Even more blasphemous, I don't care.

Prayer is a funny thing. Many of us, if pressed, would say that we've had our most transformative moments, our most intimate experiences with the divine, when we were alone. When I'm on top of a mountain and see a breathtaking vista, I marvel at the brilliance of the creator. In the moments my children were born, and the pain magically stopped, I looked into their eyes and saw God working, literally through me.
Now let's get real. I've had four children, and I don't plan on having another one every time I long for a connection with the divine. And who has time to climb mountains on a regular basis!

Any onewho expects those kind of moments continuously, spontaneously erupting out of daily or weekly prayer, is, to put it bluntly, deluded.

Here's what coming to shul on a regular basis has the power to deliver:

Entertainment

For those of us with children at home, shabbat services provide friends and activities, a free playdate without screens which you need only minimally supervise.
We grownups also get an opportunity to socialize without 12 emails back and forth planning a dinner date/ securing a sitter/ making reservations. Just show up Saturday morning.

Real live community

During the week we focus on friends who tend to fall within a few years of our own age. We get lost in the priorities of those micro communities and forget about the real needs of everyone else. On shabbat at services we are part of a community of all ages/ backgrounds/ experiences. Children chat with elderly couples, empty nesters give new moms a break and bounce cranky babies. You notice someone newly saying Kaddish, and ask about her loss.

Cultural Fluency

Rather than sitting through dry classes on liturgy in school or adult ed, people who regularly attend services attain fluency with the service simply by being there. Children and adults who have achieved mastery over the service feel at home in shul rather than feeling alienated. Circular logic, to be sure, but true nonetheless. These people are more likely to become leaders in all aspects of the Jewish world.

A Wider Focus

There will be many who suggest that the answer to engagement is individualized programming –Torah yoga, shabbat biking clubs, kabbalah for teens. These focused programs may bring people in the building, but they do little for the goal of creating long term connection and community. On the contrary, they send a message that in order for Judaism to be meaningful it must constantly be tailored to your specific needs. Real community is a place where we learn to care about people with decidedly different experiences and perspectives. The more we fracture our programming to
reflect the perceived needs of the few, the more we send the message that Judaism is only interesting to me inasmuch as it confirms the beliefs I already have.

Holiness

Judaism is not a religion based solely on belief. We do not police the thoughts of the souls who walk through our doors. But the ancient requirement that certain prayers need a minyan means that there is holiness embedded in the connection between Jews. It doesn't come from the unwavering belief in God held by the people in the room. It comes from our connections with one another.

Holiness is in the interactions between the generations. Its in the 15 year old helping the 9 year old find the page. In the inherently selfish middle schooler giving an arm to an elderly man not quite ready to give in to a walker. In the whispers in the pews between a newly unemployed single mother and the business owner who might be able to help her land on her feet. In the collective groan from the room when the Rabbi uses an embarrassingly bad pun. In the unmitigated joy we feel the first time the couple long struggling with infertility brings their new baby to services. In the very act of choosing to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.

One of the questions in the Pew survey was whether anyone in your household is a member of a synagogue. Of the people the survey identified, 60% responded "no." While a few of the children in these households will undoubtedly become future leaders, most of our leaders will come from the 40%. It is a countercultural choice to be part of a group less concerned with rugged individualism and more with the (gasp!) collective. And those who come to leadership in the next generation will be the beneficiaries of today's old fashioned joiners, keeping the seats warm and the lights on and the spark alive.

Mountaintops can be transformative. But Jewish community is built by delivering shiva meals and learning a last minute torah reading and even the kvetchers in the back of the room. By looking someone else in the eye. Is there something of the divine there? I literally do not

know. Faith is ever changing and intensely personal. Your belief has no effect on me. Your choice to throw your lot in with the rest of the Jewish people? That makes my life holy, every day.