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Back to Shul: Innovate To Beat the Synagogue Slump

Opinion

By Sid SchwarzPublished September 09, 2009, issue of [September 18, 2009](#).

In the coming weeks, Jews will be frequenting places to which they rarely go — their synagogues. One rabbi I know did an anonymous survey of his congregation on the reason they came to synagogue on the High Holy Days. The most common response was: “to see my friends.” It is enough to get clergy to question why they spend so much time preparing for services. One huge Kiddush might just do the trick!

What is clear is that the Jewish community is in a time of transition, and many synagogues — and the national denominations of which they are part — are behind the curve. The recession has put increased focus on institutions that under-deliver on their promise because funds are scarce. Philanthropists, who are quickly overtaking federations as the arbiters of what programs and institutions will live or die, want to see a return on investment. Synagogues that engage relatively small percentages of their membership on a weekly basis do not recommend themselves for such portfolios, and the trend lines are moving in the wrong direction.

Survey data from 1990 told us that, at any given moment in time, about 35% of Jews were affiliated with synagogues and that over a lifetime 80% of Jews would affiliate (usually in the years leading up to a child’s bar or bat mitzvah). The data from the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey showed that those numbers had dropped to 30% and 73% respectively.

Perhaps even more significantly, younger Jews who are most committed to pursuing Jewish life and learning are voting with their feet by creating alternatives to the American synagogue. Around the country there is an upsurge of Jewish prayer and study groups that use rented facilities, have few if any professional staff and whose energy comes mostly from the members.

The phenomenon is very similar to the Havurah movement of the 1970s. Heavily influenced by the American counter-culture, young Jews then felt that they could create more authentic expressions of Judaism than those which could be found in American synagogues. Ironically, many of the leaders of the Havurah movement now lead major Jewish communal institutions, including serving as rabbis of synagogues.

But in the short run, synagogues are challenged to prove that they can become compelling spiritual homes for Jews. Most families affiliate with synagogues for 10 to 15 years to see their kids through a cursory Jewish education and their bar or bat mitzvahs. The data indicate that few families seem to get enough out of the experience to retain their memberships.

Many wonder whether synagogues' denominational identities are part of the problem. Jews are looking for innovation and engagement; denominational labels convey conventionality. We know that American Jews are notoriously non-ideological, joining synagogues more based on convenience (e.g. proximity) and friendship patterns than for a particular denominational set of practices and beliefs. And parallel to the anti-institutional bias of young Jews is the growing trend toward trans-denominational approaches to Jewish life. The strength of organizations like Hillel, community Jewish day schools, Birthright Israel and the American Jewish World Service prove that Jewish life can be nurtured without denominational labels and that many Jews prefer it that way.

Still, it is premature to write an obituary for the American synagogue. It continues to be the primary retail outlet for meeting the educational and life-cycle needs of Jews, and no other institution seems positioned to take its place. Moreover, there are a handful of very creative rabbis out there and foundations ready to underwrite innovative new approaches for synagogue life.

What does seem critical is to encourage many more rabbis and congregational lay leaders to take some risks in the hope of making synagogues far more compelling places for serious Jewish engagement. For too many Jews coming to shul on the holidays, the fare will be predictable and will not result in a return visit for another 12 months.

We can do better.

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