

Rethinking the Synagogue for the 21st Century

Imagine A Synagogue For The 21st Century By Lawrence A. Hoffman, Fall 1996

Imagine a synagogue where people stay, finding it driven by spiritual vision and offering more than they ever thought possible.

THE SYNAGOGUE IS OUR BEST HOPE for Jewish survival into the coming century. Whereas less than a third of the total Jewish population ever joins any other form of Jewish organization, almost three out of four Jews affiliate with a synagogue. The problem is that those who become members with a particular end in mind leave when that end is served. Imagine, instead, a synagogue where people stay, finding it driven by spiritual vision and offering more than they ever thought possible.

But change is necessary. Consider, for instance, our near fixation on organ music. Nineteenth-century Reform Jews fought for the right to use the pipe organ because it reproduced a veritable orchestra of sound and filled a huge cathedral-like space. Now, however, most of us do not have cathedrals, which, in any event, can be filled just as well by microphone systems linked to any number of instrumental options for music that would be as spiritually fulfilling for us as the organ was for our forebears. Sometimes "old is good"-tradition matters – but liturgy in the 1990s that sounds like the 1960s should be suspect, and synagogue boards that "do business" the way they did in the 1950's might consider that a society of digital sound and the World Wide Web is a far cry from a time when black & white TV was new and we thought that Ozzie and Harriet were typical or that Father Knows Best.

How should synagogues plan for the 21st century, when we may at last know peace in the Middle East, when half the Jewish population may not list Judaism as its religion of birth, and where a satellite-linked global community challenges Judaism to express an equally global value system, with its age-old promise of one God, one humanity, and Israel, a holy people called to complete the work of creation?

Synagogue 3000 envisions a future that overcomes four outmoded habits of thought. Tomorrow's synagogue successes will be more than ethnic, corporate, consumerist, and pediatric.

More than Ethnic Our immigrant forebears bequeathed us a Judaism that was mostly an ethnic thing. Even twenty years ago, Jews still harked back to Europe for "authentic" Judaism, packaged for Americans in romantic shtetl memories – remember Fiddler on the Roof, when Zero Mostel brought down the house singing, "Tradition, Tradition!" The suburbs, newly opened to Jews, sported synagogues as ethnic addresses where we could mix with other Jews, eat lox and bagels, and tell Jewish jokes.

Our serious pursuits were ethnic too: saving Soviet Jews and making Israel secure as a Jewish homeland. But ethnicity was appropriate then: 95% of us had been born Jewish and actually had old-country Jewish memories.

Nowadays, by contrast, Baptists too serve bagels, and Borscht-belt humor embarrasses more than it amuses. Judaism is not solely a religion – we are a people, not just a faith – but objectively speaking, modern Jews who want only music, drama, or food may prefer Mozart to Yiddish lullabies, Shakespeare to Second Avenue, and nouvelle cuisine to overstuffed corn-beef sandwiches. Jewish identity has shifted from the ethnic to the spiritual.

More than Corporate-Consumerist It is not self-evident that synagogues need corporate flow charts and rule by committee – largely a legacy of the 1920s, when synagogues learned efficiency training. But with efficiency came a division of labor between "management" (the clergy and staff) and synagogue boards. Boards hold management liable for marketing and selling Judaism (the "product") to members, who are often seen as a "market" buying synagogue "services" with subscription packages called "dues." Management designs product lines like Friday night services, life-cycle events, and a school for kids, and then packages them for consumer appeal-Tot-Shabbat and First Friday ("Come and hear the speaker!"). The board counts members to measure market infiltration; if market share falls, management is terminated, beginning with the rabbi, who is the CEO.

Dues become discretionary expenditures to be balanced against goods (a concert series, perhaps), and synagogues become "limited liability communities" that are joined for a fee and then held liable for discrete services rendered: religious school slots, High Holiday seats, a bar/bat mitzvah, or a rabbi on call. Members leave when the cost outruns the value of anticipated services; or they stay, through inertia or responsibility, but are rarely seen.

Rabbis are apt to complain about a "job" that has ceased being a calling; managerial duties rob them of time to be serious about Torah as a tree of life and to minister to congregants who actually want to hold it fast. Board stalwarts grumble at the constant struggle to entice others into necessary administrative or fiscal decision-making tasks, without the vision that makes it all worthwhile.

No one is happy with this adversarial game that pits consumers against producers and board against management. There is nothing Jewish or spiritual about a system designed for rapid burnout in professionals and volunteers alike.

More than Pediatric Since the 1950s, moreover, when suburbanites with baby-boom children determined synagogue agendas, we have been marketing

especially to children. Nobody anticipated a time when those children, now parents themselves, might need answers to adult anxieties like broken marriages, the proliferation of cancer, community disintegration, and an anxious quest for meaning. Who would have predicted that we would live, as we do, in the third great religious revival in North American history: mega-churches thrive, the religious right is rampant, books on God become surprise bestsellers. We have grown up; we have grown older; we have been sobered into adulthood.

If we still esteem Plato, Shakespeare, and Beethoven, it is because they directed their genius at adults. We should value Judaism too, but only if it defies being reduced to a comic-book plot line or an hour-long youth-group program. Consumer synagogues which still market to children so as to attract their parents but provide nothing for the parents themselves, except what they get vicariously through their children, will eventually lose both parents and children.

Why Spirituality? Underlying all these challenges is the fact that we live in an age of choice. My Jewish parents could not settle where I now live. Jewish doctors here need no longer limit their practice to Jewish hospital. I commute with Jewish neighbors who run corporations that once wouldn't even hire them. Their children settle where they want, marry anyone they wish, and join any religion that promises a spiritual response to life's challenges.

But freedom comes at a cost: the death of the certainties that used to shape our lives. Twenty-year-olds once knew where they were heading; now thirty-year-olds still languish in extended adolescent-like uncertainty over who they are and what they want to be or do. Conflict between home and workplace is an overwhelming theme, especially for women. Middle-age crises haunt the nightmares of the outwardly successful, who secretly wonder why they became doctors or lawyers or teachers anyway, and wish they could rerun the tape of college and work choices but fear it is too late. A generation of baby-boomers has become a generation of seekers, while their parents have become the first generation of grandparents free to move into retirement colonies; however, they have had to substitute strangers for neighbors and phone calls for the hugs of nearby grandchildren.

The call for spirituality is a response to this age of freedom, where even the healthiest adults want to know that their lives have shape, that some values are eternal, that intellectual pursuit of ultimate questions is not in vain. It is the conviction that where mandated communities called families have collapsed, communities of choice called synagogues can be centers of vision, hope, insight, and care.

A synagogue for the 21st century will be driven by a vision of becoming a post-ethnic and post-pediatric community of life-long spiritual meaning and honest

human care. We are on the road from ethnic to spiritual, pediatric to adult, corporate to caring, and consumerist to cooperative. Our road to synagogue respiritualization encompasses four specific areas.

1. Prayer – a synagogue where ritual rings true: It is human nature to want to ritualize our lives – hence our fascination with birthday parties, sports extravaganzas, or even gala openings of new malls. Religious ritual should go deeper, however, connecting us with God and history, filling us with hope, enlarging our vision, and expanding the circle of people we call our own. Many synagogues are refashioning their services to do just that.

In others, however, worship is still sparsely attended, and widely perceived as irrelevant, distant, and dull. Ritual there is like a distant movie about the things that count, not an immediate experience of them. People find its language banal, its music unrecognizable, its purpose baffling. They enter as strangers, sit with people they do not know, and leave untouched.

A Synagogue for the 21st Century will feature prayer that is engaging, empowering, and participatory. It will celebrate the wholeness and mission of the community, the caring link among members, and the potential of every individual to make a difference in the world.

2. Study – a synagogue where learning runs deep: Pediatric synagogues expend massive resources on religious schools for children but make it almost impossible for adults to grow through Judaism as they grow through life. Outside the synagogue, continuing education has become big business, as all across the continent people enroll in college courses, elder hostels, and even vacations that promise to expand the mind.

Yet synagogue goers cannot get beyond the elementary.

How is this possible for a religion whose single most distinctive quality is the promise that God speaks to us through study?

A synagogue for the 21st Century will be a place of learning for people of all ages. It will invite us to grow through Jewish discovery at every stage of life.

3. Good deeds – a synagogue where members matter and compassion counts: Most people want to matter. As busy as they are, they will devote time if they think they can thereby make a genuine difference. But corporate synagogues assign all social action to a single committee, which potential members (who are already drowning in responsibilities) are apt to see more as a life sentence than as a life-line. Long-time committee members become burned out, spreading their limited efforts over the entire spectrum of good that cries out to be done.

Committees in general should be rethought, especially in the social action sphere of synagogue life. They are distinctly the wrong structure for engaging members in the spiritual work of tikkun olam, "repairing the world." Imagine, instead, a synagogue which functions also as a massive center for voluntarism in the community: a dozen small groups working on specific short-term tasks to ameliorate homelessness; another group preparing a day of public consciousness about breast cancer; several task forces investigating Jewish perspectives on complex social issues, such as Supreme Court case that everyone is following in the newspaper.

A Synagogue for the 21st Century will inspire each and every member with a personal commitment to ameliorate human suffering because we who were slaves to Pharaoh cannot abide the slavery of others. In place of a single committee to which a handful of workers give all their time, it will demand of each member some ongoing commitment to one aspect of the succession of causes that make us matter in the world beyond ourselves.

4. Healing – a synagogue where love and care are real: "Healing" is a buzz word, easily trivialized and misunderstood. In truth, nothing is more important than restructuring the synagogue as a genuine healing place. But what do we mean by "healing"?

By the 1960s, we had become a "lonely crowd." Our own surveys showed that synagogues were alienating institutions where people did not even expect to make friends. Ten years later, a study of religion featured a woman complaining that her Baptist church was so cold that she had nicknamed it Fort Baptist. She might have added that Fort Jewish was across the road. Family safety nets were disappearing and geographic mobility eroding the old-time neighborhoods where you dropped in on folks next door to share a tale of joy or sorrow. Now, in the '90s, things have only gotten worse. Our "caring community" initiative of the '80s virtually stopped in its tracks when temples assigned the work to a single committee.

A Synagogue for the 21st Century will be a place of welcome and wholeness, a home where you know you are not alone. People will come to share their lives and tell their stories; to celebrate success and lament loss; to know, in sum, their connectedness to others; to glimpse, thereby, the reality of God and the profundity of spiritual renewal.

Tinkering with existent structure will not do the job. To become a source of prayer, study, good deeds, and healing, a synagogue for tomorrow will need a genuine commitment to more thoroughgoing self-study, both as institution (how the synagogue is structured) and as ambience (how it feels to be there). Beyond the coldness of the corporate-consumer culture lies the spiritual ambience of the synagogue as community and home, a place where people feel welcome, connected, and intellectually alive – partners on a sacred odyssey of a sacred people, completing creation and thereby themselves.

Change is never easy, but it can stretch and empower, engage and enthuse. A Synagogue 2000 embraces institutional change, knowing that the alternative is the ultimate irrelevance of standing still.

Synagogue as a Summit from which to View Promise, Hope, and Meaning
Deuteronomy pictures the final vision of Moses in the stirring image of a summit or pishgah: "Moses said to God, 'Let me see the good land on the other side of the Jordan.' God replied, 'Go to the summit of Pishgah and gaze about, to the north, the south, the east and west'" (Deut. 3:23,27).

The four areas of synagogue content-Prayer, Study, Good deeds, and Healing (PSGH)-can be added to the two matters of process-Institution and Ambience (IA). Together, they form the acronym PISGAH, a synagogue summit from which we, like Moses, can see the Promised Land.

So picture the synagogue not as corporation or marketplace for programs but as PISGAH, the summit of human life, whence from every side we see promise, hope, and meaning. Services are not boring. Jewish learning is not childish, not just surface deep. People come for community and for care – and they get it. They know they matter because the synagogue is a bastion of ma'asim tovim, good deeds. The very ambience and institution have changed perceptibly. Even the physical plant is different. People treat each other specially there, knowing they have jointly come because they share a path toward spiritual wholeness in an age of religious renewal. The synagogue has become the home where we can laugh and sing and dance, but sometimes cry as well: a place where we care and are cared for.