Three Ways Synagogues Can Learn From Churches

I grew up with a synagogue inside my house and a church across the street. My dad and most of my siblings are rabbanim. I married the converted daughter of a former Christian minister. Not to mention I spent a year going to 52 different Bible churches.

I've seen some of the best and worst houses of worship (both Jewish and Christian) and, in my opinion, there are lots that synagogues can learn from churches. Indeed, the list could go on and on. To get started, I'll just post three ideas.

1. First-time visitor parking
When I visited the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, I didn't plan ahead. If I had, I would've realized that not all of the mega-church's 22,000 members could park in their (albeit sprawling) parking lot. Like a major sports venue, there was plenty of "off-site" parking where people hopped on shuttle buses to bring them to the building.

But, luckily for me, New Birth is a church that has mastered the fine art of welcoming newcomers. I drove straight up to church sanctuary and right next to the handicap parking were spots that were painted for "First-time visitors." It reminded me of the "New mom parking" I've seen at some grocery stores.

It's an overall theme of welcoming and customer service, which leads me to the next item...

2. Customer service
I once heard Bernie Marcus speak to a roomful of rabbis. Marcus is the co-founder of the Home Depot and a major Jewish philanthropist. What he was telling the clergy gathered was as follows: when a customer walks into the Home Depot, they can go up to anyone in a bright orange apron and ask them any question. Where can I find another one of those bolts? Do you sell the paint color Evening Peruvian Lily here? There is no stupid question you can ask a Home Depot employee, Marcus explained. Those in orange aprons are there for one reason and one reason only: to help customers.

So, too, Marcus continued, synagogues are in the customer service business. "In many respects," he said, "you have to think like a scholar and start thinking like a retailer." With their Hebrew prayers and insular communities, synagogues are a very intimidating place. There are lots of options for "customers" (other synagogues, outright apathy, etc.). Synagogues can stand out and rise to the occasion by offering great customer service, in very much the same way churches treat you, show you to your seat, and so on.

Synagogues can even improve with something as simple as proper signage. For example, when you walk into a Home Depot, you know exactly where the restrooms are located. At most synagogues, it would take some snooping to find the bathrooms. I discussed this with a rabbi once and he said his synagogue was different. His synagogue had...
congregants where the restrooms, sanctuary, and clergy's office was. I looked around; he was I were in Hebrew. Enough said.

3. Study the work of Synagogue 3000
A national non-profit organization called Synagogue 3000 has a singular mission: to revitalize synagogues. Efforts cross over into many categories, everything from more inspiring prayer services to ways to attract new congregants. What's more interesting to me is that one of the ways it seeks to learn how to better a synagogue is by looking to churches to see what techniques can be brought back to the Jewish world.

For example, a few years ago it invited Rick Warren (the mega-pastor who gave the invocation at Obama's inauguration) to give a workshop to a group of rabbis on how they can do better outreach at their synagogues. I was one of the biggest churches in America, sitting in a room with a bunch of rabbis, giving them advice on how to run synagogues. Everything from member retention to community outreach to fund-raising was discussed.

"Jews need to be more quote-unquote evangelical," Ron Wolfson, the co-founder of the Synagogue 3000 initiative and professor at the American Jewish University, told me. "We need to do a better job of presenting Judaism to our own people."

Synagogue 3000 has lots of resources on its website and was also kind enough to post some video clips on YouTube Warren intervention. I've posted one below:

So those are just three ideas to get the conversation going. Nothing on this list is against Jews should bring Jesus in the synagogue. But what I am saying is that it wouldn't hurt a synagogue where the restrooms are or grab a bucket of paint and mark a few spots in their parking lot for newcomers. It would go way.

Over time, I'll post more suggestions on other ways synagogues can learn from churches. Feel free to leave your own in the comments section below.

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