

## **SYNERGY: Imagining the Synagogue of the 21st Century**

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A bad joke:

On the return flight from the congregational trip to Israel, the plane crashed, and the rabbi, the cantor, and the synagogue president found themselves held captive by a cannibal tribe in some remote backwater.

"We will, of course, be eating you for lunch," the tribe's chieftain addressed the three, "but recognizing that you are distinguished men, we are prepared to grant each of you one last request."

"I request the chance to deliver my finest High Holiday sermon," declared the rabbi.

"I would want only to chant my famous Kol Nidre," announced the cantor.

The chieftain turned to the synagogue president: "And what is your request?"

"Eat me first."

The joke is telling. We expect so little of our synagogues. We don't expect the rabbi's sermon to move or to teach us. We don't expect the cantor's melody to inspire and uplift us. We don't expect the synagogue leader to be effective in leading and guiding the institution.

We expect so little of our synagogues, and we take them with such little seriousness. Nowhere, in any institution of higher learning in this country, is there an Institute for the Study of the Synagogue. Nowhere, in any institution of higher learning, is there a chair in Synagogue studies — not even in the seminaries and colleges that prepare rabbis and cantors to lead synagogues. In the seminary where I teach, and to my knowledge in this seminary and its sister institutions around the country, there is not one course offered on the social psychology of the synagogue" or the sociology of the synagogue. A graduate of these seminaries may very well enter the profession knowing much more about the synagogues of first-century Roman Palestine than about 21st century America.

We expect so little of our synagogues, and we take them with such little seriousness. In their groundbreaking study of American Jewish identity, Arnold Eisen and Stephen Cohen note that American Jews expressed great affection and loyalty to their synagogues and, to a surprising extent, a strong belief in God, but also that the two had nothing to do with each other. Synagogue is not about God. In Professor Cohen's words, "They do not come to synagogue expecting to find God there or stay away because they do not."

We expect so little of our synagogues, and we take them with such little seriousness. That is why I came to this meeting today all the way from California. I am grateful to UJA-Federation of New York and its leaders for this conference that recognizes the importance of the synagogue for the future of the American Jewish community.

There are two revolutions that I believe are implicit in the synagogue transformation movements of the past decade, in the Experiment in Congregational Education, Synagogue 2000, STAR, and others. These are hinted at in Amy Sales wonderful research but not fully captured in her data. First, the synagogue-transformation efforts have raised people's expectations of synagogues. Expectations are very powerful. Higher expectations rally leadership, attract resources, and inspire creativity. ECE, Synagogue 2000, STAR, and the other synagogue-transformation efforts have succeeded in raising expectations of the synagogue. People demand more of their rabbis, their cantors, and their

leadership. They invest the synagogue with a great deal more seriousness and ask more of the institution. In Amy Sales's data, only 25 percent of the general synagogue membership felt that worship was important to the life of the synagogue; but fully 80 percent of those who joined the Synagogue 2000 team believed so. Why? They learned that worship can inspire, uplift, teach, and connect us with God and one another. This is the first revolution.

In 1961, my parents founded a synagogue. They were among the first families to move out to a new housing tract in the West San Fernando Valley of Southern California. They found a circle of other Jewish families and began to put together a synagogue. What model did they have? Only the immigrant synagogues they grew up in, so they built that kind of a synagogue, thus giving proof of the adage that every generation gets the synagogue its parents dreamed of.

My parents' synagogue was 1) hierarchical in structure, with the rabbi as the authority on top preaching to a largely passive laity below him. 2) Its theology was vertical with God transcendent, above, and distant, worshiped from the populace below. 3) Its spirituality was what the sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls a spirituality of "dwelling" — the synagogue was the home of a set of cherished traditions, deeply-held beliefs and values, and it strongly resisted change. 4) The synagogue was monolithic in its ideology and, therefore, deeply loyal to its denomination. Finally, 5) its music was traditional; we had a cantor who performed operatic pieces and insisted that these melodies had been sung to Moses at Sinai.

The synagogue-transformation movements reflect a new generation and its sensibilities and have called all these features into question.

- 1) We move from a hierarchical to a participatory structure. My rabbi was a holy man, as distant and unapproachable as God. My congregants enjoy getting to know me as a person, as a friend and a colleague. In my community, I give few sermons; instead, we engage in a dialogue over the Torah on Shabbat. Rabbi-as-preacher turns into rabbi-as-teacher.
- 2) The vertical theology gives way to a horizontal theology — God is immanent, close by and reachable. The community is holy, reflecting the presence of God in our special moments of solidarity.
- 3) The spirituality of dwelling is replaced with, in Wuthnow's term, a spirituality of seeking. We are open to the new — to new experiences, new beliefs, and new traditions. We are not settled, but open-ended, ever-changing in our religious expression.
- 4) The monolithic ideology is surrendered in favor of a pluralistic model open to differences of opinion and practice. We are no longer defined by our denomination, but we are most definitely postdenominational. We are willing to move among ideologies, experimenting, revisiting, and renewing.
- 5) Finally, our synagogue music reflects a new idiom. My friend Ron Wolfson was invited to address the Cantors Assembly, the association of cantors in the Conservative Movement. There, he saw the cantors wearing a button on their lapels with a strange figure, the "Canto-saurus." These cantors feel threatened by a musical idiom that replaces the operatic cantorate with participatory, communal prayer. Ronny tried his best to teach them to see this as an opportunity instead of a threat, but it reflects a significant change, a change that frightens those who hold fast to what was.

The synagogue founded by my parents reflected the forms of the European synagogue brought by their parents at the beginning of the century. Our synagogue transformation programs are bringing a

second revolution. In addition to raising the expectations of our synagogues, they are introducing the values of a different generation, an American-born and American-bred generation. To speak with a degree of hyperbole, we are witnessing the birth of the first indigenous American synagogue culture. The question before us is whether this will result in a live birth or a stillbirth. The process is new and uncharted and incomplete. But it is very real. And it is urgent. The fate of the community depends upon its success.

We opened with a bad joke. Allow me to close with a great story.

When the Hasidic master Reb Yitzchak Yakov, the Seer of Lublin, died, his disciples divided his worldly goods. One got his books, one his Kiddush cup, another his tallit. There remained one humble Hasid; to him was given the Rebbe's clock.

On his way home, the Hasid stopped at an inn. When he discovered he had no money to pay the innkeeper, he offered the Rebbe's clock as payment. The innkeeper installed the clock in one of the rooms.

A year later, another of the Rebbe's hasidim passed by and stayed at the inn. All night, he could not sleep. All night, the innkeeper heard the restless footsteps of the Hasid pacing the floor.

In the morning, the concerned innkeeper inquired of his guest, "Was the room acceptable? Was the bed comfortable?" But the Hasid was preoccupied: "The clock, where did you get the clock?" So the innkeeper related the story.

"I knew it!" responded the Hasid. "This clock belonged to the Seer. It is a holy clock. All other clocks in the world mark time from the past — they measure us from where we've come. This clock ticks toward the future. Every time I lay down to rest, the clock reminded me how much more *tikkun*, repair, there is to do before redemption can be realized.

It's all in how we read the clock.