



## Extreme Makeover – Synagogue Edition

Dr. Ron Wolfson

Synagogues looking to makeover the “atmosphere” of their sacred space would do well to take note of how The Gap recently transformed their stores from “institutional” to “homey.” In an effort to woo back customers, the retailer has devised a radical plan to remodel their outlets.

CEO Paul Pressler recognized that companies such as Starbucks and the Pottery Barn have created warm, comfortable places that people want to spend time in. The Pottery Barn stores look like home and Starbucks encourages customers to linger by providing music, entertainment and high-speed Internet access.

To accomplish this “makeover,” twenty senior Gap executives in three different teams traveled the world to learn “what everyone else was doing and really experience a lot of different customer experiences – and not just retail,” according to Christopher Hufnagel, the Vice President for Brand Store Experience. They visited places as diverse as retail stores, museums, and amusement parks. They took 4,000 photographs and recorded observations in journals. When the teams reconvened, they spent a week sifting through their findings, distilling the best suggestions into a one-page brief. This formed the basis for a detailed plan to remodel their places.

Among the best ideas: warmer lighting, upgraded display tables, better sound systems, and free bottles of water in fitting rooms. After noticing the enthusiasm and pride of a young tour guide at the Kennedy Space Center, the Gap put more emphasis on staff training: instead of pushing particular products, staffers are to spend more time asking customers about *their needs* (emphasis mine).

In researching my book, *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community* (Jewish Lights Publishing), I cite many ideas for improving the “atmosphere” of synagogues I have gleaned from noticing the “best practices” of organizations that interact with the public: better signage, color photographs of clergy and staff on a wall near the office, placing couches in the lobby, and offering a Starbucks-quality coffee bar.

Some synagogues have completed their “extreme makeover.” Ahavath Achim Congregation in Atlanta participated in our recent Synagogue 3000 Initiative there and decided to renovate a long, narrow and bland entryway to their mid-twentieth century

building. Instead of a “bowling alley” effect, the entry now features a gorgeous “conciierge” desk and a flat screen LCD television that flashes rotating images of congregants participating in all sorts of activities, color photographs of clergy and key staff, and notices of upcoming programs. Situated next to this desk is a “living room” with couches, coffee tables, Jewish periodicals and membership information. In the corner, guests and members discover “Café Schmooze,” offering excellent coffee, teas, and treats.

This renovation addressed one issue facing congregations seeking to create an “ambience of welcome” in the building. But, the lobby is only the first step into a sacred community. Many congregations are looking anew at their sanctuaries, offices, classrooms, and other facilities to upgrade them from dreary to delightful.

Moreover, the quality of the building is only one aspect of creating a welcoming community. Far more challenging is to improve the *hachnasat orchim* (hospitality) most guests experience when they meet our synagogue leaders and members. Is everyone in your congregation equipped to be a great greeter? Are the prayer experiences you offer welcoming to those with few or no “access skills” to the liturgy? Have you thought about how to deepen the relationships between members and the congregation, members and each other?

Embarking on a serious assessment of your building is one way to begin the “extreme makeover” of your congregation into a sacred community. The most important lesson is this: synagogue leaders rarely look at their sacred spaces with fresh eyes. Familiarity breeds myopia. Here’s a best practice idea from The Gap: form a team of people to visit the stores and public venues in your community. Visit other congregations – Jewish and Christian. Collect your photos and observations. Look at your building as if you are a first-time visitor. Then, make the changes that can transform your “institution” into a spiritual “home.”

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