

## INTRODUCTION

### I love synagogues.

I have loved synagogues ever since I was a little boy in Omaha, Nebraska, when my parents, Alan and Bernice, moved our family to a home within walking distance of our congregational home. I was a shul (synagogue) kid.

Many people love their synagogues. You may be one of them. You may even be a leader of your congregation—lay or professional. Your synagogue is a place where you are comfortable, where people know you, a “second home.” But there are many people who don’t love synagogues, people who are uncomfortable when they walk into a synagogue. Why? Because it is unfamiliar, intimidating, and often unwelcoming—especially for guests, shul-shoppers, and even for members who rarely show up.

I will never forget the time I walked into the sanctuary of a large Conservative congregation and experienced firsthand what many newcomers have encountered on their first visit to a synagogue. I had been invited as scholar-in-residence to speak on Friday evening. After I gave my talk, the rabbi emeritus, a long-time acquaintance, said, “Ron, they won’t make you sit on the *bimah* [pulpit] tomorrow morning. Would you like to sit with me?” I readily agreed. The next morning, I showed up promptly at 8:55 a.m., five minutes before the start of the Shabbat morning service. As I looked around the enormous sanctuary, there were about eight people in the room: the shammes (ritual director); four or five regulars, who I assume always come on time; and three guests of that day’s Bat Mitzvah who had taken the invitation time seriously! The service began, but no rabbi emeritus was in sight.

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I took a seat on the aisle one row from the back of the sanctuary, hoping to see the rabbi when he came in. About ten minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up and saw a sweet old man looking at me with the saddest eyes. He said, “You know, I wouldn’t tell you that you are sitting in my seat.” He then pointed to an empty seat directly behind me. “And I would sit there,” he continued, “but, if I sat there, where would my friend who always sits there sit?” I looked around; there were 785 empty seats, but this man needed the seat I was in!

Of course, I moved immediately. Because I could identify that man. That man was a regular who had been sitting in that seat for fifty years. In a way, his need to sit in that seat is one of the great things about being a member of a sacred community. It is his *makom kavu’a*, his “established place,” in the congregation. And, it is true that if his friend who sits behind him is not in his seat, then the friends who know him would be worried: Is he sick? So, I found another seat and he took his.

At the kiddush afterward, his friends who witnessed this incident really lit into him. Why? Because he kicked the scholar-in-residence out of his seat! If I had been a stranger, or someone looking for a congregation, or a guest of the Bat Mitzvah, it would have been no big deal. Anyone in my position would have felt unwelcome, but no one in the community would have batted an eyelash had it been anybody else.

This experience highlights a key problem with synagogue life: Many of our congregations are no longer welcoming places. When I meet with synagogue leaders today, I always ask: What could the man have said that would have welcomed me *and* gotten him his seat? How do we create a welcoming atmosphere that does not alienate those who already feel at home? How can we transform our congregations into sacred communities where a spirituality of welcoming permeates the physical space and all those who walk in its doors? This book is an attempt to answer these questions.

### **Studying Synagogues: The Genesis of Synagogue 2000**

I have spent a good part of my life studying synagogues from the inside out. I have *davened* (prayed) in congregations of all sizes, shapes, and denominations—from small synagogues in the South to

enormous cavernous sanctuaries in the Northeast, from ultra-Orthodox *shteiblach* in Jerusalem to Jewish renewal *havurot* in Berkeley, from the Sephardic synagogue in North Hollywood to the Ashkenazic shul in South Carolina, from Classical Reform services in San Francisco to the Carlebach *minyán* in Manhattan.

To this day, after visiting hundreds of synagogues throughout the world, I am amazed at how I can measure the health of a congregation within minutes of stepping into the place. Perhaps it is because of my training as a cultural anthropologist. Perhaps it is because the people who meet my flight will tell me—a perfect stranger—volumes about the congregation on the ride from the airport to the synagogue, including the scoop on current conflicts and intrigues. But in any case, I have noticed that some of the congregations are far more exciting than others; you can feel it from the minute you walk into the place. I now know it is the *culture of community* that is different.

In synagogues where the culture of community is thriving, the place is buzzing with activity. More often than not, these same synagogues offer a warm greeting to a stranger. In a synagogue where the culture of community is absent, the place looks drab, feels sleepy, and even smells bad. Newcomers are treated indifferently or completely ignored, and with whispered gossip filling the air, everyone seems to be angry at somebody. It is my goal to cultivate and restore this culture of community through a process known broadly as “synagogue transformation.”

Much of my work with synagogue transformation has been in the context of Synagogue 2000, a project I cofounded with Larry Hoffman. When I first met him in 1995, Larry, a professor of liturgy at Hebrew Union College in New York, was a leading voice for the transformation of worship in the Reform Movement, influencing a generation of rabbis and cantors as one of the most beloved teachers at the college. He had also achieved great renown for his expertise in liturgy and his skill as a scintillating public speaker to audiences in the academic world as well as in Reform congregations as a popular scholar-in-residence.

Rabbi Rachel Cowan is responsible for bringing us together. I had been introduced to Rachel at a meeting of the first grantees of the

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Nathan Cummings Foundation where she was the program officer for Jewish grants. After learning of our work in pioneering Jewish family education at the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life, Rachel asked me, “What’s next on your agenda?” I replied, “Synagogues.” She understood immediately: “What do you need?” I said, “Money.” She said, “How about a planning grant?” I said, “Great!” Then, Rachel added, “I want you to meet my mentor and rabbi, Larry Hoffman.” I called Larry the next day.

Larry and I met at the Rabbinical Assembly convention in the Catskill Mountains, where he had been invited to give a keynote address and I was offering a workshop on family education to one of my primary audiences in the Conservative Movement. That meeting over stale coffee in the dilapidated Concord Hotel changed both of our lives. Each of us thought it would be an obligatory half hour chat to satisfy Rachel’s desire for us to meet. But, after what seemed like hours of animated conversation, we realized that we shared much of the same love for and critique of synagogue life and a passion to do something about it. We quickly ascertained that because of our relative standings within our movements, we could create a project that would speak to 90 percent of North American synagogues. We reveled in the fact that Larry was a rabbi and I was a Jewish educator, each bringing different skills and knowledge to the effort. He was from the East Coast, while I was from the West Coast. He was raised in a small town in Canada, while I grew up in a small town in the Midwest. He could not sit still while he talked and neither could I. We left the meeting promising each other to become partners in planning this as-yet unnamed project to deepen synagogues.

Over the next ten years, the institute we envisioned that day and later named Synagogue 2000 (S2K for short) became a leading exponent of the work of transforming the synagogue into the spiritual center of the Jewish community. When we began this project, Larry and I gathered together a group of outstanding rabbis, cantors, artists, educators, and funders to imagine the synagogue of the twenty-first century. After two days of intense deliberations, we agreed on the conception of the synagogue as a spiritual center with six entry “gates.” Four of the gates represent the fundamental functions of

the synagogue: *prayer, study, good deeds, and healing*. Two of the gates represent the processes that are essential for the synagogue to remain vibrant and enticing: *institutional deepening* and *ambience of welcome*.

Together, the first letters of each gate spell the word PISGAH, the Hebrew name for the mountaintop from which Moses looked into the future:

Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land.

—*Deuteronomy 34:1*

Moses would not reach the Promised Land, but he was able to see it from the summit.

We committed to creating a process by which synagogue teams would engage in a long-term visioning of the future of their congregation. Our purpose was not to tell congregations how to create themselves as spiritual centers; we realized that every synagogue has its own individual ideology and character. We did, however, want to cast a vision of the six gates into the spiritual center:

*Prayer* that is engaging, uplifting, and spiritually moving.

*Institutional deepening* that is possible because of an openness to change.

*Study* for adults and families, as well as children.

*Good deeds*, the work of social justice, is a commitment of each and every member.

*Ambience of welcome* that creates a culture of warmth and outreach.

*Healing*, a sense of completeness that offers comfort and support at times of illness and loss.

These six gateways into a spiritual community shaped our vision of what a synagogue of the twenty-first century would look like. It would be a place where the culture of the entire community would reflect an ambience of welcome, a place not just where everyone knew your name, but a place where everyone was treated as an “image of God” living within a culture of honor. It would be a place where the

building itself said “Welcome!” and where the people who served as professional and lay leaders truly served others with uncommon grace, courtesy, and compassion. It would be a place where the worship experience was dynamic and moving, where everyone was encouraged to study, where everyone was committed to repairing the world. It would be a place to turn for comfort and support in times of trouble. It would be a place that embraced the possibilities of change, a community unafraid to experiment, even to take risks. It would be a place of deep partnership between the clergy and the laity. It would be a high place, a place to stand on a summit, always looking into the future, hoping to enter the Promised Land.

Using the PISGAH vision as our template, Synagogue 2000 embarked on a ten-year period of experimentation and research to design a “synagogue transformation process” to envision the synagogue of the twenty-first century. Supported initially by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation, the Whizin Foundation, and a generous board of advisors, we chose sixteen pilot site congregations—eight Conservative and eight Reform—for our first national cohort. Two years later, we were invited to Washington, D.C., to work with five congregations in a regional cohort. The next year, we were asked to come to Denver/Boulder to work with thirteen congregations, funded by the Rose Community Foundation and the local federation. In quick succession, we began projects in Detroit/Ann Arbor with eleven congregations under a grant from the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit, a national cohort of eighteen Reform congregations supported by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now Union of Reform Judaism), and, finally, a group of twenty congregations in Westchester County, New York, funded by UJA-Federation of New York.

Larry and I were fortunate to assemble a talented staff of program specialists, consultants, and curriculum writers who joined our two offices—one on the West Coast at the Whizin Center for the Jewish Future at the University of Judaism and the other on the East Coast at the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, New York. In addition, we identified some of the most creative synagogue leaders and resource people doing cutting-edge work on the front lines of

congregations. We called them Synagogue 2000 fellows and they became our rotating staff of presenters to the cohort groups. Together, we continually developed and evaluated an innovative model of synagogue transformation that included conferences, curricula, and consulting to guide the deliberations of the synagogues as they journeyed through the Synagogue 2000 process.

In the early years of this project, we could not have envisioned just how far it would take us. But the importance of our work was apparent from our very first meeting in 1995. That year, with the community still reeling from the highly publicized intermarriage figure of 52 percent (later found to be more like 42 percent), the communal obsession with “continuity” was fueling any number of efforts to find ways to “ensure the Jewish future.” It was a time to stand on the precipice of the twentieth century and look forward into the next millennium. Larry and I were convinced that synagogues represented the best hope for reaching the largest number of Jews, if only the leadership of the synagogues and the community invested serious energy, effort, and resources into renewing and deepening the institution.

## **The Transformation of American Judaism**

I am willing to stake my career on this proposition:

The future of the Jewish community in America is directly connected to the effectiveness of synagogues in transforming the Jewish people. By “transforming,” I refer to two things: (1) the *spiritual transformation* of Jewish individuals and families and (2) the *physical transformation* of the Jewish community through incentives to increase our numbers through population growth, outreach to unaffiliated Jews, and welcoming and encouraging of non-Jews in Jewish relationships and families to become Jewish and/or to raise their children as Jews.

Transformation is about changing people’s lives. It is not about membership or affiliation. It is not about numbers. It is about transforming the spiritual lives of individuals, one at a time. It is about

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“forming” a Jewish identity through the experience of living in a sacred community. Spiritual formation requires the planting of seeds in the soil of the soul, seeds that must be tended and nurtured. Synagogues can be the garden in which growth occurs, but ultimately, it is God who transforms lives. Synagogues are the sacred communities that can create the conditions for spiritual formation by engaging the individual in uplifting prayer, serious study, works of social justice, acts of healing and comfort, and connectedness to others. But, ultimately, it is God who transforms lives.

Synagogues are the best hope for the physical transformation of the Jewish people. The twentieth century saw the development of synagogues as bedrock institutions of the Jewish community. More Jews affiliate with synagogues than with any other institution or group in the Jewish community, by far. The potential of synagogues to reach more people—Jews and non-Jews—and to empower them to become active citizens of the Jewish community is enormous. Most synagogues are good at what they do, especially with their typically limited staff and resources. To move from good to great, synagogues will need to accept this challenge of growth and deepen their most important work of creating inspiring and empowering spiritual communities.

This new vision of the twenty-first-century synagogue can be stated in a simple sentence: The synagogue is the spiritual center of people’s lives. It is a *kehillah kedoshah*, a “sacred community,” where relationships are paramount, where worship is engaging, where everyone is learning, where repair of the world is a moral imperative, where healing is offered, and where personal and institutional transformation are embraced.

The twenty-first-century synagogue must become a gateway of welcome for those who seek a spiritual community. When people interact with the institution, they should encounter a culture characterized by an understanding that *every* human being, not just the *machers* (leaders), is a *b’tzelem Elohim*, a person “made in the image of God.” When congregations take this charge seriously, every interaction with members and potential members is looked upon as an opportunity to create a unique, special, holy, *sacred* community. This is the first step in establishing a synagogue of relationships.

To accomplish this goal, the leadership of individual synagogues, denominational movements, and federations as well as philanthropists will need to invest the resources required to substantially increase the infrastructure and capabilities of synagogues to establish meaningful relationships with each and every person who comes into their orbit. The synagogue of the twenty-first century envisioned here will need the resources to add staff (rabbis, cantors, musicians, artists, membership directors, spiritual directors, and teachers), to renovate aging buildings, to build new campuses, and to empower lay leadership to join the professionals in creating synagogues where relationships are sacred and lasting.

When individual Jews have these kind of relationships, their lives are transformed and their commitment to Judaism, to the local Jewish community, to Israel, and to the future of the Jewish people is strengthened. This is the great goal for the synagogue of the twenty-first century.

I believe the critical challenge to Judaism in the twenty-first century will be whether we can achieve this goal of growing the Jewish people. I recall vividly conversations in the late 1960s and early 1970s about the future of the Jewish community in North America. Dire predictions were everywhere that the declining birthrate and increasing percentages of young adults intermarrying would decimate our numbers. Clearly, this has not happened.

Yet, observers of North American Jewry continue their attempts to divine the Jewish future. Sociologist Steven M. Cohen predicts that assimilation is such a powerful force that nothing can prevent the loss of as many as one million Jews, while Gary Tobin believes that, using his definition of “who is a Jew,” there are tens of thousands of Jews uncounted in the National Jewish Population Survey. Most scholars agree with historian Jonathan Sarna who summarizes the current situation succinctly in his outstanding history *American Judaism* by pointing out two competing forces at work: the slow diminution of the Jewish population and the intensification of Jewish commitment and expression among those who remain Jews.

In an age-old debate, some leaders have argued that the Jewish community has always survived because of a “saving remnant,” a

small group of dedicated Jews who keep the religion and culture alive. Others have dismissed this view as pessimistic and fatalistic, preferring to believe that Judaism as a religion, culture, and people is so deep, so inspiring, so meaningful that the only reason we have not grown is a centuries-long resistance to proselytizing. In other words, we have a great product; our marketing stinks.

This is not an insignificant issue for synagogues. There are those in congregations who believe that the purpose of the synagogue is to serve those who are already committed to Judaism and not worry about those who have yet to demonstrate such commitment. The problem today, however, is that many of our congregations, particularly in the so-called liberal movements, are populated with increasing numbers of Jews who have married non-Jews. One need not reach out too far to find people who could become Jews; they are often sitting in our pews.

This hesitancy to proselytize is deep-seated in our culture, shaped by centuries of anti-Semitism, creating fear and distrust of the “other.” There was good reason for the practice of requesting that those who sought entry into the Jewish people ask three times before being taken seriously. Then, once accepted as a potential member of the community, the bar for entry was set very high: knowledge of Jewish practice, language, values, Torah, and, in the case of males wanting in, a certain surgical procedure that would give any adult man pause.

While this cautionary approach worked well in the past, it is a disastrous prescription for growing the Jewish people. This is not to say that standards and boundaries are unimportant; there is a legitimate concern of maintaining the integrity of the community. However, with our children waiting longer and longer to get married, and with a birth rate of well under two children per family, we will not come close to maintaining our current population. How else are we to sustain our numbers except by retaining the people we have and recruiting new Jews?

I believe that synagogues can become the most powerful vehicle for growing the Jewish people. It is commonly thought that the Jewish Community Centers are the most logical gateways into the Jewish community for intermarrieds and others who stand on the periphery

of the community since the religious boundary issues are not applicable. I completely support the community center movement as a vital arm of the Jewish institutional world—some of my best friends are JCC leaders. As noted above, however, at any one time, more than twice the number of Jews affiliate with synagogues than with JCCs (in 2000, 46 percent belonged to a synagogue; 21 percent belonged to a JCC). The question is: Will congregations take on the task of bringing the “un-synagogued” into their midst?

The concept of outreach is often referred to (in the more traditional religious communities) by the Hebrew term *keiruv*, literally, “to bring closer.” The idea is that the community is obligated to bring the stranger closer to Judaism. Thus, a variety of synagogues and continental organizations have *keiruv* committees and *keiruv* projects.

This is a far too limiting view of outreach. It has often been noted that, today, all Jews are Jews by choice. The import of this statement is that all Jews, even those who are born Jewish, must make a conscious effort to “be Jewish” in the face of assimilation and competing cultural norms. Arnold Eisen and Steven M. Cohen make a persuasive argument in their excellent volume *The Jew Within* that many Jews make nearly daily choices about how “Jewish” they will be at any one moment. American Jews do not, with few exceptions, feel commanded or obligated to conform to even the most basic of Jewish standards of behavior. Synagogues are competing for the hearts and minds of all Jews, those born Jewish and those not yet Jewish. The concept of *keiruv* itself may be insufficient to confront this challenge. We need new language—spiritual language—to describe how we can best issue the invitation to our community.

## **A New Kind of *Aliyah***

Consider this question: When in modern history has there been a need to grow a Jewish community? Answer: in 1948 in the state of Israel. The Jewish population, mostly refugees from Europe, found themselves surrounded by hostile neighbors, fighting for their very survival, and succeeding beyond even their wildest dreams. The leaders of the new country knew that measures had to be taken to

stimulate the growth of the community, to gain numbers of people—rapidly. And, so, a plan to increase the population began to take shape.

Two major efforts grounded this daunting task. The first was the remarkable call for Jews from all over the world to immigrate to Israel. *Aliyah*, the Hebrew term meaning “ascend,” was a plea for Jews to return to their ancient homeland, to rebuild it as a modern state. Hundreds of thousands of Jews did so voluntarily, while thousands more were rescued from inhospitable countries in the Middle East, Africa, and the former Soviet Union.

The second strategy to grow the community involved an incredible social experiment. The government put in place incentives for parents to have more children. Taxes were reduced, stipends were provided, housing was built, and communities were founded—all with the intention of making it easier for families to grow in numbers. The theory was simple: Reduce the costs and burdens of having children and we’ll have more children.

Amazingly, it worked. The Jewish population of Israel in 1948 was 650,000. In 2004, the Jewish population was estimated to be 5,180,000.

The point is that when a Jewish community is intentional about growing itself, it can be done. Can we grow the Jewish population in America? I believe we must, and synagogues will have a major role in the effort.

We need a new *aliyah*, an *aliyah* to Judaism—a call to born Jews, to Jews by choice, to non-Jews, to members, and to not-yet members of our synagogues to affirm their desire to be within the Jewish community.

*Aliyah* literally means going up, ascending to a higher place, a place of meaning and purpose. It is a term, of course, borrowed from Jewish ritual. The act of pronouncing the blessings before and after the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue is called an *aliyah*. It is considered one of the highest honors in Jewish religious life. The actual moment a child demonstrates the ability to take on the religious obligations of Judaism as an adult is her or his *aliyah* during the Bat Mitzvah or Bar Mitzvah ceremony. In many synagogues, the honor of an *aliyah* is highly coveted.

To me, the most thrilling moment of having an *aliyah* is when I am literally *called by name* to bless God before and after the Torah reading. “*Ya-amod, Gershon ben Avraham u’Vracha!*”—“Arise, Gershon, son of Avraham and B’racha [the Hebrew names of my father and mother].” I am *called* to rise, to stand up, to come forward, to ascend the pulpit, to encounter the Torah.

*Aliyah* is a warmer invitation to Judaism than *keiruv*. *Keiruv* can be construed as a “yanking in”; *aliyah* is a “calling up.” *Keiruv* is what Jews do to bring in the “other”; *aliyah* is a spiritual act experienced by the potential Jew.

*Aliyah* is for everyone. For born Jews, the *aliyah* of their young adolescence must be renewed. To borrow a term, they must be reborn as real adult Jews who respond to the call to a life of Torah, who actualize the covenant with God through a life filled with prayer, study, social justice, healing, and connection to sacred community. For converts to Judaism, they have accepted the call and are considered as Jewish as any born Jew. For non-Jews who have not yet converted or will never convert, we need a new category of inclusion in our sacred communities, a subject I will discuss at greater length in chapter 5, “Welcoming Membership.”

We will need incentives for this new *aliyah*. Just as Israel realized it had to remove the financial obstacles that blocked the expansion of the Jewish community, the cost of living a Jewish life has become burdensome for many. I often quip that day school tuition and synagogue dues are the most effective form of Jewish birth control yet invented. It isn’t funny. Those who resonate with this call for *aliyah* to Judaism will need to devise strategies for overcoming the barriers to entry and making it financially feasible for more people to affiliate.

## **What Are the Major Challenges Facing Synagogues Today?**

In order to make this call to *aliyah*, we need to take stock of where we stand today. To that end, Larry Hoffman and I began Synagogue 2000 with an honest critique of the challenges facing the synagogue as it evolved in the twentieth century. As one of the foremost analysts

of the sociology of religion, Larry has written most eloquently on this topic. In sum, we agreed that leaders of synagogues rarely asked the deep questions of purpose: Why synagogue? What does synagogue do for people? What constitutes success in synagogue life?

During our extensive visits to synagogues throughout North America, we found many who seemed to be doing well; in fact, some were becoming quite large. Yet, sheer numbers of members is not a reliable indication of success. As one rabbi of a major metropolitan synagogue that serves more than a thousand family units told us in a brutally honest moment: “My synagogue is full, but empty.”

What the rabbi meant to imply was that though the four thousand individuals who belonged to his synagogue came in droves to the many programs that the institution offered; though the large campus was crowded with people, mostly children who were dropped off in carpool lines that snaked across the expansive parking lot; though the weekly Bar or Bat Mitzvah service attracted hundreds, most of whom were guests of the family celebrating the *simcha* (happy occasion); though there was a very small core of regulars who attended everything and who could be counted on to help out the large professional staff; though it was a place full of activity for virtually every age group, it nevertheless was “empty” of spiritual significance in the lives of most of its members.

Larry describes this kind of synagogue as a “limited-liability” community. There is a tacit understanding between the institution and the members. For the members, it goes something like this: “We pay you a fee [dues] for services rendered. We expect a religious school for our children, a rabbi on call when we need her or him, and seats for the High Holy Days. Other than that, we expect you to offer programs that may or may not attract our attendance, because, after all, we are very, very busy people and synagogue is not exactly our top priority. We like the fact that you are there when we need you, but don’t expect or exact too much more of a commitment from us.” For the professional staff and leadership, it goes something like this: “We depend on attracting enough members to pay dues to cover our expenses—professional salaries, building maintenance, and program costs. We will provide the basic functions of a synagogue; religious

school; access to rabbis; Bar or Bat Mitzvah training; High Holy Day, weekly, and, where applicable, daily religious services; and lots and lots of programs. Heaven help us if more than a small percentage of people actually want to engage the professional staff on a more intensive basis, because frankly, we don't have the time." The synagogue that developed in the twentieth century is good at serving its small core of regulars and an ever-changing group of families who join primarily to have their children receive some form of Jewish education and become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. The regulars somehow (often due to consistent attendance at worship services or by volunteering in leadership roles) find their way into a committed relationship with the congregation; the majority of members do not. Thus, the first obstacle to overcome is this: The synagogue itself—especially its spiritual and lay leadership—will need to accept the challenge of welcoming all who come within its orbit and become a *synagogue of relationships*.

This will require far more than an increased number of programs. Synagogues can have the appearance of success by sending flier after flier in an attempt to attract attendance; I call these congregations "frequent-flier synagogues." It is not rocket science to offer interesting and varied programs, and often the programs do bring more people into the building. That is a good thing, but it is nowhere near sufficient in creating the kind of sacred community that is envisioned here.

Ask yourself this question: Why is it that so many individuals and families affiliate with synagogues at one time or another in their lives but then move to the periphery of the congregation or leave altogether? Certainly, there are a variety of reasons, but if you unpack the usual reasons given, the bottom line is that most synagogues fail to establish a connection between the individual and the congregation that is so valuable, so meaningful that it would be unthinkable to sever it. This is the most serious indictment of the twentieth-century-synagogue model.

The relationship between synagogue and individual is limited. And the result is that many congregations have a revolving door in the main entrance, with members both coming and leaving.

According to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, 46 percent of American Jews belonged to a synagogue in 1999 when the survey was conducted. Most North American Jews (estimates range from 75 to 80 percent) join a synagogue at one time during their adult life, but a much smaller percentage remain members throughout their lives. (This is less true in most Orthodox and some Conservative congregations, particularly in the East and Midwest where synagogue membership tends to be a lifelong commitment.) This is both the challenge and the promise of congregations. Synagogues are the “retail outlets” of Judaism in North America. We get them in the door. The question is: Why don’t we keep them?

In fact, we know when many people drop out of synagogue membership. As soon as the youngest child in the family becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, not only does the teenager go missing in action, the parents stop coming around as well. If one of the major motivations for synagogue membership is to get the kids to the *bimah* for the big BM, then what would keep them involved after it’s over? This is the cost of the dependence synagogues have on children as the reason for membership and as the focus of programming. When the synagogue fails to engage the *adults* in the family during this twelve- to fifteen-year period of membership, then it should come as no surprise that they move to the periphery of the congregation or out the revolving door altogether.

Meanwhile, synagogues are woefully understaffed. The problem is exacerbated by how we count our membership. We count households or families or units. Bad mistake. We should be counting individuals. A medium-sized congregation of five hundred families may represent as many as two thousand individuals. How is one rabbi to minister to that many people? How can a staff of three or four professionals create the kind of synagogue of relationships envisioned here? It is no wonder that a regular feature at rabbinical conferences is a session on clergy burnout.

Thus, the first and—to my mind—most critical question to emerge from our critique is this: What should be the fundamental *relationship* between the member and the congregation? Can it be deeper than fee-for-service? Can it be different from the moment a prospective member walks in the door?

## Why Don't Most Jews Enjoy Synagogue?

When I visit a synagogue, everyone tells me what's *really* going on in the place. I will hear about the clergy, the lay leadership, the members, the demographics, the religious school, the youth group, trends in membership, the financial condition, and the current challenges. Sometimes, there is a specific issue that is all-consuming. For example, a synagogue might be facing the need to physically move from one neighborhood to another, or a new rabbi in the congregation down the street is enticing away members. I've been asked questions such as "What shall we do about including non-Jewish spouses in religious rituals? What is your opinion, Ron, of gay unions? We are looking for a new rabbi/cantor/educator; Ron, do you know anyone who might be interested?"

I am simultaneously amused and chagrined by these conversations. On the one hand, the challenges facing synagogues are universal and repetitive. On the other hand, these are not the questions I am coming to raise and/or answer with the congregation. I want them to reflect on questions of purpose, direction, future, meaning; they are busy putting out fires or just trying to survive. I want to talk about relationships; they want a list of programs. I want to talk about how to reach the un-synagogued; they are exhausted just dealing with the people they already have.

Then, I arrive at the synagogue for Friday night dinner and services, and I begin to meet the people. I am always warmly welcomed—I am a guest, after all—and I begin to hear the predictable and recurrent complaints and disappointments.

When I first moved here, I went shul-shopping. At two of the congregations, I walked around after Friday night services and no one said hello. At this one, someone greeted me warmly. This is the one I chose.

I've been a member at this synagogue for five years, and I still can't break into the cliques in the congregation.

I tried one synagogue, but the religious school was a disaster. So I moved my kids to this one.

I got a membership packet from one synagogue that assumed I was married with children, along with a computerized sheet with expected dues. They didn't bother to learn who I was—a single woman engaged to be married. It was like, "Pay up and then we'll get to know you."

Over the years, I have experienced a share of my own horror stories: I was once asked to talk with a board committee charged with improving the level of welcoming in a major East Coast congregation. I arrived early, as is my custom, in order to walk around the building to get a sense of the place. It was a large congregation with a four-hundred-student day school on campus, seven people in the office, and a gift shop open at 9:00 on a Monday morning. There were people everywhere. Nevertheless, it took nearly twenty minutes before someone finally said hello. His name was Winston. I knew his name because it was stitched onto a name tag on his shirt. He was the head custodian.

One advantage I have as a researcher into synagogue life is this: I am a layperson. I am not now nor have I ever been a rabbi. I view the experience of synagogue from the pew, not from the pulpit. I often recommend to clergy that one of the most valuable things to do during a process of reflection about the purpose of synagogues is to sit in the seat of the congregant.

One thing you notice when you sit in the seat of the congregant is that many synagogue spaces don't work anymore. By "work," I mean that they do not inspire or facilitate the kind of spiritual experience that many seek in a worship service. Synagogues built during the twentieth century were heavily influenced by church architecture. The traditional configuration of synagogues with the Torah reading table in the center of the space was replaced by high pulpits, imposing arks, and regal furniture. Pews were arranged in rows and fixed to the ground, focusing attention squarely on what was happening in the front and reducing the chance for interaction with others. This created distance between the congregants and the clergy, between the people and each other, between the people and their God. In fact,

these “cathedral” synagogues reflected a view of God as transcendent, distant, unapproachable. For a certain generation, these spaces did work to inspire awe. For me, and for most of the generation of baby boomers and those younger, these sanctuaries are off-putting, inflexible, and unwelcoming.

The rest of the synagogue building can also be problematic. For example, few synagogues have adequate gathering space before entering the sanctuary. Lobbies are often small or nonexistent. Schools are off to one side and libraries are buried off a back hallway. Gift shops range from tiny to lovely, but most often offer the usual ritual objects and Jewish tchotchkes, not serious books of Jewish content that can help families and individuals build home libraries. Offices usually feel corporate and the rabbi’s study—a very important sacred space—is often inaccessible without first negotiating the receptionist and the rabbi’s administrative assistant and offers little, if any, privacy.

For many first-time visitors, the predominant feeling walking into a synagogue building is that of being lost. Most synagogues have poor signage, making it difficult to find the sanctuary, the office, the rabbi, the cantor, the school, the social hall, or the restrooms. I visited one synagogue where I could not find a way into the building. The front door was locked, and when I finally found an entrance and I mentioned my difficulty to the executive director, he said, “Well, everyone knows to come in through the kitchen!”

In sum, the model of synagogue in the twentieth century worked well in a time and place when synagogue membership was an expected social norm. It did its job of teaching children, offering services, organizing social justice projects, supporting clergy, and providing occasional programs for adults. It served the needs of ethnic Jews with an evolving corporate structure that was effective and efficient. Yet, as we approached the new millennium, it was becoming increasingly evident that a paradigm shift away from corporate synagogues as enclaves of ethnicity was under way, demanding a new vision of synagogue. Creating this new vision became the *raison d’être* of Synagogue 2000.

## Rethinking Spirituality

The new synagogue we envision is a spiritual center for all those who set foot inside it. It is a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, where relationships are paramount, where worship is engaging, where everyone is learning, where repair of the world is a moral imperative, where healing is offered, where personal and institutional transformation are embraced.

The times are ripe for this spiritual call. There is abundant evidence that North America is in the midst of the third Great Awakening. The first Great Awakening occurred in colonial times; the second Great Awakening happened in the late nineteenth century when a revival of religious fervor swept the continent. The current Great Awakening has been fueled by a combination of phenomena: the reaching of middle age by the baby-boom generation who are asking questions of meaning, the rise of evangelical Christianity and the emergence of the megachurch, the culture wars, the increasing blurring of state and religion, the turn of the millennium, and even the tragedy of 9/11. It is during times of great turmoil that people return to houses of worship seeking comfort, meaning, and purpose.

This should be no surprise. America has always been a very religious country. In a recent poll commissioned by *Newsweek* magazine and Beliefnet, a website devoted to religious issues, 88 percent of Americans describe themselves as either “spiritual” or “religious.” Even among teenagers, more than 90 percent in a recent survey say they believe in a personal God.

Witness my friend, Rick Warren, senior pastor of the largest congregation in America, Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. On a sabbatical in 2001, Rick wrote a book called *The Purpose-Driven Life* that he intended to be used during a church-sponsored, forty-day campaign of spiritual growth. A genius at sharing his message, particularly through a network of thousands of pastors who have made the pilgrimage to Saddleback to learn its secrets of success, the book has become the best-selling nonfiction volume in history. At this writing, more than twenty-five million copies have been bought in America, and the pace of sales throughout the world is

approaching one million per month. The subtitle of the book asks the key question that religion seeks to answer: What on earth am I here for?

In short, there has never been a better time for synagogues to reach those who are seeking spirituality. Rather than concede these seekers to New Age pseudo-religions and so-called centers of Jewish mysticism, the synagogue can offer an authentic community that serves the spiritual needs of human beings.

What is spirituality? For some, it connotes some sort of New Age mumbo jumbo. I can recall when we first began our work in the Whizin Institute for Jewish Family Life in the early 1990s, my philanthropic partners Bruce and Shelley Whizin suggested we focus on “spirituality” in our work. I replied, “Don’t use the S word!” The vast majority of rabbis and educators, unused to hearing, much less teaching, God language and uncomfortable with touchy-feely expressions of emotion, would immediately turn off if they thought we were pushing an agenda that imitated some in the Jewish Renewal community. It was just too marginal and it was not, at the time, taken seriously.

I remember clearly my own feelings of discomfort when first introduced to spirituality. It was when I heard Debbie Friedman’s *MiShebeirakh* sung during a prayer service. The rabbi announced that anyone in the congregation who wanted to publicly say the name of a person who was ill could stand and do so. This was shocking to me; I was used to the rabbi reciting Hebrew names submitted to the office by people who knew the secret of getting a name on the list. What made it so strange? The public sharing of a very private matter? The invitation for the congregation to stand up during the service, in place, and participate? The willingness of people to show emotion? The power of the music? Whatever it was, I recall my visceral reaction to it: a combination of shock and embarrassment. I even began to sweat, worrying that this just wasn’t right. It was so different, so strange, so weird.

When I reflect on this experience now, I realize that displacement of accepted behavior is a kind of violation of an unspoken code. Synagogues—particularly liberal ones—were not the place for emotion or commotion; they were to be filled with intellectualism and prayer conducted in quiet decorum. Yet, clearly this code was not

working anymore. Once a few pioneers began to skillfully introduce prayers of healing and other forms of spirituality into the synagogue service, it was as if everyone recognized that something new was needed, a radical overthrow of what was most definitely not working for people. Once the strangeness wore off, an enormous feeling of relief and liberation supplanted the often uptight atmosphere of the classical worship experience.

This small example reveals much about the challenge of creating the synagogue of the twenty-first century. The first lesson is the challenge of overcoming the natural hesitation of people about attempts to be spiritual. The second lesson is that the process of change, of introducing something new, is particularly vexing to an institution that, by definition, is rooted in tradition. “New” is anything that the people in the congregation are not used to doing, hearing, or saying. The challenge of change applies to all synagogues, in all denominations.

As I became more familiar with my colleagues in the Reform Movement, I was amazed to learn how challenging it was for their clergy to introduce changes into the worship services. In the mid-1990s, the transformation of the Classical Reform service was well under way, but there was still plenty of resistance from congregants who were comfortable with the old way, who worried that the changes were robbing them and their families. Suddenly, rabbis and cantors began introducing more Hebrew, more singing, more lay participation, and more spirituality—moments that broke through old conventions to make genuine contact with a twenty-first-century spirit, shaped and influenced by the culture in which we live, yet still maintaining authentic connection with tradition, so the spirit remains Jewishly grounded.

In the Conservative Movement, other changes were challenging congregants. Perhaps the most striking was the introduction of gender-neutral language into the English translations and the addition of the *imahot*, mention of the ancestral “mothers” of the Jewish people during the *Amidah*. Of course, the very presence of female rabbis on pulpits has been an enormous change and benefit to Conservative congregations. In my opinion, the sensitivities, understanding, and

scholarship of female clergy have been an important stimulant to the introduction of spirituality into the synagogue. In the Reconstructionist Movement, the introduction of God into the service has been a radical change. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, would be shocked to hear all the talk of God and spirituality in congregations that embrace his naturalist theology.

Even in the Orthodox Movement, changes in the *davenning* have been introduced. The enormous influence of Shlomo Carlebach and his Hasidic melodies led to the development of Carlebach-style services and the Happy *Minyan* phenomenon. I once asked an Orthodox friend who attends a Happy *Minyan* why it is called by that name. He simply smiled and replied, “When we leave the service, we’re happy.” What he implied is that because the music is so uplifting and the spirit so energizing, congregants are spiritually moved and emotionally elevated.

What’s going on? As strange or different as these breakaway spiritual experiences feel to those who are new to them, it is my belief that just under the surface of most people, you will find a spiritual soul waiting to find expression. I have witnessed hardened businesspeople melt into tears when led expertly through a prayer service that is designed to tap into this reality. Why is it that Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, and Danny Maseng can bring a group to a spiritual high in a concert setting in a matter of minutes, while the typical Shabbat service in many congregations can mean hours of passive sitting with no discernable impact?

If emotionality in worship opens people up to the possibility of a new relationship to God and the synagogue, the next step is to understand what I call the “four questions of spirituality.” The term is so elusive, I have asked many congregants to tell me what it is they are looking for when they say they want *spirituality* in their lives. They say they are looking for answers to these four questions:

### ***What Is the Meaning of My Life?***

At the end of the day, or better, at the end of my days, when I look back over my life, what meaning has my presence had? What difference did I make in the lives of others? It is the question immortalized

in the song “What’s It All About, Alfie?” It is the story of George Bailey who discovers the meaning of his existence in the classic film *It’s a Wonderful Life*. After I have worked my sixty-hour week, shuttled my kids back and forth to their endless activities, acquired the home of my dreams and everything that goes with it, what does it all *mean*?

### ***What Is the Purpose of My Life?***

After considering the question of meaning, I am faced with the question of *purpose*. What am I here to do? To use spiritual language, what did God put me on earth to accomplish? Ask many people what they want to achieve in their career, they will answer “to make a difference.” For what purpose can I use my talents and gifts to make the world a better place?

### ***Where Can I Connect to Community?***

It is difficult, perhaps impossible to live alone. There is a deep-seated human need to belong, to *connect* to others. Where can I find a community to belong to, a community that will be there for me, a community that I care enough about to be there for its members?

### ***Where Is God’s Presence in My Life?***

However you define God, most of us believe, or want to believe, in a divinity that impacts our lives. But many of us need help in finding a *personal relationship with God*. Do you have to believe in God to be Jewish? No. But where can I look for God, discover God, find the godliness in others?

The seekers of spirituality come to the synagogue asking these questions. A spiritually centered synagogue, a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, will be a place to answer them.

## **The Spirituality of Welcoming: The View from the Summit**

My own research in Synagogue 2000 focused on the central issue raised in this book, namely, how synagogues can fashion a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, infused with the spirituality of wel-

coming leading to a deeper relationship with the congregation, with each member and guest, and with God. The three initial factors in creating such a spiritual community are (1) welcoming ambience (the A gate, ambience of welcome), (2) welcoming worship (the P gate, prayer), and (3) welcoming membership (the I gate, institutional deepening). Due to limitations of space, I will leave my reflections on the other PISGAH gates for another time. (Larry Hoffman's parallel book, *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life* [Jewish Lights], covers many of the details of the S2K story.)

Synagogues often do a fine job of offering a variety of opportunities to study Judaism, to participate in social action activities, and to provide comfort for those who are mourning or caring for someone who is ill. That is business as usual. The times, however, require synagogues to be much more. We need synagogues that can be on the front lines of growing the Jewish people—spiritually and physically. The best way to reach in and strengthen the relationship of synagogue members to each other and to the congregation and the best way to convince synagogue regulars to reach out to bring in seekers and the unaffiliated is to begin the process of synagogue transformation by changing the ambience of welcome (chapter 3), by creating spiritually uplifting prayer experiences (chapter 4), and by connecting members significantly to the congregation (chapter 5). These, then, will be the primary topics of this book. First, however, I will turn to a brief overview of the theory behind synagogue transformation, which is the subject of the chapter that follows.