

INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

Rabbi Hayim Herring identifies current models and challenges of synagogue transformation projects in this article. He begins with a compelling guiding vision of the ideal synagogue, a vision which serves to orient his thinking. Providing a scan of the varieties of projects aiming to transform synagogues, he shares guiding principles, recommendations, and personal reflections on some of the dilemmas facing synagogue transformation.

Synagogue Transformation: Realities and Potentialities

RABBI HAYIM HERRING, PH.D.

The synagogue remains the bedrock institution of the Jewish community. As reported in a recent census of American synagogues, there were 3,727 synagogues in 2001.¹ Consider the human, fiscal and physical resources represented by this number and it becomes clear that synagogues have the potential to play a transformative role in the Jewish renewal agenda.

Many efforts are underway to transform the synagogue so that it can touch the spiritual, social and intellectual lives of more Jews more frequently. Assuming that the average American Jew spends only 10 to 20 hours per year inside a synagogue it is a great challenge. As we discuss synagogue transformation, however, we should remember our ultimate goal. We do not want to merely change an institution. We want the pivotal institution of the Jewish community to be much more effective in changing Jewish lives. This is not a semantic quibble. Rather, the way we frame the issue determines our strategies, tactics and the potential alliances that we choose to build or ignore in pursuing this work.

The Effective Synagogue

How would we know that we have witnessed an effective synagogue? We would see a synagogue whose members believe that their rabbis are in touch with them and the issues that affect their daily lives. People involved in synagogue life would feel that they are a part of a community that both respects them and challenges them to expand their Jewish horizons. They would be involved in one another's lives and, working together, put their Jewish values in action, to achieve a vision of a perfected world that they could not achieve on their own. This vision would be broad, encompassing both their local Jewish community

and the global Jewish community, and would be nested within Judaism's ultimate universal pursuit of *tikkun olam*. The truly effective synagogue would be the primary venue in shaping the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge and skills of all those who associate with it.

In concrete terms, Jewish education in the effective synagogue would be relevant and not theoretical, and would take place in formal and informal ways. Prayer would touch people personally because there would be a variety of prayer services for them, from traditional services to innovative ones. Programming at all levels would reflect and express the vast talents and creativity of the Jewish people. Technology would be woven into all aspects of synagogue life, including marketing, programming, communications and education. Last, given the limited time most Jews spend in the physical space of a synagogue, an effective synagogue would also consciously strive to have its impact extend into people's lives where they live them the most – outside of the synagogue.

Current Synagogue Transformation Efforts

With these thoughts in mind, a review and analysis of existing synagogue transformation projects raises a number of policy questions for us to consider.

Synagogue transformation efforts exist on a variety of levels. Some are national (e.g. STAR – Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal; Synagogue 2000; Experiment in Congregational Education); some are regional (e.g. the Koret Synagogue Initiative) and some are local (Boston, Hartford, Bergen County, New York, and Philadelphia each have synagogue transformation initiatives underway). Additionally, there are individual syna-

¹ Jim Schwartz, Jeffrey Scheckner, and Lawrence Kotler-Berkowitz, Census of U.S. Synagogues, 2001, *American Jewish Year Book*, 2001.

gogues that have seriously undertaken fundamental change efforts independent of any organized effort.

The initiative for many of these efforts has originated outside of the denominations, either through newly created national organizations (some loosely affiliated with academic institutions) or through federations. Also, while some of the existing synagogue transformation initiatives are starting to involve Orthodox congregations, they are under-represented in such efforts.

Approaches to synagogue transformation have taken a variety of forms. In some cases initiatives challenge synagogues to examine their organizational culture and processes. Some organizations have invested resources in rabbinic development, on the theory that exposing rabbis to some of the more creative minds within the Jewish community will stimulate innovation, if not transformation, within synagogues. Some synagogues believe that they are engaged in a process of transformation when they hire consultants, engage in strategic planning, or invest in leadership development. Consensus has not yet emerged on defining the synagogue transformation process and the ways in which it differs from the critical but routine maintenance that is the hallmark of healthy organizations.

Observations and Recommendations

It is too early in the synagogue transformation agenda to determine which kinds of initiatives, if any, are the most likely to revolutionize synagogue life. Several observations, however, are already possible:

1. Synagogues, because they are institutions inhabited by a diverse group of people, are multi-faceted organizations. Therefore, those initiatives that focus on only one aspect of congregational life as a lever for change may find themselves disappointed in their ability to create systemic change across the synagogue.
2. Synagogue change efforts, if they are to promote fundamental change, must work harder at involving those on the “outside” of their institutions. Often, those involved in synagogue change efforts are the “insiders” of their institutions. They may be dissatisfied with some aspects of congregational life, but their involvement suggests that they have basically opted into their synagogue’s worldview. As a result, some tinkering at the temple may occur, but real change remains elusive. Synagogue transformation efforts that reach outside of their accustomed pool

of volunteers may experience some tension, but this tension may also result in some exciting innovations that will promote greater participation.

3. One of the frequent challenges for synagogues is to see themselves as a part of the larger Jewish community. Synagogue change processes must help synagogues to achieve this goal by sharing their strengths with other Jewish institutions and partnering with other institutions so that their strengths can complement the synagogue’s work.
4. Many questions on synagogue change efforts call out to researchers. Here are three that I believe are critical to the future effectiveness of synagogues:
 - Much research on synagogues has focused on “baby boomers.” What expectations do younger generations have of synagogues and are we making changes that will speak to them? What are their expectations of synagogue professionals and are our Jewish colleges and seminaries preparing future leaders for this next generation?
 - What variables impact the success of synagogue change processes? For example, how does congregational size, length of staff tenure and age of the congregation have upon these processes?
 - As the Jewish community becomes increasingly serious in turning its attention to synagogues, how can we share our successes and failures with one another? What is the best way to disseminate models of effective processes, programs and initiatives? Are we willing to spend money on evaluating these efforts so that we improve and build upon them?

Feeling the Urgency and Respecting the Reality: Personal Reflections

The pace of existing change efforts needs dramatic acceleration given the current demographics on Jewish identity and synagogue affiliation and participation. While due attention must be paid to process, the medical school maxim of “learn one, do one, teach one,” with its emphasis on action learning, would serve us well. Personally, I would be prepared to sacrifice some of the process parts of these efforts, if in doing so we could greatly hasten their pace and bring more Jews into the orbit of the synagogue.

On the other hand, I have some issues with the implicit

judgment that suggests that everything about synagogues requires immediate change. True, healthy institutions are always striving to examine how they can do their work more effectively and they actively seek constructive critique. However, synagogues are not static institutions and they often provide satisfying experiences for their members.

For that reason, when I was appointed Executive Director of STAR a year ago, one of my first recommendations was to change the acronym of STAR from Synagogue Transformation and Renewal to Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal, a suggestion that my funders warmly and immediately embraced. The reason for this change: like all those involved in the hard work of synagogue change – from national Jewish leaders to rabbis in their congregations – I want to see synagogues as places that *transform* those who walk into them for the first time and *renew* the spiritual lives of those already involved. But having served in a congregation, I also know that synagogues, as religious institutions, are conservative by nature. They change incrementally, over long periods of time. Without compromising our sense of urgency for

change, we will have to be respectful of the richness, challenges, and potentialities of synagogue life.

Rabbi Hayim Herring was ordained from the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in 1984 and received his doctorate in Organization and Management from Capella University's School of Business in 2000, where he concentrated his studies in the area of non-profit management.

For 10 years, he served as rabbi of a prominent congregation in Minneapolis, followed by seven years of service to the Minneapolis Jewish Federation, where he helped to create one of the leading-edge Continuity initiatives in the country. In July 2002, he was appointed as the Executive Director of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), whose mission is to promote Jewish renewal by helping the North American synagogue find and implement innovative, collaborative, effective and transdenominational ways to meet the spiritual, educational and social needs of every member of the Jewish community. STAR was established in 1999 by philanthropists Edgar M. Bronfman Sr., Charles Schusterman (z"l) and Michael Steinhardt.

Editor's Suggested Discussion Guide:

- Herring writes, "Synagogues have the potential to play a transformative role in the Jewish renewal agenda." In what concrete ways would you anticipate that transformation of your synagogue, or your community's synagogues, would renew your Jewish community?
- Herring puts forth his vision of "the effective synagogue."
 - To what extent do you agree with his ideal?
 - In what ways does your synagogue(s) fall short of this ideal? How do you know (evidence, anecdotes, impressions, indicators)?
 - If you wanted to address some of these gaps between your synagogue and the ideal, what strategies would be effective?
- In your opinion, what constitutes a "synagogue transformation process" as opposed to "the critical but routine maintenance that is the hallmark of healthy organizations?" How would you define the difference between what Herring calls "tinkering at the temple" and "real change?"
- Herring refers to the importance of including "out-

siders" – those who have not "basically opted into their synagogues' world view."

- Why would this be important?
- Would it be worth the tension thus created?
- How could you get those "outsiders" to join in the conversation at all?
- What kinds of partnerships does your synagogue currently enjoy? Does your synagogue both share its strengths and receive the benefits of the strengths of these institutional partners? If not, what could you do to achieve this?
- Herring outlines a research agenda to inform continuing synagogue change.
 - Would this information be helpful to your efforts?
 - Who could/should be conducting this research?
 - Who could/should be funding it?
- Herring ends with an acknowledgement of the tension between the models of incremental change and transformative change. What is your take on these two models as they pertain to the realities and needs in your community?