

## Synagogues and the Jewish Renaissance by Jonathan Woocher

There can be no Jewish Renaissance in North America without the synagogue at its heart. But, synagogues alone cannot make a Jewish Renaissance. This, I believe, summarizes the opportunity and the challenge we face today. To get to this point, we have traversed a twisting path over the past decade and a half. We witnessed courageous early efforts to place the issue of “Jewish continuity” on the communal agenda, efforts that were met with tolerant, but lukewarm, support. Almost overnight, these efforts took on a new sense of urgency as the 1990 National Jewish Population Study gave the Jewish community a “cold slap in the face” and a wave of commissions and initiatives swept across the continent. The era of “continuity,” though, was relatively brief, as the realization spread that this concept could neither describe nor inspire the new flow of spiritual energy that began to course through the community. Thus, we have come to the goal of a “Jewish Renaissance.” Our aspirations have been elevated. We can imagine becoming a community genuinely built around the values of Torah, avodah, and gemillut hasadim. We see the potential for helping thousands, if not millions, of Jews who are seeking meaning and community to live richer, more substantive, more fulfilling Jewish lives. What we need are the strategies and vehicles that will enable us to transform this vision into reality.

### The Paradigm of Jewish Life

And so we have rediscovered the institution that has always been there (at least for the last two and a half millennia): the synagogue. Increasingly, the effort to fashion a Jewish Renaissance and efforts to strengthen, renew, and transform the synagogue have become nearly coterminous. And there is good reason for this to be so. The synagogue is, after all, the paradigm of Jewish community life. Simultaneously a house of prayer, study, and assembly, it epitomizes those values that must define what a Renaissance Jewish community will look like. At the same time, the synagogue is truly the people’s institution. Every survey, and the experience of countless Jews during times like those we have known these past few months, confirms that the synagogue is the institution closest to the Jewish heart. It serves as the next circle of family. It is the place we turn to in times of joy and sorrow; it is where we go when we seek comfort and inspiration. It is also where more Jews learn Judaism than in any other setting. This is true not only for children and youth (even with the steady rise in day school enrollments), but also for adults.

This is why it is unimaginable that we could create a Jewish Renaissance without the synagogue at its center. To try to do so would be like to trying to win a World Series without pitchers and catchers — we might field a team, but it wouldn’t get very far.

### An Uphill Struggle

We also know, however, that this is not the whole story. It is no denigration of synagogues, their leaders, or the movements with which most are affiliated to acknowledge that synagogues as they exist today are not capable of fashioning an encompassing Jewish Renaissance on their own. First and foremost, the vast majority is under-resourced; they lack the staff and the programming budgets to fully engage their members in rich experiences of Jewish learning and living. It may be true that simply adding more professionals and introducing more programs do not in themselves guarantee that a synagogue will become a more inspiring place to worship

and study, a more welcoming and caring community, or be successful in attracting and engaging individuals and families who currently see little value in synagogue affiliation. But, trying to reach these goals without having a full-time educational director, family educator, and youth worker, and perhaps a counselor and volunteer coordinator as well, not to mention funds for these professionals to spend, is an uphill struggle indeed.

At the same time, it is also true that many synagogues have not challenged themselves sufficiently to become the institutions they could be — nor have their members urged them to do so. A quiet complicity has too often been allowed to develop between synagogues and their members: Don't ask too much of us, and we won't ask too much of you. (This bargain is especially pernicious when it comes to congregational schooling.)

Fortunately, our national religious movements today are tackling this issue head on, both pushing and assisting their congregations and congregational leadership to raise their sights and set higher standards for themselves, both personally and institutionally.

### The Potential and the Challenges

Even for the growing number of synagogues that are seeking to become more and better than they have been, the path of change is difficult. The rapidly expanding roster of synagogue change initiatives, national and local — Synagogue 2000, the Experiment in Congregational Education, STAR, La'atid, Mashkon, ACE — testify both to the enormous potential of our congregations to become the engines of a Jewish Renaissance, and to the challenges of fulfilling that potential. It is easy to become intoxicated by the rhetoric of “transformation” and “renewal,” but, in fact, the kinds of structural and cultural changes that many synagogues need to make to become more powerful environments for Torah, avodah, and gemillut hasadim involve costs as well as gains. Synagogues, like schools, are inherently conservative institutions, and for good reasons. Many are already performing well, and there is no guarantee that trying to change them radically will really make them better. Congregational traditions, the prerogatives of committees made up of individuals who generously volunteer their time and energy, financial concerns — all these make the pursuit of dramatic change problematic, even when there is a clear promise of tangible benefits in the future, much less when the outcomes — as they often are — are hazy.

Finally, we must acknowledge that even at their best, synagogues cannot do everything, at least not by themselves. North American Jews are incredibly diverse, and the Jewish journeys they take are numerous and idiosyncratic. Happily, most of these journeys do pass through the doors of a synagogue at some point. Thus, it makes incontestable sense that we do everything possible to ensure that the synagogue “gateway” does not become an “archway,” leading out as quickly as it leads in. But, we should not feel resentful if some Jews at some points in their lives also look elsewhere to study Torah, to nurture their relationship with the Divine, or to pursue justice and kindness. This is what being a diverse and voluntary community is about. Indeed, synagogues should welcome the opportunity to join with other institutions, and sometimes even to defer to them, to advance the vision and values that originate in the synagogue, but that increasingly animate the entirety of our institutional (and extra-institutional) infra-structure. Such partnerships will become more essential and more comfortable; they are a signal of the strength of the synagogue, not its weakness.

### Getting Down to Tachlis

What does all this mean in tachlis terms? The bottom line is that we can't be satisfied with the current reality. If we are serious about fashioning a Jewish Renaissance, then we must be serious as well about strengthening our

synagogues, with whatever mix of encouragement, prodding, and assistance that may require. So, let me conclude with a five-point plan of what I think must be done:

- Investment in synagogues must grow substantially. Federations and philanthropists must be ready to “get their hands dirty” helping synagogues build their capacities, program by program, position by position. There will be frustrations and even tensions. Synagogue culture and denominationalism often present initial barriers to those used to working in different contexts. We need to work through and around these. There is simply no alternative to spending more if we want to get more, nor should we be looking for one.
- Synagogue renewal efforts must move from being experiments to being the norm. A few exemplary synagogues will not get the job done. A true Jewish Renaissance will require that hundreds of synagogues take seriously the challenge of transforming themselves. The principles to guide these efforts are by now quite well understood. The trick is in the doing. Ensuring that our congregational movements have the resources they need to prod and support their congregations effectively might be one way of “scaling up” synagogue change efforts.
- We must address the dysfunctions of congregational schooling. For better or worse, schooling and the lifecycle events that have become attached to it represent the most prominent face of synagogue life for hundreds of thousands of young people and their families. If “religious school” is a painful or irrelevant experience, synagogues will fight an uphill battle to convince those who undergo it that synagogue life as a whole is something far more joyful and worthwhile. The plain truth is that too much of congregational schooling is mediocre or worse. Again, we know what needs to be done — the JESNA Task Force Report, *A Vision of Excellence*, to cite one example, lays out a comprehensive strategy for transforming congregational education that commands broad support from educators and volunteer leaders across denominational lines. And, if we don’t have it exactly right, we’ll learn what else is needed. But the problem must be addressed, and we may have only a few years to do so before confidence in congregational education is irremediably lost.
- We must make adult Jewish learning “the thing to do.” Children will not drive a Jewish Renaissance. Jewishly literate adults who are excited about Jewish learning will. This is especially true of “learning leaders,” who can serve not only as role models for others, but as the catalysts for institutional transformation. Synagogues have long been the backbone of adult Jewish learning in North America. It is now time to forge the alliances and allocate the resources that will allow them to become critical nodes in a community-wide network that makes Jewish learning opportunities available on a scale and in a style that leaves any Jew not involved feeling deprived. Synagogues should be proud to offer their members a rich menu of Jewish study emanating from day schools, Jewish community centers, universities, and the Internet, as well as from within the congregation itself. And synagogues should compete to see who can have the highest percentage of their members enrolled in some form of Jewish learning.
- Finally, we need to discard once and for all the notion that we are two communities, “religious” and “secular,” “private” and “public.” What we should hope and strive to be is a “community of communities.” And not just any kind of community — a “holy community,” a *kehillah kedoshah*. This means breaking down the boundaries that even today too often place synagogues off to the side of what is thought to be the main stage of community life. This cannot be accepted if we seriously seek a Jewish Renaissance. Synagogues are the strongest building blocks of community; a communal edifice that does

not rest on the base of strong synagogues will not endure. From their side, synagogues must know that they are not of, by, and for their members alone. They are microcosms of clal Yisrael, and they must serve as bridges connecting their members to the totality of Jewish life. No part of the community — not synagogues, not federations — “owns” the Jews who identify with it. Attempting to keep synagogue members within the four walls of the congregation is both a disservice to them and a misunderstanding of the synagogue’s mission.

There can be no Jewish Renaissance without the synagogue at its center. Synagogues cannot make a Jewish Renaissance alone. These are the two principles that must guide us as we go forward. The work is great, and the time is short. But the reward for success will indeed be stupendous.

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