

CONTACT

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The Synagogue: A Time for Tearing Down and a Time for Building Up

by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg
and J.J. Greenberg

A New Synagogue for a New Era

by Edgar M. Bronfman

Plus essays by Rabbi Lawrence
A. Hoffman and Dr. Ron Wolfson,
Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, Martin Tucker,
and Rabbi Daniel M. Bronstein



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Jewish Life Network is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewry to ensure a flourishing,

sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

Photographs in this issue are by Karel Cudlín and Ivo Hribek.

F r o m t h e E d i t o r

Reshaping our Synagogues and Revamping our Attitudes

According to many Jewish thinkers and leaders today, the synagogue is in a state of profound crisis. Since the synagogue is one of the most ancient, visible and important institutions in Jewish communal life, this could have dire consequences for American Jewry: the vitality of the synagogue has often been used as a barometer of the health of the Jewish community as a whole.

Critics of the contemporary synagogue point to what they view as obvious and serious problems: low congregational memberships, sparse attendance at services, few active young people, uninspiring worship, boring rabbis. For them, the heart of the problem resides in the institution itself, in its structure and presentation.

But others think that though the synagogue may be in need of certain kinds of modifications or changes (structural, liturgical, educational), the real problem lies within us—not within the shul. What keeps us away from the synagogue are our personal histories, our emotional baggage, our excessive focus on our own individual needs over the needs of the community.

The following essays represent several different viewpoints on the subject of synagogue renewal. In this season of inner renewal, may they help us in our joint and continuing effort to create a revitalized, self-reflective, and ever-improving Jewish community.


Rabbi Niles Goldstein

T o t h e E d i t o r

The latest issue of *Contact* [on Jewish service] was quite moving. You have managed to recover the spiritual roots of our traditional emphasis on service in a way that is sensitive to Jewish pluralism. You have put your finger on what really matters for us all, and I highly commend you for it. Ruth Messinger's article,

"Toward a New Concept of Jewish Service," was also particularly inspiring. Ruth was chosen as one of Hadassah's first "Women of Distinction" during my presidency, and I am gratified to see her featured in your journal.

Marlene E. Post
National President,
Hadassah



the Synagogue: a Time for Tearing Down & a Time for Building Up

by RABBI YITZ GREENBERG
and J.J. GREENBERG

After a remarkable expansion of synagogues in the forties, fifties and early sixties, the past three decades have been a bear market for shuls. Membership and participation rates have dropped significantly. Complaints of boredom and irrelevance fill the air. Shul life has been criticized for excessive factionalism and small-mindedness; many in young leadership seceded to Federations and alternative organizations. Denominational fighting polarized Jewish life. Rabbis complained that they were shoved aside by the emergent lay leadership and blamed it all on “checkbox Judaism,” i.e. Jewish life run by money instead of values. Yet the lay leaders complained that rabbis were uninspiring, acting like politicians but neglecting their constituents’—and their own—spiritual lives. The Havurot groups, which first emerged in the sixties, had kind words for alternate religions and seekers but blamed the soulless institutional synagogues and their Hebrew schools for the traumas which scarred their Jewish souls and turned off so many of their peers.

What went wrong? The synagogue always drew its strength from meeting the spiritual and value needs of Jewry. When Jews went into exile and lived as a minority, the synagogue offered decentralized communities, guided by

a shared set of distinctive values which were stronger and more compelling than those of the majority environment. To a powerless people, shul became the place where one could do something to find help in troubles, i.e. where one could pray. Over the years the services grew longer and longer as the desperate need for help grew.

In this century, Jewry went from powerlessness to power, yet the prayers continued (in length or in content) to express helplessness. Worldwide, all cultural shelters and ethnic ghettos were breaking down as the explosion of media and communications brought religious groups into open contact with each other. In such circumstances, loyalty must be won anew. Fundamentalism (traditionalism now radicalized and chosen rather than copied) does better than mere continuation of the past. Yet synagogues did not respond properly; even liberal synagogues were heavily traditional and “residual.” One might say that they kept less of the tradition rather than renewed its functions.

These errors were compounded by the synagogue’s role as the vehicle of Americanization and suburbanization. The large institutional synagogue infrastructure that was built (to proclaim that Jewry had arrived in the United States) needed to be supported financially. This led to an emphasis on social events (which expressed the family’s material success). But the Hebrew schools and B’nei Mitzvah focus crippled learning for both children and adults. And the cold, impersonal proceedings (with a weekly changing audience of guests unconnected to each

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and J. J. Greenberg are, respectively, the President and Executive Director of Jewish Life Network.

other or to congregants) choked the service. Nevertheless, the emotional dynamics of making it and being accepted in America supplied social gratification and emotional thrills to the parent generation. But the children who grew up taking this acceptance and success for granted were bored by the process and turned off by the display.

The crisis of confidence has led the Federations and foundation world to invest proportionately less of the continuity budget in improving the synagogues. Yet it is a serious mistake

American Jews are seeking a vital sense of community because individualism alone cannot meet the deepest needs of individuals

to write off an historical powerhouse of Jewry. This is especially true now, because in recent years important new experiments have brought exciting life to individual synagogues in all the movements. These vital centers should be cloned, not abandoned.

Synagogue renewal is not a matter of restoring the synagogue to its old-time centrality. We will have to “tear down” many of the errors in structure and culture to free energy for a religious renaissance. Nor can rabbis be proclaimed the true leaders of Jewry. Authority must be earned the new-fashioned way—by relevance and meeting the deepest needs of Jews more effectively than the alternatives. Competition today comes from the general culture and other media of values and self-expression rather than the Federations or secular Jewish organizations that are regularly denounced for neglecting spirituality.

We are living through one of the great cultural transformations of human history—the arrival of societies marked by a much higher degree of freedom, affluence and power for the masses. With status increasingly achieved rather than ascribed, with identity chosen and confirmed rather than given by birth, the emphasis must be on preparing people to choose to be Jewish. We believe that Judaism’s unique emphasis on covenant—on divine-human partnership—always pointed toward the emergence of a mature, voluntary relationship to one’s God and people. The Torah’s focus on

living the good life in the here and now also lends itself to giving meaning and direction in a more consumer oriented, worldly culture. Yet, Judaism never succeeded as a “me too” religion. A minority dissolves into the majority once it loses its edge.

The synagogue (and any institution that will play a vital role in Jewry’s future) must communicate its purpose and offer the advantage in being different. American Jewry—or at least that fraction that seriously wants to be Jewish—is ready to be different

even as it is integrated into general culture. For a generation, the decision makers picked their religious heads to lead the charge for Americanization and to represent Jews to others (rather than teach Judaism to Jews). Now the bulk of Jewish leadership is ready for rabbis as spiritual masters, teachers of the Torah, community organizers and role models for values.

The initial synagogue experiments point strongly to where the synagogue can be renewed. Freedom means that people must be equipped with the knowledge and experiences that enable them to choose to be distinctively Jewish. Vital forms of learning—adult as much as youth—are central goals. Given that 90% of Jews go to university, the average level of synagogue teaching must be drastically improved. Necessary changes include that the selection of rabbis be intellectually upgraded; rabbis’ time be freed up for learning and teaching; cooperative study ventures be willingly used; and outstanding talents be recruited for synagogue adult education. This implies that synagogues must stop treating each other as rivals and the Federations and other organizations as the enemy.

American Jews are seeking a vital sense of community because individualism alone cannot meet the deepest needs of individuals. The creation of powerful communities is the main challenge of synagogue renewal. Orthodox standards of visiting the sick, comforting mourners, rejoicing with the bride and groom, can be inculcated in the entire population and centrally structured into syna-

gogue life. Already there are liberal shuls that have set new higher norms in these areas—which all types of groups should strive to emulate. A true community extends hospitality to all—from the way the phone is answered to the invitation to lunch to reaching out and touching whomever comes into its orbit.

In this expressive society, music, song and dance engage people and suffuse their lives. That is why the leading synagogue pace-setters are typically marked by liturgy filled with joy and celebration. Used intelligently, the liberal advantage (the ability to use musical instruments where the Orthodox cannot) deepens the impact. But the key is creating participants, not spectators, and here the Orthodox have every equal opportunity.

We do not wish to list all aspects of synagogue renewal. One of the community’s first tasks is to identify the key characteristics of vital shuls, to establish how these can be transmitted—and to offer aid in developing and spreading them everywhere. We are confident that these transforming characteristics can be incorporated into many synagogues—given the will to do so by informed lay and religious leadership. They will need help for the additional costs and efforts involved. Here is where philanthropy can step in and make a real difference.

Michael Steinhardt has argued the case for not tackling all synagogues simultaneously and diluting the impact of innovation but rather striving to create a visible ‘chain’ of revitalized synagogues (of every denomination), backing them with investment sufficient for complete transformation. In the past year, the Schusterman Foundation has explored the possibility of leading a serious philanthropic partnership in this area. The Cummings Foundation, Whizin and others have done important pioneering work with Synagogue 2000. Time is of the essence, however, as more and more Jews lose contact altogether.

The synagogue has been the central institution of Jewish life for more than 1500 years. Yet in Biblical times, Judaism functioned without synagogues at all. What will be the *Beit Haknesset’s* place in Jewish life in the next millennium? Our actions now will determine the answer. 🌸

a New Synagogue for a New Era

by EDGAR M. BRONFMAN

What our community needs today is a renaissance of Jewish life, and that includes, or perhaps starts with, the synagogue. In the past, the synagogue was a small, intimate building within walking distance of all its congregants. At first, services were brief, just the basic required prayers. Over time, the services were lengthened, and contemporary congregations are no longer small, warm and friendly. I was brought up in Montreal, and attended the Conservative synagogue, Sha'ar HaShomayim. It was large and a bit forbidding, especially for the young.

Communities may very well have grown too large, and clearly the concept of the more intimate *shul* has suffered as a result. In any event, our young people are Jewishly ignorant. The average Jewish college student—and there are 400,000 of them in Canada and the United States—is a whiz at math, science, English, economics—everything but Judaism. There's no point in blaming anyone, it's just an historical fact. The question before us is, what can be done about it?

A Jewish renaissance, that's what. A real awakening, one that creates a desire to learn based on spiritual values, which young people are seeking all over the world.

What complicates matters is that there is no single suit/dress that fits all. One by one Jews have to be convinced that "doing Jewish" is what

they want, that it will make them feel better about themselves. We desperately need a system of Jewish education for Jews who had so little Judaism in their homes when they grew up.

We also need synagogues they will find spiritually uplifting, where they can learn together, argue together and become Jews together.

I don't like going to synagogue. I generally find the atmosphere stultifying, the services overly long, boringly repetitive, and mostly without meaning to the young Jews of today. But our synagogues and temples don't belong to the rabbis, or to the siddur, a book that was crafted for another generation in another era. Our places of worship belong to the congregants.

I once asked a friend, a scholarly rabbi, just what part of the service was essential, thinking that it might be possible to make the services more meaningful and shorter at the same time. The answer was that only the *Sh'ma* and the *Amidah* (the silent devotion) are technically essential. That means there is time for interactive study, singing and then over and out.

I have publicly insisted that the synagogue doesn't belong to the rabbi but to the congregants, and if they demand a better, simpler, more uplifting service, and the rabbi doesn't go along, as the well-known commercial says, fire the rabbi and get one who will do the congregation's bidding. Maybe then we can attract young people and make it a place where they would like to be.

The answer, of course, is young people. And what of the Sunday school and after-school learning that goes on—to fewer and fewer youngsters—in so many synagogues? I say abolish them.

Let's start all over again and have the Jewish home perform the basic Jewish education.

Let the synagogue be a cornerstone of renaissance, not what served us well in the past but is no longer relevant. Let the synagogue become more of a *beit midrash* and less of a *beit kneset*, more a place of learning than a place of repetitious worship, a place where all generations will transform form into substance, formalities into knowledge. This is a key to the Jewish renaissance. Every rabbi must again become a teacher, every congregant a student. The change must

Let the synagogue be a cornerstone of renaissance, not what served us well in the past but is no longer relevant.

come from the grass-roots, from the communities, from the congregants themselves.

Because of my negative and boring experiences with Jewish synagogue services, I have started what I hope will be a non-denominational effort which may inspire others to do something similar.

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg assembled a small group—a *chazan* and an assistant—to help him conduct a High Holiday service at the public room in my apartment building. Knowing perfectly well that all that is required is the *Sh'ma* and the *Amidah*, we made this service instructive, interactive and spiritually uplifting. When the shofar was blown, Arthur explained the notes and their meaning. When we read from the Torah, there was a discussion of the material we were reading and studying.

The aim was to do what was halakhically correct while at the same time giving the congregants the opportunity to learn, participate, and feel uplifted by the ceremonies. ❁

Edgar M. Bronfman is President of the World Jewish Congress.



Synagogue **The Vision of** **2000**

by **RABBI LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN**
and **DR. RON WOLFSON**

Despite the doom-and-gloom fallout from the 1990 Jewish population study, the decade of the 90's closes with *b'sorot tovot*, "good news," for the new millennium. Our institutions have learned that they cannot continue doing business as usual. Synagogues especially were mired in patterns of the 1950's and 60's. They were child-centered and dependent on "traditional" family patterns, even though the 1980's and 90's were highlighting a nationwide return to religion by adults, and a shift away from the taken-for-granted identity that had held Jews in the fold out of a sense of ethnic obligation. As the Iron Curtain crumbled and as peace began to seem like a genuine option for Israel, the foreign-affairs agenda that had successfully fueled Jewish identity began to look hollow. Questions that were once unthinkable—like "Why be Jewish?" and "What is Judaism anyway?"—have become the norm. No wonder Jewish identity has become the issue for our time. But not just any identity will do. For those of us living here, it will have to be distinctively American—which is to say, religious.

Jewish history teaches us this: In every welcoming environment, Jews have tapped their host culture for Jewish ends. Medieval Babylonian academies mirrored the Islamic Caliphate. Rashi was the Jewish equivalent of a Christian school of biblical commentary that dominated medieval France.

Our Jewish renaissance thus presupposes our taking seriously today's American spiritual revival, featuring adults on personal journeys of self-discovery. America remains the most religious of all modern western democracies. It was founded on the centrality of the neighborhood church (and synagogue). And it is undergoing what will some day be known as the third Religious Awakening of American history. There were too few Jews here to be influenced by the first Awakening,

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy at the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, and **Dr. Ron Wolfson**, Director of the Whizin Center for the Jewish Future at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, are principal investigators of *Synagogue 2000*.

Only the synagogue *has the capacity to deliver Judaism's religious message of the complexity of life and the mystery of God.*

in colonial times. We successfully mined the promise of the 19th-century Awakening, however, which ultimately produced our national movements. Today's Awakening features Americans who exercise their free choice in search of spiritual meaning.

Synagogue 2000 is the Jewish answer to the search for meaning. We are to today's religious awakening what the rabbinical academies in Baghdad were to medieval Islam, and what Rashi was to eleventh-century France. We combine a comprehensive and Jewish spiritual vision (a Jewish emerald kingdom) with American organizational know-how (a yellow brick road to get there). We examine everything, from physical space to organizational governance, and evaluate what we see according to the values of our tradition. We promote synagogues where learning runs deep, worship engages, welcome is everywhere, and members matter because they care and are cared for. Most of all, we have coupled the rhetoric of a Jewish ideal to a measured process of change management that makes the ideal realizable.

We are not just about programs. More and better programs are not the answer. We are not looking for a quick fix: a book to read, or an hour-long workshop to attend. We are a carefully thought-through process of doing synagogue differently. In a synagogue 2000, all who enter are made to feel that they are indeed created in the image of God. Jewish journeys happen there, because people are affirmed for who they are, not made to feel guilty for what they do not know. Collabora-

tive leadership models prevent clergy burn-out and transform even board and committee meetings into spiritual ventures.

Our vision is comprehensive—we call it PISGAH, meaning the “heights” from which Moses looked out on the Promised Land. “P, S, G, A” and “H” stand for Prayer, Study, Good deeds, a welcoming Ambiance and a Healing atmosphere, the five goals toward which synagogues strive. All five are suffused with the “I,” for Institutional change: a cultural shift away from replicating old and tired patterns. Instead, through experiential conferences, curricularized adult learning and Jewishly knowledgeable consultants, we empower synagogue teams to think boldly, take risks, and probe the farthest reaches of Jewish imagination.

Two experimental cadres of synagogues, one national, another regional, have taught us to value the synergy of ancient Jewish wisdom and the contemporary American field of organizational development. We have just inaugurated our three-year transformative track in Denver, with synagogues from all four movements participating, and in years to come, we expect to go from city to city with our message and our method.

Synagogue 2000 speaks to all synagogues, because the American religious Awakening is an opportunity for all movements. Perhaps the most rewarding moments come when rabbis and laity across denominations share what they have learned about new ways to reach outward, to the unaffiliated and the disaffected, and inward,

to the hearts and minds of synagogue loyalists. We are becoming a national institute for the synagogue of the future, a resource for synagogues of every movement.

Our work is done by a national team of synagogue “champions,” the growing body of artists, rabbis, educators, cantors, administrators, and change-management consultants who come together as our Fellows to share their leading-edge approaches with the synagogues in our system. Simultaneously, the Fellows nurture each other's creativity and return home to experiment further in the next stage of synagogue renewal, which, in turn, will be demonstrated and embedded in our ever-advancing curricula for synagogue self-study.

We believe in synagogues. Only the synagogue has the capacity to deliver Judaism's religious message of the complexity of life and the mystery of God. We are creating synagogues that feature imagination rooted in Jewish learning, but informed by organizational know-how and committed to affirming the Jewish journeys through life that all of us are on, one way or another. And, in the end, we transform not just synagogues but entire communities, because our process unites synagogues, foundations, and Federations as equal stakeholders in a Jewish future. Doing synagogue differently is the first step to doing community differently. We can reshape entire communities to share resources, work together, and embrace the promise of a golden age for Jews in North America. ✨

Orthodoxy and Synagogue Renewal

by RABBI YOSEF KANEFSKY

If I had to hazard a guess, I would bet that most of my Orthodox brethren would regard the challenge of synagogue renewal as being one that did not really pertain to us. And if we were to define synagogue renewal in the narrowest possible sense, they would be right. The percentage of Orthodox Jews who attend synagogue every Shabbat is very high, and it is common for an Orthodox synagogue to offer multiple Shabbat morning services, all of which are well attended. If by renewal we mean the filling of the seats, then this is generally not an Orthodox issue.

The reality, though, is that the challenge of renewal touches upon many more areas than simply that of numbers. It involves looking at these well-attended services of ours, and asking what they are truly accomplishing. There is, I believe, a widespread recognition within the Orthodox community that the synagogue functions as a social club as much as it does a place of meaningful religious experience. Orthodox synagogues are notoriously noisy during services, even during Torah reading. Worshipers do not generally look to the Shabbat morning services for spiritual inspiration or emotional uplift. The message of the rabbi's sermon sometimes gets lost in the discussion over whether the rabbi spoke too long. Even the Orthodox synagogue's traditional role of inspiring and transforming the religious lives of its members through weekly classes and lectures may no longer be viable. The proliferation of opportunities

to study via the internet, and the growth of adult Jewish education programs in non-synagogue forums have cut deeply into this role of the synagogue. The challenge of renewal—renewal of the spiritual potency of the Orthodox synagogue—beckons.

The key to success is the synagogue's being able to identify and recognize those areas in which it truly has the power to make a difference in people's lives. The goal, then, is to design or redesign the synagogue's activities so that the synagogue actually is making a

The synagogue can and must make the prayer experience one that consistently lifts and inspires.

profound difference in its members' lives—in the ways that they think and behave. As people come to view their synagogue as a center for personal and spiritual growth, their expectations of synagogue membership and of the role that the synagogue should play in their lives will change and expand. A self-driving dynamic of renewal will be put into motion.

One of the ways that a synagogue can have a profound impact on the life of its members is through creating a meaningful community, one in which every member feels the support and love of every other. The work toward the creation of this type of community takes place in *shul* on Shabbat morning and is the result of the efforts of a few critical committees.

The Shabbat morning service is filled with opportunities for generating a deep sense of intra-communal caring. When, for example, the *mi shebayrach* for the sick is recited, the rabbi needs to give a very specific update as to who is sick (or who has a loved one who is sick), how one may contact or visit people who are hospitalized, who could use a friendly visitor in the week to come, and to whom one can speak if one would like to prepare a meal for a person who is ill. The *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick) committee must specifically ask both the close friends of the sick person as well as people who aren't as close to help. When an individual recites the *gomel* (blessing for one's well-being) in *shul*, people have to know why it's being recited (with the individual's permission of course). When a family celebrates a *simcha* (happy occasion) in *shul*, everyone present must be encouraged to sing and to dance with the celebrants. (Yes, we really dance in *shul*!) When a baby is named, the parents must be given the opportunity to share with everyone the significance of the name they chose. There must be a committee whose specific function is to welcome and arrange Shabbat meal invitations for every new soul who walks through the door. The cumulative impact of these efforts is enormous. Everyone feels connected to and responsible for everyone else. The synagogue becomes a true community, and Shabbat morning becomes a very significant locus for personal religious growth.

A second vital area in which the synagogue can serve a transformative role is in its ability to strengthen and make holy the Jewish family unit. Programs in which parents and children celebrate and learn together (creative informal learning is often best) need to be a regular part of the program year. On Shabbat mornings, rabbis need to make the Torah's teachings concerning family relationships a frequently recurring sermon topic. The adult education offerings must include parenting classes co-taught by the rabbi and a developmental psychologist. The synagogue needs to be seen as the prime resource for how to create and to raise the Jewish family.

The synagogue can and must make the prayer experience one that consistently lifts and inspires. In this regard,

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there is nothing that comes close to the power of communal song. The energy that fills the room when all of the voices have joined as one is incomparable. Achieving this does require a rigid insistence that all of those who want to lead services comply with the communal singing standard, and the synagogue must provide opportunities for training. But the benefit in terms of the renewal of interest and active participation in prayer is enormous. The most prevalent trend in this regard has been the introduction and broad utilization of the melodies of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. A leader in this movement has been the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale which, under the direction of Rabbi Avi Weiss, has adopted Rabbi Carlebach's entire Friday night service, to the delight of the standing-room-only crowds. This enhancement of the service must be complemented by classes on the text of the *siddur*. This rightfully remains the educational niche of the synagogue even at a time when there are so many other educational resources in the larger (real and virtual) community.

Finally, for an Orthodox synagogue to renew its spiritual vitality, its members have to see their Judaism actually making a difference. Every *chag* (holiday) needs to have a *tikkun* (thematically linked) project attached to it. This could be building homes for the homeless at Sukkot time, collecting food for the hungry at Pesach time, participating in a community-building cross-denominational Torah study at Shavuot time, or whatever it is that suits the desires of a particular community. The program for Bar and Bat Mitzvah preparation needs to include group hospital visits, helping younger children at synagogue youth events, and other acts of community service. When a synagogue community works together to bring its principles into practice, the synagogue becomes so much more than a social club for its congregants. It becomes their Sinai. ❀

Coming Home Again

by MARTIN TUCKER

I had to wait till Auschwitz to return to a synagogue.

Did I have to wait? I ask myself. I know I had been wanting to return, perhaps to enter, really, for the first time. If entering means pursuit of desire and not of duty.

It's always been a question of symbols with me.

Drums matter, but symbols clang in my literary heritage. I hear not so much the drum of omen and what is coming, but the cymbal of what has been sounded and woven into air.

So I knew, when I made my plans for Poland this summer, that I would be entering a synagogue for the first time in three decades.

It was a matter of returning to the past to find my future and thereby enabling me to change the presence of my habits this far in my life. I had been wanting to surrender to this claim for exaltation and community, but I needed the propriety of an occasion. I believed I had found it in going to Cracow for a writers conference. What more apt and opportune moment to put on the fabric of my calling than by extending into a *shul* the sacred role of scholar and scribe?

Late in June of this year, I entered the Isaac Synagogue in Kazimierz, the suburb of Cracow where "Schindler's List" was filmed. It was two days after the International PEN Conference had ended in Warsaw. It was the day after an excursion of PEN members to Cracow and Kazimierz, the day I stood in front of the synagogue and found it had closed for the day. I would have to wait till the next day.

Nothing broke the silence the next morning when I approached the portal of the once-adorned *shul*, now largely bare except for the TV monitor in the front hall screening a video of the Nazi round-up of Cracow's Jews. In 1939 there were 68,000 Jews in the city, most of them living in the then-modest suburb of Kazimierz, with its countless synagogues and *shtiebels*. Today, less than 200 Jews live (and maybe practice their religion) in the city and suburb; Kazimierz has become a fashionable retreat for Warsawians. Aside from the Rema Synagogue and the Isaac Synagogue, the remaining *shuls* of Kazimierz are either museums, government buildings, or aban-



doned shacks. The Altshul, the oldest synagogue in Poland, is today a museum whose valuable objects and texts are a reminder to those who would forget and/or question the advent of the Holocaust.

And yet if I heard not a portentous sound of tribal greeting—or my familiar rendition of my mother's voice, *Why have you waited so long?*—I felt *something*. I heard little but felt greatly the tremors of an awakening. I had purchased a silver threaded yarmulke on entering, and I placed the elegant covering on my balding head. I walked by the bare walls, once beautifully colored with the radiant light of practiced faith, and then crossed into the inner rooms. I came back to look up at the still-elegant gallery. And I waited, not so much for revelation, as for an acceptance of myself by myself.

Rabbis, priests, ministers, Big Brothers and Sisters, psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors of all stripes tell their listeners that peace comes in the act of stopping action, in the arrest of energy without confinement. Freedom is the loss of will because will no longer matters in a control-less universe. Freedom and commitment become one when wanting disappears.

I wish I could say I found that indivisible time, that unique moment that subsumes all conscious time, as I stood before the place of the Ark in the Isaac Synagogue. It was what I *wanted*, what at least I could admit now that I wanted, and that I had never been able to admit before.

The moment there was a start. It was a beginning. A beginning has reverberations.

I can say I became a Jew again in Kazimierz. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew whether ordained or blessed or damned or even recognized on the street.

I became myself. ❀

Martin Tucker is a writer and the editor of *Confrontation: A Literary Journal*.

The Synagogue: Pillar of Jewish Continuity

by RABBI DANIEL M. BRONSTEIN

Throughout history, the Jewish people have faced endless challenges—religious, political, cultural, even financial ones. Through it all, from antiquity to the present, over virtually every part of the inhabitable world, they have survived and flourished. During all these centuries, the Jewish people has relied heavily upon a single institution: the synagogue.

In addition to being the oldest surviving Jewish institution, the synagogue can boast of doing more than any other communal structure to ensure Jewish continuity over the ages and over the entire globe. In twentieth-century America, the synagogue has been viewed largely as a venue for worship. Traditionally, however, the synagogue also

synagogues as largely self-reliant ensurers of Jewish continuity, it is useful to examine why, as of late, synagogues have come under harsh scrutiny if not attack.

A characteristic critique of the contemporary synagogue experience is that synagogue worship, and by extension the American rabbinate, are boring. As a rabbi, and as a son and brother of congregational rabbis, I am hardly in a position to respond to this critique in an objective fashion. Still, I would like to offer a critique of this critique.

It seems to me that to accuse synagogues of being “boring” is to mix cultural categories.

To be sure, the synagogue is a multifaceted institution. But more importantly, the synagogue is an intrinsically

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served as a focus for learning as well as the hub of communal assembly and decision-making—functions well-apparent in the earliest period of American Jewish history. We might also remember that unlike many others sectors of the Jewish community, synagogues have had no choice but to be financially self-sufficient. Given the proven track record of

religious institution. To argue that the problem with the contemporary synagogue revolves around entertainment value— or lack thereof—is to judge the synagogue through the lens of Hollywood and Wall Street, which is both a superficial and inaccurate mode of assessing the value of contemporary synagogues. Historically the Jewish people and Jewish institutions have survived because we have skillfully absorbed and even synthesized motifs, structures and philosophies of other cultures into Jewish life. Nonetheless, it is unproductive, if not destructive, to attempt to coerce, graft or impose secular modes and values onto the American synagogue.

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I suspect that an additional force at work in some of the harsher reappraisals of current synagogue life relates to our culture's deification of *self*. Although President Kennedy once exhorted the baby-boomer generation to “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” in our era and on many levels, this equation has been reversed. In a philosophical shift, many want to know what their country, their house of worship, or any other authoritative institution can do for them—as individuals—rather than what they can do for the broader community. The same applies to synagogues and Jewish worship. Many demand that Jewish institutions meet their particular needs—spiritual, emotional and otherwise—while losing sight of the fact that the synagogue, and indeed the Tradition itself, is grounded in the notion of *Avodah*, or service. This notion obligates Jewish individuals to serve God, the Jewish people, and the world at large. Jewish tradition demands that we struggle to transcend the obsession with self and replace it with service to others. To change synagogues on the basis of individual demands and needs distorts the essence of the synagogue's religious and communal function.

Finally, I would argue that the contemporary critique of the synagogue carries other historical echoes with it. While most of us are aware of the antagonism between different interpretations of Judaism, there is also a long history of power struggles between rabbis and lay-leaders. In one famous incident, the founder of American Reform Judaism was assaulted during services by the president of his congregation, ultimately leading to police intervention in order to prevent a full-scale riot. Instead of blaming boring rabbis or denouncing ungrateful lay-people, we need to remember that all concerned Jews are on the same side. We all want to further Jewish religious and cultural life and to pass on the treasures of our tradition to the many generations to come. And we must all be mutually respectful in our strivings to enrich Jewish life in North America. This may sound trite, yet mutual respect is often absent from Jewish communal life. Respecting the religious grounding of the synagogue means that we must all be cognizant of one another's humanity.

Simply deposing of rabbis such as Banana Republic military juntas depose dictators will not qualitatively or quantitatively improve synagogue life.

Neither synagogues nor rabbis should be exempt from criticism and change. But criticism of the contemporary synagogue must be made within a religious and not a business context.

Rabbis and teachers, lay-leaders and administrators must all work together at this religious task. Every human component of synagogue life should struggle with how to make worship more spiritually meaningful, compelling and accessible.

What this entails, in part, is enhancing the American synagogue's role in learning—for adults and children alike. The Jewish people in North America is highly literate in terms of the broader secular culture and there is no reason why American Jews cannot be more learned concerning their own traditions and history. Rabbis and lay-people need to devote time and energy to learning, together, about Jewish liturgy and worship. The Jewish people deserve to know why Jewish prayer has been structured and re-structured over the course of history. And the Jewish people must be active participants in the ongoing relationship with God as expressed through worship. We must also redouble our efforts to learn and to teach Hebrew so that we grasp what we are saying when we pray. Finally, Rabbis must also be open to further lay participation just as lay-people must take the responsibilities of Jewish communal life seriously, and not simply act on behalf of selfish needs.

Working together, learning and growing religiously as a community, the Jewish people can yet achieve its goal of becoming a Nation of Priests. ✿





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