

Set 'em up, Joe: The Synagogue as Corner Cafe

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Recently in the subway I saw an ad for Starbucks, the cappuccino conglomerate. On the poster was an arrow pointing to "Your Home," another pointing to "Your Work," and a third pointing to a Starbucks.

Terrific, I thought. No longer content with gobbling up mom-and-pop coffee shops, Starbucks has now set its sights on co-opting sociological trends.

The trend, in this case, is a focus by urbanologists, anthropologists and political scientists on the role played by so-called "third places" in creating vital, democratic, socially cohesive communities.

Popularized by sociologist Ray Oldenburg of the University of West Florida, "third places" are the cafés, bars, Main Streets or town squares that serve as "institutions of mediation between the individual and larger society." In his 1989 book on the subject, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg defines the third place as "a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work."

In short, it is a place where everybody knows your name.

In Oldenburg's view, the third place is the cream in the coffee, the olive in the martini, of our neighborhoods and democratic society. Clean, well lit places create the habit of association, drawing people out of their suburban anonymity and weaving them into the broader fabric of community life. They are settings where people can meet across the barriers of social difference, and in face-to-face conversations that counter the homogenizing, monopolizing voice of the media. They provide a safety valve for revelry, and lead regulars to take responsibility for the public domain—the safety of the streets and parking lots, the aesthetics of downtown, the effectiveness of the local politicians.

As far as personal benefits, third places serve as havens between family and workplace, providing "novelty," "perspective," and "spiritual tonic." Third places offer the opportunity for refreshing accidental encounters between neighbors (increasingly rare in a world where even children's "play dates" are coordinated via Palm Pilots and Filofaxes), and a web of casual friendships that do not come burdened with the emotional demands of lifelong friendships, family ties, or professional relationships.

Is it just me, or does that sound like a terrific synagogue?

There are as many reasons for going to synagogue as there are synagogue-goers-tradition, obligation, guilt, commandment, spiritual attachment, professional advancement, study, mourning, celebrating, social climbing, a deep connection to God. What brings me to synagogue every week is the company of other Jews. I enjoy, in the words of Johann Huizinga, the great theorist of human play, "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms." What else is the morning minyan, that daily gathering of mourners, aging regulars and young firebrands, but the Jewish version of the corner bar?

I've been lucky to find synagogues that have served my need for a third place. But how many Jewish leaders, at a time of much talk about "re-engineering" the synagogue and 21st century religious institutions, think of the third place function in designing new shuls or community centers? How many of them, during their research, belly up to a neighborhood bar and imagine the Jewish alternative? How many have been to Starbucks?

After all, Starbucks is encroaching on community building activities once reserved for churches and synagogues. The Seattle based corporation has been sponsoring social action projects, particularly children's literacy, and boasts of its socially responsible commerce with third world coffee growing nations. The shops have begun hosting live music, poetry readings and other community events. Combine that with the number of customers who speak of their daily coffee as a "ritual," and you have the makings of a genuine, if oxymoronic, secular religious denomination.

But it is in providing a third place that Starbucks could teach synagogues a thing or two. The physical setting is often exquisite, the seating is conducive to lingering and conversation, the music is current and tasteful, the price of admission is small, and the entire place commands you to "relax," albeit in a highly caffeinated way.

That's not to say that we should be selling our own denominations the way Starbucks sells coffee. A religious institution should inspire its customers to do considerably more than relax. And the traditional third places have elements, which Oldenburg acknowledges, that we could probably do without. They tend to be same-sex bastions; there's a fine line between friendly tipping and full blown substance abuse; and there's always the temptation to spend more time in the third place than in the first two (a temptation of shul-goers, I might add). (Rabbi Shlomo Riskin once complained about husbands who were spending too much time out with the boys: "We've replaced shalom bayit [domestic bliss] with Shalom, bayit! [Goodbye, house!]" .)

The synagogue I have in mind would place as high a value on the friendly conversations in the hallways as it does on the prayer service. Its leaders would create space, literally and figuratively, for nosing, joshing and backslapping. Its

members would understand that holy work goes on not only in the minyanim and formal services, but whenever a few Jews meet to swap inside jokes and gossip, commiserate over one another's tragedies, or celebrate their occasions of joy.

Oldenburg often serves as a consultant to church leaders, mainly Protestants, who want advice on space and facilities. "The loss of gathering places on the public terrain generally has, I think, been beneficial to religions in America generally," Oldenburg wrote me last year. "Whereas one formerly found churches and synagogues in the community, more and more people are seeking community in the churches and synagogues."

If that's the case, here are three things synagogues should do before their next planning meeting: read *The Great Good Place*, watch a few episodes of "Cheers," and order a Caffè Latte Grande.