

# SYNAGOGUES OF EXCELLENCE

STEVEN HUBERMAN, PH.D.

*Director, Department of Regional and Extension Activities, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, New York*

*There is a direct correlation between the health of synagogues and the welfare of the entire Jewish community. The federation system and the religious sector must work in synergy. This article presents recommendations on federation-synagogue synergy derived from discussions with more than 500 synagogue and federation leaders.*

*"All beginnings require that you unlock new doors." Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*

In his classic study of the American synagogue, Bernard Reisman (1977, p. 161) concluded: "The synagogue is perhaps the oldest continuous religious institution in human history. It has persisted as the central institution in Jewish life for at least two millennia. The long history and significant influence of the synagogue testify to its capacity to adapt to the changing needs of Jews across time and in varying locations, while maintaining the continuity of basic Jewish traditions."

Reisman underscores the centrality of the synagogue. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav reminds us to look at it through new perspectives.

There is a direct correlation between the health of the synagogue and the welfare of the entire Jewish community. A recent study found that approximately two-thirds of Jewish Community Center members belong to synagogues (Cohen, 1998). Our tzedakah structure and synagogues are similarly connected to each other. The New York Jewish Population Survey found that 76 percent of donors to the federation were synagogue members. Some federations report that almost 90 percent of the contributors to their annual campaigns are members of congregations. Fund raising for Israel Bonds is heavily dependent on congregational campaigns (Schorsch, 2000).

Although giving varies by denominational

preference, members of the three major denominations share a commitment to philanthropy (see Table 1). The annual budgets of congregations, denominational organizations, and other religious agencies likely total over \$1.2 billion. This figure does not include the budgets of Jewish day schools, which are predominantly run under religious auspices. When day school budgets are added to those of religious organizations, the total Jewish religious sector has an income of \$2 billion a year, almost all of which is derived from Jewish contributors (JESNA, 1994; Schick, 2000; Schorsch, 2000; Westheimer, 1997).

To measure Jewish philanthropy, Wertheimer (1997) created a "Tzedakah GNP." The figure, which excludes Jewish contributions to non-Jewish causes, is based on 1995 data.

- Federation giving of which \$600 million was from foundation and endowment funds, with the balance from campaign and special funds—\$1.5 billion
- The religious sector: synagogues, denominational organizations, day schools—\$2 billion
- Giving to Israel outside the UJC-Federation—\$700 million
- Other Jewish communal institutions—several hundred million
- Total Jewish giving to domestic and overseas causes (not including United Way and Government funding for Jewish Communal Agencies)—\$4.2 to 4.4 billion

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Based on the author's keynote address to the North American Association of Synagogue Executives; 50th Annual Convention, Orlando, Florida.

Table 1. Patterns of Philanthropic Giving by Jews by Different Denominations (Percentages)

	<u>Orthodox</u>		<u>Conservative</u>		<u>Reform</u>	
	<u>New York Only</u>	<u>Rest of United States</u>	<u>New York Only</u>	<u>Rest of United States</u>	<u>New York Only</u>	<u>Rest of United States</u>
1. Non-Jewish Giving Only	6	12	12	16	25	25
2. Jewish Giving Only	34	17	21	13	7	6
3. Both Jewish and Non-Jewish Causes	55	45	49	51	45	46
4. Does Not Give	6	21	16	17	19	21

Yet, the impact of congregations goes beyond revenue. Many Jewish communal professionals cite summer camps and youth groups as major influences in their lives. Schorsch (2000, p. 28) describes the impact of synagogues this way:

The explanation for this striking phenomenon of communal dependence on the synagogue is not mysterious. American synagogues create the social capital that sustains Jewish civil society. They foster community, broaden the horizons of individual responsibility, inculcate a spirit of volunteerism and promote the skills of self-governance. The need for a minyan for public worship has made Judaism unalterably a religion of joiners. Anchored in sacred texts and imbued with collective memory, the synagogue nurtures and transmits a spirit of civic engagement as well as a web of transcendent meanings.

**CREATING FEDERATION-SYNAGOGUE SYNERGY**

It is a given that federations and synagogues fortify each other. However, we must go much further, re-engineering the community so that the federation system and religious sector operate as inextricable entities. In a word, they must synergize. Stephen Covey's (1999) formulation of seven habits as keys to success describes the outcome of authentic federation-synagogue integration.

Synergy is about producing a third alterna-

tive—not my way, not your way, but a third way that is better than either of us would come up with individually. It's the fruit of mutual respect—of understanding and even celebrating one another's differences in solving problems, seizing opportunities. Synergistic teams and families thrive on individual strengths so that the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Such relationships and teams renounce defensive adversarialism (1 + 1 = 2). They go for creative cooperation (1 + 1 = 3 or more).

Since May, 1997 I have discussed how federations and synagogues can synergize to transform congregations with more than 500 rabbis, synagogue presidents, federation and agency chief executive officers, and community leaders. The recommendations from these discussions are summarized in Table 2.

This is a very ambitious list. The most important imperatives relate to programming, Jewish education, community, ritual, and Israel (Tobin, 1996/97).

**First, programming between synagogues and agencies has to be greatly expanded and diversified.** Today, synagogues are surrogate homes, a home being defined as "the place where even if they do not like you, they let you in." In order to implement the activities required for all age groups, a recent study conducted by the Koret Foundation (Tobin & Streiker, 1997) recommended that each synagogue should have a paid program director or have a volunteer serving in this capacity. The

Boston Jewish federation has determined that Jewish family educators are key to programming, and the federation has subvented this initiative.

Although we reach thousands of high-school students each year through our youth programming, we must double this penetration rate. It is estimated that we only reach 20 percent of our high-school students today. I recently attended a synagogue youth convention in Philadelphia and was struck by the *ruach* (spirit) of 1,200 high-school students. When I asked them why they were there, they responded because they wanted to maintain friendships with Jews from other cities and the program was unique in its commitment to social action. During one day of the conference, the Jewish students volunteered in soup

kitchens and homeless shelters, demonstrating their concern for the broader community. Social action initiatives can best be implemented in conjunction with Jewish community relations councils.

We must also program for the large number of Jews who are today living alone, many of whom have retired and left their native community and family. The elderly comprise 25 percent of our synagogue members, and the percentage is growing. Jewish Community Centers, which have a record of achievement in senior programming, are logical partners. Creating a feeling of community among the retired is crucial because their children and family frequently live elsewhere in the country (Tobin & Streiker, 1997).

**Second, Jewish education must be trans-**

Table 2. *Synagogues of Excellence.*

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Vibrant congregations of all sizes seek to incorporate the following synergistic elements.

1. Sustain quality worship and programs that bond the congregants to Judaism and create a caring community. Use federation-agency resources to instill the sense of *Klal Yisrael*, concern for the total Jewish community.
  2. Be enriched, not imprisoned by the history and practices of the specific synagogue.
  3. Encourage Hebrew literacy and acts of *gemilut chassadim*. Social action should permeate the congregation.
  4. Have congregants who incorporate Judaic values into their homes, workplaces, and community.
  5. Develop productive lay and professional leadership who work in a partnership of mutual trust and respect.
  6. Welcome and integrate new congregants and newcomers to the neighborhood. Become "user friendly."
  7. Manage controversy in a civil and respectful manner. Have dialogue with other denominations and federation-agency leadership.
  8. Actively engage in the broader Jewish and non-Jewish communal agenda.
  9. Aim to achieve a Judaic learning community based on *mitzvot* and lifelong Jewish education. Day school and quality congregational education are both viable options.
  10. Use best practices in administration, cost control, financial resource development, and management information systems. Maintain the physical plant. Incorporate federation-agency management best practices.
  11. Maintain a healthy sense of humor. Reflect the joy and beauty inherent in Jewish observance.
  12. Assume a shared responsibility for congregations and agencies with less resources and engage in inter-congregational/agency collaboration.
  13. Promote and support the national, international, and Israel-based institutions of the UJC-Federation system, such as the Jewish Agency, World Zionist Organization, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the religious streams in Israel.
  14. Actively support Israel.
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**formed.** Although a group of major philanthropists have come together to provide a pool of dollars to enhance Jewish day school education, this is not enough. For Jewish education to work, adults have to take it seriously. This means that adults must engage in serious learning programs. A prime example is the *Perek Yomi* program of the Conservative movement, in which almost 8,000 adults study a chapter of Bible each day on the Web. For students to make Jewish education important, parents must be learning role models.

Synagogues can, with the help of federation agencies, operate outside their physical structures. We can learn from successful outreach efforts among the Orthodox. Lunch-time study groups, classes, and lecture series in workplaces reach out to both members and non-members. Rabbi Harold Schulweis in Los Angeles, for example, organized an adult learning program for the unaffiliated and for non-Jews using teachers from the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox movements. This program was heavily advertised in the *Los Angeles Times* and brought Judaism to many potential constituents.

Although an increasing number of young people are attending intensive Jewish day schools, the congregational school still is our primary mechanism for identity building. There has emerged a growing literature on best practices in synagogue school education and a growing consensus about the elements that form a framework for excellence in synagogue school education.

- a sufficient number of hours and days
- educators who are leaders, not just administrators
- rabbinic interest, support, and presence in matters of synagogue schooling
- congregational investment in teacher training, retention, and development
- collaboration with and support of lay leaders, including effective committees and a congregational mission statement that has education front and center
- commitment to and investment in teenag-

ers, as manifested by high-school classes, youth activities, summer camp, and Israel experiences

family education that helps parents fulfill their roles as the primary Jewish educators of their children

Early childhood education, rich in age-appropriate Jewish experiences, sets the stage for the attainment of the aims of the synagogue school.

Congregational schools can achieve excellence if subvented by community funding and strengthened by the infusion of UJC-Federation-agency resources.

**Third, we must create a sense of community with the synagogue and federation network at its center.** Today young Jews are looking for a value system, with answers to such questions as the nature of right and wrong, the purpose of living, and why good people suffer. They also seek a caring, concerned community. One major congregation has recently taught its congregants to become "greeters" who approach newcomers as soon as they walk into the synagogue. I will never forget my first Shabbat in Los Angeles, after we moved there in 1980. I received a knock at the door unexpectedly. An elderly woman said, "Welcome to the neighborhood. We hope you will join Temple Beth Am. Here is a *challah*, a bottle of wine, and a federation guide to Jewish Los Angeles." She was Bertha Aaronson, the wife of one of our most distinguished rabbis. I will always remember Bertha's outreach, and we did shortly thereafter join Temple Beth Am and became active in the JCC.

Community also means creating intergenerational ties. A newly formed foundation, "Jewish Children without Grandparents," reaches out to children who no longer have contact with their grandparents. My own daughter Shira is a participant because her grandparents are either deceased or too sick for meaningful interaction. Adath Jeshurun Congregation in Minneapolis recently won national recognition for a program in which its youth group members interviewed

and photographed seniors in the congregation. The photographs were prominently placed in the synagogue, and meaningful ties have been created between the young people and the seniors in the congregation.

Harold Kushner (1989, p. 103), one of America's most prominent rabbis, writes about the importance of humanizing our congregations and agencies: "What does religion offer that we lonely human souls need? In a word, it offers community. Our place of worship offers us a refuge, an island of caring in the midst of a hostile, competitive world. In a society that segregates the old from the young, the rich from the poor, the successful from the struggling, the house of worship represents one place where the barriers fall and we all stand equal before God."

**Fourth, Jewish ritual and ethics must be at the core of Jewish living.** Serious Jews today are in search of authenticity. Religion has made a comeback in North America. Even people without faith are today looking for God. The generation of Jews who ran away from Judaism are finding different paths home. They are finding homes in congregations that hold healing services and use song and spirited liturgy in worship services. We must innovatively respond to this new cohort of seekers.

Young professionals are busy establishing careers and families and typically do not have time for our synagogues and Jewish agencies. Therefore, we must reach out to them on their own terms. For instance, some rabbis e-mail every college student each week with an update on happenings in the shul and community, comments on the Torah portion, and Judaic commentaries on contemporary events.

Synagogues should coordinate with Jewish Community Centers, Hillels, and federations to bring young Jews into contact with each other and to help them find Jewish partners. By utilizing the synagogue and JCCs as meeting places, we can also provide Jewish content to these interactions.

Programming for Jewish women may also be necessary. A women's Rosh Chodesh Minyan may be precisely the right way to

reach Jewish women in search of spirituality. For other men and women, Jewish meditation, which has a very long history, may be the path.

**Finally, the link to Israel and must be strengthened.** Israel is regrettably no longer as primary to Jewish identity as in the past. In response, the UJA initiated Partnership 2000 (P2K) to build a "living bridge" between many of Israel's communities and Diaspora Jewry. P2K created people-to-people connections between Diaspora Jewry and the Jews of Israel. This program, which has been enormously successful, has demonstrated that we all have a legitimate place in Israel. Congregations can link to Partnership 2000 by engaging in educational, cultural, and religious exchanges between Israelis and American Jews. In this fashion, we give content to the UJC theme, "we are one" (UJA, 1998).

Synagogues can play a vital part in advancing our Israel agenda. In the Koret Foundation (Tobin & Streiker, 1997) study of synagogue members, almost all said it is important for Israel to be safe and secure. The UJC-Federation system has excelled in promoting Israel's socioeconomic advancement. Synagogues can utilize Israel as a spiritual asset—enriching the Jewish identity of congregants by injecting more Israel content into shul programming. At the same time, we must support the projects of our various religious streams in Israel.

Synagogues and federations need to sponsor more joint adult trips to Israel, subsidize and encourage teen Israel trips, and promote participation in the birthright Israel program.

## CONCLUSION

What will a vibrant synagogue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century look like? It will have a synergistic relationship with the UJC-federation-agency network. It will sustain quality worship and diversified programs and bond the congregants to Judaism and create a caring community. Social action initiatives will take place in concert with Jewish community relations councils. The synagogue will be a place of healing, spirituality, care, and concern. It will

be enriched and not imprisoned by the past, willing to experiment, innovative, and try new ventures.

The synagogue will commit to a shared vision of Torah and acts of *gemilut chassadim*. It must be a "moral hemophiliac," prepared to literally shed blood at the sight of injustice. That means that if a congregant loses his or her job, has a death in the family, or is ill, the community will be there.

The synagogue will be a center where newcomers are welcomed and integrated. It will be user friendly.

The effective 21<sup>st</sup>-century synagogue will be actively engaged in the broader UJC-Federation Jewish and non-Jewish communal agenda. It will reach out to African-Americans, Hispanics, and others in need. It will have a *Klal Yisrael* perspective and actively support Israel. Israel will be at its core, and the 80 percent of American Jews who have never been there will go in an organized collaborative synagogue-federation framework.

It will be a Judaic community committed to learning and *mitzvot*, and this learning will be lifelong. And the synagogue of this century must be imbued with a healthy sense of humor. Although it will be engaged in serious activity and must be business-like, it must reflect the joy and beauty inherent in Jewish observance. Taken together, these attributes constitute a synagogue of excellence.

In one of the most famous exchanges in the Talmud a non-Jew asks the great scholar Hillel, "Can you summarize all of Judaism for me while I stand on one foot?" Hillel replied, "What you don't like, don't do to others. That's it; the rest is commentary. Now go study the commentary." Hillel grasped the essence of Judaism—holiness is in how we relate to others. But we must do more; we must go and study the rest. When we immerse ourselves in Torah and learn what generations of teachers have taught, we grasp what we owe our neighbors. Through regular, repeated exposure to Torah we gain the capacity to do the right thing.

Yet "go and study" are not the final words

in Judaism. Torah provides knowledge plus the resolve to do good. Through study, we agree to live Jewishly. As we live Jewishly, we go forth and bless God's world. Synagogues and federations of excellence together sanctify God's world.

We then discover the wisdom of the great French Jew, Bernard Lazare, who taught many years ago that being a Jew is the least difficult way of being truly human.

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