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Saving Our Synagogues From Within

Most synagogues today, whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist, are struggling to increase, and even maintain, membership. And most of their services are, well, boring. Across the denominational lines, congregants complain services are too long, too routine and less than inspiring, even as they wonder why more young people aren't joining up.

Recognizing the problem, several groups have launched innovative efforts to reinvigorate synagogue life. A project called Synagogue 2000 has been working for the last several years to help synagogues meet the needs of the new century. Sponsored by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Righteous Persons Foundation, it is working with about 50 Conservative and Reform congregations around the country, helping them with content as well as the organizational process of becoming inspiring centers.

In September, philanthropists Edgar Bronfman, Michael Steinhardt and Charles Schusterman plan to launch a project called STAR (Synagogue Transformation and Renewal) that hopes to help synagogues from all the denominations make Judaism "more relevant and vibrant," according to a press release.

Now comes a Washington-area rabbi, Sid Schwarz, who has written a thoughtful analysis of why synagogues are not meeting today's needs and a thought-provoking plan to help them make the paradigm shift he asserts is necessary for their survival and success. The book, "Finding A Spiritual Home," describes in detail four model congregations, one from each

denomination, and how they are serving and inspiring a new generation of American Jews. It also includes personal essays from congregants about how their synagogue has given new meaning to their lives, and concludes with "ten strategies to transform your congregation."

Rabbi Schwarz's thesis is both simple and revolutionary, making the case that most synagogues have not satisfied or attracted the baby boomers, many of whom are spiritual seekers turned off by the formality and rigidity they've found in established congregations. Unlike their parents, the new American Jews are looking for more personal meaning in their lives and a strong sense of connectedness and belonging. Often they've found this outside the Jewish community, in ashrams or self-help groups or other forms of traditional wisdom alternatives.



Rather than criticize these "dropouts," it would be more productive for Jewish leaders to analyze why so many have chosen other paths and address their needs within Jewish life, Rabbi Schwarz says. What's needed, he asserts, is to change the institution from a primarily child-centered synagogue-center, with its educational, cultural and social components, into a warmer, family-oriented synagogue-community, a synthesis of the synagogue-center and the havurah, combining informality and participation within the structure of the traditional synagogue.

Easier said than done, the rabbi readily admits. "Even synagogues that understand the need for change find it difficult to move forward," he said during an interview from his office in Washington, where he is founding president of the Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values. "Religion brings out the most conserv-

ative aspects in people, and synagogues are run by loyalists who like the program as it is, so that makes change even more difficult."

But it can be done, and Rabbi Schwarz profiles four congregations he feels successfully respond to the religious needs of younger Jews. They include two New York synagogues, B'nai Jeshurun, whose transformation from a dying Conservative congregation on the Upper West Side to arguably the most dynamic congregation in America has been widely noted, and the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Orthodox congregation known for its inclusiveness and aura of spirituality.

The other two congregations profiled are Beth El (Reform), in Sudbury, Mass., which incorporates textual study into the Shabbat service, and Rabbi Schwarz's own Reconstructionist Adat Shalom in Bethesda, Md., which seeks to involve its congregants on an intense level of participation. While there are striking differences among the four congregations, they each have a welcoming environment, and an articulated mission promoting serious Judaism. And they each have inspiring rabbis who seek to empower their members, making them feel part of a real community of caring Jews.

But Rabbi Schwarz is quick to point out that the key to success is not dependent on "superstar rabbis who do everything themselves," but almost the opposite, spiritual leaders able to teach his or her congregants that "they, the members, own it all." He compares the new-model rabbi to an orchestra conductor, encouraging each member to play his part, rather than trying to do it all for them. "That just leads

to burn-out city," he says.

Rabbi Schwarz says rabbinical seminaries still train rabbis to provide the answers "to questions no one asks anymore, and that's a sad story. The rabbis feel bitter and unappreciated." He would like to see rabbinical students taught courses in organizational dynamics and leadership development, shifting the emphasis in their role to making people feel needed as part of a synagogue-community.

"We have such talented people in our synagogues who are untapped," says Rabbi Schwarz, who advocates giving them a gentle push.

Too many synagogues are dysfunctional in their structure, more corporate than spiritual, he notes, perpetuating the perception of an institution more concerned about

revenue than satisfying the inner needs of congregants. And too many rabbis feel overwhelmed by frustration and inadequacy if they can't handle all that is required of them.

The proposals Rabbi Schwarz offers for profound change shift are compelling and merit serious attention and discussion. They seek to help young American Jews, and the institutions created to serve them, realize that meaningful Jewish lives cannot be lived vicariously, through a surrogate synagogue or rabbi, whose goals should be to teach, guide, inspire and empower.

He makes the convincing case that only if we recognize the need to harness the energy of alternative services and spiritual seekers into the mainstream will we be able to transform our synagogues into living institutions able to meet the needs of the new century. □

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