

Synagogues for a new era

by Rabbi Sid Schwarz

The changing agenda of the Jewish community is increasingly well-documented.

For the better part of the post-war period, the Jewish community focused its communal energies and resources on an ethnic/survivalist agenda. But the ethnic/survivalist agenda, which stirred the passions of an entire era of American Jews, no longer excites younger American Jews.

Raised in relative affluence with few international Jewish needs demanding their attention, younger Jews have turned inwards. Everywhere the evidence abounds that the ethnic/survivalist agenda is being replaced by a personal/spiritual agenda.

Many will weigh in about whether this is good or bad. The truth is, it is a mixed blessing. The Jewish community has ignored the spiritual dimensions of Judaism for far too long, and we are paying a heavy price for it in terms of the number of younger Jews who have abandoned the Jewish community for a host of spiritual alternatives.

At the same time, no responsible representation of Judaism can exclude a healthy dose of communal solidarity and

public responsibility — perspectives that are woefully absent from the promoters of the “new Jewish spirituality.”

The emerging interest in revitalizing the American synagogue comes not a moment too soon. By any measure, there is a religious boom going on in America. The question is whether synagogues can read the generational preferences well enough to capitalize on this boom. Among these preferences are inclusivity, empowerment and engagement.

Inclusivity implies a need for the synagogue to recognize that the two-parent family with children is only one of many family configurations in the community today and that other family configurations are deserving of equal programmatic attention.

Empowerment suggests an approach to Judaism that radically democratizes synagogue life, giving laypeople the tools to function as might rabbis and cantors.

Engagement requires a serious approach to the study of the tradition and provides an opportunity for lay-Jews to enter into the centuries-old exercise of text wrestling to discover what Torah has to say about the way we live our lives.

The synagogue-centers of the American Jewish community do not come by these traits naturally or easily; inclusivity,

empowerment and engagement are not their forte. The *chavurah* movement and Jewish renewal have been important outlets for just such expressions of Jewish life and practice.

The challenge for the century that we are now entering is to mainstream much of this style. It calls for a change in the paradigm from synagogue-center to synagogue community. In my study of American synagogues (*Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, Jossey-Bass, 2000) I identified four characteristics of the synagogue-community that are beginning to transform the synagogue as we know it:

- Articulation of mission — Fewer and fewer Jews know why it is worth the time and expense to pursue Jewish affiliation. Synagogues need to engage their members in a process of creating a covenant, one that elevates the purpose of the institution and does not shrink from making demands on members.

- Organizational culture — When lay-Jews are given a chance to lead services, deliver talks, read Torah, introduce new music, etc., what is (sometimes) sacrificed in professional quality is more than made up for in the sense of ownership that gets created. Synagogues need to find more ways to tap into that energy.

- Spiritual leadership — The deepest truth people know is their inner story, not Torah. Rabbis increasingly need to invite Jews to tell their stories, their spiritual journeys, and then to put those experiences into the context of Jewish wisdom and tradition. It is the way that seekers come to realize that Judaism offers a portal to greater meaning.

- Framing of serious Judaism — Synagogues must be, primarily, places that Jews attend to study classical texts, engage in social justice activity, and extend themselves in acts of mercy and compassion. Let worship services allow for alternate expressions of spirituality through meditation, music and movement so that we invest our ancient liturgy with newfound *kavanah* (intention). Let the halls of the sanctuary reverberate with a multitude of voices — of joy, and of anguish, of faith and of doubt.

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Raised in relative affluence with few international Jewish needs demanding their attention, younger Jews have turned inwards. Everywhere the evidence abounds that the ethnic/survivalist agenda is being replaced by a personal/spiritual agenda.

Many will weigh in about whether this is good or bad. The truth is, it is a mixed blessing. The Jewish community has ignored the spiritual dimensions of Judaism for far too long, and we are paying a heavy price for it in terms of the number of younger Jews who have abandoned the Jewish community for a host of spiritual alternatives.

At the same time, no responsible representation of Judaism can exclude a healthy dose of communal solidarity and

public responsibility — perspectives that are woefully absent from the promoters of the “new Jewish spirituality.”

The emerging interest in revitalizing the American synagogue comes not a moment too soon. By any measure, there is a religious boom going on in America. The question is whether synagogues can read the generational preferences well enough to capitalize on this boom. Among these preferences are inclusivity, empowerment and engagement.

Inclusivity implies a need for the synagogue to recognize that the two-parent family with children is only one of many family configurations in the community today and that other family configurations are deserving of equal programmatic attention.

Empowerment suggests an approach to Judaism that radically democratizes synagogue life, giving laypeople the tools to function as might rabbis and cantors.

Engagement requires a serious approach to the study of the tradition and provides an opportunity for lay-Jews to enter into the centuries-old exercise of text wrestling to discover what Torah has to say about the way we live our lives.

The synagogue-centers of the American Jewish community do not come by these traits naturally or easily; inclusivity,

empowerment and engagement are not their forte. The *chavurah* movement and Jewish renewal have been important outlets for just such expressions of Jewish life and practice.

The challenge for the century that we are now entering is to mainstream much of this style. It calls for a change in the paradigm from synagogue-center to synagogue community. In my study of American synagogues (*Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of American Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue*, Jossey-Bass, 2000) I identified four characteristics of the synagogue-community that are beginning to transform the synagogue as we know it:

- Articulation of mission — Fewer and fewer Jews know why it is worth the time and expense to pursue Jewish affiliation. Synagogues need to engage their members in a process of creating a covenant, one that elevates the purpose of the institution and does not shrink from making demands on members.

- Organizational culture — When lay-Jews are given a chance to lead services, deliver talks, read Torah, introduce new music, etc., what is (sometimes) sacrificed in professional quality is more than made up for in the sense of ownership that gets created. Synagogues need to find more ways to tap into that energy.

- Spiritual leadership — The deepest truth people know is their inner story, not Torah. Rabbis increasingly need to invite Jews to tell their stories, their spiritual journeys, and then to put those experiences into the context of Jewish wisdom and tradition. It is the way that seekers come to realize that Judaism offers a portal to greater meaning.

- Framing of serious Judaism — Synagogues must be, primarily, places that Jews attend to study classical texts, engage in social justice activity, and extend themselves in acts of mercy and compassion. Let worship services allow for alternate expressions of spirituality through meditation, music and movement so that we invest our ancient liturgy with newfound *kavanah* (intention). Let the halls of the sanctuary reverberate with a multitude of voices — of joy, and of anguish, of faith and of doubt.

These are the characteristics of synagogue communities that will inspire a new generation of Jews to join their ranks. They will also be the kind of communities that will lead the way to a renaissance of Jewish life.

Sid Schwarz, the founder and president of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, also is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Rockville.

Synagogues for a new era

by Rabbi Sid Schwarz

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