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WHY 'CRISIS JUDAISM' DOESN'T LAST

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah*

An apparent transfiguration of congregational life was reported in the national Jewish press after the events of 9-11—"From Coast to Coast, Thousands Rush to Synagogues for Solace" (*Forward*, 9/21/01)—as Jews, like all other Americans, sought in our religious traditions and communities to find comfort in the midst of personal and national tragedy, to grope for meaning, and to be guided by our rabbis and Torah wisdom.

Nothing could be more natural in a time of intense grief and doubt. But it raises a lot of questions.

Assuming that the other shoe *doesn't* drop, that we don't have more devastating terrorist attacks on American soil in the near future, what should we expect in the way of ongoing religious conviction and commitment to congregational life? If, however, the war goes on, will we learn how to live with fear, and what then? In any event, will we return to some semblance of "normalcy" in the coming months?

Withal, will this be the "shot in the arm" that our congregational life has needed for decades? Are we witnessing a dramatic turnaround in which significant numbers of unaffiliated Jews are not only momentarily "high" on Judaism and religious community but also likely to remain permanent members or even regular visitors within our temples, synagogues, and shules?

In what now seems like another era but was only a couple of years ago, a rabbi told us of his despair only a few weeks after High Holy Days: "We had 300 for Yom Kippur. I saw all these people straining, reaching out for the Torah. It almost brought me to tears. But then I thought, what does it mean to them that they come once a year? Days later for Shabbat, we were back down to thirty. Then, a week later, on a Friday night, I was leading a service for four people again."

It makes us wonder whether, ultimately, the current transformation will be any different than its somewhat weaker cousin—the cleaving to God, Torah,

and Israel at the time of personal loss and grief that congregationally *unaffiliated* Jews experience as individuals. Every year thousands of Jews suddenly reach out to rabbis and congregations for life-cycle services when death takes their parent, spouse, or child. And, not surprisingly, with equal suddenness they join the "disappeared" when the immediate sting of death and its accompanying needs recede.

Day-to-Day Pressures & Out-migration

Our experience is that large numbers of Jews, at best, find the life of Jewish congregations devoid of supportive community and irrelevant to the challenges and pressures of their day-to-day lives. At worst, they find worship and holiday celebrations (except possibly for Passover, Chanukah, and High Holy Days) irrelevant or incomprehensible, and thus without meaning.

The myth of modern American Jewry, according to one non-affluent Jew, is that all Jews "give tzedakah in large quantities. . . . send their children to camp, to Ivy League schools and to Israel for the year after college. . . . buy annuities, take cruises and retire to Florida. . . . [and] don't worry about paying their health insurance premiums." But in fact more than a quarter of American Jews have annual incomes, as single adults, at or below the poverty line. This group includes elderly on Social Security, immigrants, and divorced women and their children. Not far from them on the income ladder are Jewish white-collar workers and professionals employed in the public and non-profit sectors, and small business entrepreneurs.

We know that economically marginal Jews, and many affluent Jews too, have been out-migrating from Jewish congregations and Judaism, and that they are increasingly experiencing all the social pathologies of American society: their children are misusing alcohol and drugs and are victimized by gangs, their elderly parents and spouses are mistreated in nursing homes, their loved ones are dying from AIDS, their family

budgets are strained by high housing and educational costs, their jobs are requiring exhausting freeway commutes, and much more. We also know that out-migration from Jewish congregations and Judaism is positively correlated with the more severe “social pathologies”—divorce, alcoholism and drug addiction, domestic violence, and suicide—and statistical indicators of their incidence among Jews have been rising (except possibly for domestic violence). As a leader of an upscale Reform congregation told us, “We and our kids are involved in destructive and delinquent activities like everyone else.”

Both the synagogue as an institution and the Judaism it promotes are almost completely divorced from these pressures of daily life, albeit rabbis and congregational leaders respond to the needs of our people in times of crisis. For many Jews, given the ongoing demands in their lives, congregational affiliation and the exploration of Judaism are not worth the time, energy, and money they require. In the words of one non-affiliated, ethnic Jew: “I’ve heard of groups of people meeting to learn more about Judaism. I have friends who have been in groups like that. But I can’t see myself there. I guess I don’t want it enough. The truth is, I’d probably study Italian—we’re planning to go to Italy—before I’d study Judaism.” Given what he knows about the benefits of Judaism, learning Italian has more practical value.

Logic of Collective Action

When we examine our own experience with Jews who are religiously disaffected and disaffiliated, we find a large gap between what they say they want or believe is possible in congregational life and what they say is missing when talking about their own lives. We identify the following as missing for them personally:

- Meaning, specifically a unifying purpose in life that is shared with others—not the scattered bits and pieces of daily activities;
- Order, which is to say that many are hungry for consistency in daily life—but no one asks for order in the service of meaningless or pointless activity;
- Community, which reflects a loss of face-to-face relationships in which individuals are bonded by shared norms and common action—many miss the communities of their youth and feel such community simply does not exist anymore; and
- Ecstatic experience, which for many people is missing altogether—unless one counts the “high” associated with drinking, drugging, domestic and criminal violence, promiscuous sex, gambling, and spending binges, or the obsessive acquisition and exercise of high position, prestige, and power.

The out-migration and its causes demonstrate the logic of collective action; it is what we should expect Jews to do under the circumstances. The scale of out-migration suggests widely shared experiences of boredom, isolation, pointlessness, and irrelevance in congregational life. Thus we are not surprised to see in the outreach literature the conclusion that religious education as a prevention strategy, except for full-time day school, does not appear to be effective in dealing with out-marriage. We are not surprised to learn that whether or not rabbis officiate at interfaith marriages has little effect on couples’ decisions to affiliate and live a Jewish religious life or to out-migrate.

Historic Crisis of Faith

Social workers and religious educators must of course continue and expand their outreach to intermarried Jews—but it is not enough to rescue the people who are, so to speak, “swept downriver”; we must also go “upriver” to see what is causing so many people to be caught up in the “threatening currents” of out-migration.

We recognize that sociological, therapeutic, problem-solving, and educational approaches to Jewish out-migration are essential—we understand them and their value, and practice them ourselves—but the deeper problem is intimately linked to religion and spirituality, and how they relate to our day-to-day lives as Jews and as Americans.

We believe that even with the present blip of crisis-religiosity, Jewish out-migration reveals that Judaism and the American Jewish population are undergoing an historic crisis of faith, one that involves all the country’s congregational communities, but with varying external causes and internal dynamics. (Mainline Protestant denominations have lost 15 to 25 percent of their members in the last two to three decades. Catholic losses probably would be comparable except for the influx of new immigrants.)

What do we mean by crisis of faith? Most Jews may find solace and even guidance in Judaism at times of crisis. But overwhelmingly they do not have confidence that their personal faith, their synagogue, their religion, or their God, even if they were fully invested in them, can actually create relevant community and transform the world of day-to-day pressures, particularly those that are destructive to their lives, their families, their synagogues, and to the larger non-Jewish world in which they live.

Basis of Strategic Response

Traditional Jewish authority and its reciprocal, covenantal community, shaped and matured in the shtetl, have not worked well as the basis for authentic Jewish congregational community among geographically dispersed and denominationally disparate Jews in the United States. The authority has been undermined and

the practices abandoned as archaic, even by most congregationally affiliated Jews. It is not surprising that under these conditions many Jews have lost their faith. The religious authority sustained by the communal expression of that faith, the authority that contributed to the successful fulfillment of the faith in daily life, has disappeared for most Jews. (In one Conservative congregation the rabbi estimated to us that 95 percent of the members do not keep kosher, and the synagogue's kitchen and dining utensils and facilities were not kosher.)

The most damaging consequence is that the Jewish synagogue, as an institution, is not responding with a Judaism that is relevant to the absence of community

and the immediate day-to-day pressures faced by many Jews; so, although they occasionally double back in moments of personal and national crisis, they are walking farther and farther away from organized Jewish religious life.

To devise an effective response that counters congregational decline, the out-migration must be understood strategically as reflecting the institutional inadequacy of synagogues to meet the needs of contemporary Jews for personal faith, religious authority, and covenantal community. Put another way, we have lost the community that supported the authority that sustained the faith.

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