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BUILDING SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES

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Working over the years with several synagogues, we've frequently heard members complain about their fellow congregants. Thankfully, in most instances it wasn't by name.

Invariably they were talking about members who rarely if ever came to services or other activities; members who, although able, weren't holding up their end of the financial burden of the synagogue; and members who didn't pitch in to do the practical jobs that need to be done—whether serving on a committee, providing the *oneg* once or twice a year, or simply picking up after themselves.

Our conclusion, from personal observations as well, is that these complaints are well founded, not only in our congregation, but also in the majority of American congregations. It's a cliché that 10 percent—or less!—of the people do 90 percent—or more!—of the work.

So how can we understand what's going on in American synagogue life?

This question is *not* essentially about what motivates people to join synagogues, which is relatively easy to answer. The more revealing and difficult question—framed in entrepreneurial terms—is what it takes for congregationally affiliated Jews to become *investors* of their time, energy, money, and spirit in synagogue life; *owners* with a care for both the past and the future of their communal relationships; *proprietors* who responsibly look after the management and operations of their religious organizations; and *promoters* of their congregations as fulfilling spiritual communities.

The most pervasive idea about achieving such goals is that in one way or another we have to *entertain* people to get them invested and involved. The radical dimension of this idea within the context of Jewish congregational life is that it implicitly fosters treating our members as passive consumers of organizational services, which are provided for a fee. So, as the thinking goes, we mainly have to make it fun for them. We have to make it easy for them. We have to give them luxurious surroundings. We absolutely have to avoid challeng-

ing them, even while we provide them with religious and educational services.

The logical outcome of this perspective is that our most "successful" synagogues are bustling with activity, mounting endless programs and services, geared to satisfy every possible want or need. But often they lack a relevant and widely received *Torah* vision, and so they're undermined in achieving their religious goals and objectives. Our "failing" synagogues are organizationally moribund, slowly declining in membership and participation, mostly bereft of activities and services. Ironically, whether succeeding or failing by conventional measures of membership and activity, both synagogue models typically fail to become unified instruments of God in which the majority or even a minority of their members are consciously committed to their *spiritual* aims and methods.

The best argument against the idea of relying on various forms of "entertainment" as a more or less sufficient congregational spiritual development strategy is its consistent failure to produce the results that its advocates promise. Congregational development certainly requires a wide range of programs and activities, but they're only necessary, not sufficient to achieve a vital spiritual life.

If we're not satisfied with providing variations on the theme of entertainment as the *raison d'être* of congregational life, maybe we've already acknowledged to ourselves that it's bankrupt of predicted benefits. Maybe we've already noticed that these highly touted antidotes to spiritual enervation and ennui in our synagogues are more easily and cheaply available elsewhere, and not uncommonly at higher quality than the synagogue can offer. Take your pick: it's doubtful that we provide anyone's idea of compelling entertainment, serious or otherwise; our events are hardly the social highlight of the month; and our facilities rarely represent the apex of luxury appointments. We're simply not competitive in those arenas—the wonder is why we should expect to be—and if we were

to become so, it would almost certainly have the effect of destroying our greatest assets.

So what strengths do we have?

One possible starting place to see our strengths more clearly is the Torah portion Shemini. In this reading we find ourselves at the final, concluding day of the consecration of the Sanctuary and the priesthood. Moses tells the people to make several offerings—a *chatat* (חטאת) or sin offering, an *olah* (עולה) or elevating offering, a *shelamim* (שלמים) or peace offering, and a *mincha* (מנחה) or gift offering. (Leviticus 9:3-4)

The people make the offerings, and afterwards Moses says to them:

“Do this thing that God has commanded and the glory of God will show itself to you.” (Leviticus 9:6)

“This thing” that Moses mentions is obviously not a reference to making the offerings, because the people had already made them. So what does he have in mind?

Our Torah commentator, Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), tells us that Moses is referring to the need for each of us to *carry out* what those four offerings signify.

What exactly do the offerings signify?

We know that they weren't aimed to influence God, because that's a pagan notion—trying to manipulate God's behavior by “sacrificing” something is at the heart of heathenism. Consider that in every one of the instances of a Jewish offering, it was the sacrifice (read, subordination) of one's *own* behavior that was the unequivocal purpose of the offering:

- The *chatat* offering was to help *us* firm up our resolve when we had gone off the path and no longer felt the flame of the Torah's fire burning within us—when we had lost the inspired desire to do God's will.
- The *olah* offering was to reclaim *us* from the lack of purposive spiritual activity, inspiring us to *energetic* action upwards to God.
- The *shelamim* offering was to bring *us* nearer to God when, although completely satisfied with our material lives, we felt a spiritual vacuum—when we began to imagine trading our self-centeredness or selfishness for a sanctified life, one in which our primary purpose was doing God's will.
- The *mincha* offering was to remind *us* that, ultimately, all of the gifts we had been given were from God—beginning with our lives and

the material resources to sustain them, and all the subsequent happiness we get from living.

Incidentally, the *shelamim* offering could be eaten outside of the Sanctuary, because it served to consecrate the family and the family table as an altar of God in its own right.

The heart of Moses' idea of carrying out what the offerings represent is that if each of us devote ourselves in these ways to God's will, the purpose of the Sanctuary will be realized and the presence of the Shechinah will be palpable among us.

Here's what it tells us strategically and tactically about building up our own congregations as spiritual communities:

- That we occupy an extraordinary niche in the world of social organizations, because potentially we have a unique experience to share with those who join us—to know the Shechinah, the presence of God, personally.
- That by making a home for the Torah, we can bring the Shechinah into our midst in a way that is inspiring—awakening the Godly spirit within us, literally.
- That the awakening of the Godly spirit within us, individually and communally, is probably the most awesome, fulfilling experience we can have, one that can draw us and others into congregational community life like a magnet.
- That we make a home for the Torah not by erecting a building, but by making *ourselves*—each one of us individually and all of us together—into such a home.
- That we become such a home when all of us are dedicated to learning and living and leaving the Torah to the next generation and, in doing so, we create the basis for *authentic* spiritual community, one that fully engages the character, commitment, and competence of its members.

If together we become a home for the Torah, there's no doubt we'll also be inspired and thus energized investors, owners, proprietors, and promoters of our congregations as the kind of spiritual communities we want.

And those among us who are committed to learning our tradition by regularly attending classes and by independent study are laying the indispensable and indomitable foundation for such congregational communities, not only in our time, but also far into the future.

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