


a challenge and an opportunity.

I think that we need to recognize that we have a responsibility to create the next generation of *klei kodesh*, community professionals, and lay *kodesh*, holy lay leaders of our community. In order to do that, we must address an issue that many rabbis have: fear of the collaborative conversation with laypeople, to use Steve's word, in the "prosumer" paradigm.

Steve Wernick: Given all the difficulties, the synagogue as an institution remains the most

successful mechanism for the mass transmittal of Jewish identity from one generation to the next as well as a locus for lifelong Jewish engagement and learning. We have to be asking questions about how one segment of the community relates to another, especially when the boundaries of community are blurred: What are we doing within a synagogue's walls to create opportunities for people to journey Jewishly outside those walls, where their own particular affinities and interests lie? 

Covenantal Commitments: Rethinking the Synagogue and the Rabbinate


RACHEL SABATH BEIT-HALACHMI

The sages of the Mishnah were the first rabbinic leaders to understand that what may at first seem to be only a tragedy may also lead to extraordinary opportunities. They knew that the loss of the sacrificial cult and even the physical structure of the Temple did not mean the end of prayer or ritual but rather the strengthening of other forms of worship and leadership and the development of new schools of thought to nourish the Jewish people in a new context. The covenantal commitment wasn't shattered; it was made anew.

Today, many North American rabbinic leaders also know that historical watersheds demand historically minded, creative, and large-scale thinking about core values, methodology, institutional structure and leadership. Such grappling also often demands the renegotiation of faith in the necessity and potential of those same foundations.

While the radically changing nature of the Jewish community and affiliation in North American synagogues might be far from the dramatic paradigm shift of the first century, it certainly poses significant questions about

the nature of institutional Judaism. The data show that for many, if not most of the active Jewish community, the familiar model of synagogue and membership will continue to provide the most significant, deep, and consistent context for their Jewish communal life. But what about others who seek Jewish contexts and meaning but not membership or institutional structures? What about Jewish communal life and learning opportunities for those who don't and will likely never affiliate with a synagogue?

Each of the leaders in these two Roundtables envisions a way in which synagogues, old and new, may continue to reinvent themselves for a new era, or a new set of needs, and in many ways for a newly defined Jew — one with a multilayered identity, living out a complex set of connections to the Jewish and non-Jewish world. Each focuses on the ways in which rabbis need to be trained differently, and trained over a lifetime. These two Roundtables underscore the urgency and proportions of the current challenge and demonstrate how, when needs are responded to with honesty and creativity, new possibilities can emerge. 

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Rachel Sabath Beit-Halachmi offers a fuller commentary on these two Roundtables in our digital edition (shmadigital.com).

Another Take on 'A House of God'

STEPHANIE KOLIN

As a wedding couple stands under their *chuppah*, the first words we hear chanted are, "*Brukhim habaim b'shem Adonai, beirachnukhem b'veit Adonai*," "Blessed are those who come here in the name

of God; may you be blessed in this house of God." Traditionally, the second half of this invitation is chanted only when the wedding takes place inside a synagogue, indicating that *continued on next page*

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outside of a synagogue building is not technically a “house of God.” Perhaps liturgically, we can let this slide, but metaphorically, it should raise some red flags. In an era in which so many Jews who crave community, learning, doing justice, and prayer do not find God and all of God’s trappings inside a synagogue, it becomes more obvious that we are being called to reassess this limited definition of what makes a sacred “house of God” and, without ignoring those who love synagogue life, how we meaningfully engage those who do not choose to walk through its doors.

What we create together will be transformative and real — even if what we build is unrecognizable as a synagogue.

One of my rabbinic colleagues (in her 30s) recently told me that if she were not a congregational rabbi, she wouldn’t necessarily join a synagogue; it isn’t a space that really touches her. This should seriously worry us, yet also ignite within us a burning commitment to acknowledge and respond to this honest struggle. We have a serious challenge that we can’t afford to ignore: How do we engage those on the outside of this “house” in a Jewish life that is meaningful and relevant to *them*?

It would be a mistake to assume that those who don’t join a synagogue want nothing to do with Judaism. Many people who don’t find what they are looking for inside the walls of the “*beit Adonai*” (“house of God”) are nonetheless longing for Jewish engagement.


As a community organizer, I know that

success lies in the preposition we choose to use. Our sacred work is to reach out — to ask and then to listen carefully to what these folks care about and want, what touches them inside Jewish life. And then, choosing our preposition wisely, we can build that re-imagined, redefined, re-energized Jewish life *with* them. With, and not for. The days of creating flashy programs *for* people with the hopes that they will be enticed into our communities are long gone. Those overtures are often correctly perceived to be in the interest of the synagogue, rather than in the interest of the individual.

Community organizing teaches us to help people identify what is meaningful, life-changing, soul-touching, brain-engaging, heart-jiggling enough to invest their time and energy. If we have conversations with those outside of our synagogue walls, and build with them something that is relevant to who and where they are, then we may find ourselves with an even richer and more dynamic and networked Jewish community.

There is surely risk in working with unengaged Jews to build something of their own design. It takes more time and money, more staff dedicated to this mission, and a leap of faith that what we create together will be transformative and real — even if what we nurture and build is unrecognizable as a synagogue.

Outreach is not about filling seats or collecting dues (arguably, it never really has been). It is not about delivering a product or coaxing people into existing structures. Outreach is about breaking down walls, breaking some rules, and making a commitment to listen hard to what Jews and interfaith families need in order to live meaningful Jewish lives inside and outside of the synagogue. And then it is about building something new with them, for it is in the act of building something together that new relationships are made, community is formed, and sparks of new Jewish engagement are ignited.

Perhaps it is also time to recite the full opening wedding liturgy wherever we are. If we believe it is possible to create a house of God wherever people gather — praying in the woods, learning in someone’s home, eating at a park, acting together for justice, creating art, (making *kiddush* at a bar) — then we should restore the full sentiment no matter what place we are in: Blessed are those who come in the name of God; may you be blessed in this open, expansive, welcoming, engaging, listening, relating, building, sacred house of God. 

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- **Shifra Bronznick & Joanna Samuels** on professionalizing the Jewish workplace
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- **Felicia Sol** on single parenting a rabbinic life