

# Special Article

# The American Synagogue: Recent Issues and Trends\*

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**B**Y THE CLOSING DECADE of the twentieth century, the synagogue had become the great reclamation project of the American Jewish community. Jewish foundations poured new money into synagogue renewal efforts, hoping to teach congregational professionals and lay leaders how to create a more welcoming and religiously inspiring environment. National “outreach” programs were launched to attract unaffiliated Jews to synagogues, often

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\*I acknowledge with appreciation the generous assistance of the following academic colleagues, rabbis, and other knowledgeable observers of American congregations who graciously took the time to inform my thinking and answer my questions. *Synagogues generally*: Chancellor Ismar Schorsch, Jewish Theological Seminary; Professors Michael Berenbaum, University of Judaism; Lawrence Hoffman, Hebrew Union College, N.Y.; Shawn Landress, University of Judaism; Sara Lee, Rhea Hirsch School of Jewish Education, Hebrew Union College; the late Charles Liebman, Bar Ilan University; Michael Meyer, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati; David N. Myers, UCLA; and Ron Wolfson, University of Judaism; and Dr. Alisa Rubin Kurshan, UJA-Federation of New York. *Reform temples*: President David Ellenson, Hebrew Union College; Rabbis Herbert Bronstein, Chicago; Mitch Chefitz, Miami; Stanley Davids, Jerusalem; Daniel Frelander, Union for Reform Judaism (URJ); Elyse Frishman, New Jersey; Laura Geller, Los Angeles; Samuel Karff, Houston; Robert Levine, New York; Jeffrey Salkin, Atlanta; Herman Schaalman, Chicago; and Lance Sussman, Philadelphia. *Conservative synagogues*: Rabbis Morris Alan, Minneapolis; Aaron Brusso, Minneapolis; Richard Cameras, Los Angeles; Jerome Epstein, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism; Ed Feinstein, Los Angeles; Felipe Goodman, Las Vegas; Joel Meyers, Rabbinical Assembly (RA); Daniel Nevins, Detroit; Paul Plotkin, Margate, Florida; Elliot Schoenberg, RA; Harold Schulweis, Los Angeles; Michael Siegel, Chicago; Elie Spitz, Los Angeles; and several dozen others who invited me to spend Shabbat in their congregations and in the process enabled me to observe their synagogues. *Orthodox synagogues*: Dr. Steven Bayme, American Jewish Committee; Rabbis Jeffrey Fox, Englewood, New Jersey; Asher Lopatin, Chicago; Avi Shafran, Agudath Israel of America; Mayer Waxman, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (OU); and Harvey Well, Associated Talmud Torahs, Chicago; Professors Benjamin Gampel, Jewish Theological Seminary; Jacob J. Schachter, Yeshiva University; and Chaim I. Waxman, Rutgers University. *Reconstructionist synagogues*: Rabbi Richard Hirsh, Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, Philadelphia. *Congregational trends in American religion*: Presidents William McKinney, Pacific School of Religion, and Barbara G. Wheeler, Auburn Theological Seminary; Professors Nancy T. Ammerman, Boston University; Jackson Carroll, Duke University; Carl Dudley, Hartford Seminary; Penny Edgell Becker, University of Minnesota; Nancy Eisland, Emory University; and E. Stephen Warner, University of Illinois.

targeting specific subgroups such as singles, empty-nesters, intermarried families, and homosexuals and lesbians. Federations of Jewish philanthropy created commissions designed to improve synagogue life. Individual congregations, too, were caught up in efforts at self-reform, hiring professional consultants to guide their “re-visioning” of themselves as “caring communities.”

Much of this activity was prompted by a barrage of criticism from communal leaders and rabbis bemoaning the sorry condition of Jewish congregations. “I don’t like going to synagogue,” confessed Edgar M. Bronfman, head of the World Jewish Congress. “I generally find the atmosphere stultifying, the services overly long, boringly repetitive, and mostly without meaning to the young Jews of today.”<sup>1</sup> Writing in a less confessional vein from their perch at a major family foundation, Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg and his late son, Jonathan J. Greenberg, concluded:

The last three decades have been a bear market for shuls [synagogues]. Membership and participation rates have dropped significantly. Complaints of boredom and irrelevance fill the air. Shul life has been criticized for excessive factionalism and small-mindedness . . . Rabbis complained that they were shoved aside by the emergent lay leadership and blamed it all on “checkbook Judaism,” i.e., Jewish life run by money instead of values. Yet the lay leaders complained that rabbis were uninspiring, acting like politicians but neglecting their constituents’—and their own—spiritual lives. The Havurot groups, which first emerged in the sixties, . . . blamed the soulless institutional synagogues and their Hebrew schools for the traumas which scarred their Jewish souls and turned off so many of their peers.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Lawrence Hoffman, who cofounded a major synagogue transformation project, challenged congregations to take a hard look at themselves. Noting the boast of a rabbi that some 200 members of his congregation attend synagogue on a weekly basis, Hoffman asked, “What does the figure of 200 attendees out of 3,000 congregants mean? [It amounts to] 7 percent of the 30 percent of all Jews who claim an affiliation, [a] figure equivalent to

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<sup>1</sup>Edgar M. Bronfman, “A New Synagogue for a New Era,” *Contact* 2, Autumn 1999, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and J.J. Greenberg, “The Synagogue: A Time for Tearing Down & a Time for Building Up,” *ibid.*, p. 3.

only 2 percent of the total population[;] only one person out of every 50 Jews” attends synagogue weekly.<sup>3</sup>

Even established leaders within the synagogue world joined the chorus of criticism. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ), sorrowfully conceded his disappointment with the quality of religious services in many of his movement’s synagogues: “All of us—rabbis, cantors, lay leaders—seem ready to admit that, far too often, our services are tedious, predictable, and dull. Far too often, our members pray without fervor or concentration. Far too often, our music is dirge-like and our Torah readings lifeless, and we are unable to trigger true emotion and ascent.”<sup>4</sup> An ordained Conservative rabbi did not shrink from confessing in print that, “like the majority of American Jews, despite my personal commitment to tradition, I had simply decided to write off synagogue involvement.”<sup>5</sup> A Reconstructionist rabbi sweepingly announced his “frustration with hundreds of synagogues across America that have yet to understand the needs of today’s Jews . . . . America’s synagogues serve hundreds of thousands of Jews . . . but most are in crisis.”<sup>6</sup> And lest one assume that Orthodox Judaism enjoys immunity from the problem, Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive director of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, reported that many Orthodox Jews around the country told him that their services lacked “emotional power,” leaving them spiritually “arid and numb.”<sup>7</sup>

It would be hard to think of any other American Jewish institution that has been subjected to such cold scrutiny and withering criticism—with the possible exception of the so-called Hebrew schools, the supplementary religious programs run *by synagogues*.

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<sup>3</sup>Lawrence A. Hoffman, “From Common Cold to Uncommon Healing,” *CCAR Journal* 41, Spring 1994, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Eric H. Yoffie, “Realizing God’s Promise: Reform Judaism in the Twenty-First Century,” presidential sermon delivered at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations General Assembly, Dec. 18, 1999, and published under the title “The Worship Revolution,” *Reform Judaism* 28, Spring 2000, p. 24. More recently, Yoffie has expressed satisfaction with the positive changes in his movement’s congregations. See Yoffie, “False Prophets,” *ibid.* 29, Spring 2001, pp. 23–28.

<sup>5</sup>Richard A. Marker, “Beyond Renewal—A Call for Transformation,” *Sh’ma* 30, Sept. 1999, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (San Francisco, 2000), pp. xxiv–xxv.

<sup>7</sup>Zvi Hersh Weinreb, “Orthodox: Imbue Ritual with Spirituality,” *Forward*, Mar. 14, 2003, p. 9.

The motive of these critics—as they all hasten to point out—is not to denigrate synagogues but to spur them to take remedial action. To one extent or another, all would agree with Dr. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, that “the synagogue, generically speaking, is the bedrock institution of the total Jewish community. It alone is the aquifer for the social capital that nourishes and drives the vaunted organizational structure that marks American Jewry . . . . While its ritual is a bridge to the divine, it is also a force for cohesion and the language of social values.”<sup>8</sup> Most everyone would acknowledge that the membership figures of synagogues are unequaled by any other Jewish institution, and thus the sheer human traffic making its way through congregations, in addition to their special capacity to mobilize Jews, make them unique. And yet, as Dr. David Gordis, president of Boston Hebrew College, observed, “the very focus on synagogue transformation suggests a degree of ambivalence: it stipulates the continuing dependence of the Jewish community on a flourishing synagogue at its center for the continued vitality of Jewish life even as it questions whether the synagogue is capable of playing the required role.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite widespread skepticism about the possibility of salvaging the synagogue, a slew of new initiatives have been launched to address the criticism. These, and the dissatisfaction that prompted them, suggest the need for some stocktaking. The pages that follow will consider whether the contemporary synagogue is indeed in crisis, the factors that have contributed to the perception that it needs radical revamping, and the various programs in place to redefine the synagogue for a new generation.

### THE POSTWAR SYNAGOGUE

The first step in assessing current plans for the renewal of the American synagogue is to examine the suburban synagogue that emerged after World War II. That institution, after all, is the *bête*

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<sup>8</sup>Ismar Schorsch, “The Centrality of the Synagogue,” commencement address, Hebrew Union College, New York City, May 9, 2002, [www.jtsa.edu/about/communications/speeches/20020513.shtml](http://www.jtsa.edu/about/communications/speeches/20020513.shtml).

<sup>9</sup>David M. Gordis, “Changing the American Synagogue,” *Tikkun* 16, May-June 2001, p. 74.

noire of contemporary critics, who think that much of what is wrong with congregational life today is directly traceable to its missteps and failings.

### *Growth and Expansion*

The saga of the mid-twentieth-century synagogue is frequently told as a story of stunning growth and expansion that yielded only meager religious results. While new synagogues mushroomed across the landscape, the claim is made that Jews “seldom came to them and even more seldom identified with what was going on inside.”<sup>10</sup> Contemporaries celebrated “the flourishing state of the American Jewish community’s religious bodies,” but later observers would declare that “what was revived was not so much religious belief as belief in the value of religion,” and that the 1950s revival was “more show than substance.”<sup>11</sup> “In sum,” wrote one analyst of mid-century American Jewry, “the [synagogue] model for the 1950s was nonreligious religion.”<sup>12</sup>

It was, indeed, a time of explosive quantitative growth for the American synagogue. In 1957, the Synagogue Council of America estimated a “grand total of 4,200 congregations,” more than double the number 50 years earlier, and about 1,000 more than immediately before World War II. The Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, predecessor of the URJ) grew from 290 temples in 1937 to 698 in 1970, and in the same period the Conservative movement’s United Synagogue (US) increased from 250 member congregations to 832.<sup>13</sup> During just one two-year period of the 1950s, 131 new congregations joined the US and 50 affiliated with the UAHC.<sup>14</sup>

This frenetic growth was fueled primarily by Jewish geographic mobility. Like their fellow Americans, Jews were on the move in

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<sup>10</sup>Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the 20th Century* (Seattle, 1995), p. 31.

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, 2004), p. 277.

<sup>12</sup>Hoffman, “From Common Cold to Common Healing,” p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Arthur Hertzberg, “Communal Affairs,” *American Jewish Year Book 1958* (New York, 1958), p. 114; Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago, 1957), p. 12; Wolfe Kelman, “The Synagogue in America,” in David Sidorsky, ed., *The Future of the Jewish Community in America* (New York, 1973), p. 157.

<sup>14</sup>Jack Wertheimer, “Recent Trends in American Judaism,” *American Jewish Year Book 1989* (New York, 1989), p. 65.

the postwar era. Huge numbers abandoned urban neighborhoods, moving from the Bronx and Brooklyn in New York City to Queens and then Long Island or Westchester, from Newark to the Oranges in New Jersey, from Baltimore to the near suburb of Pikesville, from urban Roxbury in Boston to suburban Chestnut Hill and Newton, from Philadelphia and Chicago to their greener suburbs.<sup>15</sup> And growing numbers made their way to warmer regions of the country, settling in the beckoning “golden cities” of Los Angeles and Miami.<sup>16</sup>

In these new settings, the children and grandchildren of East European immigrants found themselves in an unfamiliar environment. No longer anchored in the Jewish, largely immigrant neighborhoods that had nurtured them, they eagerly sought a new central address for Jewish activities on the lonely suburban frontier. As one prototypical synagogue brochure of the time put it: “The community needs a place for our children and we adults need some place to carry on our social lives. What better place can there be than our synagogue?”<sup>17</sup>

Here in a nutshell were the dual expectations set by suburban Jews for their postwar synagogues. First, they sought a place near home for social interaction with fellow Jews because, as one new suburbanite put it, “My real close friends, my after-dark friends, are mostly Jewish; my daytime friends are Gentile.”<sup>18</sup> Second, they needed a facility to socialize and educate their children as Jews. The following excerpt from a contemporary synagogue fund-raising brochure sought to capitalize on this need:

Are not all our dreams and hopes centered around our children? . . .  
Do not wait until the moment when they will come home to us say-

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<sup>15</sup>Some particularly evocative accounts of how this transplantation process affected synagogue life are Morris Freedman, “New Jewish Community in Formation: A Conservative Center Catering to Present-Day Needs,” *Commentary* 19, Jan. 1955, pp. 36–47; Lucy Dawidowicz, “Middle-Class Judaism: A Case Study,” *ibid.* 29, June 1960, pp. 492–503; and Paula E. Hyman, “From City to Suburb: Temple Mishkan Tefila in Boston,” in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York, 1988), pp. 185–205.

<sup>16</sup>Deborah Dash Moore, *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York, 1994).

<sup>17</sup>Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia* (Boston, 1959), p. 98.

<sup>18</sup>Quoted in Herbert J. Gans, “Park Forest: Birth of a Jewish Community,” in Elliot E. Cohen, ed., *Commentary on the American Scene: Portraits of Jewish Life in America* (New York, 1953), p. 217.

ing: It is your fault that I did not make the right friends. It is your fault that I have to spend time in places that you don't like. It is your fault that my adolescent years were guided by the wrong people. It is your fault that my love and loyalty can be shaken by the slightest wind. Let's not wait for this moment—too much is at stake. Join in a sincere effort to build a Community Center where our children will meet the right friends in dignity, be guided by the right leaders and grow up to be good Americans and Jews.<sup>19</sup>

One would hardly know from this that religion was to play any role in such an institution, let alone that what was being promoted was a synagogue.

The priorities clearly lay elsewhere. As Lawrence Hoffman has noted astutely, the synagogues' "floor plans tell the tale." Suburban congregations typically built "huge school wings, but small sanctuaries."<sup>20</sup> Moveable partitions enabled congregations to carve out meeting-room spaces and classrooms. Their primary users were children enrolled in religious school programs prior to bar and bat mitzvah.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the early decades of the twentieth century, when Jewish schooling was often housed in communal institutions or separate educational settings, the synagogue now assumed predominant responsibility for Jewish education. In the late 1950s, it was estimated that the congregational school accounted for almost four-fifths of all students receiving a Jewish education.<sup>22</sup> These supplementary schools began to absorb an increasingly high percentage of synagogue budgets, a necessary investment in light of the new reality of congregational membership: most people who joined synagogues did so in order to secure a Jewish education for their children.<sup>23</sup> In one suburban community studied in-

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<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, pp. 105–06.

<sup>20</sup>Hoffman, "From Common Cold to Common Healing," p. 10.

<sup>21</sup>A growing literature traces the evolution of the bat mitzvah, an American innovation that has caught on elsewhere as well, especially in Israel. See Paula E. Hyman, "The Introduction of the Bat Mitzvah in Conservative Judaism in Postwar America," *YIVO Annual* 19 (1990), pp. 133–46, and "Bat Mitzvah," in Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore, *Jewish Women in America* (New York, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 126–28; Jenna Weissman Joselit's discussion of "Red-Letter Days" in *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (New York, 1994), pp. 89–133; Regina Stein, "The Road to Bat Mitzvah in America," in Pamela Nadell and Jonathan Sarna, eds., *Women and American Judaism* (Hanover, N.H., 2001), pp. 223–34; and Ora Wiskind Elper, ed., *Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah* (Jerusalem, 2003).

<sup>22</sup>Hertzberg, "Communal Affairs," p. 114.

<sup>23</sup>On these developments see Jack Wertheimer, "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book 1999* (New York, 1999), pp. 10–16.



tensively during this period by Marshall Sklare, “most Jews wait[ed] until their children reach[ed] school age” before joining a synagogue. Whereas “a mere 19 percent of families in which all the children are under school age belong to a synagogue,” Sklare reported, “the affiliation rate triples to 56 percent in the early-school phase and spurts to 87 percent when there is a child in the peak years of religious education.”<sup>24</sup> Congregations had clearly assumed a pediatric mission.

Simultaneously, synagogues also sought to involve adults in a range of activities. Men virtually monopolized synagogue governance in this period, particularly the realms of financial decision-making and board leadership. Women tended to be involved as volunteers in “helping” the male decision-makers and as the overwhelming majority of participants in educational programs.<sup>25</sup> “Synagogues, like churches,” Hoffman observes, developed “a shopping list of programs for suburbanites avoiding loneliness or seeking social services like welcome wagons and book clubs. Religious schools for the children and sisterhoods for the mothers soon dominated the landscape.”<sup>26</sup>

Surging enrollments in congregational schools and active social programming produced spectacular increases in synagogue membership. Although hard numbers are difficult to come by, it was estimated in the late 1950s that some 60 percent of American Jews affiliated with a synagogue and that another 20 percent turned to the synagogue for specific “sacramental events in life.” This suggested that “the synagogue was a matter of real concern to perhaps 4,000,000 American Jews.”<sup>27</sup> The laments of overextended rabbis

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<sup>24</sup>Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier: A Study of Group Survival in the Open Society* (Chicago, 1967; 2nd edition, 1979), p. 181.

<sup>25</sup>Albert Gordon concluded that “the women of suburbia are the enthusiastic ‘students’ in both day and evening classes,” but that they “complain that they cannot get their husbands to attend formal classes.” Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, pp. 124–25.

<sup>26</sup>Hoffman, “From Common Cold to Common Healing,” p. 10.

<sup>27</sup>Hertzberg, “Communal Affairs,” p. 115. To be sure, there were disparities between communities. In the Midwestern suburban community they named Lakeville, Sklare and Greenblum (*Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, p. 97) found that 83 percent were “past or present members” of synagogues, a figure that rose to 93 percent when families with children over age 18 were counted. Albert Gordon (*Jews in Suburbia*, pp. 248–49) surveyed some 78 local communities and correlated overall Jewish population estimates with membership figures supplied by synagogues, and his tables showed wide fluctuations. In Burbank and Whittier, California, for example, less than 35 percent affiliated, whereas in Swampscott, Massachusetts, 86 percent of Jews were synagogue members.

further confirmed that synagogue membership was booming. As one rabbi ruefully observed of his once “small congregation,” “I reckoned without due consideration to the likelihood that my quiet suburban community would grow and grow and grow. It has reached such proportions that I can hardly serve all my congregants adequately . . . . The congregation has grown too large—and there seems nothing that I can do about it.”<sup>28</sup>

Even if the 60-percent affiliation figure is inflated, synagogue membership in the postwar era certainly dwarfed rates prevalent earlier in the century. A 1919 estimate suggested that less than a quarter of Jewish families were members of congregations, and the 1926 *Census of Religious Bodies* counted only one synagogue per 1,309 Jews. Affiliation was undoubtedly even lower during the Great Depression, when membership in all American religious congregations declined; according to historian Jonathan Sarna, “synagogues and Jewish educational institutions suffered particularly from the economic downturn.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, membership in synagogues during the postwar era represented a high-water mark compared to previous decades—and, as we shall see, compared to subsequent ones as well.

Attendance at religious services, by contrast, did not keep pace with membership growth. A survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 1945 found that only 24 percent of Jews claimed to attend religious services at least once a month, compared to 81 percent of Catholics and 62 percent of Protestants; and a mere 9 percent of Jews claimed to attend at least once a week.<sup>30</sup> According to a Gallup survey conducted a decade later, the figure for Jewish once-a-week synagogue attendance rose to 18 percent, as compared to 74 percent for Catholics and 40 percent for Protestants, but research in local communities suggested that the Jewish figure was inflated.<sup>31</sup> By 1970, the National Jewish Population Survey determined that only 8 percent of Jewish house-

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<sup>28</sup>Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, pp. 95–96. This rabbi’s honest self-appraisal stands in marked contrast to the mythologizing in which many of his colleagues engaged, when they aimed to convince themselves and their congregants that their exceptional talents largely accounted for congregational growth.

<sup>29</sup>Sarna, *American Judaism*, pp. 356–57.

<sup>30</sup>Marshall Sklare, “The Ethnic Church and the Desire for Survival,” in Peter I. Rose, ed., *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America* (New York, 1969), p. 110.

<sup>31</sup>Hertzberg, “Communal Affairs,” p. 118.

hold heads attended religious services 50 times a year or more, whereas 55 percent attended fewer than four times a year.<sup>32</sup>

It was precisely the disparity between climbing membership figures and sparse attendance at worship services that evoked such scornful criticism of the mid-century synagogue even during its period of explosive growth. Mordecai Kaplan, for one, pronounced “Jewish spiritual life in this country [as] only skin deep. Jewish life is social rather than spiritual . . . . One half of Jewish identity is the product of Gentile exclusiveness and the other half is the product of Jewish association.”<sup>33</sup>

### *An Evolving Institution*

In the view of contemporaries, the sterility of the services repelled religiously sensitive people. “The modern temple suffers from a severe cold,” observed Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “the services are prim, the voice is dry, the temple is clean and tidy . . . no one will cry, the words are stillborn.” Rabbi Harold Schulweis understood these remarks to be “directed against the metallic services, against the lugubrious tones of the ritual master of ceremonies intoning the siddur pagination.”<sup>34</sup> “Uniformity came to characterize American decorum,” writes anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell. “Reform Jews, and the most acculturated and suburbanized Conservative Jews . . . thought decorum should govern how people prayed and who legislated the tone, volume, and pace of prayer. These more acculturated communities encompassed all of religious life into an aesthetic of uniformity and order.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, to one extent or another, synagogues across the denominational spectrum—with the exception of the Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox sectors of the Orthodox community—insisted upon decorous services and formality. This entailed the maintenance of

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<sup>32</sup>Fred Masarik and Alvin Chenkin, *Jewish Identity: Facts for Planning* (New York, 1974), p. 4. Women, in all likelihood, attended at a higher rate, but they generally would not have been counted as “household heads.”

<sup>33</sup>Jacob Neusner, “Religion,” *American Jewish Year Book 1960* (New York, 1960), p. 57.

<sup>34</sup>Harold W. Schulweis, “Restructuring the Synagogue,” *Conservative Judaism* 27, Summer 1973, p. 13.

<sup>35</sup>Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit, 1989), p. 62.

social and spatial distance between the rabbis, cantors, and other synagogue officiants, on the one hand, and the average member, on the other. Rabbis were expected to deliver formal sermons on the Sabbath and holidays. Formal attire was de rigueur: synagogue functionaries in most Conservative and Reform congregations wore black robes, and a few Modern Orthodox synagogues required top hats or cutaways. A corps of ushers supervised the proceedings to insure that all ran smoothly. Women, as noted above, though active in a voluntary capacity, rarely officiated or even appeared on the pulpit.

Still, there were important denominational variations. Reform congregations were typified by what Lawrence Hoffman has called a "common aesthetic." Services were primarily in English; all prayer was recited in unison, so that congregants did not serve as prayer leaders; and prayer was read rather than sung or chanted — singing was the preserve of the (mainly Gentile) choir, and few temples even employed a cantor.<sup>36</sup> The ideal Reform religious service included "an inspirational sermon, organ music, and [a] choir"; these "contributed to . . . the esthetic beauty, and a certain grandeur that marked the service."<sup>37</sup> Friday night services were the weekly centerpiece of the worship experience, but only a small minority of members attended even that with any regularity.

Conservative synagogues, in contrast, generally employed a cantor and included congregational singing; prayers were primarily in Hebrew, albeit with some selections read in English. Late Friday evening services were primary for Conservative Jews.

This service was scheduled at an untraditional hour, after dinner on Friday evening, rather than at dusk. This was meant to facilitate attendance by a generation that could neither hope to take off early from work on Friday nor to stay home on Saturday. The service was directed to the broad membership, not just those who equated prayer with "davening." The rabbi gave a formal sermon, rather than a *d'var Torah*, applying Jewish insights to political, social or cultural issues of the day. The service, lasting about an hour, featured a com-

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<sup>36</sup>Interviews with Rabbi Herman Schaalmann (June 23, 2003) and Lawrence Hoffman (June 11, 2003). For an ethnographic portrait of such a congregation as late as the 1970s, see Frida Kerner Furman, *Beyond Yiddishkeit: The Struggle for a Jewish Identity in a Reform Synagogue* (Albany, 1987).

<sup>37</sup>Jeffrey A. Summit, *The Lord's Song in a Strange Land: Music and Identity in Contemporary Jewish Worship* (New York, 2000), p. 63.

ination of cantorial settings and English unison or responsive readings.<sup>38</sup>

Some Conservative synagogues incorporated organ or piano music into this service, and used it on other occasions, too. Generally, however, services not held on Friday night hewed closely to the traditional Hebrew liturgy. Only gradually in this period was the annual Torah cycle replaced in some synagogues with the shorter triennial portions—the entire Torah being read over the course of three years instead of one. Otherwise, innovation was confined to English translations and newly composed English meditations added to the services. Many congregations continued to employ Orthodox prayer books and Torah commentaries (as well as rabbis with Orthodox training).

Orthodox services were, of course, more traditional, retaining Hebrew and the received *nusach*—the words and melody of prayer as handed down from earlier generations. But in the Modern Orthodox sector, which was dominant at the time, rabbis, like their non-Orthodox counterparts, delivered formal sermons, synagogues made an effort to enforce decorum, and it was not unusual for some prayers to be read in English. In the immediate postwar era such synagogues serviced a significant population of nonobservant members who attended irregularly. Especially outside the New York area, many Modern Orthodox and so-called Traditional synagogues provided for mixed seating of men and women, turned a blind eye to the reality that congregants drove to synagogue on the Sabbath, and followed the example of the Conservative movement by scheduling late Friday evening services.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, a recently arrived wave of Holocaust-era refugees—some Hasidic, others what would become known as *haredi* or “yeshivish”—established

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<sup>38</sup>Michael Panitz, “Completing a Century: The Rabbinical Assembly since 1970,” in Robert E. Fierstien, ed., *A Century of Commitment: One Hundred Years of the Rabbinical Assembly* (New York, 2000), pp. 124–25.

<sup>39</sup>Lawrence H. Schiffman, “When Women and Men Sat Together in American Orthodox Synagogues,” *Moment* 14, Dec. 1989, pp. 40 ff. On the existence of Orthodox congregations in this period with many nonobservant members see Jeffrey S. Gurock, *From Fluidity to Rigidity: The Religious Worlds of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in Twentieth Century America*, David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs no. 7 (Ann Arbor, 1998), pp. 27–37; and also Charles S. Liebman’s contemporaneous account of what he called “residual” and “nonobservant” Orthodox Jews, “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Year Book 1965* (New York, 1965), pp. 30–38.

a range of new synagogues striving to transplant European ways of prayer on American soil, but this was a marginal phenomenon at the time.

Yet despite the considerable evidence that the postwar synagogue was formal and decorous, it is inaccurate to portray it as static and unchanging. Contemporary observers, in fact, were struck by the *experimental* quality of what was unfolding around them. For one thing, a very high percentage of Jews joining congregations were doing so for the first time. Writing of the “new suburbanites” of the 1950s, Harry Gersh marveled at the novelty of the situation: while “the average metropolitan Jew is not a synagogue member . . . move this average Jew to Suburbia and the chances are he’ll join up.” One rabbi told Gersh that “most of my new congregation are new to synagogue experience. In the city it takes an effort to become a member. You have to make a decision, go find a synagogue, walk in, and join. Usually, no one helps you, even at the last stage. So it’s easier not to join. But out here it’s the path of least resistance to join.” Gersh conceded that in all the joining “there is little mention of those who come to the synagogue because this is the place where Torah lives. But they are the minority in Suburbia, as they are everywhere.”<sup>40</sup> Even so, these first-time synagogue members were engaged in a novel experiment in which synagogue participation played a central role.

This emerging new form of Jewish life was rich with possibilities. In his study of suburban Judaism, Rabbi Albert Gordon noted a remarkable transformation taking place before his eyes. He quoted the president of the Levittown Jewish Center expressing amazement at the growth of his congregation: “Do you realize that 90 percent of these people haven’t been in a synagogue since they were bar mitzvah? And look at them now, working like beavers. I guess it’s just that there’s a lot we don’t know, and we want to know—we’re hungry for Jewish learning and Jewish life.”<sup>41</sup> This hunger prompted a range of experimental and imaginative programs to teach Judaism to families and young people lacking Judaic knowledge.

Writing about a congregation founded in the postwar years, Morris Freedman captured the spirit of innovation:

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<sup>40</sup>Harry Gersh, “The New Suburbanites of the 50’s: Jewish Division,” *Commentary* 17, Mar. 1954, pp. 218, 219, 221.

<sup>41</sup>Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, p. 101.

Almost the chief impression I carried away with me was its air of improvisation and its great fluidity. Educational and youth directors seem to come and go; organization and content of class and group work do not always conform to the spit-and-polish standards the national organizations are trying to set. But perhaps this is just what the . . . public is buying right now—grandeur in the externals, undemanding informality and trial and error in substance . . . . It is clear . . . that the patterns for the future have by no means been fixed; and that what will finally emerge may show only the thinnest connection with what we see today. At any rate, a close and sober look now may offer an opportunity for those deeply concerned to help shape those patterns before the mold hardens.<sup>42</sup>

This contemporaneous description of how new congregations improvised hardly conforms to the stereotype of the complacent suburban synagogue any more than does the claim of the Levittown Jewish Center's president that people were eager to learn.

From a comparative perspective, historian James Hudnut-Beumler captures the spirit that animated American houses of worship at the time, synagogues and churches alike, their membership consisting predominantly of young families:

Suburbanization resulted in homogeneous communities that, far from being the sterile wastelands their worst critics feared, became the locus of incredible vitality . . . . These were times and places when and where everything was possible; veritable utopias in which death, cancer, and poverty appeared to have been banished. A typical suburban church or synagogue could go years without a funeral or memorial service. On the other hand, the joyful, life-affirming rituals of baptism, first communion, confirmation, bar mitzvah and now bas mitzvah, were frequently celebrated in the local houses of worship. Moreover . . . the prospects for the future were bright: ecclesiastical budgets were ever on the rise, never in descent or tied to the declining incomes of aging and retiring members; building programs were underway (the family proud of their new split-level home would soon be attending a church equally new and worthy of pride); and the typical suburban church or synagogue had exactly what most prospective members were looking for in a religious home—people exactly like themselves.<sup>43</sup>

True, as Hudnut-Beumler observes, there was an insular, naive, and perhaps even self-satisfied quality to these congregations,

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<sup>42</sup>Freedman, "New Jewish Community in Formation," p. 47.

<sup>43</sup>James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and its Critics, 1945–1965* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1984), p. 7.

but that was an understandable consequence of the rapid upward mobility and unexpected success attained by the new suburbanites who had grown up during the hard years of the Great Depression.

To be sure, no sooner had the baby-boomer children raised in these suburban congregations come of age than they subjected their synagogues to severe criticism, bemoaning their cold and impersonal atmosphere; their rigid division between performing functionaries and passive membership audience; their failure to enact equality for women; and their oligarchic structure of governance. Emerging in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this critique was part of a much broader youthful onslaught against all American establishments.

What is truly remarkable in the Jewish community is how rapidly congregations responded to the criticism. Take, for example, the question of women's participation. A national study of congregational practices carried out in 1978 found that almost all Reform congregations permitted women to give sermons, lead services, and be called up to the Torah. Almost half of the Conservative synagogues counted women for a minyan and allowed them to lead services, while more than three-quarters of them had women delivering sermons. Most Reform congregations and two-thirds of Conservative ones called upon women to open the ark and chant kiddush and havdalah. In the Orthodox world, women had only made inroads in sermon-making (7 percent of synagogues) and chanting kiddush and havdalah (2 percent).<sup>44</sup>

Congregations also innovated in other areas in the late 1960s and 1970s. Encompassing the feminist critique but going beyond it was the *havurah* movement, the expression of a new generation that insisted not only on more involvement of women but also on a dramatic change in the aesthetics and decorum of prayer: greater lay participation and engagement, less hierarchy and formality, and the active presence of children.<sup>45</sup> In response to the creation of

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<sup>44</sup>These data are reported in Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York, 1993), p. 153.

<sup>45</sup>This is the overarching theme of Prell, *Prayer and Community*. On the trajectory of American congregations more generally in the 1950–90 period, see E. Brooks Holifield, "Toward a History of American Congregations," in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago, 1994), vol. II, pp. 43–47.



fledgling independent *havurot* at the grassroots level, many synagogues established their own *havurot* to provide settings for more intimate religious experience.<sup>46</sup> And even in congregations that maintained the old structure, rabbis and cantors experimented with less formal ways of carrying out their roles. Many Reform and Conservative congregations, for example, replaced the Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew, associated with the old formal way of doing things, with an Israeli-style Sephardi accent, creating an ambience that evoked the Zionist renewal of Jewish culture.

Contrary to the common assumption, then, synagogue life in the second half of the twentieth century was not impervious to change. It was, in fact, in a constant state of remaking.

### THE SYNAGOGUE TODAY

By the end of the twentieth century, a new synagogue aesthetic had emerged that crossed denominational boundaries even as the contents of the service and nature of the liturgy continued to vary. Before looking at the situation more closely, a review of basic data about the world of the American synagogue today is in order.

#### *The Demography of Synagogue Life*

According to a recent report in the *American Jewish Year Book*, there were 3,727 synagogues in the United States in 2001, 40 percent of them Orthodox, 26 percent Reform, 23 percent Conservative, and the rest falling into far smaller groupings: Reconstructionist (3 percent); Sephardi (3 percent); Traditional (1 percent); Humanistic (1 percent); Gay/Lesbian (0.5 percent); and Jewish Renewal (0.4 percent).<sup>47</sup> This breakdown is not necessarily indicative of each movement's actual membership base: the percentage of Orthodox Jews is far smaller than that of their houses of worship, since Orthodox synagogues are generally smaller and have far fewer congregants than those affiliated with the other major denominations.

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<sup>46</sup>Harold Schulweis, "Restructuring the Synagogue," especially p. 19.

<sup>47</sup>Jim Schwartz, Jeffrey Scheckner, and Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, "Census of U.S. Synagogues, 2001," *American Jewish Year Book 2002* (New York, 2002), p. 117.

Jewish congregations are spread unevenly across the United States. They are most densely concentrated in middle-sized communities of the Northeast and Midwest, where Jewish settlement has been continuous for a long time and the population has remained stable. Synagogues are sparsest in the Sunbelt and other communities where recent transplants have settled, and where the broader local culture does not encourage joining. As demographer Ira Sheskin has explained, migrating American Jews quite often “break their institutional ties with the community in which they were raised and . . . [fail] to re-establish ties in their new community.”<sup>48</sup>

Synagogue membership varies considerably by region. The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 2000–01 found an overall adult membership rate of 46 percent, with Jews in the Midwest (53 percent) and Northeast (50 percent) having the higher rates of affiliation, and Jews in the South (44 percent) and West (36 percent) claiming lower rates. These differences match similar regional variations in overall patterns of Jewish connectedness. Jews in the Midwest tend to engage in Jewish civic life—giving to federations, joining Jewish organizations, volunteering for Jewish agencies, and participating in adult Jewish education—at higher rates than Jews in other parts of the country; Jews in the West report the lowest levels of Jewish engagement. The *household* rate of affiliation was only 40 percent overall, with a high of 47 percent of Midwestern Jewish households and a low of 30 percent of Western households.<sup>49</sup>

Since roughly half the Jews of the United States live in the three largest metropolitan areas—Greater New York, Greater Los Angeles, and the southeastern coast of Florida—the differing congregational membership patterns in these communities underline the gap between the Northeast and the Sunbelt. In the New York area, 43 percent of Jewish households are synagogue-affiliated; in Greater Los Angeles the figure stands at 34 percent; and in

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, pp. 118–25; Ira M. Sheskin, “Jewish Demographics on the Local Level,” *Contact* 5, Spring 2003, pp. 5–6.

<sup>49</sup>*The National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population* (New York, 2003), pp. 7–8. It must be emphasized that these figures cover only the estimated 4.3 million Jews who are most Jewishly engaged, leaving out another million or so less engaged Jews, and thus inflating the overall percentages.

the southeastern counties of Florida, all the individual communities have synagogue affiliation rates that fall within a 27-to-37-percent range.<sup>50</sup>

Synagogue members tend to share certain social characteristics. An analysis of the 1990 NJPS found that baby-boomers were, on average, less likely than their elders, who were born before World War II, to attend synagogue once a month or more (23.6 percent versus 27.9 percent). But the reverse was true for the Orthodox. Close to half of Orthodox baby-boomers claimed to attend services a few times a week, a figure three times greater than Orthodox Jews born before the war.<sup>51</sup> Almost half of all married couples in the “core” Jewish population that had children belonged to a synagogue, as compared with only a quarter of couples with no children. At the other end of the spectrum, “single-parent families with or without other adults present in the household proved to have the lowest rate of synagogue affiliation, only about one in three.” A family’s synagogue affiliation was shown to be linked especially to the presence of children in the pre-bar/bat mitzvah years. Sixty-two percent of “core” Jewish households with children in the 10–14 age cohort were members, as compared to just 39 percent of households with children aged 0–4. The NJPS data also substantiated the important connection between Jewish education and synagogue membership, as 90 percent of families that included children enrolled in some form of Jewish education joined a synagogue.<sup>52</sup> Jews of a higher socioeconomic status were more likely than others to affiliate with synagogues, and this was especially the case for Conservative and Reform Jews. Similarly, levels of general

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<sup>50</sup>*The Jewish Community Study of New York 2002: Highlights* (New York, 2003), p. 45; Sheskin, “Jewish Demographics,” p. 6. In Florida, Dade County reported a 37-percent affiliation rate; Broward County, 27 percent; and South Palm Beach, 36 percent.

<sup>51</sup>Chaim I. Waxman, *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective* (Albany, 2001), pp. 89–91. Reconstructionist respondents to the 1990 NJPS also claimed a very high rate of frequent synagogue attendance, close to two-thirds reporting attendance once a month or more. Impressionistic evidence of a sharp decline in the number of men who actually attend Reform temples raises the question of whether the self-reporting of individuals accurately gauges attendance. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, for example, has written of the “great, unspoken crisis facing modern Judaism . . . the disengagement of men in large numbers. . . . Men are increasingly distancing themselves from congregations—as worshipers, as students of Torah, as trustees.” Salkin, “Jewish Macho,” *Reform Judaism* 26, Spring 1998, pp. 28–29.

<sup>52</sup>Ariela Keysar, Barry A. Kosmin, and Jeffrey Scheckner, *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents* (Albany, 2000), pp. 42–45.

educational attainment were higher among synagogue-affiliated Jews than among nonmembers.<sup>53</sup>

Initial findings of the 2000–01 NJPS suggest a significant shift underway in the fortunes of the various denominations, and the prospect of even greater change in the decades to come. Adherents of Reform now constitute the plurality of synagogue members (39 percent of affiliated households), supplanting membership in Conservative synagogues (now 33 percent of affiliated households).<sup>54</sup> But Reform's position as the largest synagogue movement will probably be short-lived, as high fertility rates in the Orthodox community are likely to catapult Orthodox Judaism into the lead. Today, 21 percent of households affiliated with a synagogue are Orthodox, but their children represent 40 percent of youngsters in synagogue-affiliated families, as compared to 27 percent in affiliated Conservative households and 33 percent in Reform households. If Orthodoxy can retain the allegiance of its younger generation, the Orthodox synagogue will replace the Reform temple as the congregation of choice for the plurality of synagogue members in the near future.<sup>55</sup>

Membership does not necessarily translate into attendance, and it has long been acknowledged that the large majority of synagogue members attend infrequently. According to the 2000–01 NJPS, 27 percent of Jews claimed to attend a Jewish religious service at least monthly. The same regional variation seen in synagogue membership applies to attendance, with 30 percent of Jews in the Northeast saying they attend at least once a month as compared to 22 percent in the West.<sup>56</sup> Nationally, the denominational differences are stark, with the Orthodox far ahead: 58 percent of synagogue-affiliated Orthodox adults claim to attend religious services *at least once a week*, compared with 37 percent of Conservative synagogue

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<sup>53</sup>Bernard Lazerwitz, "Denominations and Synagogue Membership: 1971 and 1990," in David M. Gordis and Dorit P. Gary, eds., *American Jewry: Portrait and Prognosis* (West Orange, N.J., 1997), pp. 199–219.

<sup>54</sup>"National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Conservative Jews," Feb. 2004 posting on the United Jewish Communities Web site, [www.ujc.org](http://www.ujc.org).

<sup>55</sup>These data are from an unpublished paper by Steven M. Cohen, "The Changing Contours of Conservative Jewry and Other Major American Jewish Denominations: Evidence from the National Jewish Population Studies, 1990 and 2000," pp. 6–7. I thank the author for sharing a draft of his work with me.

<sup>56</sup>*National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01*, pp. 7–9.

members and 24 percent of Reform members who claim to attend *at least monthly*.<sup>57</sup>

As is the case with synagogue membership, more Jews in the 35–54 age bracket claim to attend monthly (32 percent) than Jews aged 55–64 (25 percent), probably because the former are more likely to have pre-bar/bat mitzvah children at home. This difference holds for Conservative and Reform Jews, but not for the Orthodox, among whom there is virtually no difference in attendance rates between members below age 55 and those above it. Clearly, the great majority of Orthodox Jews decide whether to attend services on grounds other than the ages of their children.<sup>58</sup>

Frequency of synagogue attendance has been found to correlate with the contribution of time and money to Jewish institutions and causes beyond the congregation itself, as well as to participation in broader civic matters. A team of scholars at Brandeis University concluded:

In the case of Jews, religious involvement seems to lead both to involvement in Jewish organizations and to participation in other general organizations. In other words, the synagogue socializes American Jews into further voluntary participation in other Jewish organizations, which in turn socializes them into participation in general voluntary associations. Synagogue membership and frequency of synagogue attendance have been found to be strong predictors of philanthropic contributions to non-Jewish organizations. Frequency of attendance at synagogue services is one of the strongest predictors of volunteering for Jewish organizations.<sup>59</sup>

As such findings have become public knowledge, federations of Jewish philanthropy and other Jewish bodies have drawn the ob-

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<sup>57</sup>“National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01: Orthodox Jews” and “National Jewish Population Survey: Conservative Jews,” both at [www.ujc.org](http://www.ujc.org). On Reform Jews I am using unpublished data analyzed by Steven M. Cohen, “Denominational Variations in Jewish Identity Characteristics: Evidence from the National Jewish Population Survey, 2000–01,” dated Nov. 20, 2003, table 10. In a survey of Conservative synagogue members in North America (including Canada) conducted in the mid-1990s, 45 percent of respondents claimed to attend religious services at least once a month. See Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995–96* (New York, 1996), p. 38.

<sup>58</sup>Cohen, “Denominational Variations,” table 11.

<sup>59</sup>Gary A. Tobin and Gabriel Berger, *Synagogue Affiliation: Implications for the 1990s*, Research Report 9, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, ed. Sylvia Barack Fishman, Sept. 1993, p. 3. Waxman (*Jewish Baby Boomers*, p. 92) has found this correlation especially true for Jews of the baby-boom generation.

vious conclusion that organized Jewish life is largely sustained by congregational activity, and have been paying greater attention to synagogues.

When examined in the broad framework of American religious life, these Jewish patterns are anomalous in a number of ways. Roughly two-thirds of Americans claim to be members of a house of worship, at least 25 percentage points higher than Jewish synagogue membership. Whereas the highest regional affiliation rates for Americans are found in the South, for Jews they are found in the Northeast, and even Jews in the Midwest affiliate to a greater degree than those in the South (Jews, like other Americans, are least likely to belong to a house of worship if they live in the West). In the general population, Americans join churches in rising percentages as they get older, whereas Jewish rates of synagogue affiliation drop after children have left the house.<sup>60</sup>

The Jewish/non-Jewish difference in membership patterns is also true of attendance at religious services. Surveys of American religious behavior have consistently reported that at least two out of every five adults say they attend church weekly. The high point of church attendance occurred during the 1950s, when 49 percent reported attending on a weekly basis; by the 1990s the figure had fallen to around 40 percent. American Jews, in contrast, have consistently reported far lower rates. According to a Gallup poll conducted in 1998, 46 percent of Catholics, 42 percent of Protestants, and just 27 percent of Jews claimed to have attended a religious service during the previous week. Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), which yield lower numbers for all groups, also have Jews at the bottom of the list: 7 percent of Jews claim to attend services weekly, as compared with 27 percent of non-Jewish Americans—22–26 percent of liberal-to-moderate Protestants, 31 percent of Catholics, and 36 percent of fundamentalist Protestants.<sup>61</sup> As was the case for membership, church attendance in the East lags behind rates in the South, but patterns of synagogue attendance are just the reverse. And while

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<sup>60</sup>George Gallup, Jr., and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs* (Harrisburg, 1999), p. 12. Self-reported church membership rates fluctuated between 65 and 71 percent from the mid-1960s through the 1990s.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15; Tom Smith, *Jewish Distinctiveness in America: A Statistical Portrait* (New York, 2005), p. 9.

church attendance is strongly correlated with age, older Jews, their children grown, are less likely than their middle-aged coreligionists, whose youngsters are still home, to attend services.<sup>62</sup>

As for denominational patterns, Orthodox Jews outpace every other American religious group when it comes to reported rates of regular attendance at worship services; the percentage of Conservative Jews who say they attend is roughly comparable to that of liberal Protestants; and Reform Jews score below every other American religious group in their self-reported frequency of attendance.<sup>63</sup>

### *Why Don't They Join?*

The generally low rates of synagogue affiliation and attendance have elicited no small amount of anguished hand-wringing in the American Jewish community, as well as attempts to determine the causes. A standard culprit is the high cost of synagogue membership.<sup>64</sup> Most churches support themselves through voluntary offerings, such as cash donations when the plate is passed, or tithing. Synagogues, however, usually charge fixed membership dues to

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<sup>62</sup>Gallup, Jr., and Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape*, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup>Bernard M. Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory, "A Religious and Social Profile of Reform Judaism in the United States," in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (New York, 2001), pp. 19–38; J.J. Goldberg, "People and Politics," *New Jersey Jewish News—MetroWest*, Apr. 20, 2000, p. 37. The accuracy of these surveys has been challenged by a small-scale study that compared self-reporting about church attendance with an actual count of the number of Protestants and Catholics attending church one Sunday in two counties in Ohio. The head count found that only half the number of people who claimed to attend weekly actually appeared in church, leading the authors to conclude: "Too much trust in survey data has produced a distorted image of religion in America by masking declines in church participation. Church attendance is less strong and stable than pool data shows." Since figures for synagogue attendance are also based on self-reporting, the question remains why roughly half as many Jews as Christians claim to attend weekly. See C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny L. Marler, "Did You Really Go to Church This Week? Behind the Poll Data," *Christian Century* 115, May 6, 1998, pp. 472–75.

<sup>64</sup>A poll in Los Angeles concluded that synagogue membership is higher among "parents, more affluent and more educated Jews, and more observant Jews." This led the survey researchers to suggest that "cost may be a factor for less affluent Jews." *L.A. Times/Yediot Aharonot* poll, March/April 1998, "LA Times Poll Alert," April 23, 1998—Study #407/408, p. 3. The case for viewing the entire problem as a matter of "sticker shock" and for throwing billions of dollars at the problem is made by J.J. Goldberg, "Jewish Sticker Shock," *New York Jewish Week*, Feb. 26, 1999, pp. 2–3. A useful overview of the subject is Jeffrey K. Salkin, "The Jews We Don't See: What To Do about the Unaffiliated," *Reform Judaism* 20 (Winter 1991), pp. 4–6, 39–40.

pay for expenses, such as salaries for the rabbi(s), cantor, educators, office and custodial staff, and the costs of electricity, phones, and office equipment. Some congregations also fold the costs of synagogue schooling into the membership dues, rather than charging a separate tuition. Recent surveys indicate that such dues currently range from a few hundred dollars to over \$3,000 per family.<sup>65</sup> The dues generally fall short of covering the synagogue's entire budget.<sup>66</sup>

The annual dues are collected in the weeks before the Jewish New Year, as those charges entitle families to have seats for High Holy Day services, when synagogues attract their largest crowds. That is why Jewish newspapers in late summer are invariably filled with articles bemoaning the practice of requiring Jews "to pay to pray." And just as routinely, synagogue officials defend the practice of charging dues as a necessary means for congregations to finance their activities, even as they claim never to turn anyone away who cannot afford the expense. In some cases, congregations do indeed erect monetary barriers that are too high; in other instances, the process of applying for lower membership dues is onerous, or members are unwilling to bare their personal financial data.<sup>67</sup> Often, though, people simply do not regard the synagogue as a service worth paying for. As one rabbi has summarized the attitudes he has encountered: "I have other priorities in my life. My spare money goes to vacations. I'm still Jewish, whether I belong to a synagogue or not."<sup>68</sup>

To address the concerns of those who genuinely cannot afford high dues, a number of congregations have experimented with alternative fee structures. It has become common for synagogues to

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<sup>65</sup>Julie Wiener, "Redefining the Synagogue: Temple Tries Voluntary Dues to Get Rid of Shul Sticker Shock" *Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Reporter*, Aug. 15, 2000.

<sup>66</sup>In an interview with the author, Rabbi Daniel Freeland, a professional at the URJ, estimated that 80 percent of the budget of Reform temples is covered by membership dues.

<sup>67</sup>Lani Harac, "Paying To Attend Services—A High Holiday Staple," *Baltimore Jewish Times*, Sept. 14, 2001, [www.jewishtimes.com/1666.stm](http://www.jewishtimes.com/1666.stm); Ami Eden, "Synagogues: How Much is Too Much? The Cost of Jewish Living," *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, Aug. 19, 1999, p. 6. Prof. Ron Wolfson offers a defense of congregations in Eryn Brown, "An Experience Worth the Price of Admission," *Los Angeles Jewish Journal*, Sept. 14, 2003, Web edition. For a report on 15 congregations in the San Francisco Bay area that offer free High Holy Day services see Aleza Goldsmith, "From Vallejo to Nob Hill, Free Holy Day Services Abound," *Jewish Journal of Northern California*, Sept. 9, 2001, [www.jewishsf.com/bk010907/1b.shtml](http://www.jewishsf.com/bk010907/1b.shtml).

<sup>68</sup>Salkin, "Jews We Don't See," p. 5.



offer discounts of varying degrees, and even free membership, to young adults, singles, widows, widowers, divorced people, and families headed by a single person. Quite a few congregations have stratified fee structures pegged to the separate needs of over a dozen different subpopulations.<sup>69</sup>

Such variations in dues structures have important implications for the marketing of congregations. One of the factors driving experiments in pricing is the heightened competition between the many congregations, as each seeks to create a “market niche” for itself and to develop “name recognition” in an age when quite a few potential synagogue members “shop around” before joining, just as consumers of other services do.<sup>70</sup>

The Reform movement has devoted the most sustained attention to the fee structure of its congregations. In the late 1980s, over 300 Reform congregations signed on to a “privilege card” program that reduced or eliminated fees for Jews under the age of 30.<sup>71</sup> Others offer a first year of free membership as an inducement—in marketing parlance, a “trial membership.” For more established members, a fair number of Reform temples offer a system of dues geared to the ability to pay, the money “collected according to an honor system” so that no one at the temple checks tax forms to ensure that people are honestly reporting their incomes. Some congregations report considerable success in bringing in new members at discount prices who eventually go on to pay full freight when asked, or even before being asked. To be sure, some cheat, like the family that bought a home for \$5 million while it was underpaying its synagogue dues.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>To illustrate the lengths to which synagogues go to accommodate younger Jews, we cite the example of Temple Chai in Phoenix, which introduced a new rate structure in 2000: singles under age 25 were asked to pay \$20, and those between 26 and 30, \$120, with the amount rising by another \$120 each successive year. Young couples had to pay double these sums. “Temple Offers Reduced Rates to Young Adults,” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*, [www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/970822/rates.shtml](http://www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/970822/rates.shtml).

<sup>70</sup>The commodification of houses of worship is discussed in Donna Gehrke-White, “Selling God—Churches Lure Flock with Madison Avenue Flair,” *Miami Herald*, July 22, 2001, p. 1A. A good survey of ad campaigns run by congregations is provided in Walter Ruby, “Get It While It’s Hot,” *Manhattan Jewish Sentinel*, Oct. 31–Nov. 6, 1997, pp. 8 ff.

<sup>71</sup>Salkin, “Jews We Don’t See,” p. 6.

<sup>72</sup>Julie Wiener, “Redefining the Synagogue: Reform Movement Most Aggressive in Synagogue Transformation Efforts,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Aug. 15, 2000, p. 1. See also Mark Jacobson, “How to Make Temple Fees Fair,” *Reform Judaism* 22, Spring 1994, p. 53.

One Jewish community whose congregational fees have been systematically studied is Philadelphia. A survey of synagogues there found that Orthodox and Conservative synagogues dealt with the challenge of financing their operations somewhat differently than Reform. The Reform temples followed the system described above, relying on members to assess themselves based on a scale provided by the congregation. In addition, some charged a special fee for those who wanted to purchase High Holy Day seats without joining, while others insisted on additional payment for “those who do *not* come on the High Holidays.” Six out of the seven Reform congregations also required members to contribute toward a building fund. The Orthodox synagogues, in contrast, charged a fixed annual amount, between \$300 and \$650, with no extra fees. Two reasons were offered for this policy: first, the congregations, relatively small and employing few professionals, needed less money,<sup>73</sup> and second, allowance was made for the large tuition costs being shouldered by member families, virtually all of which were sending children to Jewish day schools. Conservative synagogues (and the Reconstructionist ones as well) employed a stratified dues structure based on family and life-cycle status, with single members under 35 charged less, and families with children in the pre-bar/bat mitzvah years charged more. Another factor in calculating fees in the Conservative synagogues was the location of one’s reserved seats.<sup>74</sup>

But contrary to the claim that “sticker shock” is at the root of the contemporary synagogue’s problems, sheer cost is hardly the only factor. It is not so much that dues are high, but rather, as the late sociologist Egon Mayer put it, “The full sentence is: ‘for an institution I’m not using, that’s a lot of money to pay.’”<sup>75</sup> Many Jews have gotten used to viewing synagogue membership as a form of insurance, bought just in case they will actually need the services of the congregation for a life-cycle event. As such, it is ex-

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<sup>73</sup>Quite a few Orthodox pulpit rabbis supplement their income by working outside the congregation, a practice far less common in the other denominations. In Chicago, for example, every single Orthodox rabbi with a pulpit also has other employment. Interview with Rabbi Harvey Well, Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago, Feb. 3, 2005.

<sup>74</sup>Rela Geffen Monson and Ruth Pinkenson Feldman, “The Cost of Living Jewishly in Philadelphia,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 68, Winter 1991–92, pp. 148–59. The dollar figures reflect fees levied during the late 1980s.

<sup>75</sup>Quoted by Salkin, “Jews We Don’t See,” p. 39.

tremely expensive, and under this calculus it is hardly surprising that fewer Jews join.<sup>76</sup>

When synagogue affiliation was at its peak, in the postwar years, an estimated 60 percent of American Jews belonged to a synagogue at any one point in time.<sup>77</sup> This was, we recall, the period that Jews newly arrived in the suburbs needed the social outlet the synagogue provided. Furthermore, the large baby-boomer generation was approaching bar/bat mitzvah age, and parents needed the services of the congregational supplementary schools. By 2000, however, membership rates had dropped to 46 percent of households. This was largely because Jewish adults now had many social opportunities outside the synagogue, and there were far fewer families with small children. With little perceived need for what the synagogue provided, there was widespread reluctance to spend money on a membership that was rarely used.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, despite the fall in levels of affiliation, there is no evidence that attendance by members has dropped. Indeed — if the self-reporting of synagogue members is to be believed — Jews who join synagogues today are attending with greater frequency than before.

According to the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1971, 18 percent of Jews claimed to attend services at least once a month.<sup>79</sup> Surveys conducted in Boston and New York in the mid-1960s concluded that 17 percent and 20 percent of Jews, respectively, could be counted as “frequent” synagogue attenders, defined in the Boston study as “more than once a month” and in the New York study as “once a month or more.”<sup>80</sup> The 2000–01 NJPS,

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<sup>76</sup>Sociologists Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, speaking about Jews, found that “this kind of calculating, consumerist approach to involvement . . . is particularly evident in some of the younger families, Xers and young boomers.” Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations* (San Francisco, 2002), p. 158.

<sup>77</sup>During the late 1950s, almost two-thirds of “Lakeville’s” Jews claimed to be synagogue members (Sklare and Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, p. 97). Surveys, of course, take a snapshot in time when they ask about current membership; the majority of American Jews do affiliate with a synagogue, at some point in their lives.

<sup>78</sup>In the mid-century years, as noted above, a staggeringly high 87 percent of “Lakeville’s” Jews affiliated with a synagogue in the years immediately before a child in the family was reaching bar/bat mitzvah age. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>79</sup>Ira Sheskin, *How Jewish Communities Differ: Variations in the Findings of Local Jewish Population Studies* (New York, 2001), p. 89.

<sup>80</sup>Marshall Sklare, *America’s Jews* (New York, 1971), pp. 118–22. Sklare and Greenblum, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, p. 60, concluded that only 13 percent of Jews in “Lakeville” attended twice a month.

by contrast, indicates that 27 percent of Jews say they attend at least once a month.<sup>81</sup> A separate recent survey of the New York area had 29 percent of respondents claiming to attend at least monthly.<sup>82</sup>

If anything, then, congregations appear to be more successful today at attracting their members to participate in religious services with some frequency. But they are less successful than synagogues during the halcyon years in the mid-twentieth century at recruiting new families to join and at ensuring that affiliated families maintain their membership.<sup>83</sup>

### *Making Changes*

Seeking to heighten their appeal to unaffiliated Jews—and also to attract more of their current members to prayer services—congregations of all stripes have worked hard over the last two decades to improve their programs, and especially to rethink aspects of their religious worship. Every movement within American Judaism has issued newly revised prayer books, Bible commentaries, and, most recently, a plethora of weekly *divrei Torah*, pages discussing the portion of the Pentateuch read in congregations that week, distributed free of charge over the Internet and also available in hard copy at synagogues. Congregations in all of the movements have been reconfiguring the roles of rabbi and cantor, and have experimented with music and dance as central features of the worship service. There is increased emphasis on individual petitionary prayer—for healing, for comfort, to celebrate personal milestones. Congregations set aside more time during regular services for such prayer, and may also conduct specially designated services just for such petitions. The cumulative effect of these changes has broken down much of the formality of the mid-century synagogue, making what goes on more participatory and personalized.

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<sup>81</sup>*National Jewish Population Survey 2000–01*, p. 7.

<sup>82</sup>Jacob Ukeles and Ron Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002* (New York, 2004), p. 125. While the increase of the Orthodox group is certainly a major factor in New York, the more punctilious religious practice of the preexisting Orthodox element and the disappearance of the old “nonobservant Orthodox” category also contribute to the increase in the overall frequency of synagogue attendance.

<sup>83</sup>According to the *Los Angeles Times* poll mentioned above (note 64), some 23 percent of respondents nationally claimed they had dropped their synagogue membership.

## REFORM

The transformation has been most dramatically evident in Reform temples. The formal, clergy-dominated religious services they used to provide are now largely a thing of the past, replaced by a far more participatory style of worship. Some of the more ambitious congregations have accomplished this by encouraging every member to “re-imagine” the congregation “literally from the ground up.” At Oheb Shalom in Baltimore, for example, a reporter noted that “literally everything is changing”—the use of space, governance structure, dues policies, delivery of services to youth and families, not to mention the style and content of the worship services.<sup>84</sup>

The push for change usually comes on the congregational level, from members or synagogue professionals. The long-time spiritual leader of Oheb Shalom, Rabbi Donald Berlin, launched “Project Joseph”—what he called “a visionary exercise”—in response to complaints from younger members that the “congregation of my parents and my grandparents . . . doesn’t speak to me.”<sup>85</sup> At Temple Israel in Miami, congregational decline was the motivating factor: the rabbi and cantor felt they had to develop a new approach to worship because membership had dropped so precipitously that there was little to lose in taking a gamble.<sup>86</sup> At Temple Israel in Boston, a new style of worship evolved after its recently hired rabbi, Bernard Mehlman, discovered that his new congregation offered no Friday evening service during the summer; the experimental service he initiated, held in the synagogue atrium, proved immensely popular.<sup>87</sup> Congregation Shir Tikva in Troy, Michigan, started without a rabbi, and the members created a lay-led service. Later, when they got around to hiring a full-time rabbi, he was careful not to do “anything to lessen lay involvement in worship.”<sup>88</sup> In the last quarter of the twentieth century it became common for Reform temples to

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<sup>84</sup>Adam Stone, “Redefining Oheb,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, May 11, 2001, [www.jewishtimes.com/1444.stm](http://www.jewishtimes.com/1444.stm).

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup>Interview with Rabbi Mitchell Chefitz, cantorial soloist Karina Zilberman, congregational president Jane Kahn Jacobs, and Robert Glazier, an officer, at Temple Israel, Miami, March 4, 2005.

<sup>87</sup>Summit, *The Lord’s Song in a Strange Land*, pp. 54–58.

<sup>88</sup>Janet R. Marder, “Worship that Works,” *Reform Judaism* 25, Spring 1997, pp. 18–19.

compile their own prayer books to fit congregational needs, using the new technology of desktop publishing to usher in an “era of . . . customizing and greater localism.”<sup>89</sup>

Given the longstanding tradition of congregationalism in American religion, it is hardly surprising that Reform worship has remade itself through the initiatives of individual synagogues. Somewhat more surprising is the extent to which the movement’s national leadership—the UAHC and then the URJ—has pushed for such changes, so that the pressure for innovation came not only from the bottom up, but also from the top down. The process began under the UAHC presidency of Rabbi Alexander Schindler in the 1980s, when the issue was pressing congregations to hire cantors who would introduce congregational singing. The current president of the URJ, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, escalated the rhetoric to urge nothing less than “a new Reform revolution” in worship.<sup>90</sup> He has prodded congregations to innovate, and chastised those that let themselves get mired in turf battles:

We Reform Jews are, on the whole, quite conservative in our worship patterns. We say we want prayer that is authentically Reform, but this usually means “what I remember from *my* temple when I was growing up.” And no two of us ever seem to remember the same thing. Generational differences are particularly pronounced. Our congregations, therefore, often confront a multiplicity of conflicting worship demands. Older members threaten to vote with their check-books if worship is changed, while younger members threaten to vote with their feet if it is not.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, the URJ uses its biennial conventions to model a variety of different styles of worship service, in the hope that participants will take those ideas back to their home congregations.<sup>92</sup>

One innovation that has caught on among many congregations is the reconfiguration of the synagogue building to create a more intimate ambience. The changes were already beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, when newly constructed temples were “built with

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<sup>89</sup>Peter S. Knobel, “The Challenge of a Single Prayer Book for the Reform Movement,” in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives in Reform Judaism* (Lanham, Md., 2002), especially pp. 185–89.

<sup>90</sup>Quoted in Debra Nussbaum, “This Year, No Christmas Wreaths; UAHC Biennial a Time for Quiet Reflection,” *Intermountain Jewish News*, Dec. 24, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>91</sup>Eric H. Yoffie, “The Worship Revolution,” pp. 24–25.

<sup>92</sup>For a good overview of the changes see Dana Evan Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction*, (New Brunswick, N.J., 2003), pp. 79 ff.

[weekly] Shabbat worship in mind” rather than, as was the case before, with an eye only to the two High Holy Days. The new setup often allowed rabbis to sit or stand in the center of a circle rather than occupy a platform situated away from, and on a higher plane than, the rest of the congregation.<sup>93</sup> Daniel Frelander describes the new type of Reform temple:

To encourage congregational participation and make the worship leaders more accessible, the bimah is built low and open, and seats are often arranged in a “U” or semicircle so worshipers can see one another. Sound systems are rarely necessary, as discussions and Torah dialogues have often replaced formal sermons. Organs and choir spaces rarely exist; members prefer a cappella singing or the use of electronic keyboards or guitar as accompaniment.<sup>94</sup>

Also, some already existing congregations rebuilt their spaces to achieve the new feeling. An observer of congregational trends reported that it had become impossible to keep count of the number of congregations “that are lowering their bimah or removing their fixed seats so that people can sit in a semicircle and see one another, rather than sitting in long, straight rows.” One temple replaced its sanctuary, which had once seated 2,000 members, with two large rooms that would work well on ordinary Sabbaths. But this required a major rethinking of High Holy Day services, since neither room seated more than 800 after the renovation.<sup>95</sup>

Even a number of congregations that did not undertake new construction have moved their smaller services into rooms that allow for informal seating arrangements. Thus has emerged another innovation: providing a variety of types of religious services within one congregation—in the words of one such temple, affording “multiple worship opportunities.” This reflects a desire to cater to the different tastes and needs of individual members.<sup>96</sup> As we shall see, Reform temples are not unique in this regard.

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<sup>93</sup>Diane Winston, “Searching for Spirituality: Reform Judaism Responds” *Moment* 17, June 1992, p. 34.

<sup>94</sup>Daniel Hillel Frelander, “Why Temples Look The Way They Do,” *Reform Judaism* 23, Fall 1994, pp. 35–37. Frelander also notes the “economic pragmatism” driving these changes: “Congregations could not afford to heat or air-condition massive social halls used only four or five times a year, or classrooms used once or twice a week. Sanctuaries with high ceilings were seen as an energy nightmare” (p. 37).

<sup>95</sup>Stone, “Redefining Oheb.”

<sup>96</sup>For a run-down of the seven services sponsored by Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco, see Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, pp. 92–93.

The “alternative” Shabbat morning session, separate from the main service (which tends to be dominated by bar/bat mitzvah celebrations), is often arranged so as to maximize face-to-face interaction, such as meeting in the round. “It’s very important that we’re able to face one another,” said one participant in such a service in San Diego. “It means that the minyan is not a theater. You can see people’s eyes rather than the backs of their heads. Dressing casually helps people feel at home. And most important is the sense of participation.”<sup>97</sup>

Indeed, personalization of the service, a major departure from the high degree of anonymity that characterized the Reform temple of old, is a hallmark of much of the movement today. Here is a description of a typical Friday evening service at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Massachusetts:

Before the congregation rises to recite the kaddish together, those who are observing a *yahrtzeit* [anniversary of a relative’s death] or are mourning a recent death are invited to stand as the name of the deceased is read. “It’s important for people to stand as individuals,” explains one rabbi. “How else will congregants know who is hurting that evening, so they can reach out and offer support? This is particularly important for women, whose names have been changed through marriage; without asking them to stand, we’d have no way of knowing they are mourning.”<sup>98</sup>

Other occasions for providing a public forum to recognize the individual include the Torah reading, when members are called up to celebrate joyous personal and family occasions, and the old but newly popular prayer for the sick, *mi sheberach l’cholim*, when members may publicly name people close to them who are ill.

A new emphasis on study and discussion has added to the participatory atmosphere. Rather than rely upon the rabbi to deliver formal sermons, congregants today are more apt to engage in discussions with one another, with the rabbi playing the role of facilitator. Not only does such a system enable members to express their views, but, in the process, rabbis are relinquishing control over who may speak publicly and over what may be said. A particularly successful example of this was a program launched at the Jewish Community Center of White Plains, New York. Over the course

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<sup>97</sup>Marder, “Worship that Works,” p. 14.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.



of nine years, 120 regulars have met for a weekly service they call “Shabbat Morning Lift,” centering on a line-by-line discussion of the Torah text. “Everyone offers a different perspective, and all questions are encouraged—even irreverent and challenging ones,” comments Rabbi Shira Milgrom. “Each participant is both giver and receiver, including me.”<sup>99</sup> This is an approach to synagogue life that few Reform rabbis of an earlier generation would have contemplated.

The modernization of synagogue music has become so central to contemporary Reform that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the URJ president, has identified it as “the single most important key to the success or failure of our revolution.”<sup>100</sup> In the pages of the *American Jewish Year Book*, Mark Kligman has provided a detailed discussion of how the traditional cantorial repertoire has been replaced by popular music imported from Reform summer camps and composed by homegrown musicians such as Debbie Friedman and Jeff Klepper.<sup>101</sup> Congregations are also experimenting with various combinations of musical instruments to accompany the services, and with changing the rhythm and style of performance. There might be the folk-music sound, jazz improvisations, 18-piece orchestras, klezmer music, African-American gospel, or Jamaican reggae.<sup>102</sup> Thus there is great variation from one congregation to another, and even from one Friday night to the next in the same temple. Fidelity to a fixed liturgy is the farthest thing from anyone’s mind. Rather, the common denominator in today’s Reform temple is engaging people in active, full-throated singing, often accompanied by clapping, foot-stomping, or dancing, a far cry from the reserved Reform worship of the past.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>100</sup>Yoffie, “The Worship Revolution,” p. 26.

<sup>101</sup>Mark Kligman, “Contemporary Jewish Music in America,” *American Jewish Year Book 2001* (New York, 2001), pp. 115–25.

<sup>102</sup>The range of musical styles to be found in Reform temples is nicely captured in Beth Gilbert, “Worshiping With Joy,” *Reform Judaism* 31, Winter 2002, pp. 50–54. Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, p. 60, describes the “Rock ‘n Roll Rabbi” who plays Jewish songs set to the melodies of Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and the Beach Boys.

<sup>103</sup>For a good overview of Reform services in the early 1980s that suggests the gradual evolution of new musical tastes, see Ronald N. Ashkenas and Todd D. Jick, *Coping With Change: The Reform Synagogue and Trends in Worship*, published in 1984 by the Joint Commission on Worship: American Conference of Cantors, Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Union of American Hebrew Congregations, especially pp. 10–11. On the debate over the desirability of these shifts in musical tastes, see David Mermelstein, “Is Popular Culture Defining Synagogue Music?” *Reform Judaism* 24, Spring 1996, pp. 42–49.

The Reform cantor is no longer a classically trained singer. Baltimore's Oheb Shalom, for example, replaced its long-time cantor—whose expertise was in formal renditions of the classical *nusach* either solo or accompanied by a choir—with a successor who defined herself as “a song-leading cantor” who offered “approachable music.” In line with this populist approach, the somber tones of the organ have been replaced by guitar strumming, keyboard music, and the sounds of a flute. Thus was effected a “change from aria to folk music, [which] mirrors a transition in the cantor’s role from ambassador to God, chanting on behalf of the flock, to a leader who helps members pray directly to God.”<sup>104</sup>

The turn to participatory singing is just one example of how Reform temples are going back to once rejected forms. The most recent survey of congregational practices conducted by the URJ documented the growing receptivity to traditional usages. Over 90 percent of responding congregations placed *kippot* (skullcaps) in a visible and accessible place for congregants wishing to don them, and 65 percent did the same for *talitot* (prayer shawls); 78 percent of rabbis and cantors claimed to wear both these ritual garments by choice. Greater traditionalism is also evident in the recitation of *slichot* (penitential) services in the period before the High Holy Days by 85 percent of congregations, the celebration of two days of Rosh Hashanah by 44 percent, and the sponsorship of *tashlich* (symbolic casting of sins into the water on Rosh Hashanah) by 69 percent.<sup>105</sup>

Since only 38 percent of Reform congregations responded to the survey questionnaire, the URJ did not publish it, and the results should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the findings are in line with an earlier survey, conducted in 1994, that had a response rate of over 50 percent.<sup>106</sup> The 1994 data showed 51 percent of temples conducting services on the second and last days of Passover and Sukkot, which had not been celebrated by earlier generations of Reform Jews, 66 percent reciting the *yizkor* memorial service on the last days of festivals, and a marked increase in the incorporation of at least a modicum of Hebrew into the services. In addi-

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<sup>104</sup>Kimberly A.C. Wilson, “Congregation Sings a New Song,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 29, 2003, Internet edition.

<sup>105</sup>Union for Reform Judaism, “Worship Survey 2000 Summary,” unpublished report. I am grateful to Rabbi Daniel Frelander for sharing this with me.

<sup>106</sup>Daniel Frelander, Robin Hirsh, and Sanford Seltzer, *Emerging Worship and Music Trends in UAHC Congregations* (New York, 1994).

tion, as a sign of the decline in formalism, growing percentages of congregations reported that they turned to face the back of the sanctuary to welcome the Sabbath during the singing of *Lecha Dodi* on Friday evenings, carried the Torah scrolls around the sanctuary before and after they were read, and called mourners to rise in place to recite the kaddish. These seemingly small gestures represented, in fact, a sharp break from the choreography of the Classical Reform temple, and, in many cases, were introduced only after serious and sometimes heated congregational debate.

“Inclusiveness” is a relatively new priority of which Reform congregations are exceptionally proud. Reform has been at the forefront of efforts to equalize the status of women and men in the synagogue. By 1975, virtually every American Reform temple counted women as members of the minyan (ten-person prayer quorum) and involved them in the Torah service. Hebrew Union College, which trains Reform synagogue professionals, has been ordaining women as rabbis since 1972 and as cantors since 1973.<sup>107</sup> Another target of Reform outreach has been the gay and lesbian community. Reform performs commitment ceremonies for them in the synagogue, calls such couples up to the Torah together, and ordains openly homosexual rabbis and cantors.<sup>108</sup> Reform temples have also aggressively courted intermarried families, so much so that the NJPS 2000–01 found that some 20 percent of members either were at the time, or had previously been, intermarried.<sup>109</sup> Efforts to address the needs and interests of these different populations have clearly affected the contemporary Reform temple, placing new strains on the clergy to address what one cantor called “the

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<sup>107</sup>Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana, 1989), p. 120.

<sup>108</sup>Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, chap. 10, “The Acceptance of Gays and Lesbians.” The URJ has prepared a handbook to help congregations welcome them, *Kulanu (All Of Us): A Program for Congregations Implementing Gay and Lesbian Inclusion* (New York, 1996).

<sup>109</sup>Kaplan, *American Reform Judaism*, chap. 8, “The Outreach Campaign.” For the percentage of intermarried Jews in Reform temples see Bruce Phillips, “American Judaism in the Twenty-First Century,” in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (New York, 2005), p. 411. On the challenges that this population poses to temples, see Michael A. Meyer, “The Place and Identity of the Non-Jew in the Reform Synagogue” [Hebrew], *Gesher* 146, Winter 2002, pp. 66–74; and Fran Chertok, Mark Rosen, Amy Sales, and Len Saxe, “Outreach Families in the Sacred Common: Congregational Responses to Interfaith Issues, Summary Report,” Cohen Center, Brandeis University, and UAHCCAR Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach, Nov. 2001.

competing interests.” She went on: “It means that I have to try to appeal to many constituencies. I have to offer a smorgasbord so people are comfortable.” One frequent result, given the menu of different kinds of worship services available in the synagogue, “is that families often go to just the monthly service that appeals to them.”<sup>110</sup>

Nothing dramatizes the unresolved tensions generated by the transformation of Reform Judaism more than the long-delayed publication of a new Reform prayer book. The Reform movement replaced its standard *Union Prayer Book* in 1975 with *Gates of Prayer*, and then issued a second version of the latter that provided gender-neutral translations of the prayers. But *Gates of Prayer* has attracted criticism within the movement for the confusing inclusion of numerous alternative prayer services (ten different ones for the Friday evening service alone), the absence of transliteration of Hebrew for those who do not read that language, retention of masculine language in describing God, reliance upon prayers recited in unison rather than sung together, and the mere smattering of excerpts from the traditional liturgy.<sup>111</sup> The availability of *Gates of Prayer* did not bring greater liturgical coherence to Reform, and the popular trend of individual congregations devising their own prayer books continued.

After conducting a study to ascertain “what was working or not working,” the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) resolved in 1998 to publish a new prayer book “to maintain a sense of movement identity.” Since then, various draft versions of *Mishkan T’fila*, the projected new prayer book, have been tried out in over 300 congregations. Now scheduled for publication in 2006, *Mishkan T’fila*, with prayers for weekdays, the Sabbath, and holidays, will strive to encompass varying points of view within the movement while also creating commonalities between Reform congregations—no easy task. It will appear in two versions: a single volume without transliterations, and a two-volume set with

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<sup>110</sup>Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Reform Jews Pursue Quest to Find New Religious Balance,” Jewish Telegraphic Agency Daily News Bulletin, Dec. 21, 1999.

<sup>111</sup>“*Gates of Prayer*: Ten Years Later—A Symposium,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 32, Fall 1985, pp. 13–38; and Elyse D. Frishman, untitled forthcoming article to be published in the *Journal of Reform Judaism*. Rabbi Frishman, who chaired the publication committee for the new *Mishkan T’fila* prayer book, not only graciously shared an advance draft of this article with me, but also consented to an interview that provided much useful information about prayer book revision in the Reform movement.

transliterations of all Hebrew texts. Both will feature pages facing the Hebrew liturgy that will provide reflections on key themes “of Reform Judaism and Life: social justice, feminism, Zionism, distinctiveness, human challenges.” *Mishkan T’fila* will include a variety of theological positions, with God portrayed variously as “transcendent . . . naturalist . . . mysterious, [a] partner . . . [an] evolving God.”<sup>112</sup>

The protracted debates over the new prayer book suggest that the process of remaking worship in the Reform temple has not been accomplished without serious internal tensions. For one thing, Classical Reform still has its supporters. Despite the manifest enthusiasm in many quarters for revolutionizing the synagogue, there remain champions of the more formal and decorous worship service who feel alienated by current trends, which they see as too insularly Jewish. As two long-time members of a prominent temple in Los Angeles put it in a letter of complaint to their rabbi, for the past seven generations their families had worshiped at Reform temples that had urged them “to participate in community affairs and to fully appreciate all that America offered. Today it seems all they want us to do is learn Hebrew so we can understand the service and music.”<sup>113</sup> Another point of friction can be found in lay/rabbinic relations. The more the CCAR/URJ, the lay arm of the movement, has pressed for changes in worship, the more rabbis have found themselves under the threat of displacement by lay leaders, who want to participate and make decisions in all spheres, including the religious.

Truth to tell, the efforts to break down the stiff formalism of Reform worship services have proved only partially successful. Many temples still have not freed their prayer services of the need to recite or sing everything in unison. And for all their success in increasing attendance levels at various types of services, the temples still attract no more than 10–25 percent of their members to worship on a regular basis.<sup>114</sup> Still, no one can gainsay the fact

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<sup>112</sup>On this background, see Knobel, “The Challenge of a Single Prayer Book,” pp. 185–89.

<sup>113</sup>Letter dated Oct. 11, 2004, sent also to the top leadership of the Reform movement. Names withheld.

<sup>114</sup>This discussion of tensions and unresolved issues is distilled from my interviews with Reform rabbis, as is the estimate of regular attendees. See also the observation of Lawrence A. Hoffman, who claims that the likelihood of average Reform temple members attending a Sabbath morning service with a sharp focus on a bar or bat mitzvah if they do not know

that a scant five years after hearing a call for a “revolution” in the synagogue, Reform Judaism has taken enormous strides in a new direction.

#### CONSERVATIVE

Conservative synagogues also transformed themselves in the closing decades of the twentieth century.<sup>115</sup> Like their Reform counterparts, they have sought to encourage greater participation by all members, a less formal style of worship, and an ambience that takes diversity of needs into account. But they have done so in their own fashion, developing a particular “Conservative” style. Indeed, there is probably greater uniformity of Sabbath worship, particularly on Saturday mornings, in Conservative synagogues than in the other synagogue movements.

While someone entering a Reform temple during services will likely find the congregation using a self-published prayer book composed by congregants and the professional staff, “no matter whether one attends a Conservative synagogue in Seattle or Miami, Boston or San Diego,” one peripatetic observer noted, “the Sabbath morning service is virtually identical.”<sup>116</sup> This uniformity is due to the adoption of a common prayer book and *Chumash* (Pentateuch) within the movement. In the mid-1990s, approximately half of the Conservative synagogues employed the *Sim Shalom* prayer book, and 94 percent the so-called Hertz *Chumash*, a commentary written by Joseph Hertz, a former chief rabbi of Great Britain who was the first rabbi ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary, and whose orientation to biblical scholarship was

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the celebrating family “is only slightly higher than the probability that they will be found at a randomly selected funeral where they know neither the mourner nor the deceased.” Quoted in Marc Lee Raphael, *Judaism in America* (New York, 2003), p. 105.

<sup>115</sup>Journalists and scholars have lavished a good deal of attention on Conservative synagogues in the closing decade of the twentieth century. Among the former are Paul Wilkes, *And They Shall Be My People: An American Rabbi and His Congregation* (New York, 1994); and Stephen Fried, *The New Rabbi: A Congregation Searches for its Leader* (New York, 2002). An academic research project I directed on Conservative synagogues produced a series of five pamphlets and an edited volume, Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and Their Members* (New Brunswick, 2000). See also Martin Laskin, *An Ethnographic Study of an American Conservative Synagogue* (Lewiston, N.Y., 2002).

<sup>116</sup>Raphael, *Judaism in America*, p. 98. In preparing this book, Raphael visited over 100 congregations of all denominations.

Orthodox.<sup>117</sup> Since then, the Conservative movement has issued a revised version of *Sim Shalom* (1998)—the two most important additions, both optional, were a reference to the biblical matriarchs along with the patriarchs at the opening of the *amidah*, and the long abandoned priestly benediction—and a new *Chumash* commentary, *Etz Hayim* (2001).<sup>118</sup> By 2005, some 669 out of the 750 Conservative congregations (belonging to the United Synagogue) in North America had adopted *Etz Hayim*, and the vast majority of Conservative congregations were using one or another version of *Sim Shalom*.<sup>119</sup>

The liturgical music employed in Conservative congregations is also fairly uniform. The Conservative movement has not produced innovative liturgical composers and performers comparable to Debbie Friedman (Reform) or Shlomo Carlebach (Orthodox),<sup>120</sup> though some rabbis report that the latter's tunes have recently become popular at Friday evening services.<sup>121</sup> Insofar as any American congregations still adhere to the traditional tunes and include nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century compositions, Conservative synagogues are most likely to do so. Conservative services have also been influenced by Israeli music and even more by so-called "camp music," melodies introduced for educational

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<sup>117</sup>Wertheimer, *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members*, p. 13. The data are for the 750 out of 860 Conservative synagogues that belong to the United Synagogue.

<sup>118</sup>*Siddur Sim Shalom*, edited by Jules Harlow, was published in 1985. It was then issued in a revised format for Shabbat and Festivals in 1998 (edited by Leonard Cahan and others); and for weekday services (edited by Avraham Reisner). Both the latter strove for "gender sensitive language." *Or Hadash*, a commentary on *Sim Shalom* by Reuven Hammer, was issued in 2003. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* was published in 2001. *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: A Prayer Book for the Days of Awe*, edited by Jules Harlow, appeared in 1972. All were copublished by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. On the various publications, see Ami Eden, "Conservatives Taking a Page From Orthodox Prayer Book," *Forward*, Mar. 28, 2003, Internet edition.

<sup>119</sup>Communication from Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly, May 3, 2005. Over 200,000 copies of the *Etz Hayim* Torah commentary were sold in the four years after its initial publication.

<sup>120</sup>Max Wohlberg, cantor and professor at the Cantorial Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, fulfilled such a role in the last generation. His liturgical music was widely adopted in Conservative synagogues, even though few worshipers could identify the composer. Charles S. Davidson, *From Szatmar to the New World: Max Wohlberg, American Cantor* (New York, 2001).

<sup>121</sup>Through an Internet search, I learned of the proliferation of such Friday evening services. Rabbis Paul Plotkin of Margate, Florida, and Aaron Brusso of Minneapolis shared their experiences with me via e-mail. Both indicated that such services had increased attendance on Friday evenings.

purposes at the Ramah summer camps, run by the Jewish Theological Seminary. While camp alumni have brought this music into the synagogue, many Conservative congregants are ignorant of its origins.<sup>122</sup>

In contrast to Reform temples, which are still heavily oriented to the Friday evening service as the primary worship experience of the week, Conservative synagogues now attract their largest numbers of worshipers on Sabbath and festival mornings. The impetus for this shift came, among other factors, from younger families with children that found attendance on Friday evenings burdensome, and rabbis eager to free up their own Friday evenings for a leisurely dinner with their families. In 1990, the Conservative rabbinate responded to this groundswell: the Rabbinical Assembly passed a resolution encouraging congregations to move toward a reemphasis on Shabbat morning prayer.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, a survey of congregational practices conducted in the mid-1990s found that nearly half of Conservative congregations offered a Friday evening service at the traditional time of sundown, which varies with the seasons of the year, as an alternative to the late service. Smaller congregations and those with many older members still favored the late service, while large synagogues and those with younger congregants opted for the early time.<sup>124</sup>

The Sabbath morning service has not only replaced the late Friday evening service through much of the Conservative movement, but also differs from it in being less formal and more traditional. On Shabbat morning there is very little of the recitation of English prayers in unison that was characteristic of the Friday evening service. As noted by Rabbi Robert Fierstien, “with the exception of the abbreviation of the Torah reading to the triennial cycle, popularized by the 1980s, the Shabbat morning service remained essentially traditional in length and in its focus on Hebrew. The re-

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<sup>122</sup>This phenomenon has been analyzed—and excoriated—in Boaz Tarsi, “Voices in the Sanctuary: Musical Practices of the American Synagogue,” *Conservative Judaism* 35, Fall 2002, pp. 61–73; and Pinchas Spiro, “Ramah—A Blessing and a Curse,” *Journal of Synagogue Music*, 25, 1995, pp. 5–8.

<sup>123</sup>Robert E. Fierstien, *A Century of Commitment: One Hundred Years of the Rabbinical Assembly* (New York, 2000), p. 125.

<sup>124</sup>Quantitative data are available in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members: Highlights of the North American Survey of 1995–96* (New York, 1996), p. 43.



focus on Shabbat morning meant that, for the typical synagogue-going Conservative Jew, prayer now meant a more traditional activity than had previously been the norm.”<sup>125</sup>

To be sure, the triennial cycle “exception” noted by Fierstien—completing the reading of the Torah in three years instead of one, as is done in Orthodox congregations—has the very untraditional effect of abbreviating the length of the Sabbath morning service. In every region of the country a majority of Conservative congregations employ the shortened readings, with a high of 88 percent of congregations in the West and a low of 56 percent in the Northeast.<sup>126</sup> Quite a few congregations have also adopted another means to shorten the service: eliminating the prayer leader’s complete repetition of the entire *amidah* either for the morning service or for the additional service that directly follows it.

The turn to traditional observance has also found expression in the continuing practice of celebrating the second days of the festivals, which, according to Jewish law, is required only outside of Israel. Beginning in the 1960s, there was considerable rabbinic agitation to eliminate the second day on the grounds that, with the creation of the State of Israel, Jews around the world should follow the calendar of coreligionists in the Jewish state, and also because attendance on festivals that fell out on weekdays was quite low. The Conservative rabbinate, in fact, sanctioned the option of eliminating the extra day, but most congregations continue to observe it.<sup>127</sup>

As in the case of Reform, Conservative congregations offer a wide selection of concurrent religious services on Sabbath mornings. Over two-thirds say they have a Shabbat program for toddlers and a junior congregation for older children; others also have teen services.<sup>128</sup> There are so-called learners’ services for those with minimal background, and intimate *havurah* services, in addition to the main service.<sup>129</sup> Obviously, the availability of many different types of services depends heavily on the size of the congregation.

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<sup>125</sup>Fierstien, *Century of Commitment*, p. 125.

<sup>126</sup>Wertheimer, ed., *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members*, p. 21.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>129</sup>For an account of how one Conservative congregation developed a thriving alternative service that attracts an average of 180 weekly attendees, many of whom are Jewishly knowledgeable, see Joel E. Rembaum, “A Venture in Synagogue Spiritualities,” *Sh'ma* 21, Jan. 25, 1991, pp. 45–48.

It is not at all unusual for large congregations—those with over 600 members—to sponsor three or four simultaneous prayer services every Shabbat morning, some targeted at people with particular needs or interests.<sup>130</sup>

The participation of ordinary lay members in leading parts of the service is a noteworthy feature of the Conservative synagogue. They routinely lead the morning services. Quite a few congregations encourage the laity to deliver *divrei Torah*—their thoughts on the week's Torah portion. In many congregations laypeople take turns reading the Torah, and it is not uncommon, in larger synagogues, for dozens, if not hundreds, to participate. Often, these Torah readers did not have this skill before, but were trained in synagogue programs. Anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell describes such a program at Beth El, in Minneapolis, where the cantor not only teaches this skill to congregants, but also recognizes those who have read at least seven Torah sections during the previous year with an annual Shabbat dedicated to their accomplishments. "In 1995," Prell writes, "at their Shabbat service recognition, Beth El's *bimah* was filled with young adults and men and women who had met this goal, some for as many as ten years."<sup>131</sup>

Like Reform and Reconstructionist congregations, Conservative synagogues have become overwhelmingly egalitarian: women and men partake equally in the services.<sup>132</sup> A survey conducted in the mid-1990s indicated that 83 percent of Conservative congregations in North America counted women in the minyan and allowed them to read from the Torah, 78 percent reported that women led services, and 79 percent had had a female president.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, bar mitzvah boys and bat mitzvah girls are treated the

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<sup>130</sup>For examples of how this works in several Conservative and other kinds of synagogues, see E.J. Kessler, "Rabbis Bucking for Friday Nights at the 'Synaplex': Trend Sees Practice of Holding Several Smaller Minyans Within a Synagogue," *Forward*, June 5, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>131</sup>Riv-Ellen Prell, "Communities of Choice and Memory," in Wertheimer, ed., *Jews in the Center*, p. 277.

<sup>132</sup>The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, an umbrella for some 275 men's auxiliaries in Conservative synagogues, has labored to strengthen the participation of Jewish men in religious life. One of its most noteworthy programs, "World Wide Wrap," aims to raise the number of men donning phylacteries (tefillin) during weekday prayer. See Pauline Dubkin Yearwood, "Teaching Tefillin: They Aren't Your Father's Men's Clubs Anymore," *Chicago Jewish News*, Jan. 26–Feb. 1, 2001, pp. 14–15; and Aleza Goldsmith, "S.F. Men's Club Gets All Wrapped Up in Ties that Bind," *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, Feb. 2, 2001, Internet edition.

<sup>133</sup>Wertheimer, ed., *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members*, p. 16.

same way in the large majority of congregations.<sup>134</sup> Since this survey included Canadian congregations, which tend to be less friendly to gender equality than those in the U.S., and the trend toward egalitarianism has undoubtedly accelerated in the decade since the data were gathered, it is likely that egalitarianism is all but universal today in Conservative congregations throughout the United States.

Like their counterparts in the other movements, Conservative rabbis have, both literally and figuratively, sought “to come down off the *bimah*.”<sup>135</sup> Many younger rabbis sit or stand among the congregants rather than on a pulpit above them. Except for the High Holy Days, rabbis are apt to engage in a discussion or study session with congregants about the Torah portion, and not deliver a full-blown sermon. These interactions with the laity, often interspersed between the portions of the Torah reading, generally take the form of brief observations about the text, sometimes with the opportunity for questions and reactions from the pews.

A number of Conservative synagogues have also followed the example of Reform and Reconstructionism in the use of musical instruments in the service, a practice contrary to rabbinic law and therefore generally avoided in earlier generations. Geography makes a great difference: Conservative synagogues on the West Coast are more likely to allow instrumental music during Shabbat and festival services than those in other regions.<sup>136</sup>

The success of Sinai Congregation in Los Angeles in drawing up to 2,000 singles to its monthly “Friday Night Live” is undoubtedly due to the popularity of Rabbi David Wolpe and the central location of the synagogue. But the music of Craig Taubman and his band is also a major draw. “It’s a very musically oriented service,” commented a neighboring rabbi, “which makes people very comfortable who are not normally used to going to synagogue, because the tunes are catchy.”<sup>137</sup> With Sinai Congregation providing a model for emulation, Conservative synagogues on the West Coast

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<sup>134</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>135</sup>Sarah Blustain, “A New Generation of Rabbis Is Coming Down Off the Bimah,” *Moment* 24, Dec. 1999, pp. 61–65, 76–79. As this article makes clear, the trend is common among rabbis of all denominations.

<sup>136</sup>Wertheimer, ed., *Conservative Synagogues and Their Members*, p. 21.

<sup>137</sup>Michael Aushenker, “Will Friday Nights Ever Be the Same?” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Nov. 22, 2004, Internet edition; Angela Aleiss, “Friday Night Live Draws

that do not employ instrumental music at Friday evening services are at a great disadvantage in attracting worshipers.<sup>138</sup> The technique also draws crowds on Shabbat morning: another congregation in Los Angeles now sponsors a monthly event called “One Shabbat Morning,” also featuring Taubman’s band and music, which attracts many hundreds of worshipers to its two-hour service.<sup>139</sup> In other parts of the country, where Conservative congregations remain averse to such practices on the Sabbath, some are experimenting with Friday night services that utilize musical instruments only before the Sabbath begins,<sup>140</sup> while many more have adopted the melodies composed by the late Shlomo Carlebach, in the expectation that the spirited singing and dancing can have the desired effect without the instrumental music.

The most influential Conservative congregation during the 1990s was B’nai Jeshurun of Manhattan, whose combination of instrumentation, lively singing and dancing, exclusively Hebrew prayers, and facilitated discussions has been widely discussed and admired by other Conservative synagogues.<sup>141</sup> Attending Friday evening services at “BJ,” as it is affectionately known, became an almost required pilgrimage for rabbis across the denominational spectrum, and especially for those who are Conservative. Under the leadership of the charismatic Rabbi Marshall Meyer, a community activist who had previously rebuilt Jewish institutional life in Argentina, “BJ” was transformed from a small, failing congregation—albeit one with a history dating back to the 1820s—to a powerhouse that packed in between one and two thousand wor-

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Young Jews to Their Faith,” *Religious News Service*, June 8, 2000, Internet edition. For a more extensive analysis of the phenomenon see J. Liora Gubkin, “Friday Night Live: It’s Not Your Parents’ Shabbat,” in Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds., *GenX Religion* (New York, 2000), pp. 199–210.

<sup>138</sup>The use of instrumental music by Conservative congregations in the Bay area is surveyed by Abby Cohn, “Rock Services Bring New Sprit, Controversy to Conservative Synagogues,” *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, Aug. 22, 2002, [www.jewishsf.com/bk020822/la.shtml](http://www.jewishsf.com/bk020822/la.shtml).

<sup>139</sup>Julie Gruenbaum Fax, “New Stamp on Service,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Oct. 22, 2004, Internet edition.

<sup>140</sup>Adat Shalom of Detroit, for example, sponsors Shabbat Rocks, featuring music performed by the clergy prior to the onset of the Sabbath. See Shelli Liebman Dorfman, “Shabbat Just Keeps on Rockin’,” *Detroit Jewish News*, Nov. 29, 2002, p. 57.

<sup>141</sup>Sara Moore Litt, “BJ: A Model for a Revitalized Synagogue Life. A report based on research by Dr. Ayala Fader and Dr. Mark Kligman,” Congregation B’nai Jeshurun and Synagogue, May 2002.

shippers every Friday evening, and many hundreds on Sabbath morning. Its liberal politics<sup>142</sup> also endeared it to many New Yorkers, as did the attractiveness of Meyer's successors, Rabbis J. Rolando Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein.

But the style of the service was vital to its success: keyboard music accompanied by other instruments; joyous singing and dancing in the aisles; and an air of informality modeled by rabbis and congregants alike. While most Conservative congregations have concluded that the "BJ" model cannot be adopted wholesale, aspects of its service have been widely emulated.<sup>143</sup>

#### ORTHODOX

Orthodox Jews, constituting less than 20 percent of synagogue-affiliated Jews but maintaining more synagogues (some 1,500) than any other branch of American Judaism, are the Jewish group most likely to attend synagogue weekly, with many attending daily. Orthodox synagogues are highly autonomous, with no single overarching umbrella organization. Slightly under a quarter of Orthodox synagogues are affiliated with the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (popularly known as the OU), which is the largest Orthodox congregational body. Smaller numbers of synagogues belong to the National Council of Young Israel, Agudath Israel of America, Chabad-Lubavitch, and other Hasidic groups. Over one-third (more than 500) are not affiliated with any congregational arm.<sup>144</sup> This diffusion means that systematic data are not available for Orthodox synagogues in the way they are for

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<sup>142</sup>Although it was one of the founding members of the United Synagogue, the congregation no longer identifies with the Conservative movement, preferring a postdenominational label. Part of the reason for the break was the status of gays and lesbians in Conservative Judaism: at "BJ" they are fully integrated into the community. See Walter Ruby, "Growing Pains," *Manhattan Jewish Sentinel*, Oct. 30–Nov. 5, 1998, pp. 20–21.

<sup>143</sup>For one of many examples of a Conservative congregation explicitly trying to adapt this model for its Friday evening services, see Mara Dresner, "Ruach Shabbat Services Big Draw at Emanuel Synagogue," *Connecticut Jewish Ledger*, Feb. 2, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>144</sup>Schwartz, Scheckner, and Kotler-Berkowitz, "Census of U.S. Synagogues," pp. 117–18. Nearly 100 of these are non-Ashkenazi, usually consisting of recent immigrants from Syria, Iran, Iraq, or elsewhere in the Middle East, or from Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. While tending to fly under the communal radar screen, they deserve careful study both because of the interesting ways they have adapted to America, and because their second generation will enrich many other congregations. For reports on two such congregations in the Los Angeles area, one Baghdadi and the other Farsi-speaking, see Gaby Wenig,

those of the other denominations, making it more difficult to generalize about trends within Orthodoxy.<sup>145</sup>

There are a number of reasons why Orthodox synagogues tend to be smaller than those of the other branches. For one thing, Orthodox Jews must live within walking distance of a synagogue, limiting the number of potential congregants to residents of the immediate neighborhood. They also do not use microphones on the Sabbath or holidays, and therefore need a smaller setting than the average Reform and Conservative congregation. In addition, Orthodox Jews maintain the traditional view of the synagogue as not just a place for prayer but as a manifestation of community, and therefore prefer a more intimate setting. In the last few decades, this search for intimacy has accelerated. There was much discussion, toward the end of the twentieth century, of the “shtiebelization” of Orthodoxy, as earlier, relatively large Orthodox synagogues gave way, in many neighborhoods, to small, informal prayer settings, sometimes in private homes, storefronts, schools, or rented facilities.<sup>146</sup> A major factor propelling this trend was the growing popularity of yeshiva education.

Indeed, Orthodoxy generally has been profoundly reshaped by the high percentages of its young people attending Jewish day schools at least through the high school years, and then, for many, continuing on in some form of post-high-school study. For thousands of young Modern Orthodox men and women, this means spending a year or two before college at an Israeli yeshiva.<sup>147</sup> In the

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“Kahal Joseph’s New Beginning,” and “Nessah Seeks Younger Crowd,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Aug. 27, Sept. 2, 2002, [www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=9093](http://www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=9093) and 9145.

<sup>145</sup>My discussion of Orthodox synagogues draws heavily upon interviews I conducted with Rabbis Avi Shafran of Agudath Israel of America and Mayer Waxman of the OU, May 3, 2005. Due to the paucity of research on the subject and the tendency of newspaper articles to focus on “out of the box” trends and efforts at religious liberalization that are favored by journalists, my description of Orthodox developments is inevitably impressionistic.

<sup>146</sup>*Shtiebel* is a Yiddish word meaning a small room. For a description of such a prayer group—albeit one in Canada—that tries to recreate the ambience of a yeshiva, see Simcha Fishbane, “Back to the *Yeshiva*: The Social Dynamics of an Orthodox Sabbath Morning Service,” in Jack N. Lightstone and Fredrick B. Bird, eds., *Ritual and Ethnic Identity: A Comparative Study of the Social Meaning of Liturgical Rituals in Synagogues* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1995).

<sup>147</sup>There are separate schools for men and women, and the latter, which do not call themselves yeshivas, generally do not teach Talmud, which is the primary subject of study at the men’s yeshivas. On long-term trends in Orthodox life see Haym Soloveitchik, “Rupture and

more strictly Orthodox and Hasidic worlds, where college is shunned or attended reluctantly and only part-time for the purpose of preparing for a career, young men and women are likely to spend several years mainly in yeshivas and women's seminaries, both in the U.S. and Israel.

Yeshiva attendance has not only raised the literacy of these Jews, insuring their easy participation in worship services conducted entirely in Hebrew, but has also shaped their expectations of synagogues. The yeshiva has gotten them used to praying three times a day, every day, and Orthodox synagogues, which a generation ago might have had trouble rounding up ten men for a weekday minyan, may have a hundred or more attendees for morning and afternoon/evening prayers.<sup>148</sup> Many young women, having adopted the same regimen, now attend weekday services, a phenomenon virtually unheard of in previous generations, and this sometimes requires rearrangement of the prayer room to provide a screened-off space for the female participants.

Furthermore, prayer may be intense in the typical yeshiva, but it is not prolonged, since the students' focus is on their regimen of study. This experience has now come to define the style and pace of Orthodox synagogue worship, as congregants look for a service that is speedy, yet cuts no corners. There is little patience for the formality and slow pace of Sabbath prayers found at larger Orthodox synagogues, and hence the attractiveness of the *shtiebel*. Conventional Orthodox congregations, feeling the need to compete, have created alternative Sabbath and festival services on the premises. Some meet in a smaller room than the main sanctuary to impart a sense of intimacy; others are geared to specific sub-populations with common interests, such as young families. Most popular is the so-called *hashkamah* minyan that begins at 7:30 or 8:00 on Sabbath morning, an hour or more before the regular service (*hashkamah* literally means getting up early). Dispensing with sermons and other time fillers and zipping along at a brisk pace, the *hashkamah* minyan resembles the yeshiva prayer service.

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Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition* 28, Summer 1994, pp. 64–130; Chaim I. Waxman, "The Haredization of American Orthodox Jewry," *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* 376, Feb. 15, 1998; and Samuel C. Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of Orthodox Judaism in America* (Berkeley, 2005).

<sup>148</sup>Afternoon prayers are generally followed immediately, or after a short break, by evening prayers, so that all three daily services can be recited in two visits to the synagogue.

Explaining why his congregation sponsors seven different Shabbat morning services attracting 1,300 worshipers on a regular Sabbath, and five separate services on weekday mornings, the rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere explained: "People come from different homes, different traditions. People studied in different schools. Some people like a smaller minyan. Some people like a bigger minyan. Some people like a quicker minyan," a perspective shared, as we have seen, by many rabbis of the other denominations today.<sup>149</sup> The availability of so many options within the synagogue, of course, also serves to limit the incentive to abandon the congregation in favor of a *shtiebel*.

The yeshiva experience has also influenced the roles played by synagogue professionals. Gone are the days when Orthodox synagogues conducted their Sabbath and festival services with pomp, relied upon star cantors, and featured a sermon with suitable oratorical pyrotechnics.<sup>150</sup> Today, laymen rather than professional cantors lead the prayers, generally in the style of the yeshiva world. And, given the Judaic sophistication of many of the members, pulpit rabbis can no longer get away with conventionally edifying sermons, and so they either deliver talks that are highly textually based, or offer critiques of what are perceived as pervasive problems in the community, such as the evils of gossip and the dangers of family strife.

Similarly, in their capacity as teachers, the rabbis are under great pressure to offer high-level classes (*shiurim*) several times a week, hopefully emulating the intensity of what synagogue members experienced in the yeshiva. Both the number of classes per week and the intellectual demands they make of the rabbi and his congregants are unique in the history of the American synagogue. In the more modern congregations, men and women may attend these classes together (though women rarely study Talmud), while in more strictly Orthodox communities study is segregated by sex. To augment both the variety of classes and their quality, Orthodox synagogues have harnessed new technologies such as the Internet

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<sup>149</sup>Rabbi Hershel Billet quoted in Steve Lipman, "A Place for Everyone," *New York Jewish Week*, Apr. 7, 2000, p. 16.

<sup>150</sup>For a description of such services in several Manhattan congregations during the first half of the twentieth century, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York's Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990). Actually, there are a few synagogues in Manhattan and elsewhere that still adhere to this model.



and satellite television to bring prominent teachers virtually into the congregation. Some 44 institutions, mainly synagogues, are hooked up to the Torah Conferencing Network, which beams in the presentations of leading rabbis, thanks to the miracle of dish TV.<sup>151</sup> *Daf Yomi* classes, the daily study of a page of the Talmud that has caught on throughout the Orthodox world, are facilitated through use of the telephone—“dial a *daf*”—and Internet sites. And yeshivas in the U.S. and Israel deliver analyses and study packets on the weekly Torah reading through e-mail and the World Wide Web.

The Orthodox synagogue has also benefited from a highly sophisticated publishing enterprise, Mesorah Publications/ArtScroll, which has issued many different versions of the prayer books for the daily service, Sabbath and festivals, and High Holy Days; Torah commentaries; and the complete Talmud with the original Aramaic and English translation on facing pages. These handsomely produced volumes appear in different sizes, formats, and with varying amounts of elucidation and commentary, albeit from a strictly Orthodox perspective that ignores modern critical scholarship. These publications are ubiquitous in Orthodox synagogues across the spectrum, including the most modern. The prayer book alone, for example, had sold some 800,000 copies by 2003, more than one for every Orthodox Jew in the land!<sup>152</sup>

Like their counterparts in other denominations, Orthodox synagogues have experimented with different musical styles. Hasidic *nigunim* (wordless melodies), which have made their way into all types of American congregations, have taken particular hold in Orthodox ones, which have also been at the forefront of incorporating neo-Hasidic compositions by the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Quite a few Carlebach services have sprung up. The Carlebach Shul on the West Side of Manhattan—where the rabbi often officiated when he was alive—and the so-called “Happy Clappy Minyan” at Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills are particularly renowned, but Friday night Carlebach services are featured

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<sup>151</sup>See [www.torahconferencing.net](http://www.torahconferencing.net). On the broader phenomenon, see Jonathan Rosenblum, “Technology in Torah’s Service,” *Hamodia*, Feb. 16, 2005, [www.jewishmediaresources.com/article/808](http://www.jewishmediaresources.com/article/808).

<sup>152</sup>The sales figures are reported in Ami Eden, “Conservatives Taking a Page From Orthodox Prayer Book,” *Forward*, Mar. 28, 2003, Internet edition.

at modern Orthodox synagogues across the country, indeed, all over the world.<sup>153</sup>

And also like their non-Orthodox counterparts, Orthodox communities have developed a new mode of engaging their members in petitionary prayer, especially for healing. In addition to the traditional custom of mentioning the names of sick people and praying, in the course of the Torah reading, for their recovery (a practice that most non-Orthodox congregations have adopted), many Orthodox synagogues have instituted so-called *Tehillim* clubs. These are groups of women who gather weekly in private homes to pray for the recovery of the sick through recitation of the biblical Psalms. Orthodoxy's continuing ban on calling women up to the Torah reading, when the standard prayer for the sick is recited, undoubtedly has spurred this phenomenon. With an eye to this potential market, ArtScroll published a *Women's Siddur* in 2005 that pays particular attention to prayer practices relevant to women, reproduces Psalms "in an easy-to-read font size," and includes "hard-to-find prayers" for those looking to find a marriage partner, for marking one's wedding day, for "pregnancy and childbirth," and for "raising children."<sup>154</sup>

While seeking to maintain the guidelines of Jewish law, Orthodox congregations have expanded the role of women in other ways as well. In Modern Orthodox synagogues, women have been elected to the board beginning in the 1970s, and have more recently served as presidents of congregations. The propriety of board membership was first addressed in a 1976 responsum, "Women on Synagogue Boards" by the noted authority Rabbi J. David Bleich. He left it up to pulpit rabbis to decide the issue, concluding that "given a spirit of good will and cooperation, substantive accommodation of the needs and desires of women can be achieved even within existing parameters."<sup>155</sup> Less than 20 years later, a Modern Orthodox rabbi in the Midwest reported: "our shul in Chicago is on its fourth woman president."<sup>156</sup> It has also become common-

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<sup>153</sup>For a vivid description of a Sabbath morning service in the Carlebach mode, see Gaby Wenig, "C'mon Get Happy," *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Feb. 7, 2003, pp. 35, 38. Some observers believe that the Carlebach phenomenon has already peaked in Orthodox circles.

<sup>154</sup>[www.artscroll.com](http://www.artscroll.com); and *Jewish Press* (Brooklyn, N.Y.), July 8, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>155</sup>J. David Bleich, "Women on Synagogue Boards," *Tradition* 15, Spring 1976, p. 67.

<sup>156</sup>Communication from Rabbi Asher Lopatin, May 5, 2005.

place for Orthodox synagogues to celebrate the bat mitzvah of 12-year-old girls, albeit not as part of the service. Some provide for the girl to deliver a speech to the congregation after the conclusion of services, or at a party in a room separate from the sanctuary. In the more strictly Orthodox and Hasidic sectors, the bat mitzvah is relegated to a party for family and friends, but it is surely noteworthy that a girl's Jewish coming-of-age is acknowledged at all, something that would not have happened 50 years ago.<sup>157</sup>

A very small number of Modern Orthodox synagogues have experimented with ways to involve women in leading the synagogue service. One approach is the creation of a separate women's *tefilla* (prayer) group, which is entirely led by women and omits those prayers that require a quorum of males.<sup>158</sup> Other congregations maintain one unified service with women and men sitting separately, but allow women to come forward and lead certain parts of the service. An Orthodox rabbi from Chicago described to his congregation what he witnessed at a number of such synagogues in the U.S. and Israel, where women led

*kabbalat shabbat* [welcoming the Sabbath], but not *ma'ariv* [the evening service], *p'sukei d'zimra* and *hotza'at sefer torah* [preliminary psalms and taking out the Torah], but not *shacharit* nor *musaf* [the morning service proper and the additional Sabbath or festival service]. Women read Torah, *haftara* [the prophetic reading] and get *aliyot* [are called up to the Torah] equally with men. There are some differences from minyan to minyan: the D.C. minyan . . . apparently is fully egalitarian, and, while having separate seating, does not have a *mehitzah* [separation between the sexes]. Some services wait for ten men and ten women to come before starting (Shira Chadasha in Jerusalem, and Tehilla in Chicago), while others will start with just ten men. Some try to always give to women the limited parts they

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<sup>157</sup>For a brief survey of practices in different sectors of the Bay area Orthodox community, see Rachel Sarah, "Public Bat Mitzvahs Come to Orthodoxy," *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Mar. 11, 2005, [www.jewishjournal.com/home/searchview.php?id=13770](http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/searchview.php?id=13770). On national trends, see Sylvia Barack Fishman, "Women's Transformation of Public Judaism: Religiosity, Egalitarianism, and the Symbolic Power of Changing Gender Roles," in Eli Lederhendler, ed., *Who Owns Judaism? Public Religion and Private Faith in America and Israel*, Studies in Contemporary Jewry 17 (New York, 2001), p. 141.

<sup>158</sup>About 45 groups across the country belong to the Women's Tefilla Network. For a listing see [www.edah.org/tefilla.cfm](http://www.edah.org/tefilla.cfm). These groups have sparked considerable controversy in the Modern Orthodox sector. On one particularly intense confrontation in Queens, New York, see Elicia Brown, "The Politics of Prayer," *New York Jewish Week*, Jan. 31, 1997, p. 14, and Jeff Helmreich, "Rabbinical Supervision: Did a Ruling on Women's Prayer Groups Go Too Far?" *Manhattan Jewish Sentinel*, Feb. 6, 1997, p. 3.

can do; others will just choose the person—man or woman—who they feel fits the role for that Shabbat.<sup>159</sup>

These represent a tiny number of congregations within the larger synagogue world of Orthodox Judaism, and it is still too early to tell whether they represent a vanguard or a fringe phenomenon.<sup>160</sup>

#### NICHE SYNAGOGUES

As one of the dominant synagogue trends of the late twentieth century was the creation of religious services tailored to the needs of subgroups within larger congregations, it is hardly surprising that freestanding niche synagogues have sprung up across the land aimed at particular clientele. These types of congregations still attract a relatively small minority of synagogue members, but they speak to the changing needs of American Jews and a continuing dissatisfaction with larger congregations. Their purpose is to create a setting for populations of Jews who claim to be underserved by mainstream synagogues, much as niche churches perform the same function for American Christians.<sup>161</sup> Whether or not they actually draw significant numbers of unaffiliated Jews to the synagogue—a claim they make, but which is hard to substantiate—their very existence generates competitive pressure upon mainstream congregations, and these are forced to pay greater heed to previously overlooked Jewish subpopulations.

*Orthodox Outreach:* The largest niche-congregation sector is that of the Orthodox. Within this group, Chabad has the most congregations (some 346),<sup>162</sup> followed by Aish HaTorah, and other outreach groups. Even though these synagogues are organized by entrepreneurial Orthodox rabbis and attract mainly “seekers” who

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<sup>159</sup>Rabbi Asher Lopatin of Chicago described these synagogues in an open letter to his congregation dated July 31, 2003.

<sup>160</sup>The Tehilla Minyan in Chicago bills itself as “a minyan *shiviyoni hilkhati*—a minyan committed to following a Modern Orthodox perspective of Halakhah while enabling women to participate in leading *tefilla*.” See [www.tehilla.org](http://www.tehilla.org).

<sup>161</sup>Sociologist Nancy T. Ammerman, in *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996), pp. 130–31, defines niche churches as congregations that “do not serve a specific locale. They reach beyond an immediate neighborhood to create an identity relatively independent of context. . . . The implications of a mobile, cosmopolitan culture where congregational choice is the norm make such religious sorting more and more likely.”

<sup>162</sup>Schwartz, Scheckner, and Kotler-Berkowitz, “Census of U.S. Synagogues,” p. 128.

are drawn to the Orthodox ambience, many of the rabbis, especially those representing Chabad, have no illusions that their congregants are, or will become, observant Orthodox Jews, and a good number of the major donors belong to the non-Orthodox movements.

Most outreach synagogues begin as storefronts or in modest dwellings, but some, especially those identified with Chabad, develop into major institutions. In 1994, Chabad opened a \$10-million synagogue in Bal Harbour, Florida. In Solon, outside Cleveland, some 500 “Reform and Conservative families” put up a \$3-million Chabad synagogue. In Aspen, Colorado, the local Chabad rabbi purchased a plot for \$6.3 million that will be the site of a synagogue. In Weston, Florida, a 16,000-square-foot Chabad Center was opened in early 2004.<sup>163</sup> In 2005, 20 new Chabad centers were scheduled to open on the West Coast alone, bringing the number in that region up to 180.<sup>164</sup> Chabad has been particularly active on or near campuses, attracting young Jews of many backgrounds to religious services, Shabbat meals, and Jewish study at some 67 colleges and universities across the country.<sup>165</sup> The scope and seriousness of Chabad’s foray into synagogue life is also illustrated by its publication of a new prayer book for weekdays, the Sabbath, and holidays. It reproduces “an emended text” of the standard Chabad prayer book, a full English translation, “transliterated essentials, like Kaddish and Borchu,” “instructions for sitting, standing, and other customs,” and ample English explanations and diagrams for those unfamiliar with the services.<sup>166</sup>

Chabad’s extraordinary success is due to the overriding sense of mission that animates its *shluchim* (emissaries) and the minimal de-

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<sup>163</sup>Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York, 2003), p. 34; Ellen Harris, “Building Their Congregation ‘One Family at a Time,’” *Cleveland Jewish News*, Sept. 10, 2004, [www.clevelandjewishnews.com/articles/2004/09/10/news/local/achabad0910.prt](http://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/articles/2004/09/10/news/local/achabad0910.prt); Chris Leppek, “Chabad Buys \$6.3 Million Aspen Resort,” *Intermountain Jewish News*, Sept. 12, 2003, [www.ijn.com](http://www.ijn.com); “New Jewish Community Center Opens in Florida,” Mar. 22, 2004, [www.lubavitch.com/Article.asp?Article=427&Section=50&Month=3&Year=2004](http://www.lubavitch.com/Article.asp?Article=427&Section=50&Month=3&Year=2004).

<sup>164</sup>West Coast Chabad Lubavitch, [www.chabad.com/communityoutreach03.cfm](http://www.chabad.com/communityoutreach03.cfm).

<sup>165</sup>Shlomo Shamir, “The Lubavitcher Rebbe’s Legacy Keeps Rolling Across America,” *Haaretz*, Jan. 8, 2004, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=380719](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=380719).

<sup>166</sup>Nissan Mangel, ed., *Siddur Tehillat Hashem—Nussach Ha-Ari Zal, With English Translation, Annotated Edition* (New York, 2003), advertised at <http://store.kehotonline.com/prodinfo.asp?number=EP-STH.AB>.

mands it makes on those it serves. In the words of Professor Michael Berenbaum, “Those who attend come from all backgrounds and all places—socioeconomic, religious, spiritual and psychological . . . . They are warmly welcomed and the service, however traditional, is tailored to their needs, without compromising Orthodox standards or principles. How the Jews get to the synagogue or what they do after Shabbat services is less important than their presence at services.”<sup>167</sup>

For the most part, Chabad synagogues make no pretense of being Orthodox. As one of their rabbis put it: “We don’t serve Orthodox people here . . . . We’re not looking to build an Orthodox community. We’re looking to build a strong Jewish community.”<sup>168</sup> The attraction for non-Orthodox Jews, both to Chabad and to other outreach facilities, comes from the intimate community they find, the personal attention they get, and the few demands made on them—most charge little or nothing for dues; children can celebrate their bar/bat mitzvah without fulfilling any minimum requirement of school attendance; and celebrations can be informal and inexpensive.<sup>169</sup>

While these outreach synagogues claim to address otherwise unaffiliated Jews, quite a few of their people maintain dual memberships or are dropouts from the mainstream congregations.<sup>170</sup> There is every reason to expect the continuing expansion of this sector of synagogues, particularly as Chabad, Aish HaTorah, and

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<sup>167</sup>Michael Berenbaum, “To Change But Not Be Changed,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Sept. 10, 2004, [www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=12818](http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=12818).

<sup>168</sup>Leppek, “Chabad Buys Resort.” See also the statement of a Chabad rabbi in Alpharetta, Georgia, who acknowledged that at a Chabad center “most of the people will not be Orthodox and will not be very religious.” Vivi Abrams, “Marketing Judaism in Suburbia,” *Atlanta Jewish Times*, May 17, 2002, [www.atljewishtimes.com/coverstory.htm](http://www.atljewishtimes.com/coverstory.htm).

<sup>169</sup>The low expectations are an ongoing source of friction with Conservative and Reform rabbis, who feel that Chabad is poaching on their turf and competing unfairly. See Fishkoff, *Rebbe’s Army*, pp. 123–31, and Bob Keeler, “The Lubavitchers of Long Island,” a multi-part series in *Newsday* (Long Island), especially “The Debate Over Chabad,” Oct. 25, 2000, pp. B6–B9.

<sup>170</sup>This vastly complicates the challenge of measuring the relative memberships of the different denominations. A leading Chabad spokesman in California observed that fewer than 100 Sabbath-observant Jews live in Orange County, but nearly 2,000 had attended High Holy Day services at the six Chabad centers and one Modern Orthodox synagogue. See David Eliezri, “Undercounting the Orthodox,” *Forward*, Nov. 12, 1999, p. 12. The task of counting participants in Chabad programs is also made more difficult by the movement’s tendency to inflate figures, as noted in Fishkoff, *Rebbe’s Army*, p. 204.

a growing number of yeshivas have instituted training programs to prepare young rabbis for outreach work.<sup>171</sup>

*“Progressive” Synagogues:* At the other end of the ideological spectrum are several hundred fellowships and congregations that describe themselves as liturgically and socially progressive. That is, they compose their own prayers, resist the “corporate” culture of conventional synagogue life,<sup>172</sup> pride themselves on their openness to previously marginalized groups such as gays and lesbians, the intermarried, and singles, and embrace the causes of the political left. Unlike Orthodox outreach congregations, founded by rabbis looking to recruit congregants, the progressive groups are a grass-roots phenomenon: Jews in a particular locality band together without professional assistance, often intentionally eschewing rabbinic leadership.<sup>173</sup> Some 120 of them affiliate with the National Havurah Committee,<sup>174</sup> approximately 100 are linked to the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot,<sup>175</sup> and another 35 to Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Structurally, these three bodies are not easy to disentangle, and a number of congregations belong to more than one. For quite a while their leaders were also intertwined: many Renewal and Havurah people were either ordained at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College or taught there, and their members still attend retreats together at places such as Elat Chayyim in Accord, New York.<sup>176</sup>

The Reconstructionist movement is the best known of these groups. It has, in fact, the infrastructure of a Jewish denomination—an umbrella organization for synagogues, a rabbinical seminary, and an association of rabbis. Reconstructionism also has the most defined ideological positions, originating in the views of its

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<sup>171</sup>Adam S. Ferziger, *Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation* (Ramat Gan, Israel, 2003).

<sup>172</sup>This theme has been central to the writing of Rabbi Sidney Schwarz. See, for example, his “The Rabbi as Spiritual Leader,” *Reconstructionist* 64, Fall 1999, pp. 24–33.

<sup>173</sup>See the description of the Shir Hadash Reconstructionist *havurah*, with its emphasis on the pride and self-reliance of the members, in Susie Davidson, “Shir Hadash Includes Jews of All Types,” *Boston Jewish Advocate*, Sept. 5–11, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>174</sup>[www.havurah.org/directory](http://www.havurah.org/directory).

<sup>175</sup>[www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org).

<sup>176</sup>The former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College has stated that “the furthest left people, spiritually and intellectually, produced by [his college] . . . find their home in Aleph.” David Teutsch quoted in Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati, 2002), p. 349.

founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), although the clarity and direction of the movement became murkier in the decades since his death, just as all the movements have become less ideological. Many of the congregations meet in their own buildings, and approximately two-thirds have rabbis. In the more established congregations, the Sabbath morning service is the focal event of the week, whereas in the smaller *havurot*, twice monthly Friday evening services are central. Reconstructionism proudly embraces an especially large percentage of intermarried families. The 2000–01 NJPS found that 44 percent of self-identified Reconstructionist adults were intermarried. While that figure may be exaggerated by the small size of the Reconstructionist sample, the movement's own internal survey a decade ago put the figure at 30 percent for members under age 40, higher than any other movement.<sup>177</sup>

A sampling of mission statements put out by Reconstructionist congregations highlights their overall direction. Congregation Dor Hadash in San Diego describes Reconstructionism as “ritually traditional and socially liberal.” It goes on:

Reconstructionist congregations are based on the belief that each generation of Jews is charged with the responsibility for envisioning the Judaism of its own time and then creating it. Congregation Dor Hadash offers its members a community-based environment in which to learn, pray and make friends. . . . [I]ts doors are open to all—singles, marrieds, gays, lesbians, interracial, interfaith. The members are a diverse and varied group of people from all walks of life. A significant portion of Dor Hadash households are interfaith families who have decided to keep a Jewish home.<sup>178</sup>

The Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Havurah “requires commitment to building a participative [sic] inclusive Jewish community.” Furthermore,

We depend upon shared leadership among a broad range of members and the active participation of all members in community life. Because participation extends beyond formal group activities, we

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<sup>177</sup>The NJPS data are cited by Phillips, “American Judaism in the Twenty-First Century,” p. 412. For results of the survey conducted by the Reconstructionist movement in 1996, see Carol Towarnicky, “Boundaries and Opportunities: Report on the Role of the Non-Jew in Reconstructionist Synagogues,” *Reconstructionism Today*, Spring 1998; and Elaine Kahn and Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Reconstructionist Survey Finds Inclusiveness Attracts,” *MetroWest Jewish News*, Dec. 12, 1996, pp. 8, 19.

<sup>178</sup>[www.dorhadash.org/aboutus.htm](http://www.dorhadash.org/aboutus.htm).



make a commitment to support each other in our efforts to integrate Jewish principles and practice into our daily lives. As an inclusive community, we recognize that barriers come in many forms and we are committed to pluralism and gender equality. Events will be held in wheelchair-accessible locations. Non-traditional households are welcomed. While not imposing on the prerogatives of parents, we take a share of responsibility for our Havurah's children. Finally, we each agree to provide funds within our means so that economic hardship will not hinder participation.<sup>179</sup>

A third congregation, the Reconstructionist Synagogue of the North Shore (Long Island, N.Y.), affirms in its mission statement the centrality of "the democratic process . . . to the functioning of a Reconstructionist synagogue," and therefore,

The Rabbis and Cantor are the resource persons, the guides, the facilitators. With this guidance and the cooperation of the Ritual Committee, the congregation participates actively, offering readings, songs, performing rituals such as candlelighting and kiddush. Congregational singing plays a large role in our services, as the rabbis, cantor and congregation come together for meaningful, responsive worship experiences.<sup>180</sup>

Reconstructionist congregations assume that members have some familiarity with the traditional services but are prepared to experiment with the liturgy and jettison aspects that do not speak to them. They are outspokenly left-wing in their political and social orientation. Rejecting hierarchy, they have reinterpreted the role of the rabbi, making him/her a facilitator of democratic decision-making rather than the decision-maker. The emphasis on inclusion of groups that are allegedly excluded from other synagogues, such as the handicapped and indigent, is a point of pride. But it has created some discomfort in Reconstructionist synagogues that have undertaken capital campaigns to build permanent structures, since raising the necessary money entails breaking with their "anti-hierarchical approach to fund-raising," and potentially embarrassing people who cannot pay their share.<sup>181</sup>

From its inception, the Reconstructionist movement has issued a steady stream of innovative liturgical publications. Since 1999 it

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<sup>179</sup>[www.aarecon.org](http://www.aarecon.org).

<sup>180</sup>[www.rsns.org/html/worship.html](http://www.rsns.org/html/worship.html).

<sup>181</sup>Julie Wiener, "Are the Reconstructionists Becoming More Mainstream?" Jewish Telegraphic Agency Internet edition, Nov. 7, 2000, [www.jta.org/index.exe?0011075](http://www.jta.org/index.exe?0011075).

has released a series of new prayer books called *Kol Haneshamah* and a new Passover Haggadah, and these have become ubiquitous in Reconstructionist congregations. They contain a considerable amount of transliteration to enable nonreaders of Hebrew to participate in the services, and use gender-neutral language. While retaining Mordecai Kaplan's naturalistic understanding of the Torah's origins and his removal of references to miracles and to a personal messiah, these works are more open than earlier Reconstructionist liturgy to a mystical understanding of God, and affirm the legitimacy of reinterpreting rather than rejecting the concept of the chosenness of the Jewish people.<sup>182</sup>

Jewish Renewal and the network of *havurot* share the Reconstructionist niche, but differ primarily in the liturgical realm. Reconstructionist congregations follow their movement's prayer book; the others experiment both with the content of the prayers and with deportment during prayer. From the Renewal perspective, the large quotient of Hebrew and traditional liturgy in Reconstructionist synagogues and the cerebral approach taken to Judaism render the services stiff and staid. Renewal congregations favor body movement, meditation, wordless song, and the like. The point was driven home by a reporter who visited Makom Ohr Shalom in Woodland Hills, California, where the Yom Kippur services were led by the guru of Renewal, "Reb Zalman" Schachter-Shalomi: "Picture 20 massage tables, with people lying down and being gently touched, with music playing in the background. On Yom Kippur."<sup>183</sup> To be sure, Renewal has become somewhat less touchy-feely under the recent leadership of Rabbi Daniel Siegel, but it nevertheless remains highly experimental.

Both Renewal congregations and *havurot* tend to be small fellowships that meet a few times a month, lack large congregational structures, and focus on prayer, education, or social causes.<sup>184</sup> Jewish Renewal groups involve themselves with Jewish mysticism, neo-

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<sup>182</sup>Reconstructionism's evolving liturgy is treated in Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy*, especially chap. 5.

<sup>183</sup>Gaby Wenig, "Stand-up, Sit-down, See the Light," *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Sept. 14, 2002, [www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=9229](http://www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=9229).

<sup>184</sup>Because most *havurot* do not have their own buildings but usually meet either in member's homes or in rented facilities, they struggle to gain visibility. See the letter to the editor from Mark Frydenberg, incoming chair of the National Havurah Committee, *Boston Jewish Advocate*, Aug. 29–Sept. 4, 2003, p. 15.

Hasidism, and meditation. Convinced that only “a paradigm shift” will “develop a spirituality through which Judaism can transform itself,”<sup>185</sup> they incorporate aspects of Eastern religions into their prayers, proudly borrowing “openly and liberally from other faith traditions and speak[ing] of ourselves as JuBus, Jufis, and Hinjews.”<sup>186</sup> The Renewal movement has issued a prayer book, *Ohr Chadash: New Paths for Shabbat Morning*.<sup>187</sup> Independent *havurot* are liturgically eclectic, using works and performing practices that originate in various religious movements.<sup>188</sup>

*Gay and Lesbian*: Another niche is occupied by the 19 gay and lesbian synagogues that have been founded around the country since 1972, when the first, Beth Chayim Chadashim, was organized in Los Angeles.<sup>189</sup> Eleven of these are independent, seven identify as Reform and belong to the URJ, and one affiliates with the Reconstructionist Federation.<sup>190</sup> Prayer services in gay and lesbian synagogues tend to follow Conservative or Reform practice, and therefore the congregations tend to employ the prayer books of these denominations. As the rabbi of Bet Mishpachah in Washington, D.C., put it: “When people come to our synagogues they’re coming for the same reasons that any other Jews come to synagogue. With few exceptions, we say the same prayers. It’s not really different in content.”<sup>191</sup>

Even so, these synagogues have developed their own liturgical and theological responses to issues of particular concern to their

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<sup>185</sup>“Four Worlds, Eighteen Affirmations, One Covenant: Aleph Statement of Principles,” [www.aleph.org/principles.htm](http://www.aleph.org/principles.htm). Also included is a commitment “to consult with other spiritual traditions, sharing with them what we have found in our concerned research and trying out what we have learned from them, to see whether it enhances the special truths of the Jewish path.”

<sup>186</sup>That is, Jewish Buddhists, Jewish Sufis, and Hindu Jews. See Rami Shapiro, “Jewish Renewal Makes It to Film,” *Tikkun* 16, Nov./Dec. 2001, pp. 72–73.

<sup>187</sup>*Ohr Chadash* is discussed by Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy*, pp. 350–64.

<sup>188</sup>Given the far-flung and unaffiliated status of many *havurot*, it is hard to generalize about their ideologies. Quite a few are defined less by social and political outlook than by their goal of creating an intimate community; others are simply serving small groups of Jews in remote places that have no synagogues. But the leadership of the National Havurah Committee is heavily drawn from the so-called progressive community.

<sup>189</sup>Melissa Minkin, “Celebration of ‘Life’: The First Lesbian and Gay Synagogue Marks Its 30th Anniversary,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, July 1, 2002, [www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=8708](http://www.jewishjournal.com/hom/preview.php?id=8708).

<sup>190</sup>Schwartz, Scheckner, and Kotler-Berkowitz, “Census of U.S. Synagogues,” p. 129.

<sup>191</sup>Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “Rabbis Explore Uniqueness of Gay Shuls,” *New York Jewish Week*, June 9, 2000, p. 49.

members, ranging from prayers acknowledging discrimination to meditations on the ravages of AIDS, from attention to gender neutrality to the inclusion of non-Jewish partners in the services.<sup>192</sup> Since the number of their members' children is steadily growing, these synagogues are increasingly grappling with the tension between demands for congregational supplementary schools and the resentment of older members, who say that they established these synagogues as "adult places in an era when gay couples didn't often have kids."<sup>193</sup>

*Humanistic:* Still another niche is occupied by so-called Humanistic communities and congregations, which are dedicated to secular Judaism. Beginning with the founding of the first of these in a suburb of Detroit by Rabbi Sherwin Wine in 1963, the movement has grown to some 30 communities, under the umbrella of the Society for Humanistic Judaism.<sup>194</sup> Humanistic congregations draw upon the traditional liturgy as well as other Jewish texts when they engage in communal gatherings, but, as committed secularists, they do not pray, although they do celebrate lifecycle passages so as to "allow the family and community to reinforce their unity and to articulate the values that make life worthwhile."<sup>195</sup> One Humanistic congregation in Washington, D.C., eventually withdrew from the society because it was partial to a more traditional liturgy, and accepted as members Jews who believed in God. This congregation pushed the envelope by saying the Shema, a central prayer of traditional Judaism that affirms belief in one, indivisible God. To be sure, the recitation was prefaced with the words: "In concert with what Jews have said for thousands of years, let's rise and say the *sh'ma*. We are doing this as a tradition, not as a prayer."<sup>196</sup>

*Gen X and Gen Y:* Rounding out the picture are a small number of Gen X and Gen Y congregations established by and for young

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<sup>192</sup>The most detailed study of one such synagogue, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in Manhattan, is Moshe Shokeid's, *A Gay Synagogue in New York* (New York, 1995). Its discussion of the prayer service is on pp. 100–117.

<sup>193</sup>Cohen, "Rabbis Explore Uniqueness," p. 10.

<sup>194</sup>Its Web site is [www.shj.org](http://www.shj.org).

<sup>195</sup>"What Do Humanistic Jews Do?" [www.shj.org/do.htm](http://www.shj.org/do.htm).

<sup>196</sup>"Beth Chaim Leaves National Movement," *Washington Jewish Week*, Jan. 19, 2003, [www.washingtonjewishweek.com/localstory.html?/wjw/279687396775336.html](http://www.washingtonjewishweek.com/localstory.html?/wjw/279687396775336.html). This congregation is now a member of the National Havurah Committee.

Jews—that is, those born since the end of the baby boom, both singles and young couples. Insofar as these groups appeal self-consciously to Jews of a specific age group, they are the contemporary analogue to the independent *havurot* of the 1970s, although they draw a far more upscale clientele than the graduate students who established the first *havurot*.

Thus the Soho Synagogue, which is Orthodox, seeks “successful, religious twenty- and thirtysomething Jews interested in being cool and kosher, too.” One of the founders pronounced the synagogue’s goal to “appeal to Jews who want an alternative but nothing too out-there.”<sup>197</sup> Kehillat Hadar, perhaps the largest of the Gen X congregations, is an egalitarian, traditional minyan of several hundred that is entirely led by its members and meets in various places on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Its participants are heavily drawn from Conservative synagogues, but the group eschews a denominational label.<sup>198</sup> By contrast, the Ma’alot Minyan meets in a large Conservative synagogue on the East Side of Manhattan, receives assistance from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and openly recruits alumni of Camp Ramah, Koach, the Solomon Schechter day schools, and other specifically Conservative institutions. And in nearby Park Slope, Brooklyn, a Reform congregation houses a minyan with no name that is lay-led and conducts services entirely in Hebrew. These, and others scattered around the country, have been described as “very pragmatic and self-sufficient . . . They emphasize lay leadership, and are less interested in rabbinic authority and in creating super-structure buildings than they are in building their community.”<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup>Shana Liebman, “Can a Shul Be Cool?” *New York Magazine*, Apr. 25, 2005, p. 17; and Liel Leibowitz, “Hip With a Mechtiza,” *New York Jewish Week*, June 24, 2005, pp. 8–9.

<sup>198</sup>For a description of Hadar by one of its founders, see Elie Kaunfer, “Attracting Young People to Jewish Life: Lessons Learned from Kehillat Hadar,” *Jewish Education News* 26, Spring 2005, pp. 1–2.

<sup>199</sup>These New York minyanim for the post-baby-boom generation are surveyed in Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “The New Gen-X Judaism,” *New York Jewish Week*, Aug. 2, 2002, [www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=6503&print=yes](http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=6503&print=yes). On the Ma’alot minyan, see Elianna Baslaw Goldman, “Building Young Adult Infrastructure: Manhattan’s Ma’alot Minyan Project,” *United Synagogue Review* 57, Spring 2005, pp. 18–19. Another effort in New York, Tikvat Yisrael, seeks to emulate the multiple minyanim held at Harvard Hillel that then join together after services for a communal Shabbat dinner and joint study. Eli Sachs, “Alumni Replicate Hillel Community in Manhattan,” *Harvard Hillel Newsletter*, Spring 2005, p. 8.

Whether these congregations will still exist once their members have married, borne children, and moved out is doubtful.<sup>200</sup>

*Postdenominational:* Cutting across several types of niche congregations is a small but growing movement toward the creation of postdenominational synagogues. As distinct from unaffiliated congregations, these not only reject a movement label, but also revel in their eclecticism in an age when ideology is looked upon with suspicion or dismissed as irrelevant. As one Jewish Renewal rabbi, Gershon Winkler, sees it, most American Jews are “turned off by the rigidity of established ‘standards’ found in every Jewish denomination.” Instead, Jews might be more attracted to “the broader spectrum of Judaism that shines far beyond and above the particular party-line versions they have been fed by every denomination.”<sup>201</sup> Younger Jews seem especially attracted to this approach since, says one of them, Rabbi Leon Morris, they “resist categorization. We don’t want to be labeled. We seek a model of Jewish life that is self-designated.”<sup>202</sup> One such community in Los Angeles, named Ikar, has been touted as a vanguard institution that will inspire others to imitate its vibrancy, attractiveness to younger families, and eclecticism.<sup>203</sup>

In fact, not only are many of the Gen X and Gen Y synagogues postdenominational, but so are a considerable number of *havurot* and Renewal groups, which do not view themselves as belonging to denominations. Even Orthodox outreach synagogues speak the same language of inclusiveness, scornfully rejecting denominational labels. As an advertisement for one such outfit puts it: “Conservative? Orthodox? Reform? Labels are for clothes . . . not for

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<sup>200</sup>Congregations around the country have invested, either sporadically or in a more sustained fashion, in special singles’ or young people’s services aimed at Gen X and Y Jews. Friday Night Live at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles is perhaps the best known of these, as described above, p. 44. Even more remarkable is the phenomenon of members of this age cohort founding their own synagogues. For an early effort, see Alan Silverstein and Bob Rubin, “Serving Jewish Singles in Suburbia,” *Conservative Judaism* 38, Fall 1985, pp. 71–76. A survey of efforts by Reform congregations to engage with this age group is discussed in Sue Fishkoff, “New Jew Cool,” *Reform Judaism* 33, Fall, 2004, pp. 20–27, 32.

<sup>201</sup>Andrew Silow-Carroll, “Crossing Over,” *New York Jewish Week*, Dec. 15, 1999, pp. 46–49.

<sup>202</sup>Leon A. Morris, “Beyond, or Mixing Denominations,” *New York Jewish Week*, Mar. 7, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>203</sup>For the program of this congregation, see its Web site, [www.ikar-la.org/vision.html](http://www.ikar-la.org/vision.html). Aitz Hayim Center for Jewish Living in Chicago explicitly advertises its postdenominational approach. *JUF News*, Sept. 1996, p. 17.

fellow Jews.” And this sort of rhetoric emanates from Chabad and Aish HaTorah networks, which, for all of their tolerance of variations in religious behavior, would not think of breaking with Orthodox norms. In an age of “seekers,” postdenominational congregations are attractive because they reject what are perceived as artificial boundaries between Jews and because they draw freely from many traditions of Judaism. Instead of setting up boundaries that read people out, they affirm community, celebration, and personal meaning.<sup>204</sup>

### *Synagogue Renewal Efforts*

As synagogues have rethought their programs and approaches to worship over the past 15 years, there has been no shortage of advisors eager to guide their work. A veritable cottage industry has sprung up that seeks to “reengineer the shul,” engender “synagogue change initiatives,” encourage congregations to “re-vision” themselves, and offer help with “strategic planning.” What follows is a thumbnail survey of the major initiatives.<sup>205</sup>

#### SYNAGOGUE 2000

This is the best known renewal initiative. Founded in 1995 by Professors Lawrence Hoffman of the Hebrew Union College in New York and Ron Wolfson of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, this program has, to date, worked with some 195 congregations around the country. It is funded by private foundations and local federations of Jewish philanthropy. Synagogue 2000 operates interdenominationally, bringing professional and lay leaders of different local congregations together, in part to demonstrate to them that they share many common challenges, and in part “to build community across denominations.”<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup>An unknown number of congregations are independent of any organized umbrella groups, and thus fly below the radar of anyone studying synagogue life. For an “inside look at the world of independent shuls,” see Walter Ruby, “Saturday, the Rabbi Stayed Home,” *Moment* 22, Oct. 1997, pp. 37–44.

<sup>205</sup>For a complete listing, see the Databank of Community-Based Synagogue Change Initiatives compiled by the Jewish Education Service of North America, [www.jesna.org/cgi-bin/dbroundtble.php3](http://www.jesna.org/cgi-bin/dbroundtble.php3).

<sup>206</sup>Lawrence A. Hoffman, “Synagogue 2000: Lessons for the Future,” *Contact* 7, Autumn 2004, p. 9. Information on Synagogue 2000 is available at its Web site, [www.s2k.org/About/about.html](http://www.s2k.org/About/about.html).

Synagogue 2000 workshops try to get synagogues to work on six key areas of congregational life: (1) providing meaningful and participatory worship; (2) engaging members of all ages in Jewish learning; (3) developing the congregation as a locus for performing good deeds (social action); (4) converting synagogues into places for people to give and receive comfort and support; (5) encouraging synagogues to operate in a way that reflects Jewish values; and (6) creating an ambience of a welcoming community.<sup>207</sup>

Those in charge of Synagogue 2000 have candidly noted the two major obstacles they face: the inertia of denominational institutions—seminaries and movement organizations—that allegedly “work programmatically, providing short-term ‘fixes’ without addressing underlying systemic impediments,” and the unwillingness of some congregations and their leaders to consider change seriously because they are continuing to attract members even as they do business as usual.<sup>208</sup> Synagogue 2000 has worked especially to sensitize congregational leaders to the importance of welcoming newcomers, and has distributed tapes and CDs to teach synagogues how to utilize liturgical music in new ways. The program’s workshops aim to “reboot synagogue life,” particularly by “sweating the details”—to imagine how the service looks to an outsider, and to find ways to involve members actively.<sup>209</sup> In line with its efforts to shake up the status quo, Synagogue 2000 held a huge event in Los Angeles for 6,000 lay and professional leaders. They gathered for a program called Hallelu, which used stars of stage and screen to fire up participants to “act on behalf of their own synagogues and on behalf of . . . the Jewish people.”<sup>210</sup>

#### SYNAGOGUE TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL (STAR)

The STAR initiative has been funded to the tune of \$18 million by a consortium of donors interested in helping synagogues reach more Jews. Its two main programs are “PEER: Professional Education for Excellence in Rabbis” and “Synaplex.” PEER offers a

<sup>207</sup>Elliot Fein, “Synagogue 2000: Seeking Change. An Interview with Dr. Ron Wolfson,” *Jewish Spectator* 66, Winter 2002, p. 24.

<sup>208</sup>Hoffman, “Synagogue 2000,” p. 9.

<sup>209</sup>Gary Stern, “Synagogues Study Ways to Reform,” *Journal News* (Westchester), Dec. 1, 2002, pp. 1B–2B.

<sup>210</sup>“Six Thousand Jews Strong,” and “Sacred Connections,” Synagogue 2000, Dec. 2002, [www.s2k.org](http://www.s2k.org).



form of in-service training for rabbis already in the field, bringing them together for mentoring and mutual support in those areas of the profession for which their rabbinic training did not prepare them.<sup>211</sup> Synaplex focuses on involving ever larger numbers of Jews in a range of programs held in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

While the provision of multiple services is one aspect of Synaplex, other programs seek to attract people to educational and recreational activities. “We are calling on the original functions of a shul as a *beit tefillah* (house of prayer), *beit midrash* (house of study), and *beit kneset* (house of gathering) during Jewish prime time—Shabbat,” contends Rabbi Hayim Herring, executive director of STAR.<sup>212</sup> The program does not necessarily seek to attract Jews to worship. In the words of one participating rabbi, “Even if people come on Shabbat and never open a prayer book, it’s fine.” Accordingly, some participating congregations run everything from Saturday yoga groups, to classes on psychology, to bike rides and bird-watching excursions.<sup>213</sup> Strong emphasis is placed on marketing techniques to get people involved. Traditionalists may blanch, and even people in the synagogue-renewal business have their doubts. Ron Wolfson of Synagogue 2000 cautioned that “programming is essential but not the core of building a synagogue,” since one must “address the issue of engagement with synagogue life.”<sup>214</sup> Filling the synagogue on the Sabbath with people who are not there for Jewish worship or study may not be the way to create a religious community.

#### EXPERIMENTS IN CONGREGATIONAL EDUCATION (ECE)

Begun in 1992, ECE has worked with 41 congregations around the country, most of them Reform but also some that are Conser-

<sup>211</sup>Eric Fingerhut, “Torah, Talmud—and Management: Program Teaches Rabbis Skills to Run a Nonprofit,” *Washington Jewish Week*, Jan. 20, 2005, [www.washingtonjewish-week.com/localstory.php?wjw2/2886](http://www.washingtonjewish-week.com/localstory.php?wjw2/2886); Stacey Dresner, “PEER Program Helps Rabbis Learn Practical Skills,” *Jewish Ledger of Western Massachusetts*, Sept. 15, 2004, [www.jewishledger.com/articles/2004/09/15/news12.txt](http://www.jewishledger.com/articles/2004/09/15/news12.txt); Lisa Goddard, “New Twists on Old Faith: Young Rabbis Learn Novel Approaches to Worship and Business Affairs,” *Sun Sentinel* (South Florida), Dec. 10, 2004, [www.sun-sentinel.com](http://www.sun-sentinel.com).

<sup>212</sup>Danielle Haas, “Playing at a Shul Near You,” *Jerusalem Report*, Dec. 2004, p. 30.

<sup>213</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 30–31; Gabrielle Birkner, “Stretching the Shul,” *New York Jewish Week*, June 24, 2005, pp. 6–7.

<sup>214</sup>Ellen Jaffe-Gill, “Emanuel’s Jumpin’ at the Synaplex,” *Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles*, Mar. 26, 2004, [www.jewishjournal.com/hom/print.php?id=12016](http://www.jewishjournal.com/hom/print.php?id=12016).

vative or Reconstructionist. Based at the Los Angeles campus of the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, ECE, as its name implies, works mainly to develop the educational programs of synagogues so as to create a "congregation of learners." This is to be accomplished by engaging congregants of all ages "in some form of Jewish learning on a weekly basis in which the study of Jewish texts is woven into worship, social action, and all committee meetings." Facilitators, who are Jewish educational professionals, help congregational leaders "reflect on their current situation and consider alternative courses of action."<sup>215</sup> ECE also developed the Re-Imagine Project to help synagogues rethink their delivery of supplementary education, and to understand how that schooling fits into the life of the congregation. Participating synagogues benefit from a curriculum as well as a Web site where they "can take 'virtual visits' to congregations with a variety of innovative educational models already in place."<sup>216</sup>

#### FEDERATION PROJECTS

Federations of Jewish philanthropy became involved on a large scale in the wake of the 1990 NJPS, which was interpreted as showing a worrisome crisis of "Jewish continuity." Previously disengaged from synagogue life, which they considered sectarian and therefore divisive, local federations now sought to work with congregations, since strong synagogues were vital for building Jewish life. In the words of the Chicago federation's task force, "Synagogues [serve] as a portal or entry point for services . . . offered by the Jewish Federation and the agencies it supports."<sup>217</sup>

Indeed, since 1990 federations have come to recognize that the old division between "synagogue Jews" and "federation Jews" had

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<sup>215</sup>Isa Aron and Robert M. Weinberg, "Experiments in Congregational Education," *Contact* 7, Autumn 2004, p. 10. See also two books by Isa Aron, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners: Learning as a Key to Revitalizing Congregational Life* (Woodstock, Vt., 2000), and *The Self-Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life* (Woodstock, Vt., 2002). For a report on the impact of ECE in one Reform congregation, see Richard Jacobs, "Forsaking the Status Quo in Scarsdale," *Reform Judaism* 29, Summer 2000, pp. 51–59.

<sup>216</sup>Gabrielle Birkner, "Re-Imagine the Possibilities: A New Program Allows Congregations to Examine Educational Change," *New York Jewish Week*, June 24, 2005, pp. 14–15.

<sup>217</sup>"*Hazak V'Amatz: Be Strong and Have Courage: Strengthening Kehilla*. The Report of the Synagogue/Federation Long-Range Planning Task Force," July 2001.

collapsed, as federation supporters now tended to be people affiliated with a synagogue. Communities across the country established joint commissions on synagogue-federation relations, bridging the old divide between the two institutions. Federations have also lent their expertise to congregations, helping them with everything from bulk purchases of supplies to management training. Some federations have also underwritten the costs associated with participation in national projects such as Synagogue 2000 and the ECE so as to enable their local congregations to benefit from these revitalization programs.

And federations have channeled funds to congregations. In Boston, the federation pays for youth workers who develop synagogue programs for teens, helped establish Meah, an adult-education program in congregations, and supports family educators working in congregations.<sup>218</sup> Philadelphia's federation has funded programs to develop synagogue leadership and to weld together a consortium of congregations offering combined programs of Jewish education.<sup>219</sup> In New York, the UJA-Federation runs a management-assistance program under which congregational leaders of all denominations participate in eleven months of workshops run by the consulting firm McKinsey and Co. A separate program of "continuity grants" has enabled New York-area synagogues to develop initiatives to engage their members more actively.<sup>220</sup> Federations in communities as diverse as Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles have experimented with new ways to deliver funding and other support to congregations.<sup>221</sup>

#### PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS

In a few communities, private foundations have funded efforts to strengthen synagogue life. In San Francisco, for example, the

<sup>218</sup>[www.cjp.org/section\\_display.html?ID=192](http://www.cjp.org/section_display.html?ID=192); Amy L. Sales, Annette Koren, and Susan L. Shevitz, *Sh'arim: Building Gateways to Jewish life and Community: A Report on Boston's Jewish Family Educator Initiative* (Boston, 2000).

<sup>219</sup>Brian Mono, "The Buzzword on the Bimah: Consulting," *Philadelphia Jewish Exponent*, Sept. 14, 2000, [www.jewishexponent.com/Zoom.asp?stroyID=3949&pubID=67&subact=Cover](http://www.jewishexponent.com/Zoom.asp?stroyID=3949&pubID=67&subact=Cover).

<sup>220</sup>Stewart Ain, "The Ties That Bind," *New York Jewish Week*, Oct. 22, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>221</sup>These are surveyed in the Databank of Community-Based Synagogue Change Initiatives, [www.jesna.org/cgi-bin/dbroundtble.php3](http://www.jesna.org/cgi-bin/dbroundtble.php3). On programs launched in Houston, see Arlene Riesenfeld, "Houston Congregations Make Sabbath Come Alive," *Jewish Post and Opinion*, Sept. 6, 1995, p. 1.

Koret Foundation sponsored its own initiative, which “tested the hypothesis” that the presence in the synagogue of a program director or assistant rabbi with programming responsibilities would strengthen the Jewish identity of members and nonmembers.<sup>222</sup> In New Jersey, a similar effort to aid local congregations was supported by the Taub Foundation.

#### SYNAGOGUE PROGRAMS

Individual synagogues have launched their own strategic-planning initiatives. As synagogue boards are ever more likely to include members drawn from corporate sectors of American society, business models are finding their way into synagogue life—sometimes to the dismay of rabbis. The latter are now under far more pressure than before to act as chief executive officers rather than pastors or teachers, and their portfolio of responsibilities has been reshaped accordingly.<sup>223</sup> Synagogue boards are far more apt now to engage in McKinsey-style strategic planning to clarify their congregational mission and strengthen its delivery system.

#### DENOMINATIONAL BODIES

The congregational organizations of each movement have played a role in stimulating new thinking in their synagogues. Reform has been the most aggressive, promoting the ECE process and also involving some 80–100 congregations in a project called “Creating Learning Congregations.”<sup>224</sup> Perhaps most interestingly, Reform has invested considerable energy in developing guidelines for improving “the sacred partnership” between professional and volunteer leadership in congregations.<sup>225</sup> The other denominations have developed new programs for congregational change as well. One prominent Orthodox rabbi, Saul Berman, has predicted that,

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<sup>222</sup>Databank of Community-Based Synagogue Change Initiatives.

<sup>223</sup>For one rabbi’s lament, see Allen I. Freehling, “Chief Executive Reform Rabbis: A Disturbing, Damaging Imbalance,” *Jewish Spectator* 66, Winter 2002, pp. 21–23. On the larger phenomenon, see Jill Davison Sklar, “The Corporate Look Comes to the Synagogue World: And the Bottom Line Isn’t Always Rosy,” *Long Island Jewish World*, May 12–18, 1995, pp. 23 ff; and Jeffrey Levick, “Reinventing the Rabbi,” *Cleveland Jewish News*, Dec. 4, 2000, Internet edition.

<sup>224</sup>Julie Wiener, “Charging Into Change,” *Long Island Jewish World*, Sept. 29, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>225</sup>UAHC, “Brit Kodesh: Sacred Partnership: Readings and Exercises for Self-Study on the Relationship Between the Professional and Volunteer Leadership in Reform Congre-

as transformation efforts spread across the land, “the Orthodox community will be deeply engaged in the same process.”<sup>226</sup> Two major Orthodox congregational bodies recently launched synagogue-renewal programs for their congregations. In May 2005, the OU offered grants of up to \$20,000 to member synagogues that would develop “innovative programming,” and six months earlier, in December 2004, Agudath Israel formed a National Tefilla Initiative encompassing 400 congregations for the purpose of revitalizing prayer—and this in the sector of the American Jewish community most routinely engaged with public prayer.<sup>227</sup>

### *Heralding a New Approach*

It is still too early to assess the impact of these myriad efforts. The STAR initiative boasts a 78-percent increase in participants at Synaplex congregations on Friday evenings, and a 61-percent jump for Shabbat mornings. These programs have been in existence for only a few years, and it is anyone’s guess how long those numbers will hold up. Everyone involved in these renewal projects acknowledges just how labor-intensive the task is, and for that reason alone all the programs combined have worked directly with only a small fraction of American congregations. But their impact transcends the individual synagogues directly served. Not only do they channel new thinking and new funding to synagogues, which, in the past, were left to fend for themselves, but they also send a strong message that the larger Jewish community is paying attention to what happens in synagogues. Whether new, more effective approaches have been developed, or whether, alternatively, “best practices” have been identified, is less important than the contribution these initiatives have made to the spirit of the age, which is to encourage systematic synagogue revitalization.<sup>228</sup>

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gations,” 2001. See also “The Rabbi-Congregation Relationship: A Vision for the 21st Century, Report of the Reconstructionist Commission on the Role of the Rabbi,” Jan. 2001.

<sup>226</sup>Wiener, “Charging into Change,” p. 16. Berman is the director of the Modern Orthodox group Edah.

<sup>227</sup>[www.ou.org/oupr/2005/grants265.htm](http://www.ou.org/oupr/2005/grants265.htm); Jennifer Siegel, “Seeking a ‘New Way to Daven,’” *Forward*, May 13, 2005, p. 10.

<sup>228</sup>Zachary I. Heller, ed., *Re-Envisioning the Synagogue* (Hollis, N.H., 2005) is a recent volume that brings together the views of 17 rabbis and academics on the revitalization endeavor.

## THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY SYNAGOGUE

*Common Themes*

As is evident from the extensive initiatives for synagogue change, the American Jewish community at the beginning of the twenty-first century is eager to draw more people into congregations and to provide those who attend with a more positive experience. For all their differences of ideology, liturgy, and style, American synagogues have moved in similar directions, some with greater speed and comprehensiveness, some more slowly and haltingly, but few have been unaffected by the new spirit. Conversations with rabbis and other professionals in the denominational offices reveal a common language. Synagogues of all stripes share the following ten tendencies:

## 1. CREATING A "CARING COMMUNITY"

Congregations across the board are paying far more attention than in the past to the needs of individual members, and hence all the talk about "inclusiveness," a term that has different meanings depending on the setting. Reform and Reconstructionist synagogues strive to welcome Jews thought to have been marginalized—singles, gays and lesbians, intermarried Jews, Jews of non-Caucasian appearance. Conservative synagogues strive primarily to insure the involvement of women and multiple generations. And Orthodox synagogues address populations within their membership that come from different backgrounds and with different experiences, and therefore have varying sets of expectations about the style and pace of religious services.

To implement this outreach, congregations in all the denominations have expanded their activities for mutual support. Synagogues now have teams of members in the health-care field who serve as consultants for fellow congregants in need; they have organized members to visit the sick and prepare meals for the bereaved; and *hevra kadisha* groups (burial societies) have proliferated beyond the Orthodox community. A survey of congregations in Atlanta, for example, reported on synagogue programs that offered "gifts to new babies . . . support groups for divorced people, and . . . a 'member to member' group so con-

gregants can seek out others who have undergone similar life experiences.”<sup>229</sup>

Another dimension of the widespread effort to build caring communities is a new emphasis on hospitality and attentiveness. We have already noted the organization of welcoming squads for newcomers and the carefully organized practice of getting attendees at services to greet one another. Some synagogues go further. A Conservative congregation in Detroit sets aside time for a “*simcha* moment,” when “everyone has the opportunity to tell the congregation something good that happened to them during the prior week.” Congregants “bless each other at the end of services. It’s not quite a group hug, but it’s important that you are not ignored when you come to the synagogue.”<sup>230</sup> And at a Reform temple in Maryland, a number of services over the course of the year are set aside as “Sacred Story Shabbats,” when, instead of the usual talk about a topic in the Torah portion, members relate to the group their personal spiritual journeys. Each member focuses on a theme, such as “A Sanctuary in My Life,” or “When I Have Experienced the Presence of the Divine in My Life.” At the end of services, the congregation breaks into groups of ten to talk about themselves.<sup>231</sup> The common thread here is the attention given to individual experience in a very public setting.

## 2. SERVICING THE NEEDS OF MANY SUBGROUPS

Related to the emphasis on the individual is the willingness of congregations to sponsor multiple prayer services tailored to different elements of the community. “It may be stating the obvious, but different people have different spiritual needs,” reports the rabbi of a Conservative congregation in suburban Philadelphia, which has three separate Sabbath morning services for adults. “If I had more space to start more minyanim, I would start them,” he said. “We could have five different davening groups going on

<sup>229</sup>Todd Leopold, “Caring Communities,” *Atlanta Jewish Times*, May 19, 2000, Internet edition. This article surveys the mutual-aid activities of half a dozen Atlanta congregations.

<sup>230</sup>Don Cohen, “Sacred Space,” *Detroit Jewish News*, Oct. 1, 2004, [www.detroit.jewish.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=1693](http://www.detroit.jewish.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=1693).

<sup>231</sup>Warren G. Stone, “A Place of Jewish Personal Revelation,” *Reform Judaism* 25, Winter 1996, pp. 70–71.

here.”<sup>232</sup> In fact, the Synaplex model promoted by STAR seems to be pushing more congregations in this direction.

There are some downsides to the multiplication of services under one roof. For one thing, fragmentation can diminish allegiance to the synagogue, in turn affecting the cohesiveness of the entire congregation, not to speak of making it more difficult to raise money. “The fund-raisers can’t give the same pitch. It’s easier for people to say, ‘I gave at the other minyan.’ There’s not that critical mass,” argues one observer. Also, rivalries can erupt between competing services. Still, many synagogues have concluded that the risk is worth taking because members enjoy the intimacy of smaller services and the enhanced opportunities for active lay participation. To counter the dangers, some congregations have instituted a kiddush buffet after services to bring everyone together and maintain a sense of common purpose.<sup>233</sup> In an era when Americans are seeking options, multiple minyanim provide multiple points of entry.

### 3. THE REVIVAL OF PETITIONARY PRAYER

Petitionary prayer, asking God to fulfill one’s needs, especially for healing, has become so important that synagogues of all denominations have reworked their worship services to allow special opportunities for it. Such prayers have always been part of the traditional liturgy, but over the past decade or so congregations of every stripe have come to emphasize one particular prayer—the *mi sheberach* for the sick. Matters were not always so. In Reconstructionist and Reform synagogues the prayer had long been anathema—in the former because the movement’s theology denied the prayer’s underlying assumption that a personal God is directly involved in the lives of people, and in the latter because classical Reform services had no place for individual prayers. But with the setting of the *mi sheberach* to the music of Debbie Friedman, it has now become ubiquitous in Reform temples and even among Reconstructionists. Today, even in most Orthodox congregations, worshipers line up to insure that a synagogue functionary will in-

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<sup>232</sup>E.J. Kessler, “Rabbis Bucking for Friday Nights at the ‘Synaplex’: Trend Sees Practice of Holding Several Smaller Minyanim Within a Synagogue,” *Forward*, June 5, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>233</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.



clude the names of friends and relatives who are ill in the communal prayer, or, as is the practice in virtually every Conservative synagogue, members stand at their seats and state the name of the sick person at the appropriate spot in the communal prayer.

It would make for a fascinating ethnographic study to understand why this once fairly obscure prayer has assumed such importance and ubiquity: Are more people living with illness? Has research on the efficacy of prayer inspired people to participate? Is the *mi sheberach* popular precisely because it is both highly personal and universal? Is it a further expression of the quest for “meaning” in congregational worship?<sup>234</sup> What is beyond dispute is that the prayer for healing has profound meaning for many congregants in all kinds of synagogues.<sup>235</sup>

#### 4. THE SPIRITUAL USES OF MUSIC

Music has become crucial to the American synagogue service. We noted above the emphatic insistence of Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the URJ, that a “prayer revolution” is dependent upon the appropriate use of music during worship. The exact same position was espoused by a Modern Orthodox rabbi, who wrote:

nothing . . . comes close to the power of communal song. The energy that fills the room when all of the voices have joined as one is incomparable. Achieving this does require a rigid insistence that all of those who want to lead services comply with the communal singing standard, and the synagogue must provide opportunities for training. But the benefit in terms of renewal of interest and active participation in prayer is enormous.<sup>236</sup>

Few who are engaged in synagogue revitalization would disagree, and thus congregations all across the spectrum have developed

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<sup>234</sup>Congregations do not confine themselves to this one prayer; some support the expressions of their congregants’ Jewish needs “in health, spirituality, family relationships, education and social life.” See, for example, the survey of new synagogue initiatives in Sun Valley (Phoenix) described in Barry Cohen, “Seeking Meaning: Synagogues Offer Cornucopia of Opportunities for Adults 35–55,” *Jewish News of Greater Phoenix*, Sept. 22, 2000, [www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/000922/seek.shtml](http://www.jewishaz.com/jewishnews/000922/seek.shtml).

<sup>235</sup>It is not easy to ascertain how many synagogues offer healing services, but a network of some 30 healing centers, mostly based in Jewish family-service agencies, is affiliated with the National Jewish Healing Center. See its Web site, [www.ncjh.org/centers.php](http://www.ncjh.org/centers.php).

<sup>236</sup>Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky, “Orthodoxy and Synagogue Renewal,” *Contact* 2, Autumn 1999, pp. 8–9.

new approaches to music in order to overcome sterility and rote renditions of the prayer service.

For some congregations on the more traditional end of the spectrum, the music of Shlomo Carlebach has offered a new way: “Call it Modern Orthodoxy meets the holy rollers—a joyous, some say ecstatic, Judaism,” wrote two journalists of Carlebach’s “heart-stirring melodies.”<sup>237</sup> Others outside Orthodoxy, and not constrained by traditional opposition to the use of musical instrumentation in the services, have introduced complete bands or combinations of instruments chosen for their effects on worshippers. All are aimed at “bringing back that loving feeling.”<sup>238</sup>

## 5. RETHINKING SPATIAL ARRANGEMENTS

As we have seen, some congregations have embarked on new construction to create more suitable spaces for prayer, and rabbis and cantors, in many cases, now place themselves within the congregation rather than in front of or far above it. In 1989, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary urged congregational leaders of the Conservative movement to “take a fresh look at the nature of our main services, so heavily dependent on the frontal orientation of the sanctuary . . . . The erecting of a new synagogue should encourage those responsible to consider a design that would restore the reading of the services and the Torah to the center of the sanctuary, and would underscore the role of the cantor as agent and facilitator.”<sup>239</sup> Similar themes have been sounded in all the movements, so that even when congregations cannot afford to rebuild, they are moving services into rooms permitting flexible seating arrangements. Synagogue architects have designed light-weight pews and *mehitzahs* that can be moved easily; ramps and other conveniences to allow the disabled to get around; and environmentally sensitive arrangements to connect worshippers with nature.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>237</sup>Herb Keinon and Marilyn Henry, “Music to Their Ears,” *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 29, 1999, p. 19.

<sup>238</sup>Miriam Shaviv, “Bringing Back That Loving Feeling,” *Jerusalem Report*, Oct. 2, 1997, pp. 50–51.

<sup>239</sup>Ismar Schorsch, “A Synagogue Is Not a Temple,” delivered at the United Synagogue convention, Nov. 8, 1989, and published in Schorsch, *Polarities in Balance: Essays of Ismar Schorsch* (New York, 2004), p. 45.

<sup>240</sup>Sandee Brawarsky, “Rearranging the Synagogue: When It Comes to Shul Re-Design

## 6. REVOLUTIONIZING THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF WORSHIP

Congregants are less apt today to view themselves as an “audience” and more as participants. They are no longer docile, but move around during prayer, clapping and sometimes dancing; even in Reform temples it is not uncommon for the Torah to be carried around the synagogue and for congregants to turn around to greet the Sabbath on Friday night. An increasing number of people are able to read the Torah publicly, rather than relying on the cantor. Rabbis and cantors, in turn, are now far more facilitative than priestly; they work to involve congregants in the service, not to enact it for them.

## 7. THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Aside from Orthodox synagogues, virtually all congregations treat women and men equally. Bar mitzvah boys and bat mitzvah girls assume the exact same roles during their rites of passage, and that egalitarianism extends into adulthood. Women play equal roles in board leadership, and congregations of all stripes (even Orthodox) have elected women as presidents. While there is still talk of a glass ceiling for female rabbis, change appears to be in the offing in this realm too: females outnumber males as students in most rabbinical schools that accept women, a phenomenon that is even more pronounced in cantorial schools. Particularly on the West Coast, some of the largest Reform temples are now led by women rabbis, a trend that will undoubtedly make its way eastward.

The exception proves the rule: Orthodox synagogues still maintain a physical partition between the seating areas for women and men, and the focal points of worship activity—the prayer leader and the Torah reading—are situated in the men’s section. It is nonetheless noteworthy, as noted above, how Orthodox congregations have struggled to involve women in ways that are permissible within the framework of Orthodox Jewish law.

## 8. FOCUSING ON ADULT STUDY

Across the spectrum of congregations, far more educational courses are offered by congregations than in previous generations, and it has become part of accepted synagogue culture for people of all ages to engage in learning. This may take the form of building skills, such as reading Hebrew, Torah cantillation, kosher cooking, or crafting Jewish ritual objects. Reform and Conservative synagogues offer intensive adult bar/bat mitzvah programs for those who did not receive a strong education when they were young. And congregations of all kinds offer a multiplicity of textual study, with classes on the Torah portion, Talmud, Jewish history, and Jewish customs and practices among the most popular.

A recent study of adult Jewish education found that the synagogue is the most commonly utilized site for such classes, followed by the Jewish community center. Why, the authors ask, is this so?

Aside from all their other assets, synagogues are numerous and widely scattered; generally at least one is found very near where most Jews live. Nearly two-thirds of American Jews (64 percent) live within 15 minutes of a synagogue. More than two-fifths (41 percent) live within 10 minutes of one. The comparable figures for JCCs are 37 percent for 15 minutes, and 19 percent for ten minutes or less. Synagogues are quite accessible, local institutions, often surrounded by concentrated congregants who encounter one another outside the temple, thereby organically reinforcing their bonds of community. . . . Congregations are also the loci of the most important family lifecycle transitions, a place where Jews come to pray, and are professionally headed by Jewish education professionals whose very title refers to the educational role ("rabbi"="my teacher").<sup>241</sup>

Not surprisingly, some of the nationally franchised Jewish adult education programs, such as Meah and the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, offer courses in synagogues.

## 9. SERVING AS THE VENUE FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Congregations sponsor activities designed to engage their members in programs to aid other Jews and/or the larger communities

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<sup>241</sup>Steven M. Cohen and Aryeh Davidson, *Adult Jewish Learning in America: Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth* (New York, 2001), pp. 27–28.

in which they are situated. In the more traditional congregations, these generally take the form of providing clothing and food to impoverished Jews, organizing visits to those who are ill, and raising money for Jewish institutions in the U.S. and abroad. As one moves across the spectrum from the Orthodox to the more liberal synagogues, congregational programming becomes less parochial and more universalistic: synagogues might involve their members in helping out at soup kitchens, shelters for battered women, and agencies for the sick and needy, or creating a market for the sale of organic food.

Rabbis and lay leaders freely concede that they are intentionally widening the scope of their work in order to bring in Jews who are not interested in prayer and Jewish study, the synagogue's traditional priorities. "For better or worse," said one thirtysomething rabbi, "American Jews of my age have for the most part not grown up davening." Yet even in congregations where prayer is not a foreign experience, a range of social action programs, often going under the rubric of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), are sponsored in the clear understanding that they build social capital, and in turn strengthen the fabric of the synagogue community.<sup>242</sup>

#### 10. FOOD, THE WAY TO A JEW'S HEART

Although it appears nowhere in the foregoing study, food is a basic ingredient of community-building in synagogues. Late Friday evening services routinely include a "collation" of coffee (always decaf) and pastries. On Shabbat mornings, study groups in Reform temples begin over bagels and lox. And in most synagogues, there is a kiddush after Sabbath and festival morning services, as well as *seudah shlishit* ("third meal") on late Sabbath afternoon. Increasingly, congregations are introducing a "break-fast" for the community of worshipers at the end of Yom Kippur. Every synagogue offers a kiddush in its sukkah on the holiday of Sukkot. After the reading of the Scroll of Esther on Purim evening, *haman-*

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<sup>242</sup>A survey of such activities sponsored by synagogues in New York is provided by Steve Lipman, "The Multitasking Shul," *New York Jewish Week*, June 24, 2005, pp. 4–5. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000), chap. 4, discusses the role of religious congregations in building social capital.

*taschen* and drinks are provided, and refreshments and alcoholic beverages are to be had on Simchat Torah.<sup>243</sup> The communal seder is a commonplace at many synagogues on Passover night. And then there are the light spreads available, before and after committee and board meetings, educational and other programs, and the more elaborate meals prepared by women's auxiliaries for the entire congregation at all kinds of festive occasions.

All of this is the source of much humor, but in truth it is hard to find a congregation that does not use food as a lubricant for community-building. More than anything else, food is the common denominator of all contemporary American synagogues.

### *The Synagogue in the Context of American Religious Trends*

None of this would come as great news to informed observers of Christian (and perhaps other non-Jewish) congregations in America. To begin with food, note how a student of Protestant churches describes "food-centered social events":

Church dinners and coffee hours . . . are crucial to the religious life of many Americans. For these people participating in a community is often the most important motivation for attending church, and shared meals are often more important to creating community than are shared worship experiences. The meals are a place where religious identity is shaped, community is built, and memories are created. They may not be religious, but they're not just another meal.<sup>244</sup>

Beyond the specific issue of food, what is noteworthy is the extent to which building community is a central preoccupation of churches, and is now driving synagogue transformation as well.

Churches, too, have grown far more interested in the choreography of services, the uses of space, and, of course, music. This is how Robert Wuthnow, one of the leading students of contempo-

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<sup>243</sup>Of late, some Orthodox congregations have innovated unofficial "kiddush clubs" that make available high-quality liquor after the Shabbat Torah reading. The OU grew so concerned about the potentially embarrassing disruptions of the service that could ensue that it has tried to ban the clubs. See Gabriel Sanders, "Orthodox Union Sets Ban on Clubs for Scotch Tipplers," *Forward*, Jan. 28, 2005, pp. 1–2; and Steve Lipman, "Whiskey Rebellion," *New York Jewish Week*, Feb. 18, 2005, pp. 8–9.

<sup>244</sup>Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York, 2000), p. 62.

rary American religious life, has described changes in Christian worship:

Some of the nation's fastest-growing churches attribute their success to what leaders enthusiastically refer to as contemporary worship. This is a distinctive innovation that has emerged largely since the mid-1970s. Pioneered by young pastors and lay volunteers at fledgling nondenominational churches, it has grown to the point that many traditional churches have started borrowing from it as well. Contemporary worship lives up to its name. It incorporates musical instruments (such as electric guitars and keyboards) and lyrics unheard of in churches a generation ago and makes use of new communication technologies such as home-produced videos and the Internet. It is meant to attract people with little interest in historic approaches to worship. Some of its advocates further distinguish it by arguing that it offers immediacy, relevancy, and intelligibility, rather than permanence, and that it is an expression of a new generation trying to find its voice in the church.<sup>245</sup>

It is not difficult to find strong parallels between most new trends in synagogue life and prevailing patterns in churches, from the concern with women's equality and gender-neutral language to the harnessing of new technologies for worship and study; from the quest for inclusiveness<sup>246</sup> to less formal styles adopted by clergy; from the creation of niche congregations to serve specific age groups, people of the same sexual orientation, or like-minded political views, to the goal of creating "caring communities."

A recent study reports on Christian congregations that make "community building . . . an explicit focus, a subject of conversation not left to chance but carried out through organized programs":

Beyond making some effort to care for those members who are experiencing a personal crisis, and beyond the informal groups of friends that are found in all congregations, these congregations engage in a conscious attempt to provide members with experiences of community and an opportunity to discuss what that means. There is an explicit language of community-building employed here, an elab-

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<sup>245</sup>Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley, Cal., 2003), p. 151.

<sup>246</sup>To be sure, inclusiveness has a very different connotation in churches than in synagogues, as the former are primarily concerned with ensuring racial and ethnic diversity in the membership. A fascinating ethnographic study of how one church achieved this goal is Gerardo Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers: Diversity and Innovation in a Multiethnic Church* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005).

orated discourse about what it means to be a community. This is in contrast to the family congregations, where “family” as a term is used frequently, but what it means to be a family is seldom explicitly articulated.<sup>247</sup>

Members of such community-building churches self-consciously refer to themselves as a “community of like-minded people” or “a caring community.”<sup>248</sup> Is this not precisely what efforts at synagogue change are promoting? It is difficult to avoid agreeing with Heinrich Heine, who wrote over 175 years ago about his former coreligionists, “*Wie es sich christelt, so jüdet es sich*”—as do the Christians, so do the Jews. Only, perhaps, in their heavy emphasis on textual study do synagogues depart very far from emerging church norms.<sup>249</sup>

### *A Final Word*

There is much to admire in the recent drive to revitalize American Jewish congregations. Many concerned Jewish communal leaders, as we noted at the outset, regard the revival of synagogue life as vital for the health and growth of the entire Jewish enterprise. Yet even as congregations experiment with the liturgy, music, and choreography of worship services, a note of caution is in order. Perhaps synagogues have struggled to attract more regular worshipers because prayer itself is difficult, particularly for highly educated American Jews. In their study of moderately affiliated Jews who maintain some formal attachment but are not engaged actively in Jewish life, Arnold M. Eisen and Steven M. Cohen identify the gap between private and public prayer as a primary challenge. They summarize their research as follows:

The most striking finding of our study in connection with God and the synagogue is that, for the most part, the Jews we interviewed do not make any straightforward connection between the two. They be-

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<sup>247</sup>Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York, 1999), pp. 104–05.

<sup>248</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>249</sup>Nancy T. Ammerman has commented on the divergent approaches to learning taken by synagogues and churches both in terms of subject matter and the purpose of study. She also demonstrates significant differences in the study of the Bible between the different Christian groups. See her book, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley, Cal., 2005), pp. 30–34, 47–49.



lieve in God far more than we expected, or than survey data about American Jews led us to believe. They are also surprisingly content with, and even fondly attached to, their synagogues. They told us time and again that they do not come to synagogue expecting to find God there, or stay away because they do not. The words in the prayer book do not particularly interest them. The God described and invoked in those prayers is very different from the one in which they believe—too commanding, for one thing, and . . . far too “Jewish.” They are distinctly uncomfortable with the act of prayer. And yet, they pray. This combination of unease and devotion, enthusiasm and disquiet, came through repeatedly in our interviews—making for patterns of alienation and belonging not easily unraveled or reversed.<sup>250</sup>

Here, then, is the deeper dilemma facing synagogues and their members: a great many Jews have difficulty engaging in public prayer and finding it personally meaningful. Like their Christian counterparts, Jews have moved away from what sociologist Robert Wuthnow has called “a traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places” to a “new spirituality of seeking,” exchanging the sublimity of churches and synagogues for “the new spiritual freedom” to be found through privatized, inner experiences.<sup>251</sup> If that is a correct diagnosis, none of the current synagogue revitalization programs will make large numbers of contemporary Jews comfortable with public prayer.<sup>252</sup>

Moreover, dual-earner families have to make hard decisions about how to use their limited time most efficiently. Synagogues feel compelled to make allowances for what one rabbi has called the “McDonald’s generation, fast food for the soul,” which is impatient with religious services that stretch on.<sup>253</sup> Many congregations have sharply curtailed services to fit into neat packages of an hour on Friday night or two hours on Shabbat morning, but whether such a step can make for a more satisfying synagogue experience, let alone allow for a meaningful reading of the Torah and serious prayer, is another matter.

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<sup>250</sup>Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), pp. 155–56.

<sup>251</sup>Wuthnow’s study, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, is cited *ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>252</sup>Perhaps for this reason, the STAR initiative urges congregations to offer alternatives to worship services so as to bring in people who cannot relate to public prayer.

<sup>253</sup>Steve Lipman, “Timing Is Everything,” *New York Jewish Week*, June 2, 2000, p. 12.

In the years to come, American synagogues will undoubtedly continue to address the difficulties Jews experience when they engage in public worship, and in the course of doing so will engage in further experimentation. What should be clear from our survey of recent trends in synagogue life is that no matter how we judge the efforts of congregations as they have negotiated the challenges of the past decades, no fair-minded observer can accuse them of having been moribund, static, or unchanging. Surveying the world of the American synagogue at the end of the twentieth century, anthropologist Riv-Ellen Prell concluded as follows:

Since the 1970s, the synagogue has been anything but an uncontested bedrock of American Jewish life . . . . Synagogues . . . have been responsive to cultural and social change and the challenges posed. Rabbis have fought aggressively on all sides of issues to allow their synagogues to reflect passionately held principles about gender equality, the rights of homosexual Jews, access of the intermarried, and the maintenance of Halakhah. Thus, there has been nothing bland about American synagogues. To the contrary, they have become important testing grounds, even battlegrounds, for shaping American Judaism . . . .<sup>254</sup>

Synagogues will surely continue to serve as such testing grounds—as indeed they must, given their centrality to Jewish life—just as they have responded with creativity and innovation to the altered religious landscape of the past half-century.

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<sup>254</sup>Riv-Ellen Prell, “Communities of Choice and Memory,” p. 271.

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**DEMOGRAPHY**