

JCC and Synagogue: Creating American Jewish Community

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A publication of the JCCA (Jewish Community Centers Association of North America)

Leaders of American Jewish life are struggling to understand how to reshape and create institutions that will draw Jews in the next century. The task is challenging and even urgent. Leaders are coming to believe that their institutions, beyond their specific tasks, will need to provide Jewish meaning within nurturing Jewish communities if they are to succeed. It is in this context that understanding synagogues and Jewish Community Centers, two of the premier institutions of Jewish life in North America, will help us to understand community-building. How do they complement each other and what can each learn from the other?

Every generation of American Jewish leaders, thinkers, and activists has been convinced that the synagogue they envisioned, the prayer book they translated, and the organization that they created, created the perfect synthesis for being an American and a Jew. Whether it was Isaac Mayer Wise introducing the family pew that allowed men and women to sit together, or the leaders of B'nai-B'rith who found a club-like setting to allow Jewish men to feel at home in America, or Louis Kraft who envisioned a Jewish community Center that could create a vibrant Jewish life for American, and ideal American Jewish life seemed within our reach.

At the end of the twentieth century Jews are certainly humbled. No ideal synthesis has emerged in this century that worked for every generation. An American Jewish society has, as it inevitably must, created discontents. We might not be able to have it all -- enormous social and economic opportunity and cultural continuity. If the dilemmas of Jewish life are not enough, we face the complexity of a "post modern" world where identities are fractured, meaning is fragile and hard not to parody, and community is radically voluntary and built on hard-to-find shared principles.

It is tempting to think of community in any form nostalgically, as something that happened in another time and place when people didn't work quite as hard, when families were more stable, and when Jews lived with each other out of necessity and choice. It is tempting to want the forms of community that rarely exist to be the ones that our children will have because they seemed to ensure a shared sense of what it meant to be a Jew --who to marry, where to live, what jobs to hold, and where to be on Yom Kippur. But nostalgia of course has its dangers. Above all, it might discourage us from thinking about the future, our most important task.

The rich variety and diversity of Jewish communal institutions of the last centuries should point us toward what we need to understand about creating Jewish community. We do not need to look back to a world we will never have again. We need, instead, to understand how and why Jewish institutions serve as a source of community. That task is well served by comparing and contrasting two central institutions of Jewish communal life -- the synagogue and the Jewish Community Center.

SYNAGOGUES - SCRIPTS FOR COMMUNITY

The synagogue has served Jewish life as the central institution of its Diaspora existence. Classically, it has three functions : a house of prayer, a house of study, and a house of assembly. Each function builds a set of relationships between, in the traditional world, men and men and men of God. Every activity and task reinforced the other. The people with whom one prayed were the people with whom one made decisions about the distribution of funds for the needy. The people with whom one studied were those with whom one observed holidays and Shabbat.

Synagogues were never inevitably sites for conflicts, creating factions, and disputing leadership.

They were certainly hierarchic, and wealth and prestige set individuals and groups apart from one another. There was, however, no doubt that they were the basis of a vibrant communal life both in small towns and cities. The synagogue was often the crucial address, particularly for men, to gather with friends and relatives. Jews felt both at home and the obligations of and responsibilities to community and God.

Synagogues were never interchangeable. Throughout the world they were as diverse in their architecture as they were in the styles of prayer they fostered, and the communities that they created. The Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv presents that astonishing diversity in its display of synagogues around the world, vividly demonstrating that the synagogue was the meeting ground of Jewish life and its surrounding culture.

Congregations in the United States function as "voluntary associations". Like churches, fraternal organization, or clubs, synagogues are spaces that governments do not regulate and to which no American Jew has been obliged to go. If privately participants feel "obligated" to the activities of the group, that is of no concern to the larger society. Americans participate in such organization in their "leisure" time. They are often "task oriented".

Voluntary organizations of all sorts in the United States are often "task oriented". People gather to share activities or to do work on behalf of others. The experience of community and belonging is most often the outcome of what work or activity, rather than the purpose for the group's existence. For over three centuries, voluntary organizations have epitomized the freedom and pluralism of American life. They are the organizational counterpart to the "free market". Competing institutions offer a huge range of activities competing for participants whose choices enrich their lives.

For example, American Christians are among the most avid attendants at weekly worship services of any Western nation. In fact, countries with state churches such as England and Sweden have low attendance, while American flock to places of worship. The great variety and choices available in American worship have created religious institutions as important settings to create community.

The encounter with American "Protestantized" the Jewish congregation, as it did Catholic churches as well. The great emphasis in Protestant church life on the individual, and on the private and interior experience of religious life rather than communal, ritual worship has shaped us all. The orderliness, quiet, and minimalism of mainline Protestant worship has fundamentally shaped American Jewish worship for centuries.

Synagogues have served American Jews as important vehicles to express their identities as Jews and Americans. The history of America's synagogues throughout the last two centuries has been radically democratic. They illustrate the Yiddish proverb, "Nine rabbis don't make a minyan (prayer quorum), but ten cobblers do". Ordinary Jews, lacking wealth and knowledge, are the basis of synagogue life. Voluntary organization need members. Without them they cannot accomplish their purposes.

American Jewish life took shape through its synagogues and more often than not they were founded without rabbis. The immigrant synagogues first built a bridge to the Old World, but not for long. Even as they were also becoming Americanized, Jews loved democracy and created constitutions and by-laws, elected officers, and ideas that occupied the ideologically minded reformist rabbis in Europe and America who were envisioning denominations and their relationships to Jewish law. Rather, first and second generation Jews were concerned with how to make worship beautiful, dignified, and American. They debated what language the sermon should be delivered in, whether to use musical instruments, and if men should cover their heads with hats or uniform black paper kippot. They yearned to imitate the aesthetics and behaviors that were middle and upper middle class American.

These debates did not disappear in the next generation, or the ones following synagogues continue to offer a powerful and visible expression of what its members believe is beautiful, spiritual, and meaningful in the America of their own time because synagogues continue to let Jews define themselves as American and Jewish synagogue boards not only fight over constitutions. Their members, again in response to the surrounding political culture, seek to put "rational", "corporate", and "business" models into their organizational structures. The synagogue is not a cultural island; it embraces and integrates worlds, often not consciously mindful of what is American about itself.

The synagogue cannot be understood as only radically democratic. They are also hierarchic. Their tasks are created not only by the needs and desire of their members. Though rabbis may be fired, while they preside, they stand for what is "authentically" Jewish in the context of the synagogue. Although Jews can and do pray without rabbis, the vast majority of North American congregations continue to depend on a rabbi for her or his knowledge and expertise. And synagogues do not invent their tasks, but follow series of inherited scripts that create their calendars, their activities, and the services that they offer their members, all of which shape the way their members join together to create a community.

WHAT INHIBITS AND CREATES COMMUNITY WITHIN THE SYNAGOGUE

In 1996 I spent a year observing two Conservative synagogues in Minnesota in order to understand how their members experienced their Jewishness and found meaning and community in their synagogues.

Jews are drawn to synagogues not by the celebration of the new year, leading people to characterize them as "three day a year Jews" Jews want to belong to synagogues to mark the important events of the cycle of their lives. Birth, the stages of their children's development, their own weddings, divorces, illnesses, and the deaths of their families and friends tie them to rabbis, synagogues, and one another. They are eager to share and often to understand these important transitions and events as Jewish experiences with other Jews. They motivate families, over many years, to spend tens of thousands of dollars in dues to a synagogue they may infrequently attend. And while their children reaching school age may be the magnet that draws them to synagogues, once there, "moderately affiliated" Jews want to belong and to feel connected to Jews.

Synagogues provide community of different scales. Through family activities, classes, social events, committees, boards, and prayer and study, synagogues are able to build more intimate communities within the larger community. It is from these smaller groups that members derive their sense of community and build friendships. At the same time the synagogue stands over and above all of its small groups. Particularly at the Jewish New Year, a congregant is confronted with the full dimension of the largest community.

One of the congregations I studied initiated an oral history project that gave teenagers the opportunity to interview seniors who were members. Those interviewed had their photos and excerpts of their interviews framed throughout the social hall. One shabbat, an older member looked at the wall of photographs and commented to a friend, "Now they will never forget us". Through just such experiences the congregation promises to be a community that transcends the life of the individual. It creates the possibility of a connection over time and across generation beyond even family.

Part of the synagogue's script is to encourage members to develop what may be called "sacred skills". As the synagogue grows increasingly participatory in the practice of Judaism, encouraging members to read Torah, to give sermons and divrei Torah (comments on the weekly Torah portion), to study Talmud in English, and to see oneself as a competent Jew, it provides another critical vehicle to community. These skills provide a vocabulary of Jewishness that can be shared with the group. Greater expertise increases the desire to participate; Adults learn new skills in groups and create shared experiences. The traditional "script" of Judaism creates shared

meaning and arenas for action.

Ideally, even for the moderately affiliated Jew, synagogues have the potential to create community through a script that established a personal, seasonal and communal calendar. It has given tasks and ones it can create. It opens opportunities for increased knowledge that will encourage greater commitment. It creates communities within the community that serve as an important source for making friends who will share events established by the Jewish year.

THE SYNAGOGUE AS A VULNERABLE COMMUNITY

For all of its potential and success as a source of Jewish community, the synagogue has deep vulnerabilities. Synagogues, both their rabbis and active members, are constantly anxious about their failures. They are always aware of who hasn't joint, who doesn't attend, who might not return. Like all organizations, and almost all churches, congregations have a committed core within a much greater membership, maintaining a fairly minimal connection to the institution. That connection closely follows the life cycle, and synagogues find it very difficult to hold on to members, either their loyalty or their membership, once children reach the age of bar and bat mitzvah. Families often leave because they do not want to spend limited resources on an "activity" they do not use, and the synagogues' own resources are dependent on their ability to hold onto their members.

Synagogues have a script, but it is one that provides a fairly limited idiom for Jewish life. Prayer does not draw or speak to the majority of America's Jews. Few congregants attend on a daily or weekly basis. Orthodox synagogues are more successful to this end, but not entirely so. Most synagogue activities are geared toward children and teens. The dual career family has made men's and woman's clubs the activities of the elderly. If prayer is not the primary means of being a Jew for a congregant, the synagogue is less likely to be a central address for Jewish life.

Some congregants are not particularly comfortable with prayer but they do attend synagogue regularly. In my research I saw groups of congregants who spent the majority of the service in the hall, who worked in the kitchen and helped with lunch and kiddush, who hung around with their children and other parents. I saw many congregants who sat in the service and simply read other books and magazines during the service. Jews experience community together, but paradoxically, often by ignoring the medium that was scripted to create community, prayer.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER AND JEWISH COMMUNITY

Founded in the late nineteenth century, the Jewish Community Center has been no less a meeting ground for a vision of American Jewish identity, community and life than the synagogue. Over the century it too has provided settings in which Jews have the opportunity to express their vision for what an American Jew is and to experience it with other like-minded Jews. Like the synagogue, it is organized in such a way that it both fosters and potentially limits Jewish community. The synagogue and the JCC share the task of promoting Jewish communal life and thus the future of the Jewish people. They go about it in different and often complementary ways. They therefore face different advantages and liabilities in providing a context and setting for Jewish life.

The synagogue has a number of scripts and calendars that structure its purpose and very often narrow it. The Jewish Community Center has precisely the opposite advantage or problem. Also a voluntary associations, it has no given script it must enact, nor tasks it must accomplish. This feature is both its vulnerability and its great strength. No one joins a JCC to do something other than what is available there. Members don't stand in the hallway chatting when they really should be exercising or going to a committee meeting. They don't subvert the purpose which has drawn them there. A JCC may have an ideology, but it will never have a single overarching purpose that will inevitably alienate Jews just as it draws them to its community. If the synagogue ideally is a house of prayer, study, and assembly, the JCC is a setting for Jewish life that is open ended, multifaceted, and sensitive to the historical moment, community, and competing ideas of Jewish

life in which it finds itself.

Does this mean that the Jewish Community Center is more Center than Jewish or a Community without a Jewish Center? The answer is, that depends on its leadership and visions. There is no question that the lacking the compass of the liturgical year, it is more open-ended than a synagogue. But without that compass it is freer to create the creative synthesis between Judaism and American life, and Jewishness and community that often challenges the synagogue.

If the synagogue is by its nature radically democratic, the JCC is perhaps less so. It depends on leadership that can create an important vision for its vitality. It too must attract followers, even without the necessity for a minyan. However, nurturing leadership, and investing in those who look creatively toward a future is critical for all institutions; but especially for an open-ended, radically voluntarist one.

LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY COMMUNITY

That position makes the JCC the ideal setting for meaningful community as the end of the twentieth and into the next century. A variety of scholars describe the "successful" forms of community of our time as occurring in "small groups". Although many view the trend as problematic for the nation or the culture, they know that Americans, and Jews among them, seek out small face-to-face groups as the places where they are most "at home". The voluntary associations of our time often speak to us most profoundly through our personal lives. Prayer, healing, and support groups are the most common types mentioned. In them, members find common cause, feel cared about, feel connections, and feel like they belong. These groups may lead Americans away from responsibilities beyond the self, and they may create a fragile form of community in which it is relatively easy to leave or join because personal needs are paramount. Fragile or not, it does seem to be the compelling form of community of our time.

Scholars contrast these groups to larger institutional communities like churches and synagogues where men and women often complain about feeling anonymous, unknown, and disconnected. In the endlessly busy lives of Americans in our time, perhaps they need such small groups to create community because they have neither the time nor the interest to show up in larger settings where they might eventually find and create smaller groups. Americans and American Jews seem less willing to pledge allegiance to general concepts, and want instead to find the custom made activities that are right for them as parents, as spiritual seekers, or as people interested in changing their lives.

It is clear that many synagogues have created a new organizational structures that responds to this need. What some have jokingly called the "synaplex" as a play on multi-screen theaters, reflects this trend. Synagogues often simultaneously run a variety of services for groups more finely differentiated by need. The learners' minyan, the families with preschooler minyan, the minyan of those who want to pray and study at a higher "level" than others in the synagogue, and the bar or bat mitzvah service are just some examples of who might be praying together and apart on any single shabbat. Unified, communal prayer may be less likely in the coming decades.

Because the Jewish community Center is not built upon a vision of a single community sharing a single set of obligations or tasks it is in the position to foster the community of our time. The JCC is pre-eminently a community of communities, and its members' sense of attachment and purpose is enacted in multiple communities. Overlapping groups prove to be the stickiest glue of communal life. JCC members who find themselves in the locker room at the same time, spending Sundays watching their children participate in an active basketball league game, taking a class, and serving on a JCC committee for the arts or social justice work are those members who will feel rooted in and loyal to Jewish communal life. Hypothetically, if they also encounter some of the people from these settings at their synagogue, at their children's Day School, or in Federation settings, their Jewish communal life will offer a contemporary version of the denser and more encompassing neighborhoods of Jewish life that dominated the United States in the 1950s and

1960s

Their sense of connection to a Jewish world is tied to the shared purposes of a number of smaller and overlapping settings for making Jewish connections. No entry way to Jewish life is more powerful than children, but what a JCC offers those who come by that route or another will determine a great deal about Jewish life in the United States in the future.

COMMUNITY FOR WHAT?

Given the critical role of the JCC in fostering not only community, but Jewish community as well, how might this vision of the JCC as a beehive of small communities work? The synagogue, I suggest, is disadvantaged by the tasks at which it cannot succeed, drawing more of its members into greater participation, most likely because of the centrality of prayer to that mission.

The JCC has the possibility to develop a much broader range of Jewish activities than the synagogue. The professional and lay leadership of the Jewish of the Jewish Community JCC movement has the opportunity to shape a creative and profound a synthesis between Jewishness and JCC activities as it chooses to imagine. At various points in the JCC's history it has taken team sports, athletics, and cultural activities and filled them with Jewish content. There is nothing artificial about this work. We define our identities as much, if not more, in our "leisure time" as we do in any other dimension of our lives. If we are living in the promise of a Jewish renaissance, we will know that not just in the schools that children attend, but in the social world they, along with their parents live as well. The JCC is the address where that work may well be done.

Research on synagogues makes clear that they are very much institutions tied to the life cycle. Adults tend to join when their children are school age and leave when they reach high school. All Jewish institutions should be mindful of the fact that the large Baby Boom generation is made up of a variety of diverse forms of families and households whose children are increasingly becoming adults. The Baby Boomers themselves are facing a dramatic change in their lives as they begin to retire, rethink their professional lives and begin to seek out other opportunities for development and change. Whether Jewish institutions are in a position to speak to that group depends entirely on their creativity.

Middle age and beyond is a time of experimentation. Changing family constellations and changing residences open these adults to new needs for community and new types of communities as well. The JCC as a Community of Communities is in a position to program and formulate groups attuned to their needs, to the very "small groups" that are so critical to identify and meaning in American life.

In a recent commitment to education as a key element in the JCCs agenda, Jewish Community Centers have already demonstrated their ability to focus and change the "culture" of the JCC, to draw in Jews with different set of needs and offer them a variety of possible settings to grow in and develop as a Jew.

What JCCs need to understand about themselves is that they have the institutional framework to create Jewish community for the next century. The movement's leadership should take that as a given. The more compelling question is how to translate the possibility for creating a content-rich Jewish community into the lives of Jews who make up the American Jewry of today. Like most middle and upper middle class Americans, they are seeking meaning in a rather chaotic world. Their time for "leisure" is limited. For those with young families, their children draw them to virtually any activity in which they participate. As children grow and parents age a whole new set of needs develop for community and identity. Their needs for community are neither settled nor unchanging. This generation has a broad range of family types. Synagogues, despite their efforts, are often not comfortable settings for families without young children, or adults without spouses. The JCC would be foolish to ignore the diversity of Jews who are in search of Jewish community.

Religion is undergoing a revolution in American with an ever-growing interest for Jews in study,

learning, and spirituality. A highly secular educated Baby Boom generation will need programs about Jewish life that address them with great sophistication. The extent to which American Judaism of the last half century had or lacked content is much debated. It would be safe to say, however, that Baby Boomers and their children will seek out settings rich in content and meaning. As well acculturated Americans many institutions compete for their loyalty and participation. JCCs do two things well, they are sites of Jewish community and Jewish meaning. Their moment may well have arrived.

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