

SH 130 T
SH B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue
SH Synagogue

TZ 1134926

CHAPTER 10

Congregation B'nai Jeshurun: The Power of a Relevant Message

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer

B'nai Jeshurun was the first Ashkenazic synagogue established in New York City and the third Conservative synagogue in the United States. It was founded in 1825 when a group of Ashkenazic Jews broke away from the Sephardic congregation of Shearith Israel, until then the only place of Jewish worship in New York City. The new congregation was housed in a series of buildings before it built, during World War I, a magnificent synagogue on its present site on West 88th Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

In the early 1980s, this once-prestigious synagogue was in decline. The building was in shambles, and the congregation on the verge of extinction. There was no heat in the synagogue. Rooms were piled high with trash and broken furniture. The roof leaked and the vestry was flooded. The congregation, in bankruptcy, had sold one of its buildings. Only eight paying members remained, not even enough for a *minyan* (the 10 Jews required for prayer) without counting the rabbi and his wife.

In 1959, my own life took me to Argentina, where, for twenty-six years, I worked within the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. I founded a synagogue, Bet El, which grew from a handful of members who met in a private home to an institution with more than a thousand families and its own school system and summer camp. In 1984, the board of trustees of B'nai Jeshurun, hopeful the same congregational growth might be possible in New York, invited me to assume their vacant pulpit.

I was attracted to B'nai Jeshurun in part because there was not anyone or anything to fight against and, literally, the only way to go was up. There was no need for politicking because there were virtually no members of the congregation. There was a board, but it presided over virtually nothing. When I assumed the rabbinate in September 1985, there was no office and

no telephone. I had a bridge table, a folding chair, and a public pay phone in the hallway downstairs in what once was the community center of the congregation.

Today B'nai Jeshurun has 3,200 congregants—over 1,000 member units (both families and singles). Some 600 to 700 worshipers attend Friday night services, and 250 to 300 come for Saturday morning services. The annual budget has increased from \$100,000 to over \$1 million. This growth was achieved by sending forth a message which appealed to a large number of unaffiliated Jews.

ATTRACTING A TARGET POPULATION

When we began our work in the mid-1980s, we faced an establishment Jewish community which had moved to the right. To many Jews, the Orthodox stream seemed unable to deal effectively with the modern world, and a congealing, deadening process in Judaism had turned many liberals and social activists away from the synagogue. The synagogue, in large measure, had become a reactionary institution—Jewishly, politically, and economically. In contrast, at B'nai Jeshurun we proposed that taking Judaism seriously required having a *relevant message*—a community to which people could relate seriously, a liturgical experience relevant to their feelings and lives, and social action which provided a meaningful response to the world in which they lived.

Our message attracted a population distanced by previous congregational experiences and by the current social, political, and religious climate in the Jewish community. Many had never been in a synagogue or had left twenty to thirty years ago vowing never to return. Our message spoke to those repelled by congregations in which one's wealth and social status were of utmost importance, to those who disagreed with rightist politics in Israel and similar policies of much of the American Jewish establishment, and to those who rejected the positions of the right-wing Orthodox and their almost exclusive concern with ritual law at the expense of dealing, Jewishly, with the existential exigencies of contemporary society. Intellectual Jews, liberals and social activists, were attracted to B'nai Jeshurun. We did not attract the very wealthy because there is no social status in being a member here. Rather we have a highly volatile group of people, passionately interested and mostly creative—writers, artists, scholars, university professors, and people in creative endeavors in business. Our membership is young (on average, members are around 40 years of age) and highly educated (most have advanced degrees). The majority share liberal views and find within our synagogue an outlet for their social-political leanings, although there are many who come for the rich liturgical experience they find regardless of all politics.

The following sections detail the ways in which we have developed a religious institution relevant and meaningful to the lives of our congregants.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

We do not talk about “building a congregation” at B’nai Jeshurun; rather our work is *building community*. I have heard it said that it is not possible to build a community of New Yorkers, a people who cherish anonymity. That, however, is simply not true. In my experience, New York can be a lonely, cold city, and many of its citizens want to reach out to others. We have seen many lives changed in the synagogue because people have engaged other human beings, because they have enlarged their support group, because they have responded emotionally to a service in which people dying with AIDS were called to the Torah. When people desire to belong to a real community—one that cares, one that allows them to cry in a service, laugh, sing, dance, or sit quietly and meditate—a spiritual electricity is generated which energizes the rabbi and the entire congregation.

Inclusion of All

In building community, we have striven to be an inclusive body. We have no fixed membership dues, but rather have established a system in which dues are determined according to self-declared income. We do not have tickets for the high holidays. Our doors are open and there is no charge. Should our congregation grow so large that tickets become necessary, we will still manage to find a place for those without tickets to join us in prayer. (N.B. An open door policy is highly unusual in the Jewish community. Given space limitations, the importance of the holidays to so many Jews [even those who do not practice their Judaism during the rest of the year], and the resulting fund-raising potential, the vast majority of synagogues admit worshippers to high holiday services only if they have a ticket. In some cases tickets are included in the annual membership dues; in other cases there is an additional assessment for high holiday seats.)

We welcome diverse groups. For example, we hold a special gay/lesbian Shabbat dinner, and we perform the *brit ahavah* (covenant of love) for homosexual couples. When the first lesbian couple engaged in this ceremony, the congregation embraced them and danced about them in a fulfilling and emotional moment of community.

Once a month, B’nai Jeshurun has a spiritual gathering of Jewish people with AIDS and their loved ones (who may be Jewish or Christian, white, black, or Asian). During Passover, the temple sponsors an AIDS seder attended by over one hundred people. The congregation provides meals which our members serve to AIDS patients in one of the local hospitals.

Reaching out to those with AIDS is a quintessentially Jewish act. We learn in the Midrash that God himself visits the sick and that God himself accompanies the dead. The imitation of God (*imitatio dei*) in Judaism is the *Kedoshim TiHyu*, "You shall be holy." Just as God is full of loving kindness, so shall you be full of loving kindness. Just as God is compassionate and full of mercy, so shall you be.

Intimacy and Egalitarian Forms

A great intimacy was struck up from the beginning. We all knew each others' names and the names of each others' spouses and children. After services on Saturday morning, worshipers were invited to the rabbi's house for *kiddush* (the blessing over the wine), something to eat and conversation. As new members joined the congregation, they were invited to a meeting at the rabbi's house where they would hear what the congregation was trying to accomplish and have the opportunity to ask questions and feel "ownership" in the congregation.

We have striven to eradicate hierarchy in the synagogue, and our membership has been highly responsive to egalitarian forms. Everyone in the congregation, including the rabbi, is addressed on a first name basis. My former student, Rolando Matalon, joined me in the synagogue when he graduated from the seminary. We have a cooperative rabbinate; there is not a "senior" and a "junior" rabbi. We changed the geography of the sanctuary. In most synagogues, there are chairs placed on the *bimah* (pulpit) where the president, cantor, and rabbi sit looking out at the congregation. We removed these chairs so that worshipers would look at the ark and the eternal light, not at the rabbi. The rabbis lead services; they do not sit or chat, and they rarely look up during prayer. It is not theater: there is no performance and there is no audience.

We did away with other formalities which interfere with intimacy and community. There is a social element in many synagogues in which a person does not fit if he or she does not have money or he or she is not dressed properly. How could seriously searching moderns identify with that type of religious expression? People come to B'nai Jeshurun in blue jeans or whatever clothing suits them. The rabbis wear *kipot* (skullcaps), but never robes (except on the high holy days). In summer, they stand on the pulpit on Shabbat without a tie or jacket.

At services, debates outnumber sermons. The rabbis do not sermonize; we hold dialogues with each other or with the congregation. Something new happens at each service. The congregation is challenged: a question is posed before the reading of the Torah and those assembled respond, or in the midst of the service, the rabbi will stop to ask "What does this prayer mean?" We discuss with the congregation the many meanings of the Torah portion. People raise their hands, and they are free to speak into one of the

microphones passed around the sanctuary. And they listen to each other. We might read an article, for example "Principles and Procedures of Jewish Law" (Robert Gordis, 1979) or Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (1954). These are not easy pieces, and we spend a number of services on them, a half hour each session, five hundred to seven hundred people studying together.

The message of community is found in these simple acts—that the rabbis are called by their first names, that they do not set themselves apart with robes and chairs on the dais, that they speak spontaneously from the pulpit and hold dialogues with the congregation. In this community/congregation, everybody, in cooperative partnership, is called upon to do something. We sing together, pray together, and invite those with musical instruments to come and play for the congregation. As we approach community in this way, so do we enhance the passion and vigor of our prayers.

PASSION IN PRAYER

The liturgical drama is of overwhelming beauty in Judaism. It is destroyed, however, when we confuse pomposity with esthetics and solemnity with passion. At B'nai Jeshurun, we have created a liturgical experience that, while truthful to the traditional text, invites spontaneity, melody, and dance.

We have no formal cantor but rely on the congregation itself to make music. We have a variety of musical instruments, including an organ. Our musical director, Ari Priven, sings from the organ and only assumes the formal role of cantor on high holy days. (N.B. In many Conservative synagogues, prayers are chanted unaccompanied; the organ is often viewed as an assimilationist form imported from Christian churches.) How did we get the people to accept all the instruments? We took the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service (Welcoming the Sabbath) and went psalm by psalm to show how many instruments were mentioned. Evidently the cymbals, strings, drums, and other instruments were played in the temple—every reason to bring them into our worship services now.

Freedom of liturgy in the synagogue is a hallmark of Jewish growth. It allows for passion, for music, for dance. Indeed, we dance in our services. On Friday night, hundreds dance *L'cha dodi* just as they did in Safed in the sixteenth century.

We want and need a faith experience that spurs us to commitment, to living testimony, to passionate witness through encounter with reality. It is a necessity for us to pray. It is a joy to sing praises to God. But praying and singing are simply not enough. We must translate our prayers into action.

SOCIAL ACTION

Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say that the most tragic figure is the messenger who has forgotten his message. And so we began by asking, what is the message of our synagogue? What do we stand for? In response to this question, we challenged the congregation to accept its social responsibility. A congregation cannot pray on Shabbat and not have a position with regard to the hungry and homeless on the street. The less fortunate may be black or Latino, but they are our brothers and sisters. If the synagogue does not say anything about them or to them, how can we engage in authentic Torah? Where is the message of compassion and justice? Where is Isaiah's prophetic message: "Share your bread with the hungry. Take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him. Do not turn away from people in need"? There are tens of thousands of homeless families in New York City. If this is not a Jewish problem, then I do not know what Judaism is all about.

Such was the message that came from the pulpit. We never preached what people wanted to hear. We never avoided difficult issues. Personally, I do not believe in a neutral Judaism, nor a gastronomic Judaism where people gather for lox and bagels. Synagogues, I find, have frequently become settings for sterile exercises in ritual, gathering places with a country club atmosphere, or arenas to enjoy culture. We proposed, instead, a Jewish liberation theology, a prophetic Judaism that informs a relevant message about how we relate to the world and to other human beings.

Establishing a Shelter

The first step we took at B'nai Jeshurun, therefore, was to establish a shelter for the homeless and to feed the hungry people in the street. We cleaned out the vestibule, previously flooded and full of trash, to create a space for people to eat and sleep. We instituted a weekly meal for the hungry. This is not a soup kitchen. At the meal, flowers grace the tables, a Barnard professor plays the piano, and members of the congregation join the people they term their "guests" for food and conversation. Other congregants sleep overnight at the shelter or come in the morning to serve breakfast.

The synagogue has always been a trifold institution—a house of gathering, of study, and of prayer. The fact that there should also be a shelter in the synagogue goes back at least to the medieval period, when the wayfarer slept in the synagogue. The role of social action within Judaism dates from the eighth century B.C.E., although one might also say that it began with Moses himself. Despite these historical traditions in Judaism, it is a rare synagogue that opens its doors to the homeless and the poor.

Eco-Kashrut

Only kosher food is allowed in the synagogue because *kashrut* (the code of Jewish dietary laws) is a tenet of the Conservative movement that we believe in and maintain. Kashrut is a highly valuable concept which teaches reverence for life. But kashrut as generally practiced today is not meaningful enough and it often devolves into a competition to see who can be more kosher than the next. In response, we want to extend the concept of kashrut to make it more relevant to the congregation. We have been working for a number of years with the Jewish Renewal Group on the concept of eco-kashrut, a new sense of kashrut geared toward ecology and what is appropriate to use without defiling the planet. It is inconceivable to us that *piku-ah nefesh*, the saving of human life, not be extended to include fauna and flora, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the refuse we leave, the products we manufacture, the destruction we wreak upon God's creation, and the economic resources that we plunder. We believe that within Judaism are found the tenets to support the concept of kashrut as applied to the environment.

For example, is nonrecycled paper kosher? Can you or should you eat grapes picked in California by migrant agricultural workers who are treated inhumanely and are dying by the thousands because of the pesticides and other chemicals used in the vineyards? Perhaps those grapes should not be *kasher*. Our children, the next generation, are probably more sensitive to ecology than we are. If we can show them that Judaism has a relevant message on this topic—that we should not have some item in the house because it is not ecologically kasher—kashrut would become an important and worthwhile concept to them.

Role of Women

The structure of Judaism is male-dominated and patriarchal. Women, for example, have been largely read out of Jewish history. There is Golda Meir in modern Israeli history, and Deborah and a few others in the Bible, but overwhelmingly women are ignored in rabbinic, medieval, or modern literature. As with other elements in Judaism, gender roles have become fossilized.

B'nai Jeshurun, to the extent possible, has created a nonsexist liturgy. In the Hebrew blessing (of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), for example, we add the blessing of the matriarchs (Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Leah). In the wedding ceremony, we use an egalitarian *ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract). Women have been given a role in the congregation equal to that of men. They recite the blessings at the Torah and perform all the other functions traditionally fulfilled only by men. This egalitarian approach

attracts both men and women who neither understand nor tolerate the inequality of women in some other congregations.

Education and Discussion

B'nai Jeshurun has become identified as a place where all shades of social politics are presented and discussed amidst the traditional functioning of the synagogue (worship services, bar/bat mitzvahs, the naming of newborns, and so on). After services, we might have a speaker who represents a hotline for the protection of workers' rights in Israel, prominent members of the peace camp (representing both Israeli and Arab perspectives), someone from the Israel Religious Action Center concerned with religious freedom, social action, government accountability, and civil rights in Israel, or a local activist educating the congregation on how to keep the religious right from taking over the public school system.

This programming is an important part of realizing the potential for taking action in the world as a Jew. Our theology suggests that the congregation address the world through its Judaism, but not limit itself to the Jewish world. We Judaize our understanding of the human condition by passing the elements of human wisdom and knowledge through the filter of Judaism. We find when we do this that many social and political problems marked by suffering and injustice are religious, spiritual issues. We emphasize this perspective in the liturgy at B'nai Jeshurun, changing the text so that prayers are not offered exclusively for Israel. For example, as we conclude the *Kaddish* ("God who makes peace in the high places, may God grant peace to us, to all Israel"), we add, "May God grant peace to *all* the inhabitants of this planet."

RELEVANCE AND CONTINUITY

Judaism is not a fundamentalist religion based on the literal understanding of the Biblical text. Rather, it is an ongoing search for the meaning of God's revelation and the adaptation of that revelation to the exigencies of an ever-changing world. Thus Jews believe in the oral law as well as in the written law. The oral law's basic text is the Talmud and its exegesis according to certain hermeneutic laws. The dynamic, organic process of its development, which occurs throughout history, reflects Judaism's endless search for the relevance and merit of its message in history and its search for God's presence in time.

In the aftermath of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, which showed increased rates of intermarriage and declining rates of affiliation (Kosmin, Goldstein, Waksberg, Lerer, Keysar, and Scheckner, 1991), there has been deep concern with Jewish continuity and with the survival of the Jewish people. Let us begin by asking, survival as what? Is Judaism a relic

from antiquity, a fossil, or does it have something to say to the world? Does it have something to say to our own children? If we have a message, the unaffiliated will come to us and our children will remain with us.

If Judaism is only about whether or not swordfish is kosher or whether men and women sit together or separately, the vast majority of young Jews will not be interested. Most intelligent, sensitive, well-educated Jews have questions. The richness of life—spiritual, psychological, and emotional—is bound up not so much with answers but with the formulation of the questions. The synagogue should be the place where people are in quest of a meaningful encounter with God, and with the reality of their lives and their world.

NOTE

This chapter is a compilation of previous writing, speeches, and interviews on Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. During 1993, the editors worked with Rabbi Marshall Meyer to prepare this piece.

REFERENCES

- Gordis R. (1979). A Dynamic Halakhah: Principles and Procedures of Jewish Law. *Judaism*, 28, 263–282.
- Heschel, A. J. (1954). *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*. NY: Scribner.
- Kosmin, B.A., Goldstein, S., Waksberg, J., Lerer, N., Keysar, A., and Scheckner, J. (1991). *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. NY: Council of Jewish Federations.