

Synagogues That Work

by Sidney Schwarz

The Jewish community has ignored the spiritual dimensions of Judaism for far too long and we are paying a heavy price for it in terms of the number of younger Jews who have abandoned the Jewish community for a host of spiritual alternatives. There is ample cause for concern that the Jewish community is not reading the signals of this changing agenda quickly enough. Wade Clark Roof, in his *A Generation of Seekers* (1993), noted that the Boomer generation of Americans, as they enter middle age, has little loyalty to their birth religion. Their search for "post-materialistic" values about meaning and the purpose of life generally leaves them disillusioned with the traditional churches and synagogues of their youth, which are long on doctrine, liturgy, and hierarchy and short on personal engagement. The greatest beneficiaries of the spiritual wanderlust of the Boomer generation are a wide array of spiritual retreat centers, ashrams of eastern religious traditions, and New Age-inspired self-help groups. Among the most avid consumers of these new spiritual alternatives are Jews.

CAPITALIZING ON THE RELIGIOUS BOOM

Given this fact, the emerging interest in revitalizing the American synagogue comes not a moment too soon. By any measure, there is a religious boom going on in America. The question is whether synagogues can read the generational preferences well enough to capitalize on this boom. Among these preferences are inclusivity, empowerment, and engagement. Inclusivity implies a need for the synagogue to recognize that the two-parent family with children is only one of many family configurations in the community today and that other family configurations are deserving of equal programmatic attention. Empowerment suggests an approach to Judaism that radically democratizes synagogue life, giving laypeople the tools to function, as might rabbis and cantors. Engagement requires a serious approach to the study of the tradition and provides an opportunity for lay

Jews to enter into the centuries-old exercise of text wrestling to discover what *Torah* has to say about the way we live our lives.

The synagogue-centers of the American Jewish community do not come by these traits naturally or easily. The synagogue-center was created for the first generation of American Jews that entered suburbia. As such, these synagogues served as status markers for a generation that was celebrating its newfound prosperity and was eager to fit into the suburban landscape of middle class America. Synagogue-centers were characterized by large edifices, clergy in robes, services with choirs and rehearsed staging, and a program that supported the ethnic agenda of the community. Though most synagogue-centers have made modifications from these institutional styles, inclusivity, empowerment, and engagement are not their forte. The *havurah* movement and Jewish renewal have been important outlets for just such expressions of Jewish life and practice.

The challenge for the century that we are now entering is to mainstream much of this style. It calls for a change in the paradigm from synagogue-center to synagogue community. In my study of American synagogues, I identified four characteristics of the synagogue-community that are beginning to transform the synagogue as we know it — articulation of mission, transforming organizational culture, spiritual leadership, and framing of serious Judaism.

Articulation of Mission - Fewer and fewer Jews know why it is worth the time and expense to pursue Jewish affiliation. Precisely because the rationale for ethnic loyalty has broken down, we need synagogues to frame answers to the question "Why be Jewish?" for a generation that, itself, cannot answer the question. As synagogues begin to ask such big questions, they will point to new ways to reach a generation that has an entirely new set of assumptions than did their parents about being Jewish in America.

Organizational Culture - Synagogues need to embrace a new ethic of egalitari-

anism. The greatest spiritual power of a synagogue-community lies latent in the soul of every person who walks through the door. Attend the hundreds of lay-led *minyanim* that now take place in synagogues across the country concurrent with the main service. Compare the passion and energy at the two services and you will be amazed. When lay Jews are given a chance to lead services, deliver talks, read *Torah*, introduce new music,

The greatest spiritual power of a synagogue-community lies latent in the soul of every person who walks through the door.

etc., what is (sometimes) sacrificed in professional quality is more than made up for in the sense of ownership that gets created. Synagogues need to find more ways to tap into that energy.

Spiritual Leadership - Most rabbis are relegated to serving as religious functionaries — leading services and overseeing *B'nai/B'not Mitzvah*, weddings, funerals, and the like. It is an important and time-consuming job. But, a generation starving for spiritual direction will not be drawn to religious functionaries. They need to hear someone articulate a vision for how to invest life with meaning and purpose. Rabbis increasingly need to invite Jews to tell their stories, their spiritual journeys, and then to put those experiences into the context of Jewish wisdom and tradition. The deepest truth people know is their inner story, not *Torah*. Rabbis can and should help relate such personally framed truths to the truth passed down by our heritage through our sacred texts. It is the way that seekers come to realize that Judaism offers a portal to greater meaning. It is a portal that thousands are ready to walk through, if properly guided.

Framing of Serious Judaism - If we want to create serious Jews, we must offer serious Judaism. Too many Jews remem-

ber the synagogues of their childhood as long on ostentation and form and short on spirituality and substance. It is enough to keep them away from synagogues as adults. Let synagogues be places that offer opportunities for study of classical texts, challenging *Torah* discussions, and an incentive to achieve Hebrew literacy. Let worship services allow for alternate expressions of spirituality through meditation, music, and movement, so that we invest our ancient liturgy with newfound *kavanah* (intention). Let the halls of the sanctuary reverberate with a multitude of voices — of joy and of anguish, of faith and of doubt.

DOING A BETTER JOB FOR THE YOUTH

If these are the first steps to transforming the culture of American synagogues so that they might become more vital and engaging for the adults who make up the community, how might these same institutions do a better job with their youth? Let me offer three thoughts.

1. I no longer believe that the afternoon Hebrew school system is tenable, if it ever was. Students of today are no more interested in giving up their after-school hours than were their parents who today *shlep* them in carpools, fighting afternoon rush hours to get them to class. Though the caliber of educational materials and curricula is improving, the problem of finding competent teachers is getting worse, not better. It is the rare congregational school that can even dream of addressing the wide range of special learning needs that exist in their student populations. Most principals are struggling to start the school year with a live body in front of every classroom.

It is time to accelerate the transition to a retreat-based, experiential model of Jewish learning. Scrap the weekly lessons and in its place substitute a series of retreats, *Shabbatonim*, half-day family education programs, and trips. Educators know of the greater impact and effectiveness that these settings allow.

Let's take the risk and go for broke. We can't do much worse. Let's create a logical sequence of such Jewish learning adventures so that they progress in a meaningful fashion and are age appropri-

ate. Let's directly involve parents in some of the experiences, but allow enough time for the age cohort to bond in informal settings. It will plant the seeds for ongoing

..... on the eve of the rebellious teen years, (a tikkun olam project) provides a young person with a sense that their religious heritage is more than pomp and ceremony.

involvement in youth movements and camps as children move into their teen years. Use the Internet to equip parents to support these activities with appropriate preparation and follow-up. Even cognitive material can be imparted with greater effectiveness in informal educational settings in a fraction of the time than it would take in an after-school class.

2. To the extent that the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* will continue to be the holy grail of Jewish education, let's use it to maximize what impact it has on the student and his or her family. Let the focal point of the experience be a *zedakah/tikkun olam* project. Let it be shaped by the student in consultation with teachers, rabbis, and parents. Let it be a focal point of the service, in addition to the chanting of *tefillot*, *Torah* and/or *haftarah*.

Imagine the value to all assembled as the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* talks about how he or she helped to organize a book drive for an inner city library, raised money to build a playground for a youth center in Israel, or collected household items for a family recently escaped from Kosovo, now living in a nearby community (all real examples from the congregation I was privileged to lead). Imagine the impact as the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* talks about the Jewish values that informed the project and asks guests to honor him or her by contributing to the cause that was just presented.

This is, by no means, a panacea to Jewish education. But, it can provide a critical focal point to a young person's entry into responsible Jewish adulthood. It marks the "coming out" of the child

into a new identity as a "*mitzvah*-man/woman." Not bad for an adolescent searching for self-esteem and a feeling that they can make a difference in the world. In addition, on the eve of the rebellious teen years, it provides a young person with a sense that their religious heritage is more than pomp and ceremony. It drives home the lesson that the centerpiece of entry into Jewish maturity was an act of reaching out to repair a piece of a broken world (*tikkun olam*). Hopefully, the experience will pave the way to rich engagement with a whole range of social action and community service work during the teen years under the aegis of youth movements and camps.

3. To paraphrase a title of a book by our former first lady, Hillary Clinton, "it takes an entire community to raise a child." So often, synagogues seem to have two separate realms that rarely come together — the adult and youth realm. When the two realms meet, on the day of the *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, both constituencies are resentful. The student is placed in a setting that is more or less foreign to him/her; the regular worshippers wonder why there is so much intrusion into the worship service that they cherish.

One of the great untapped treasures of the Jewish community is the life experience of the thousands of Jews who are in our midst. The raising up of a generation of young people who, we hope, will be affirmative and identifying Jews as adults is the process of passing a heritage down through the generations. Obviously, family legacies and parenting play a big role in this process. Where there is little to no Jewish legacy, it is much harder to raise a child into an affirming Jew. But more and more of our families are in this very category. What should they do?

I want to suggest that synagogues should pair every child up with an adult in the community who is a positive Jewish role model. The purpose of this pairing is to create a mentoring/role model relationship for the student. It is relatively easy to suggest dozens of appropriate activities for the pair to engage in. When we did this in my congregation, the experiences varied widely in terms of frequency of contact. It was originally conceived of as

(continued on page 46)

Synagogues That Work

(continued from page 45)

a tutoring relationship in cases where the parents had no ability to help their children with Hebrew language assignments. But in many cases, the relationships blossomed into regular outings and the sharing of a wide array of experiences. In most cases, the pairings were with adults whose children were already grown. Not only do those adults have more time available, but they also begin to play the role of pseudo-grandparents.

The effect of the program is transformative for the entire congregation. First, it connects the adults with the "netherworld" of youth in the community in a way that rarely, if ever, happens. Second, it sends the message that the entire community needs to take responsibility for

raising the next generation of Jews. It also gives important recognition and honor to the wisdom and experience of older adults at a time in their lives when they are beginning to feel "put out to pasture." I recall several *B'nai/B'not Mitzvah* when the adult mentor made a presentation to the student during the service. There is hardly a better example of *dor, dor vedorshav* (passing down the heritage through the generations).

These are some of the characteristics of synagogue communities that will inspire a new generation of Jews to join their ranks. It requires some "thinking outside the box" and institutional leadership that will not shrink from taking some risks. But, for those synagogues that are

bold enough, they will soon find themselves to be the kind of communities that will lead the way to a renaissance of Jewish life. ■

Rabbi Sid Schwarz is the founder and president of The Washington Institute for Jewish Leadership and Values, an organization dedicated to the renewal of American Jewish life through the integration of Jewish learning, values, and social responsibility. He is the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Rockville, MD, and the author of Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews can Transform the American Synagogue (Jossey-Bass, Spring, 2000).