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# The Logic of Numbers vs. The Logic of Souls

## The Synagogue-Center and Jewish Communal Continuity<sup>1</sup>

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In the second half of the 19th century a new type of religious institution, the “synagogue-center,” appeared in the United States. Today it represents the accepted model for most contemporary Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox synagogues. The synagogue-center was an ambitious attempt to return Jews to the fold and is a distinctly modern conception of the interface between religion and community. In this essay, I argue that the ironic consequence of the creation of the synagogue-center is the erosion of Jewish communal life.

Before the rise of the synagogue-center, the American synagogue devoted its building and calendar to the prayer service and other religious rituals. The synagogue was a religious institution that stood next to, and complemented the activities of other Jewish communal institutions. These included religious institutions such as the *hevra kadisha*, *bet midrash* and *talmud torah*, and secular leisure, cultural, welfare and educational institutions that served the Jewish community. In contrast, the synagogue-center is an institution that seeks to subsume activities that go beyond the domain of religious ritual narrowly defined.<sup>2</sup> If the traditional synagogue was one part of a larger communal framework within a geographic region, the synagogue-center attempts to become a community unto itself.

### The Logic of Souls vs. The Logic of Numbers

The interface of the synagogue with the Jewish community rests on two cultural logics that always vie with one another for influence. These are the logic of numbers and the logic of souls. Both offer distinct theological visions of

“Klal Yisrael” or “Jewish Peoplehood,” and both demand different forms of synagogue organization with different implications for community.

No synagogue follows either logic to its ultimate end. The logic of numbers determines that a successful synagogue attracts enough Jews to maintain a stable financial basis and a critical mass of members. However, if the logic of numbers is exaggerated the synagogue will eventually die. At a certain point, too much attention to numbers undermines communal and religious life. In contrast, the logic of souls inquires into the quality of religious conduct and the depth of communal life. However, as in the logic of numbers compromise is important. Members will have different ideals regarding religious conduct, and some are unable (or perhaps unwilling) to live up to the ideal. While the level and nature of compromise differs from large to small synagogues, from area to area, and from denomination to denomination, there will always be some form of compromise in order to maintain membership and satiate the logic of numbers.

Most Conservative synagogues emphasize the logic of numbers over the logic of souls, by tying success and failure to the size of membership. A stagnating synagogue is one that fails to grow for an extended period. A synagogue in decline is an institution losing members. The larger the synagogue the greater its prestige, influence and importance within the Conservative movement. Relatively little attention is paid to the religious and communal mission of the synagogue in determining standards of success and prestige. For example, a synagogue might shrink in size of membership, but improve the quality of religious and communal experience for its remaining membership.

A good example of the logic of numbers is the Rabbinical Assembly seniority scale that regulates which rabbinical applicants can apply for jobs in different sized synagogues. The larger the synagogue, the higher the seniority of the rabbi applying for the position. In other words: rabbinical prestige = synagogue size. There are solid theological and sociological reasons for the emphasis on numbers, but there are also tremendous costs in terms of religious and communal continuity. My goal is to highlight the dilemma and illustrate the damage caused by a logic of numbers that is unchecked by the logic of souls.

### **The Rise of the Synagogue-Center and the Power and Consequence of the Logic of Numbers**

The tension between numbers and souls goes back to the earliest days of the American synagogue. In tracing the creation of what we now call the Orthodox synagogue, Jeffrey Gurock describes conflicts in nineteenth century American synagogues.<sup>3</sup> Should non-Jewish spouses and Jews who violate the Sabbath receive synagogue membership and honors? Are liturgical and procedural reforms to the prayer service acceptable if the goal is to make the synagogue more attractive to the less observant Jew? A small number of nineteenth century synagogues resisted the logic of numbers and chose instead to

remain small and religiously "pure." Some of these synagogues paid dearly, losing membership to more liberal synagogues and were eventually forced to close their doors.

Proponents of the synagogue-center emphasized the logic of numbers as a theological virtue. As long as the synagogue remains narrowly focused on "religion," Jews who are less than fully interested in the religious life are unlikely to enter the Jewish orbit. The more Jews who use the building, the more successful the synagogue.

The best-known proponent of the synagogue-center was Mordecai Kaplan. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Kaplan worked with others to found the Young Israel movement and worked within the Conservative movement to restructure the synagogue. Kaplan argued that Judaism is a civilization and not simply a religion, and that the most important institution of American Jewish life should reflect the multi-dimensional nature of the Jewish experience. The main impetus for reform was to broaden the scope of synagogue activity in order to pull Jews into Jewish communal life.

To achieve its new mission, the synagogue-center added sports facilities, entertainment halls and classrooms and correspondingly reduced the space and time delegated to prayer and religious ritual. The synagogue moved from a religious to a communal or ethno-religious mission. Whereas the synagogue previously served a religious function alongside other institutions that together enabled Jewish community life, the synagogue has become a Jewish community unto itself. David Kaufman argues: "In Jewish historical experience the synagogue, school, and communal agency were most often three separate institutions. Even when offering multiple services in practice, the multi-functionality of the historical synagogue was never a matter of ideological intent."<sup>4</sup>

The synagogue-center prospered as Jews increasingly left urban neighborhoods for suburbia between World War I and World War II. If in an urban neighborhood non-observant parents were reasonably sure that the chances of their children socializing with and marrying other Jews were high, in suburbia the reality was different. Jews could no longer take interaction with other Jews in daily life for granted. With its multiple activities, the synagogue-center positioned itself as a substitute for the ethnic neighborhood.

There are several implications of the synagogue-center for Jewish communal life. Most importantly, the synagogue-center pushes forward a denominational conception of community by competing with non-denominational Jewish institutions. Potential adversaries of the synagogue-center include the Jewish community center, the community day school and non-denominational youth movements. As stated above, the alternative to the synagogue-center is a Jewish community in which the synagogue continues to complement other religious and secular institutions. The result is a community in which Jews interact with other Jews in institutions that are not always denominational.

A second effect of the synagogue-center for communal life is in the religious realm. Changes are made in the prayer service to attract large numbers

of non-observant Jews. The primary change involves reducing the obligation on individual congregants to own the materials and acquire the knowledge necessary for participation in religious life. The synagogue-center provides *kippot* and *talleisim*, page numbers are read aloud and a stage-audience relationship is created by elevating the rabbi and cantor to a more active role within the prayer service. In many cases, a choir and organ add to the sense of the prayer service as theater in which the “audience” maintains a silent and passive posture in comparison to the clergy who stand on stage and perform. On one hand, the less the obligation, the easier for less knowledgeable Jews to participate, and the greater the chances of pulling them into the orbit of religious life. On the other hand, over the long term, the theatrical nature of the contemporary prayer service limits the ability of the synagogue to draw most of their members into the logic of souls. The liturgical and ritual innovations also strengthen the denominational identity of the congregants by creating a distinction between “types” of religious experiences.

The alternative to the logic of numbers is to increase an emphasis on the logic of souls. Next to the goal of attracting large numbers of Jews, there is an equal emphasis on religious knowledge and participation. In the logic of souls, active religious practice receives a larger place in the life of the institution. The synagogue service obligates the participant, and discourages individuals from sitting passively in the pews.

A third effect of the synagogue-center’s emphasis on the logic of numbers is the creation of an educational and religious agenda that distinguishes between age groups. There are children, teen and adult prayer services, and most educational activities focus on the younger generation. Division by age displaces the family as an integral religious unit. While the logic of numbers demands participation of non-observant families in religious life, all too often the synagogue and denomination take over the family’s religious life, rather than complement it. Less observant or irreligious families are relieved of their obligation to maintain a religious home, as they are now members in good standing simply because they send their children to synagogue. A clear example of the larger phenomenon is the institution of religious summer camps that remove children from their families for two months a year in order to give them a Jewish education (i.e., save them from their families).

I recently conducted a discussion group on the subject of interface between the synagogue and the Jewish community with several Conservative rabbis at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires. One participant noted that a stranger entering a synagogue is more likely to receive an invitation for a Shabbat meal at an Orthodox, rather than at a Conservative synagogue. In response, another participant noted that there first has to be a significant number of families within the synagogue having Shabbat meals in order to extend invitations to others.

The separation of children from adults within the synagogue and the summer camp is part of the larger problem in which parents and children no longer share a common religious rhythm. The synagogue-center exacerbates

rather than solves the problem of the disintegration of the family as the primary problem of religious life. The alternative is a communal life, synagogue service, educational program and summer camp/retreat center that revolves around the family and the home.

### **Can We Tame the Logic Numbers? Impediments and Possibilities**

At the levels of community, family and religious practice, the synagogue-center has serious consequences. I think few observant and knowledgeable Conservative Jews will disagree with the claim that a synagogue should balance the logic of numbers with the logic of souls. However, few are willing to act for two important reasons. The first reason is financial, having to do with building maintenance and clergy wages; the second is religious, having to do with conceptions of rabbinical authority and liturgical decorum.

There is an important reason why the Rabbinical Assembly limits pulpit positions in large congregations to senior rabbis. Large congregations can afford higher salaries. Any move to restructure the synagogue around the logic of souls will affect the numbers of Jews paying membership dues. Jews who resist or fear religious obligation will turn to the synagogue down the road where they can continue to feel that they are members in good standing.

There are at least two ways to maintain a rabbinical salary and emphasize the logic of souls. The first option is for the synagogue to revert to its role as a religious institution. If the synagogue devotes its energy to religious purposes and cooperates with other institutions for the provision of leisure, cultural, sports and educational activities, then the many salaries and tremendous maintenance costs will disappear. There will be fewer staff and clergy to support a smaller building and congregation. The smaller synagogue can put its financial resources into the salary of a single rabbi and will likely encourage their rabbi to work with other Jewish communal institutions, including the family. The result is a less denominational and synagogue-oriented conception of communal life. In this scenario a synagogue that is losing members does not close down or amalgamate with another synagogue in order to maintain numbers. Instead the congregation sells the large building and creates an endowment to maintain a smaller religious institution with fewer employees.

The second option is to maintain the synagogue-center but restructure the religious and communal component within it. For example, many Conservative synagogues create a number of smaller member-run services (*havurot*) that replace or parallel the large "bar-mitzvah factory" of the main sanctuary. The smaller service has several distinguishing features, the most important of which is the removal of the stage-audience relationship. A transformation of rabbinic authority occurs as the rabbi becomes a coach or manager, rather than the central religious actor. Members are obligated, both on the liturgical level and social level, as member participation and learning is critical for insti-

tutional success. The demise of the stage-audience relationship discourages an over-emphasis on decorum that elevates rabbinical authority, silences congregants and marginalizes children.

Reducing synagogue size and/or creating intimate religious forums within the synagogue-center can balance the logic of souls with the logic of numbers. The difference between the two options is that the former returns the synagogue to its role as a member of the larger Jewish community, while the latter does not. There is a continual need to maintain numbers in the synagogue-center and the maintenance of numbers requires a greater range of educational, cultural and leisure activities. The result is that the synagogue-center remains in direct competition with non-denominational institutions. The synagogue, as opposed to the synagogue-center, is more dependent on the activities of other institutions (denominational and non-denominational) and as such is more likely to contribute towards a non-denominational conception of Jewish community.

### NOTES

1. The ideas presented in this essay first formed during the interviews I conducted with Conservative rabbis and academics for my doctoral thesis (see Ezra Kopelowitz, "Shifting Boundaries of Religious Authority: A Comparative Historical Study of the Role of Religious Movements in the Conflict Between Jews in Israel and the United States," Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2000). While the doctorate had to do with other issues, the nature of synagogue life was always present in the interviews. After completing my degree, I had the opportunity for reflection while spending the summer with my family at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires during the summer of 2000. There I enjoyed a series of informal conversations and formal discussion groups with a number of rabbis and rabbinical students working at the camp. These included Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Josh Finkelstein, Professor Bob Goldenberg, Rabbi Eliot Malomet, Rabbi Larry Seibert, Rabbi Howard Stecker, Rabbi Howard Buechler and Royie Shaffin. While the ideas in this essay are entirely mine, the positive and frank reactions by the "Rabbis of Ramah" went a long way towards pushing them forward.

2. For background on the changing nature of the American synagogue see Jack Wertheimer (ed.) *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1987), and David Kaufman, *Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999).

3. Jeffrey Gurock, "The Orthodox Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1987) pp. 37-84.

4. Kaufman, *idem.*, p. 6.

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