

# CONTACT

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**Revitalizing Our Synagogues**





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Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational, religious and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life.

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## Revitalizing Our Synagogues

For nearly 2000 years, the synagogue has been one of the most emblematic and recognizable institutions in Jewish life. At various times, it has served not only as a sanctuary of prayer, but as a focus of community administration and social life. But in the past two centuries, the synagogue has lost much of its resonance for non-observant Jews, particularly among young people. Reasons for this vary from disaffection with the traditional liturgy to discomfort with a prayer structure that, in the 19th century, borrowed much from the hierarchical rituals of the Church. To be sure, many still associate the synagogue experience with prayer, community, contemplation and reflection. But too many Jews associate it with stultifying boredom, moralistic sermonizing, rote repetition and uninspired ritual.

It is wishful thinking to believe that these views are a product of American society. But synagogue ennui is unique neither to America nor to contemporary Jewish life. In Prague in 1919, a 36-year-old Franz Kafka reminisced on his own synagogue experiences:

And so I yawned and dozed through the many hours (I don't think I was ever again so bored, except later at dancing lessons) and did my best to enjoy the few little bits of variety there were, as for instance when the Ark of the Covenant was opened, which always reminded me of the shooting galleries where a cupboard door would open in the same way whenever one hit a bull's-eye; except that there something interesting always came out and here it was always just the same old dolls without heads. ... I was not fundamentally disturbed in my boredom, unless it was by the bar mitzvah, but that demanded no more than some ridiculous memorizing, in other words, it led to nothing but some ridiculous passing of an examination....

Given that similar views have afflicted non-observant Jews for generations, what is to be done? Perhaps it is time to return the synagogue to its role as a central gathering space for the entire community. To recruit those who no longer find spiritual sustenance or community cohesion in traditional Jewish liturgy or in sermons, synagogues might begin to express Jewish connections in areas beyond the liturgy. Non-traditional prayer and meditation, learning, music and arts are some avenues that have a potential to bring enriched and multifaceted dimensions to the synagogue experience. Such activities would not replace traditional prayer, but supplement it in order to involve a broader spectrum of Jews. Innovative programs have already sprung up in synagogues such as B'nai Jeshurun in New York City and at Sinai Temple's "Friday Night Live" in Los Angeles, but these models need to spread beyond the major Jewish population centers to become more widespread in American Jewish life.

This is not only a challenge, but an opportunity. American synagogues continue to represent a precious resource for the community, not only through their historic function but for the vast infrastructure and real estate they embody. Indeed, the majority of American Jews still pass through synagogues at some point in their lives. The challenge is getting them to return. Thankfully, many synagogue-based initiatives have begun to fill this need. By refashioning themselves as vehicles of engagement through innovative liturgy and dynamic programming, these initiatives are helping synagogues realize a new mission as a portal into Jewish life and a major link in renaissance. The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore ways of revitalizing synagogues so that they are equipped to engage the majority of the Jewish people and serve, once again, as the center of a flourishing community.

*Eli Valley*  
Eli Valley



# Synaplex in White Plains

by **RABBI SHIRA MILGROM**

**Shira Milgrom** is Rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains, New York. For further information about Synaplex at Congregation Kol Ami, please contact Janet Hershey, Program Director, at 914-949-4717 or [janethershey@aol.com](mailto:janethershey@aol.com).

“Am I meeting you at Synaplex tonight?” I overhear one teenager asking another. In just one year, Synaplex has become the hot place to be on Friday nights. How did this happen in a Reform, suburban Westchester congregation?

Synaplex is based on two assumptions. The first is that the natural gathering time for Jews is on Shabbat. The second is that just as one movie cannot meet the needs of a diverse community, so one synagogue program also cannot meet the diverse needs of its community.

The idea of a Shabbat (Friday nights, in our case) that included a multiplicity of programs made immediate sense to us. We knew we could make this happen, as we have a successful track record with a similarly conceived program. Our congregation offers an annual community retreat over Memorial Day weekend, an opportunity regularly seized by

nearly 200 people. Teenagers, single adults, families, couples, grandparents and grandchildren join in creating and participating in an intergenerational Jewish village. There is no pressure or coercion to attend any particular activity; people can sit in an Adirondack chair by the lake and read or sleep all weekend if they choose. Or, better said, sitting by the lake in a chair is one of many legitimate options offered all weekend long. There is never only one option — people choose from an extraordinary array of classes and programs: arts, music, Jewish learning, community softball games, cooking, parenting discussions and others. What is most remarkable is that most of these classes are offered by congregants — people teach one another from their own skills and talents. There are activities for children of different ages, for adults alone, for parents with their teens and for families.

We brought the experience of our temple retreat to Synaplex. We realized that we could recreate the retreat, albeit on a smaller scale, right here at home. With a grant, inspiration and support from STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal), we could make it happen not just annually, but on every Shabbat.

Even with our confidence and optimism, we did not know how it would be received by the larger community. Would it bring the same crowd that already attends so many of the temple's



programs? Would it bring in marginal members of our community? Would it bring in new members? Would it energize those whose feelings about the temple were lukewarm or tired?

A small and talented team of staff and volunteers began to work together. Egos and territorial concerns were put aside to generate a genuinely shared vision of what Synaplex could be. Some focused on publicity and marketing, some on children's programs, some on adult learning, some on food

## Synaplex has made Shabbat much more a part of the rhythm of the lives of our members.

and menus. It is important to state, from a purely pragmatic perspective, that the success of our Synaplex could not have happened without a staff member devoted to this project. A portion of the grant from STAR has been used to underwrite a Program Director who invests time, talent and energy into preparing for and orchestrating this Shabbat experience.

And master conductor she must be. At 5 pm on Friday afternoon, young children and their parents gather for Shabbat arts and crafts. At the same time, the chapel-in-the-woods is filled to capacity with adults fully engaged in "Explorations in Jewish music." Others meet for yoga, while new members are invited to an introduction to the prayer book. All this takes place from 5 – 6 pm. Remembering our retreaters who sat by the lake all weekend, and being faithful to the Synaplex axiom that there should always be more than one offering at any given time, even services are not an exclusive event. As joyful and spiritual as I think the services may be, those who don't feel like praying are invited to unwind with wine and cheese and friends. At the same time, there is a lay-led Torah discussion for those who prefer their Shabbat/Jewish connection through study rather than through prayer.

Following services, more than 300 people find themselves at one of three Shabbat dinners — a community and family dinner, a candlelight and quiet conversation dinner, or a teen dinner. These dinners are followed by adult learning (scholars, keynote presenta-

tions, parenting discussions), children's activities, youth group activities, basketball, movies, and service activities such as preparation of food for the homeless and hungry.

Our full temple staff is involved on Synaplex nights. Our Youth Group Director oversees youth programming, our rabbis and cantor teach, our Early Childhood Director interacts with families of young children. We have also brought our programming together for Synaplex nights.

Rather than offer an adult education lecture mid-week, when it might be attended by 40 people (on a good night), hundreds of adults are now present for quality Jewish learning. Youth group events also take place on Synaplex nights, bringing our teens into a community that is celebrating Shabbat. Older adults find a place to meet one another, to enjoy a (relatively) quiet Shabbat dinner, to have access to phenomenal learning and to sustain friendships.

The events following dinner conclude with an ice cream bar as people stream in from all over the building to dig in and talk about what they have been doing. And for those who have the stamina, Shabbat evening ends with a coffeehouse of Jewish music and folk artists — and yes, a glass of wine.

In the final analysis, we return to the two basic, brilliant assumptions of Synaplex. The first is that Shabbat is the natural gathering time for Jews. Synaplex has made Shabbat much more a part of the rhythm of the lives of our members. Synaplex is on people's calendars; they look forward to it, month by month. The second assumption is that many things need to happen at the same time. A Synaplex Shabbat is a model of pluralist, non-coercive, creative Jewish life. It is respectful of the different needs of individuals and of the different ways we learn. And by bringing together on Shabbat the programs that might have been spread out all week long, we create a living, organic "village" — an intergenerational community filled with friends, music, spirit, prayer, dance, food, *tzedakah*, social action, learning and joy. ✿

## STAR'S SYNAPLEX INITIATIVE

by RABBI HAYIM HERRING

Synaplex is a Shabbat-centered, synagogue-based initiative that uses the synagogue to help strengthen and build community. It enables contemporary Jewish individuals and families to celebrate Jewish life through a menu of innovative options in the realms of prayer, study and social and cultural programs during Shabbat in the synagogue. Jews have a multitude of ways to participate in Judaism and Jewish life. Synaplex brings them together in Jewish "prime time" at the grassroots organization of the Jewish community — that is, in the synagogue on Shabbat. A diverse, increasingly secular Jewish community requires multi-faceted programs, offered in smaller group experiences, which have the power to sustain and deepen Jewish identity and expand community.

Synaplex speaks to the values and strengths of synagogue professionals and lay leaders. Synaplex is inspired by the classical functions of the synagogue: Beit Knesset, a house of meeting; Beit Midrash, a house of study; and Beit Tefilah, a house of prayer. Synaplex revitalizes that tradition for the 21st century by emphasizing all of these meanings concurrently.

Synaplex allows synagogue leaders to re-envision a renewed community by obtaining immediate, measurable results, while building in reflection and evaluation. Results have been dramatic, with increases in participation of 78 percent on Shabbat evening and 51 percent on Shabbat morning. Synaplex provides an ongoing, powerful framework for increasing the meaning of being Jewish for those already involved and for the many that synagogues strive to reach. At its heart, Synaplex is about an idea, a vision and a way of reorienting the synagogue to match the realities of today's Jewish community.

Synagogues in STAR's Synaplex network designate at least one Shabbat each month as "Synaplex" and offer a multiplicity of program options that speak to the different needs and interests of community members. Each synagogue has creatively adapted the Synaplex concept to its unique setting. Some of the more innovative programs include Shal-OM (Torah and Yoga), Genes and Levis (biomedical ethics), mother-daughter programs and meditation. Currently, there are eleven synagogues in STAR's pilot cohort; by September 2005, that number will double.

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# Impact of the spark HeartAction Curriculum

by RABBI NEAL BOROVITZ

Temple Sholom is a 52-year-old congregation located in a middle-income community in Bergen County. As our community has absorbed newcomers, Temple Sholom has come to consist of several generations of unrelated congregants. One of our ongoing challenges has been creating connections and ultimately relationships between these diverse groups within our membership.

Last year, our Synagogue introduced spark's HeartAction curriculum into our Bar/Bat Mitzvah year program. We organized a series of study sessions and a number of community service opportunities in which a group of active temple senior citizens and our seventh graders participated together. The combined group visited elderly Jews in local nursing and rehabilitation facilities and participated in a number of educational field trips, including New York City's Lower East Side and the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

*Bikur holim*, the problems of aging and the Holocaust have been units of our seventh grade curriculum for many years. Bringing our teens to nursing facilities and inviting Holocaust survivors to speak to the class were already part of our program. What made this year special for our teens was the fact that they interacted with people they now studied with on a regular basis. Cantor Ronit Josephson, who taught the class, set up some situations in which our teens were the "teachers," and others in which our seniors served as mentors. The most significant outcomes of this pilot program were:

**1.** Teens saw that adults also wanted to learn Torah and perform acts of *hesed*.

I noticed toward the end of last Spring that on our Synaplex Shabbatonim, when we provided parallel programs for teens and older adults, some of the teens and the seniors who had studied together earlier in the year would exchange greetings and acknowledge each other. I even saw one thirteen-year-old introduce his parents to a Holocaust survivor and say: "She was in my class this year. Did you know what happened to her...?"

**2.** Our seniors saw the kids of our temple in a new light. For a congregation in which the generations are not related (only one of the 36 seventh graders had a grandparent who is a Temple Sholom member), the positive response of our seniors will have a long-term impact upon congregational support for our Religious School.

**3.** While at least 50 percent of our seventh graders always continue on to our confirmation program, the figures this year are closing in on 75 percent. Anecdotal responses indicate that the spark HeartAction curriculum played a role in this increase.

The primary goal of HeartAction as it was designed and as we implemented it was to increase teen involvement in Jewish community service and to teach our children that community service is a *mitzvah*, and not something you do to satisfy a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or college application requirement. However, as the program evolved and as we hope that it will continue to grow in the years ahead, we have found HeartAction to be a very effective tool in building bridges upon which diverse temple members of different ages and backgrounds can come together as a community to learn and to perform acts of *hesed*. ❁

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Neal Borovitz is Rabbi at Temple Sholom in River Edge, New Jersey.

# The Changing Role of the Synagogue Rabbi

by RABBI TERRY BOOKMAN



When I was growing up, my rabbi was European born and trained. His only role in the worship service was that of teacher — his weekly sermon exhorted us to greater observance and loyalty to both Judaism and Israel, his greatest passion. I do not recall ever seeing him attend a meeting, raise funds or teach a class, though he did, personally, train each of us in our Bar or Bat Mitzvah preparations. I have wonderful memories of his care and concern, as well as his trips back to the kitchen for a little afternoon nosh. And, oh yes, he and the *rebbetzin* (who, as far as I could tell, really ran the *shul*) owned the synagogue and its property.

We certainly have come a long way. In an age of specialization, the modern rabbi must be a generalist, balancing skills and roles that are often in tension (if not outright conflict) with one another. And all this at a time in which we have lost any real authority, working as employees for a lay Board of Directors at congregations in which many members feel they are voluntarily paying a steep price for services they are rather ambiguous about valuing.

Please don't get me wrong. I love being a rabbi of a synagogue and would not trade the past twenty years for any other profession or calling. It is just that if we are going to be honest about our role in the modern world, we need to show it as it really is.

What follows then is a “typical” day in the life of a rabbi. In truth, we have no typical days, because each day presents challenges and opportunities that we could not have anticipated just by looking at our calendars. But for the purpose of this article, I have encapsulated it all into a single day.

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# In an age of specialization, the modern rabbi must be a generalist, balancing skills and roles that are often in tension (if not outright conflict) with one another.

## MORNING

I awake at **5:00 AM**. I have some letters to write and need to prepare for a class I am teaching later in the week. I also check my e-mail and write a few responses.

After dropping off our son at his high school, I arrive at my study at **8:00 AM** to set up the day's to-do list with my assistant. At **8:30 AM**, I participate in our weekly Management Team Meeting with the President, Executive Vice President, and Treasurer of the Board as well as the Chief Operating Officer of the temple. We are setting the agenda for the Executive Meeting later that evening, discussing several families who are in arrears and trying to figure out how to fix a committee whose chair is not getting along with the staff person assigned to him.

At **10:00 AM**, I head off to the preschool to tell a story. It is Grandparents Day and I emphasize the important role that a grandparent can play in the religious development of a child.

At **10:30 AM**, I have my biweekly supervisory meeting with the Director of the Religious School. I have each staff person set goals for the year based on his/her job descriptions and use that as a tool to help each one feel a sense of accomplishment.

At **11:30 AM**, I return a few phone calls — one to respond to an invitation to speak at an upcoming community event (I am not really interested, but I know it will be attended by many of my congregants, so I say “yes”); a second to tell one of my Understanding Judaism students I think it is great that her non-Jewish mother wants to attend her upcoming *mikvah*; and another to someone who is seeking guidance about an aging parent who is not responding well to her diminished capacity and independence.

At **NOON**, I head out for a lunch in which I am soliciting a congregant for our Capital Campaign. I have shared a number of life cycle moments, both happy and sad, with his family, and the Campaign Committee felt I would be the best person to talk to him.

## AFTERNOON

At **2:00 PM**, I have a staff member coming to see me. She is also a member of the temple and the note on my calendar says “personal.” It turns out she is having a problem with her daughter and wants my input as her rabbi, not her boss.

At **3:00 PM**, I meditate, which I do every afternoon for a half hour. I find it rejuvenates me physically as well as spiritually, and at this point, I do not know how I would get through my day or week without it.

At **3:30 PM**, I call a young woman who is battling breast cancer and is now confined to her home. We spend some time with her questions about the visualizations and Hebrew “mantra” I taught her when I visited in her home the previous week. She is effusive in thanking me for my help, and all the while I am wishing I could do more for her.

Before my afternoon Bar and Bat Mitzvah students arrive — I help them to write their *D'var Torahs* — I try to catch up on my interoffice e-mails, now numbering 26, but realize many of them will have to wait until after my meeting that night.

From **4:00 PM to 6:00 PM**, I meet with four different students, each for a half hour. After the third one, her father asks for a “minute” of my time, in which he shares with me that he and his wife are now separated and wonders if this will have a negative effect on his daughter's Bat Mitzvah. I assure him it will not and urge him to come and speak to me when we can spend some more time, that this is too important a conversation to have on “one foot.”

At **6:15 PM**, I head home for dinner, knowing I will have only about half an hour before driving back to the Executive Board meeting, which will begin at **7:30 PM**. Still, it is a rule I have maintained for my entire rabbinate. We (almost) always have dinner together.

## EVENING

I share the *D'var Torah* I wrote the day before to start the meeting. All of our meetings have learning components. I try

to attach it to something on our agenda. Tonight, we are going to vote on a proposal from the Tikkun Olam Committee, so I teach about “seeking the welfare of the community.” With our very large Board of Directors, most of the real work of the temple takes place in these executive sessions, so I am always a part of them, weighing in only when I have to. Tonight is no exception.

At **10:00 PM**, after the meeting is adjourned, I do get back to those e-mails, but only a few. Most of them, I decide, can wait until tomorrow. I call it a day.

My job description — yes, I have one — says that the rabbi of our temple wears many *kippot*: teacher, scholar, pastor, *shaliach tzibur*, counselor, community leader, CEO and role model. Modern rabbis, in order to be effective, must become better managers — creating highly functional relationships with lay leaders and staff teams, developing and implementing compelling visions for their congregations, managing conflict proactively and usefully, and encouraging work environments that are positive and supportive — so that they can be catalysts for organizational health and well-being. Though I appreciated and still value the education I received while in rabbinical school, seminaries across the denominational movements need to pay more attention to this shift in rabbinical roles. These are skills that can be taught and learned. This will result in rabbis being not only better prepared once they are ordained, but also better equipped to spearhead changes in their synagogues, rather than simply accepting organizational dilemmas, conflicts and problems as inevitable.

A number of years ago, a former student sought my guidance on whether or not to apply to rabbinic school. He asked me, “What do I need to be a rabbi?” I answered him, “You need only two things. Love of the Jewish people and a strong relationship with God.” In spite of what I have written in this article, if asked today, I would respond the same way. And then I would add, “But it wouldn't hurt if you learned how to be a teacher, a counselor...” ✿

# The Revitalization of the Synagogue: New Models for Rabbinic Education

by DR. S. TAMAR KAMIONKOWSKI

At the core of the revitalization of the synagogue must be the revitalization of the rabbinate. We must train visionary leaders deeply rooted in tradition who have learned how to boldly respond to contemporary challenges, leaders who combine spirituality with a practical understanding of how to work in the environments in which they will find themselves. In an increasingly complex world where specializations are the norm, the rabbi necessarily remains among the last of the great generalists. The task of today's rabbi is multifaceted and demanding, requiring a vast range of expertise.

The challenge of any rabbinical school is to prepare Jewish leaders by providing them with a body of knowledge, immersion in tradition and practical training. Of equal importance, rabbinical school must aid all students in actualizing their potential by discovering and developing their greatest skills and encouraging them to develop their own creative thinking. At the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC), we do this through a range of programs, seeing ourselves as part graduate school, part yeshiva and part professional school. Through each of our programs, we seek to strengthen the spiritual, intellectual, communal and ritual lives of our students. In today's world, it is imperative that we train a range of individuals with different skills, personality types, and political and social commitments. Rather than have all students fit the same mold, we nurture them to become uniquely strong leaders. We seek out individuals with a passion for Judaism, leadership abilities and a healthy sense of self.

The heart of rabbinical training is academic study, which encompasses his-

tory and culture, thought and theology, Hebrew and text study. At RRC, we are guided by Mordecai Kaplan's teaching that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization. Simply put, this means that the Jewish experience of life, learning and practice was not the same in Rabbi Akiba's time as it was in Einstein's. Similarly, the needs of Jewish Americans today are not the same as those of our grandparents. In practical terms, we acculturate our students to this awareness through a chronologically based curriculum encompassing the biblical, rabbinic, medieval, modern and contemporary periods. When our students study a Talmudic *sugya* (passage), they are already familiar with the biblical passages upon which the rabbis drew their interpretations. This academic framework provides necessary knowledge and enables our rabbis to understand how and why today's practices and traditions have gained prominence. It shows them how Jewish leaders of the past adapted Judaism to their time and helps the students find the creativity and courage to do the same for our time. This approach also encourages them to look to the future, anticipating the ongoing evolution of our people.

As RRC students proceed through a rigorous course of study in Jewish history, thought and text, they are strongly encouraged to consider how the material may be adapted for the current generation. Rabbinical school faculty not only transmits a body of knowledge and trains individuals in critical thinking, they also help students interpret this material to address contemporary Jews. As our students study biblical texts related to kashrut (dietary laws), they are encouraged to reflect upon the connections between various ancient perspectives and their own practice. We seek ultimately to blend critical thinking and book learning with professional training and inspirational experience in order to

produce effective, visionary leaders.

In addition to traditional Jewish learning, RRC has developed a comprehensive set of courses in practical rabbinics aimed at creating strong leaders who can negotiate a complex world. We require students to take courses on homiletics and life-cycle events, administration and pastoral counseling, and world religions and the social sciences, to name a few. In order to respond to the challenges of a changing world, rabbis must understand the dynamics at play in a synagogue, a local community and the broader world.

Rabbinical school, however, is not just about the classroom experience. Jewish spiritual training and *tikkun olam* work are also key components to rabbinical training. We need Jewish leaders with robust inner spiritual lives to keep them healthy and reduce the burnout rate among today's rabbis, as well as to serve the growing population of Jews who are seeking spiritual guidance and meaning for their lives. Just as important as the inward focus is the responsibility that we have as social and political beings. Through the generous support of the Cummings Foundation, RRC has pioneered an overwhelmingly successful Jewish Spiritual Direction program and a growing *tikkun olam* initiative.

Rabbinical school ought to be a place where healthy community, values-based decision-making and proper boundaries are modeled. Rabbinical school must be both a safe community in which individuals can grow, make mistakes and develop, and an institution that is responsible to the Jewish communities that we serve. The Jewish community relies on rabbinical schools to produce responsible and knowledgeable leaders. At RRC we work to model healthy community. We require students to take seminars and courses in such areas as values-based decision-making, professional use of self and administration.

Rabbinical school today must be a place where future Jewish leaders can explore their places within Jewish tradition, a place where they can develop a healthy inner spiritual life, and a place where they come to understand the great demands and responsibilities of the rabbinate. They must learn to operate within the confines of their world, to push the envelope when necessary and to offer models for change and new visions. ✿

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# Synagogue 2000: Lessons for the Future

by RABBI LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN

In June 2004, Synagogue 2000 (S2K) completed an exciting experimental decade helping synagogues, large and small and of all denominations, rethink their mission as “Sacred Communities.” Stage Two of the Synagogue 2000 project will commence in January 2005, after an extensive review of what we have learned from the initial ten years.

The S2K national team that planned and executed the project modeled itself after the kind of synagogue we sought to create. We became a learning organization, collaborating with synagogue partners and funders, ever conscious of Jewish values that should guide us. Whenever we met, we studied, prayed and shared personal crises before doing business. We nurtured a network of rabbis, cantors, educators, artists and innovative leaders in and outside of synagogues. These constituted a growing body of S2K fellows, each a thoughtful contributor to synagogue enhancement.

Believing that the Jewish community

must abandon the atomistic model of organizations working independently for their own self-interest and without regard for one another, we worked cross-denominationally, with city- or area-wide synagogue cohorts assembled by community-wide funding partners, mostly Federations. We sought simultaneously to reorient individual synagogues; to build community across denominations; and to demonstrate an alternative model of Jewish organization in our own operations. All three goals deserve extensive comment, but for now, I emphasize two underlying challenges.

**1.** Synagogues are default organizations. American synagogues have grown up with little long-range planning. Mostly, they have responded to emerging crises, like the changing face of the baby-boomer population. Rather than pursue a sacred mission, they fall back into a comfort zone of activities which they know how to do very well — but at a cost. Large numbers of Jews find synagogues irrelevant. Unknowingly, the very voices calling for renewal collude in maintaining synagogues as they are. Seminars, for example, train personnel for what synagogues have

been, not what they should become. Movements work programmatically, providing short-term “fixes” without addressing underlying systemic impediments. Most of all, even while bemoaning the synagogues’ shortcomings, Federations starve synagogues for funds, making them the most underfunded and overworked organizations in Jewish life.

**2.** Synagogues are “limited liability communities.” Limited liability communities are the opposite of sacred communities. They are like the Parent Teacher Organization and the local arts center, institutions that people join for a fee in expectation of a delineated set of services. Synagogues rarely attract commitment to anything deeper than services rendered. As market-determined organizations expected to “deliver,” they are in competition with each other and are likely to be replaced by whoever offers a better deal. Hence, the revolving door syndrome of Jews who join and later leave, reapportioning membership dues to buy basketball or theater tickets. Synagogue energy is expended on frantically finding new programs for new needs — like retailers who alter their offerings to retain their clientele. To succeed in a

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competitive environment, they hire rabbis as CEOs and create a board to judge their success in increasing the market share of members.

Meanwhile, we are living through an unprecedented “synagogue moment,” a historic opportunity to build synagogue-based communities responsible to the Jewish People and to Jewish people. Congregations barely survive in Europe, where unchurched atheism is the norm, and where Jews identify primarily as an ethnic enclave. By contrast, America, which has always made religion central, is undergoing an unprecedented spirituality boom. Considerable evidence demonstrates the growing strength of religious institutions that remain true to their religious calling. We therefore have a window of opportunity now, as never before, to restructure synagogues away from their default status and to move them toward a spiritual alternative, a *Kehillah Kedoshah*, or a “Sacred Community”

That became the S2K mission, pursued in a complex, three-year process, combining synagogue conferences, curricula of study and consultation. Among the concerns addressed were: How welcoming is the synagogue? How do people treat each other there? What relationship exists between rabbi and cantor? Clergy and board? We sought to enhance Jewish prayer, rethink synagogue schooling and integrate the Jewish Healing Movement into synagogue life. Through it all ran the vision of synagogues rooted in Torah and serious about our covenant with God and with each other.

We are still looking carefully at what succeeded (or did not) and why, but even at this early stage, we can say the following:

We had many outstanding successes. A surprising source of useful information, however, came from the failures. Because we worked in synagogue cohorts that were funded communally, we admitted to our program all synagogues who applied, even those who came for the wrong reasons (social pressure, perhaps) and, therefore, had little

chance of success. We were thus able to watch some synagogues explode in respiritualization and others implode in conflict and failure. At their best, rabbis reported being empowered to think creatively and innovate bravely because they worked with equally empowered laypeople, committed to transcending the futile model of lay-rabbinic distrust that characterizes limited liability communities. At their worst, we found leaders who could not surpass mutual distrust, or who preferred the status quo — usually because they were situated in thriving Jewish settlement areas and could count on membership growth without taking the risk of thinking differently so as to become more than a disburser of limited-liability program initiatives.

We remain critical of synagogues that are content with attracting mostly parents who drop off children (pediatric Judaism) or members who attend programs or services sporadically and only for their own need-fulfillment (limited liability Judaism). We are more than ever convinced that synagogues must be reshaped with religious promise and spiritual depth, and must work cross-denominationally to create overall sacred community. But we came across many synagogue leaders who left us in awe at what they are already doing and who taught us much by their example. Across the continent, we are blessed with selfless leaders who think continuously of a better Jewish future.

The problem is they are mostly left to think alone, without the support of allied communal institutions on which they depend. Rethinking a sacred Jewish future will require concerted collaboration among Federations, seminaries, denominational headquarters, and our many Jewish organizations and agencies that often exist only for themselves.

Everything we know about American life suggests that only a spiritualization of synagogues will galvanize widespread Jewish affiliation and commitment, but as yet, despite lip service to the contrary, synagogues remain low on the communal agenda. 🌸

## Experiments in Congregational Education

by ISA ARON, Ph.D. and ROBERT M. WEINBERG, Ph.D.

Imagine a Congregation of Learners in which congregants (adults as well as children) participate 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. Now imagine, further, a Self-Renewing Congregation in which lay and professional leaders take the opportunity to reflect on their current situation and to consider alternative courses of action for the future, rather than feeling as though they are constantly dealing with emergencies. Creating Congregations of Learners and Self-Renewing Congregations is the dual goal of the Experiment in Congregational Education (ECE), an initiative of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles.

Founded in 1992, the ECE has, to date, worked with 41 congregations in the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements throughout North America.

ECE congregations go through one of two tracks:

- a comprehensive, three-year process focusing on learning for all ages
- a more focused, two-year process that explores alternative models of the religious school

Participating congregations receive a comprehensive Guidebook to structure their processes, as well as the services of a specially trained consultant. Congregants focusing on alternative models of the religious school also have access to an online learning experience that includes video footage of alternative models in action.

The ECE's future plans include the creation of additional online learning experiences on such topics as the recruitment, training and support of religious school teachers (in process), readiness for change, leadership development and adult learning initiatives.

To date, most congregations have joined the ECE as part of a cohort, but the ECE hopes to be able to work with individual congregations in a variety of ways in the near future.

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# Women in the Rabbinate: A Revolution of American Jewish Life

by RABBI JAN CARYL KAUFMAN

In 1985, six years after I was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, I was admitted to the Rabbinical Assembly. This was also the first year that women were ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Twenty-five years in the rabbinate has given me pause to reflect not only on my career but on the state of the rabbinate, the synagogue and the Jewish people. The impact that the ordination of women has had on the community is significant and transformative. It has invigorated the Jewish community with an increased pool of talent, vigor, brains and compassion.

For the past 25 years, my rabbinate has been shaped by my personality, values, experience and *hashkafah*. As the child of a mother who had an illustrious career as a physical chemist (including over 300 publications), and who went back to work full-time when I was an infant (in 1955), it never occurred to me that women couldn't do whatever they wanted to do professionally. I started my rabbinic career in 1979 and have established myself as a rabbi, not as a female rabbi.

The feminist movement of the 1960s could not help but propel the issue of women rabbis to the fore. Jewish women represented a high proportion of those women who obtained graduate and professional degrees in the 1960s. It was inevitable that modern American Jewish life would be faced with the prospect of women applying to rabbinical school. When I was ordained in 1979, you could count the number of women rabbis on two hands. They now number in the hundreds.

The greatest impact that women rabbis have had on the community is to be role models for their congregants and students. We see more adult women learning synagogue skills and taking an active role in Shabbat *tefillot*, not to speak of the increased participation of women in serious text and Torah study. Women rabbis have helped adult women in the pews realize their aspirations. They have helped young girls in schools to become active participants in religious life.

Being female is clearly a part of my personality, but my rabbinate is about serving

the Jewish people, not about being a woman. Helping to enfranchise women as full and equal participants in Jewish life provides immeasurable benefits to the Jewish people. In my rabbinate, I hope that I have served as a role model to both men and women, but I know that for young women, seeing a woman rabbi provides the notion that they, too, can learn and do everything that young men simply assume is their right.

Women rabbis have influenced the way rabbis work as well. Women rabbis who are raising children have raised the flag on the issue of rabbis as parents. It was always assumed that the rabbi would be available morning, noon and night for his congregation. Women in the rabbinate have pushed for rabbis to work differently and for the recognition that rabbis, both male and female, need to be accessible to their children and spouses.

The influence of women rabbis has not been confined to synagogues. Teachers, especially those who teach in Jewish day schools, have a tremendous impact, perhaps even more than congregational rabbis, simply by virtue of the sheer number of hours spent with students in small groups. The impact of women rabbis who serve as teachers and administrators in Jewish day schools cannot be underestimated.

I spent the first half of my career in Jewish day school education. When I began teaching in 1981, I was a phenomenon no one had seen before. I inserted the matriarchs in the *Amidah*. I wore *tefillin*. Soon enough, my students, both male and female, inserted the matriarchs without batting an eyelash. One of the most successful programs I instituted was a *yom tefillin* with the seventh grade starting in 1983. Held on a legal holiday when school was in session to give the greatest number of parents the opportunity to attend, *yom tefillin* introduced the Bar/Bat Mitzvah students to *tefillin* several months before they would start to don them in daily *tefillah*. I made sure that daughters were treated the same as sons and sent to school with a pair of *tefillin*. While I knew that few girls would obligate themselves to wearing *tefillin* daily, I thought this represented a first step on the road to equality.

In addition, our liturgy has been enriched by the contributions of women in the rabbinate. The Rabbinical Assembly's



Rabbis Manual, *Moreh Derekh*, published in 1998, includes a memorial ceremony for neonatal death and burial, a grieving ritual following termination of pregnancy and a prayer for coping with infertility. The push for the inclusion of the matriarchs in the *Amidah* in the revised edition of *Siddur Sim Shalom* came from women in the Rabbinical Assembly. These liturgical innovations have brought inclusion and enfranchisement. This has meant that now all Jews, men and women, are equally obligated to perform Jewish religious observance and *mitzvot*.

I chose to be a rabbi to serve the Jewish people. For the past twenty-five years, it has been not my gender but my experiences, my passion for the inexorable survival of the Jewish people, and my commitment to Jewish study and observance that has shaped my rabbinate.

Unfortunately, despite the levels of equality brought by the ordination of women rabbis, they are still not treated the same as their male counterparts. The Rabbinical Assembly has just completed a study on the career paths of women in the rabbinate. The study reports that women receive lower compensation and fewer benefits than their male counterparts with similar professional positions. Given my personal experiences in the rabbinate and the manifold contributions women have made to the rabbinate in the past three decades, it is imperative that the institutions of the Jewish community insure that women enjoy comparable career opportunities and equal compensation to that of their male colleagues. It is the moral obligation of the Jewish community to make certain that women and men who have dedicated their careers to serving the Jewish people are treated fairly. ✿

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*Rabbi Jan Caryl Kaufman is Director of Special Projects at the Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis, and is also an attorney.*

# From B'nai Mitzvah To B'nai Tzedek: Connecting Teens To Synagogues Through Youth Philanthropy

by K'VOD WIEDER

Now, instead of complaining  
that their synagogue doesn't  
meet their needs, teens can  
organize funds to create a youth  
lounge, a synagogue teen trip,  
or a synagogue project to  
address a social issue that is  
important to them.

At the Shabbat morning service in Northampton, Massachusetts, thirteen-year-old Mariel stood at the *bimah*, beaming. After a beautiful Torah and *Haftarah* reading, Mariel accepted the usual gifts from the synagogue: a *Kiddush* cup from the Sisterhood, *Chumash* from the Brotherhood and a special certificate to acknowledge a lifelong commitment to *tzedakah* through the B'nai Tzedek Teen Philanthropy Program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation.

The B'nai Tzedek Teen Philanthropy Program is well-known throughout synagogues in Western Massachusetts. The goal of the program is to redefine what it means to be a philanthropist — that one doesn't have to be wealthy to create an authentic relationship with lifelong giving. The ability to affect change in their community while learning about the impact their dollars can have in the world is appealing to teens who often feel like voiceless, second-class citizens. Through the B'nai Tzedek program, teens learn more about their synagogues and the Jewish organizations that surround them, while emerging as equal builders of the community.

The unique feature of the program is the establishment of indi-

vidual endowment funds in each teenager's name. When a teen joins the program, she contributes \$125, which is matched with an additional \$125 by the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Western Massachusetts. Then, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation adds \$250 so that each fund starts with a minimum of \$500. Every year, each B'nai Tzedek member can allocate 5 percent of his or her fund to a Jewish organization that he/she chooses: locally, nationally or internationally. In addition, teens learn about Jewish philanthropy through Jewish texts, financial literacy and modern philanthropic strategies.

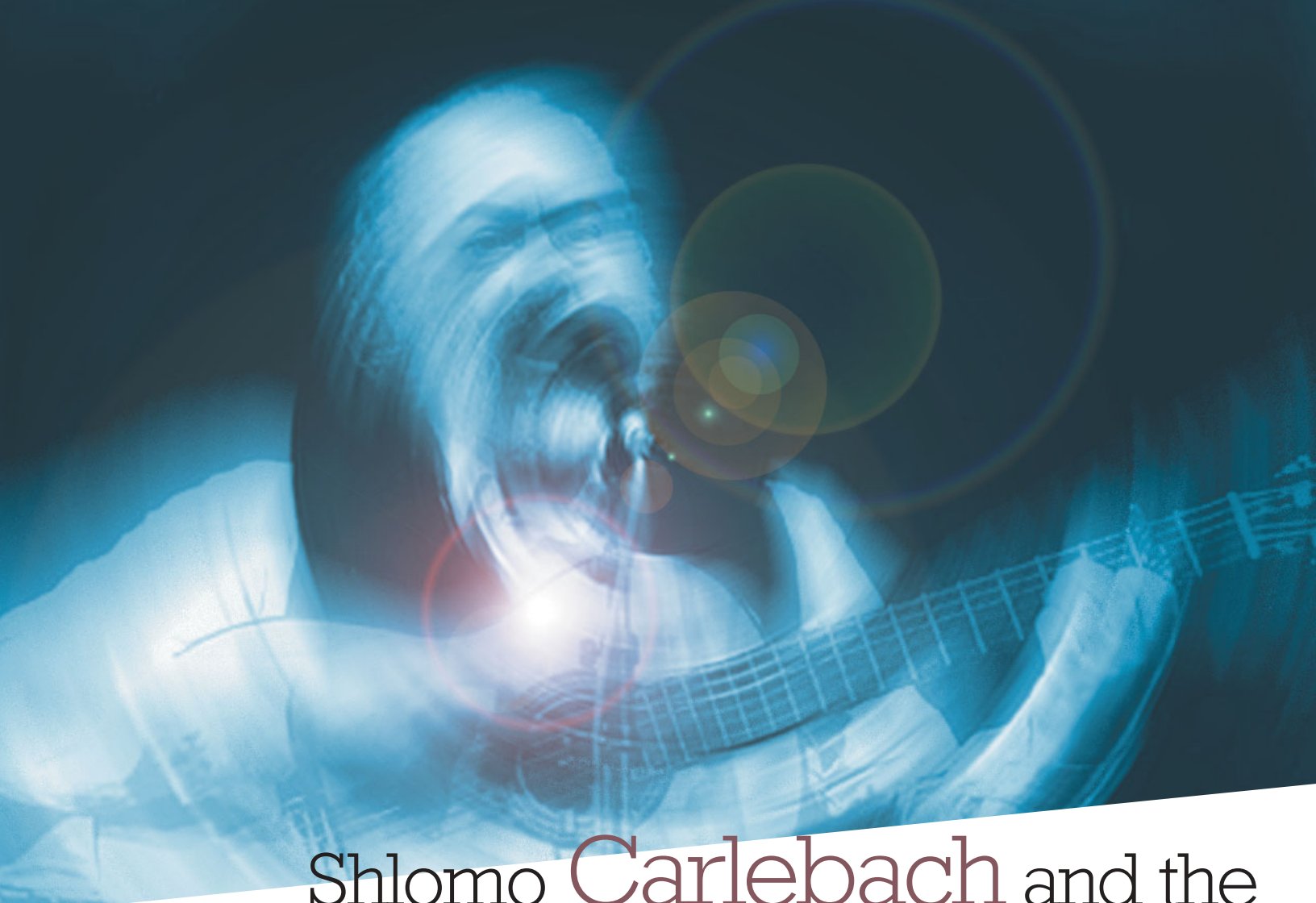
Now, instead of complaining that their synagogue doesn't meet their needs, teens can organize funds to create a youth lounge, a synagogue teen trip, or a synagogue project to address a social issue that is important to them. Through B'nai Tzedek, teens have the potential to experience their synagogue community as a place for their visions and creativity.

Currently, there are 25 B'nai Tzedek programs in North America that have established partnerships with federations, philanthropists, educational institutions and synagogues to enable their teens to be more empowered and connected to the Jewish community. ✿

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# Shlomo Carlebach and the Synagogue of the Future

by RABBI MICHAEL PALEY

*Davening* seems to be a unique human activity, one that must engage the whole person and one which one performs together with, as opposed to in front of, others.

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**Rabbi Michael Paley** is Scholar-in-Residence at UJA-Federation of New York. He can be reached at [paleym@ujafedny.org](mailto:paleym@ujafedny.org).

American Judaism, like most everything in American culture, is a careful translation of rhythms and themes from a foreign past. America is the collector of traditions of many lands, but when they emerge in our society, they have a distinctive flavor and hue. Shlomo Carlebach, the late rabbi, teacher and, above all, composer and musical entrepreneur, served as the translator from the Hasidic past to the broad modern Jewish community. His outstanding contribution was to take the *niggunim*, or Hasidic melodies, and bring them to whoever would listen and whoever was in need. Rabbi Carlebach devoted himself to the task of producing enchanting tunes for all aspects of Jewish liturgy. He created so many that it is now possible to sing the entire Friday night service of *Kabbalat Shabbat* using

only his key and rhythm. These chants are infectious; they gather you in and compel you to sing along.

I would like to share some stories — or *maselach*, as Shlomo might have said.

I am sitting in my suburban synagogue just outside of Boston in the late 1960s. We are in the social hall, not the elegant Eisenhower-era sanctuary. We have gathered for a concert by Shlomo Carlebach. In walks a vested figure with *tzitzit* flying (we didn't even know what *tzitzit* were), *payos* behind his ears and quite long gray hair — a completely outlandish figure. He takes out his guitar and starts to play, "For the sake of my brothers and friends." We, a group of American teenagers, have no idea what to make of it. We don't sing. Shlomo comes off the stage and stands in the middle of the audience and starts to sing harder.



**The music of prayer is not arbitrary. It comes from the deepest wellspring of Jewish tradition and imagination.**

We don't sing. All of a sudden, he puts down the guitar, grabs two teenagers, pulls them out of their chairs and demands that they dance with him. We begin to sing, and we sing and sing late into the night. And we never again listen to our synagogue's choir in silence. From that evening on, we demand to sing and sometimes even to pray.

I am standing at a Soviet Jewry rally in the middle 1980s with thousands of completely secular Jews. In front of us are some recent Russian émigrés who are exhorting us to demand the liberation of their imprisoned community. We hold signs with pictures of *refusniks* who are living in limbo with no prospects or hope. Without warning, one of the émigrés starts to sing, "Am Yisroel Chai" or "The People of Israel Lives." It is Shlomo's tune borrowed from a synagogue by Jews who are forbidden to enter one. Our gathering is transformed into an open-air synagogue and thousands who gathered start to dance in the Hasidic circle style, but this time, men and women and Russians and Americans all together. At the end of the song, the Russian tells us that he had only learned the song the previous *Simchat Torah* in Moscow, and that the tune had opened the mouths of those whom Elie Wiesel had called "The Jews of Silence."

I am walking down *Meah Sha'arim* Street in Jerusalem. At the end of the

street is a stone building called Toldot Aaron, one of the most stringent of all synagogues in that community. It is during the week of *Succot*. Festivals of music are being celebrated all around. As I walk by the synagogue, I hear a familiar tune. They don't know it, but even at Toldot Aaron, they are singing Shlomo's music.

From these vignettes, one can extract a few insights that are transformative for the synagogue. First, Shlomo never prayed, he only davened. Davening seems to be a unique human activity, one that must engage the whole person and one which one performs together with, as opposed to in front of, others. From his Lubavitch background, Shlomo learned the necessity of finding a chord that would resonate in the whole community. A *chazan* had to take the responsibility of leading others in davening, rather than doing for them. There are lots of synagogues that now have so-called Carlebach *minyanim*. These *minyanim* tend to be smaller and more intimate, entirely participatory and more lively. They have a quality of revival and even reawakening. From Ramat Orah on the Upper West Side of New York City to Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, these *minyanim* have attracted a new generation. They compel our attention. They put the davener or leader in the center and engage the surrounding community. When Shlomo led the davening during his life, services were unpredictable. They might last four hours. You couldn't make any plans. The new *minyanim* are more disciplined, but they still retain the character of Shlomo's Hasidic translation.

A second insight is that the syna-

gogue has to be for everyone. Shlomo was great, sometimes too great, at tearing down the barrier between frequent synagogue goer and guest. The music created in that environment sang out, "We are all in this together." It was this commitment that allowed his music to bridge secular Russian Jews and Hasidic insiders. It is hard to think of another person in recent Jewish memory who had as broad an impact. This is a complicated enterprise. Shlomo's music is not for everyone. And while it is easy to learn, it can be alienating in the beginning. Many *minyanim* have put out CDs with their melodies so that the entire community can participate. There are, of course, many recordings of Shlomo himself singing his compositions, so that people can prepare for the serious endeavor of approaching God. In many synagogues where there is a Carlebach *minyan*, there is still the option of the main sanctuary. This allows the Carlebach *minyan* to retain its alternative, even counter-cultural flavor, an authentic aspect of the Hasidic legacy.

A final insight is based on Shlomo's attention to the inner aspects of prayer and intentionality. The music of prayer is not arbitrary. It comes from the deepest wellspring of Jewish tradition and imagination. At a wedding where the Carlebach music is present, one can hear the established *nusach*, or traditional tunes that always characterize an Orthodox wedding. These are carefully performed. On many occasions when the chant would go awry, Shlomo would stop the singing and make sure the correct edition was used. Prayer is not simply stringing together one song after another. It is a deliberate act that demands that a community nurture the right blend of speed, volume and pitch for its service. When it works, it goes in the ear but opens up the heart of both the singer and the entire community. ✿



# Covenantal Citizenship: A Common Vision for Congregational Education

by **BILL ROBINSON**

**W**hat do we all envision for our children? We hope that they will grow up to be happy, healthy, in love and blessed with children. We long for them to live in a world of peace and justice. We desire that they will become responsible and active members of their communities, especially the Jewish community. These are vital seeds for nurturing a common vision of congregational education.

I choose to focus on the last element and call this covenantal citizenship. Simply stated, we are bound together as Jews in a shared destiny within which we shoulder profound responsibilities for our own future and the future of the world. As a Jew, I have the right to reshape the nature of these responsibilities. I do this alongside and in partnership with other Jews as members of a (covenantal) community. Furthermore, my responsibilities as a Jew do not begin and end at the synagogue door or with the setting of the Shabbat sun. I act as a Jewish citizen within my communities of town, country and world.

Yet, most of what occurs in our congregational schools undermines the realization of this vision of covenantal citizenship. Let's take two examples: the teaching of *tefillah* and *tzedakah*.

The teaching of *tefillah* in most congregational schools focuses on providing students with sufficient Hebrew skills to lead services during their Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Secondly, the students are provided with the meaning of the prayers (as if there is one particular or primary meaning), so that they will have some understanding of what they are reading and, hopefully, will read them with some *kavanah*. Like an actor learning her role, the script is set; all that matters is performing the piece well. Perhaps, when they're older, they can participate in the practice of crafting an actual prayer service. This familiar way of teaching *tefillah* inculcates a view of prayer that stands in opposition to understanding prayer as the creative expression of our spiritual desires and anxieties, shaped by us within community.

The teaching of *tzedakah* in most congregational schools revolves around the collection of money to donate to needy causes. Except for the occasional youth group "midnight run" —

notably not part of the religious school curriculum — where clothing, food and money are distributed during a few evening hours to the homeless in the nearby city, the learning about *tzedakah* (as well as the teaching of other values) is strangely divorced from its actual, everyday practice. The frequent comparison among students and parents between religious school and "regular" school is telling. This familiar way of teaching *tzedakah* reinforces the divide between learning about Judaism and living in the open society, instead of overcoming it.

For the overwhelming majority of our children in congregational schools, learning remains trapped within prescribed boundaries: learn now to do later; learn inside about what you may choose to do outside these walls. Learning remains divorced from the practice of covenantal citizenship. Yet, everything we know about quality education shows that students learn best when they have the opportunity to explore, critically assess and socially construct their understanding of their own Jewish practices.

If we sought actively to realize this vision of covenantal citizenship, then students would learn from and in their actual practices of crafting communal *tefillah* for themselves, their classmates and other congregants. They would learn from and in their actual practices of doing *tzedakah* (and other values) to create a more just world in their towns and beyond. The classroom would be the sanctuary and the town center. Teachers would be guides, facilitators, resources and role models, and they would learn from each other and by reflecting upon their experiences. Instead of hour-long classes within actual and metaphorical concrete walls, students would engage in projects that span months, occur throughout the week, and move seamlessly among their homes, websites, retreat centers and public spaces. Perhaps most illustrative of the difference are the questions they would ask — questions that would not normally arise if students weren't reflecting on the construction of their own Jewish practices, their individual rights and their communal responsibilities.

In what ways is a particular prayer service meaningful or spiritually powerful for me, for my classmates and for other congregants? What responsibilities do I have as a member of my community to stand as part of a *minyán*? Should I pray even when I am not moved to prayer? In crafting and leading communal *tefillah*, when should I be creative

My responsibilities as a Jew do not begin and end at the synagogue door or with the setting of the Shabbat sun.

and when should I follow tradition?

Should I always give *tzedakah* when someone asks? What if I think they don't really need it? Should I give more if I like the person? Should I give regularly when I get my monthly allowance or whenever I see someone who needs it? Since I forget to do *tzedakah* often, how can I make this a regular practice?

In seeking answers to these questions, the students would eagerly read and learn from our textual traditions, as these are the same questions that our rabbis have pondered and sought to answer for over two millennia. Furthermore, a rich source of learning for our children is our own behavior as role models. But in our own lives, have we sought to answer these questions?

How many congregants have actually participated in crafting their congregation's regular services, and not just in choosing which prayerbook to use and who is entitled to sit on the *bima* during services? How many congregations (not just on *mitzvah* days and not just the twenty-somethings) gather on a regular basis to build homes, work in a soup kitchen, clean up the local park or give out food and clothing to homeless people? How many spend time reading and discussing relevant Torah while engaging in these projects? How many gather together in prayer in public spaces before beginning to engage in these acts of loving kindness? The answer, sadly, is not many. There are congregations that have taken steps in these directions, but they are few and their efforts remain isolated from each other. Recent initiatives, such as STAR's Synaplex, spark: Partnership for Service, and Experiment in Congregational Education hold promise.

If we are to captivate and impassion the minds and hearts of the next generation, Judaism must continue to offer pertinent and powerful paths toward spiritual and ethical living — paths that move us outside our institutional walls and empower us to continually reshape our personal relationship to Judaism. We cannot continue to educate our young into a Judaism that is fixed and confined. We cannot wait for them to become adults to experience their rights and responsibilities. Beginning in the earliest years, we must teach our children the skills and knowledge to craft a Jewish life in the open society by giving them the opportunity to practice their Jewish citizenship everywhere and now. ✨

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**Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation** was founded in 1995 by Michael H. Steinhardt to strengthen and transform American Jewish life so that it may flourish in a fully integrated, free society.

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