

# Synagogue: A New Concept for a New Age\*

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*Ministry, programming and religious education are not problems, they are challenges. The message of Torah lives. And the synagogue can still be the center of the Jewish Community.*

THE unique alliance between family and synagogue has fostered Jewish survival in the past. It is a nurturing relationship. In fact, it has been the ability of the synagogue to remain the cornerstone of the community that has demonstrated the abiding strength of this union. Nevertheless, the synagogue is beset by social problems. Today, it functions with the prototype developed in the post World War II period. Then, there was unprecedented growth. We were in the midst of a baby boom. Our communities were being suburbanized. The paradigm for the synagogue, successful at that time, may now need to be enhanced. It must reflect the complexity of the world which surrounds us. Thus, the synagogue must evolve further in order to usher in the twenty-first century effectively. If it is to survive, the synagogue must continue to grow.

If Reform Judaism is not monolithic, then the synagogue, which is a pluralistic institution also and is the reflection of the Jewish spiritual self, cannot likewise be singular in its religious and social services.

The time has come, in order to address the diversity of the spiritual needs of individual congregants, young and old alike, to encourage multiple opportunities for worship within the same congregational family. Those alterna-

tive modes of religious expression must be granted support and legitimacy. For example, the locus of worship need not be restricted to the sanctuary, or even the synagogue building or grounds. But personalized worship experiences must be guided as fully as are those for whom the formal synagogue setting is the most uplifting. Since worship is a shared experience, participation on all levels is important. Thus, we must educate our lay leadership to be sensitive to the need for a rabbi or cantor to share Shabbat with a group assembled at someone's home, for example, while the other provides direction to the movement of worship in the synagogue's sanctuary itself. In this new synagogue, with an enlarged structure, I see the unlimited potential of a ministerial care team made up of rabbi, cantor, and educator; each with his/her own strength and area of specialization and concentration. However, there are no bounds to what can be accomplished by the rabbi and cantor and educator. I see opportunities for unlimited service to our people by all three of these major Jewish community professionals.

A multitude of services are now provided by organizations outside the synagogue—and Jewish Federations often wield power because they control funding dollars, but require little commitment of conscience. These organizations may be earnestly serving the basic life-support needs of a community that is increasingly fraught with problems of social disintegration, alienation and despair, but they cannot offer the

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spiritual foundation of synagogue community. Social service organizations serve vital needs of our people, but if the synagogue is to maintain its rightful role in the community, as we who are committed to synagogue believe it should, then the program of a synagogue must be restructured so that it can continue to reach out and touch our people. The synagogue, to endure, has to expand into areas of critical need such as: day-care, support groups for traumas of all sorts, transportation and alternative housing for the elderly. In the recent past, in our zealotry to meet the perceived requirements of what we saw as groups with similar needs, that is, sisterhoods, brotherhoods, youth groups and young couples clubs, we actually divided the families of our synagogues into smaller fragmented units. And so, as the family unit itself became threatened, the synagogue has had difficulty in mobilizing the uniform strength necessary to build family. At this time in our history, the family structure is in flux. And the synagogue has to muster its resources in order to stabilize this structure—once and for all.

Our people are in pain. Like the lifeblood of Abel, they cry out to us. And your charge, in response, is to minister to them. Physical illness strains the body while loneliness torments the soul. Divorce, separation, social isolation, alienation and despair: all are hallmarks of an ancient people facing the pressures of modern life. In our ministry, we must work on behalf of children's day care centers which will help bring young families into the synagogue. We must spend time with lonely, elderly people following their loved one's funeral and the period of shiva. I truly believe that there is a Jewish hierarchy of physical, psychological, and social needs that we have to explore, a hierarchy that can direct us in establishing priorities in ministry, pro-

gramming, and education in the synagogue. I perceive Jewish education as the primary bridge between the real and ideal world. This bridge is indispensable to the survival of the synagogue, the institution to which we have all committed ourselves. Yet, in our quest for quality Jewish education, we have unfortunately taken too much of our structural lead from the secular school systems. And now, we are faced with the challenge of making quantum jumps in order to "truly teach Torah" still too often restricting ourselves by the criteria established by secular schools. It is time to break out of the mold of passive Jewish schooling which is dependent on the status quo standards of theoreticians of American and Jewish education. We must be willing to be daring and be innovative. As cantors and as educators, you must become intimately involved in the entire Jewish educational system of your synagogue.

If we, in the Reform movement, have been honest enough to re-evaluate our position in so many vital areas, whether it be in areas of Shabbat and holiday observance, Zionism or aspects of ritual, then we must also be prepared to re-evaluate our stand on Jewish education. Let us consider the importance of supporting day schools in our movement; let us consider returning to a cadre of volunteer, committed teachers, freeing up economic resources for other important endeavors of service and education. Let us consider concentrating on programs of family education, rather than narrow, grade-level, subject-oriented, textbook-centered curricula. Let us use those precious few hours for education more wisely, more creatively, than sitting in a classroom, often studying the same reconstituted material year after year. And let us return to a celebration of holidays rather than completing an endless amount of ditto sheets about their observance.

The synagogue's educational program must expand beyond the walls of the school and beyond the years of Confirmation. The new curriculum of the Reform movement has taken important incipient steps in that direction. Lifelong learning in a multiplicity of formats should be the order of the day. Different lifestyles require different educational programs.

Furthermore, the synagogue must be willing to reach out to disparate groups who may not necessarily be financial supporters (or members) of the congregation. Specifically, I mean: street ministry, housing the homeless, college campus work, prison and mental health pastoral care, and nursing home advocacy; our people are part of these segments of society as well. We can no longer afford the security of the gilded golden ghetto.

And I believe that too few people care enough about the elderly in our midst to create supportive environments for them in our synagogues. Gerontology is missing from much of our ministry and curricula. The needs of the aged are being forsaken. The movement has done little on their behalf, given the special needs of older adults. We must now heed the practical advice of the extra-biblical author Ben-Sira when he said (8:6) "Dishonor not the old, we shall

be numbered among them." Our mission is clear: If others do the work, they will reap the harvest, while we share only the gleanings.

Finally, the synagogue building itself should reflect the longings of the new generation. Let's fill it with the work of our hands. Let's build up a program of spiritual service beyond the building. Let's make more creative use of space and lighting. Let's bring the rabbi and cantor down from the pulpit, into the midst of the congregation, among families, including one's own, surrounded by noisy children, crying babies, participating adults of all ages, and the chatter of life itself.

Ministry, programming and religious education are not problems, they are challenges. The message of Torah lives. And the synagogue can still be the center of the Jewish community: a *Bet Knesset* for assembly, a *Bet Tefillah* for prayer, a *Bet Midrash* for study, and a *Bet Shalom*, a house of spiritual wholeness.

The synagogue evolved even as the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem lay before our stricken eyes. It joined us in exile. It was a place of hope in dark days of despair. The synagogue of this generation will be what you, its new leadership, make it!