

## THE SYNAGOGUE OF THE FUTURE

Shana tova!! What I'm about to tell you may be the oldest Jewish joke there is. If you know it, don't spoil the punchline for your neighbor. It would mean one more thing to atone for.

A Jew is shipwrecked on a deserted tropical island. The search goes on for months, and eventually he is found. When the rescuers come ashore, they notice that he has built two identical huts out of bamboo. "What's this?" they ask, pointing at the first building. "That" he says proudly, "That is my synagogue." And the other building? "That? Feh! That's the synagogue I would never set foot in."

We laugh because we recognize ourselves. We know all about synagogue politics. We Jews are easily offended, and in previous generations it didn't take much for a group of disgruntled congregants to break away and start a new synagogue. Fascinating fact: the majority of American synagogues with the word "shalom" in their name started as break-offs from another shul.

We laugh because we share a common cultural language about synagogues, about ourselves and our occasional divisiveness. But I think there's more to this particular joke. Or maybe there's less than I'd like there to be. If you had told that story at any point in the last hundred years to any group of Jews over the age of 13, they all would have gotten the joke. Today I'm not so sure. I'm not so sure because it is less and less clear that the younger generations of American Jews share that particular cultural understanding about the primacy of synagogues in Jewish lives, in their lives. I can imagine telling that joke and hearing, "I don't get it. Why, of all the things he could have built, did he start with a synagogue?"

We are in fact living through a sea change in our feelings about the place of the synagogue in the life of American Jews. I have shared before Rabbi Harold Schulweis' observation that, "100 years ago Jews got together to make synagogues. Today we expect synagogues to make Jews." He made that comment in the 1980's. And he was right. For most of the past 2000 years basic Judaism was learned, was absorbed from the environment. We lived mostly among other Jews. Everybody lived in Jewish time. Whether they liked it or not, everybody kept Shabbat in one way or another,

everybody built a *sukkah*, everyone gave *tzedakah*. In that setting, the synagogue – what they called a *shul* - was first and foremost a *beit tefilah* – a house of prayer. There was no need for a religious school to provide a Jewish education because living Jewishly was the education. That was life in the *shtetl*. And for a while it was life here in America as well. Wherever Jews went across this country, if there was no synagogue they built one. That's how the Hebrew Congregation of the Tarrytowns was founded in 1899, by a group of Jews who moved up from the lower east side, and just knew in their *kishkes* that in order to live here there had to be a synagogue, a *beit tefilah*, a house of prayer. And in fact, the first building they built, down on Valley Street, was only that -the entire building was just the sanctuary.

But over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, things changed. The rhythms of life were less and less defined by the Jewish calendar. Now they were defined by the American calendar, and the American work week. It became harder and harder to live a fully Jewish life while also living as an American. Now, in addition to a place to pray, we also needed religious schools where our children could learn the things that they used to just absorb. So when they built this building it had both a sanctuary - *beit tefilah*, and for the first time a school wing -a *beit midrash*, a house of study.

And there was a third function that 20<sup>th</sup> century synagogues served. For a variety of sociological reasons Jews also turned their synagogue into a *beit Knesset*, a community center, and a large part of their social life occurred there. Through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was basically inconceivable that a Jewish family in the suburbs would not belong to a Temple. This was true as recently as a generation ago. It is no accident that 25% of our members are 65 years old or over, and that many of them have been members for 30 years or more. Some don't get here very much anymore, and yet they are still members. They are of the generation that takes it for granted that if you're a Jew you belong to a synagogue, because Judaism needs synagogues if there are going to continue to be Jews, and who else is going to support them if not the Jews themselves?

It has been clear for some time that the younger generations no longer feel this way. And let me say this very clearly: that is not their fault. It is not their fault that they don't have the same deep-seated, in-the-*kishkes* feeling

that the synagogue is the irreplaceable pillar at the center of Jewish life. I wish it was their fault. I wish I could wash my hands of responsibility. But the fact that they do not feel as strongly connected as older generations do to the synagogue, the central institution of Jewish life, the place that makes Jews, is not their fault. It is our fault. It is the fault of the leadership, both lay and professional, who have failed to connect to the needs and the passions of so many in the Jewish community. It is the fault of my generation and even the previous generation who, despite our best efforts apparently did not adequately demonstrate, teach, convince our children and grandchildren that supporting a synagogue is an obligatory part of their membership in the Jewish people.

What's done is done. I don't believe that it's possible to go back. As much as I wish we could, I have no illusions that going forward we will convince the majority of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Jews that being a member of a synagogue is a nonnegotiable obligation of being a member of the tribe. But that does not mean that synagogues are doomed. It does mean that the rules have changed and that we, those of us who care about the future of Judaism, and therefore about the future of synagogues, need to change our thinking as well. If we want our children and grandchildren and great grandchildren to even have the option of belonging to a progressive, egalitarian, liberal synagogue, we cannot continue to do things the way we've been doing them.

Most of you already know, and the rest will not be surprised to learn that I am very troubled by Chabad. Not by any particular rabbi; they are generally truly nice people. I am troubled by Chabad as a movement, but it's not for the reasons you might think. It is truly not a sense of competition; there are, unfortunately, enough unaffiliated Jews in the Rivertowns for all the synagogues to recruit. What has always troubled me about Chabad is that they play by different rules than the rest of the Jewish community. It used to be that if a family joined a synagogue, the other synagogues in the area respected that and made no effort to get them to switch allegiances. There was no poaching. Once a family joined, the synagogue could expect to have them as members for life. There was a certain level of inertia. Truth be told, the synagogue didn't have to do anything particularly great to keep those members. It just needed to make sure that it didn't screw up. The problem with that system is that while it

may have made membership numbers stable, it was unlikely to inspire passion. More importantly, it was unlikely to push synagogues to do much to make members feel as though they matter.

Chabad comes in to every community they target with a completely different game plan. They don't care who is or is not already a member of a synagogue. They are looking for Jews. They send postcards and fliers and invitations to every Jew they can find. They offer programming that is accessible and that requires no prior knowledge and no commitment. It's only if you stay around that you are asked for financial support. And you know what – they've gotten that right. They start with the interest, the passion, the warmth, and then they worry about money. And this is something that resonates strongly with Jews of all denominations. I still think they don't play nicely in the sandbox with the rest of the Jewish community, and I disagree vehemently with their less-than-liberal positions on women and intermarriage and homosexuality and more. But as much as it kills me to say it, they have a business model that appeals to many Jews. They figured out way before the rest of us even realized it was a problem that we can no longer take for granted that Jews will support synagogues out of obligation; Jews will only do so if they find meaning, and if they feel their membership matters.

Temple Beth Abraham is in fact a wonderful place. We can inspire interest and passion and help you find meaning, and we can do it all without your needing to check your egalitarian values at the door. But to get us to the point where we all feel that way about this place, we need to embrace the idea that connecting to the synagogue is about relationships and not transactions. We need to eliminate the widespread feeling that the first interaction one has with our office is a discussion about the cost of membership.

To that end, many of you were involved in the parlor meetings that were held last year discussing the possibility the Temple Beth Abraham will stop charging membership dues. Instead, we would explain how much it costs to keep the synagogue open and then ask people to donate an amount that they feel is appropriate. This is a discussion that is happening in synagogues all around the country and to tell you the truth it's a very scary step. It's frightening because without having a good idea of what next year's income

will be we're not sure how to create a budget. It's frightening because we don't know if we will have enough money to meet payroll or pay the heating bill. But mostly it's frightening because we simply don't know if enough members feel passionately enough about Temple Beth Abraham that they will continue to voluntarily invest in its future. The fact that we have been serving the Rivertowns for over a century is no guarantee of the next century.

The Board has not made a final decision to do this. There are many details to work out and contingency plans to put in place. It is frightening but I have to tell you that it is also exciting. It is energizing. It is an opportunity for us to be at the cutting edge of remaking what the entire American Jewish community will look like. And as important as it feels, how we are funded is actually only part of that equation.

In order to revitalize the American synagogue what we really need to do is create a true community of meaning. We need to make this a place where you know that your concerns, your fears, your joys and your passions matter to us. We need to provide opportunities and support as you strive to live a life that makes a difference in the world. We need to offer guidance and flexibility as you explore your relationship to the life of the spirit. And we need to know that this community matters to you, because "we" is really all of us.

I realize that to a large degree I am preaching to the choir – you are the ones who understand. You are the ones who are already supporting this wonderful synagogue and therefore investing in the continued presence of liberal, inclusive Judaism in the Rivertowns. I believe that together we can continue to build Temple Beth Abraham into a model for the American synagogue of the next century and beyond as

- a place that touches your heart and your soul
- a place that helps you deepen your sense of life's meaning
- a place where prayer is joyous and life-affirming, and as a result you know that we are not alone in the universe
- a place which embraces and embodies and acts upon the prophetic values of creating a just society and protecting the most vulnerable among us

-a place in which our *simchas* are even happier because we share them with one another, and the pain of our losses is softened because we do not bear it alone

-a place in which study and learning is a lifelong process

-a place in which the wisdom and life lessons of our elders are sought out and valued

-a place where you know that we care if you are here and you are missed if you are not

-a place in which you feel that you are connected to something that is both older than you are, and that will live on beyond you

This is my vision of our community. This is what I believe Temple Beth Abraham can be. This is the community that every one of us deserves, a community which reminds us every day that who we are and what we do matters.

On this sacred day, as we turn a new page in our individual lives, let us also commit to a beginning a new chapter in the life of our people, in the life of this synagogue. Together, let us re-create a sacred community which helps us to aspire to the best that is in us so that our lives will truly be a blessing.