

## Reengineering the Jewish Nucleus by Ari Trachtenberg

Two fundamental misfortunes befell the Jewish people as a direct result of the destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent exile: the codification and writing of the oral law into the form of the *Mishna*, and the establishment of the synagogue as the nuclear core of a Jewish community. The former resulted in the fossilization of a vibrant oral tradition meant to live and breathe with the Jewish community it supports. The latter led to artificial imbalance in an exquisitely structured religion, a disharmony between teacher and priest, between man and woman, and between community and G-d. Much of the Jewish effort in the last couple hundred years, primarily in the Ashkenazi community, has focused on mitigating the former tragedy, trying with mixed success to find a satisfactory compromise between the ancient traditions that define us and the modern world we define. This proposal, on the other hand, seeks to address the second misfortune, a task that should be no less daunting or important.

### **The problem**

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE brought with it the suspension of animal sacrifice and the re-establishment of the Jewish exile, both reflecting a profound deterioration in Jewish unity and a general threat to continuity. Led by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the Council of Yavne developed a practice of communal prayer to replace the sacrifices, centered in an individual house of worship, which later evolved into the modern synagogue. These synagogues eventually came to be led by rabbis in a revolutionary merger between priestly and rabbinic authority, two disparate yet interdependent archetypes that had been carefully divided in Temple times between the *Cohanim* and the *Sanhedrin*.

Synagogues immediately developed a distorted influence within Jewish life. Jewish communities became identified through their synagogues. Communal considerations and responsibilities, Jewish education, and traditional observances all came to revolve around the synagogue. Inevitably, communal resources and focus were disproportionately funneled towards the synagogue, and Jewish identity came to depend on a connection to some synagogue.

All this occurred in stark contrast to the more modest role that synagogues play in Jewish law. For one, it is not clear that periodic communal prayer of the type typically practiced in synagogues was an essential component of pre-exile Judaism, and, in fact, the *Mishna* itself admonishes, "... do not make your prayer a set routine ..."<sup>1</sup> The need for prayer can be mitigated by other obligations, such as that of welcoming guests, as seen when Abraham leaves the Divine presence to welcome three strangers.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, communal prayer, though clearly encouraged, does not appear to be absolutely mandated,<sup>3</sup> and it is severely limited in the traditional law for vast swaths of people (e.g. slaves, youth, women, ...).<sup>4</sup> Finally, a synagogue can be sold for a number of more important appurtenances, such as a books of Prophets or Hagiographa, a Torah scroll, to facilitate a marriage, or to build a mikvah.<sup>5</sup>

In short, the centrality of the synagogue in Jewish life seems not entirely supported by tradition, and the consequences of this radical development have been manifold. For one, merging the priestly and teaching roles into one rabbinic figure has frustrated a separation of powers meant to divide

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<sup>1</sup> *Mishna Avot* 2:13

<sup>2</sup> *Genesis* 18:2

<sup>3</sup> *Shulkhan Arukh* 90:9

<sup>4</sup> *Maimonides Hilchot T'phila* 12:3

<sup>5</sup> *Talmud Bavli, Megilla* 25b-27a

responsibilities and political considerations. In addition, artificially increasing the role of the synagogue, which was intimately tied to men in the tradition, has artificially and inappropriately elevated the role of men in a religion that is no less respectful of its women. Finally, the expanded role of synagogue prayer has distorted the dual responsibilities a Jew has to her God and to her community. The former has largely subsumed the latter, with rabbis being left to single-handedly implement what have historically been communal responsibilities.

### **The need**

In the United States, the Jewish community has been clearly clamoring for an alternative to a prayer-focused communal experience. This is evidenced from many sources, for example the recent shifts in philanthropic donations away from traditional infrastructure and towards cause-based giving.<sup>6</sup> The proliferation of Havurah groups also points towards an increasing realization of the failure of the synagogue model to satisfy common Jewish needs. These groups typically rely on lay leadership and organization, forgoing both central rabbinic authority and national denominational affiliation, and they tend to emphasize communal support during difficult times (e.g. unemployment, recent birth/death, isolation), a role that has otherwise increasingly been relegated to a single synagogue rabbi (or rabbinic administrative team).

In Israel, the need for an alternative is evident in the increasing tension and separation between the secular and traditional communities. Ironically, the underlying Jewish environment in Israel reduces the synagogue to serving almost entirely within the context of communal prayer. Communal concerns are typically covered by secular, independent organizations, thus clearly bisecting the fundamental aspects of the religion. To be fair, there have been attempts to facilitate the entirety of the Jewish experience within a single community, most notably within the religious kibbutzim. However, these approaches depend on isolating their members from the broader community, rather than building a more global cohesion, and it remains to be seen whether they will be able to sustain themselves in the face of the competing interests of an open modern community.

### **The proposal**

We believe that the modern synagogue model is failing the majority of the Jewish community. Its failure is especially evident in our post-industrial modernity, when Jews no longer live in tight, ethnically homogeneous communities due to a combination of technological advances (e.g. automobiles, cell phones) and increased assimilation. Whereas not so long ago, extended families lived nearby, playing support roles ranging from child care to elder care, advancements in transportation and communication have “intraspersed” Jewish communities no less than the exile had dispersed them. It is our belief that the synagogue model must be dramatically changed in order to reinvigorate and reinvest the Jewish community in its own future.

To be sure, we are not the first to recognize this need; Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan utilized this realization as a catalyst for his development of the Jewish Community Center model. However, time has shown that this latter model has also failed in its ambitions, degenerating in many cases into a secular country club catering primarily to Jews. The Diaspora Jewish community’s attempt to divorce religious and communal activities, as exemplified by the modern synagogue and the JCC, has led to the steady decay of both. The younger generation finds its communal needs unmet in the prayer-centered synagogue structure, and its spiritual needs unfulfilled in the community-centered JCC environment. This situation is even more evident in Israel, where the primarily Jewish environment has led most

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<sup>6</sup> A. Buchholtz, *The Changing Face of Jewish Philanthropy*, World Jewish Digest, Vol 5, No. 2.

synagogues to function almost exclusively as locations of prayer, simultaneously distancing the the unobservant, who have not fostered the habit, and the observant, who require a more variegated experience.

It is our belief that a new entity must be researched, developed, and then fostered that unabashedly and holistically addresses the many facets of Judaism. Our approach is modeled on the university *Hillel* movement, which serves as a one-stop center for communal, social, and religious needs of students. *Hillel* has been amazingly successful in providing a delectable taste of cosmopolitan Judaism, if even for a short period of time, without compromising either its rich past or its diverse present. Within *Hillel*, observant Jews interact with unobservant Jews in a non-judgemental, non-demanding environment, honestly experiencing elements of the community that have been sheltered from them by the existing synagogue model. Zionists and Thinkers, Heretics and Ignorami, Secularists and future rabbis all display their life choices in a neutral setting representing the ultimate test of ideas. In this setting, students have an unparalleled opportunity to objectively evaluate a large spectrum of modern Jewish existence and make long-lasting decisions about the course of their lives and the future of the Jewish community.

We believe that the adult community requires a similar entity to serve it after its standard post-adolescent communal experience (be it college, army, or first job), an entity that provides support for communal and religious functions, *in solō et in totā*

Fundamental to this entity are the following properties:

- **All-encompassing**

Rather than focusing on prayer as a common cause, the new entity should simultaneously facilitate all aspects of a Jewish life: communal, social, and religious. Participants should feel free to narrowly focus on one aspect (say Zionism, social justice, or prayer) without pressure to participate in others. As with *Hillel*, people might enter the building for one purpose, and end up enjoying and evolving from a non-judgemental exposure to others.

- **Fundamental infrastructure**

Successful ideologies from Chabad, which I respect, to Hamas, which I do not, have typically gained the respect of their communities by providing fundamental infrastructure. As the Mishna wisely enjoys, “without flour, there is no Torah [and] without Torah, there is no flour.”<sup>7</sup> A young working couple with kids requires, first and foremost, affordable daycare or school before they can properly consider community building. The recent college graduate needs work, companionship, and mentorship before she can feel comfortable devoting her time regularly to Torah learning. The sick widower needs support with child care, food preparation, and daily upkeep before he can properly appreciate prayer services. The proposed entity must shoulder a direct community-wide responsibility for concurrently maintaining all of these needs.

- **Broader community**

The proposed entity must feel a responsibility for the entire, broader Jewish community within its geographic limits. Rather than focusing on one particular religious denomination, political leaning, or global ideology, it should be open to (and feel responsibility for!) reasonable Jews of all persuasions in a non-judgemental atmosphere. As such, this entity should provide for and support communal meals, social gatherings, dating opportunities, religious activities, social action, lifetime

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<sup>7</sup> *Mishna Avot*,3:17

transitions, counseling, moral support, mentorship, source-based Jewish education, and, quite importantly, Hebrew education in the Diaspora, without which most of the religion is available only through the interpretation of intermedial translators. The modern State of Israel can serve as an initial model for this ideal, in that it truly is open to all Jews, albeit in an unnaturally trenchant atmosphere borne of history and war.

- **Veritably pluralistic**

We propose that the entity be pluralistic according to a traditionally appropriate rendering of the word. The contemporary rendering of Jewish pluralism plays upon the finiteness of human understanding to prohibit the invalidation of any given philosophy. As such, it enjoins people to live with the acceptance of the possibility that any other Jew's beliefs are more correct.

We argue that this position is vacuous. Though it is true that we have only a finite comprehension of a vastly complicated world, we still make profound, binding decisions every day. Decisions about what school to attend, whom to marry, and even (as a community) whom to imprison all rely on imperfect information and analysis, and yet it is evident that they are essential and unavoidable for the proper functioning of humankind. As the Torah itself teaches, "She [the Torah] is not in heaven to say 'who will rise up to the heaven and will take her to us and will explain her to us and we will perform [her duties]'.<sup>8</sup>

We propose to utilize an alternate understanding of pluralism, which is developing within the Jewish community. It contradicts contemporary pluralism by insisting that other people's understanding of Judaism might be entirely wrong or even hurtful. However, there is an intrinsic and overarching importance in have these people participate with us in the Jewish civilization as a whole. Like the four species that we unite on Sukkot, representing the four types of Jews,<sup>9</sup> this type of pluralism is predicated on the fact that the Jewish community cannot thrive without the support and participation of the entirety of its members, whether in the right or in the wrong.

- **Uncompromising respect and inclusion of tradition**

The role of traditional observance in Jewish organizations is a Pandora's jar<sup>10</sup> fraught with arguments of exclusivity or religious coercion. However, our argument throughout this document is that tradition cannot be simply incised from a Jewish body; it is an essential component of the value of both our nationality and our religion. As such, we feel that the proposed entity requires a traditional mein, insisting that organizational activities sport appreciation and respect for principles of Jewish traditions, such as Shabbat, Kashrut, and even Mikvah. Compromising on these fundamentals, as modern JCCs have started doing, inevitably chips at the Jewish foundation and value of the institution.

- **Volunteer leaders, professional support**

It is our profound desire that the proposed institution be lay lead and maybe professionally supported. From a purely structural perspective, lay leaders who derive financial support from alternate source are in a much better position to include long-term considerations in their planning. They need not fear replacement, and, more importantly, they may be replaced without fear for their livelihood. From a more idealistic perspective, we follow Maimonides' belief reinforcing the

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<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 13:12

<sup>9</sup> Those Jews with Torah learning and good deeds, those with learning and no good deeds, those with no Torah learning and good deeds, and those with no learning and no good deeds.

<sup>10</sup> *Pandora's Box* is the colloquial (but not quite right) translation of the Greek.

*Mishna*'s comment "[Do not make the Torah] a spade with which to dig,"<sup>11</sup> suggesting that making a *living* from *Torah* denigrates both.

### **The challenge**

The Jewish community, infrastructure and funding is rooted in the synagogue model, and fundamental changes to this model most probably cannot be accomplished from within. The spiritual leaders of the synagogues are financially dependent on the existing model and would be foolish (or inordinately idealistic) to undermine their own livelihood. The Jewish communal organizations have significantly invested in the current model and also rely heavily on the synagogue infrastructure to raise funds. As such, they would be similarly foolish to undermine their own funding base.

Worse yet, there are many who claim that Hillel, as an organization, is, in fact, an abysmal failure. Anecdotal evidence, supported by half a life of involvement with Hillel by the author (4 years undergraduate, 6 years graduate, 7 years as faculty) suggests that as few as 10% of a college's Jewish population might be actively involved in its Hillel. Most students participate in the Hillel experience extremely rarely, either as a synagogue away from home during high holidays, or else for the occasional social or cultural experience.

We argue (perhaps perversely) that this is not a 90% failure, but rather a 10% success. As many Hillel directors will attest, even a one-time Hillel experience during the course of an undergraduate education can serve as a seed for a fulfilled and involved Jewish connection much later in life. The Jewish community cannot afford to act myopically on this vision, counting beans in a vain attempt to find some objective measure of their success. The vision and measurement must be long term, as must be the commitment.

On a political front, Hillel justifies its all-encompassing Jewish provider role through the transient nature of its student and the claim that it sets the foundation for interest and activity in synagogue membership. Our proposed organization would not be able to make such claims, seeing as it targets the adult population in direct competition with the establishment. Instead, it should hope to transform the model of Jewish existence, and lead from success. Eventually, some synagogues will recognize the long-lasting benefits of transitioning to all-encompassing providers and transform themselves to meet the challenge (in fact, some are already doing this!). Other synagogues will resist the changes and, perhaps, disappear in the natural competition. In all, we have full confidence that "an assembly for the sake of heavens will [surely] last."<sup>12</sup>

In order for this high risk venture to succeed, it must come about from without; the ideas must be designed and developed outside of the existing Jewish infrastructure. That said, the risk of not undertaking such a venture is equally severe, with the discernible prospects of all but the most fundamentalist elements of our religion fading into non-existence within a stagnant Jewish community that slowly loses its meaning and direction. As Jews, we must decide: will we hand over our fate to Social Darwinism, as it filters all but the most committed from our ranks much like Amalek prayed on our weak and weary, or will we fight the natural entropy of our community and maintain both our breadth and our depth.

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<sup>11</sup> *Mishna Avot*, 4:7

<sup>12</sup> *Mishna Avot* 4:11