

A SYNAGOGUE OF BECOMING- WHY WE NEED YOU

Last month I came across an article on my Facebook feed that was both painful to read and important to understand. The article, written by author Judy Mollen Walters, was entitled: *Becoming an Unaffiliated Jew: Why I Left my Synagogue.*¹

In the article, the author describes through the long and difficult path that caused her and her husband to leave their synagogue. She had a list of reasons for their ultimate decision: They no longer felt connected to the community now that their children were older. They used to volunteer, but no longer found opportunities where they really "fit in." The financial pressures of belonging to a synagogue were too much now that their daughter was entering college. And -- the one that intrigued me the most -- they did not feel that they needed the synagogue to "be Jewish." Despite this seemingly long list of reasons why discontinuing her synagogue membership made sense, Walters explained that this was not an easy decision to make. She wrote:

I wrote the email [to the synagogue cancelling our membership] on a late June day. I rewrote it. Again. And again. Then I walked away from it. I looked at it the next day. And the next. Then I hit "send." And I had done it. I had left my synagogue.

After 20 years of mixed feelings and more than eight months of discussion and debate with my husband, we had walked away from the place where our babies had been named, welcomed, and bat

¹ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/181524/why-i-left-my-synagogue/2>

mitzvahed, the place where we had celebrated countless holidays, volunteered hundreds of hours, and—not to mention—spent thousands of dollars.

The monthly newsletter, chock full of information about lectures and events and Hebrew school news and births and weddings would no longer come to my house on the first of every month. The August brochure, detailing the year ahead, would not show up just as we were making back-to-school preparations. My husband wouldn't stay up with the youth group until 3 a.m. helping the homeless, and we would not go to one more youth-group pasta fundraiser dinner to eat undercooked spaghetti and listen to teenagers play bad music on the electric guitar.

We hadn't come to the decision lightly. In the eight months of debate—and maybe even for years before that—we'd been feeling dissatisfied, like we were missing the essence of belonging. We didn't feel particularly connected to the other members or that we were getting much out of it. Or, I should say, I felt that way. My husband seemed to manage it all better than I did.

Since we left, I feel relieved in some ways. Certainly, it's easier financially not to belong to a synagogue, and I don't miss the 20-minute drive each way. But there are other areas in which I'm struggling. We always believed in being affiliated Jews, and I wonder sometimes if being Jewish and being part of a synagogue must go hand in hand. I still feel as Jewish as ever. But am I as Jewish as the person who is a member of a synagogue—or not?

We talked all that winter. We'd go back and forth—sometimes I would want to quit, sometimes (though less often) he would. Sometimes we would agree to stay for another year. What would we do if we quit? Would we join another synagogue? We didn't like the other options in our area. So, we focused on whether or not to stay, not what we would do next. That spring, we agreed, though reluctantly, that the best thing to do was leave. So, I began working on the email.

It was one simple line. We were leaving the temple. We thanked them for their years of service to us. Still, it hurt to hit send...

We still talk about where else we can join, but we haven't found the place, a place where we can volunteer comfortably and go to adult education classes and where everyone knows who we are and we know who they are, and we feel like we fit in. There are geographic obstacles, too—synagogues that sound good but are just far enough away that we know we wouldn't go.

Then again, we may never find that place, and may never join another synagogue. I've come to realize that it's OK if we don't. I'm as Jewish as I was the day before I sent the email releasing us from our old synagogue. I still celebrate the holidays; I still make Shabbat dinner. I'm just unaffiliated.

As hard as this was for me, a congregational rabbi, to read these words, I appreciated the honesty of her article. I appreciated the struggles that Walters and her family faced and that they did not make this decision on a

whim. It is of course true that one does not **need** to belong to a synagogue to be Jewish. It is also true that one does not need to learn English or American history to be American. But "being something" by virtue of inheritance is not the same as understanding what it means to "belong" to something.

It is abundantly clear that American Judaism continues to undergo massive transitions and changes in assumptions from previous generations. Nearly a year ago, the now infamous Pew Study of American Jewish life was released. Much like a traditional page of Jewish text, over this past year the meaning of this study has been debated, discussed, and analyzed at length. It seems that every Jewish leader, organization and institution had something to say about the Pew Study, some positive and some negative. For those who did not follow the discussion about the study, some key findings include:

- One in five Jews now describes themselves as having no religion
- 62% of Jews views Judaism from a strictly cultural lens, and only 15% say that being Jewish is primarily a matter of religion.
- Of the Jews who identify with Judaism as their religion, more than 90% are raising some type of Jewish child, whereas of those Jews who identify with Judaism as a culture, *nearly 2/3 are not raising their children with any Jewish identity at all.*
- Jews are, in general, less religious than the U.S. public in terms of synagogue attendance.
- And, while the study did find a strong percentage of Jews who openly express pride in being Jewish- just what exactly that means is up for debate.

These statistics share the same struggles and bring up the same questions that Walters shares in her essay. What does being Jewish mean? How does

one learn how to be Jewish? Are institutions such as synagogues necessary for cultivating, creating, nurturing, and educating Jews anymore? Of course, you know that I think the answer is a resounding, YES. But it seems that American Jews are not so sure.

Two more examples of the changing landscape for synagogues,, membership, and the entire notion of being "affiliated" with institutionalized Judaism. In May, on the Conan O'Brian show, actress Lisa Kudrow, most well known for her role as Phoebe on the 90's sitcom Friends, shared the story of how her son had just experienced what she jokingly called "a drive-by bar mitzvah." Conan wanted to know why he wasn't invited:

Kudrow explained that she wasn't even there for the event. It seems that her 15-year-old son was at the mall one day when he was approached by what Kudrow guesses were Chabad representatives, who asked if he was Jewish. He said half, they asked which half, he said his mother's side, and they asked if he had been bar mitzvahed. He hadn't. Did he want to? Sure.²

She went onto explain how this rabbi put tefilin and a kipa on this young man, had him recite a prayer, and took a picture that he could show his mother. And poof- he had been "bar mitzvahed!" This all seemed great to him, especially when his family started sending him checks in the mail!

I am not intending to disparage Chabad, and I myself have run programs in public spaces. But to call this encounter a "bar mitzvah," is demonstrative of just how far away from the true meaning of Jewish community we have

² <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/173040/lisa-kudrow%E2%80%99s-son-had-a-drive-by-bar-mitzvah>

come. It is true that just as one does not have to belong to a synagogue to be Jewish, one does not have to do anything specific to become a bar or bat mitzvah. Contrary to popular belief and to Lisa Kudrow's claim, there is no such thing as "getting bar mitzvahed." The terms bar and bat mitzvah literally mean "son" or "daughter of the commandments," and can essentially be understood as a responsible Jewish adult. The ceremony at synagogue is not really necessary or directly linked to this concept -- one simply becomes bar or bat mitzvah on their 13th birthday.

So why do we make these young teens go through the challenging process of preparing for their bnei mitzvah? I can tell you that the process is **not** about checking some rite of passage off of a list. It is not about engaging in "transactional" Judaism. But it **is** about this young adult learning what it means to become a responsible member of the Jewish **community**. It is about taking a leadership role **in a community**. It is about standing up and declaring that I, as a new member of the Jewish adult population, am responsible for **my community**, for my fellow Jews, for my fellow human beings, and for bringing the values of Torah into the world. It is about accepting one's role as a responsible member of **the Jewish people**.

Those of us who are born Jews, and even those who have become Jews by choice, are Jewish regardless of synagogue membership or formal community affiliation. Thirteen-year-olds become a bar or bat mitzvah regardless of any action that they take. But no one can possibly understand what it means to belong to something, without belonging to anything. And without belonging, Judaism is meaningless.

I often tell people that I don't believe that Judaism was designed to be a "fee for service" system. Just a few months ago, Jane-Rachel and I were in NYC in a Jewish bookstore on the Upper West Side when a woman walked into the store, asking the owners if they had a Torah for "rent." She explained that her son was having a bar mitzvah at a hotel and she needed to rent a scroll for the occasion. When the owner politely said that his store does not rent Torah scrolls, that they had once upon a time, but there had been many problems, including the insurance liability. The woman was clearly very aggravated, miffed that another place she found that did in fact rent Torahs had quoted her what she deemed to be an exorbitant amount, and she just said "*well I just don't understand why you won't do it if **the consumer** wants to pay for it?*"

Forgetting insurance issues, or the fact that a Torah is easily valued upwards of \$40,000; this woman had no understanding of why one couldn't simply rent a Torah, just like she would rent chairs, a band, or even a rabbi (!), for the occasion. She was looking at her ceremony through a "transactional" lens that was focused solely on her logistical and technical needs. Please don't miss understand me. It has become very clear over the past few decades that people are looking for personal meaning when it comes to their Judaism. That is a wonderful thing. But making meaning in Judaism is done through relationships; it is done (as our synagogue's mission states) in a community building relationships. It is not done alone. Judaism is, by definition, a team sport. A baseball player can learn how to hit a ball from a coach, but he cannot have any real understanding of the game of baseball unless he plays with a team. So too, an individual can be trained how to put on tefilin, say a prayer, or read from the Torah by a teacher- but he or she will not gain any type of significant level of Jewish understanding, appreciation, or meaning without living Judaism with a community.

So what are synagogues to do? How can we address this challenge? How can we be understanding of current trends towards individualism, while at the same time creating compelling centers of Jewish meaning? Important questions are being asked and certain long-held assumptions are being challenged. Questions such as:

- What do I really need the synagogue for?
- What meaning can I find in belonging to a synagogue?
- Do I have any responsibilities as a member of a synagogue?
- Why should I pay so much money to belong to a synagogue when I can rent a rabbi, order a shiva tray online, and pray in the comfort of my own home?
- What do I need a Jewish community for? Can't I do Jewish "myself?"

What we must **not** do is ignore these questions. As a synagogue, we must respond creatively, thoughtfully, and passionately. **And we need your help.** I'll come back to this in a few minutes.

Let me start with what not to do if one hopes to get any meaning out of their synagogue membership. In an article entitled, "*5 Ways to Be Unsatisfied with Your Church*," blogger and former pastor Shane Blackshear shared some important insights that apply to synagogues as well.³ If you want to be *unhappy* with your synagogue, here are his top suggestions:

³<http://www.shaneblackshear.com/5-ways-to-be-unsatisfied-with-your-church/>

#1: Don't participate, merely consume. The synagogue should not exclusively be about "what's in it for me?" That is a selfish question, not a Jewish one.

#2: Criticize your leadership. Of course synagogue professional and volunteer leadership is not perfect, and as Blackshare writes: *If you have a legitimate concern, approach your leader about it.* Our synagogue leaders, both professional and volunteer, are dedicated and hard working, but of course we all make mistakes just like anyone else. But if the first impulse or instinct is always to criticize, you are setting up a pattern and expectation of being dissatisfied. And I will add to Blackshear's note about not talking behind the backs of leadership: I would **always** rather you come to me in person with feedback or concerns, than do things like write me an anonymous note or complain to someone else.

Tip #3 for how to be unsatisfied: Don't spend time with your church (or in our case synagogue) outside of the church (synagogue) building.

Blackshear explained: *We worship together and we learn together. But most (houses of worship) aren't very conducive to getting to know each other on a deeper level.... We need small group gatherings (not just official 'small groups', but parties, coffee dates, men's/women's nights, etc.). I've found that I learn more about a person over 30 minutes of sharing coffee or a beer, than I did attending liturgy with them for several months.*

This year I began going out to coffee with members, having breakfast and lunch with members- and I am hoping to continue that in the years to come. All of us should do a better job at getting to know

those "outside of our personal circle, but inside of our synagogue circle" on a deeper level.

Tip #4 for how to be unsatisfied: Believe that everything should be *about* you and *for* you, all the time. Judaism reminds us, each and every day, that we are not the center of the world. That is a spot reserved for God only.

And, #5: Be unhappy with the fact that it isn't perfect.

Blackshear writes: *"There is no perfect church, and if you find one, don't join it because you'll ruin it."*

So now, I'd like to ask you each to take a moment to ask yourselves the following difficult questions:

- Do you look at our synagogue as a consumer or as a someone who wants to contribute to creating a spiritual home of meaning?
- Do you complain unfairly or excessively? Or, if you have a legitimate complaint, do you look to help provide a solution when possible?
- Do you intentionally gather with synagogue friends outside of the synagogue?
- Is everything in the synagogue all about you? When something doesn't speak to you, do you ever wonder who it might speak to, or try to see if you can get anything out of something that you perceive to be irrelevant to your life?
- Do you expect perfection? Just remember that when God created the world, God never said it would be perfect, merely "good." The pursuit of perfection in life, or in synagogues, is a losing proposition. Do you expect your synagogue leadership to be on a higher level of creating than God?

So now let's move from the destructive to the constructive. From what not to do, to what would be helpful to do as we seek to address the changing nature of synagogue membership and affiliation. Here's another list, but this one is filled with reflections and wisdom to help us take a more positive outlook about how to approach the future as a synagogue and community, from well known Jewish musician Craig Taubman:

#1: There's nothing wrong with synagogues. Like most things in life, there are good, bad and great ones.

#2: Dues are not inherently bad, but for many communities the model no longer works. It's like the record stores which were once the only places to purchase music. They're no longer relevant or needed.

As you know, this is a topic that we, at Congregation Torat El, are currently looking to address- something that you will hear more about throughout the year.

#3: Synagogues should focus on building relationships with people not wallets. We should revisit the shul business model and determine our objectives. What are people paying for? Prayer? Aesthetic buildings? Great programs? Tradition? Education? Healing? Define why we exist and create places that reflect our objectives. Jewish life has changed and evolved. "Just because it got us here doesn't mean it will get us there".

#4: Consumers are savvy, even when it comes to matters of faith. People are hesitant to pay up front for a product unless they are 100%

*convinced that it's a good investment. Solution? **Deliver services and programs that people value and if they are pleased and sated, they will pay for the service.** It's called Tithing!*

#5: Judaism does not belong to executive directors, rabbis, cantors, temples or JCC's. Judaism is our inheritance. We need to stop pointing fingers and become the living, breathing blessings we are meant to be.

#6: The good news? With fewer people interested in synagogue membership we have an opportunity to start over with a clean slate and reimagine what our "houses of worship and gathering places" could, should and ought to look like. The Jewish people have, and will survive. It's time we focus on thriving!

Hevre, my friends: we, at Congregation Torat El, **do not** think that individualism is the way to go for our synagogue. We believe in the power and need for community. We believe in the power and need for building a community based on relationship. Community and synagogue relationships in all of their forms have a transformative power and address an essential part of the Jewish experience that cannot be underestimated or replaced.

There is no one magic solution to this problem. Over these past few years we have begun to address many of the issues that Taubman raises in his list. But we are just beginning and there is SO much more to do. We have begun to shift our focus to the importance of creating a community that is all about building relationships; to creating a community that is more focused on people than program. We have worked hard to begin sharing the power of building relationships between individuals, with Jewish texts and values, with God, and with the people Israel. We have focused our energy in

creating a more empowered community- where members take part in everything from leading prayers, to reading Torah, to visiting the sick, comforting the mourner, creating educational, social, and tikkun olam opportunities that will bring meaning into the lives of our members and our community. We have decided to focus much of our energy on attracting Jews of the next generation, along with their families who are looking for a place to spiritually connect, while At the same time continuing to work to offer a diverse range of opportunities for Jews of all ages and stages of life to connect to Judaism and our community.

We have also begun looking at various aspects of our financial structure -- from dues, to the way that we raise funds in general -- in order to secure our financial future while addressing the changing nature of the American Jewish community. We are flexible. We are open to change. These two characteristics alone are not things that many synagogues are willing to embrace. We have an amazing group of dedicated volunteers, lay leaders, and staff members, including our newest addition, Rabbi Sara Metz, our Assistant Rabbi Educator.

We are on the right path. But we have a long way to go until we reach the promised land. And we need your help.

We do not pretend to have all of the answers. This sermon was not intended to convince you of the perfection of this community. Instead, I want to invite you to take part in shaping YOUR community. I want you to contact me, a member of our hardworking and dedicated board, or another member of our synagogue professional staff, with a suggestion, a question, a comment, a request, or an area where you might like to volunteer to be a part of the change that is happening here.

The choice is yours. You can view your Judaism as a "fee for service" proposition instead of as something much more complicated, beautiful, and powerful than that. But if you do, I am sadly confident that you will lose out on the depth, wisdom, beauty, power, and comfort that can be found when one is fully a part of a synagogue community. Judaism was never meant to be lived alone. So if you care, **at all**, about the future of our synagogue and our community, if our synagogue community or another synagogue community has ever brought meaning, support, comfort, encouragement, friendship, or inspiration into your life, then I am asking you to step up now, and take some ownership for your Jewish life and your Jewish synagogue.

Rabbi Tarfon taught:

ו רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצֵר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה, וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים, וְהַשֹּׂכֵר הַרְבֵּה, וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק: הוּא תִּיהָ אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מְטֵנָה.

The day is short, the task is great, the workers lazy, the reward bountiful, and the master insistent! You are not obligated to complete the task, neither are you free to neglect it (Avot 2:21).

My friends, we cannot afford to be lazy. The future of our synagogue, the future of the American Jewish community is in our hands. It is in yours, just as much as it is in mine. The question for this New Year, a time for introspection, and a celebration of renewal is this: will you be a part of the change? Will you be a part of the renewal? Your synagogue needs you, and I believe with all of my heart, that you need your synagogue too.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah- may it be a good and sweet New Year for all of us.