

# Refocusing Synagogue Life... For a Little While

I would like to suggest something radical, perhaps even controversial:

In this age of pandemic, the focus of synagogues should consciously and intentionally switch from offering experiences that prioritize building community to instead trying to create learning opportunities in which we can truly hear both sides of contemporary issues and also wrestle with the eternal messages of Sacred Scripture in their ability to shape our lives coming out of the pandemic.

There: I said it. For just a little while – perhaps for as long as a year – we, the Jewish community, should spend more time listening than talking. Gathering, primarily virtually, should be dedicated not to digital replications of synagogue experiences that were at their core social. Instead, our focus must shift to a primary emphasis on learning about that which is timely and timeless in an effort to come out of our current situation stronger and holier as a people, as a community, and as a country. And this will require a conscious shift of programming.

## **Companionship and Community Are Vital**

There is an old joke about an agnostic Jew who tries to explain to his son why he goes to the synagogue every Shabbat though his own theology is unsettled. “You remember Mr. Goldberg?” he asks his son. “Mr. Goldberg goes to the synagogue to talk to God. Me? I go to the synagogue to speak to Mr. Goldberg.”

Indeed, companionship and community are vital to human existence and part and parcel of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> From the physical warmth of friendship in times of both joy and loss, to *kibitzing* about world affairs, to the Shabbat *l'chayim* table, seven layer cake and endless tuna fish, the pursuit of fellowship has for generations driven the synagogue model as we know it, especially in non-Orthodox communities. While some of us may not be sure where we stand with regard to our belief in God, we know that we enjoy spending time with our Jewish friends and that truly the synagogue is our *Beit K'neset*: our place for gathering.

But this virus causing a global pandemic is particularly cruel. It spreads quickly, even from those who are asymptomatic, and wreaks havoc on the most vulnerable among us. Covid-19 has caused tremendous loss of life and economic suffering; it has inflicted significant emotional pain and physically separated families. Because of the nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Torah reminds us, “It is not good to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Or, as we often sing, “*Hinei! Mah tov umah na-im, shevet achim gam yachad* ~ Behold! How good and how pleasant it is when people dwell together!” (Psalm 133:1). Our synagogues are successful community centers.

contagion, the synagogue building – that one place that normally provides us sanctuary from life’s storms by allowing us to come together to give voice to the heart’s yearnings – is by and large off-limits to us.

Yes, CSZ has started gathering outside on Friday nights to welcome Shabbat. Yes, we hope to re-enter our Sanctuary on Shabbat mornings in August, and for small gatherings thereafter in celebration of holidays and *simchas*.

But this form of coming together is not the same. Our ability to offer physical companionship – the hug at a time of mourning, the cheek-kiss at a *simcha*, or even the handshake greeting – is prohibited. *Kibitzing* is impeded by physical distancing and masks. And – oh my gosh – there are no tables at which to stand for *l’chayims*, seven layer cake or tuna fish.

Synagogue life is different now. The High Holidays will be different, too. But rather than continue to mourn the loss of what we love – after all, there has been already so much mourning for losses small and large – perhaps we could see purpose in this new, temporary refocusing of the synagogue mission.

Perhaps, temporarily and for a short time, we ought to embrace this opportunity to shift away from prioritizing building community to focusing instead on listening – truly listening: (1) to each other and (2) to the transformational messages of Jewish Sacred Scripture. Sermons, adult education, religious schools and day schools have never been more important than they are now.

### **Now is the Time for Radical Listening and Cognitive Empathy**

We are all well-aware that we live in era of increasing polarization, and our synagogues are hardly immune to the terrible plague of those who take narrow-minded or one-sided stances. Yet, it is to the exact climate today that our rabbinic tradition speaks.

Taken as a whole, the central teaching of our Talmud is that God’s message – that Truth – can actually exist simultaneously in two opposing beliefs and that as Jews we are duty-bound to the “radical listening” of those whose views oppose our own.<sup>2</sup> Put in contemporary language, if our ancient rabbis could speak to us today, they might tell us that those who call for the removal of statues of the American Founding Fathers might have a point. Then again, those who proclaim that the statues should remain standing have a point too.

Imagine the audacity of recognizing that one is not the sole possessor of truth and righteousness and that other points of view must be considered respectfully. This is what scholars refer to as “cognitive empathy.”

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Micah Goodman of the Shalom Hartman Institute who shared this with me in the name of his teacher, Dr. David Hartman (z’l).

Our sages practiced what they preached. Those qualified to attain the highest level of rabbinic leadership were those who studied the opinions contrary to their own so deeply and openly that they could argue in favor of their opponent's message. The sages were so well steeped in "the other side" that they could even make an argument that a non-kosher animal could be considered kosher!<sup>3</sup>

The authors of our Talmud challenge us to achieve cognitive empathy through radical listening and, when confronted with an idea or a person different from us, choosing to approach the situation with curiosity rather than anxiety – with inquiry rather than fear. By way of example, one should read *both* the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, listen to Fox News *and* to MSNBC.

### **Shifting the Focus from Us to Others: Prophetic Empathy**

Despite the rabbis' teaching to the contrary, in our world today, empathy is in rapid decline and tribalism is rampantly growing. Collaboration and the art of compromise are criticized while polarization is celebrated and reinforced by social media and the 24/7 jabbering of questionable punditry.

Moreover, Americans harbor a tremendous amount of anger, fear, and doubt, leading at times to racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, among other expressions of power. And, perhaps worst of all, is the complete abdication of personal responsibility for society's ills expressed by – well – everyone: from our nation's leaders down to the average person on the street. We have become a nation of blamers.

If, however, we are to listen carefully not only to the timely but also to the timeless, we are called upon to remember that the entire Hebrew Bible, is, in many ways, an emphatic "Yes!" to Cain's question to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"<sup>4</sup> Indeed, all Jews are responsible for one another.<sup>5</sup>

Our Bible tells us too that to be a strong Jew and to practice Judaism is to observe the ritual laws and to know the Jewish story so well that we use these rituals and stories to connect to and care for others outside our community.

When one wears a *tallit* or *tefillin*, it is to remember God's commandments and thereby to follow God's lead in clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, and uplifting the fallen. When one lights Shabbat or holiday candles, the act of kindling must connect us as well to Isaiah's call to be a light unto the nations. And, especially at Passover but at other moments in the year as well, we are told to uphold the humanity of the "other" because we were strangers in the land of Egypt and we know what it means

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<sup>3</sup> "Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: They place on the Sanhedrin only one who knows how to render a carcass of a creeping animal pure by Torah law" (BT Sanhedrin 17a).

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Dani Segal first shared this beautiful teaching with me.

<sup>5</sup> BT Shavuot 39a.

to be the stranger. Both ritual and ethical laws are commanded of us because they reinforce each other and lead us to a higher existence.

As our prophets remind us to no end, we are our brother's and our sister's keepers and, for the sake of peace and our own well-being, this empathy must lead to the active care and concern for those beyond the Jewish community as well.

### **Emerging as Something Better**

This virus is a significant threat, and it is not the only ill affecting our society. As individuals and as families, we should continue more passionately than ever to seek out charitable and volunteer opportunities within and beyond the Jewish community, and we should continue to try to right the injustices of our society. We must learn and practice prophetic empathy.

More radically, in this age of pandemic, the focus of our synagogues should consciously and intentionally switch from experiences that prioritize building community to instead offering learning opportunities in which we can truly hear both sides of contemporary issues while also wrestling with the eternal messages of Sacred Scripture in their ability to shape our lives coming out of the pandemic. Sermons, adult education, religious schools and day schools have never been more important. We must learn and practice cognitive empathy.

For just a little while – perhaps for as long as a year – we, the Jewish community, should spend more time listening than talking. We should seek to learn about both the timely and the timeless so that we might come out of our current situation stronger and holier as a people, as a community, and as a country. Then, when the suffering of the pandemic has eased, we might emerge from our cocoon of growth to come together for companionship and community even more spiritually beautiful than we were before.

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