



Synagogue Life The Next Paradigm

Opportunities to engage and inspire Jews exist, but they're different than before. The real question is, how can congregations do what it takes? **By Rabbi Charlie Savenor**

THERE WAS ONCE A BEAUTIFUL TEMPLE, full of spiritual inspiration and learning, that was a gathering point for the entire community. With time the situation changed. New people moved to the area, many of whom were not Jewish; young people voiced new ideas about what it meant to be Jewish and how to serve God. Things got so tenuous that a group decided it was time to move away and create their own spiritual home.

You might think I'm talking about a North American congregation, Conservative or otherwise, but in fact, I'm describing the situation our ancestors faced 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem.

While the Temple was held in high regard, some Jews wondered about new approaches to God and interpretations of Torah. Eventually the future of the Temple, despite its beauty and stature, was held in the balance not just from external threats but also from internal debate.

At that critical moment in Jewish history, a group of rabbis led by Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai created a new home in the northern town of Yavneh. Some thought they were crazy, even radicals. How could they go off to serve God outside of the center?

Fortunately, this breakaway group had the vision to create something new. So when the Temple was destroyed shortly thereafter there was a new reality in place to serve as a vehicle for spiritual fulfillment and meaning. Ben Zakkai's actions in creating this new reality were brave and visionary.

We can only imagine how hard it was for the Jews of that day to live with such recent memories of a vibrant Temple. Yet in light of their circumstances, they had no choice but to create a different future for themselves.

That moment in Jewish history was a major paradigm shift for our people, comprising the transition from biblical to rabbinic Judaism. This change also entailed moving from a centralized institution to a decentralized system of communal engagement.

During the next two thousand years, synagogues became the loci of Jewish community. Wherever Jews settled, a synagogue was built as a communal house of study and prayer.

A hundred years ago, Solomon Schechter established the United Synagogue of America as a confederation of synagogues with a shared purpose and an inclusive ideology framed around Conservative



Judaism. The hallmark of this approach was its adherence and connection to tradition as well as its openness to new interpretations and modern methods of analysis.

During a time of rapid growth for the American Jewish community, immigrants from Europe looked to their synagogues for a familiar place where they could see friends from their country of origin and experience the traditions that united them and Jews worldwide.

To his credit, Schechter understood the critical role United Synagogue congregations and JTS-trained rabbis could play at this moment, not only as transmitters of Judaism but by acculturating immigrants to this land of opportunity and its newfound freedoms. This helps explain Schechter's legendary words: "In order to be a success in the American rabbinate, you must be able to talk baseball." It was essential that leaders be prepared for the challenges and opportunities they faced in framing Judaism in modern terms.

A lot has changed since then. The landscape and makeup of Jewish life is vastly different than in Schechter's day. Most notably, after the Holocaust decimated Jewish Europe, a Jewish sovereign state was miraculously established in Israel. Also the acculturation of Jews into American society has brought new blessings and challenges, including rising rates of interfaith marriages.

In light of these changes, I believe we are experiencing another paradigm shift,

one as significant as that experienced by Ben Zakkai and his followers.

This moment of change centers on how North American Jews experience religious life and spirituality. Affiliation rates across religions and denominations are down. Community is no longer just about who our neighbors are and who we sit next to in synagogue, but also who we follow on Twitter and who we "friend" on Facebook.

In their book, *The Jew Within*, Dr. Steven Cohen and JTS Chancellor Arnold Eisen assert that this moment can be defined as the era of "the sovereign self." Today many Conservative Jews want to be Jewish as long as it's on their own terms and that it emphasizes personal meaning.

This trend has impacted our synagogues, as many Jews today look to their synagogues for something altogether new. People yearn for personal meaning not membership, for community not committees, and for a sense of spiritual purpose not programs.

MANY LEADERS LAMENT that Jews are not coming to synagogue like they used to. While this may be true, many opportunities for engagement and relationships still exist. They are just different than before.

Working with synagogues for the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism consistently brings me face-to-face with the impact of this new paradigm on congregations. Here are two examples of how different congregations' leaders recently responded to decreased participation and membership.

At the first congregation, they gave me a status report with palpable anxiety for their future. Their membership, consistent with local demographics, was declining and attendance at services and classes had dropped.

After this report, one of the officers made an offhand remark, accompanied by a smile and a heavy sigh, that their most popular offering now was Zumba, a dance/exercise class. They were getting nearly 100 people to every Zumba session.

Hearing that Zumba was outperforming every other program they offered, I suggested that perhaps Zumba represented

an opportunity for Jewish engagement and community building. At first they thought I was joking, but I couldn't have been more serious. "If you want to connect with your congregants, go where the people are," I said. "Ask the rabbi to attend the Zumba classes. He can welcome people, offer a prayer for health at the beginning; he could even give a d'var Zumba."

Now I'm not saying that the rabbi meeting folks at Zumba is the answer to all the issues facing this congregation. But I do believe we have to rethink how we develop relationships with the members of our communities. On a weekly basis 100 members of this congregation were broadcasting with their feet, literally, what was important to them. Could their leadership respond in a way that was vastly different from what they had done before?

The second congregation has an impressive state-of-the-art building. Unfortunately, due to the high cost of housing in the area, many young adults and young families have been moving across town. Some of these newcomers have expressed interest in this congregation, but few have been willing to trek across town to participate.

When it was suggested that the synagogue hold events across town as a satellite or outreach effort, the idea was dismissed. "We have a beautiful building, so why would we ever hold an event anywhere else?" the synagogue leaders replied.

By focusing on their building, this synagogue board let potential members, future leaders and opportunities for Jewish engagement slip through their fingers.

These anecdotes illustrate how resistant we can all be to new ways of reaching out to people, even when we can clearly identify those we seek to engage, whether they be right under our nose or a little further away.

If we really want to address the rapid changes taking place around us we must be open to new approaches. The first element of a new paradigm is how we think of and refer to synagogues. As part of its 2011 Strategic Plan, *V'Asu Lee Mikdash*, Make for Me a Sanctuary, United Synagogue purposely began using the Hebrew »

word *kehilla*, which means community, in place of synagogue, because the former alludes to inclusion and companionship while the latter refers to a building. The mission of a *kehilla* is not to maintain a structure, but to welcome, educate and inspire those individuals who constitute our community and share a pursuit of spiritual connection to God, Torah and Israel.

It is amazing to see vibrant independent minyanim that meet in basements or rent nondescript community halls. Clearly, the interior design of the sanctuary is less important than the inner spiritual life being nurtured by Torah, by a sense of purpose and by empowering meaningful volunteer experiences.

The word *kehilla* also suggests that the success of congregations can be measured through the authenticity of communal experience, the strength of our relationships and the opportunities for growth. Furthermore, *kehilla* points to the fact that we live in a less hierarchical society, where everyone's voice and presence matters.

OF COURSE IT'S EASY TO SAY that we need to create congregations where people feel connected to Judaism and to each other. It's harder to figure out how to get there. That's why in planning the upcoming United Synagogue Centennial, we wanted to create something much more than a 100th birthday party. Rather, the Centennial represents our collective effort to address head on the issues facing *kehillot*. Its topics and takeaways are directly related to the challenges and opportunities facing congregations today.

The tagline of the conference, "The Conversation of the Century," reflects our commitment to convene open, relevant discussions and workshops instead of just speeches by talking heads. The usage of the word "conversation" is not a cliché, but is designed to facilitate what Dr. Ron Wolfson calls "relational Judaism." (See article, p. 22.) There is nothing more special than when we talk to each other *panim-el-panim*, face-to-face. A sincere discussion, a meeting of the minds, helps us better understand each

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other and work together toward a shared vision. This conversational approach also serves as a model for *kehilla* leaders, professionals and clergy, as they consider how their congregants learn and grow. It is our vision that at the Centennial Conservative Jews will be transformed into conversational Jews.

The conversations at the Centennial will focus on four crucial areas: understanding how to better engage people on a personal level; how to create dynamic communities with a sense of sacred purpose; how to improve dramatically the job we do of welcoming interfaith families, and how to sustain and promote a relationship with Israel in a civil, constructive manner. The essential question is this: Where do we need to go and how can we get there together – as rabbis, professionals, lay leaders, cantors, scholars, and all who care about the future of Conservative Judaism? Every presentation is designed with takeaways so that the conversation and momentum can continue when people return home.

In addition to the leading lights of Conservative Judaism, the Centennial will feature new and different voices from both inside and outside the movement.

The Shabbaton will include multiple services with amazing rabbinic and cantorial talent from all over North America. It will be for *tefillah* (prayer) what Limmud International is for study – an inspirational, spiritual model that can be emulated at home.

Conservative Judaism has a unique, timely and timeless message to share with the Jewish people and the world. We espouse an inspiring message of inclusion, communal concern and spiritual alignment that goes against the grain of a society that values individual autonomy and personal choice above all.

Like Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai leaving Jerusalem for Yavneh, today we are entering a new paradigm of American Jewish life.

The good news is that our *kehillot* can serve as beacons of inspiration, intimacy and innovation, as long as we are open to new approaches to community, engagement, education and leadership. If Schechter were asked today what 21st century *kehilla* leadership teams need to know, one can imagine he would suggest learning to use Facebook, mastering community organizing skills, and developing a vision statement. In order to create connected, purpose-driven *kehillot* in the new paradigm, these skills are even more important than baseball!

Over the last 10 years many conferences have been held about "Conservative Judaism at a Crossroads." These gatherings featured demographic data and outlined the cause of our challenges. Contemplating this information, one could feel paralyzed by the forecasts of our demise.

After attending several conferences with this type of theme, I have begun to wonder, when does the light turn green? When is it time for us to move forward?

That time is now. The light has turned green. Join us at the Centennial and be a part of the Conversation of the next Century. **CJ**

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