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Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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A DWELLING FOR GOD'S TORAH

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Who's in the Temple on Friday evening—not only in our sanctuary, but also in almost any synagogue in the country?

Sad to say, we know it will be a miniscule minority of American Jews.

One kind of description of who is present at Shabbat services might focus on whether we imagine ourselves to be largely producers or consumers of the burdens or benefits entailed in maintaining the synagogue, not only as a physical facility but as a congregational community.

For the most part, the producers are the people who understand that maintaining the community is a kind of juggling act—somebody or bodies have to work constantly to keep the balls in the air, or the whole thing spirals down into a shadow of a synagogue. Those who are largely consumers of congregational “services,” on the other hand, tend to treat the community as if it were made out of the same solid materials as the building—like it's nothing but brick and mortar. In effect, they *dehumanize* it. They treat the community as if its continuity didn't rely on human beings constantly juggling the balls. In sociological parlance we call that reification—they reify the congregational community.

Now it would seem that to strengthen, unify, and expand the community, enlivening participation and increasing membership, we mostly need to have more producers. But that would be a mistake, because producers don't inevitably produce what's needed—they often do precisely the opposite. That is, as producers we sometimes consume prodigious amounts of the community's resources—the time, energy, money, and, most importantly, the spirit of many people—with no discernable positive effect on membership participation and growth. And, of course, as far as consumers go, without their payment of fees for the congregation's services, how would the congregation raise enough funds to meet its budget requirements?

So how do we understand what's going wrong in so many American congregations and how the situation can be remedied?

To answer that question we have to ask ourselves some other questions: Why would *anyone*—given all the other pressures and priorities in the lives most of us are living—want to make a major investment in the life of a congregational community that's largely irrelevant to day-to-day pressures and disappointed hopes? Or to take the question to another level: Why would anyone want to make their participation in the life of a congregational community their highest priority—to make it the center-point of their life?

The idea is so far from contemporary values and experience that it has a ring of ridicule and ludicrous humor to it. It seems a far-fetched fantasy that we, and people like us, would make the synagogue the center-point of our lives.

Nevertheless, the Torah has much to teach us in the way of understanding and elevating the circumstances of American synagogue life. At the beginning of *parasha* (Torah reading) Terumah (Exodus 25:2), we read of God saying:

“Speak to the children of Israel that they will receive for Me a portion [*terumah*]. . . . And this is the portion that you shall receive from them: gold and silver and copper; sky-blue wool, purple and scarlet wool, linen and goat hair; and ram skins dyed red, *tachash* skins, and *shittim* wood, oil for lights, spices for anointing oil and for the incense, *shoham* stones and stones for setting, for the *ephod* and for the breast pocket. They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, then I will dwell in their midst.” (Exodus 25:2-8)

The first point to note about this offering of materials to create the Sanctuary is that they were *not* given to God; they were given to the community to be used for godly purposes. So it was not one or a handful of individuals but the community that would build the institutions for God's purposes. So, of course, the subsequent arrangements that were

made were not to suit particular, well-heeled contributors, but the whole community.

How are we to understand what it is that will bring about God dwelling in our midst?

V'shachanti b'tocham (ושכנתי בתוכם), “and I will dwell in their midst,” describes far more than God simply being present in the Temple. Our commentators tell us that the Shechinah, the presence of God among us on earth, doesn't come about because we erect and equip a Sanctuary. God is palpably present among us when as a community we dedicate the central purpose of our own private and public lives to learning, living, and teaching Torah.

We know the term Sanctuary by two Hebrew words: Mikdash (מקדש) and Mishkan (משכן). Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that, to build a *mikdash* is to take on the task we have to do for God: That task is to create a welcoming place for the *Torah*, not only in the Ark and the Sanctuary, but in our minds and hearts. The Sanctuary is *not* created as a sanctuary for humankind; it is a sanctuary for God's *Torah* that we're tasked to create. And the Mishkan, the place of dwelling for God among us, is what God promises us if we create that dwelling for His *Torah*.

It is the creation of that welcoming place for the *Torah* in our communal mind and heart that not only brings the Shechinah down to earth, but in doing so spurs us beyond vague spiritualism to a spirituality that bears the *mitzvah*-fruit of transformed lives.

But, of course, given all those pressures and other priorities in our lives, why should we want to take up the daunting task of creating a dwelling place for God's *Torah*?

Maybe the most compelling contemporary answer to that question is that many of us are spiritually starved for a *relevant* religious vision and path. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972): “God is the meaning beyond absurdity. Wherever I go, I encounter absurdity. We can everyone do our share to redeem the world in spite of all the absurdities and all the frustrations and all the disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You're not a machine. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence. Remember the importance of self-discipline, study the great sources of wisdom, and remember that life is a celebration.”

What might be possible if we started working on our individual lives and our communal life as if they were great works of art, if we studied our wisdom tradition to do that, and if in doing so we were genuinely inspired to celebrate overcoming absurdity and finding *mitzvah*-meaning together?

Possibly we would want to make Judaism and congregational community the center-point of our lives and, in doing so, become an inspiration to others who might be spiritually searching and inspired by the idea of building a community committed to treating their lives as works of art.

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