

Synagogue 3.0

A Hasidic rabbi tells the following story, “Once there was a beloved king whose court musicians played beautiful music before him. The king loved the music and the musicians felt honored to be able to use their talents to bring him joy. Every day for many years the musicians played enthusiastically, and the king and the musicians developed a deep love for one another. But eventually, after years of dedicated service, all of the musicians died. Their children were called into the king’s court to take their parents’ place. Out of loyalty to their parents, they began to appear every morning to perform. But unlike their parents, the children did not love the music. While they could play basic tunes, they did not understand the hidden power of their instruments, and in their hearts they believed that they had better things to do than spend time trying to please some king. Each day that they played, their resentment grew. And each day the king became more and more frustrated-as much by their dismissive attitude as by the noise they made.

After some time, for reasons nobody really understood, a few of the children developed a renewed interest in serving the king. They realized that playing beautiful music was the way to connect with him and bring him joy. But because

they had abandoned serious practice for so long, their instruments were rusty and out of tune, and their skill was embarrassingly inadequate.

So these children set out to remember what their parents had known so well. They arrived early each morning and found a remote corner of the palace to practice together. They began to experiment with sound, rediscover harmony, and rededicate themselves to service spawned by love. In the evening, after the other musicians went home, they'd practice more, trying desperately to make their instruments sing.

The king witnessed their efforts and was deeply moved. Their music was different from their parents', but like them, it was driven by dedication and love. And for this reason, their efforts were received as a blessing.

When we look at the themes of this story, alienation and resentment followed by revitalization and adaptation, we see all of the themes of change, especially generational change. The parents were doing things the same way for years and the king and the parents loved each other. Their music meant something to them. When their children took over, the music that their parents played didn't speak to them. They resented playing the music their parents played. Eventually, they started to find a new way of playing music. It was different music, but it worked because it was filled with the same love and dedication as the music the

parents played. The lesson of this parable is that it doesn't matter what form the music takes because what matters is discovering a way to connect with a music of dedication, joy and love.

A couple of years ago I heard Rabbi Daniel Freeland, president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, speak about the changes that have occurred in the Jewish world over the past one hundred years. He talked about two phases, the first he called Synagogue 1.0 that lasted up until the 1950s and the second phase which we are largely in today, he called Synagogue 2.0. These changes arose because there was a generational shift in the larger society and in the Jewish world that led to major changes in synagogues. Rabbi Freeland's talk led me to start thinking about the reality that our society has been undergoing another generational shift that is leading to transformations in synagogues.

As we think about the future of synagogues, it is important to begin with thinking about what has changed from the past. For those who grew up after World War II, the memories of the Holocaust and the memories of Israel's early struggles deeply affected many American Jews. For younger Jews, these events are not as central since they occurred 40 to 70 years ago. Jews have been fully accepted into American society so anti-Semitism is not a central motivating reality, though sadly over the last couple of years anti-Semitism has been on the rise. Whereas Israel once faced daily threats from much more powerful enemies, now Israel is one of

the strongest armed forces in the world. To be sure, Israel is still surrounded by those who wish to destroy her, but most American Jews do not see these threats as being as desperate as they once were. In addition, with Israel in control of a large Palestinian population, Israel's actions appear more morally complex to younger Jews. Demographic studies repeatedly show that while the Holocaust and Israel were the most important elements of Jewish identity for the post World War II generation, for younger Jews they are decreasing in relevance.

For the first and second generation of American Jews, ethnic identity continued to serve as a central focus of Jewish life. First generation American Jews moved to largely Jewish neighborhoods continued to participate in Yiddish culture and maintained a sense of personal identity from their Jewish connections as they struggled to gain acceptance in an America that was still filled with Anti-Semitism. Second generation American Jews grew up in the suburbs in less densely populated Jewish communities, largely assimilated to American culture and with much less Anti-Semitism. For second generation Jews, the Holocaust and Israel were powerful elements of maintaining ethnic identity since these events were perceived as happening to our people. Today, with younger Jews being the third and fourth generation of Jews in America, ethnicity is diminishing in importance.

For previous generations of American Jews, the synagogue was a central place to assimilate to American life, express American civic values, and maintain a sense of communal identity. Many of the elements of earlier synagogue life reflected larger social and religious trends within America at the time. Synagogues were a place to adapt to American society while maintaining a sense of Jewish community.

For most of America's history, a dominating feature of American culture has been religiosity. Having a religious affiliation has been an expression of American civic identity. For most of American history, those who said they had no religious affiliation never rose above five percent. Today, those who say that they have no religious affiliation has risen to twenty percent with the highest incidence of no affiliation being among the young. These changes in religious affiliation and changes to American civic practices have occurred because there has been an increased emphasis on radical individualism, what one scholar calls "the sovereign self". Today there is less emphasis on maintaining tradition as each individual feels the authority to choose what they find personally meaningful.

These challenges, the decrease in emphasis on the Holocaust and Israel, a decrease in ethnicity, and the increase of radical individualism, all represent generational changes that will lead to significant adaptations in synagogue life. Already we can see the signs of alienation and resentment in younger generations

as the number of those with no affiliation continues to rise. Now we have the opportunity to review the way we engage in the music we play so that we can adapt and revitalize Judaism for the future. We need to find what music will speak to people in contemporary Judaism so that they will feel connection to a living Judaism filled with dedication, joy and love.

Since issues of continuity, the Holocaust, Israel, and ethnic identity, do not have the same importance, I believe that we will need to focus more upon personal meaning. In a world of radical individualism, we must situate the synagogue as a place to find community, where people can find support in times of need, communal celebration in times of joy, and friendships to make life fulfilling. We should concentrate on experiences that provide holiness, transcendent meaning, and a sense of purpose. In a world where civic values are unstable, we should embrace a new vision of the Jewish community as a place with a mission for creating real change in the world.

Despite the clear challenges that I have outlined, the story of the children creating new music for the king shows us that we do have a future. In every generation, the Jewish community has adapted and revitalized itself to develop new, vibrant expressions of Judaism. The ultimate lesson of this Hasidic story is that the most important measure of success for a synagogue is not the size of the synagogue or whether the food was good at an event, but that we are able to make

music filled with dedication, joy, and love. As we enter this New Year, may we always be able to play music that speaks to the deepest part of our souls.