

When we gather in synagogue on the New Year, our focus is on the future. We pray for renewal, health, and good fortune in the year ahead. To be sure, we also feel a need to cast a glance backward, to own up to our past mistakes and shortcomings, and to seek atonement for any wrongs we may have committed, but our purpose in so doing is to free ourselves from habits and patterns of behavior that distance us from God and from each other, so that we might be worthy of blessing and come closer to living up to our potential in the year ahead. We know how fickle fortune is and how fragile our hold on health and life. So much of what lies ahead is unknowable. Accordingly, while we are optimistic about God's forgiveness and about our own capacity for renewal and change, there is more than a touch of anxiety and trepidation that accompanies our prayers on the Days of Awe. We seek for ourselves the assurance that the prophet Jeremiah, in the words found in the Haftorah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, conveyed to the exiled Israelites and Judeans of his time, *v'yesh tikvah l'achritech*, there is hope for your future.

Understandably, our personal future preoccupies us at this season, but as committed members of Jewish communal institutions – synagogues and Federations – we might also ask what of our collective future? *Ha'im yesh tikvah*, is there hope for us, non-Orthodox American Jewry, for our institutions, both religious and secular, and for the continuity and survival of a distinctive and cohesive Jewish community? Without trying to sound alarmist, I must concede that the signs are not encouraging.

I recently attended a Board of Rabbis meeting in Chicago featuring Rabbi Sid Schwarz from the Washington, D.C. area, editor of a volume titled *Megatrends*, which analyzes in depth various aspects of contemporary Jewish life and suggests strategies for coping with the challenge of shaping a viable Jewish future.

Rabbi Schwarz began his presentation with some disturbing statistics. Jewish Federations currently are raising roughly the same amount of funds as they did twenty years ago but with only half the number of donors. The Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the major congregational bodies representing non-Orthodox Jews in America, report that only 7% of the members of their affiliated congregations are under the age of 35. Rabbi Schwarz had a most telling line: any business whose appeal to the under-35 demographic was so weak would likely be

considering closing its doors. The time interval that began with the Six Day War in 1967 and culminated with the mass rally on the Mall in Washington in behalf of Soviet Jewry twenty years later was, in Rabbi Schwarz's view, a heroic era that inspired a level of Jewish commitment that we today would be hard pressed to replicate. In a similar vein, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, co-founder of the Synagogue 2000 initiative and author of the book, *Rethinking Synagogues*, writes at length of the daunting challenges involved in getting Generation Xers and millennials, those born in the 1970's and later, to participate in synagogue life. Both Rabbi Hoffman and Rabbi Schwarz view the problems that Jewish communal institutions are facing as part and parcel of a larger American context: the privatization of our lives, the disinclination of the young to be joiners, and the disappearance in America of a civic culture and a compelling vision of the common good.

My evidence is anecdotal rather than scientific, based on my observations locally and my contacts with friends and family elsewhere, but it does bear out some of the concerns mentioned. Look around you at services on Friday night and Saturday morning. How many folks under the age of 55 do you see? Consider the membership rolls of our Springfield Jewish congregations, which have plummeted by a quarter to a third. More worrisome is the enrollment in our joint Religious School, which once was over 100 and is now less than 30. Declining membership numbers, aging congregations, the inability to afford the maintenance and repairs on buildings put up fifty to sixty years ago, and discussions between synagogues about merger are the common threads in the fabric of American synagogue life. And no, the picture is not uniformly bleak. We in Springfield may have a somewhat skewed picture because our young people tend to move away after college and because state government, one of the main draws for Jewish families to move into our community, has contracted in recent years. On the positive side of the ledger, Birthright has sponsored trips to Israel for tens, hundreds of thousands of Jewish young people. A younger demographic was very much present at the General Assembly of Jewish Federations that Nancy and I attended in Baltimore last November. And, yes, there are some vibrant synagogues on the American scene, characterized by dynamic rabbinic leadership, lively worship, an intense spirituality, and an embracing sense of

community. But overall the trends do necessitate soul-searching and creative thinking on the part of Jewish communal leaders.

Rabbi Hoffman sees an opportunity for the synagogue in the hunger that exists within our society for spirituality, a hunger that is no less real and no less widespread in spite of disenchantment with and withdrawal from mainstream congregations and denominations. He believes that the stress on ethnicity which sustained Jewish congregations from the era of mass immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries until the present will no longer suffice to keep synagogues vibrant and attractive to the younger generation. Nor will programs for the sake of having programs. The synagogue will flourish, he maintains, only by addressing people's quest for experiencing and expressing the spiritual in their lives.

Rabbi Schwarz focuses on four aspects of congregational life, four "pillars" he calls them, that can revitalize the synagogue and enhance its prospects for the future: *Tzedek*, social justice, *Chochmah*, wisdom, *Kedushah*, literally holiness but understood by him to mean sacred purpose, and *Kehillah*, community. It is this last concept, *Kehillah*, to which I would like to devote most of my attention this evening.

More than ever, the sense of community is something we need and something that has become increasingly difficult to find. Humans are fashioned to find meaning and fulfillment in relationship and intimacy, in the one-on-one relationships we have with spouses, life partners, or close friends, but also in the warmth of community, where we can share our joys and find comfort in our times of sorrow, where we more than just a cog or a number, and where people know and cherish us for ourselves (or sometimes, in spite of ourselves) and care about our well-being.

A number of recent books and articles have highlighted the irony that in this, the most wired and connected of worlds, we feel more alone than ever. Sherry Turkle, a professor of communications at MIT and an expert on the influence and effect of computer technology on human culture and society, has titled one of her books *Alone Together*. According to her, we have become "closer to our machines but farther and farther from each other." We may have hundreds of friends on Facebook, but we lack the ability to enter into genuine relationship with each other and to have authentic

communication. Technology offers, she maintains, only the illusion of companionship; it provides us with friendship and connection devoid of emotional tone.

These concerns were echoed in a Sunday New York Times piece several months ago by the writer Jonathan Safran Foer, who noted that all of the tools that were developed to facilitate communication have made it progressively less personal and less emotionally engaging. We've gone from the personal visit and the letter to the telephone to the e-mail to the Tweet and the text, all in the interest of saving time, overcoming geographic distance, and making communication more convenient. But again, there is an irony, in that the time saved by our high-tech devices is sometimes squandered on distractions. We become so enamored of and fascinated with the potential of our machines that we neglect to be attentive to the people and situations at hand. Our attentiveness to others, says Foer, is the best gift which we can offer them.

Gershom Gorenberg, an American-Israeli journalist and blogger, recently wrote a column titled *I Don't Tweet on Shabbat*. Gorenberg is personally observant of Orthodox Jewish tradition and would be inclined anyway to refrain from the use of electronic devices on the Sabbath, but he finds an additional rationale for his practice, in that Shabbat thus enables him to concentrate on relating to people face to face. "Seeing the face", *lirot panim*, is a concept that resonates powerfully within the Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Schwarz believes that in promoting *Kehillah*, community, over the virtual versions thereof and in bucking the trend toward privatization and the loss of civic ideals, Jews need to be counter-cultural. I don't think he means that we must become anti-technology scolds, toss out our computers and our Smartphones, forego the benefits these devices can offer, and abstain from using social media such as Facebook. What I believe he's asking is that we be more cognizant of what technology can and can not accomplish, that we give priority to face to face encounters in which the parties can be fully present and attentive and to real-time, live, and actual community.

That feeling of community is something I believe to be one of the great assets of Temple Israel and of Springfield Jewry. We may lack much of the infrastructure of a larger Jewish community (a community center, bookstores, delis) but we have an enveloping sense of warmth and caring here that many a larger community would envy.

Community, particularly in the form of structures such as religious congregations which mediate between the individual and family and the anonymity of urban life and mass society, is a human need, one that in our atomized and fragmented modern world is sorely lacking. Having said that, however, I recognize that I have not yet closed the circle, and that the case for the synagogue as the place where one who is Jewish by ancestry or choice might want to come to experience community requires further elaboration. Communities, especially religiously-oriented ones, can be repressive, hostile to individuality and to freedom of thought and expression. Why then should one affiliate? To which my response is that all of life consists of trade-offs and almost all groups which we join voluntarily do have, along with the benefits they confer, their boundaries, their expectations, and their accepted standards for how activities and programs sponsored by the group will be conducted. Having responded, however, I would add that the question does challenge us to strive within the agreed upon boundaries to be as inclusive, as open, and as non-judgmental as possible.

But why the synagogue? What advantage is there to satisfying our quest for community through participation in religious life? Here I turn back to Rabbi Schwarz's pillars. Judaism's sacred texts contain a repository of wisdom spanning the centuries that teaches us how to be fully human and how to celebrate the joys and cope with the sorrows of the human condition. Judaism, furthermore, encourages open-ended engagement with these texts as we ponder their relevance to the here and now. Questioning and intellectual openness are encouraged. Jewish ritual provides us with a path to connect with the transcendent, to experience the awe and wonder of creation and the sacredness of life. And the prophetic strain within the Jewish tradition summons us to strive for the realization of our ideals of peace and justice in the world. In sum, the synagogue is a community with a compelling mission that engages both the intellect and the emotions and spurs us to action for the betterment of humankind.

But how do we appeal to the younger generation, who, according to Rabbi Hoffman, are averse to overarching and ongoing commitments and affiliations? The nature of modern life is to belong to multiple mini-communities, and to take on overlapping identities that may change over time – a group of fellow-parents from our children's schools or sports teams, an extended family group that we see for out-of-town

simchas, a neighborhood association, a professional society or trade union, a weekly or monthly card game, a hobby club, and in later years, perhaps, a retirees' group. The mobility and transience of American life are reflected as well in the nature of work in today's world. People are no longer employed in the same factory, office, or agency for forty years from school graduation to retirement. Economic forces have often made it necessary for workers and business owners to return to school for re-training and to pursue a second career, sometimes very different from the one that they had originally trained for. And, of course, geographically we Americans are mobile as well; it's not uncommon for families to move several times during a lifetime in pursuit of job opportunity or career advancement or, following retirement, a hospitable climate.

While I concede Rabbi Hoffman's point about lifelong commitments and identities no longer being the norm, this may sometimes work in our favor. It may be that at least some younger Jews might be seeking an anchor of stability amid a sea of change and that the synagogue might be able to serve that function or, that in moving to a new locale, where one has to establish new friendships and networks, the familiar rituals and liturgy of the synagogue may provide a zone of comfort. The synagogue, moreover, differs from many of the communities and identities I enumerated in that it is multi-generational. In our congregation I can draw upon the wisdom and experience of our elders and listen to their stories and I can relive my own experience of thirty-five plus years ago as a young parent as I watch our pre-schoolers and grade schoolers learn and grow. We're skewed here toward the grey-haired end of the age spectrum, but we do at least in some measure represent the full range of the life cycle.

I have no doubt that the synagogue of the future will differ from the institution as we have known it until now. We will, as the scholarly and thoughtful rabbis I've quoted have said, need to re-invent ourselves and choose carefully the pillars on which we hold up the structure of synagogue life. In Springfield we will have to work even harder at the task because of the demographic trends we are dealing with. But I want to and I have to believe that the synagogue will survive, because we have the potential to be *kehillot kedoshot*, holy communities, where we see each other face to face and give each other the gift of our attentive presence. May the year ahead be rich in the blessings of health and happiness for you and yours, and may we in our Jewish communal institutions experience

the fulfillment of Jeremiah's promise: *yesh tikvah l'achritech* – there is hope for your future.