

RESPONSE

A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

Everett Gendler
on
New Alternatives
to the Synagogue

Arthur Waskow
First Fruits, 1999

Bill Novak
on
Philip Roth
and Our Situation

Joel Rosenberg
New Poems

Mark Winner
on
Reform Judaism

Ben Hollander
on
New Alternatives
in Jewish Education

YESH B'RERA?

Is There An Alternative?

[A Preliminary Proposal for An Alternate Religious Structure]

Author's note: As I prepare to send off this somewhat personal proposal for wider circulation, I feel a certain temptation to de-personalize it and make of it a more objective model. Yet that would be rather misleading and perhaps presumptuous at this stage of the experimentation.

So far, I've had the opportunity to meet with only three or four nuclei, and these are at various stages of development. But in each case there has been some response to the proposals as here submitted. Why not, then, share this beginning point? It is clearly presented as suggestive, not definitive, and it invites critical treatment and modification, not imitation.

If there is some wider interest in this proposal, others will surely try it out in various ways. Several of us here in the Boston area will be involved as well, and later in the year we may well want to compare reactions and results.

For now, however, with all its loose ends and ambiguities, the following preliminary formulation is the most honest for wider sharing.

E.G.

When Havurat Shalom Community Seminary was established three years ago, its founders felt a keen sense of the crisis both in the United States at large and within the Jewish community in particular. The draft, Vietnam, racial and economic injustice, and personal disorientation were evident to all. These issues persist today in perhaps aggravated form, while the deterioration of cities and the massive environmental threat join the list of urgencies. As for the Jewish scene, there was little within organized Jewish religious life in the U.S. which adequately related the resources of the tradition to the problems faced at the time; and that has not changed significantly during these three years.

Havurat Shalom has provided an important alternative for some concerned Jews of the college and post-college age group, but it has not addressed itself to the religious needs of many other Jews, including those with young children. Neither has it been particularly satisfying for Jews with a socialist activist bent; nor has it related to comparable religious experiments in non-Jewish segments of our society. In short, Havurat Shalom, for all its accomplishments and value, has not concerned itself with the needs of many Jews whose present alternatives seem either to be established synagogues or non-affiliation, with consequent religious isolation. Are there other conceivable alternatives?

Personally, I do not write off the synagogue as a potential resource, but there are some basic problems with the institution in its present form which

make it an unlikely agency for religious involvement of a kind appropriate to the coming age.

The present synagogue depends on a full-time professional staff whose income needs are constantly rising. The present synagogue also presupposes a sizeable building which, however modest, is still costly to construct, finance, and maintain. Together, these factors tend to make the synagogue captive to an affluent lifestyle which is ecologically untenable, economically unjustifiable, and religiously questionable. Even a slight economic recession threatens its solvency, and it has a built-in tendency (like all institutions) to become self-preoccupied, financially and institutionally.

In addition, for economic reasons, it must grow to a size which precludes the very intimacy and warmth which people rightly seek from religious involvement.

The religious professionals, especially the rabbi, both enjoy and suffer from being the primary focus of the institutionalized religious activity. On the one hand, the rabbi enjoys great personal gratification from his creative work with services, teaching, preaching, counselling, and pastoral functions. On the other hand, his hierarchical position is a burden as well, making enormous demands on his time and emotions, leaving little time for his family, and tending to routinize his contact with people.

As for the congregant, his own opportunities for personal gratification through such significant religious activities as planning and leading services are few. However talented, however learned, the structure tends to place him in passive relation to the religious life of the synagogue, with few opportunities to share his personal gifts of religious sensibility.

The religious education which students receive often bears little relation to their homes or lives outside the synagogue. They often find little meaning in the instruction; they retain little; the burden of additional formal class hours added to overly-demanding school days pressures them further, and their indifference to Jewish learning quickly becomes active resistance and hostility.

Synagogues are almost never selective in membership. Financial needs combine with a commendable spirit of hospitality to make the synagogue open to all who can afford it. This means, in practice, however, that each synagogue tends to have such a mixture of people in it that, attempting to meet the needs of all in this quite random grouping, there develops a distressing uniformity among the institutions. Given the rich individual diversity among Jews today, it is sad that particular synagogues do not represent particular emphases and outlooks so that those so inclined might find fuller satisfaction of religious expression in them. Furthermore, in this situation each rabbi must moderate many of his own particular gifts and tendencies in order to be as "fair" as he can be to all involved. This, too, contributes to a lack of distinctiveness in the institutions, and what the rabbi pays in loss of genuine selfhood is hard to calculate.

32

What I have mentioned should be sufficient to suggest that the plight of the synagogue today is not basically due to egotism, greed, or personal inadequacy, but rather results from characteristics of the institution as we know it at present.

Before attempting to outline a possible alternative, a brief speculative word about the general U.S. scene might be in order, for it is within that context that any alternative must function.

Most likely, some modifications will be made in the draft policies of Selective Servitude (SS) in order to reduce popular political protests against U.S. policies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world. It also seems likely that political repression will increase. Economic injustices domestically will almost surely be aggravated, as economic policies seek stability through devices which favor the already well-off; and internationally the appalling gap between us and the "underdeveloped" nations will continue to widen. Environmental reactions here may already be beyond our means; it is certainly beyond our will at this point. Hence congestion will increase, local travel become more and more difficult, essential services continue to deteriorate, costs increase, frustration increase, and a sense of helplessness grow as over-centralized, exploitive, industrial gigantism continues slowly to disintegrate in nervous convulsions of varying degrees of intensity.

Given the present situation in the United States and in its Jewish community, what significant alternatives to the present synagogue structure might be imagined? There are already some in the process of emerging, with the model of the Jews for Urban Justice especially suggestive. However, this model presupposes a communal lifestyle which most of us are either unable to unwilling to adopt at this time; or else it requires a physical relocation which again many of us are not able or willing to make. Our own search, then, should be for an alternative which could help us grow toward changes in our lifestyles without demanding, as the starting point, an impossible and immediate break with where we are now.

Such a model should be modest in its use of resources, minimize regular travel, be intimate yet not insulated from the larger society, be respectful of all the people involved in it, and utilize the capacities of all. It should relate to the traditions of Judaism but to other traditions as well, and therefore be a possible agency for whatever religious development and change may be appropriate at this period of history. It should also offer maximum possibilities for distinctiveness and spontaneity of expression. In yet other terms, it should offer us some support for our own lives while helping us direct ourselves to other lives as well.

What, then, might such an alternative be like?

Formally, YESH BERERA? would be a buildingless network of regionally grouped nuclei which would meet regularly in homes of the members for various

functions. For example, let us assume that there are three to twelve families* in a given area of the city, the suburbs, or the countryside who feel that they share certain religious/societal/communal interests**. These families would arrange to meet on a weekly basis. There could be considerable individual variation, but one possible cycle might be the following: One week a Shabbat evening potluck supper at one home, with the hosts assuming special responsibility for the religious atmosphere, table ceremonies, singing, a home service, etc. Other weeks, Shabbat morning services in someone's home (or lawn or at a park) which, meeting at different times of day, might produce quite different moods. ("The raiment of morning is not the raiment of evening.") Still another week, the group might meet for a sunset *Havdalah* service with yet a different mood and focus.

From such involvement, we might find ourselves using space differently in our homes. A corner, a fireplace, or a room might come to have a special sense of the sacred, with certain meditative objects concentrated there. Differentiated space within the house might make all of the space more significant. (Cf. Japanese interiors, wooden synagogues, Mircea Eliade on sacred space, candelabra, oil lamps, samovars, earthenware vessels, kiddush cups, incense holders, etc. Add to the list and we'll sanctify together.)

We might also find ourselves collecting and sharing with one another meditative material, selecting appropriate expressive music, using artistic talents to design pages for loose leaf prayer books, writing new material, etc.

Combined with this would be a program of religious-cultural-social learning centered primarily in homes and related directly to the weekly coming together of the entire group. After exploring in a preliminary way some of the religious sensibilities and inclinations of members of the group, both adults and children—N.B.: adults first; no cop-out via "it's only for the kids"—a relevant program of activities for learning would clearly suggest itself both for the children and for the adults, and this could be assisted in several ways.

First of all, we should hope to have a regular weekly session for children of each group, with an innovative curriculum which could be assisted, led, or taught by parents of the group, students from Haverat Shalom, or students from other colleges in the area. The rabbi would be one resource person for leaders of the various learning groups, and the imaginings of all of us might provide interesting

* Family is the unit I select by way of example, but this is to illustrate, not to exclude non-family units. Single people should not feel excluded, nor students; hopefully, the tradition of *bachnasat orchim* [hospitality] could be practiced with some ease. In fact, a broad age and status range would be desirable, since there are serious questions to be raised about the increasing age-and-other segregation in our society.

** These people might be Jewish but need not be. Judaism would be the religious resource consulted at the beginning, but need not be the only one. In addition, crucial to the experiment, would be the slow combining of various significant elements of our lives and outlooks so that there might begin to emerge genuine and whole expressions of our real religious commitments today. This setting might be especially helpful to couples which are trying to achieve a respectful synthesis of differing birthright traditions, i.e., the "intermarried".

