

# RESPONSE

A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

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## 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.

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 corrections 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 or 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 B'RERA? 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 *Havurat 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 *hachnasat 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".

stimuli for our children's expressive learning activities (though, in all likelihood, the children would soon provide a good bit of their own curriculum).

Secondly, in order to avoid the segregation of religious education from the rest of life, a sharing of resources with one another could help the religious material flow in and out of the children's experiences easily and naturally, becoming part of the texture of life rather than an element isolated from it. What I have in mind are some records of Hebrew, Israeli children's, and Holiday songs which, played at home among other records, quickly become part of the children's natural frame of reference; simple but colorful Hebrew letter projects out of felt or wood, with flannel boards; some charming, easy, and bright Israeli children's books (the Hebrew version of Dick Bruna's series, for example, in which *Tilly and Tessa* becomes *Tzili v'Gili*, is a delight to our children); the Columbia Israeli recording, with Hebrew narration, of "Peter and the Wolf" (with word lists, etc; I've done this once before and the kids loved it, at least those who weren't afraid of the wolf!); *z'mirat*; and various other songs. The list will be a long one, and all of us will have ideas to contribute which, day by day, at story hour before bedtime, or at other shared times during the day, will help desegregate the "Jewish" and the "religious" from the rest of life.

Thirdly, for those who feel unsure of their own resources in these areas, support and instruction should be provided. After knowing what we're after and why, we can become very specific in ways of sharing such material and experiences naturally and comfortably with our children. It's important to remember, after all, that children are delighted to learn *with* as well as *from* adults, and that not everything has to be done immediately. It's also important to remember that it's not a matter of sitting down and summoning the kids to order. If the music is right, the sounds will themselves invite attention and interest; the same applies for colors, shapes, objects, movements, and occasions.

As for the adults, besides the discoveries about ourselves which we shall be making from our involvement in the religious education of our children, there ought to be another kind of relating among ourselves. This will surely vary from nucleus to nucleus, but could be seen as an exploration which draws upon intellectual resources without being intellectually bound. Thus, to share feelings, problems, and concerns of a personal kind, and to follow these wherever they might lead, could be aided by our various learnings and competences as well as by elements of our own and other traditions. To determine a course, a study, or an exploration by internal promptings and personal concerns rather than by external classifications of subject matter would be our point of departure.

One other formal element should be mentioned: periodic gatherings when the various nuclei could share concerns and celebrate together. These gatherings might take place at camp or retreat facilities in the Boston area, and could be either for a Shabbat or for an entire weekend. The timing might be related either to special Sabbaths, holidays, new or full moons, or to occasions in the growth cycle of either vegetables or humans.

*Substance* has to do with social and religious emphases as well as with agents. A word about the latter first.

If this buildingless synagogue is truly to function, it will require a certain time investment on the part of both parents. A good beginning might be Urie Bronfenbrenner's *Two Worlds of Childhood*, a study of contemporary child rearing patterns in American and in Russia. In important respects, this volume, together with some of the issues raised by Women's Liberation, are central to this whole scheme of communality, study, and worship. If "the system sucks" (and it does!), it sucks the best of our time, our energies, and our attention outward toward production, professions, profits, and power—one goal of this buildingless institution must be to help us to redress the imbalance of our lives.



### A Personal Statement

For a variety of reasons, among them, ecological considerations, religious tendencies, and personal preferences, we will be living on a small acreage not far from Boston. Part of our time, especially during the growing season, will be spent raising vegetables, planting fruit trees and preserving. On the other hand, we hope to combine this with significant contact with people further in the city; Mary through her involvement in T-groups and Women's Liberation, I through some part-time congregational involvement, and both of us through YESH B'RERA? By sharing time and tasks rather differently from the way we used to, we hope that each of us can find some fulfillment while relating in mutually rewarding ways to the lives of others.

I would like briefly to state some of my own particular religious inclinations, which might perhaps help some of you evaluate how compatible with your interests and inclinations mine may be:

—*the prophetic*: This must be singled out for special mention since it lies at the heart of the Biblical adventure both in time and meaning; it is a difficult, essential category of awareness for our lives in relation to society, and one which must be made specific for all of us.

—*women in Judaism*: Male dominance must be corrected, and the tradition of Miriam the Prophetess leading the people in celebration of the Crossing of the Sea must be reclaimed; the need for feminine religious leadership is great within Judaism today for obvious and varying reasons.

—*theology*: The supposed split between "nature" and "history" has been a disaster environmentally and spiritually; to reclaim the nature elements of Judaism while retaining the prophetic emphasis on redemptive history is an urgent priority.

—*prayer*: Rather more meditative and celebrative than petitionary, with a central purpose of helping us integrate ourselves with the cosmic rhythms which manifest *chei ha-olamim*, the Life of the Universe, God-in-Creation.

—*Hebrew*: A fine sound of a language, expressive and powerful, some relation to which is almost essential to a genuine religious service.

—*Israel*: A focus of deep personal concern for Jews today and one vital aspect of contemporary Jewish life; not, however, the center of Jewish life as I understand it, but one pole of it; also, the power-political reality which is the State of Israel should not be identified with the religious ideal of Zion; hence, critical sympathy is appropriate, together with a concern for all the human beings and peoples involved in the Middle East.

—*Jewish Identity*: The predicate "Jewish", like all predicates today, is problematic; furthermore, new religious conditions and developments suggest that there are possibly some new religious formations in the making, related to the traditional ones and drawing from them, yet very likely having their own distinct characters; part of our task is to assist with this process of transformation.

—*Inter-religious relations*: An area to be explored not by good-will clichés, nor by institutional defensiveness, but by inter-personal religious experiments of various sorts; these might include study of the meaning of shared religious symbols (e.g., bread, wine, candles) to the various traditions, considerations of new religious developments, sharings of particular holiday celebrations, and so on.

—*Jewish survival*: A by-product, not the goal, of religious involvement; self-preoccupation is both wearisome and self-defeating; religion should be mainly a lens for viewing the world, not primarily a mirror for viewing the group self; those aspects of the tradition which genuinely contribute to the vitality of our lives *will be preserved*, whatever the fad of the moment; our job is to live the tradition, not focus so overwhelmingly on preserving it.



### How to proceed

**Organization:** I should imagine that we begin by individual expressions of interest, see where the interested people are, bring them together with other interested people in the area, and work from there.

**Personally,** I would hope to meet with each nucleus to help explore the particular possibilities and problems at the beginning, and if it were helpful and not intrusive, I'd like to continue to meet personally with the various nuclei in some regular way.

**Financing and personnel:** Hopefully, with time, each individual nucleus would draw increasingly on its own resources, and even at the beginning much would depend on the personal involvement of members of the group. This, of course, would help minimize costs.

On the other hand, it does seem to me that the assistance and coordination of a rabbi would be important, at least at the beginning of such an alternative.

This may simply reflect my own clerical training and bias, but it is also possible that it reflects the reality of our relating to the resources of a rich historical tradition such as Judaism. If the latter is so, then the rabbi as a resource person, teacher, and guide might have a valid transitional role in YESH B'RERA?. However it would work out in practice, it seems to me that the rabbinic involvement should in principle be defined as "part-time" rather than "full-time," and that the maximum salary be anticipated at \$7500 for the year.

In addition, it seems desirable to have the services of at least some student-teachers, and funds should be available for them also. How many teachers will be needed will depend, of course, on how many nuclei form, each nucleus probably needing a teacher for one session of a couple of hours each week. Assuming the present remuneration for teaching of this kind to average \$10 per hour, assuming weekly sessions of two hours extending over forty weeks, and allowing extra hours for regular meetings between teachers, the rabbi, and parents, each nucleus should envision a teaching budget of approximately \$1000.

As for Shabbatot and weekend gatherings at camps or retreat centers, the costs of these could be shared by the participants on each occasion.

Were we to assume seventy-two families involved, say six nuclei of twelve families each (with the twelve perhaps splitting into two sections for the weekly Shabbat home get-togethers), the budget for rabbi and teachers would be about \$13,500 for the year. If each family could assume the responsibility for \$18 per month (*chai* is a fine number), this would yield \$15,552 per year of twelve months, leaving a margin for expenses of mimeographing, phoning, mailing, etc.

However, no one should feel excluded if these costs were too high. Who knows, after all, precisely what the figures will be? Perhaps some will be able to contribute more. Perhaps some concerned agencies or individuals will want to contribute towards this experiment (though ideally it should be self-sustaining). In any event, *no one* should hesitate to express interest because of financial considerations. Unquestionably, deficits, if there were any, would be met somehow. Personal commitment must be the determining criterion for participation in YESH B'RERA?.



### Relation to the present Synagogues

How essential is a building to religious involvement? How centralized must worship be? How professional must be the leading of services? How much equipment, and what kind, does education need? To what extent will home involvement prove more effective educationally than almost any conceivable developments in curricula, materials, and techniques?

To what extent does the synagogue as institution release religious energy, insight, and involvement? To what extent does it repress them? Do the formal religious institutions help or hinder people's involvement in social issues?

Can the function of the rabbi become different such that the present dissatisfactions with congregational work will be reduced, and defections from the pulpit decreased? What changes should take place in the rabbi's role? Should it be re-defined or superseded altogether? If the latter takes place, will there still be a need for some specialized ministering to pastoral needs such as weddings, funerals, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and so forth? By whom? What about maintaining contact with the resources of the tradition, and of Jewish learning? What changes, if any, in the directions outlined in this proposal can or should occur within the present synagogue structure?

The above questions are not meant to be rhetorical; they are genuine. The answers are not clear to me, but I think they are important in relation to the future of the synagogue and the future of Judaism. YESH B'RERA? may cast some light on at least some possible answers.



## YESH B'RERA?

The term includes a question mark at this point. Perhaps in a year it can be removed and stand as a tentative affirmation. Perhaps in three years it might be replaced by an exclamation mark. On the other hand, it may well be that the removal of the question mark will follow the erasure of the slogan altogether, at least as it relates to this particular model. Then we shall know that if there is an alternative, this is not it.

Shall we at least explore the matter together?

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*Interested persons are urged to write to Rabbi Gendler in care of this magazine.*

## THE BIRTH OF A JEW

### The Story of an Unstructured Synagogue

**Y**ou can say what you want about God. You can even say you don't believe in Him. But you can't say that He—or at least his ancient spokesmen—did not understand human nature. Take the Second Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Good thinking. The Lord figured correctly—how else—that man has not yet reached the stage where he can focus his full devotion to the one God. In days past, Baal and Ishtar competed for equal time with the Lord. Today it may be Cadillac or Magnavox. But take heart. God understands why we worship other gods. As long as He comes first.

The Lord certainly had me figured out. I am what you call an assimilated Jew. That means no shtetl background, no Yiddish, no thought of Jews as a people but as a religion into which I was born, as a dachshund is born a dachshund. And as a dachshund must follow its dachshundian ways, so did I pursue my way through Hebrew School and Sunday School and the Bar Mitzvah without question. Of course my family went through the motions: Kashres, the Havdalah, the Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, schul. But that's really all it was: motion.

When I learned in college that the Israelites were nothing more than a Semitic tribe of nomads who picked up a Midian volcano god during their travels, I was glad to drop the entire sham and proclaim myself a Moral Human