

THE SYNAGOGUE: REGAINING CREDIBILITY

by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

I. The Root of Jewish Ethics. The cornerstone of Jewish faith is imitatio dei, the imitation of God. In our tradition what is stressed is not knowing God intellectually or believing God theologically, but imitating God morally.

God functions in our tradition not as some abstract being upon whose nature we speculate but as a model to be emulated. God is not something to be believed. God is something to be behaved. God is not an article of faith. God is an activity which changes. As God is merciful, be thou merciful. As God is just, be thou just. As He clothes the naked and visits the sick, and comforts the bereaved and buries the dead, do thou also.

Every belief statement about God must be translated into terms of behavioral consequences for man. Every time you talk about God it must make a difference in the way you live. Every time you say "God" it must implicate "you." Do you believe in God? If you say "yes," what difference does it make? What does it mean to say "I believe that God created the world." Is it like a theoretical statement in physics? Does it mean to oppose the principle of evolution?

In terms of the principle of imitatio dei, it means: as God creates the world, we have to create a world. As God creates out of chaos a cosmos, we have to create out of our own emptiness and void a universe of meaning and of purpose. Why us? Because unlike all other creations, man is unique in that he is a co-creator with God. Anthropologists have noted that unlike other animals who

are born fairly complete with highly specialized instincts and specific drives, man is born incomplete with freedom and rationality with which he can control, sublimate, utilize his instincts. He can say yes and he can say no.

Whenever the Bible says God creates light, moon, stars, the sun, waters, fish, fowl, animals, it is always God who creates it alone. "Let there be," and with that word there springs into existence...being. Only with man, God does not say, "Let there be." With man, God says, "Let us make man." Because God cannot create man, unless man is willing to cooperate with God in working on himself and in becoming a human being. God can create "Adam"--not "ish" (man). God alone cannot create man because God will not destroy that which is unique in man, namely his freedom to create an environment and a world of meaning to man.

We are creators. We fashion our own world. We choose professions and vocations of our own, we make choices: whom to marry, to have children or not to have children, how many children to have, what kind of friends we have, what kind of enemies we make; what our hobbies, what our style of life, what our recreation. And we choose community. We chose to belong to the synagogue. We are here as Jews, and nobody forced us.

II. Choosing Synagogue Affiliation. We chose to join a synagogue. No army and no ecclesiastical authority and no theocratic polity threatens excommunication. We don't have to be Jewish if we don't want to. We don't have to raise our children Jewishly. If we're here in the synagogue it's because we believe that the synagogue represents an institution that seeks to create a world, to build a world of meaning and of value. What kind of spiritual architecture and design are we constructing?

The question sounds pretentious. Does the synagogue build a world? Is the synagogue concerned with building moral character? For most Jews the synagogue is the most irrelevant institution in their lives. And they vote their repudiation of the synagogue, its smallness and its irrelevance, by the fact that the large, overwhelming majority of Jews are disaffiliated from the synagogue; and even those who are in the synagogue who are affiliated, the disaffiliated affiliated, don't take the synagogue seriously. The synagogue is a shteibel, a place where tickets are bought, and funds solicited, a place for raffles and donors and bonds, and where children celebrate the Bar Mitzvah, and where people talk about kashrut and Shabbat and prayer, and the board plays temple politics. It is hardly a very serious institution. How much of a difference does it play in your life?

The synagogue has lost its credibility. It has little moral force in this community. There's no nexus, no connection between belief and ethical conduct, between prayer and social responsibility, between the synagogue and the home, between the synagogue and my personal concerns, between the synagogue and the community. I hate to admit it and it gnaws at me. And it bothers you as it bothers me that the synagogue simply has no plausibility, no credibility, is not respected. What haunts me, as I am especially reminded on the Sabbath of Sabbaths when we hear that section of the 57th chapter of Isaiah. "Did I choose the fast so that you bow down your head as a bulrush and spread sackcloth and ashes upon you; is this not the fast that I have chosen to loose the fetters of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, that ye break every yoke, is it not to deal thy bread

to the hungry, and that thou bring the homeless to thine house, when thou seest the naked that thou cover him and that thou hide not thyself from thy fellow man." And when I was a young man and I came to the synagogue and I heard the words of Isaiah I said, this is it; that is what makes Jewish life worthwhile. Judaism is concerned with helping the naked and the poor and the fallen and the rejected. That is the grandeur of the synagogue.

And as I grew older I began to recognize that the synagogue has been more and more swept up into a society and culture in which we have only beautiful people. The synagogue seems to care only about educated people, married people, affluent people. And it is embarrassed by failures to such an extent that it will not allow failures to really become part of its interests and concerns. I mean dropouts, fallen people, hurt people, hungry people, weak people, widowed people, old people, divorced people, the lepers of our society. I mean the synagogue untouchables who have no place here among us.

It's not because the synagogue, you and I, have ever said that they are not wanted here, but if the measure of theological belief is behavior, then the synagogue de facto has nothing to do with failures. And should the failures ever come to darken the doorways of the synagogue, the sanctuary, we say to them in one form or another, "Go elsewhere. Outside. Go elsewhere for help, elsewhere for guidance, elsewhere for support." Here is a place for prayer. Here we daven. Here we study. Here we celebrate the rites of passage. But the other world, the world that helps, the world that cares, is outside the synagogue...in the secular world, in the non-denominational world, in the agencies which are largely inde-

pendent of the synagogue and of the temple. So why in the world should anyone take the synagogue seriously as an important moral force in the community and in the life. And why should anybody not feel a little proud when they say to me, "You know, rabbi, I'm not religious." I know what they mean.

Fortunately, we have consciences. What is it that we've been trying to do for these past five years and what is the thrust of our design? Is it not in essence to restore credibility to Judaism. To make people really believe that to be a member of a synagogue makes a difference. That to be a member of Valley Beth Shalom means that there is some commitment involved and that one has a right to have certain expectations from a synagogue.

III. Food Bank. In reality and symbolically, I think there is something moving about those food bins that are in the synagogue vestibule, because that represents a nexus, a connection between davening and doing, between prayer and practice. When on Friday nights, and during the week, men and women and children come to the synagogue, and in their hands are packages of dry cereal, or rice or dry milk or peanut butter, which they know will be packaged and distributed to the poor; when they know that this synagogue is open throughout the entire summer months, and that the hungry people of the San Fernando Valley come to this synagogue to relieve some of their hunger, they understand that there's a blood and flesh connection between prayer and petition. You know what ideal prayer is, say the rabbis in the Talmud BABA BATHRA: it is when tzedakkeh precedes tefillah. "And I in righteousness will see thy face." If you want to see the face of God, comment the rabbis,

then you come before him with help, and then you pray. Said Israel Salantor of the 19th century to his constituents: "I see that each time you look out of the window and you say come, come, come and join us in the minyan because it is time to daven Minchah, how is it that in the evenings I do not see you look through the window and say, come, come home with us; it is time to eat, you who are hungry."

There's an old custom called "shlogen kaporres," which took place on the morning before Kol Nidre, in which you would take a hen or a rooster and wheel it around your head. Many of the rabbis didn't like it, but they knew the people wanted to do it, so they ethicized the ritual by proposing that the chicken, rooster, be gifted to a poor individual, or else it be redeemed, and its worth in money be given to the poor.

Well, this Kol Nidre let us adopt that rite. Before we come to daven on the eve of Kol Nidre, come with food or with a check, and we will have people from the Food Bank stationed here. It's our responsibility as a Jewish community to feed those who are hungry. That will be our supplementary prayer for Kol Nidre, a vital supplementary act. We will pray better for that, and our children will be able to pray better for they will understand that the antecedence of prayer is tzedakkeh.

For the last two years Marge Titcher has served as chairman of our Food Bank. This year Carol Solomon and Louise Silverberg are going to do that which is sacred: imitatio dei--"The Lord, Lord God, merciful, long-suffering and long in kindness and in mercy." As God is the model of mercy and kindness, you be so. There are people who are hungry. There are 250 old people in the Israel Levin Center in Venice, with an average age of 80. They're

lonely, they're frightened, they're scared, and they're alone. I'm very proud that this past Passover packages were delivered to the 40 poorest of those people in the Israel Levin Center homes, and with our children, that 28 havurot participated and raised over \$1000, to see to it that these people had something to eat. That through the efforts of our remarkable Sisterhood these people have an Oneg Shabbat once a month. That's Yiddishkeit, that's Jewish theology, that's godliness, that's prayer. The delightful children who delivered those packages into the hands of those needy people, and who received their embraces, understood very well what it means to be Jewish, and that the synagogue cares. The synagogue cares.

IV. Blood Bank. Members are sick. Some are in need of operations.

They are frightened, it's a costly affair and they need blood. I'm proud of this congregation, which this past year has instituted a blood bank, and has collected 78 pints of blood, and every pint of blood has been used. And I want you to share the blessings of those recipients of blood, the blessings I have received and that Arlene Hirschler has received, she who is in charge of the blood bank. "Ki hadam hu ha-nefesh": blood is the life of man.

V. Paraprofessionals. People are bleeding in all kinds of ways.

Come with me into my office and sometimes at home, and listen into some of the conversations. I'm witness to great sadness, terrible quarrels, bitterness between husbands and wives, between parents and children. They have nowhere to go. They find it difficult to cope with a society that is rapidly changing. They can't relate to children, they don't understand what is going on. They're intelligent people but they're not trained for it. For the past

two years one of our own, Dr. Arthur Sorosky, has given countless of hours and weeks and months and years to the training of 14 of our own people, men and women of our own congregants, who have disciplined themselves to learn, to study, to be exposed to the dynamics of various modes of psychotherapy; who have themselves undergone a group therapy. These 14, without exception, are helping members of our congregation with problems, counseling them: adolescent problems, problems of marriage, problems of the aged, problems of bereavement. That is part of what a synagogue is.

VI. Widows and Widowers. Last year I spoke to a group, it was on a Friday night, and I spoke about the single parent, and this congregation was filled to capacity with hundreds and hundreds of divorced people who are in trouble. At the end, a woman in this congregation, a lovely woman who has been widowed for a number of years, came to me at the Oneg Shabbat. She wished me a Gut Shabbos, squeezed my hand and said, "Rabbi, help me. It's been a long time and I can't get out of my depression." The woman has a claim on us. She has a claim on the synagogue, because a synagogue is supposed to be an institution that cares for its people. "...To cause the widow's heart to sing..." Something has got to be done. It's going to be done through our paraprofessionals, it's going to be done because we launch this year of 5736 a widows and widowers program to ease the burden of widowhood. People have to know how to live in such threatening circumstances. Barbara Braun and Jeanie Blanc, two members of our paraprofessionals are committed to help organize this neglected body of our membership.

People die. And those who are left with the loss need comfort, they need help with their children and with their lives. Lil Klempfner, this entire past year, has dedicated herself with tremendous compassion and intelligence to serve those who are bereaved in our congregation.

VII. V.B.S. Senior Center. Why is it that we are such a shrivelled institution? Do you know that when I came to this congregation five years ago, there was an earthquake. No cause and effect relationship here. The earthquake happened after I came. And I read in the newspapers that the churches were there, the churches were open to the victims of that catastrophe, the churches were giving food and giving help and aid. Where was the synagogue? Am I not a member of this community? Don't I have a responsibility to this community? Where is the moral force of the synagogue, which represents Judaism, which is concerned with helping people.

You're going to be reading in the newspaper in a few weeks of the opening of a Valley Beth Shalom Senior Citizen Center on Van Nuys Boulevard, corner of Sherman Way, which deals with the needs of the elderly. A grant of \$55,000 was awarded by the Area Agency on Aging to Valley Beth Shalom's counseling service, and if you know anything about grants you know how difficult it is to procure such grants. It was through the energy, the will, the drive of Lyn Levine, one of the members of our paraprofessionals, and one of the members of our temple board, that it was granted. And it is this unique community contribution which will be directed by Lyn Levine. Her assistant director is another member of the temple board, Estelle Cooper, who served as our Ethical Action chairman for two years, and the secretary of the Valley Beth Shalom Senior Citizens is Lila Segal, a board member and officer of the Sisterhood, and

the Friendship Circles which the Senior Citizens are going to have are modeled after our own havurah program; and our own paraprofessionals will provide therapists when the senior citizen's social functions are challenged and threatened, at a minimum of 11 hours a week.

This is new. And some may say, "Is that the shul? Have I become a member of a shul that suddenly is reaching out to the community, that is going to be concerned with the needs of the community aged, not only aged, but non-Jews and Jews alike." And I ask myself, why is it that Jews who have been prominent in the fields of philanthropy and social action, interested in raising the lot of mankind, have done so, but almost always anonymously, almost always not as Jews. There are hundreds and thousands of Jews involved in ethical activity, but rarely do you find that this is the voice of a Jew who is rooted in a tradition, never do you find that it is a synagogue that is concerned with the community. I want the name Jew to be as sacred and as meaningful as to some of us at one time the Quakers used to be. I want people to know that if you are part of the Jewish community you are part of an institution, part of a synagogue that is a caring, feeling, acting institution. When I find here on a Wednesday or a Tuesday men and women who are picking up their packages, some of them wearing crucifixes, coming into the synagogue, I am proud. I remember one of them saying to me, when I was introduced to her as the rabbi, "You know, the synagogue is the only institution that cares."

Why should we as Jews care about feeding non-Jews along with Jews in our community? Because we are not a tribe. Because we Jews celebrate the creation of man; because the God whom we revere

is a God of the entire world; because the rabbis have said it is your obligation to feed those who are hungry amongst the Gentiles, to clothe those who are naked amongst the Gentiles, to comfort those who are bereaved amongst the Gentiles, together with the Jews. "Mipnei darkei shalom"--because that is the way of peace. That's the way you build up a world. That's the way you imitate God.

When I hear that the supervisor of schools of the City of Los Angeles met with Mayor Bradley to discuss the terrible hunger in the San Fernando Valley, and that the mayor and his agencies referred to Valley Beth Shalom; when that superintendent of schools organized a food drive amongst his junior high school students and had his high school students come here with trucks laden with food, they knew they came to a synagogue. I want Jewish and non-Jewish children to know that the synagogue helps the poor, the failures, the downtrodden, the neglected, the rejected, the "lepers" of society.

What do you think the synagogue is? Never let it be said a country club. That's not what motivated you to join. That's not why I became a rabbi--to be an entertainer of beautiful people. It is to make those of us who are not "failures" understand that they cannot live narrow, uncaring "successful" lives. What are we to do about the 250 Vietnamese families in Camp Pendleton who have no place to go, who are threatened with being shifted out of Camp Pendleton to Arkansas, to Tennessee, anyplace. Why should you and I give a hoot about the Vietnamese? Because we are Jews. Because these people are homeless, rootless. These people don't know how to get a job, how to find a house, how to buy some food. They're strangers. "Ye shall love the heart of the stranger--for ye were

strangers in an alien land." We know what it means to be estranged, how important it is for someone to do something for the abandoned. And don't tell us that nobody did anything for us. Shall we conduct ourselves as pagans, as tribal primitives? Is that the meaning of our eternal dissent, our struggle, our suffering? We're going to help. We're going to help because we're Jews. And Helen Rubin, who is newly appointed to this very important Ethical Action Committee, has begun the holy task of helping. Together with Bonnie Ader and Ellen Silk, we're resolved to help settle these Vietnamese in whatever ways we can. With Murray Brasky we are going to continue to help settle Russian Jews in our community.

I know you're worried about your children. I hear it all year long. I'm worried too. You're worried about mixed marriage, about marrying out of the faith, about the effort to convince them that the synagogue is worthwhile.

Stop arguing with your sons and daughters. Stop trying to convince them verbally and quotationally about how great Judaism is. Stop telling them about the shtetl, stop telling them about Akiba and Hillel and Abraham and Jeremiah. I know you have been taught that "if you know your past you will respect your present." I don't agree. If you know your past, and your present is empty, then that past will only serve as a condemnation of your present. The only way you're going to have pride in your present is if you can show your children that to be a Jew now and here is to be a great human being; that we are not of the "beautiful" people interested mainly in hedonic gratification.

Stop arguing with your children about the past and you start creating the present. Judaism is important as an intellectual tradition, it's important as a ritual tradition, but that erudition and piety must be expressed by making Jewish life a moral force in the world. The synagogue will thrive if it justifies fidelity. The synagogue can become the most indispensable institution in your life and the life of your children. That's what we're trying to do.

And we have wonderful people here. People whose altruism is genuine and who require only the vehicle to bring out the goodness in them. We are creators of worlds. The synagogue is a world which must be modelled after the ideals of our moral tradition. When you are called to build, to add your nail and hammer, do not look elsewhere. Lend us your hand to create a viable, credible synagogue in the heart of our community.