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RESTRUCTURING THE SYNAGOGUE

Harold M. Schulweis

IT IS Now some twenty years since our teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, *alav ha-shalom*, addressed this assembly and spoke these strong words: "The modern temple suffers from a severe cold . . . the services are prim, the voice is dry, the temple is clean and tidy . . . no one will cry, the words are stillborn." The criticism was directed against the metallic services, against the lugubrious tones of the ritual master of ceremonies intoning the Siddur pagination.

For us it was neither a novel nor a pleasant criticism. The complaint has long since taken on the acerbity of folk humor. A penetrating Jewish anecdote tells of a nouveau riche young man who invited his European traditionalist father to his modern temple. The son was proud of the decorum and, indeed, when the rabbi informed the congregation that they were to rise for the silent meditative prayer, there was a silence. With pride the son whispered to his father, "what do you think about that?" Papa responded in Yiddish, a *mechayeh! Der rav steht un zogt gornisht un alle heren zich zu* (The rabbi stands and says nothing, and everyone listens to him).

What do they want of us rabbis? Are we not warm enough? The services are cold. Shall we raise the thermostat? The prayers lack relevance. Shall we experiment more? Should we add guitar or flute or harp to the organ? Should we gather new prayers from the liturgy of our Jewish theological trinity—Joan Baez, Rod McKuen and Khalil Gibran?

Somehow the criticism and the apologia seem misdirected. The remedies fail. All the best intentioned creative efforts, liturgical innovations, and theological reconstruction fail to warm up the frozen pew.

Our creativity and experimentation, I shall argue, are premature. Criticism of the services deals only with symptoms, and symptomology is not etiology. The complaint about the "coldness" of the synagogue points only to the tip of the iceberg. No amount of pulpit charisma will thaw out the frigidity below. Heat rises from below.

I propose that we turn from symptom analysis to character analysis. Whom are we addressing? What nexus is there between them and us? What fidelities to Jewish life and Jewish values have we as leaders the right to assume?

We are confronted with a new character ideal, with a radically different kind of Jew, the newest sociological phenomenon in our history. We face the emerging “psychological Jew.” Our rhetoric, our allusions, our claims presuppose a set of experiences, values and basic categories which, in fact, belong to another Jewish typology. We appeal to “God, Torah and Israel” and experience the shock of non-recognition when the triadic sancta are addressed to our new audience. We sense vaguely that we have lost the power to bind and to loosen, to move our people, to seriously affect their behavior.

Out of frustration, we may scapegoat our audience, and murmur at their ignorance or indolence or apathy. More often, we turn our complaints inwards, against ourselves. We begin to doubt our competence, to question the adequacy of our charisma, our ability to lead. Once again we have fallen back on symptoms.

Harold M. Schulweis is Rabbi of Congregation Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, and teaches philosophy at the University of Judaism. This paper was originally given at the Rabbinical Assembly Convention, May 9, 1973 at Grossinger, New York.

the religious typology

MOST OF US ARE FAMILIAR with two Jewish typologies: the religious Jew and the ideological Jew. They are wholly other than the psychological breed. My grandfather was a religious Jew. The repertoire of his responses was informed by the wisdom and ethics of his community. No act was too trivial or too private to escape the impress of communal approbation or opprobrium. From *nagel vasser* to the order of putting on and lacing his shoes, every gesture responded to a communal norm. The right shoe first, for “*the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly*,” the left shoe laced first as a mnemonic for binding the phylacteries of the arm.

The rhythm of his private life was synchronized by the three prayer coordinates of communal prayer: *shacharit*, *minchah*, *maariv*. For my *zayde* “too early” referred to the community’s time limit. P.M. and A.M., for him, meant “*post-maariv*” and “*after minchah*.” Erev Shabbat, my grandfather was transformed into a Thomas Alva Edison, winding a cord around the key of his alarm clock which in turn was twisted around an electric bulb, an ingenious “*shabbos zayger*.” Saturday night he was a Galileo looking to the heavens for a sign from the stars which would permit him to smoke again.

My grandfather enjoyed the therapeutic power of his community of faith. When my grandmother grew ill, the synagogue authorities offered a prayer whose very formula embraced the community. “May she be healed together with all the sick of Israel.” When she died, the vocabulary of consolation was again tied to the community. “May God comfort you together with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” When the festival of Sukkot penetrated the seven days of mourning, my grandfather’s rabbi had only to remind him, *haregel mevatel gezarat shivah*—“the festival cancels the seven-day mourning period,” and he abided by the norm. No resentment was felt, no protestation that the community was interfering with his private sorrow. He knew that the immortality of his wife was linked with the eternity of her people: *ain ha-zibbur met*, a community does not die. That kind of Jew is a rarity in my congregation. I am not my grandfather’s rabbi.

the ideological Jew

THE OTHER TYPOLOGY with which we are acquainted has rejected the sanctions and proscriptions of the rabbinate. The *issur-heter*, *kosher-treif* dicta are, for the ideological Jew, the language of ritual claustrophobia. For him, the metaphors of *meshiach*, *techiat ha-metim*, *gan Eden*, *im yirtzeh hashem* only manifest Jewish impotence, innocence, acquiescence. The ideological Jew may be a Zionist or Socialist, a Bundist or atheist. His heroes are not the rabbis, but secular figures—Zhitlowsky, Jabotinsky, Dubnow, Ahad Ha-Am, Ber Borochov.

However different from the religious Jew, the ideological Jew shares with him an ultimate fidelity to the Jewish community. The speaker cries out *dos Yiddishe volk*, the will of the people to exist, and the cry resonates in the soul of the ideological Jew. In common, both typologies respond to the corporate needs and voice of the Jewish people. Their leaders can appeal to the survival and community of the people. They can make claims upon the religious and ideological Jew.

the psychological Jew

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JEW is “*sui generis*.” He is radically different from the other familiar types. He is on principle a privatist. For this post-religious, post-ideological Jew, all community is suspect. He may not have read Freud or Marcuse or Norman O. Brown, but a meta-psychology has filtered down to warn him that civilization is repressive. Psychological wisdom counsels that community, whether in the shape of religious faith or political ideology, robs him of his private satisfactions, his privacy and individualism. In our times, the danger to ourselves comes from the suffocating demands of community. And while community in part is useful, it must be kept at a safe distance lest it drain our energies and desiccate our joys.

Consider the religious community. It holds claims on what we eat, where we eat, when we eat; when we fast and when we feast; when and who and where and how we mourn. Consider the secular community. Its ideology calls for sacrifices in the name of “classless society,” “the proletariat,” “the ingathering of the people,” “redemption of the land.” The ideological community, no less than the religious community, presses for commitment. And commitment is precisely what the psychological Jew, the special case of the psychological man, seeks to escape. As the salmon said to the hen, when the latter invited him to dine at an inn featuring lox and eggs, “I must decline, dear hen. For from you they only want a contribution, from me they want a commitment.”

The emerging privatist has accepted this meta-psychological wisdom as a way to achieve his salvation. His posture is that of detachment from the draining enthusiasms of the community. Fear of being absorbed by the community has extended to marriage and the family. The popular and sophisticated arguments for relationships without the burden of commitment and responsibilities are extensions of self-conscious privatism.

the psychological Jew and the synagogue

HE MAY JOIN the synagogue. But his affiliation is not motivated by religious or ideological faith. There are “psychological” advantages in joining. It is good for the child to celebrate his rites of passage. It is wise for him to identify with a group. The psychological Jew of the seventies is not the assimilationist Jew of the thirties. His reality principle accepts the fact of anti-Semitism, and he knows that all efforts to cut his nose to spite his fate are wasteful. The fear of being discovered is too enervating.

Psychological wisdom, not communal loyalty, leads him to join a negative community. For even in affiliation, he is a Jew by double negation, /i.e., he is not not a Jew.

He is not a believer and not an atheist. He is not a Zionist and not an assimilationist. He is neither a Jewish loyalist nor is he vulnerable to conversion. His style is that of deconversion. He defuses all passionate attachments. His peculiar toleration of all is a consequence of his refusal to take any single option seriously enough to live it out "with all your heart and all your soul and all your might." Passion for communal causes, religious or secular, is anathema.

Sigmund Freud; the paradigmatic psychological Jew, considered conversion from Judaism in order to avoid the "cumbersome" Jewish wedding ceremony. He was dissuaded from such an act by his friend Breuer with two major words out of the vocabulary of privatism: *zu kompliziert* (Too complicated). One must somehow disentangle oneself from the web of communal commitments while living within society. There is an art of disrelating even in the heart of the institutions of community.

privatizing the synagogue

INADVERTANTLY, for he is no passionate champion of causes, the psychological Jew manages to privatize the synagogue. Ineluctably, the character of the synagogue, its programs, educational philosophy, ethical action, the role of its professional leaders are shaped in the image of the psychological Jew. Illustrative of that transformation is the modern phenomenon of the Shabbat *minchah* Bar Mitzvah. The request to have the Bar Mitzvah at five P.M. is not motivated by the parent's affection for the plaintive melody of *atah echad v'shimcha echad*. He knows that his son will have no *haftarah* to chant, but more important to him he knows that it will be "his" Bar Mitzvah. The congregation will not attend, only "his" guests. Who needs the witness of the community at this private affair? Who needs the expense of a Kiddush for the "free-loaders?" He will have "his" rabbi and "his" cantor all to himself, and this private use of the *klay kodesh* (Jewish religious professionals) is of paramount import to the congregant. The psychological Jew is reluctant to share the rabbi with others.

At the hotel reception, the psychological Jew finds no anomaly in serving shrimp or bacon hors d'oeuvres. From his perspective, the entire celebration is a private affair. He will provide for the rabbi and his wife a special plate of tuna. (I am not critical of tuna fish. I predict, however, that Conservative rabbis will go down in medical history as possessing the highest mercury count in our population.) The treatment of the rabbi is most assuredly not intended to mark disrespect. It is simply an outgrowth of the psychological Jew's refusal to view the rabbi as a representative of the Jewish community. He has become a private man engaged for private purposes. He has been transfigured into a ritual maitre d', a master of ceremonies.

Whatever the psychological Jew touches falls apart into private pieces. He will be indignant at the synagogue's public stand on almost all social issues. Whether the stand is endorsed by boards of rabbis, synagogue councils, Jewish committees and congresses, his argument echoes the depth of his privatist outlook: "no one can speak for me." And he can speak for no one. He recognizes no collective wisdom or corporate-voice, because he has rejected community. He may insist that taking a public stand will split the congregation. From my perspective, however, the psychological Jew is fragmenting the Jewish community into unrelated, unrelating entities.

The rabbi then is addressing not a Jewish congregation but an audience of Jews. He commits “a fallacy of composition” who assumes that an assembly of Jews is a Jewish assembly. A congregation is made up of people who share experiences and values which transcend their private perceptions. An audience is comprised of separate egos who have come together for reasons of their own and dissolve into discrete bodies after the event is over.

The rabbi is faced with a profound *mechitza* between one affiliate and another. The empirical test of the segregated pew is tragically witnessed on the Day of Reconciliation. To sit in a seat which is ticketed to another, to pick up a synagogue Mahzor from another's lectern is to experience the primal howl of the “territorial imperative.”

The complaint that the synagogue is cold and irrelevant will not be answered from the pulpit and not from the seminary. We are at a station of Jewish life, faced with an emerging character ideal, in which needed theological reconstruction, ritual innovation and liturgical creativity are nevertheless embarrassingly premature. Without the matrix of community, one cannot speak of peoplehood or of the wisdom, ethics and aspirations of that people. Without the concreteness of inter-personal relationship, the rhetoric of I-thou dialogue between man and man and between God and man is vacuous. At best, Judaism turns into a meta-language, a way of speaking.

the task of the new synagogue

THE PRIMARY TASK on the agenda of the synagogue is the humanization and personalization of the temple. To overcome the interpersonal irrelevance of synagogue affiliation is a task prior to believing and ritual behaving. To experience true belonging is an imperative prerequisite for the cultivation of religious and moral sensibilities. To read in Professor Leonard Fein's two and a half year study of Reform congregations that “friendship patterns do not appear to play a leading part in the determination of temple membership” is a tragic condition which cannot be compensated for by the most relevant of sermons and services. That sixty per cent of the adult respondents in the study reported that they have very few friends, if any, in the temple, is a sobering revelation.

The Gerer Rebbe was appalled at his Hasidim who did not know what had happened to one of their peers. “You study together, and pray together, and celebrate your festivals together and you don't know if he is sick or well?” To adapt, the Gerer's concern to our own—if our congregants do not know each other, mean little to each other—can we expect them to pray together, to learn together, to act together?

the shadow of the psychological Jew

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL JEW, like the religious and ideological Jew, does not exist in a vacuum. Each typology has his non-Jewish counterpart. The general literature abounds with the cries of loneliness, anomie and alienation which haunt the footsteps of the psychological man. Psychological man has outshrewded himself. Privatism has soured into isolation; individualism into a cage of solitary confinement; cool, analytic detachment into numb affectlessness. The children of the psychological man have begun to openly reject the insularity of the privatist and to search for some sense of community. The hidden hunger for relationship, for the celebratory and affective is shyly repressed by the psychological man. But here and again, in the flirtations with encounter and sensitivity groups, one discovers evidence of a deeply felt need for community.

If the exhaustion of the life style of psychological man is correctly read, we have a new opportunity to restructure the synagogue and to offer the searching Jew a community

which yet does not ignore his autonomy. For he will not return to the pseudo-community of the establishment synagogue. He will not be bound-by mailing lists, raffles, public lectures, pulpit-centered services or professional-centered celebrations of the *gesellschaft*.

We are challenged to decentralize the synagogue and deprofessionalize Jewish living so that the individual Jew is brought back into a circle of shared Jewish experience. My experience with the havurization of the synagogue strengthens my conviction that we can help the psychological Jew meet his genuine needs for autonomy and help overcome his depersonalization by providing a way towards authentic community. I see one of the major functions of the synagogue to be that of the shadchan—bringing together separate, lonely parties into *havurot*. In our congregation, a *havurah* is comprised of a minyan of families who have agreed to meet together at least once a month to learn together, to celebrate together and hopefully to form some surrogate for the eroded extended family.

philosophy and method in forming havurot

Tim How, WHERE AND WHEN of *havurah* formation is not simply a matter of mechanics. They are informed by a philosophy. The questionnaire which is sent to each member seeks to determine such matters as the interests of the family and the age and number of the children. While our philosophy of pluralism encourages each group to discover its own chemistry, its own pace, we set as ideal a *havurah* with a balance of social, cultural and celebratory ingredients. We have found that children are flesh and blood ties which, in many instances, shape the character and concerns of the *havurah*.

Where shall the *havurah* meet? Location is important. We forever meet in board rooms, conference rooms, classrooms, social halls. But our homes are off-limits, the private domain not to be penetrated by others. Members of synagogue committees, men and women who have worked and worshipped together for decades, have never entered each others' homes. The ethic of privatism has erected tall fences to keep all others out. Yet it is within the ambience of the home that we gain personal insight into the personality and uniqueness of the other.

What shall we discuss? Who will be our teacher? The synagogue, ever responding to the demands of the psychological Jew, has become a caterer in all things. It provides him with topics, lectures, books and lecturers. Consequently, the congregants have become increasingly passive and dependent upon the professional in all things. They are helpless without experts. But after attending hundreds of lectures, symposia, sermons, panel discussions, forums—how is it that so little seems to stick?

Seals are fed by caretakers who throw out fish which are gulped down whole. Nothing is chewed, assimilated, digested. Men and women are not seals. They will not learn by being fed. They will not learn until they themselves teach. In the *havurah*, each family takes it upon himself to prepare to lead a discussion on some matter of concern which the group has decided upon.

We lift a page from Franz Rosenzweig's *freies judisches lehrhaus* in Frankfurt. He knew Jewish learning, for most modern' Jews, cannot start from a knowledge of Torah and then lead from there into life. The directions the other way around. From life as it is experienced, with all its doubts and fears, back to the center. For such learning "he is most apt who brings with him the maximum of what is alien . . . not the mere specializing in Jewish matters . . . (but) the one who is groping his way home."

What shall the *havurah* study? Let them begin with themselves; with their uncertainties and disbeliefs and dreams of Judaism. Let them pierce through the false outer

conformity in which all believe, all practice and all enjoy Judaism. Such external compliance is no blessing. Theirs is a satisfaction borne of small expectation.

Rosenzweig did not take Jewish experts to teach at the Free Jewish School. He asked physicians and lawyers, businessmen and artists to form the faculty on the grounds that "Jewish learning includes Jewish teaching." The *havurah*, on a rotating basis, learns and teaches itself. To reach this end requires a struggle against a variety of fears. People are afraid of revealing their not knowing or their not believing or their not behaving. They choose muteness and revel in the experts' articulateness. Such diffidence must be overcome. The motto of the *havurah* must be the obverse of the instruction of the Hagadah: "Though we, all of us, are not all wise and do not know, and do not understand the entire Torah, it is our Mitzvah to start learning." I can testify to some remarkable self discoveries of insight and intelligence by *haverim* consequent to breaking down the obstacles of false shyness by the group.

The stone of fear and shame has dammed up all kinds of sensitivities and intuitions in our laymen. The rabbi may release that lay energy by refusing to play the part of the ubiquitous, omniscient authority. He will provide the group with bibliographies, essays, articles, propose themes for discussion but he will not be their cultural vicar. We will see later that the same resistance to their initial calls for the rabbi to be the ritual vicar can be better managed within the context of the *havurah*.

The involvement of the *havurah* in self-growth brings them to the rabbi with different requests. They have been discussing abortion or capital punishment, the Bible or the rites of passage, and have come up against certain obdurate problems. Here is where the rabbi's sermon may become a contemporary responsum. The sermon need no longer be the Rabbi's mind-reading of questions the congregant may be asking but a dialogic response to *havurah* inquiries seriously posed.

The adult education program similarly promises to be more than a smorgasbord of speakers. It can reflect the needs and wants of the *havurot*. The author invited to speak will have his book studied by the *havurah* so that when he lectures they will listen differently and he, if he is informed beforehand that he has been read, will lecture differently.

the celebratory havurah

THE HAVURAH is no book club. Cerebration must not eclipse celebration. The *havurah* must be encouraged to celebrate the rhythm of the Jewish calendar. From the pulpit I have never succeeded in getting many of my congregants to build a Succah. The *havurah* has succeeded. One needs the encouragement and help of other families and the goal of a family dinner in the Succah to motivate such activity. I know what it means for children to see ten Jewish males with hammers and nails and saws helping to build a Succah; for children to see their mothers gather flowers and fruit to decorate the Succah; to see Jews celebrating life without the rabbi and outside the synagogue but in one's own backyard.

These past Passovers since the formation of the *havurot*, have further demonstrated to me that theological seriousness requires an existential matrix. Formerly, it was I who planned the Seder for others, I who decided which Haggadah to use, to include or delete the ten plagues or the narration of Moses' life or "Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations." They, the laity only came and sat and ate and listened. And even when they came to the synagogue to hear me discuss the theological issues at stake in preparing for a Seder, Passover was my problem and the excitement of making a decision was all mine. These past years, when many of the *havurot* plan their own Sedarim, they began to wrestle with the Haggadah and with the decision to add and delete. Out of the need to know the songs of the

Seder, there emerged the professional preparation of a Passover cassette of songs and commentary. The *havurah* has taught itself to sing. At *p'tach lo*. The cantor's task is to open their mouths in song.

the personal dimension within the havurah

A MEMBER OF THE HAVURAH has moved into a new home. Who will officiate at the *hanukat ha-bayit*? The omnipresent rabbi, of course. With the emergence of the *havurah*, the joy of such Mitzvah, is shared by the *havurah*. Each family brings something to the home: salt, honey, *hallah*, wine—and they recite a psalm or write a poem of good wishes. Not the rabbi, but the new owners of the home compose a statement in which they explain to what end they wish their home to be dedicated. The rabbi may be more eloquent, but nothing can substitute for a statement which comes out of the natural and personal sentiment of the participants.

Is the rabbinate rendered superfluous? Is the rabbi needed less with the rise of the *havurah*? On the contrary. The rabbi becomes important to the community only when the community itself shares his interests and participates in the sancta of our tradition. The “Jewish distance” between the rabbi and the psychological Jew made the rabbi indispensable as a functionary, but insignificant as a guide. He is needed everywhere but only to do that which others cannot or care not to do for themselves. It is a noble saying which declares that nine rabbis do not make up a minyan, but ten laymen do. But we who have often arrived at the crowded homes of mourners have painfully observed the muteness of the assembly of Jews who come to life only with the rabbi's presence and ritual competence; de facto, ten laymen do not necessarily comprise a minyan.

the extended family

IT IS BY NOW axiomatic that the modern family has shrivelled to a nucleus of two plus a child or children. In increasing numbers, the *havurot* have begun to share personal experiences and to demonstrate the kind of concern for each other once associated with the extended family. I think, for example, of the Bar Mitzvah which one *havurah* catered itself. They were discontented with the impersonalism of the commercial maitre d', the canned “traditional” candlelight ceremonies conducted by the hired band leader, and the like. They resolved to help celebrate the Bar Mitzvah of one of their *havurah* families. They brought the dishes of food, the wines and flowers; and on the Shabbat, the two families of the *havurah* participated in the service, shared the pulpit and were very much an extended *mishpacha*.

There was a death in the *havurah*. The widow had few members of the family around her; most were back East. I saw who was at the funeral, who took care of the children during the black week of the shivah. The widow remained within the *havurah* and it is the *havurah* who “made the widow's heart to leap with joy.”

We can no longer depend alone upon temple committees to visit the sick or comfort the bereaved. With the best of intentions, committee members of *bikkur holim* and *nichum avelim* rarely know the sick they visit or the bereaved they mean to comfort. It is different with the members of your *havurah*. The burden of pastoral visitations falls upon the rabbi alone. I recall visiting a woman in the hospital who complained that though she had been affiliated with the temple for over a decade, no one had visited her throughout her three week stay at the hospital. “But I am here,” I answered. “I mean no disrespect, rabbi,” she replied, “but you are not the congregation.” She would, I am certain, have had no cause for her justifiable complaint had the *havurah* been in existence and had she been part of a *havurah*.

Since the creation of the *havurot*, now three years in existence, our people are offered opportunities to express their Jewishness in a more natural and personal setting. During the recent economic depression in the aero-space industry, a number of engineers found themselves quite suddenly without employment. I know of *havurot* which drew together to help their *haverim*, making contacts for them with employers in related fields, assisting them in the writing of resumes, offering counsel and support to the families involved.

The *havurah* offers the synagogue member a community small enough to enable personal relationships to develop. It enables families to express their Jewishness without dependence upon experts, without the faceless relationship of the lecture hall. Hopefully the synagogue itself will gradually be transformed into a *havurat ha-havurot*, a Jewish assembly in which *havurot* meet for prayer, study and celebration, not as isolated men and women who have never experienced godliness, nor the joy of shared learning, nor the sense of community. One cannot continue talking about God, Torah and Israel to those who have no opportunity to experience elements of that sacred triad. The rabbi and cantor and educator cannot continue to serve as a surrogates for the congregant. No one can feel for him, or think for him; no one can cry his tears or sing his songs.

My grandfather came to the synagogue because he was a Jew. His grandchildren come to the synagogue to become Jewish. My grandfather's synagogue and his rabbi had a function different from ours.

The synagogue whose audience is the psychological Jew is no longer the consequence of his Jewishness; it must become the cause of his Jewishness. Sabbath services will not celebrate his fidelities until he has labored six days outside the synagogue. When he enters the synagogue, having begun to taste the joys of Jewish growth with other families, he may understand what it is that rabbi is talking about. He will be prepared for creativity in Jewish theory and practice. Having experienced the warmth of *havurah*, he will heat up the synagogue from below.

1 New York: AJC, 1972.

2 Ibid., p. 39.

Dr. David Lieber is President of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, California. This paper was originally presented as the keynote address to the Educators' Assembly at their mid-year Kallah in January, 1973.