Zoning Out and Tuning In To Education for Jewish Journeys
by Larry Hoffman

Architects and urban planners describe the unexpected consequences of zoning. Even in cities that allow anyone to build anything anywhere, similarly intended buildings tend to cluster together: a strip of body repair shops, automobile showrooms, garages, or even a gentrified alley with chic restaurants and boutiques.

Commercially speaking, these focused enterprise zones successfully attract like-minded businesses and customers in densely pressurized areas that reinforce common interests. But, they come at a psychological cost: the more we contend with space that is zoned, the more we segment our internal imagination into discrete walled-off zones of thought. Pre-modern societies didn't do that. Instead, they viewed the world holistically. That is why the rabbis of antiquity could juxtapose lessons on ritual, civil law, and personal status on a single Talmud page and apply lessons from any one of those topics to all the others. By contrast, people today think that "business is business," while religion is only religion. They are either "off" or "on" duty. It is "vacation time" or "down time," though not "working time" or "time to be up and on top of things." Sociologist Peter Berger says we have broken the continuum of daily life into discrete provinces of meaning (business, school, leisure, and so on). We spend our days commuting among them, ending up hassled, harried, and conflicted about how much time to allot to each province.

Beyond Synagogue Zoning

Zoning is evident in synagogues as well, most obviously in the separation of religious schools from other aspects of religious-communal activity. It may be convenient to have a separate school drop-off point, but it makes both parents and children consider education as its own separate activity, uninfluenced by the prayer, social action, and religious counseling that take place in other equally walled-off zones of congregational life. People are apt to enter only the door that leads to the enterprise that suits them: sanctuary, boardroom, religious school, or another area used for a specific function. Synagogue zoning ensures there will be no integrated sense of the wholeness of Jewish tradition.

A historical look at synagogues demonstrates how strikingly new this concept of a zoned synagogue is. The eastern European synagogue that was transported to these shores during the early years of the twentieth century demonstrates a holistic spatial design. There was often no back door at all, but simply the front entrance that leads directly into a tiny foyer outside the sanctuary. It doubled as a crowded meeting space and a place where people emptied their pockets of spare coins for tzedakah before the Kol Nidre service. The foyer led directly into the sanctuary, which took up almost all the building. Classrooms did exist, but downstairs, and doubled as adult conversation rooms when school was not in session. But, study occurred in the sanctuary, too — and the study that took place there accounted for more study than in all the downstairs rooms together.

As a child, I studied in the basement, but was expected to put in my time in the sanctuary, and, when I did, I encountered spare volumes of Talmud laying out on large study tables for the adults. The goal of Jewish life was clear. One began in the bowels of the synagogue learning the aleph bet, but the goal was to graduate to the sanctuary where one helped make up a minyan and, before or after services, joined really learned people around the folio editions laying invitingly all around.

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The origins of the synagogue are an equally good counterpoint to the modern building with its walled-off zones divided by function. Synagogues emerge in the first century C.E., when Josephus reports their existence and early Christian writings locate Jesus or Paul within them. Today, we think of them as houses of prayer (Beit Tefillah), study (Beit Midrash), and assembly (Beit Knesset), but the historical reality was more measured. Early inscriptions on synagogue buildings do list study as a synagogue activity, but not necessarily the kind of study we think of as rabbinic, for the simple reason that rabbis tended not to frequent synagogues that they suspected were less than sacred gatherings. Most of all, the synagogue was a gathering place, though not for the practice of Judaism as the rabbis were defining it. (The Greek word synagoge and the Hebrew bet knesset both mean "gathering.") The beit midrash study of the rabbis occurred separately and not even in a permanent building. Like Plato or Socrates, the rabbis were peripatetic scholars who wandered anywhere they wished and taught wherever they happened to be. Their beit midrash was no bayit at all. It was more akin to a Runyonesque floating card game, but with Torah study and not with dice. Daily prayer and the conversation that results from people getting together interrupted their study. Only eventually did all of this move to the synagogue, which became "rabbinized" and then was passed down to us as a place where gathering, study, and prayer coalesce as a single and integrated daily religious regimen.

Did children study in classrooms somewhere? That is hard to say. Some of them surely went to classes, but we do not know how many, and we are told that Akiba began his study only as an adult. Ancient Judaism was not a child's religion. A direct line leads from it to the eastern European experience, where childhood education was just preparation for the main event: study, prayer, and adult responsibility symbolized by the centrality of the main sanctuary.

Synagogue 2000 is a project to prepare the synagogue as a spiritual and moral center for the 21st century. Taking its lessons from Jewish texts and history, it seeks to reestablish synagogues without a zoning mentality. Parents would not drop off children without attending some form of learning themselves. Prayer would be integral to everyone's learning experience. Even the ma'asim tovim (good deeds) that people do should come with prayer and result from study.

Our logo integrates the functions of prayer, study, good deeds, and healing — all the ways of human growth and healthy interaction — in an atmosphere of institutional welcome and depth: a kehillah kedoshah, a sacred community. The key is getting synagogues to look critically at the patterns of interaction that they contain. The question is whether we have lost the very essence of what the term kehillah kedoshah were once meant to convey.

Building Sacred Community

How do you build a kehillah kedoshah? We begin with the microcosm, a multi-generational Synagogue 2000 team that volunteers to examine the synagogue culture. Twenty (or so) representatives of all the stakeholders in the synagogue's future — synagogue members, some board members and some not, old-timers and newcomers, men and women of all ages, perhaps a youth-grouper or two — make a three-year commitment to gather for study and institutional evaluation. They will not function as a committee, but, instead, are encouraged to think of themselves as an "un-committee" in the same way that Madison Avenue has described Seven-Up as the "Uncola." Comedian Milton Berle once said, "Committees are places where people take

Seven-Up as the "Uncola." Comedian Milton Berle once said, "Committees are places where people take minutes and waste time." Neither happens at Synagogue 2000 team meetings.

Instead, they follow a careful regimen that humanizes relationships around the table, builds confidence and trust among members, raises everyone's Jewish knowledge and sensitivity, provides moments of care and healing to those who need them, and enhances the spirituality of participants who then dedicate themselves to spreading their experience elsewhere in the synagogue's orbit.

However, this is no simple old-time havurah. Havurot began in the sixties as a counter-cultural expression of personalized Judaism differentiated from synagogue structures that were perceived as stodgy and bureaucratic. Like the havurah, a Synagogue 2000 team pursues personal Jewish enrichment, but it differs in that its mandate is an honest reevaluation of the entire synagogue as an institution.

Early on, the team begins to develop holistic experiential gatherings. Every meeting features study, prayer, and conversation. The first few minutes are spent "checking in," just inquiring about everyone's well being, as if to say, "We cannot turn to business until we turn to each other." Part of the time is spent sharing food and reflecting on how the group is managing thus far.

Study material comes from Synagogue 2000 curricula that juxtapose current synagogue case studies with Jewish texts and organizational learning. Teams can work their way through curricula on prayer, study, good deeds, or sacred community itself, but, regardless of the focus, it is the medium that is the message. The real lessons flow from the nature of the group that bonds together around Jewish learning, prayer, and care.

Teams operate according to Jewish values. They may argue, indeed they should, as they debate matters of consequence. But they must do so in the spirit of Hillel and Shammai, each of whom was said to reflect "the words of the living God." They differ, but with respect. They even practice arguing the other person's position before rejecting it. They learn to be quiet and listen, "silence" being the best character trait the Mishnah has to offer.

Most synagogues never consider the cultural assumptions that govern how they do their daily business. Everyone tends to think that his or her own synagogue is warm, friendly, loving, and just. However, even the best synagogues need to take stock of how they really are perceived and how they connect with the busy lives of community members. To do so, teams master the acronym KeSHeR (connection).

- *K* stands for *kehillah* (community). How does the synagogue interface with the larger community? What is its message beyond its walls? What reputation does it have?
- *SH*, which stand for *sha'ar* (gateway), is the second challenge. How are people treated when they knock on synagogue doors? How are new members integrated? Are they informed that this is a holistic institution, not a zoned one? That everyone here is expected to study, pray, nurture, and be nurtured? A Synagogue 2000 asks prospective members about their passions, their gifts, and where they are in their spiritual odyssey, not just their financial commitment.
- All of which leads to *R* for *regel* (the journey, or pilgrimage) that synagogue membership entails. Synagogues should be places where life-long Jewish journeys happen, where people pursue their God-given gifts and passions for the public good, and where they are nurtured in return by what others give to them. The secret of synagogues as Jewish Journey Places is Jewish Journey Groups.

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Where Jewish Journeys Happen

A zoning mentality invites people to sign up for discrete synagogue events with no larger view as to how they affect the rest of their Jewish identity. A fifth-grade mother calendars in teacher-student conferences and teacher recognition night. An advocate of social justice attends social action committee meetings and plans a mitzvah day. A Shabbat morning study group meets before services, but its members leave before services begin. As they pursue their own zoned-off agenda, members rarely even meet each other. They approach their synagogues like consumers, measuring dues against programs. Synagogue time is categorized in the brain alongside little league, soccer practice, piano lessons, and opera tickets as ways to spend a morning, noon, or night for one's family or oneself. What matters is the cost-benefit ratio. What is never considered is the personal journey for which programs should be significant parts. No one realizes that, underneath it all, we are all alike: set existentially adrift on a journey called life and pursuing our journey holistically, from birth to death, in a synagogue.

Synagogue 2000 is a new way of thinking. It eradicates mental zoning as the way we pursue life's opportunities. It offers Jewish Journey Groups composed of like-minded people who are at the same place in their journey and who, together, pursue Jewish study, activity, prayer, and the sharing of mutually reinforcing life stories.

One example is Alan, a man now in his seventies who recently had a heart attack and also attends his Orthodox synagogue daily to help make the morning minyan. However, since what really matters for him now is the trauma of his heart attack, he recently joined a hospital group for male heart attack survivors. It never occurred to him that his synagogue, which he attends daily, has many men like himself, who together might form a Jewish group to share their stories while also drawing wisdom from Jewish sources on life, death, and healing. These men might reach out to current sufferers of heart disease with their own poignant message of hope. Alan could belong to a synagogue Jewish Journey Group for heart survivors.

The Synagogue 2000 process begins by creating a small integrative group called the Synagogue 2000 team. By studying, working, praying, and acting together, they overcome the zoning mentality that prevents serious human growth and deepening. They become an ongoing support group of learners who simultaneously work for the synagogue's betterment by applying what they learn about Jewish values to the synagogue's way of doing things. As they consider the community (kehillah), the prospective members at the synagogue gate (sha'ar), and the way individual passions and gifts can move people forward on their life journeys (regel), they begin reshaping the way in which people relate to the synagogue. No longer mere consumers, members find Jewish Journey Groups where they make friends and engage in study, prayer, and social justice, while constantly informing their own identity with Jewish wisdom that they discover together.

Jewish Journey Groups are as diverse as synagogue rosters. One group could gather expectant parents into a Jewish Lamaze class, and then keep the parents connected to explore Jewish parenting. Another set might be seekers, intent on asking questions about God, life, and the meaning of their own future. A third could be those with mental illness in their family, whose mission is to support each other, to study Jewish sources on illness and healing, and to surface the traumas that they know first-hand to draw out a more understanding synagogue and community around such matters. Still another group might meet only between Passover and Shavuot to

and community around such matters. Still another group might meet only between Passover and Shavuot to read a daily meditation on the sefirah period and subsequently discuss it via nightly e-mail and weekly gatherings culminating in a concluding siyyum (celebration) on Shavuot. Yet another group might meet to practice meditation, but in a Jewish mode, with Jewish sources from the Kabbalah and elsewhere. This is integrative Jewish education for all ages. Action, prayer, and study come together as necessary building blocks in individual life stories still in process.

Synagogue Transformation

How hard is it to transform a synagogue in this way? It is not easy, because old habits die hard.

But it is happening all across our continent. It is a new approach to integrative learning that also will impact on the training of tomorrow's clergy and educators. It demands unique leadership skills, including the ability to develop a genuinely Jewish vision that galvanizes people into a collaborative team. We at Synagogue 2000 use conferences, curricula, and consultants to achieve the task. And we are still learning. We think we practice revolutionary thinking in an evolutionary process.

But the goal is clear. Jewish learning needs to be everywhere and not zoned off from the wholeness that is life itself.

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman is Professor of Liturgy at Hebrew Union College and Co-founder of Synagogue 2000.