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The Theory in Short

I write detective stories, not arguments to a jury. Instead of giving opening statements that summarize my conclusions in advance, I build my case slowly and steadily, hoping the reader will stay the course until the end. But then, I am a professional scholar who can afford the luxury of lingering over details before the summary payoff: scholars write that way; other scholars expect it.

In this case, however, too much is at stake. My topic is the future of the American synagogue. I go so far as to wonder on occasion if there even is a future for the American synagogue, a topic that ought to alarm Jewish leaders in droves, but instead barely piques their interest. I believe that significant Jewish existence in North America depends on our ability to sustain Judaism as a religion, rather than a last hurrah of ethnic nostalgia. And the only way to do that is to sustain a synagogue where religion is taken seriously. By religion, I mean more than outward demonstrations of ritual observance. I mean a combination of spirituality and ethics. The theme of this book is that synagogues must become spiritual and moral centers for the twenty-first century.

Synagogues are not exactly in trouble: membership is stable, even rising somewhat. But what does “being out of trouble” mean? Public education is also not in trouble, if by that we mean that classrooms are mostly full of children who mostly graduate and mostly move on to jobs and life. But no one seriously thinks that schools are successfully maximizing deep, learned, and lasting commitment to cultural competence and democratic debate. It may be too early to

dial 911 for synagogue help—synagogues are doing many things exceptionally well. But it is not too early to think about putting 911 in our phone directory. This book is about synagogues now, so we won't have to dial 911 later.

The Jewish People in America is also doing reasonably well. No 911 required. But population surveys properly raise concerns about what “doing reasonably well” means. Already in 1990, while the American population grew, our numbers remained stagnant. In an article entitled “Zoroastrians Turn to Internet Dating to Rescue Religion,” the *Wall Street Journal* chronicles heroic measures by “one of the world's oldest religions” to avoid oblivion—frantic warnings against intermarriage and appeals to Zoroastrian women to have more children.¹ American Judaism is a whole lot better off than Indian Zoroastrianism, but the parallels are striking. I do not really worry that we will disappear. But if “Jewish People, USA” were a stock, I wonder how many people would invest in its growth—without some steps taken to retool its product, American Judaism. This book proposes such a retooling: not Judaism by default, but Judaism with purpose. I ask synagogues to make that purpose manifest.

My observations derive from a decade of experience with Synagogue 2000 (now relabeled Synagogue 3000), a project dedicated to synagogue transformation. While there, I worked directly with close to a hundred synagogues. But this is not an official report. It is my own personal “take” on things. I support my position with facts and figures when they are available, but I consider my argument philosophical in its essence. I think ideas that matter cannot fly in the face of fact, but they cannot limit themselves to empirical experience either. They have to challenge the facts, suggesting that if we think differently enough, other facts are possible.

But new ideas presuppose new conversations. As philosopher Richard Rorty says, we make progress not by arguing better but by talking differently, finding endless redescriptions that move our projects forward.² Redescriptions require new sentences, and new sentences need new words to string together in promising and provocative ways. This is a book about changing congregational culture by redescribing what synagogues are all about; it is a book about thinking and talking differently.

Given the religious-theological nature of my redescriptions, I worry that people who consider themselves “cultural Jews” may misconstrue my intent and be tempted to close the book before even beginning it. I hasten, therefore, to reassure such readers that I neither minimize nor denigrate Jewish culture—just the opposite. I believe it rich, wise, deep, and compelling. I am also a Zionist by commitment, upbringing, and maybe even neurosis; I identify firmly with the Jewish People. What I oppose is not Jewish culture but a particular form of vapid ethnicity that once sustained Jewish life here but cannot do so any longer. What then is the difference between Jewish culture and Jewish ethnicity? Why should Jewish religionists and Jewish culturalists care about our synagogue future?

CULTURE, ETHNICITY, AND RELIGION

By Jewish culture, I mean the totality of wisdom, practices, folkways, and so forth that constitute what we choose to remember of Jewish experience. That experience is simply too massive for anyone to remember it all, so every generation selects part of it (reinterpreting it as necessary) and leaves the rest behind. Leaving behind does not mean losing it forever, however. The parts of Jewish culture that do not get selected in any given generation remain in the cultural reservoir, as it were, to be recovered someday by others.

The reason the cultural reservoir remains so fertile is the remarkable fact that Judaism demands study of even the most arcane material, the stuff that generations haven’t lived by for centuries. This insistence on studying everything, not just what is immediately pertinent, is basic to Jewish culture, making Jewish culture its own best argument for itself, in that it insists on its own intrinsic importance. Jewish study differs from the kind of analysis that occurs in a secular university, where Judaism as a culture might also be pursued, but without regard to its relevance. What matters here is the Jewish People meeting “virtually” over a discussion of Talmud, a shared identification with a Jewish novel, passion for the State of Israel, attention to headlines about Jews in foreign countries, enjoyment of Jewish music, and just plain coming together as Jews, in a Jewish setting, and for Jewish purposes. Jewish culture is

reflected, borne, and furthered by the conscious choice to be part of these meetings.

Since my topic is synagogues, and since I argue for them on religious grounds, I must be quite clear that I by no means disparage Jewish culturalists who support Israel, defend Jewish rights, use Jewish values in raising children, go to Jewish concerts, read Jewish novels, and so forth, without demonstrating concern for Judaism as a religion. I do, however, believe that because America is a religious country, Judaism as a religion will flourish, whereas the purely cultural agenda will not be as successful. I hope I am wrong. I hope both approaches to Judaism prove winning. I hope religionists round out their religious attachment with due appreciation for Jewish culture. Equally, however, I hope culturalists will appreciate the centrality of the sacred within Judaism and the role that the synagogue as sacred center must play in a vital future for North American Jews.

My argument is not with Jewish culture, but with Jewish ethnicity, by which I mean something altogether different, something best illustrated by the tale of how Synagogue 2000 came into being. Ironically, it originated in a dying ethnic center, the Concord Hotel in the New York Catskill Mountains. Once upon a time, it had been a mecca for New York ethnic Jews. It is now defunct.

It was there that Ron Wolfson and I met, at the behest of Rabbi Rachel Cowan, the grants officer at the time for Jewish causes at the Nathan Cummings Foundation. Ron had requested seed money to study synagogues. As my student some years back, Rachel remembered my own wish list for synagogue reform (no one used the word “transformation” yet); I had even sought a Cummings grant years earlier—in vain, at the time—to apply spiritual thinking to synagogues. As a specialist in people-synergy, Rachel put Ron and me together. We later shared with each other (and with Rachel) the fact that we had come to the meeting purely as a favor to her. By the end of what became a two-hour conversation, we agreed not only to ask for the seed grant together, but also to collaborate in spending it.

The Concord closed officially shortly after we met, but the shape of the coffee shop at the time suggested it had already died but didn’t know it. It had a frayed look; we were the only customers. Old signs remained up from the people who had come the week before: a con-

vention of Polish Americans celebrating their ethnic identity. The dying coffee shop and the signs celebrating old-world ethnicity proved omen-like (though not ominous) for the project we hatched there. At stake was the imminent demise of Jewish ethnicity.

“Ethnic” comes from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning “nation” or “people.” In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible), it replaces the Hebrew *goy*, meaning “nation,” and through early Christian usage, it comes to denote those who are neither Jews nor Christians, that is, pagans. It eventually gets twisted into the word “heathen.” But everyone belonged to an all-embracing *ethnos* of some sort, so sociologists adopted the word without its negative connotations to describe any group with a common cultural tradition and unique identity as a subgroup within society as a whole.³ To the extent that Jewish ethnicity reflects Jewish Peoplehood and represents the commitment to build thriving Jewish community, I applaud it.

But “ethnicity” has a less positive connotation: a nostalgic yearning for Jewish folkways that once sustained us as a people apart, but can no longer do so. Ethnicity in this sense is doing what we think Jews have always done, whether or not they have always done it, and whether or not it is even authentically Jewish. It is behaving by social habit, “doing what comes naturally,” but with no transcendent purpose. Philip Roth illustrates this kind of ethnicity when he says he grew up knowing little about Judaism except that Jews were “we” and everyone else was “they.” Ethnic Judaism is psychological Judaism, the psychological penchant for being with other Jews who have the same ethnic memories, but not, say, with Jews by choice, who (ethnic Jews think) “can never really be fully Jewish”—as, indeed, they cannot, if Judaism is the residue of growing up Jewish with little or no concern for Jewish religion and culture. Freud was such a Jew. All Freud’s friends were Jewish; he belonged “faithfully” to B’nai B’rith, but would not allow his wife to light Shabbat candles; he told Karl Abrahams, one of his many Jewish disciples, that Jung was not smart enough to grasp psychoanalysis because he wasn’t Jewish.⁴

My use of “culture” here is admittedly biased. I can fairly be charged with emphasizing elite, not folk, culture. In its broad sense, Jewish culture does include behavior governed by shared ethnic moments of the past—borscht belt humor, for example, or lox and

bagel breakfasts. But the borscht belt is dead—its humor now embarrasses more than it entertains—and lox and bagels are American, not Jewish, staples. “Lox and bagel” culture has no staying power. It evaporates into nostalgia.

The argument here is that synagogues ought to be religious in their essence. But even though Judaism is indeed a religion, it is not purely a faith, in the Protestant sense of being a “confession.” It includes elite Jewish culture, which is defined by the real and virtual gatherings of Jews intent on enjoying, interpreting, and staking a claim on Jewish texts, music, novels, history, and so on. Jewish culture looks forward, Jewish ethnicity backward. Jewish culture changes and grows; Jewish ethnicity peters out and dies.

It is of mild interest, for example, that Greco-Roman Jews in the first couple of centuries CE enjoyed festive meals in which men

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(mostly) ate hors d’oeuvres, then reclined on couches to eat and drink heavily, and discussed gentlemanly Jewish topics of one sort or another. That much is ancient ethnicity, easily mistaken for being Jewish, when in fact it is simply Greco-Roman with a Jewish slant. It is of permanent significance, however, that one such meal became a Passover seder with a

script that invests the ordinary festive food with Jewish meaning. Similarly, although it is interesting, no one much cares in any serious way about the fact that northern European Jews, who had no spring greens at Passover time, substituted potatoes for lettuce, or that Mediterranean Jews, who had all sorts of produce by that time of year, made *charoset* out of dates, almonds, and other fruits that grew naturally in their backyards. It does matter, however, even for Ashkenazi Jews who never eat it, that the dates and almonds recipe was interpreted culturally as honoring the special produce of the Land of Israel, in an effort to keep that Land foremost in Jewish consciousness—a lesson that every viable form of Jewish civilization has retained in one way or another.⁵

Ethnic things get forgotten if they do not enter cultural consciousness. Historians may sometimes dig them up, but they can usually do so only because culture-conscious Jews saw fit to write about them, and not just as curios, but as cultural symbols that point to something higher.

Immigrant Yiddish humor, for instance, that the Concord Hotel once featured is pure ethnicity. In 1952, Nathan Ausubel collected a lot of it in *A Treasury of Jewish Humor*, a popular book of its time, but hardly read by anyone anymore. That self-effacing humor is now an ethnic dinosaur. As for gastronomic Judaism, never mind the lox and bagel breakfasts; what about the ubiquitous Chinese restaurant in Jewish neighborhoods? Shall we identify that as Jewish just because for some period of time Jews in some locales have tended to meet there while their neighbors ate Christmas dinners?

By contrast, I applaud Jewish culture as lasting. Insofar as it depends on Jews who celebrate it with other Jews, it appears to be ethnic, but there is a huge distinction between Jewish storekeepers who would habitually meet for a corned beef sandwich lunch and Jews who gather for a Jewish folk or film festival. The former is a bit of nostalgia for a romanticized touch of eastern Europe. The latter is an inchoate quest for the glue that binds Jews together into virtual Jewish community.

I am in favor of Jewish culture, then, as I am committed to the need for a Jewish community that logs time together pursuing it. Long ago, Emile Durkheim, a founder of sociology and a Jew himself (though hardly a practicing one),⁶ saw the positive correlation between logging regular and sustained time together and the growth of shared communal sympathies. If ongoing Jewish community requires Jewish culture, it is equally true that Jewish culture demands ongoing Jewish communities. So I support Jewish community in and of itself, without which neither Jewish religion nor Jewish culture will survive.

But my concern for Jewish community is not ethnic. It is religious. Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Jewish Reconstructionism and a disciple of Durkheim, thought Jewish community needed no justification beyond itself. Every people requires community, so any community that exists for the good of its members (and not to the detriment of others) has an absolute right to exist. But Kaplan was a

staunch advocate for Jewish culture, not just Jewish survival for its own sake, and he knew also that Jewish culture has never been successfully divorced from religion. He described Judaism not just as a civilization, but as a *religious* civilization.

Decidedly irreligious culturalists are actually a phenomenon of a very small swath of Jewish history, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they are nowadays just that—history. When, for example, Czarist politics announced a threefold Jewish solution—one-third killed, one-third emigrated, and one-third assimilated—Jews responded with two ideologies: Zionism and territorialism. Zionists, even nonreligious Zionists, demanded a return to the religiously significant homeland of Israel. The territorialists, by contrast, sought to carve out a Yiddish-speaking land in Czarist Russia, like those of other ethnic groups in the Russian orbit. Religion was to have no place in their territory. Zionism is still a live topic; territorialism is dead.

The culturalist commitment to Jewish Peoplehood is itself religious. If Jews who arrived here from 1881 to 1924 ate Lower East Side food and laughed at Catskill humor, other immigrant groups had their own culinary and jocular favorites. But they did not see anything transcendent in the people to which they belonged, while Jews did. Religionists may describe it as our covenant with God; nontheists may prefer thinking of the role Jews play in human history. In any case, there is something transcendent and, therefore, religious about it. Joel Hoffman, an academic linguist and passionate Jew in his own right, is fond of saying that some people never leave home without a gun; he never leaves home without a pen and a book. Jews have contributed mightily to the growth of the human spirit; we represent a notable share of the list of Nobel Prize winners; we invented vowels to make reading possible.⁷ Many Jews see these accomplishments as the unfolding of a Jewish mission in the evolution of human affairs.

Like all things historical, both culture and ethnicity are contingent. But ethnicity is contingent on forces that inevitably die out, whereas culture depends on historical chance, human will, and, perhaps, divine intervention. Of the three, human will alone is ours to control. That is why we elect to study culture over and over again. And that is where the obligation to worry about synagogue change enters in. History places us in a country and time where religious institutions matter, but where our

own such institution, the synagogue, is threatened. Unable to count on God to come to our rescue, we need to manufacture the will to redescribe the synagogue in a newly compelling way.

I plead for a revival of Jewish culture as religiously important, and I plead for the reinvention of the synagogue as the sole institution with the capacity for reviving it. To be sure, I believe also in other institutions—JCCs, Federations, and the like. Ultimately, my plea is for a reshaped Jewish community altogether (chapter 7). But I firmly believe that any North American Jewish community that hopes to be around in a hundred years must have religion at its center, with the synagogue, the religious institution that best fits North American culture, at its very core.

So much for “culture” and “ethnicity.” I should now explain what I mean by “religion” and “synagogue.” I will be clearer about “religion” in a moment, when I discuss spirituality and the sacred. For now, I need only say that I do not identify

religion as any single variety of what any particular kind of “religious” Jew practices. I mean by it any serious and ongoing interpretation of the theological claim of Jewish ultimacy (I am comfortable using traditional “God language” for it). Not every interpretation of Jewish religion will be seen in retrospect to have worked. (Christian Jews, for instance, eventually became Jewish Christians, and then just Christians, substituting the story of Jesus of Nazareth for the tale of Jews leaving

Egypt.) But, by the same token, no one knows in advance just which definition will turn out to count, and part of my claim will be that American culture is kind to Jews because it allows us free reign to experiment with many forms of what we think Jewish religion ought to be. By “religious,” then, I do not mean “Orthodox” in the sense that many Israelis understand the word, even though I fully appreciate modern Orthodoxy as a valid religious option. I say the same of Reform,

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Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Renewal Judaism. Religion is a moving theological target. Religious Jews are those who keep trying to hit it somewhere rather than give up Jewish archery altogether. Synagogues should at least hand out bows and arrows.

I asked earlier, why should both Jewish religionists and Jewish culturalists care about our synagogue future? The answer is now clear. Since America is a religious country, it is likely that Judaism as a religion, not just a culture, will flourish. Religion in America means churches for Christians and, therefore, synagogues for Jews.

I recognize the cultural vagaries that have informed the evolution of synagogues, so I do not necessarily argue for every neighborhood synagogue that we now have. On the contrary, the synagogue is at a new set of historical crossroads. This book makes the case for synagogue transformation, not the retrenchment of yesterday's synagogue forms.

It is a case, moreover, that I hope the people charged with synagogues will read. It is directed at synagogue boards, denominational leaders, seminarians, cantors, rabbis, executive directors, educators, and all the others who make synagogues their passion. I assume, however, that these people are not fools. Jews may be the most learned sector of North American society. Of Jews aged thirty-five to forty-four, 88 percent have been to college, 68 percent have a college degree, and 33 percent have a graduate degree as well. Of those who are synagogue members, the numbers are even higher: 93 percent, 77 percent, and 42 percent.

The last thing I want to do, then, is dumb down a topic that already suffers from a dearth of serious conversation. The whole point of the book, after all, is to provide a new and exciting vocabulary that will facilitate equally new and exciting conversation. While not technically academic, then, this is hardly a quick and easy read. It is meant for people with intellectual curiosity who know their discussions about synagogues do not measure up to the depth and seriousness that they expect in other areas of expertise—legal, business, and medical journals, for example.

I write my critique as the individual Jew I am—I have no choice but to do that—but also as a thoughtful and creative Jew who has been privileged to work alongside other thoughtful and creative people in a ten-year experiment called Synagogue 2000 (S2K). Although

it is now renamed Synagogue 3000 (S3K), I will refer to it by the older title, the one it enjoyed during the period I am reporting on. But given the need for synagogue seriousness, it is more than a field report on what works and what does not. It is a work of theory intertwined with practice—what philosophers have called “critical theory.”

CRITICAL THEORY

“Critical theory” is a technical term describing a philosophical movement that emerged in Weimar Germany, known also as the Frankfurt School. With the rise of Hitler, its members, mostly Jews, relocated to New York. Like so many Jews, they had begun as Marxists, only to be appalled at the way Marxist thought had crystallized into real-world politics—first and foremost, Stalinism, but also civil war between Stalinist and independent socialists in Germany following World War I, which allowed the German state to do them both in.

In the light of practical defeat, the Frankfurt School set about redefining the theory, but this time verifying it empirically as they went along, the idea being that theory should explain the possibility of social transformation but that it should also prove practical in terms of actually working toward the predicted transformative end. The word that came to be used for the combination of practice and theory is “praxis.”

Synagogue 2000 was an experiment in praxis: theory that explains transformation while bringing transformation about. This book, then, is neither theory nor practice independently. It is praxis, the kind of interweaving that prohibits practice from going unexplained and prevents theory from lapsing into fantasy.

The central idea is that ideas count. They provide ways of thinking about what we want to change, such that we can imagine what it is we want to become. What was striking, as we considered synagogue

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transformation, was the absence of any conceptual framework with which to imagine it. Critical issues like funding, boards, and the space that synagogues inhabit were treated just as “funding, boards, and space”—they were givens, as if they could be critiqued or altered without first having some prior idea from which to entertain the critique or design the alteration. It would be tantamount to speaking about arms, legs, and intestines as making up a body, but having no notion of personhood—and unable, therefore, to distinguish a living being from a cadaver. The success of *Synagogue 2000* followed from its insistence on reconceptualizing just what synagogues are.

We shall see later (chapter 5) that we ended up thinking of synagogues as models of sacred community. In one way, that is hardly news; it is just a translation of *K'hillah K'doshah* (usually shortened to K.K.), the designation that precedes many synagogue names. In another way, it proved radical in that most people do not even know their congregation's name begins with “K.K.,” let alone what the initials denote. The connotation of “sacred community” allowed us to tap the wellsprings of Jewish values in modern ways.

More and more, we came to realize the chasm that separates the era now opening up before us from what we are used to. We are challenged by the dissipation of traditional religious and ethnic loyalties; radical religious freedom (even to be irreligious); the ubiquitous search for personal spirituality; a changeover from print to computer culture; adults with lives that begin all over again at forty; and a generational turnover from baby-boomers, who are aging, to their Gen-X children, who are beginning to attain positions of authority and power. In the pages that follow, we shall see why “sacred community” seemed an apt term for describing the spiritual niche that synagogues will need to occupy, and we shall see also just why and how that concept challenges us to rethink everything else about synagogue life: its governance, its mode of relationships, its spatial organization, its business ethics—everything.

RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL, SACRED

All three words recur regularly here, so I should be clear about what I mean by them. Religious is the opposite of secular, from the Latin

seculum, used by the medieval church to denote “of the world.” Originally, it was a positive term denoting clergy who lived and worked with the people, as opposed to those who chose monastic seclusion. Eventually, it took on negative tones, referring to people who denied religion. A great number of Jews define themselves that way. But what exactly is it that they deny?

If pushed, most secular Jews would say they deny the existence of God. When I ask them for a description of the God they deny, however, it usually turns out that I deny that kind of God also. Grown-up religion need not affirm the kindergarten concept of a deity who looks, acts, and thinks like a superhuman being. Belief in God need not in any way conflict with such scientific tenets as evolution, the “big bang,” and entropy.

Jewish theology posits all sorts of definitions for God that might be attractive to people who think they are secular because they have outgrown simplistic notions of the divine. I find no single definition *totally* sufficient; I revert to bits and pieces of many to make sense of the complexity of life. Back in the twelfth century, philosopher Moses Maimonides insisted that no positive descriptions of God can do God justice. I find it easier to speak negatively, as he advised.

A religious person believes that life is not without meaning. It is not devoid of transcendent purpose. Ethics cannot be relative, as if to say, I am right for me, you are right for you, and Hitler was right for Hitler. Enslavement, torture, and mass murder are immoral, absolutely. It cannot be true that life demands nothing of us, leaving us free to search out pleasure at whatever cost to others.

By “religious,” I mean to connote people who affirm purpose, meaning, morality, and duty—to name but some of the things that science does not investigate—and who, therefore, are willing to concede some transcendent force, being, entity, power—none of these words suffice—that stands behind those otherwise irrational affirmations. Statements about God in the Bible, Talmud, and other classic Jewish works can be taken as metaphoric descriptions that worked in their time, and that have a claim on us too, even though they need to be translated into idioms that work better nowadays.

When I say that we need to think religiously, I mean we need to take those claims seriously, believing that there is more to life than our

meager lifetime; that we matter in some ultimate way; that our lives are invested with purpose; that our actions must accord with some absolute standards of right and wrong; that when we die, we can look back on a life meaningfully lived; and that purpose, rightness, and meaning are not mere fictions that we independently or communally invent.

As hard as it is to define “religious” in a mature and responsible way, it is harder still to say what I mean by “spiritual.” Jews seem to be divided into seekers of spirituality, who think the organized Jewish world is dominated by closed-minded bureaucrats, and tough-nosed realists, who cannot fathom what spirituality is and suspect that those who seek it are slaves to mindless irrationality. As with “religious,” the problem here is that “spiritual” is too narrowly defined.

The word has gone through many incarnations. Originally, it just meant the opposite of “immoral.” By the Middle Ages, it denoted the sphere of the church as opposed to the monarchy. We shall see later that powerful figures in American history—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and William James—thought spirituality was the elemental experience of the sacred before churches tamed, institutionalized, and ruined it. By the 1960s and ’70s, “spirituality” came to mean popularized forms of Eastern religious consciousness and practice. By the 1990s, spirituality had become an inchoate “something” that defied definition but was readily recognizable in a variety of venues. In 2001, *Fortune* magazine even ran a lead story entitled “God and Business: The Surprising Quest for Spiritual Renewal in the American Workplace.”

For many, nowadays, specifically Jewish spirituality is largely the melding of 1960s and ’70s ideas with Judaism. It features yoga, meditation, and withdrawing from the daily hustle-bustle to a state of interior mindfulness and quietude. Jews who are dubious about spirituality usually have a stereotyped notion of that in mind. I emphasize the word “stereotyped.” It is not as if these critics have ever experienced the practices that they consider worthless.

In any event, that is only one form of spiritual practice. Spirituality can mean a whole lot else. It can, for example, be the studied consciousness of a kind of Jewish “being in the world,” the way, that is, that Jewish texts suggest we live, with the greatest mindfulness

of our selves, our world, and our cosmos. To name but one example, Judaism has the Land of Israel at its center in ways that Catholics do not have the Vatican. Catholics do not yearn to return and live in Rome; it is not their home. Jerusalem, by contrast, is our Jewish spiritual home and, for many, their real-life earthly one as well. Spirituality derives from the Jewish significance of “home,” and the horror of its opposite, “wandering” or “exile.”

The entire Bible contrasts home with exile. The Torah begins with Adam and Eve being exiled from Eden; it ends with the People of Israel, having been exiled to Egypt, finally going home to their Land. The rest of the historical books and the prophets who punctuate it are consumed with exile in Babylonia, then restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah. Until relatively recently, the rest of Jewish history has been an exercise in “living in exile” (the Yiddish word *golus*) and yearning for return.

What makes this deeply rooted Jewish consciousness spiritual is the way it obligates Jews to take “home” seriously. On the elementary level, our own homes matter metaphysically. Unlike Christianity, for instance, home ceremonial is as important as what transpires in synagogues. Home and synagogue are equally sacred places. But there are ethical consequences too. Homelessness becomes a specifically heinous social problem for Jews. We know what it is to be without a home, to be wandering in a desert of city streets all night, to go without food, but to be without manna also.

By spirituality, then, I include both examples given here: the Eastern model and the deeper message of Jewish texts. Spirituality may also be the sense of connectedness that comes from singing together in prayer, attending a healing service, experiencing nature at its finest, or knowing the reality of perfect strangers reaching out in a moment of need.

In general, all these instances become spiritual when they prompt the recognition that we are at one with something beyond ourselves; it may be the earth, our community, humankind, or the transcendent “something” we call God.

Finally, we come to the sacred. I will later have occasion to cite Jewish sources that identify the sacred as things, actions, and places that exist for their own sake, not for utilitarian ends, even though they may have consequences that flow from them. Here, all I need to say

is that Synagogue 2000 subsumed under the “sacred” both spirituality and morality. Since spirituality is part of the sacred, we can say that the sacred, too, connects us beyond ourselves. The critical breakthrough for us was the determination that Jewish continuity demands religion, spirituality, and the sacred.

RELIGION AND SECULARITY

The American synagogue arose in the first place because America is a uniquely religious country. Colonial villages built churches at their center, then fashioned life around the churches. As cities developed, urban synagogues paralleled urban churches, slowly coalescing into denominations. Pre- and post-World War II congregations, Jewish and Christian, dominated urban skylines or laid down new roots in suburbia. The primary question before us is whether either one (as we now know it), church or synagogue, has any hope of succeeding in the twenty-first century.

There are those who claim that secularity will inevitably win out over religion, in which case Jews—who, as the saying goes, are just like everyone else, but more so—are really prophets of religion’s demise. Jews, after all, lead the trend of advancing secularity at the expense of religion. As religion necessarily recedes—goes the theory—religious institutions (both churches and synagogues) are doomed. The downward trend in membership, attendance, and engagement that we now see in mainstream churches and synagogues alike is irreversible.

This topic will recur in chapter 7, but for now, I can say simply that I am convinced of the opposite. There is equal evidence, especially in America (but elsewhere as well), that religion is strengthening its hold on popular thought. It is just that many churches and synagogues have not kept pace with the population. Since Judaism as ethnic memory is dead, the synagogue as ethnic preserve is dead as well. Yet that is exactly what synagogues here have been: ethnic enclaves.

After World War II, Jews built synagogues (as Christians did churches) as the family places America valued in the Ozzie and Harriet days. They suited the Eisenhower era’s insistence on visible signs of religious Americanism. Theologian Will Herberg attacked

that synagogue as merely a local Jewish address with little that was religiously trenchant. After the Six-Day War, ethnicity was repackaged as a national effort to guarantee the survival of Israel and, by extension, to save Jews abroad, especially those behind the iron curtain. It took powerful Federation-UJA coalitions to do that, and as these attracted more and more leaders of stature, the authority of the local synagogue languished, a shadow of what it had once been.

That all changed in the 1990s, when a new generation of rabbis began occupying positions of influence. All across America, a spiritual revolution was under way, as maturing baby-boomers reclaimed a word that had cropped up in the 1960s of their youth, when they had replaced synagogue loyalty with varieties of experience they called “spiritual.” Recognizing the thinness of Judaism’s ethnic patina, the best of these rabbis initiated a radical overhaul of synagogue existence. They still supported Israel, unstintingly, just as they worked to save Jews facing persecution in lands far away. But the American ethos that provided freedom of, but also freedom from, religion was taking its toll. Without a compelling religious rationale, synagogues were becoming increasingly marginal to Jewish life. Synagogue leaders worried also about the well-being of the American Jewish soul, hoping to save it from eclipse by making synagogues spiritually satisfying.

The new generation of rabbis, lay leaders, and the men and women who worked with them as cantors, educators, synagogue administrators, and their extended staffs were Synagogue 2000’s target audience. We provided what they couldn’t easily get alone: intellectual

Especially in America (but elsewhere as well), religion is strengthening its hold on popular thought. It is just that many churches and synagogues have not kept pace with the population. Since Judaism as ethnic memory is dead, the synagogue as ethnic preserve is dead as well. Yet that is exactly what synagogues here have been: ethnic enclaves.

and social glue, which is to say, novel ideas and a chance to think them through in a network of people like themselves. We and they set as our joint mandate the spiritualization of synagogues for adults.

This book, then, challenges not just nostalgic ethnicity but Jewish secularism also by claiming that if people show signs of leaving Judaism as a religion, it is because synagogues have yet to foster a religion that adults can reasonably conclude they ought not to leave. In the end, I hope I will have made the case for religion and its promise, for synagogues as the religious backbone of Jewish continuity, and for a theoretical understanding of what synagogues are and what they can yet be.

I do not claim that everything I say fits all synagogues equally. My charges are both specific and general. As to the specific, I make many particular claims here: that synagogues lack good spiritual leadership; that they do not use volunteers well; that they squander their members' natural gifts because they never ask what they are; that synagogues do not rise to the level of excellence that the new generation expects; that their websites are poorly utilized; that their bulletins fill a congratulatory function (they reward the regulars who plan everything) but are inefficient as announcements; that tension is growing between rabbi and cantor; that, despite the claims of the regulars, synagogues are by and large neither welcoming nor warm; and so forth. To these and other similarly specific claims, some readers will retort, "Not *my* synagogue!" And they may be right. If so, I can only respond that I wish most other synagogues could honestly say the same thing. I do not know the specifics of every synagogue, but I believe I am correct regarding the majority.

In any event, more important than any of these *specific* claims is my *general* one: the need for an overall theory of synagogue life. The specifics are symptoms of a general malaise, an underlying synagogue culture that has been taken for granted over the years and that I now call into question. Among other things, I charge synagogues with being a market, not a sacred community; hewing to an ethnic and corporate model that was outmoded twenty years ago; and pursuing an atomistic existence (as if they need not collaborate with each other or with other Jewish organizations). It is this set of larger claims that really matters here. More than any specific manifestation of trouble, I hope to convince my reader of the need to change direction in gen-

eral: to think theologically, not programmatically; to foster the synagogue as a spiritual and moral religious institution; to appreciate the increasing role of ritual, spirituality, and healing, not just formal and didactic education; to overcome the dominant fee-for-service mentality that haunts the way synagogues are perceived; and to take risks rather than settle for the safety of the status quo.

I take my own risks in what I say here, stretching hypotheses rather than containing them, so as to fuel public debate about synagogue life. I have not shirked from implicating all the systemic parts of our institutional “thinking” apparatus: clergy who get too busy to remember how spiritual is their calling; seminaries that still train graduates as if it were the 1950s and ’60s, attending little to the kind of competence demanded in the 2000s and beyond; denominational bodies that deliver ever more programs, rather than devising ever deeper purpose; Federations that still relegate synagogues to the margins of Jewish continuity; and old-time leaders who delude themselves into thinking that healthy Jewish life here can continue by responding to anti-Semitism, threats to Israel’s survival, and yesterday’s ethnic memories. There are, however, no villains in my story, only victims who should be helping one another.

My first law of systems is “Most institutions are mostly efficient most of the time.” It follows that “If an institution seems to be failing, you are probably not noticing what the institution is doing efficiently.” My example is a toaster that burns toast. It may be failing as a toaster, but as a burner, it is an undeniable success. I will argue that most synagogues are similar unparalleled success stories at what they have drifted into doing: catering to children, providing bar/bat mitzvah and High Holy Day services, organizing committees that plan events like *mitzvah* days, and holding Shabbat services for those who like them. It is just that as admirable as these things are, synagogues cannot afford doing them alone anymore. All my examples, even Shabbat services, are examples of programs, because what most synagogues are truly successful at is programming. What they do not do well is think deeply about anything. A ship adrift on a soft and gentle tide can lull its passengers into thinking that because their daily programming remains pleasurably intact, the ship is still anchored close to shore, rather than being slowly swept out to sea.

But as I say, the synagogue is part of a system, and it is the system that has to rally if we are going to save the ship. Seminaries still train students how to program on board ship, without acknowledging the drift; denominational headquarters provide programs and reward the programmers. Federation leaders who are not internally tied to congregational life the way synagogue loyalists are have been watching the drift from afar and should know better than to think we can keep on drifting without leaving the majority of American Jews behind on shore. I fault Federations too, then, not for what they do well—support Israel, provide human services and a modicum of Jewish programming—but for what they avoid: recognizing that without the synagogue ship, Jews on shore are going to run out of what the ship alone carries in its hold—Judaism.

The synagogue has been our religious reservoir of record. More than any other institution, it has sustained American Jewry, nurturing and educating the individuals who compose it. I have only the highest regard for the dedicated men and women, professional and volunteer, who devote their lives to synagogue success. I write not just about them, but for them. What I have to say comes mostly from them, for I have logged hundreds of hours listening to my colleagues, lay and clergy, say privately what they would not admit publicly. These good people are allies, not enemies, in the task of synagogue transformation. This book should help them do what they want to do anyway. It is not their fault that their seminary education never trained them to do it, that their professional organizations do not encourage it, that the denominational bodies do not emphasize it, that Federations do not support it, and that, especially if they are rabbis, they are spread too thin to have time to think thoroughly through what “it” even is.

But I am far from trashing everything we have, a simple task, for there is hardly an institution in the world that is immune to yellow-press headlines of incompetence and looming failure. To say that synagogues should evolve to better serve the future is not at all to claim that they have been failures in the past. My critique is offered from within, with love, concern, and respect.

I have been guided by yet a further consideration: that this book report not only on the synagogues with whom we worked, but also

on who “we” at Synagogue 2000 were. We sought to model what we preached. Believing that synagogues should be driven by Jewish principles, we practically obsessed over our own theological rationale, asking such questions as, Why are we doing this? Does this fulfill our spiritual mandate? Similarly, we insisted that synagogues become places where God’s presence was patently present in the way people treat one another. So our own staff meetings began as we hoped synagogue board meetings would: with personal “check-ins,” where people brought to the table not just their institutional business but their lives in progress. We prayed together, studied together, and ritualized life’s surprises together, even as we worked very hard together to help others do the same. Everything about Synagogue 2000 as an organization was to reflect the Synagogue 2000 ethos. This book, then, must do the same. It will be judged a success by the extent to which it, too, models what we were in the years that it reports on.

This is no do-it-yourself manual of becoming a Synagogue 2000; it is a think-it-yourself challenge to change the way we conceptualize synagogue life. In order to prompt different thinking, it provides a new vocabulary with which to make new sentences about old problems. Joel Hoffman never fails to remind me, “If we always think the way we always thought, we will always get what we always got.” And “what we always got” is just not good enough anymore.

Somewhere, someone—it may have been C. S. Lewis—said, “Christianity is an excellent idea yet to be tried.” The same can be said of synagogues in our time. It is time we tried out synagogues as a new idea.

Concepts from This Chapter

Jewish culture: The totality of wisdom, practices, folkways, and so forth—the content of all our texts, songs, poems, artwork, stories, and axioms—that constitutes what we choose to remember of Jewish experience.

Jewish ethnicity: A nostalgic yearning for Jewish folkways that once sustained us as a people apart. Jewish ethnicity is what we *think* Jews have done, and what we may continue to do, but with no transcendent purpose.

Praxis: The combination of practice and theory—an idea that explains transformation and then proves successful in bringing it about.

Activities and Topics for Discussion

1. What about your synagogue appeals to Jewish culturalists? What opportunities exist to meet over Jewish texts, songs, poems, artwork, stories, and so on? How often does your community delve into the “cultural reservoir”?
2. What about your synagogue appeals to Jewish religionists? What kind of “God language” is employed, and in what contexts? How is religious experimentation supported for the congregation as a community and for individuals in their private practice?
3. What was the last “big idea” your congregation sprouted and nurtured? In what context did it emerge? What parts of Jewish tradition did it draw upon? What did it glean from modern thought? What kind of transformation did it bring about? Did people speak differently because of it?