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Too big to fail? Too crucial to discard? A relic of a bygone era? What place does the synagogue occupy in present-day Jewish life? This issue of *Sh'ma* offers a wide range of views about the future of the synagogue. Other kinds of congregating — micro-institutions once considered marginal, such as independent *minyanim*, ersatz prayer communities, and pay-for-fee Friday evening gatherings — have gained momentum, energy, and constituencies large enough to challenge the synagogue as the central address of Jewish ritual life. At a time of declining institutional affiliation (except among the Orthodox) and a growing list of questions — including what it means to “belong,” what relationship one has to authority, and how to create sacred communities for ends other than ritual — the once-hegemonic synagogue is facing a challenging future that demands redefinition.

In the following pages, we turn to many of the leading figures inside and outside of brick-and-mortar institutions to reflect on how we can best create and sustain a religious life — broadly understood — while acknowledging an ever-changing ethos. We include two Roundtables (found on pages 6 and 9) that explore what it means to create covenantal communities, an essay by an architect on creating sacred space, an article that rethinks synagogue membership and dues structures, and a piece that reminds us about the importance of integrating the full age spectrum into our communities. We hear from young rabbis who are attempting to create a new rabbinat, and also from several voices in a Facebook conversation on emergent communities. How we rethink the mainstay of Jewish life is an abiding concern — one we have addressed several times in these pages. We hope this issue suggests some hard questions along with some nuanced answers to help navigate this uncertain and complex future.

—Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

The 75 Percent

ARI Y. KELMAN

Here's just one example of how strange synagogue culture is: Synagogue members pay dues. On any given weekend, approximately 25 percent of those members avail themselves of some services: worship, study, volunteering, school. Rabbis and communal professionals regularly bemoan this fact, searching for the other 75 percent who pay but don't play. But here's the weird thing: Synagogues need that 75 percent not to show up. If they did, the synagogue could not provide for them. Imagine if the crowd at the average Shabbat service looked like that of the High Holidays.

Here is my point: Synagogue and movement leaders talk about membership, community, commitment, and 'sacred purpose,' but the congregational business model relies on people who pay their dues but show up only once or twice a year.

Mormons tithe. Protestants and Catholics,

for the most part, do not, making their offerings instead by “passing the plate” or now, via credit-card-accepting kiosks.¹ Jews paying dues have long been the convention at American synagogues. But such an arrangement, which

Some synagogues alter the dynamics around what people pay in an attempt to influence how people feel about what they pay.

predicates membership on a financial agreement, seems to place synagogues on a par with country clubs or gyms or fraternities — places that survive on the logic that everyone pays the same amount, no matter how heavy their usage is.

This relationship — between the ways in which synagogues talk about community and

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