

findings, that is, some instances where we might expect to find a source for this central measure but did not.

Generational membership in North America makes no difference. Our collective imagery is of pious ancestors and fallen children. The former were pious, learned, loyal Jews while the latter are clearly lesser Jews. While this is undoubtedly true for some of us individually, it is not true collectively. In the main, age makes no difference—with the following qualification: the youngest group, those under 35 years old, is significantly more likely to assert the importance of both Jewishness and religion; once we consider those above 35, age makes no difference. Perhaps, the more powerful commitment of the under 35 group presages a new day for the Conservative movement or simply reflects the fact that most people joining Conservative congregations hold off affiliating until they have children of school age. Those who do affiliate when they are young are not a random sample of their age cohort. At any rate, our image of the pious "old folks" needs updating.

So too our image of the "corrosive" effect of education. "Religionists" in the synagogue are no less intellectually sophisticated than are "secularists," nor are "peripherals" less committed to Judaism and Jewishness because they "know better."

If the variation in the sort of Jewish commitment we are discussing does not come from broad social and demographic forces, what is its source? No one source explains everything neatly—there is no magic solution. But the explanations that do work are connected with the influence of significant others. That is, parents and spouses are the most effective agents of Jewish socialization. If a parent wants his/her child to be a concerned Jew then the parent must include the child in his or her world of Jewish concern. If a parent wants his/her child to be a believing Jew, then the parent dare not depend upon the Jewish school to do the job alone. Schools transmit knowledge and skills; loved ones shape life commitments.

We have seen some of the consequences of the marginalization of Jewish religion even within the precincts of the synagogue. Those who do not express a religious commitment participate less in the life of the synagogue. They also demand less from the leadership of the congregation. It is less important to the "secularists" and the "peripherals" that their rabbi be a model of Jewish piety and scholarship. From a cynical perspective, they are ideal members. They demand little and pay their dues. However, Jewish consciousness, Jewish collective memory and Jewish community, are embedded in Jewish religion. Without Jewish religion, Jews quickly become amnesiacs and ultimately cease functioning as Jews.

Until modern times, Jewishness and Judaism were linked together such that it was impossible to affirm one without affirming the other. The religion of the Jewish people is a response to the history of the Jewish people. In the traditional

Jewish imagination, the Jew exists on two levels, which coexisted easily with one another. Jews gave their children the names of heroes and heroines from Jewish history. Thus, there was *Avraham Avinu*, our Father Abraham, and *Avremele*, little Abraham, who lived down the street. They were equally real. Somewhere along the way to westernization and modernization, a large fraction of the Jewish people lost touch with its ancestors and the ancient family saga, though they maintained contact and concern for and with the Jews of their own time. In the foreshortening of their time horizon and their turn away from the past, many Jews became "secularists" and some became "peripherals."

Late Twentieth Century Conservative Synagogues: An Ethnographic View

Riv- Ellen Prell

Thirty years ago, the new suburban synagogue was the source of important insight into the postwar American Jewish community. Burgeoning membership, sparse synagogue attendance, women in leadership roles and a focus on children's education revealed the eagerness of Jews to join mainstream American culture but not to abandon their Jewish identity. Community and the importance of transmitting Jewish identity to the next generation were at the core of a Jewish life for young families that distinguished them from their suburban neighbors.

My study of two suburban Minnesota synagogues suggests that synagogue life has something different to tell us about the American-Jewish world of the late twentieth century. While children are still the crucial factor in a family's decision to join a synagogue, and attendance continues to decline, community is no longer the synagogue's primary draw. The adults who join and count themselves among the active members seem far more interested in learning than in other activities. Jews have greater access to social clubs and mainstream activities today than just after World War II when anti-Semitism was still widespread. The synagogue now plays a narrower but more religious role in its members' lives, although what constitutes a religious life is negotiated by individuals and families.

Family Life

Families today are fundamentally different from those in that earlier era. They are far more likely to be headed by two working parents, both facing heavier demands on their time than when mothers were expected to meet all family needs. There are more divorced parents and reconstituted families; intermarriage has increased. Conservative synagogues of the late 1990s respond to members, whatever their level of observance, who must integrate Judaism into the same limited non-work hours that are reserved for children, family responsibilities, leisure and volunteer activities. Synagogues therefore must transmit Jewish practice within the social realities of their own time.

The Synagogues

I have compared two synagogues that are remarkably alike in certain ways. Beth El Synagogue and Beth Jacob Synagogue are both centrist Conservative congregations, committed to the full equality of men and women in every aspect of Jewish life.

Their rabbis are traditional Jews with young families whose own lives model scrupulous observance of Jewish law. Beth Jacob's congregants are more observant than Beth El's, but congregants in both synagogues are more observant than the national average for Conservative Jews. Their Shabbat morning services are virtually identical liturgically. They have active youth programs, their Shabbat skills training and preparation for *b'nai mitzvah* are highly regarded and impressive numbers of their teenagers go on to become Torah readers and teachers in the programs that produced them. Although the synagogues do not provide Jewish education, all their youth are required either to attend a community supplementary school or a day school.

Beth El and Beth Jacob are, nevertheless, dramatically different congregations. Even more than their difference in size — Beth El has about thirteen hundred households and Beth Jacob has about three hundred fifty — and the fact that Beth El has a cantor whose leadership is critical, are the synagogues' ages. Beth El was not quite seventy-five years old at the time of this study, while Beth Jacob was celebrating its tenth anniversary. Both congregations have had rabbis with remarkably stable tenures. Beth El has had three distinguished senior rabbis for more than seventy years, although during 1995-96, the position of senior rabbi was being held on an interim basis by the congregation's junior rabbi while the community conducted its search. Beth Jacob's rabbi has served the congregation for nine years and the community anticipates that he will remain with the congregation until his retirement.

Community and Religious Life

In creating Jewish community and religious life, the congregations share some but not all of the same goals. They envision different types of communities, and to some extent, they serve different types of Jews. The contrasts between them are evident in examining what happened when, in 1995, during their Yom Kippur sermons, the rabbis of both synagogues initiated a year of programming dedicated to *mitzvot*. The idea was to increase congregants' personal observance within the home and private life.

Shabbat Observance at Beth El

At Beth El, Rabbi Kahn, Cantor Newman, the staff and a lay committee developed "Celebrate Shabbat" to encourage congregants to increase their religious observance of Shabbat at home on Friday night in conjunction with the synagogues'

decision to limit "late" Friday night services because of dwindling attendance. A series of in-synagogue Friday night dinners and services marked the move from weekly to monthly Friday night services. Virtually all of the special events had an explicitly educational function. The dinners taught Shabbat observance in the home. The lay committee created recipe boxes of materials — blessings, songs, recipes — to help families create Friday night in the home. And the initiative was explained to the congregation in the following announcement: "We'll discover how to bring Shabbat into your home if you've never done so before, or how to enhance the rituals you are already practicing today. We'll provide suggestions for helping families learn how to fit Shabbat into their hectic life styles. We'll experience how celebrating Shabbat can make the family more cohesive and provide the welcome respite from the busy work week."

In a much commented upon Yom Kippur sermon, Rabbi Kahn discussed the importance of Shabbat observance in the lives of harried, exhausted families and the need to give up the large and complex meals associated with Shabbat so that no one would feel "oppressed." He said, "When we celebrate our Minneapolis or suburban Shabbat, we must catapult ourselves into a whole new world, different from the world we experience during the week. Our Shabbat must emphasize relaxation, self-reflection. It must emphasize family; it must serve as a break from busy-ness, technology, consumerism, and modernity."

Then Rabbi Kahn delivered what many congregants consider the most memorable part of his sermon. "I have found that one of the biggest barriers to celebrating Shabbat is what I call the 'bubbe syndrome.' Everyone feels that the Shabbat they make must be just like *bubbe's* was, with homemade *challah*, chopped liver, chicken soup, kugel, everything. But this image of the traditional meal, while wonderful, represents further enslavement for the person who literally has to slave away to prepare it. So I say, 'Buy frozen or make pasta.'

"Let me share with you how our family has celebrated an occasional Shabbat. Every once in a while, maybe once or twice a year, we have a week where we are just swamped, but by the end of the week, we are in desperate need of Shabbat. Yet neither of us has the energy to make it. On those occasions we have gone and picked up a pizza, and made Shabbat over wine and pizza. Why not? We didn't need the chicken or the kugel. We needed Shabbat."

Rabbi Kahn's choice of vocabulary was deliberate. He specifically used the word "celebrate" rather than "observe." He had learned over the years that his congregants were not likely to observe all of the laws of Shabbat. He wanted to encourage them to participate more actively in home observance, even if they could not or would not be observant Jews. He explained, "I want people to feel more identified and I want people to be more observant, but I'm not willing to look upon people negatively who aren't willing to. I also think that there are a lot

of people who just need to be made aware of the beautiful things of Judaism because they don't really know that they are available."

Programming was at the heart of the "Celebrate Shabbat" campaign. The staff carefully tailored the monthly Friday night dinners to Beth El's various constituencies. Late Friday night services were linked to the presence of the choir. Some Shabbat dinners and services were directed at particular groups such as singles and families with children of different ages. "Informal Shabbat" encouraged people to dress casually and stay after services for dinner and Israeli dancing. "Artsy Shabbat" included a week-night crafts program enabling people to create their own "heirloom" Shabbat objects.

The core programs of the initiative were three Shabbat workshop/congregational dinners following early services in December, February and April. These educational dinners were far more widely attended than anyone had anticipated — the second two sold out right after the first dinner was held. All three attracted a remarkable cross-section of the congregation.

Some congregants were reinvigorated in their observance by "Celebrate Shabbat," and some began to create a Shabbat experience for their family — the purpose of the rabbi's initiative. The vocabulary of "celebrate," "casual," and "liberation from the kitchen," signaled, according to congregants, a Judaism that understood the complexities and needs of their lives. As a parent of a young family commented, "I loved what he said about Shabbat. It was the first time I ever heard a rabbi say that you don't have to do it like your grandmother. You don't have to do it right; just do it. I never had that permission from a rabbi before. Always, it's never enough."

Rabbi Kahn estimated that about twenty families with young children did observe Shabbat in their homes for the first time. But the unanticipated and more widespread effect was to bring congregants together in the synagogue to create a communal, inter-generational experience. The staff learned that hundreds of Beth El members hungered for Jewish community within the synagogue. Paradoxically, what was most effective in increasing Friday night observance among families was to bring them together for Shabbat in the synagogue.

As one congregant in his late twenties said, "The thing that's been most inviting to me lately at Beth El has been these programs about Shabbat, I think because you go and you meet people and you learn something about Shabbat." A very active member who had inconsistently observed Shabbat his entire life also found these programs "reinvigorating because it had been quite some time since we had done that. It was like 'Oh yeah, I know about that. I haven't done that in a while.' But in the last year we've had friends over who are *Shomer Shabbat* and live in the neighborhood. Since going to this it's giving us a greater confidence to share Shabbat with them."

The ironic shift from the goal of increasing Friday night

observance at home to the wildly successful communal Shabbat observance in the synagogue may be better understood in the context of Beth El's history, which continues to serve as a powerful draw for the community.

Beth El is made up of a number of multi-generational families whose own ancestors founded the synagogue. Beth El's members talk often about the synagogue's previous location on the north side of Minneapolis, where it stayed well beyond the mass exodus to the suburbs out of the community's deference to the remaining shopkeepers and elderly members. That neighborhood remains their model for synagogue life, with its overlapping ties between families and neighbors, social life and religious life. Beth El is currently described by some of its members as a replacement for that neighborhood. While the experience of living in a Jewish neighborhood was one of the strongest expressions of American Jewish culture for them, Minneapolis Jews no longer share a single neighborhood. They are scattered in a variety of suburbs, some without a strong Jewish presence. They sometimes refer to the synagogue as their "home."

The practice of Judaism by new members, just as by those who grew up at Beth El, is rooted in the hope and promise that their children will feel comfortable as Jews, often coded as feeling "at home" at Beth El. They too are attracted to understanding Judaism as multi-generational and focus on the importance of its transmission to their children. Perhaps it is no accident that congregants' often express their great pleasure in Rabbi Kahn's leadership with the Yiddish word for home, calling him "*haimish*."

"Celebrate Shabbat" at Beth El might be understood as a synagogue and its members coming to terms with Judaism in a community where home, food and memory are the critical foundations of Jewish life.

Kashrut and the Ladder of Observance at Beth Jacob

On Yom Kippur at Beth Jacob, each person found a pink pledge card with nine fold-down tabs and a place for a signature on his or her seat. The card included an advertisement for the new Jerusalem McDonald's with the symbol "O" superimposed over it in black. The tabs corresponded to the ladder of *kashrut*, beginning with "no pork" and leading to other prohibited foods, the separation of milk and meat, a kosher home and finally "only hechshered products outside of the home." Rabbi Allen devoted his Kol Nidre sermon to the topic of *kashrut*.

"The process of a holistic approach to Jewish life which defines us as an *am kadosh* (holy people) is quickly disappearing," said Rabbi Allen. "Without a sense of distinctiveness about who we are and what we are all about, all the buildings and all the programs and all the love and wonder and awe we generate here in the *shul* will one day simply disappear. The act of eating can become a means for holiness, for sanctifying the world in which we live." Referring to the

pledge card, the rabbi asked his congregants to make the "*kashrut* pledge."

He continued, "Each of us, that means me, too, can move one step further up the rung of holiness by increasing our level of *kashrut*. That is all we need to do tonight — start the process in motion. Okay, before you tune me out and say, 'No way — I'm willing to hear about great causes, to give to make the *shul* vibrant, but I'm not willing to give up my pepperoni pizza,' hear me out. While all the world's problems will not be solved by your increased observance of *kashrut*, you at least can become increasingly sensitized to what it means to be a feeling person, a passionate Jew and a member of a covenantal people extending back through history."

The sermon initiated a year of programming around *kashrut*. Rabbi Allen convened two discussions to allow members to talk about keeping kosher. Every household at Beth Jacob received a *kashrut* package that included "A Guide to the Jewish Dietary Laws," a booklet describing the philosophy and methods of *kashrut* and a refrigerator magnet proclaiming "Chew By Choice."

Rabbi Allen sees the synagogue as a place that can do some, but not all, things. He explained that Beth Jacob never set out to provide "a whole range of things that I'm not sure that *shuls* need to be providing," such as a Sisterhood or a Men's Club. He argues vigorously that faced with diminishing resources and people's busy lives, American synagogues will have to define the central core of synagogue life as the opportunity to grow as Jews. And, he said, "*Kashrut* is one of those things that, given the highly individualistic world that we live in, is effective. A lot of people don't study and don't come to *shul*. Everyone eats. I think for many people it is the crucial element of how they define themselves. *Kashrut* clearly demands some sort of observance of boundaries and creating separation from the world. By elevating the decision-making process around food, we invite people to see themselves as engaged in Judaism. I really believe that if someone gives up pork products, they have entered into the discussion. Then suddenly, they feel connected to something that certainly is a defining element of Judaism classically. We need to demonstrate that Judaism is part of your everyday consciousness, and I think the easiest way to do it is *kashrut*."

"Chew By Choice" was not a collective effort. No one appointed a committee to oversee its projects. Like much of the religious life of the synagogue, it was rabbi-driven. However, it did affect many congregants. About fifty members returned the pledge cards, though it was unclear if congregants were intended to literally mail in the card. Most of those moved up from one to another level of commitment, for example, from keeping a kosher home to observing *kashrut* outside of the home. In addition, two families took up the synagogue's offer to help defray the cost of creating a kosher home.

Many congregants spoke about the sermon and the matter

of *kashrut* to me throughout the year. One woman, raised as a committed Reform Jew, worried, "Am I going to feel that I'm not meeting the expectation of a good congregant and a good Jew if I don't keep kosher?" On the other hand, others welcomed the sermon. A member in his late thirties told me, "I found myself thinking, I'm exactly one of these people who is very comfortable with what I eat, what I do in my home and outside my home, but I haven't looked at it for a long time.' There was a challenge there." Another congregant, also in his thirties, an Orthodox Jew before joining Beth Jacob, said, "One of the things I like also about the Conservative approach is the notion of the ladder of *mitzvot*. You can start at a certain level and gradually work your way up. You can strive for an ideal, but you're not going to get there overnight. You take one step for now and think about the next step later." His wife echoed those sentiments by asserting that the presence of too many rules creates a desire to rebel. "Tell me all the rules and I'll say, 'No.' If I feel that I have room to do what I want, I'll go further."

Another member, a man in his early fifties and a Shabbat morning regular, does not yet keep kosher, but sees himself in a process, on a lower rung of the ladder. "Although we haven't yet really completed the commitment to *kashrut* and we're only talking about it, it has begun to affect my eating patterns. There are certain things that I just don't eat anymore. It's not because I willfully cut them out, but because the incongruity makes them uncomfortable." He was particularly impressed by the book the rabbi sent to the households. Its authors viewed *kashrut* as a means to holiness, in contrast with his parents' approach. "I very clearly understood *kashrut*, as I was growing up, in the context of identity. But never — in all those years that I lived in my parents' Orthodox home and kept kosher — never did I understand *kashrut* as it is presented in this booklet: the concept of hallowing God and hallowing one's relationship to God through sanctifying even my most mundane activities. Why is that a new concept for me? What did that generation think it was accomplishing? That *kashrut* would continue to be passed on, when the single richest justification was completely omitted from our educations, formally and informally? It stunned me to read this thing. I wonder how I would have felt giving up *kashrut* as a young adult had I seen it in this light."

This congregant came to understand a lifetime of choices as simply not having had a powerful enough rationale for observing the dietary laws — one that is now available to him.

Beth Jacob congregants are unusually committed to the practice of the Jewish dietary laws in comparison to Conservative Jews nationwide. Our membership survey found that 43 percent of Beth Jacob's congregants separate milk and meat dishes and 27 percent refrain from eating meat in non-kosher restaurants. However, these numbers do not indicate how gradual this process has been. No one that I interviewed, including the rabbi, as he explained in his sermon, has

continuously observed *kashrut* throughout his or her life. Nor do Beth Jacob's congregants consider their observance of *kashrut* as a single, unchanging package of decisions, activities and attitudes. Few people actually described "ladders," but many seem to be in the process of scaling them. People used words like "experiment" or "try" as they described their relationships with *kashrut*.

Eight months after the sermon, Rabbi Allen told me that he never judges his effectiveness over a single year because he considers that far too short a period to gauge change. Rather, he is committed to continue to link *kashrut*, Shabbat observance and study, so that they will reinforce one another.

Rabbi Allen recalled attending a celebration recently for a congregant's promotion. The congregant received a gift certificate to a restaurant whose symbol is a lobster. Obviously embarrassed, that individual told Rabbi Allen during the party, "A year ago I would never have imagined feeling embarrassed about this gift." Another congregant had lunch with the Rabbi and told him as he ordered a turkey sandwich, "I don't have it with cheese any longer." Rabbi Allen noted, "That was true, by the way. He used to always order cheese on his meat sandwiches when we had lunch together." Rabbi Allen mused that while some might see these examples as a complete trivialization of *kashrut* and others might see them as a victory, he felt they were important first steps in the decision to enter the conversation.

The focus on conversation explains why Rabbi Allen did not pose the issue of *kashrut* to his congregation of overwhelmingly young families as something to do for the sake of their children, or, for that matter, for the sake of the memories of their families. He sidestepped hygiene and the sociological explanations that provided the crucial rationale for observance in the 1950s. Instead, Rabbi Allen asked his congregants to learn to make ordinary life holy and set apart, to reject the homogeneity of late twentieth century American life and assert difference. In that very formulation he acknowledged that Beth Jacob is a congregation with unusual expectations for the practice of Judaism, and that its members practice in different ways and are at different rungs on the ladder of observance.

The vision of the founders of Beth Jacob is entirely consistent with that of the rabbi. The community was shaped by a powerful 1980s focus on the importance of participation and equality. Lacking memory and neighborhood, Beth Jacob was founded on the principle of creating a unique community. As one founder explained, "Members are not here because of their parents or grandparents. I meet people at *shul* who searched for several years before finding a synagogue. They made a judgment and joined. They are here by choice, and not by default."

In contrast to the memories and focus on transmission that dominate Beth El, Beth Jacob emphasizes active and self-

conscious commitment to Judaism and to the synagogue. While members chose to create an egalitarian synagogue, "choice" on the ladder of *mitzvot* has a rather different meaning. Congregants describe choosing to be commanded, and Rabbi Allen places the sense of obligation at the center of his vision, acknowledging that people come to that obligation in different ways and at different paces.

Synagogue Cultures

Although congregants do not self-consciously use the term, I have come to understand Beth Jacob as a community of choice, and Beth El as a community built on memory. Neither foundation reflects nostalgia or backward glances. But they do not proceed with the same vision of Jewish life. The ethos of Beth El continues to ignite a strong relationship among memory, neighborhood and community. Continuity and family are at the core of how most members describe their Jewishness and the synagogue. Beth El's members are far more likely to describe their synagogue as a home than a community, the most common term used by Beth Jacob's members.

Beth Jacob's focus on choice describes a group committed to an approach, rather than to a single set of practices or assumptions about how to practice. The power of participation and egalitarianism reflects not only a synagogue still quite young, but one built less on ties of extended family and shared memories than on commitment to a vision of Jewish practice.

As examples of late twentieth century synagogues, Beth El and Beth Jacob reveal that religious idioms of practice and *mitzvot* take center stage in synagogue life, though each synagogue creates a unique culture that shapes that practice within a community grounded in history and a vision of Jewish life for late twentieth century families.