

Passing on the Message: Children and Synagogue Life

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The concern with children, particularly their absorption of Judaism, is one of the essentials of Conservative synagogue life. People often join the synagogue upon the birth of their first child or when that child reaches the earliest age for Jewish education. That education, in turn, is often perceived and presented as a necessary prerequisite for the all-important bar or bat mitzvah rite of passage. If the danger in this approach is that people will come to consider going to the synagogue (and Judaism) as "kid stuff," its promise is that it may also maintain the Jewish engagement of the adults, at least insofar as they are parents and grandparents. Being an active Jew may be a by-product of being an active parent.

The orientation of Judaism and synagogue life around children is even greater in the suburban milieu. People who move to suburbia often claim to have done so for the sake of their children—for example, in order to enroll them in good schools or to provide them with the open spaces of backyards and private homes. In line with these child-centered concerns, synagogues increasingly are expected to assist in the enhancement of child development.

Reflecting this concern, both Kehillath Achim and the Central Synagogue, the Conservative American congregations which I studied for nearly a year and serve as the sources for my paper, spend large resources on their nursery and religious schools. The schools are key vehicles for bringing in new members. Each synagogue devotes a significant part of its physical plant to school facilities and has a large staff. Both synagogues have established "Torah for Tots" programs in which parents and often grandparents as well come—some for the first time in a long time—with their children to be introduced into synagogue life. At Central Synagogue, the rabbi meets regularly with nursery school parents, usually mothers, for a seminar on a Jewish topic. Each synagogue devotes a significant part of its physical plant to its school and its staff.

If the synagogue displays its concern for children in the allocation of resources and programs, parent-members do so not only by sending their offspring to the synagogue but also by becoming Jewishly active and committed to synagogue life.

"We wanted to be involved in our children's nursery school," one young mother explained, accounting for her own growing attachment to the synagogue. This involvement meant attending services on nursery school Shabbat, going on a synagogue family retreat and participating in various holiday events.

Yet from doing things as a parent to doing them for

oneself is a short leap. "At first it was as good parents doing this because this is something you do for your child. And then it just woke up something inside of me," said one member.

Some parents resolve that their Jewish involvement will increase as their children move up through the grades: "As my children learn and do more in their Jewish lives, I am sure I shall as well," a young mother reasoned.

"I want my children to have a Jewish education, foundation and base, as does my husband. And in order to give them this involves our coming to shul and participating," said another in the same spirit. "We're both committed shul-goers," explained a third, describing herself and her husband.

"We believe on Shabbat we need to be here for ourselves, and as well because we believe that we need to set an example. And we want our children to see that we need to be here."

Another mother interpreted coming to the synagogue and bringing her children as an expression of her "hope [that] my children will feel comfortable here." A fellow member averred that for her, the synagogue "is simply a place to observe my religion and to teach my children their religion." Still another parent explained her increasing involvement in Judaism as "a constant reminder to my children that they are Jewish."

In short, for many if not all of these synagogue members, Judaism and parenting are inextricably intertwined. The triumph of each is often reflected in the other.

Each family, of course, will make its own judgments about whether or not it has succeeded Jewishly with its children. For many, the ultimate test is what kind of Jewish lives their children lead, whom they marry (if they do) and how they act as parents and adults. Many evaluate their own Jewish lives by measuring how closely their children emulate them.

One member, for example, pointed to her triumph as a Jewish parent by noting that whenever her children come home—from school or from their married lives—they return to the synagogue. Another reported with satisfaction that his children are affiliated with a synagogue where they live and are giving his grandchildren a Jewish education.

Alternatively, some members look at their children and have misgivings and doubts. One reflected on mistakes he may have made in not coming to the synagogue more when his son was young. "Maybe he wouldn't be about to marry a non-Jewish girl if we had come more."

Yet if each individual evaluates his or her own children and Jewish life separately from the community, how can a congregation measure its success? How can the synagogue

discover whether or not its children have internalized Judaism and the way of life of the congregation?

Both of these synagogues have devised special public occasions when these questions can be answered, opportunities for their children to demonstrate their relationship with the synagogue, Conservative Judaism and the Jewish people. They are what social anthropologists call "cultural performances"—events enabling members of a cultural community to make "visible, audible and tangible beliefs, ideas, values, sentiments and psychological dispositions that [otherwise] cannot directly be perceived."* They are opportunities for insiders to express what they are at the same time that they reenforce this identity. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, they are opportunities for people to offer not only models of what they believe, but also models for believing it. "In these plastic dramas men attain their faith as they portray it."**

In what follows I present an ethnographic sketch of two such cultural performances, at which synagogue youth demonstrate that they have gotten the Jewish message. This study represents a kind of religio-cultural report-in-progress on where the next generation is Jewishly.

Let us begin with the following postulate: a good measure of competence and engagement in synagogue life is how the synagogue school and the children prove themselves in public. When both prove themselves, the congregation has also proved itself.

A Synagogue Procession of the Youngest Children

The festival of Sukkot presents a challenge. Occurring just after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it may seem past the climax. Often coming on a weekday, it competes with the demands of work and weekday routines, already greatly disturbed during the High Holy Day season. Unlike Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when almost every member of the synagogue makes an appearance at one service or another, Sukkot appeals primarily to the core congregation, the regular attenders. But Sukkot, according to Jewish tradition, "the time of our joy," is a festival that celebrates Jewish continuity. That continuity is most vividly symbolized on the last day's Simhat Torah celebrations, during which the conclusion of one Torah reading cycle is coupled with the commencement of another in the never-ending Jewish sequence. Much is made of the occasion, a joyful time when parents bring their children to the synagogue, especially in the evening.

But Sukkot is more than the celebration of Simhat Torah. It is a time for building a *sukkah*, a temporary dwelling with a thatched roof from which decorations are hung and in which

edibles are consumed in symbolic display of abode. It is also a festival when the four species, the citron, palm branch, myrtle and willow are held during *hakafot* (circuits) around the synagogue — processions that symbolize the endless circle of Jewish life.

At Kehillath Achim, Sukkot has a special meaning. One of the synagogue's veteran members has made it his special duty to teach members how to construct their own *sukkot*, and over the years many have done so with their children. Indeed, for many Kehillath Achim members who would otherwise have little celebration of Sukkot, this *sukkah*-building project has proved to be an important part of synagogue life. It has helped save the festival from the void into which it might otherwise have fallen because of its unfortunate temporal location, one holiday too many in a season overloaded with Jewish celebration.

Generally, though, it is only after families have reached a fairly high level of involvement that they consider building a *sukkah*. Those with a far more tentative connection to synagogue life, often those with the youngest children, need some less demanding, yet no less compelling, activity that will bring them to the synagogue. At Kehillath Achim, that something is a children's *hoshanot* procession.

The *hoshanot* procession is that part of the service during which the four species are held in hand and carried around the sanctuary. According to tradition, only adult men are expected to participate. But at Kehillath Achim, little children lead the procession. On cue, a line of small children with *lulav* and *etrog* in hand entered the sanctuary from the side doors. With the tall palm branches waving in their hands, they looked like a moving forest of sprouts. All around, the adults burst into smiles that grew in proportion to the increasing length of the line. Some were parents and grandparents, who came just to see their offspring. Others were core members of the congregation, happy to see these new Jewish buds, the future of the congregation and the movement. The seemingly endless stream of them pouring through the doors served as a testimony to the continuing growth and vitality of the congregation.

The children were all between five and eight years old. After their dramatic entrance, excited by all the attention it had elicited, they sat down in the front rows and then, the youngest among them spilled over onto the steps of the *bimah* (the front of the sanctuary). There they were, literally at the feet of the rabbi and the congregation, in front of the ark which held the most sacred Torah scrolls. Neither the ark nor the Torah scrolls, but rather the children were now the focus of the proceedings. As the rabbi stood at his pulpit, he began to pose questions, ostensibly to the entire congregation but in such a tone and manner that they were clearly addressed to the children.

What sorts of Jews, he asked, do each of the four species contained in the *lulav* and *etrog* represent? It was a question full of assumptions: 1) that the species could and should be

* Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p.450.

** Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p.114.

understood symbolically; 2) that Jews can be categorized; 3) that some people in the congregation had heard these matters discussed some place and time before and that this would be an opportunity to repeat these lessons in a ritual-like fashion; and 4) that the questions offered some meaning, pleasure, even entertainment that would enhance the festival.

The children answered with great enthusiasm and near total accuracy. In the back, the educational director of the synagogue school, for whom this display of his students' knowledge was a demonstration of accomplishment, seemed to burst with pride. He smiled and cracked jokes with the people around him who offered their approval.

At last, when the festival quiz was over and the children had displayed their knowledge, the rabbi his ability to elicit it, and the congregation their pride and pleasure, the actual *hoshanot* procession began, led by the assistant cantor. In addition to the many children, about twenty-five adults with the four species in hand joined the procession. Clearly, more children than adults were in line. In this congregation, the children are expected to have more than their forbearers. Whether they will continue in this pattern is, of course, the essential question of continuity.

As they all marched around the sanctuary and out into the social hall, the rest of the congregation stood about and chatted. When the procession re-entered the sanctuary, everyone greeted the marchers as they passed. The congregants once again bonded as they celebrated Sukkot, secure, at least for the moment, that they had passed Kehillath Achim Judaism on to the next generation.

A Teen Shabbat

While tots and toddlers represent renewal and the opportunity for congregational continuity, a greater test comes with teens. On the verge of adulthood, they are past their all-important bar or bat mitzvah and now may be tempted to embrace identities other than Judaism. Attracting the teens to the synagogue presents a quandary for the core members. Without the incentive of bar or bat mitzvah preparation, they will have to be attracted by an acquired attachment to the community, to Judaism, or ideally, to both.

"I will say we are not as successful with continuation for our children and that's a problem," admitted one of the active members of the congregation while talking about those aspects of Kehillath Achim life that concerned her. For many in the congregation, bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies mark the end of synagogue involvement instead of its commencement. Yet at Kehillath Achim, all is not lost. On the contrary, there are teens in the congregation who do appear to display the promise of continuity and commitment to Conservative Judaism that Kehillath Achim wants. At no time is this good news more apparent than on special occasions such as Teen Shabbat.

On this Shabbat, the teens are given an opportunity to run

the show in the main sanctuary—as it were, the main arena—instead of remaining out of sight, limited to a small chapel downstairs. It is also a time for the educational director and his staff to demonstrate their success in dealing with the problem of community. Teen Shabbat is therefore considered "the crown of glory," as the educational director put it. It was a crown of glory for him, for the proud parents of the participants, for the congregation and for all those who somehow felt a part of the day.

Moreover, by handing the service in the main sanctuary over to the teens, the congregation demonstrated its belief that, as the president put it, "It is the obligation of each of us to do no less [than our predecessors did] for our own children." And in their performance, the children in turn demonstrated to the congregation that Kehillath Achim has a future—that the current generation has, in fact, succeeded. It is therefore a day of no small consequence.

On this particular teen Shabbat, the main sanctuary was full and an additional section was opened to increase seating capacity. The addition of the teen participants, their parents and other relatives to the core congregation helped fill the room.

As the service proceeded, there were a few no-shows for Torah *aliyot* (among the most minor of honors for they require almost no display of Jewish competence). The rest of the show—and a show it was, a chance for the congregation to shine via its teens—went on smoothly. Among the major ritual tasks the teens were assigned were reading the Torah, leading the services and giving a sermon and a *d'var Torah*. Those who carried out these assignments were the jewels in the crown of glory. Indeed, when the service was over, I was asked by several people in attendance, "So what did you think?" They sought admiration, approbation, approval and even endorsement of what they had displayed. "Kehillath Achim is a special place," one of the women concluded, without waiting for my response.

More teens participated in this service than did normally in the weekly teen minyan. Like their elders, the teens were more likely to come to the synagogue for special occasions than on a regular basis.

In planning today's service, the organizers, especially the educational director whose products are the synagogue school teens, had tried to make it difficult to distinguish between the day school students and the synagogue supplementary school students. And to the uninformed observer, they reached their goal successfully. To the informed observer, however, who knew which honors and ritual tasks require more background and skill than others, the distinctions were pretty clear, as even the cantor admitted in a candid moment.

From early morning, even before most of the congregation had arrived, the teens led the service, offering responsive readings of Psalms and other English prayers, opening the ark, chanting the Torah, receiving *aliyot* and giving

talks. They replaced the adults who normally filled these roles and at the same time provided yet one more special performance of what they had learned as Jews. Since their kindergarten years, they had been giving such performances at least once a year. But during their lifetime of special Sabbaths, they had for the most part performed at an auxiliary service, or as a brief coda to the main service. Now, they arrived in the main arena, the main sanctuary, where they were crossing the bridge into Kehillath Achim adulthood. That is why this was an occasion of importance not simply for the teens but for the adults as well.

In Kehillath Achim—as indeed in many if not all synagogues like it—there are those who feel comfortable performing ritual in public and those who, either because they lack the requisite knowledge or the self-confidence, prefer assuming lesser tasks or serving as part of the responsive congregation. So too with the teens. Some of them performed more limited tasks or performed in groups—reciting prayers as part of a mini-chorus, a device used since the first grade for those who have a harder time performing alone. Others, often but not exclusively day school students, offered solo acts.

Throughout the service, the rabbi and cantor played subordinate roles. The latter had worked hard to prepare some of the participants. In a way, this service operated a lot like junior congregation. The educational director was still directing things, and parents were still the audience, rooting for their kids to perform well. But this performance was on the congregation's main stage. It encompassed the entire service.

Though errors were made in the Torah reading and prayer pronunciation, they were not corrected. Such details did not appear to matter to the congregation—paying attention to them would mar the celebratory character of the occasion. Still, some participants were quite nervous. One cried. And the girl who chanted the *maftir* portion seemed on the verge of tears. But as a whole, the teens' achievements were cause for communal pride.

Most accessible of all the performances were the speeches. Unlike the Torah reading or prayers, these talks, given in English, could be judged by everyone present. They were reports from the Jewish world of the teens, a chance for the congregation to gauge precisely what their offspring had received in terms of Jewish training and outlook. The speakers became collective representations of Kehillath Achim youth. As such, each speaker was, as Emile Durkheim put it, someone who stands for the group, "who transcends himself, both when he thinks and when he acts."⁵

The two major speeches were given by graduates of a local Conservative Schechter day school who were now attending a yeshiva high school that served a mixed Orthodox and non-Orthodox community. They were the religious elite of the teen population, whose parents had made a sustained

⁵ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

commitment to intensive Jewish education beyond bar/bat mitzvah age.

These speeches were more than one-shot performances. They articulated publicly the meaning of committed Conservative Jewish identity. Because the high school is under Orthodox auspices and the teachers are Orthodox, what the students revealed in their remarks about Conservative Judaism they learned from their families, congregational life and primary school—not from high school.

The first talk came from a young woman, a high school junior embodying the quintessence of what committed and dedicated Conservative Jews should be able to produce. The experiences of which she spoke in her "Personal Prayer," as the talk was entitled, touched on her identity. Her mother would later say about her performance, "Today, I got my money's worth," meaning, I suppose, that in her daughter's presentation she saw what all her expenditure of money and effort on Jewish education and life had produced. In a sense, the congregation might have echoed these sentiments.

After the end of the *haftarah*, chanted by a different teen, the young woman stepped gingerly to the podium. Around her on the *bimah*, next to the rabbi, the honorary president and the cantor, sat several other teens. Seeing them in these places of honor served as a constant reminder that this was a Sabbath different from all others. Many of these youngsters had sat in these seats only as a bar/bat mitzvah or on teen Sabbaths in previous years.

As she stepped forward, a hush fell over the congregation. All eyes turned toward her. She had seen her father and brother take the podium on Sabbaths past; now at last it was her turn. Blond and blue-eyed, standing erect, she began in a soft but sure voice.

Identity? A definition? To actually be someone. To maintain certain characteristics that make you a unique individual. While "identity" is not an extraordinary word in the English language, it is, I would venture to say, a word with which many adolescents my age cannot relate. The question is, Why? Why do so many youths have a problem finding their identities?

High school is a time of inner struggle. Speaking from personal experience, my struggle was intensified when I was forced to begin the search for my role as a member of the Jewish society alongside the secular one. For thirteen years I had been raised in a Conservative household. I knew no other aspects of Judaism other than what I had been living. Then, in September of my freshman year, I began to attend an Orthodox yeshiva. I was faced with a new life style, one that I had never before explored. The first few months of that year were strange for me. I was taught to pray differently, dress

differently and open my mind to new possibilities. And this is where my inner conflict began.

Throughout that year, I was in school from seven fifty in the morning until five o'clock in the evening. I barely had time to sit and talk with my family, let alone think about my new experiences. Yet as the months continued, I realized it was time to open my eyes. I needed to sit down and think about the dramatic changes I was going through. I remember one day I spent an entire morning in my rebbe's office, crying. I was so confused and did not know how to deal with my frustration. I felt as though I was living inconsistently. For nearly nine hours every day, I would go to school to learn and act like an Orthodox Jew. However, when I would return home at the end of the day, I had to switch gears once again and resume my usual life style. As I utilized an entire box of tissues, I told my rebbe about this conflict I was facing. And the entire time I spoke, he just sat there, listening, with a subtle smile stretched across his face. Then he began to speak, and the words that followed were ones that will remain with me for the rest of my life. "Elisheva," he said, "nothing is wrong with you. In fact this is a very good thing. You have shown me that you are thinking, something most kids your age do not know how to do."

I heard these words yet I had no response.

I spent the next couple of weeks thinking about what my rebbe said, his voice ringing in my ears. I never did come up with any definite answers to the problems I was facing. Even now, almost three years later, I often stop to think about what I am doing.

Everyone wants to have an identity. Feeling lost can be a very scary thing. And I know that while things may be hard for me now, they do not become easier next year when I leave home. Without anyone telling me how to observe Judaism, I am not sure which path I will choose to follow. Yet throughout all of my grappling, I have learned one thing. That is, for right now, I do not need to have a label. As long as I continue the search for my identity as a Jew in society, I am well on my way. As my rebbe said to me, I have begun to think, and sometimes that is what is most important.

There are several important themes expressed here. First, this is an opportunity for the teen to reveal herself publicly to her community—to share a dilemma that may ultimately put her at odds with either or both of her identities. Can she accept inconsistency? That she should choose to make the conflict

public at Kehillath Achim demonstrates the communal aspect of the congregation—it is a place where the young feel comfortable baring their souls.

Second, her quandary — how to differentiate herself as a serious Conservative Jew — is shared by many members of the core congregation. She has simply articulated the essential dualism of the culture in which she was nurtured. The attentiveness of the congregation suggests that they shared her feelings, ideas and ideological issues.

And finally, while her predicament was complicated by the conflict between her daily Orthodox education and the Conservative life style of her synagogue, she found the right response. She presented herself as a serious Jew, not doing what she does by rote. Her choices, she suggests, are thoughtful Jewish choices, and these she implies are the ideal, along with the Jewish commitments that accompany this thinking.

For active Conservative Jews, thoughtfulness and seriousness along with knowledge and commitment, are the hallmark of Conservative Judaism. In this movement, the speaker seems to be telling her audience, in an ethos she has at least partially gained from the very congregation she addresses, the key is to think, not just to do. To make decisions on one's own is what she expects of her Jewish identity. And though she is a Conservative Jew (albeit one who is not yet certain "which path I will choose to follow"), her teacher's assurance that "there is nothing wrong with you" may be for her (and her audience) a kind of legitimation (even by the Orthodox) of her "usual lifestyle," the Conservative one.

Conclusion

When the service was over, the audience was genuinely touched. The children had shined. These teenagers were proof that there would be a Conservative synagogue tomorrow. For those with younger children, the teens represented something their own children could aspire to become. The performing toddlers and teens made public the culture being transmitted, revealing how successful the transmission had been. They expressed feelings, ideas and ideology in ways that the adults could not. The children were a barometer of synagogue life and a symbol of its success.

As one member said with obvious pride, "Isn't this something?"

The Conversion Illusion

Steven M. Cohen

The rise in intermarriage over the years (Kosmin, et al. 1991; Cohen 1994; Phillips 1997) has brought with it a rise in conversion to Judaism. Although a few born-Gentiles convert to Judaism on their own, the vast majority of converts become Jewish in connection with marriage to born-Jewish spouses. In this sense, out-marriage leads to more conversions.

For good reason, converts have been seen as partially offsetting some of the deleterious consequences of intermarriage. Over time, intermarriage shrinks the Jewish population; converts clearly add to the population. When ten born-Jews marry each other, they create only five Jewish families; when they marry converts, they create ten such families. From a purely demographic point of view, therefore, conversionary marriages (the union of one born-Jew with one convert) are positive.

Mixed marriage (the union of a Jew with a non-converting Gentile) is associated with lower levels of Jewish involvement of all sorts (Medding et al., 1992). For reasons having to do with both upbringing and current marital situation, Jews in mixed marriages report lower levels of engagement in almost all available measures of Jewish identity. However, conversionary marriages seem to be associated with above average levels of religious practice, even exceeding families headed by two in-married born-Jews (e.g., Winer et al., 1987: 96). To be sure, some research has pointed to lower levels of what some call the ethnic side of Judaism (Huberman 1979; Mayer and Avgar 1987; Winer et al, 1987). Notwithstanding this qualification, the research portrays converts as committed, if not more committed, to Jewish life than are born-Jews.

The considerable differences between conversionary households and those headed by an interfaith couple are so pronounced that some have called for major efforts to promote conversion. Gary Tobin, one of the clearest voices on this matter, writes:

Rabbis need to be active promoters of conversion. With their passionate belief in Judaism, they need to encourage individuals to become part of the Jewish faith...[S]tandards and challenges should be put forward as desirable goals, not obstacles to be overcome. Individuals should not have to prove that they are interested in Judaism in order to receive encouragement from a rabbi about the possibility of being Jewish. (Forthcoming: 171).

A few pages later, Tobin's enthusiasm for conversion is even more manifest:

There is no intermarriage problem. There is a failure to adjust to denominational switching and the dilemmas that choice imposes. Other religions have aggressive, charismatic clergy and laity attempting to bring in converts and adherents. Judaism can do no less. (Forthcoming: 177).

If, in fact, converts function Jewishly as well as born-Jews, or even nearly as well, then a policy of promoting conversion makes eminent sense. If, however, converts fail to "deliver the goods" — if conversionary marriages fail to produce nearly as much involvement in Jewish life for themselves and, eventually, for their children — then, of course, advocating conversion becomes less desirable.

Indeed, other voices have questioned the cultural and demographic value of converts to the Jewish population. Commenting on a study of Reform Jewish lay leaders (Winer et al, 1987) which reported extensively on converts and their spouses, Jonathan Sarna expresses some grave anxieties. He refers to "the tendency of converts to subordinate the ethnic aspects of their Judaism." Elaborating on this theme he says of converts:

They are more diffident about Kelal Yisrael in general, particularly the idea that Jews should extend special help to fellow Jews in need. And their support of Israel is, statistically speaking, much lower than that of born Jews. (1990:5).

He is, it seems, even more troubled by their attitudes toward intermarriage:

In the Reform leadership study, more than 50 percent of the converts responding — leaders, I remind you — would not even be bothered a great deal if their children converted to Christianity! [Sarna's italics] There is here a world of difference between converts and born Jews, and one that augurs very badly indeed for our future. (1990: 7).

The findings he cites, with their implications for high intermarriage rates among children of conversionary couples, leads Sarna to raise the specter of "one-generation Jews-Jews with non-Jewish parents and non-Jewish children." (1990: 7).