

THE SYNAGOGUE AND JEWISH COMMUNAL ACTIVITIES

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The question to which I am addressing myself is the part the synagogue should play in the scheme of Jewish communal organization and activities. I would like also to offer a suggestion by way of remedy of existing conditions.

What *are* the existing conditions? If we are to consider the synagogue and the activities of the community with a view to bringing them into more effective relationship, it is necessary that we first survey the present situation. Therefore, let us glance for a few moments at the manner in which our communities are now organized for what I may briefly denominate "Jewish work." By that term I mean the religious, educational, philanthropic, and protective activities carried on by Jews more particularly for their own welfare and betterment, as distinguished from the general activities which they share in common with all other people in the communities in which they live. In the phrase "Jewish work" I include activities for the benefit not only of the local communities but also for Jewish national institutions and relief work of all kinds abroad.

How are our communities now organized to carry on such work? Notwithstanding the popular belief held by the world around us that we are a clannish folk, that we work at all times in unison and with well-defined purpose, that we are not only knit together sentimentally but well-organized practically, that we are an outstanding example of the force of racial solidarity—I say notwithstanding such an estimate entertained by our non-Jewish neighbors, we ourselves know only too well that we are one of the most individualistic and least organized peoples in the world. We are separated from one another by the same differences

that exist among the individuals and the groups that make up other peoples, races, and nations—the ordinary differences of education, wealth, and political, economic, and social viewpoints—but in addition to these we have internal differences peculiar to ourselves. We who live in this country have come from various lands, or our ancestors have so come, and in those countries our forefathers lived under varied conditions which engendered quite amazing differences of outlook upon the world and of individual and group psychologies. In addition to this the individual Jew has always had a mind of his own, and usually a very active one. Our people have never submitted blindly and automatically to leadership. We are extremely critical and analytical. Historic conditions have made us sceptical in the sense that we take little for granted. We have never had a secure or snug position in the world. We have always had to watch the ground under our feet and to move warily among hostile surroundings. We have had to look out sharply for ourselves in order to preserve our existence both individually and as a people. This has made us self-reliant, and a self-reliant man is better timber for a general than for a private in the ranks. Even Moses, great leader that he was, found his leadership no sinecure, and the autocracy that has prevailed generally and at all times throughout the Orient obtained little foothold in the self-governing commonwealth of the Jews in Palestine, as Judge Sulzberger so interestingly pointed out in his "Polity of the Ancient Hebrews." Be these things as they may, the fact is clear that we do not readily lend ourselves to mechanical organization. Indeed, it is the chronic lack of organization, the inability to unite for common ends, that divides the Jews in some of the East European countries into an absurdly great number of parties and thereby makes it difficult for them to insist effectively upon the civic and economic rights to which they are entitled.

Coming back to the concrete situation presented in our communal life in our own country, we find no basic or comprehensive system whatever in our communal organization; indeed we *have* no communal organization. It is true that annually we improvise in more or less hasty fashion a sporadic and emotional campaign for local philanthropic

purposes, but even in this matter, which is the source of our greatest pride, we have no really stable, permanent mechanism for obtaining in systematic and well-ordered fashion the charity contributions which should be regularly forthcoming from each and every member of the community. The religious school work of the community is carried on in still more chaotic fashion. It is largely a disorganized mass of unit institutions. There may be Talmud Torahs grouped together in a general association; there may be Sunday Schools similarly united; there may be local religious educational associations trying to bring order out of chaos, but as a general rule and a prevailing condition each of the congregational as well as the other schools goes its solitary way; thousands of children in the community get no religious education whatever; there is no standard curriculum; there is no general provision for the preparation of teachers, and there is, in short, no communal organization planned, equipped, and adequate to cope with those problems that exist in all of our larger cities today.

If these statements be true as to local conditions, how much more disconcerting is the situation with reference to the organization and maintenance of our national institutions! Anyone who is connected with them as an officer, trustee, or worker in any capacity knows that it is impossible to obtain support for them, either financially or by way of general enlistment of interest, other than by mere occasional and haphazard pleas here and there to so-called communal leaders to lend themselves to a special and usually hectic campaign for those purposes. And so-called communal leaders are usually tired people, who, if I may paraphrase from non-Jewish literature, having been faithful over a few things have been made by an inconsiderate community ruler over many things. If, therefore, such an organization as the Jewish Publication Society, or such an enterprise as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, or such a body as the American Jewish Committee, or any of many other bodies that might be named, wishes to raise funds for support or to obtain members or subscribers, it must beg and implore here and there some individual, suspected of being kindly disposed, to attempt to organize in his particular

city a movement for such support, and since no real support can be consistently maintained in any such manner, the result is that our best institutions languish woefully and American Jewry is disgraced by reason of its failure properly to maintain and enlarge its most worthwhile projects, although that failure is probably due almost entirely to lack of organization rather than to lack of interest on the part of our people when properly and efficiently approached.

There is another result of our lack of organization which takes the form of duplication of efforts and impingement of the work of one organization upon that of another. This causes not only a weakening in the results accomplished but frequently involves embarrassing and humiliating situations in which the Jew is placed in an awkward light in the world at large. If some incident occurs of an anti-Semitic nature, several institutions may rush forward to be the first to meet the situation, and they are not apt to be deterred by the fact that thereby they sometimes gain the front page of the newspapers and impress constituents with the alertness of action on the part of the officers of their organization. Not infrequently a lack of harmony and coordination on their part nullifies the common effort.

Finally there is another aspect of the situation to which I have incidentally alluded, namely, that in the great communal tasks of religious and educational work, philanthropy and all the other special problems of Jewish life, instead of each member of the community taking a definite part and being given either—as one may choose to regard it—the duty or the opportunity to serve in a designated and specific capacity for the common good, there are a few individuals in each community who are asked and required to do nearly everything, a great many who are never sought out and asked to do anything, and a great majority who are expected and urged to do something but without clear direction as to when, why, and how that something is to be done, and without providing that the things that are to be done shall be properly and fairly divided among the workers. To start a campaign in our communities for the beneficent purposes in which Jews have their major interest nowadays requires the task of developing new units of organization, requires time and laborious effort,

results in much straggling and confusion, and even if success be attained the work of organization will be but temporary and will die with the cause which it sponsored.

In short, what I have attempted thus far to emphasize is the obvious truth that there exists among us at present no effectively organized communal life for the kind of work which we are here discussing; that there is much duplication of individual and institutional effort; that our most important organizations are insufficiently and only sporadically maintained, and that such work as is done is very unevenly distributed among the individuals in the community. Can we get a better, a more logical, a more permanent, a more practical form of communal organization for the management of our communal activities? Can the synagogues offer the means for such a better form? To answer these questions requires that we take a glance at the role now played by the synagogue in our communal life.

We all know that the synagogue of today is vastly shrunken in its activities as compared with periods previous to the present. The synagogue was formerly the centre of all Jewish life. Abrahams says that the medieval Jew not only prayed in the synagogue, he lived in it. It was the common meeting place and in it the communal life expressed itself. In the synagogue were carried on all the activities which were shared in common—study for child and for adult, charity, religious worship, social life. Today the synagogue is a place in which to pray and to hear occasionally a sermon or a lecture. Attendance at divine service tends to become something merely incidental, like going to any other place of meeting or diversion. It is true that some synagogues have so-called "centres" or community houses attached to them, where there are gymnasiums and even swimming pools, and assembly halls where brotherhoods and sisterhoods and Sunday School alumni have dinners and receptions and dramatic and vaudeville performances and lectures. These kinds of entertainment are not to be condemned nor criticized, but on the other hand their religious and ethical value should not be exaggerated in the minds of those who sponsor and those who enjoy them. A lecture on Chaucer or on Sovietism or on

the Einstein theory of relativity is no different when given in a synagogue than in a university, except that it is not apt to be as scholarly or profound. A concert is no different in a synagogue than when given by a great symphony orchestra in a public concert hall, except that it is not apt to be as good. There is nothing distinctively Jewish about these things and no particular reason why the members of synagogues should listen to them in the synagogue centres when they can be so easily and so much better obtained in the larger communal life. Be this as it may, however, the point for our present purpose is that, whether there be "centres" and community houses attached to the synagogues or not, they do not function in serving as units of Jewish communal activity. And for this change over former days there are many reasons, which we must frankly face in order that we do not blink facts and build our plans upon impossible foundations.

One reason for the sloughing off of communal activities in the synagogue is the fact that our synagogues, at least in the larger cities, are no longer neighborhood affairs. At one time the people lived in the very shadow of the synagogue building; to-day the residences of a congregational membership are scattered from end to end of the city. Then again, there is a far greater complexity than formerly in the communal work to be done. Take, for example, the matter of charity. It once consisted of gathering comparatively small sums of money and distributing them to the poor to be used by the latter as they pleased. Nowadays the amounts necessary to meet the wants of the needy are enormous, and the disposition of the money raised, utilized as it is for constructive and intelligent relief, requires technically trained students and workers in a way that would be quite impossible unless it were all managed and organized in a secular and community-wide federation. There is no doubt that even the religious schools of the congregations would be improved if federated and managed by a central organization just as in the case of our public schools; a much better grade of professional supervision would be thus obtained.

Another reason for the decline in synagogal activity is the fact that in trying to retain the loyalty of its members,

synagogues are now obliged to compete with numerous physical, social, and educational institutions and instrumentalities that tend to divert the people, such as automobiles, golf clubs, radios, bridge parties, extension lectures, and the proceedings of various learned and pseudo-learned societies. There is also to be considered, of course, the general circumstance that religion, at least in its organized forms, has to an appreciable extent lost its hold upon the present generation.

Such being the conditions that prevail, it would seem well, before we attempt to ascertain whether there is any method by which the synagogues can overcome these adverse conditions and become again in some form the centres of communal activity, to consider whether from the standpoint of the synagogues themselves it is desirable in this day and age that such result should be accomplished. Is it desirable that the synagogue should be an institution of active Jewish work, or should it confine itself to being a house of prayer and a source of spiritual inspiration? There would seem to be anything but unanimity in the opinions of those who have given thought to this question. Some think that the synagogue should be a place that is wholly unworldly, a place in which the mystical should be the paramount influence upon those who worship therein, a place in which ethics and high and noble standards of living should be taught but the practice of such teachings be left to the contacts with the world without, and that the value and holiness of meditation, communion with the divine, prayer, worship and adoration of God, should not be confused with the mere pragmatic expression of character in good deeds in the worldly relations of life. Persons of these views would urge that just as a school furnishes an education the practical utilization of which is for life beyond the school walls, so the synagogue should furnish the spiritual stimulus and the ethical education which will enable its members to acquit themselves as religious and God-fearing persons in the world in which they move. On the other hand, there are those, especially among the youth, who insist upon seeing the immediate practical results of religious teaching, and who feel that mere prayer and devotion do not justify themselves with sufficient

obviousness unless the synagogue, by and in itself, shows by its own organized work that its members are carrying their high impulses into concrete action. Such persons would argue also that the carrying on of communal activities within the synagogue would tend to give to such activities a direct religious sanction; that it would emphasize Judaism as the vital force of Jewish life instead of allowing the present tendency of secularization in Jewish work to progress; that it would bring about the maintenance of a healthy interest in the synagogue, especially on the part of the young; that it would indeed be a visible and continuous justification of the synagogue in their eyes, and that on the whole it would bring organized religion into better accord with the spirit of the age in which we live. If to these contentions there be added the reasonable expectation that, as I hope to show, by making the synagogues foci of communal activity a more efficient and better organized system for the carrying on of Jewish work will result, it would seem that the weight of the argument is in favor of at least an experimental attempt to restore the synagogue in part to its former position as a centre of communal activities.

In any scheme of communal organization for the purpose which we are considering, it is obvious that there are three chief desiderata: (1) to have a permanent form of organized Jewish life in each community, not so much for the purpose of its being ready upon occasion to spring into action on behalf of Jewish causes, as rather of having it continuously working for them; (2) to have every member of the Jewish community interested in Jewish work by being actively engaged in some form of it most congenial to him, and incidentally thereby to have that work distributed as fairly in the community as possible; and (3) to interest especially the young people in the solving of Jewish problems and the performance of communal work.

I propose that in every synagogue—I am referring more particularly at present to Reform and Conservative Synagogues of the prevailing American type—the body of the membership shall be organized for the purpose of active Jewish communal work. Thus I would have a

group in each such organization devoted to the cause of the local charitable work, the hospitals, the relief agencies, the federations, etc. I would have a group devoted to the cause of national charitable organizations. Another group would concern itself with national educational institutions, such, for example (merely by way of suggesting illustrations chosen at random), as the Jewish Publication Society, the Hillel Foundations, the Jewish Welfare Board, and many others that might be mentioned. Then there would be a group studying and promoting the activities of national institutions engaged in religious training, the theological seminaries and colleges in New York and Cincinnati, and institutions of religious purpose like the United Synagogue of America and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. There would be a group on foreign relief work, engaged in cooperation with such an organization as the Joint Distribution Committee. Still another group would concern itself more particularly with the work concerning Palestine, the Jewish Agency, the Zionist organizations, the Hadassah, the Hebrew University, and so on. Another group would cooperate in the work of the protection of Jewish rights at home and abroad as carried on by the American Jewish Committee, the B'nai B'rith, or the American Jewish Congress, and would also interest itself in affairs at Geneva in connection with the minority rights established in post-war treaties. Then there would be a group working on the problem of local education as represented by the Hebrew Sunday Schools, the Talmud Torahs, the congregational religious schools, the teachers' institutes, and other bodies with whom cooperative study and effort would be maintained, but it is not necessary to multiply illustrations.

My thought would be that each and every member of the synagogue, and as far as possible each and every adult member of his family, be requested to align himself with such one of the groups I have suggested as may most appeal to him, and that every person hereafter becoming a member of a synagogue be similarly placed in one of such groups according to his selection. That is, he would sign up, so to speak, for local or national charity work, or local or national educational and religious work, or foreign relief

work, or protective work, as the case may be. There would soon develop, I am sure, a public opinion such that any member who did not, unless for good personal reasons, take his place in the scheme of work as thus suggested would be looked upon by the other members of the synagogue with the same disfavor as is now visited upon any member of the community who shirks his obligations to local charities. The various groups to which I have referred would specialize in their respective subjects. They would have meetings and discussions, invite to address and inform them those most qualified in such subjects; they would also do such clinical work as the nature of the subject made possible; that is, they would steadily work for the causes covered by the group subject. For example, they would familiarize themselves, according to the group they were in, with let us say, the work of the Jewish Publication Society, or with that of the local federation, or with that of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, or with that of the Jewish Agency, or with that of the American Jewish Committee. They would in turn instruct the public generally on behalf of the causes in which they would thus be interested; they would labor for such causes by arousing public interest therein, by seeking funds if need be, by building up their memberships, by spreading the benefits of their work. Of course, all of this would be done in conjunction and cooperation with the similar specific group covering that special line of endeavor in each and every synagogue in the community. In this way every Jewish cause would be represented by a group in each synagogue in each community. On the other hand, the sum total of the annual efforts of the organization in each synagogue would represent the contribution of that synagogue for that year to the common Jewish welfare, thus enabling such a synagogue to say at the end of any year: "This is what we have actually done during the year to translate the teachings of our synagogue into practical and beneficent action so far as concerns the interests of our own people; we have obtained so and so many members in our city for such and such societies; we have brought about such and such reforms and improvements in our local religious schools; we have accomplished

such and such results for the local Y. M. H. A. or for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; we have cooperated in such and such manner for foreign relief work," and so on. These concrete attainments would be the answer to those who are cynical as to the influence of the synagogue upon its membership, particularly upon its youth. Let us pause for a moment to observe what benefits and desired results would be the product of such a system.

First: There would be a healthy congregational rivalry in the pursuit of definite accomplishments.

Second: Every member of a synagogue would align himself with at least one subject of Jewish interest, and instead of confused, haphazard, and unequal distribution of the common burden—or of the common happiness, as one may choose to regard it—there would be a systematic and orderly organization with each and every member of the synagogue participating in some measure.

Third: Every one of our institutions would have, in such synagogal groups, nuclei or cells of permanent organization for cooperative purpose. Thus if, let us say, the Jewish Welfare Board wished to lay its cause before the Jewish community of Pittsburgh or St. Louis, instead of trying for months, and usually in vain, to obtain some exhausted communal leader in one of these cities to sponsor its cause, and with the probability that, even if it should be successful in securing such leadership, the work would be done with a minimum of enthusiasm and in a mere spirit of obligation to conscience—I say instead of such a method of approach, there would be permanent committees or groups in the synagogues of those cities, who would be familiar with the work of the Jewish Welfare Board (I might, of course, have selected for illustration any other worthwhile Jewish institution) who would be constantly in touch with it and who would be the ones to start any desired local movement in support of it in those communities. In short, as already pointed out, all of our organizations would have permanent local committees made up of those who themselves selected the particular organization as a subject of their interest and of their communal activity.

Fourth: The members of the synagogue would take

more interest in Jewish work if given a definite part and a definite responsibility in regard to a specific cause or causes assigned to them.

Fifth: The aspiration and natural desire of youth to express religion in actual deeds and with concrete results would be satisfied, and the young people, whose slogan is apt to be: "Religion is as religion does," would become less critical as to the justification of the synagogue and more attracted to it for all purposes.

Sixth: The members of the community would become better educated as to Jewish institutions, needs, and problems. They would tend to become specialists in the various Jewish causes and thus to fit themselves for service as directors and executives of communal organizations.

Seventh: The synagogal organization would become the liaison between the pulpit and the outer world; it would be the lay arm of the synagogue, representing Jewish principles and ethics in action for the communal welfare; it would be the tie-up between the synagogue and the life of the community.

Eighth: The synagogue would be restored to its natural and deserved primacy as the centre from which would emanate all worthy communal work, and the sanction of religion would be directly placed in back of such work.

Is this picture too alluring? Of course many will say that, however lovely as an academic proposition, it is not practical; that it will not and cannot work. Thus to think, and, being of such thought, to dismiss the proposition from mind, is the easiest way to dispose of the suggestion. There is nothing easier than to say that the members of the synagogue would not be interested in such a program; that the interest of the young people, even if initially secured, would not be maintained; that the people would balk at listening to discussions of religious, charitable, and educational work, and especially at active participation in such work. It may also be objected that even if the proposed plan becomes effective and proves successful, there are so many Jews who are not members of synagogues that it would furnish at best but a partial organization in any given community upon which the various Jewish

causes and institutions could rely for their support. I am sure that there are other doubts and criticisms which might suggest themselves. Nevertheless, I am confident that the suggestion is practical and indeed vital if we really wish to do effective and comprehensive work in our philanthropic, religious, and educational activities, and to develop and maintain the interest of the Jewish youth of today in the synagogues. The fact that so many of our people do not belong to synagogues and therefore that the proposed plan would not be all-embracing in the community would not militate against the benefits that would accrue to the synagogues themselves, and certainly the communal work would be improved at least to the extent to which the proposed synagogal groups were formed. As for the fear that the synagogue membership and more particularly the young people would not remain long interested in such work, I believe that it is an unjustified apprehension. Of course, if the rabbi be lukewarm or lackadaisical in regard to Jewish communal activities and the support of Jewish organized work, little could be hoped for from the synagogue in which he officiates; but if he should really attempt, with enthusiasm, to organize his synagogue in the manner proposed, and interesting meetings and discussions were arranged, there is no reason for any pessimistic ideas concerning the practicability and likelihood of success of the movement. It must be remembered that the work would be part of a concerted whole, which would be far more attractive than where it is purely casual and without definite relationship to the activities of the community as a totality. When each group is working with all others, and with the wholesome synagogue rivalry that would arise, there is no reason why such a permanent form of organization could not be gradually developed, until finally it would be accepted by all as the recognized basis upon which every synagogue should operate.

If our people are satisfied with the present disorganized conditions of our community life and are disposed lazily to tolerate them; if they are satisfied with the gradual retrenchment and shriveling up of our synagogues so far as direct communal activity is concerned; if they are satisfied with the loss of interest of the new generation in organized

religion; if they are satisfied to allow our synagogues to become mere theological shells stripped of their former communal glories, prestige, and dominance; if they are satisfied with the continual struggles that must be made by our important Jewish organizations and causes to gain support in our various communities—in short, if our people are satisfied with ineffectiveness, wastefulness of effort, and with passive submission to the drifting away of our youth, then of course no effort need be made in the direction of galvanizing the synagogue into communal activity. But if the Jewish people feel that it is important, that it is vital, that our communal work be effectively and worthily performed; that our communities be permanently organized for such work; that each and every member of the synagogue should play his part in such work; that the synagogue should be made a living and active force in enriching Jewish life through proper support of the organizations and institutions which exist for that purpose; that our youth should be attracted to a dynamic synagogue of accomplishment in Jewish causes—then it is worth while that at least there should be tested out the possibilities of the suggestion which I have thus attempted to formulate.