

Synagogue Renewal and the Role of Federations

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The 1980s were still years of the federation-synagogue wars. Federations had grown in stature after the Six-Day War: they raised money, held demonstrations, organized marches, and sent missions to save refuseniks behind the Iron Curtain. They were where the “action was.” Synagogues supported these efforts.

But visitors to synagogues at that time were likely to have someone take them aside and complain about the “unfairness” of it all. Big givers were abandoning synagogues for federations; federation-supported JCCs were “competing” with synagogues for the discretionary income of Jewish families and sometimes even running parallel programs—preschools, for example, and adult education. To top it off, synagogue members were taxed twice, because they paid dues to the synagogue but felt obliged to support federation too. That, at least, was how a good number of synagogues saw the situation only 25 years ago. How things have changed since then.

For starters, the Jewish world is different. Although hardly at peace, Israel is far more secure than it was when Egyptian forces crossed into the Sinai on Yom Kippur, 1973. Who even remembers the word “refusenik”—or the “Iron Curtain,” for that matter? The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey shocked us into recognizing that, side by side with saving Jewish bodies abroad, we had to save Jewish souls at home.

In response to all these changes, the relationship between federations and synagogues has been changing, at least in forward-thinking communities. No longer at war, the two organizations are becoming allies. They need each other. And the Jewish community needs them both.

The best way to understand the mutuality of need is through an understanding of society as three divergent but interlocking sectors: the state, the marketplace, and the nonprofit voluntary organizations that people join by choice. Federation is the *de facto* Jewish government, the only Jewish organization that oversees all the community’s parts and that has the moral suasion to demand support the way a government would. The Jewish market sector is tiny: it includes some for-profit enterprises like the Jewish arts and Jewish book stores.

Synagogues fall within the third sector. They have neither the governmental clout to levy taxes nor the market structure to turn a profit. So synagogues have limped along on an antiquated system called dues. It is becoming increasingly hard for synagogues to operate well that way. They look to their “government” for a partnership that will sustain synagogues and build the larger Jewish community at the same time. Governments exist for their people; federations serve

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the Jewish people. In the United States, religion holds sway as in no other industrial or postindustrial country. As long as churches matter, synagogues will too. That is why any vibrant Jewish community here will have to have a network of synagogues as its base; hence, the alliance between federation and the synagogue community of the future.

This was the thinking that brought Synagogue 3000 (S3K) together with UJA-Federation of New York in the early years of the 21st century. Synagogue 3000 (known until the year 2000 as Synagogue 2000) had developed a strategy of synagogue transformation that would help synagogues become spiritual and moral centers for the 21st century. With 75% of North American Jews becoming members of congregations at some point in their lifetime—far more than the number who joined JCCs or other organizations—synagogues would have to become an effective “bedrock” of Jewish identity, or the effort to build communal consciousness would falter. America is a religious country where churches matter greatly. To overlook the parallel role of synagogues would be to ignore the very culture in which we live. “Larger Jewish community” in the American context will mean “synagogue-centered community,” or it will not exist at all.

That was when we met John Ruskay. In his inaugural address to UJA-Federation of New York (see the Appendix), he had already called for the creation of “inspired communities.” As a founding leader of the chavurah movement, he appreciated the power of visionary change and the way that change might “inspire” synagogues to become the communities we need. He also shared our view that most synagogues, though effective as fee-for-service organizations dispensing religious schooling for children, offering High Holiday services, and providing rabbis “on call,” could benefit from a rethinking of what might raise them to warrant the description “inspired.” So Ruskay brought in S3K to experiment with community building in synagogues throughout Westchester County. Working together with synagogue leaders throughout the county, UJA-Federation and S3K hammered together a broad coalition of synagogues from all denominations for a three-year commitment involving a grant of more than a million dollars. The project fit Ruskay’s vision perfectly and, together with his outstanding colleagues, synagogue clergy and lay leaders were invited to join the project. Initially funded for just 12 congregations, all 22 synagogues in the Westchester County area subsequently asked to be included.

We sought to make over synagogues into places where the culture reflects an ambience of welcome—into places not just where everyone knows your name, but where the “everyone” whose name we know is treated as created in the “image of God.” It would be a culture of honor, a place where the building itself says “Welcome!” and where professional and lay leaders serve with uncommon grace, courtesy, and compassion. Its *tefilla* (prayer) would be compelling; study would permeate the synagogue building and its members’ lives; people would assemble there to repair the world and turn there themselves to find comfort and support in times of trouble. An “inspired synagogue” would demonstrate a partnership between the clergy and the laity—and it would reflect another partnership as well: the ongoing collaboration between synagogue and federation, in common search for greater Jewish community.

New York was not the only community that we approached. Other federations too had discovered the need to extend their local funding to creative synagogue

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coalitions. For their part, synagogues needed to demonstrate a willingness to think differently, going beyond the atomistic view of themselves as totally independent operators with nothing beyond their own membership to worry about. We found synagogues that did that—in many parts of the country. But we also found communities where federation dismissed synagogues as ineffective and where synagogues acted as if the synagogue–federation wars were still being fought.

Synagogues and federations need each other more than either of them sometimes seem to know. What will create Jewish commitment more than caring rabbis who name a baby, perform a marriage, or officiate at a funeral? A Bar/Bat Mitzvah with a rent-a-rabbi in a catering hall is not going to forge strong ties to the Jewish people. Think of synagogues as sacred communities along the lines of the Synagogue 3000 vision and imagine the difference they would make in the life of a new family moving into town. We can have synagogues like that if we simply say, once and for all, that mediocrity will not do any more. Federations can move synagogues to envision excellence; synagogues need federation support if they are to engender the excellence they want.

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