

## I. The End of Secular Judaism

The education I received in seminary (Hebrew Union College) was principally academic with courses on Hebrew Scripture, rabbinical literature, history and philosophy. The school, however, did not neglect the practical elements of becoming a rabbi, and so we also had classes in counselling, education and homiletics (sermon composition). In the last semester before ordination there was "Senior Seminar" that covered various topics that might be related to operating in a congregation. When I began my actual work as a Hillel Director in Columbus, Ohio, I learned that there had been a glaring omission. I had never learned about the role of a Jewish Federation. Encountering the Federation Director – a crusty old-timer (probably in his mid-50s at the time, but what did I know!) – within the first week of arriving in Columbus, became a whole new rabbinic education.

In the mid-1970s, I learned, the local Jewish Federation was probably the most powerful and singularly influential institution in the lives of average American Jews. This power arose from two sources: one was control of the purse-strings that underwrote such community institutions as the Jewish Center and the Jewish Nursing Home and a Congregate Housing complex for seniors. These organizations drew a large percentage of the Jewish communities locally spent funds. The second, more impactful source, was the Federation's control of the communities support for Israel. Fully 50% of Columbus's annual campaign went overseas to the United Jewish Appeal.

I focus on Columbus because I knew it personally, but it was also perfectly typical of federated Jewish communities throughout the country. The Federation was center of Jewish life. I would surmise that Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County were not dramatically different.

And what about synagogues? They had their place. Most Jews belonged to one congregation or another. (Even the Federation Director was a member of the local Conservative shul, although he proudly noted that he almost never attended.) Their lay leadership tended to use them as a stepping stone toward community and Federation leadership. The rabbis were mostly marginalized and kept from having much of a say in community matters.

That was then. It is pretty obvious that the centrality of Federations has dissipated over the past few decades. Let me suggest two reasons for this dynamic. First is the reduced importance of local fund-raising on behalf of Israel. By the early 1990s, Israel's economy had become very strong and stable. Most of the endangered communities – Soviet, Ethiopian and Yemenite Jews in particular – had completed their immigration and absorption into Israeli society, and much of the international hostility to the Jewish State (especially from the Communist bloc and its allies) collapsed. Israel simply did not need both the economic and political support from American Jews that was so much more necessary in previous years.

The second reason is the collapse of secular institutions in American Jewish life. B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Congress, Hadassah, ORT, Workmen's Circle, National Council of Jewish Women, the Zionist Organization of America, and numerous smaller organizations devoted to Jewish political, social or cultural concerns have atrophied and virtually disappeared. The Federation and Jewish Center, both reflecting a fundamentally secular approach to the Jewish community, have been deeply affected as well.

What is left? In a word, Judaism. That is, Jews who are bound together not merely by the notion of historic peoplehood, but also by Covenant, by Sinai. I am resisting the use of the word 'religion,' because the bond of Jewish identity is not quite that narrow. 'Spirit' or 'spirituality' is too slippery. The right term does not seem to exist, but it is more than a sense of being part of a historic family, and it is more than participating in certain rituals and traditions. It is however being touched by the transcendent, and feeling that by being a Jew one has an affirmative purpose: to oneself, one's family – especially the children – and to humankind.

Once more, what about synagogues? I actually do not believe that the relative importance or centrality of the synagogue has changed greatly over the past forty years. The synagogue has been for 2100 years – and almost certainly will continue to be – the most enduring institution of Jewish life. It is also the most essential institution, even though Jews throughout the ages (including, in the first few centuries the Rabbis themselves!) have resisted participation in its programs and services. It is virtually the very definition of what it means to be a Jew. And yet, by its nature, the synagogue is local and personal. The old joke of pointing proudly toward "the synagogue I would never step foot into," is a historic truism. The synagogue can be the central location of an individual's Jewish life, but it cannot be the center of a Jewish community.

Something profound has changed regarding American Judaism over the past half-century. It has led to the withering of many secular Jewish institutions. It has also presented those institutions that survive, both the synagogue and the Federation among others, with significant challenges that require change and transformation.

## **II. A Transforming Dutchess Jewish Community**

This past year (2013-14, corresponding to the Hebrew year 5774) has brought significant change in the configuration of the local Jewish community. One historic institution disappeared. The Community Hebrew School (CHS) was founded shortly after World War I. Since 1964, it was housed in the Jewish Center Building. At its peak, it had well over 300 students enrolled. For more than a decade, however, the CHS has been in distress. A large percentage of students had been utilizing private tutors rather than being enrolled. The very notion of a community-wide Hebrew program required a mostly secular Jewish attitude to education. The program could not be sustained.

Thus, last Fall, Vassar Temple began to offer a mid-week Hebrew Program principally for members of the congregation, but open to the community. The program was designed by our Education Director, Joel Hoffman, who has a national reputation as an expert in Hebrew pedagogy. Although students seemed to respond positively to the curriculum and instruction, we will only be able to assess the full effectiveness of the program when the current Fifth Grade students (the *Aleph* class) have gone through all three years of schooling. I am confident nonetheless that we are off to a very good start.

A second historic institution is beginning to disappear. The Jewish Community Center began downtown early in the last century. It built a large complex, complete with gym and pool, on the eastern edge of the City in the early 60s. This building, I would guess, was seriously underfunded virtually from the start. By the beginning of this century, the entire operation was under great financial stress. It came close to shutting its doors on at least two occasions. In 2011, one effort to sell the facility and lease back much of its space fell through. The next year, however, a sale was successfully negotiated.

For the past year, the building operated as a Jewish Center. There is little reason to believe the current owners will continue to maintain such a program much beyond the near future. The CHS is gone. Very soon, the JCC, at least as currently conceived, will be no more as well.

Doors close and new ones open. The CHS and the JCC represent, on the one hand, fundamental and necessary elements of any vibrant Jewish community. They were managed, on the other, in a fashion whose time had come and gone. Jewish children need a good quality Hebrew education. It has been the lifeblood of Jewish identity for three thousand years. Supplemental Hebrew education, however, cannot be sustained outside the comprehensive experience of the synagogue.\* If good Hebrew learning was going to occur in Dutchess County, it would have to happen in the synagogues, and not in a stand-alone institution.

As for the JCC, its role has changed as well. Once an exclusively secular outlet for Jews, its continuation requires a closer and more interactive arrangement with the synagogues. The gym and pool are extremely important assets, particularly in light of the demise of both the YW and YMCA in the last decade, but they are no longer specifically needed by the Jewish community. What our community needs is a location for the exercise and expression of Jewish life that reaches beyond any one congregation. It needs a large public space, a kitchen, and some smaller rooms. In due time, the historic Center facility will be closed off for these purposes, and so, in the short run, the synagogues should avail themselves to provide the space needed. This would only be a temporary fix. At some time in the not-too-distant future, the area's Jewish community will need and deserves a new Center.

### **III. Vassar Temple in the Center**

One hundred thirty years ago, Vassar Temple *was* the Dutchess Country Jewish community. Fifty years ago, Vassar Temple – along with Beth-El, Schomre Israel, and to a smaller degree, the Amenia and Beacon congregations – were basically self-contained expressions of Jewish religion operating mostly in tension with the central institutions of the community, the Federation and newly built Jewish Center. Today, the Temple has returned to a central role.

Jewish religious expression cannot be as narrowly construed as it once was. It is no longer a series of decisions regarding identifiable Jewish ritual – kosher or not kosher, walking or riding on Shabbat, all, some or a little Hebrew in worship, etc. It is rather the quest for a comprehensive Jewish identity that cannot avoid responding to the challenges: What does God want from me? What does God want from us, the People Israel? Vassar Temple is fundamentally a means for confronting those challenges.

Some might question whether the Temple is not still in tension with the community-wide institutions, particularly in terms of claims on time, energy and especially donation dollars. My own personal experience over the past forty years, and the evidence gathered by researchers in the field, indicate that the congregation is best served by leadership that is also engaged in the overall concerns of the community. In a most fundamental way, what is good for the Jewish community is good for Vassar Temple...and so is the reverse.

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\* A Jewish Day School is itself a comprehensive experience, as is Jewish summer camp.

#### IV. *Kol haKavod* (Kudos and Honors)

Everyone who has had a child navigate kindergarten knows that at the end of the year, each of the proud rising First Graders comes home with a prize for being the Best (you fill in the rest) in the class. I am confident that virtually every member of the congregation could be so honored as well. Many of you provide important service to the maintenance and well-being of the Temple and its constituency, some in ways that deserve more recognition than you will ever receive. Each year, I give space in this report to a limited number of congregants; some obvious, some more subtle, but it is hardly a comprehensive list.

I begin with the learners. These are the congregants who make a point of including Jewish study, either regularly in the weekly Torah and Talmud sessions, or faithfully as attenders of our evening mini-courses. They include:

**Doi Cohen, Elaine Lipschutz, Harriet Fein, Muriel & Matt Lampell, Goria Turk, Ron Rosen, Sam Finnerman, Lou & Candy Lewis, Allen & Susan Fink, Melissa Wall, Joan Blanksteen, CJ Kelly, Kristen Judd, Joel Kelson, Sheila Newman, Neil Gould, Marsha Lowry, Linda Cantor, Bob Ritter, Jim Robinowitz, Maury & Miriam Lacher, Gil & Arlene Seligman, Bill & Susan Barbash, Howard Susser,** and most especially, **Sue Needleman**, who has ably and diligently coordinated the Temple's Adult Education program.

The teachers. I have been thrilled to call on a number of congregants who have given of their own knowledge and insights in order to make presentations through the year. **Dan Katz, Jed Turk, Larry Schek, Andrew & Barbara Chernack, Art Groten, Inna Kudria, Sanford Metlis, Steven Ellis, Marion Schwartz, Melissa Erlebacher, Rabbi Stephen & Cecille Arnold** (via Skype), and with particular thanks to **Joel Hoffman**, who continues to impart with generosity his own learning and spirit for the benefit of the whole congregation.

I join with the congregation in extending my gratitude to **Nancy, David & Max Samson**, this year's Arnold Award recipients. Through the Can Jam, the Souper Sale and Cereal Counts, among other efforts, the Samsons have placed Vassar Temple in the forefront of efforts to alleviate hunger and food anxiety in the Hudson Valley. And to **Marge & Art Groten**, receivers of the Founders Award, who for so many years have benefited the congregation in so many ways.

This has been a bittersweet year. A larger than usual number of congregants are taking leave in one way or another. **Gayle Margolin** (*zikhrona liv'rakha*) exhibited her devotion to the congregation through her music and her personal attention to so many congregants who were in need. **Peter & Bernice Edman**, who graced the congregation in many ways with their presence and good humor, have moved closer to children.

**Marsha & Richard Lowry** have also moved closer to children after nearly fifty years of involvement in the life of the Temple. Their own personal standards of integrity coupled with a delight in Jewish learning could not help but make the synagogue a better place.

**Doi Cohen** is one person who is literally irreplaceable – at least by one other person. Now relocated to outside Philadelphia (there are worse fates, I suppose), Doi brought an uncommonly high level of acuity, insight and dedication to many roles: teacher, editor, organizer and helping hand. Some

people are like bright novas. They shine and dazzle for a while and then fade quietly away. Doi presence did light up the Temple, but her contributions will not fade for years – decades – to come.

**Brian Silverman** has probably done more to keep the congregation afloat over the past ten years than anyone else. As Treasurer, Finance Committee chair, and unofficial Board historian, Brian has sweated the details of maintaining a financially sound institution without choking the wherewithal that allows the Temple to be vibrant. It has been an amazing balancing act – done mostly without a net! – for which I am eternally grateful.

*Aharon aharon haviv* [the Hebrew expression for saving the best for last], few congregants know more about the demands of synagogue leadership than **Bob Abrams**. Bob put time in as the Temple's Secretary and Treasurer, as well as Religious School Chair and Bulletin publisher, before entering the path to the Presidency. Few people have thus been more prepared for taking top leadership, and fewer still have had to assume it under more trying and tragic circumstances. The congregation could not have been more fortunate given the situation. Bob's outstanding characteristic has been his calm and steady hand. I have been around a large number of synagogues in my career. None are more dynamic with a relative abundance of strong, dedicated personalities. Talk about herding cats! The Temple has been blessed with a President who, especially in the past two-plus years, has been able to provide a quiet and strong center, empowering all the forces to act for the benefit of the congregation, and to do so in mostly the same direction.

I stated that these departures have been bittersweet. Some extraordinary talents have or are moving on, and their presence or their roles in the recent life of the Temple will indeed be missed. But, oh sweet it has been to have had them be part of my life, and to know that the very auras of their deeds have penetrated the very walls of the Temple. All congregations require sturdy foundations on which a challenging but exciting future can be built. I have been blessed with such foundation builders as these.

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