

Restoring a Center City Congregation

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9:00 A.M., April 1, 2002. April Fools Day. I stand in the parking lot across the street from Temple Israel of Greater Miami, the old city cemetery behind me. Temple Israel is 80 years old, the cemetery, older. The silhouette of the buildings reminds me of my destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1966. That destroyer patrolled a five-mile course, back and forth, monitoring air traffic returning from strikes in North Vietnam. The temple floats on a sea of asphalt, but all I can think of is "dead in the water," my metaphor mixing as I contemplate the task ahead, wondering which task would prove more treacherous, ascending to the bridge of a destroyer at war or to the pulpit of a classical Reform congregation in decay.

Temple Israel of Greater Miami, once 1,800 households strong, 5,000 souls gathering for the Holy Days in the Convention Center, had a great rabbi, Joseph Narot, gone since 1980, and a great cantor, Jacob Bornstein, also gone. They left behind a fairy-tale beautiful sanctuary, a gaudily ornamented chapel, a ballroom auditorium, several meeting spaces, and 11,000 square feet of classrooms. Twenty years after the passing of Rabbi Narot, there remained fewer than 400 households, average age 75. The other 1,400 had moved on to either the suburbs or the next world.

The year before, when the temple had been unable to find a new rabbi, Chaim Stern, z"l, stepped from retirement into the breach but was taken within a few months, long enough to leave a positive impression, but no momentum. There had been no rabbi at the temple since shortly after the Holy Days.

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Two weeks before, when I had accepted the position at Temple Israel, I had been summoned to the office of a friend and colleague, the Rosh Yeshivah of the Talmudic University.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"No different from what I've been doing the last twenty years," I answered, "just in a different setting."

Since 1980 I had been experimenting with progressive outreach, the Havurah of South Florida, creating independent havurot in the vacuum of the Jewish community, the 85 percent who were unaffiliated with any Jewish institution. Havurah of South Florida met the religious and spiritual needs of over 300 souls, had over 200 programs and services each year, and attracted great spiritual teachers to intimate home venues.

But in the last years, after serious illness, my stamina had diminished. So I contemplated a career change. I began to write, travel, lecture, consult. The new career was bearing fruit. So why did I agree to interrupt that career to stand in the puddle of asphalt before a congregation that seemed in the last stages of steady decline?

The Mishnah "B'makom sh'ein anashim, hishtadel I'hiyot ish" was a part of it. There was no other rabbi readily available to guide the work. But also there was a curiosity. Could I reproduce an experiment in someone else's laboratory? Could I take the same approach to Jewish life that made the Havurah of South Florida a vital organization inside synagogue walls?

Temple Israel could not return to life as a conventional Reform congregation. It could not compete with successful suburban congregations for religious school and bar/bat mitzvah students. It had to create a program that would draw adults from great distances to spiritual sustenance they could not get elsewhere.

Who were these adults?

Some were progressive Jews who had gravitated to Chabad, Aish HaTorah, Young Israel, even the Kabbalah Centre, for lack of some other place to go where they might engage text and religious experience at an adult and profound level. This was our competition, to draw such Jews back to an institution that could provide this engagement and experience in a progressive and non-cultic environment and then reach out to those on the fringe of the Jewish world, to convince them there was something in the center city worth their time, resources, and energy.

That had been my work in the Havurah. Would it work within conventional walls?

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My agreement with the temple was for five years, to create a bridge from what had been to what might be when 20,000 new condominiums would stand as close as two blocks away overlooking Biscayne Bay, bringing several thousand Jewish occupants into the neighborhood. My obligation was to bring enough vitality into the congregation to attract a good Reform rabbi to serve it long term. I hoped that after five years I could return to my writing career, to travel, teach, consult, and float on the cushion of Medicare.

I knew I couldn't do those five years alone.

There were resources within the temple, a small, dedicated group of older members still with the energy and will to continue, and a small, dedicated group of younger members, mostly children of members, but some newcomers eager to see the temple return to health. Among the newcomers were members of Ruach, the GLBT havurah that had been welcomed inside the synagogue walls.

Professional staff included a core of dedicated workers in the administrative offices, and Dr. Alan Mason, the director of music, who had within him the liturgical history of the temple and talent beyond measure at the piano.

There was also a recent immigrant from Buenos Aires who had grown up under the tutelage of Marshall Meyer, z"l. She was the backup to the cantorial soloist. She was a tango singer, a cabaret performer, a recording artist who could sing in Spanish, Hebrew, English, and Ladino. Karina Zilberman was not a conventional cantor or soloist, but perfect for what I had in mind. Before I accepted the position at Temple Israel, we met and decided this was an endeavor we would attempt together.

So we began.

Five years later we had nearly 500 households, average age 54. The increase consisted of younger adults, mostly empty-nesters, intent upon serious Jewish learning and experience. Toward the end of those five years the congregation began its search for a new rabbi and had over twenty applicants.

What did we do? We set a goal across the Jewish horizon, maintained focus throughout the five years, and drew all temple activity in that direction. The goal was to create an educated and responsible Jewish laity capable of extending progressive Judaism beyond its current frontier.

The basic principles:

- Judaism is for adults. If we make Jewish adults, the Jewish adults will make Jewish children.
- Adult Jews are smart. Most all have college degrees, if not graduate degrees. Therefore address congregants at the graduate, not the entry, level.
- Get out of the way. (*Tzimtzum.*) Leave room for the congregants to reach and grow. The congregation belongs to them, not to the clergy.

There's nothing new there. Larry Kushner expressed it well in his "Tent Peg" article, first published in *New Traditions*, the journal of the National Havurah Committee in 1984, now posted on the URJ website.

We began by advertising a series of four Holy Day workshops, promising a profound, spiritual experience. Attendance increased with each workshop as word spread that we could deliver on our promise. Alan and Karina taught the musical experience. I taught the most difficult texts I could find concerning *tefillah* and *teshuvah*. Why did I choose difficult texts, and why do I continue to do so?

- If I teach what is difficult and admit I don't understand the text completely, I cannot fail. I invite creative interaction.
- If I choose something easy and the students don't grasp it, they feel foolish. On the other hand, if I choose something difficult and the students grasp even a little, it's a great accomplishment. Likely they will grasp more than a little and succeed beyond all expectations.
- If I repeat material the students heard back in religious school yet one more time, they won't return to hear the same thing again. Every experience has to be new and challenging.

The result of the workshops was a critical mass expecting a profound experience at the Holy Day services. It wasn't Alan, Karina, and I who provided the experience for them. It was the members who took risks in participating that enabled them to achieve it. The expectation of something spontaneous held the new participants on the edge of their seats. The service was always the message, not the sermon. Prayer was prayer, not pageantry or instruction. The congregation sensed quickly the change in tone and intensity.

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How did the older members react? At first they chafed at what was new, but, on the other hand/they turned around to see the sanctuary full. I listened to their complaints patiently until we became friends.

Not everything we tried worked. The very nature of risk invites occasional failure. But it was readily acknowledged that risks had to be taken. So the failures were tolerated while the successes far outweighed the setbacks.

The Havurah of South Florida never had a religious school. There was only family education. It took some years to blend such inter-generational education into the small religious school of Temple Israel, but it became the accepted norm in the last few of the five years.

Regular learning developed on Shabbat morning, but not a regular service. Thirty, forty, or more gathered around tables to learn text—difficult text, of course. The learning was preceded by blessings, concluded with meditation and prayer, but it never became a conventional service. A few families that were regular participants at those tables chose to celebrate a bar or bat mitzvah there, but most families chose to create a unique service in the sanctuary. With only eight to ten such celebrations a year, it was easy to do.

A tradition in the Havurah was for each bar or bat mitzvah to take the Torah scroll home the week before his or her service. The Havurah had no building. The Torah scroll moved regularly from home to home. I continued this tradition at Temple Israel to good effect, and then took it one step further.

Within a few years Temple Israel had become a religious institution, its focus on divine service, whether through Torah, prayer, or social justice. Fund-raising at Temple Israel had followed conventional paths: honoring a person at a dinner, casino night, raffles. If there was a single moment that indicated a shift, it was at a fund-raising committee meeting in the third year. The committee had run out of people to honor. It was considering a golf tournament, among other devices. Then, the executive director, Amy Mallor, proposed restoring a Torah scroll that had fallen into disrepair. This classical Reform congregation had never done such a thing. The argument was subtle and persuasive. "We have become a community focused on divine service. What most moves us in that direction? A golf tournament? A casino night? A raffle? Or the restoration of a Torah

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scroll?" Writing or restoring a Torah scroll is a time-honored institution in a great many congregations, but it was new to this one.

I added an additional innovation. Since this was Florida, the land of the timeshare, we would invite members to underwrite a parashah, and that would become a timeshare. The week of the parashah the family could welcome the restored Torah into its home, with an appropriate program or celebration. The restoration of that Torah scroll raised four times the amount of funds expected. It also raised consciousness concerning Torah from household to household.

My five years are over. Constructing that bridge from what had been to what could be was a great adventure. The 20,000 condominium units were also constructed, but, because of the economy, they stand empty. So the bridge is still very much in the air, not yet grounded on the other side of the chasm.

The momentum of learning continues. We have a new senior rabbi on board. The temple facility is in good repair. Will all remain in good repair long enough for the economy to turn around, for the neighborhood to develop, for Jews to move in? It will be a difficult task. But, better difficult than easy, for if we succeed even a little, the accomplishment will be great.