

We live in an age of demographic mobility; it's not unusual for individuals, over the course of a lifetime to move two, three or four times from one region of the country to another, or from one part of the world to another. Each time one must learn about a new community -- where are the best schools, how does one get around, where to shop, to play, and where to pray. In searching for a synagogue, prospective members weigh many considerations. One of the most critical, of course, is whether or not they feel wanted and welcomed.

Several years ago an acquaintance of mine contemplated a change of jobs from one city to another. Since Judaism was an important aspect of his family's life, he took great care to explore the local Jewish community. Having scheduled a job interview with his prospective employer, he contacted an area synagogue in advance to let them know he'd be in town and looked forward to visiting them. Amazingly, the synagogue dispatched a member to meet this fellow at the airport, drove him around town to orient him with the major landmarks and highways, and showed him the various institutions of the Jewish community. Later that evening, he returned to his hotel room to find a welcome basket from the congregation.

Pretty neat, huh? But wait, there's more . . . When his prospective employer invited this man back for a second interview, he brought his wife and eldest child. Once more he telephoned the synagogue. Not only did they insist again on picking up the fellow and his family from the airport, but when a traffic jam caused them to miss their flight and they had no choice but to fly into another airport 140 miles away, their volunteer chauffeur drove the extra distance to pick up the man and his family! My acquaintance, his spouse and son were hosted by a member family for Shabbat, and when the time came for them to fly home, the synagogue was considerate enough to offer them box lunches to take to the airport.

Some of you may be skeptical. How could a synagogue extend itself so much to a single prospective family? Transportation to/from the airport? Welcome baskets? Tours around town? Arranging for them to stay with a member family over Shabbat? What congregation could possibly manifest so much hospitality?

The answer is the Jacksonville Jewish Center. I can personally attest to the fact that all these kindnesses were extended -- and many others that I haven't mentioned -- because that's what you all did for us when we visited the First Coast 3 1/2 years ago.

“Well, that's different; after all, you're the rabbi,” some of you might be thinking. “The congregation *had* to treat you nicely.” Maybe . . . but isn't there a similarity between enticing a potential rabbi and courting a new member? In both instances it's vital that the individual feels valued, welcomed, wanted. Had I not felt the Jacksonville Jewish Center to be a place of great warmth, I'd be preaching from a different *bimah* tonight; and should prospective members feel neglected or ignored, they, too, go elsewhere. What if our congregation accorded potential members the same care and attention lavished on my family when we first visited? Can you imagine the enormous impact that would have on our membership?

There isn't a congregation in the world that doesn't think of itself as warm and welcoming. Have you ever visited a community that prided itself on its neglect of newcomers, or advertised its insensitivity to visitors? Yet a palpable difference exists between believing oneself warm and *haimish*, and the conscious cultivation of a warm and *haimish* character. As individuals, people can be naturally friendly or reserved, but the same doesn't hold true of institutions, which consist of diverse populations. Unless synagogues deliberately and systematically promote a culture of welcoming, they remain no more than the random sum of their memberships. The visitor who enters the building through a particular door on a particular day who meets a particular person may have a very different experience than someone else who enters by way of a different door at a different time. Indeed, some months ago two people approached me at the same Bar Mitzvah -- one had nothing but lavish praise to offer: “Rabbi, this is the most welcoming synagogue I've ever visited.” Not twenty minutes later, however, someone else had a completely different take: “Rabbi, I sat by myself at *kiddush*, and virtually no one greet me. Is this a way for a *shul* to act?

The corporate world understands that welcoming is a skill requiring systematic coaching and training. At Disney, employees are challenged to take five extra minutes per day to exceed the expectations of guests. At one of their hotels, for instance, housekeepers are told to notify

the front desk if a child falls ill during their family's stay. The manager will then send the child a complementary bowl of chicken soup, often accompanied by a toy. Bernie Marcus, founder of Home Depot, has his own wisdom to add to the literature of customer service. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Built from Scratch*, "If I ever saw an associate point a customer to what they needed three aisles over, I would threaten to bite their finger. Don't ever let me see you point. You take the customer by the hand, and bring them right to where they need to be and you help them."

Of course, we don't need to look to the corporate sphere alone for inspiration. In the religious world, Chabad and the Protestant mega-churches are true masters of hospitality. In his recent book, *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, Dr. Ron Wolfson, Professor of Education at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, offers myriad examples of how evangelical and Lubavitch institutions effectively draw in newcomers. In Orange County, California, one large church offers a special parking lane for first-time visitors -- they are warmly greeted by church members, who personally escort the newcomers inside and sit with them. And at virtually any Chabad in the world, strangers will receive an invitation to a meal and the offer of a place to stay over Shabbat. Wolfson writes, ". . . the Chabad and mega-church regulars have been taught that the stranger, the guest is no intrusion whatsoever. If anything, they represent lost souls who can be returned to the fold . . . [they] view the welcoming of strangers as a core value; in fact, bringing someone closer to God is considered a spiritual act of the highest order."

Mainstream synagogues, on the other hand, are geared to think in the opposite direction. Worship and programming are designed to reflect the values of core members, those already integrated into the culture of synagogue life. A colleague of mine recently introduced a program entitled Synaplex to his congregation that, once a month, offers a variety of Shabbat experiences intended to reach out to the many members who don't regularly attend. These programs run concurrently with the traditional Shabbat morning service, and end at the same time so the community can join together for *kiddush*. The good news? On a Synaplex Shabbat in that synagogue there are more than three times as many people present as on other Sabbath mornings. Yet a group of regular worshippers have expressed unhappiness that the Synaplex services are "stealing" the limelight from the main sanctuary. In my colleague's congregation a number of

lay leaders are also chagrined; now the congregation has to pay for three times as many people at Kiddush!

Synagogue regulars sometimes also remark that the High Holidays make them uncomfortable because there are so many unfamiliar faces in the building; it feels as though the *shul* somehow doesn't belong to them. Intellectually, they realize that these so-called strangers are fellow Jews, that many are fellow congregants, and that the High Holidays offer an unprecedented chance to connect Jewishly with those on the margins; still, there is a gap between what their heads tell them, and what their hearts feel. I am the last person in the world to take for granted the commitment of those who are here week-in, week-out -- after all, without them we wouldn't exist, period -- but on this day devoted to unsparing self-evaluation, it is necessary to honestly examine the unconscious assumptions so many of us make about synagogue life -- whether we attend once a day, once a week, or once a year.

The Jacksonville Jewish Center is blessed with so many wonderful warm and welcoming individuals! We need, however, to aim at nothing less than fostering a welcoming demeanor that suffuses every facet of synagogue life, one encompassing staff, lay leadership, as well as each member of our congregation. Can we truly see ourselves through the eyes of potential members and visitors from the moment they set foot on our property until the instant they leave the synagogue?

Let's take a virtual tour, if you will, starting at the front gate: What's the very first sign a visitor encounters when entering the Jacksonville Jewish Center? "Tow away zone -- Unauthorized vehicles or vessels will be towed at owners' expense, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week." O.K, how about the next one? "Protected by 24-hour audio-video surveillance." And the third sign, which, incidentally, is the largest one on our property? "Private Property/Private Road. Trespassers will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Police Officer on Premises." Don't look for "The Jacksonville Jewish Center welcomes you" sign or the "Shalom Y'all" billboard, cause it doesn't exist. Yet. Those of us who mindlessly drive or walk past those signs on a daily basis no longer even see them, but if we truly desire to create the consciously welcoming culture of which I've been speaking tonight, then we better start paying attention to

what newcomers physically see (or don't) when they enter our building.

But signage and lobby design are just the tip of the iceberg. We must also think carefully what our services seem like to newcomers. Does our worship invite participation or its opposite? Listen to the following account, based on Ron Wolfson's book, *The Spirituality of Welcoming*:

*I walked into the building and immediately felt lost. No one was at the door when I entered. I haven't worn a tallis or a yarmulke for ages. The prayer shawl was made from polyester and kept sliding off my shoulders, and the yarmulke didn't fit very well either, and kept falling off my head. I sat down, but then a man came in and told me that it was his seat, and to prove the point, he pointed to a little plaque that had his name on it. I sheepishly got up and found another place to sit; fortunately, no one told me I couldn't sit there, either. There were two books in the back of the chair in front of me -- one was a small blue book, the other was a larger red one. I looked around at the people nearby and noticed they were holding the smaller blue book. I opened it up and tried to look like I knew what I was doing, but once again, I felt lost. Clearly there were some people who knew what was going on; they responded to the prayers, and knew when to stand and sit even before the rabbi said anything. I'm not sure if they sensed how inept I felt; they certainly didn't volunteer any information, and maybe it was just as well, because I didn't want to look stupid by asking them about what was happening.*

I refuse to accept that traditional services are by definition unwelcoming, or that genuinely inviting worship requires dilution to work. We can be faithful to tradition and empathetic to those who are new to it. People really do value authenticity and appreciate substance, but they also want to feel welcomed and understood, not awkward, ignorant or ignored; they want to know that their presence matters. But don't take my word for it, go visit Chabad and you'll know what I mean.

We've taken several important steps this year to making worship at the Jacksonville Jewish Center more inviting: the most significant one, of course, is becoming egalitarian. But in smaller and more subtle ways we've made other changes as well. On those weeks when we have a smaller attendance, Rabbi Weiner and I get off the bimah to speak to the congregation from the floor of the sanctuary because we want to close the distance between clergy and congregation; with varying success, we also invite people to leave their regular seats in the rear or sides of the room and sit in the middle to create a cozier atmosphere. We've experimented with discussions and small group study as alternatives to the traditional sermon, and will continue to do so. On

non-Bar/Bat Mitzvah weekends, kids are invited to join the procession as we return the Torah to the ark, and each child receive a piece of candy afterward to reinforce the sweetness of being a welcome presence in our sanctuary. There is now a variety of alternative worship options that run in parallel fashion to the regular service, be it our Family Friday evening service once a month, where joyous singing, story telling, dancing and a shortened liturgy are intended for families with younger children, or Saturday morning's monthly *Havurat Shalom* service that focuses on informal and relaxed worship with maximal lay participation, spirited singing and a Torah discussion instead of a sermon.

But there's more work to be done. In the coming year, the full implementation of our own version of Synaplex will reach fruition, God willing, and with it an even greater array of Shabbat options. Equally significant, it is my hope that we will also seriously pursue new ways of deepening the musicality of our worship, and actively strive to build melodic bridges that lead from our schools into our sanctuary, and from our sanctuary into the homes of our members. We must teach new music regularly, and integrate such with traditional favorites, rotating new and old tunes to create a sense of freshness and spontaneity, rather than plain predictability. There are synagogues that feature new congregational melodies on their websites, suitable for downloading onto one's i-pod; why not us? There are communities that create CDs of new *shul tunes* that they distribute to the entire congregation as a Rosh Hashanah gift each year; why not us? There are congregations that begin or end their regular Shabbat service with fifteen minutes of spirited *zemirot*; why not us?

In the final analysis, synagogues are about far more than their physical plants, their services, or their programming. Our ultimate resource -- not to mention our *raison d'etre*, our very reason for being, is people, pure and simple. To embrace more people at different places on their Jewish journeys is to increase the spiritual capital that is our priceless treasure.

To deepen and expand sacred community, however, we must pay more heed to those who once belonged to our congregation -- in some cases for many years -- whose resignation came as a scrawled sentence on a dues notice. How did we become superfluous to their spiritual lives? How do we better serve these individuals by demonstrating to them that synagogues aren't only

about raising children, but are places of lifelong Jewish celebration to grow and learn?

To deepen and expand sacred community, we must question ourselves why our synagogue is filled with children on an ordinary Wednesday morning, but often attracts no more than a handful on Shabbat or Festivals? Are our services welcoming to children? If not, how could we be more responsive to the needs of families? Do parents know about our youth services and our babysitting/ Do they care? And if our services more conducive to youngsters, what would it take to encourage parents to accept our heartfelt hospitality and show up on Shabbos or Yom Tov?

And to deepen and expand sacred community, we must be also willing to consider whether or not we could do more to make intermarried families feel welcome. We cannot and will not be all things to all people; and yes, we must continue to encourage our children and teens to view marriage within Judaism as crucial to our future. Nevertheless, can we find some way to acknowledge mixed marriage as a 21st century reality of American life, or would we rather we say that those with non-Jewish spouses should go up San Jose Boulevard? If we're a Shabbat observant institution, yet don't turn away those who work on Saturdays, if we only permit kosher food in our facility, but embrace those who eat *trayf*, I firmly believe we can be more welcoming community to intermarried couples without sacrificing the substance of our tradition, or our unapologetic belief that marriage between Jews still remains one of the best guarantees for the creation of a strong Jewish home and the raising of Jewish children.

Midrash teaches that our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah stood at the entrance of their tent to welcome weary wanderers and wayfarers. In greeting these strangers they saw on the countenance of each the Divine Image in which all God's children are created. Generations later, the Torah would teach the necessity of welcoming the newcomer, the marginalized, the stranger in our midst, *ki gerim heyitim b'erezt mitzrayim*, for "You, too, were once strangers in the land of Egypt." This value is the precious inheritance our ancestors have given us, but it is also the challenge to which we must rise if we are to grow and flourish, rather than shrink and wither. On this Yom Kippur it will be written, and in the year to come it will be sealed. Who shall enter? And who shall resign? Who shall come but once? And who shall come back? Who will

be made to feel welcome and nurtured, and who shall be marginalized or ignored? But our attitudes, our worship, and our compassion can avert the severe decree . . . “For over a hundred years, the Center of your life.” we like to say; may God also grant us the wisdom to realize that no one ever begins a journey at the center of a circle, but only at its edge. the path to the Center always starts at the front door.