

## Join a Synagogue for the ‘Fringe’ Benefits

Alan Teperow, Executive Director  
Synagogue Council of Massachusetts

I once heard a joke about a man who came to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah. He tried to get into the sanctuary, but since he didn't have a ticket, the usher refused to admit him. The poor man pleaded to be let in, but the usher stood his ground. The man pleaded some more, claiming that he had not come to worship, but rather to consult a business partner on an urgent matter that needed immediate attention. Giving in, the usher retorted in exasperation, "Okay, you can go in for a few minutes, but don't let me catch you praying!"

I must admit that whenever I hear that story I am reminded that the High Holy Days have a certain magical quality to them, bringing thousands of people into our synagogues each year. Although this is the one time during the entire year when people “pay to pray,” most congregations are bursting at the seams during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Why do people flock to “shul” on the holy days? Why do otherwise non-observant Jews find it so important to be in a synagogue during this holy season? I believe the answer is both very simple and incredibly subtle. We come because we care about being Jewish. We come because we are seeking God's presence. We come because we need to listen to what our religion has to say to us - and the synagogue is the place where, for countless generations, Jews have gathered together to be part of a vibrant community.

Rabbi Jack Reimer, a Conservative rabbi from Miami, explains, “I want to be a part of a synagogue because I want to be a part of the Jewish people, and there is no other institution that unites the Jews as well, across the centuries and across the borders. The synagogue is not only a bond to my past. It is also a bond to the Jewish people of the present, the ones with whom I live. During the week, I may bump into them somewhere, as a neighbor, as a friend, as a client, perhaps even as a co-worker or as a competitor. But when we meet together in this place, we meet as partners. We stand here with a sense of being connected to each other, and of being responsible for each other.”

In my experience, without question, the synagogue was the gateway to a rich and fulfilling Jewish life. Although my parents weren't particularly religious, they became very involved at Temple Beth Am in Randolph in the mid-1950's. Having joined the migration of Jews from Dorchester and Mattapan to suburbia, we all found a sense of extended family at the synagogue, a community where we could express ourselves Jewishly, make a connection with our religious/spiritual identity, and learn about the profound teachings of our heritage. From those early days in Randolph, and years later at Temple Emanuel in Newton, I have personally experienced the synagogue as the most significant and nurturing institution in Jewish life.

Based on my personal and professional involvement with synagogues, I would like to share a short list of offerings and opportunities that congregations provide:

- **a caring community where people support one another in both good times and bad.** I have heard countless stories of people coming to the synagogue to say kaddish after the death of a loved

one, overwhelmed by the warmth and caring of the members of the daily minyan. It is heartening to know that there is a supportive community able and ready to “be there” for individuals when they are experiencing life’s joys and sorrows.

- **a place where Jews go to express their belief in God, or to seek answers to some of the most difficult theological questions that have perplexed philosophers and religious thinkers throughout time.** My own way of connecting spiritually in synagogue is through music, which uplifts my soul and connects me to the other daveners/worshippers and to God. Rabbi Alexander Schindler, z”l, former President of the Reform movement, once noted that the synagogue “helps us in our quest for God, to evoke our sense of the sacred, to enhance our capacity to respond with wonderment to the essential mystery of life.” I believe that our presence in synagogue should move us to seek the presence of God, not only within the synagogue’s four walls, but in our daily lives as well.
- **a venue for the celebration of important life-cycle events.** I was fortunate to experience the double Bat Mitzvah of my own daughter and step-daughter three years ago, a day I will long remember with abundant love and gratitude. The way the girls shared that moment -- with each other, with family and friends, and with the entire community -- was not only a source of tremendous pride for me personally, but was also a joyful reminder of the significant role the synagogue plays in the lives of its members.
- **a meaningful space for children and adults of all ages to learn and grow as Jews.** The unparalleled success of Boston’s Me-ah program (for adult Jewish learners), and more recently Ikkarim (for the parents of pre-school children), is additional testament to the power of the synagogue to reach deep within our Jewish community. The organizers of these adult learning opportunities, CJP and Hebrew College, understood fully that the best way to ensure success was to reach Jews where Jews are – in their congregations and communities.
- **a focal point for the entire Jewish community for supporting important causes and responding dramatically to communal concerns and crises.** I am sometimes overwhelmed by the enormity of the need (Darfur, tsunami relief, global hunger, illiteracy, homelessness...) but, collectively, we energize one another and can draw upon our combined resources to make a difference in people’s lives. Whether it be social justice, support for Israel and world Jewry, relations with church officials, or hosting major international leaders – the synagogue has always been at the center of community affairs and social action, working closely with JCRC to support those in need.

In his book entitled “Re-envisioning the Synagogue,” Rabbi Zachary Heller, editor, suggests in the Prologue that “the synagogue must be open and inviting to all Jews, both to those who are already committed to Jewish tradition and find fulfillment in it as well as for those who find the language and symbols of the synagogue either unfamiliar or lacking in meaning.” It seems to me that the challenges of affiliation go in two directions: to the synagogue, which seeks to attract new members, and to the individual, who may find the search daunting. The stakes are incredibly high. Our congregations’ survival is dependent on an active and involved membership; Jewish continuity is dependent on individuals who express their identity in tangible ways through communal structures. The quality of

Jewish life of most individuals and families is, I believe, in direct correlation to their involvement in synagogues.

In many ways, joining a synagogue is like selecting a college. A one-time visit is rarely adequate to appreciate the full essence of either institution. Meeting people at kiddush, or at college orientation sessions, can't begin to provide a snapshot into the ambiance and breadth of either community. My advice to anyone considering joining a synagogue: take that first step; be persistent and don't expect instant gratification. I urge you to keep coming back - it may take time. If you do -- like the transition to college life -- you will find that being part of a synagogue takes patience, regular attendance, and openness to personal growth. But, it will be worth it.

The future of the Jewish community depends on Jews to step across the threshold, not to trip or falter, and to find their place in the synagogue. We will all be enriched by their participation and involvement.

As we approach the holy day season, I pray that the doors of our synagogues will stand wide open and their hospitality ever be warm and gracious. And may those who pass through our synagogue gateways find a spiritual home that is good, and holy, and beautiful.

*Alan Teperow is Executive Director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts and Managing Director of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis. The Synagogue Council -- a joint venture of the Union for Reform Judaism, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Orthodox and Reconstructionist Congregations in Massachusetts -- has 120 member congregations and is the only interdenominational organization of its kind in all of North America. Visit the Synagogue Council's website: [www.synagoguecouncil.org](http://www.synagoguecouncil.org) for further information.*