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OP-ED

Synagogues must experiment to remain vital in Jewish life

By Edgar M. Bronfman

Published: 05/08/2007

NEW YORK (JTA) -- Hayyim Hirschensohn, an Orthodox rabbi living in New Jersey at the turn of the 20th century, espoused a doctrine that Jews, if their intent was clear and honorable, could experiment with their religious observances.

"For the truth," he wrote in 1921, "emerges only after inquiry and investigation, and in the initial stages of study, everyone possesses false beliefs and errs until acquiring a clear comprehension of the matter."

Hirschensohn was responding to those who promoted a dogmatic and fixed interpretation of Judaism and Jewish life.

Most pulpit rabbis of large congregations would probably have a difficult time acting on such a statement, and understandably so. The idea of experimentation and trial by error can seem oxymoronic when placed next to the very sober words "religion" and "synagogue."

Yet without experimentation the synagogue will continue to diminish as Judaism's central institution. An ethos of experimentation is precisely what is needed in order to attract more people to Judaism and create a renaissance in Jewish life.

With the approach of Shavuot on May 23, which celebrates the Jews' receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and focuses on Jewish learning, let me suggest a few experimental approaches that might result in increased synagogue attendance and engagement.

In the world of Orthodoxy, why wouldn't a rabbi experiment with some forms of gender equality? Even within the limitations of Orthodox Jewish law, why wouldn't a rabbi try to propose that instead of a minyan of 10 men, there should be one of 10 men and 10 women?

Why wouldn't a rabbi in a Reform congregation experiment with dispensing of the Torah reading as it is done now, ask the congregants to read the parshah before the service begins, and then have a discussion involving any congregant who wants to be involved? Perhaps that same rabbi would refrain from giving a sermon to allow time to thoroughly discuss the Torah reading.

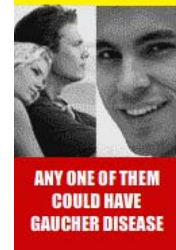
Most important, all synagogues would do well to experiment with shortening the length of service. Two to two-and-a-half hours, and sometimes three, on a Saturday morning, or even on a Friday night is a daunting commitment for anyone, let alone someone who just wants to explore Judaism for the first time.

When I speak with young people, they tell me that services should be shortened. But even then, an hour can be too much to handle if what transpires is boring, irrelevant and bereft of meaning. With beautiful music, choirs chanting, meaningful short services and prayers that speak to the human condition, perhaps we can attract a younger segment of the population, especially if we ask them to participate in their services.

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WHAT DO THESE PEOPLE HAVE IN COMMON?



ANY ONE OF THEM COULD HAVE GAUCHER DISEASE

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Skeptics have charged that people are no longer interested in prayer or synagogue life. A 2006 poll conducted by Gallup ranked Jews second to last in terms of weekly worship attendance with less than one in six attending services, beating out only those who report no religious affiliation.

The Evangelical churches burgeoning across the country prove that if done properly, congregational life can be meaningful and relevant to the lives of people and a source for communal identification. Aside from taking contemporary visual and audio aesthetics seriously -- something sorely lacking in synagogues -- the success of these Evangelical groups has come from realizing that massive anonymous Sunday church experiences alone fail to provide worshippers with the kind of rich communal experience they are seeking.

Therefore, alongside the large-scale gatherings we see on TV, Evangelicals empower laity to partake in smaller study groups and salons hosted in their friends' homes and other intimate venues. Encouraging laity to experiment with where and when services are held does not weaken communal bonds; it diversifies and strengthens the core religious experience.

Some congregations and organizations have begun to promote and adopt such an experimental approach. Others have gone further, permanently changing their services and venues based on the above-mentioned ideas. Such initiatives should be encouraged and the experimental outlook fostered.

Synagogues have long been bastions of the most conservative tendencies -- lengthy, drawn-out services, geshrying over our historical grievances, and focused more on God's needs than on man's yearnings. Instead we should encourage synagogues to become places of joy where people find meaning and fulfillment.

Many of us respect and admire the traditional forms of synagogue life as important strands in the rich overall tapestry of Jewish life and observance. We hope and trust that those forms will always be there for those who are drawn to them. But for the most part synagogues whose raison d'etre is to preserve a certain form or style inevitably will lose their ability to respond adequately to the needs and aspirations of younger people.

The Jewish historian Salo Baron famously decried the tendency toward "a lachrymose conception of Jewish history." Today some continue to perversely believe that the more we cry and suffer, the more we understand and observe. The challenge before rabbis of all the branches of Jewish observance is to make the synagogue experience joyful and affirming on an everyday basis.

Can experiments like broadening minyans and shortening prayer services achieve that goal? If we don't try, how will we ever know?

Edgar M. Bronfman is the president of The Samuel Bronfman Foundation.

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I would point out to Mr. Bronfman that the Reform Movement, which the Orthodox have been demeaning for many years, has been doing, and continues to do, exactly what he suggests and much more, including informal Jewish education of our youth through our extensive camping and other summer programming both in the U.S. and in Israel.

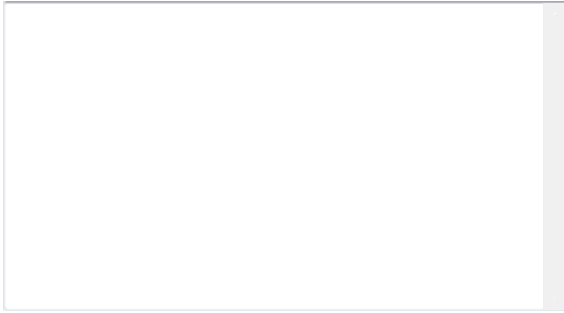
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