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Julie Stapen

A children's art program during a Synaplex weekend at the East End Temple in New York.

## EXTREME SHUL MAKEOVER

# Making the synagogue a home: Rethinking the mission of shuls

By [Sue Fishkoff](#)

OAKLAND, Calif. (JTA) — There are more than 3,000 synagogues in America. Why do some of them struggle week after week to make a minyan, while others are bustling with energy, song and laughter?

What is the magic that transforms certain shuls into sacred communities that embrace and uplift their congregants, while others just seem to be going through the motions?

These are questions that have been attracting communal attention since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey suggested that many Jews in this country weren't joining synagogues, and even when they joined, they weren't going as often as they used to.

Alienation from the synagogue is a worrisome trend because the shul, by default, has assumed a greater role in American Jewish life than ever before.

At a time when the home is no longer the prime source of Jewish education for many, the synagogue has become the central address for American Jewry. Shepherding Jews through their major life-cycle events, the synagogue is now the chief institutional bulwark against assimilation.

"Synagogues are the place where Jewish identity is formed," says Dru Greenwood, director of synagogue renewal for the UJA-Federation of New York.

If older generations "came to synagogue to express being Jewish," today's attendees "come to learn how to be Jewish," adds Rabbi Hayim Herring, executive director of the Minneapolis-based program known as Star — Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal.

Synagogue involvement is important, since it seems to be related to Jewish

engagement in other spheres. But membership is only half the story. While 46 percent of American Jews belong to synagogues, according to the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, only a quarter of them show up for services even once a month. In order to reach more Jews more deeply, the synagogue, according to Jewish educator and innovator Ron Wolfson, must rethink its mission and become “a sacred community.” That is, a place where Jews can find knowledge, meaning and connection with other Jews.

### **Home Is Where The Bima Is**

An array of programs aimed at creating “sacred communities” have cropped up since the early 1990s. The vast majority of them are used in non-Orthodox synagogues, although there are some noteworthy exceptions.

Emanating from both national organizations and individual shuls, these programs run the gamut in terms of style and substance. Many of them aim to cultivate a sense of comfort and belonging among congregants — a homey feeling that the term “program” doesn’t capture, according to Rabbi Jonah Pesner of Temple Israel, a Reform congregation in Boston.

“Congregations are about people, not programs,” says Pesner, who has drawn hundreds of people into social-action work at his synagogue through community-based organizing. He is now trying to incorporate that model throughout the Reform movement. “Synagogues are organized backwards,” he adds. Instead of asking people what they want, “we start with programs and wonder why people don’t show up.”

Encouraged to cultivate what one trailblazer calls “a culture of experimentation,” rabbis and other leaders have examined virtually every mode of Jewish expression, from worship to Jewish scholarship to social activism, in an effort to find common ground with congregants and enhance the synagogue experience. Likewise, they have appealed to a wide range of personal interests — from fine arts to music to theater.

“We feel the arts is a wonderful doorway into Judaism,” says Michael Goldberg, program director at the arts center of Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, Calif., which sponsors lectures, chamber concerts and play readings, most with Jewish themes.

Temple Israel in Memphis has reinvigorated itself by instituting a rousing Friday-night “ruach,” or spirit, service that employs a house band, says the synagogue’s rabbi emeritus, Harry Danziger, president of the Reform movement’s Central Conference of American Rabbis.

The music isn’t just a device to lure young people, adds Danziger. “Our drummer,” he says, “is a 70-year-old dentist.”

### **One Size Does Not Fit All**

Change-minded synagogues have experimented with shorter services, smaller services, neighborhood-based services, earlier Friday-night services for families who want to eat Shabbat dinner together — even services written by the congregants themselves.

Beth Smith, a longtime member of Conservative Congregation Beth Shalom in Kansas City, Mo., decided the Shabbat service at her shul was “boring,” so she gathered a group of congregants together to write a new one. The resultant lay-led service, called Tefillah 2000, doesn’t always run as smoothly as the main service in the sanctuary. But participants find it appealing precisely because it is homegrown.

Some congregants do without services altogether, preferring instead to worship in other ways. “I don’t go to shul,” says Beth Barry, a member of the board of The Brotherhood Synagogue in downtown Manhattan. Rather than attend

services, Barry and several other congregants serve free Shabbat lunch to isolated and homeless Jews as part of Synaplex, a national synagogue revitalization program Brotherhood is participating in. "This is what I do," Barry says on a recent Shabbat as she urges an elderly lunch recipient to "take some of the chicken home."

"It doesn't have to be one size fits all," Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, says of synagogue renewal efforts. His shul, Beth El in New Rochelle, N.Y., for example, has a variety of Shabbat offerings, including a learning service and a chavurah, or small fellowship of congregants with common interests.

In fact, the chavurah, which originated in the late 1960s as a boutique-like alternative to institutional worship, has become popular in many large congregations that are seeking to shed their aura of impersonality and encourage individuals to develop bonds of friendship linking them to the larger community.

Congregation Beth Israel, a large Reform congregation in San Diego, instituted its first chavurah two decades ago. Today, it has 28 chavurot linking people by age, family status and personal interests.

"In a big congregation, people feel lost," says Beth Israel program director Bonnie Graff, who is in charge of matching congregants to an appropriate chavurah. "If you get them into a chavurah as soon as possible after they join, it bonds them. They have people to call and say, 'let's go to services tonight.' "

Meanwhile, more synagogues have become "learning congregations," where Torah study and the practical application of Torah values are considered as integral a component of Jewish involvement as meaningful worship.

Adult learning programs in particular have become more popular.

"If the theme of the 20th century was learning for kids, the 21st century is about learning for adults," says Rabbi Daniel Frelander, vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Some synagogues highlight the family nature of Shabbat. Recognizing that many Jewish families do not make Shabbat at home themselves, these shuls are encouraging families to come to the synagogue to worship and learn together.

Thirteen years ago, Congregation Beth Am, a large Reform synagogue located in Los Altos, Calif., just south of San Francisco, created "Shabbaton," a three-hour Shabbat-afternoon program for entire families. Parents and children study a topic together for an hour, break apart into age-based groups for a second hour of study, and come together again for the havdalah ceremony marking the end of Shabbat. Then, each family picks a tzedaka, or charity, project for the coming week.

Seventy families take part in Shabbaton, says congregational president Amy Asin, including her own. "We've built a community of people who know each other, who go out to dinner together," she says. "Shabbaton is about coming to the congregation as a family and being Jewish, as opposed to learning about being Jewish."

### **Leadership Matters**

Programs come and go. But experts agree that the key intangible that makes synagogue transformation possible is strong rabbinic and lay leadership — the human catalyst that links the pulpit to the congregation.

"It's about who's sitting out there and the ability of whoever is on the bima to connect with them," Frelander says.

For example, Rabbi Laura Geller at Reform Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, who hosted an African-American church at her congregation's Passover seder and got every participant, Jew and Christian, to commit to a social-action project.

Or Rabbi David Fine at Congregation Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner in Kansas City, Mo., who brought a national synagogue revitalization program, Synaplex, into an Orthodox shul.

Or Rabbi Ron Shulman of Chizuk Amuno, a Conservative congregation in Baltimore with about 1,400 families. Soon after his arrival two years ago, Shulman instituted "Shabbat Yachad," a monthly event in which worshippers from all the congregation's Saturday morning services gather in the sanctuary to watch the kids parade around with the Torah. Then everyone adjourns to their separate minyans, coming together again afterward for a communal lunch.

"People talk to each other," says congregant Glenn Ulick, who attends Shabbat Yachad with his wife and children. "They never did that before."

There are also dedicated lay leaders, like Bernie Scheiman at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, N.Y., who delivers a Medicare "tip of the week" on Thursdays during the shul's senior lunch program. The program is part of Leisure Thursday, a revitalization initiative created nine years ago by the synagogue's rabbi, a congregant and a handful of lay leaders.

Consider also lay leader Mona Yaguda Ross, who joined Reform Temple Shalom in Newton, Mass., 10 years ago. Her expectations were, she says, "fairly low." She wanted "a place where my family could be comfortable." She quickly became very involved. Last year, she headed up a group that wrote its own curriculum for an in-house leadership development class, which will debut this fall.

Her volunteer work has, she says, transformed her relationship to her synagogue. "Temple Shalom is my home, it nurtures me and I nurture it," she adds. "Each time you get involved, you have more ownership and you meet more people. You develop a depth of friendship you can't get by just dropping off your kids in the parking lot."

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