

"WHY SYNAGOGUES FAIL"

Our Sidra's key verse, *וּבְנִיתָ מִקְדָּשׁ*, the commandment to construct a temple, offers us an opportunity to speak of the synagogue, which our tradition regards as a *מִקְדָּשׁ קָטָן*, a miniature sanctuary.

There are three conceptions of the function of a temple or a synagogue.

The first is the common-sensical understanding, one that appeals to most of us at first blush. That is, that the synagogue is the source and origin of kedushah in the community. It is the provenance of spiritual values which radiate from the synagogue outwards in concentric circles. The synagogue, according to this understanding, is the wellspring of religious teaching for the entire community.

The second conception is the classical Jewish view, which does not agree with this first idea. It maintains that the synagogue must not be the cause or source of holiness, but the effect and the result of the kedushah of all the people.

The RaMBaN points to this idea as the reason for the portion of Terumah, with its commandment to build the mishkan, coming after the portions of Yitro and Mishpatim, which speak of the revelation of Torah and the system of laws and social justice which together qualified Israel as a goy kadosh, a holy nation.

It is only afterwards, after we had already attained this level of holiness, that it became necessary and meaningful to speak of a mishkan, of a Tabernacle, which would focalize the preexistent holiness within the community and allow man to confront the Presence of God in a sustained and regular manner. Only through the study of Torah and the practice of mitzvot do we become a holy nation, and only then does a sanctuary become relevant.

A temple or a synagogue, then, is not the cause of holiness but its effect, not its origin but its result. Therefore, a synagogue whose members do not observe the laws of Torah, or which is built by people who are in violation of the principles of justice and whose money was improperly acquired, is truly invalid; it is a sacrilege.

This interpretation of the role of the temple in Jewish life is even older than RaMBaM and the Middle Ages. In antiquity already, the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed:  $\text{יְהוָה בְּמִקְדָּשׁוֹ}$

צבא-ואל אלקי ישראל: תיטירו דרביכם ועלעליכם ואשפנה אתכם  
מתקופת העת: אל תבטחו בדברי שקר עמתי: היום ה' היום ה' היום ה'  
ה' העת (ירמלאו ז-ז')

"Thus sayeth the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: mend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in the lying words, saying: the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these." (Jeremiah 7:3,4). The prophet is mimicking his deluded people, who believe that it is unnecessary to observe any laws, it is a matter of in-

difference whether our conduct is moral or immoral, because all that counts is "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." In their fixation on the Temple cult and their disregard of personal conduct, the people are guilty of repeating this empty litany, "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord," and hypnotizing themselves into an official religious amorality.

But what does that last word,  $\text{בְּתוֹכָם}$ , "in them" mean? The author of  $\text{בְּתוֹכָם}$ , explained as follows: The prophet mimicked the people in the first two expressions, "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." The third time he repeats these words, he is presenting his solution, his answer: Instead of this endless invocation of  $\text{בְּתוֹכָם}$ , the Temple of the Lord, as if it were some magical incantation, you must understand this: the real Temple of the Lord, the true  $\text{בְּתוֹכָם}$ , is:  $\text{בְּתוֹכָם}$ , in them, in you, in your hearts, in your attitudes. The authentic "Temple of the Lord" possesses sanctity only because it is brought there by the worshippers, and it is therefore conditioned on your piety and morality, on your character and your decency, on your deeds and on your deportment. A "Temple of the Lord" is not a structure of wood and brick and mortar and aluminum and glass. It is a House of Holiness that is built out of the collective good deeds of the worshippers, the cumulative piety and generosity and nobility of those who minister within it.

According to this classical conception, the synagogue is not an oven which gives heat and power to the religious functioning of all else; but a thermometer, which gives a clear index and measure of the spiritual health and warmth of the entire community.

Such was the synagogue of European Jewry, East and West. The synagogue was not expected to be a cause and supplier of kedushah, the religious dynamism of the kehillah, but an indicator of how well the community was doing spiritually. That is why the European Jewish community understood and instinctively assented to the halakhah that a House of Study is greater than a House of Prayer, that the yeshivah where Torah is studied possesses a higher degree of sanctity and significance than the synagogue, where prayers are offered. That is why they understood and assented to the halakhah that even a mikvah is more important than a synagogue and, if need be, the Sefer Torah must be sold in order to provide funds to build a mikvah.

But there is also a third conception of the role of the synagogue, one that is not arrived at by thinking the problem through, but is posited by experience; one that is not even acknowledged as such, but factually exists. In our days, American Jewry has largely realized the idea of a synagogue that is neither the cause nor the effect of kedushah, but a substitute for it, that which replaces all other religious values.

We have made, in this country, the fatal error of

accepting the temple as the end-all of Jewish existence. We have replaced the cult within the temple to the cult of the temple. Like the primitives whom Jeremiah castigated, our modern Jew ignores the totality of Judaism, and satisfies his spiritual yearnings by raising his eyes heavenward and piously but emptily proclaiming: הַיְיכָל, הַיְיכָל, "the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord." Masses of American Jews primitively speak of "going to Temple" or "giving to Temple" or a "dance at Temple" as if this defined the comprehensive sweep of all of Judaism -- and whoever dissents is a "fanatic." Sophisticated American Jews behave naively, as if they are erecting temples as our human contribution for God's welfare, providing a house for a homeless and dispossessed Deity. They conveniently forget that when they contribute towards a temple they are doing God no favor; on the contrary: וְיִקְחֵי מִיְיָ, they are not giving but taking when they erect or support a synagogue. For a synagogue is God's gracious gift granted to men who first must earn it, spiritually and ethically.

And of course, once the temple has displaced all else -- the study of Torah, Shabbat, kashrut, Family Purity -- the next step is its own inevitable displacement and disappearance. In most Jewish communities throughout the United States today, the temple as a substitute has suffered massive trivialization. It has been secularized into just one tiny component of an empty Jewish community. On the list of priorities of most Jewish commu-

nities, the synagogue or temple takes its rightful place only after the Jewish Country Club (built because the Gentile country club permits no Jews), the "Y" or the Center, the Old Age Home, B'nai B'rith, and Hadassah -- and even then, when the Temple is finally acknowledged, the sisterhood and the men's club and the young couples' club and the teenagers and the bowling league... all come before worship and prayers!

Interestingly, we find the following paradox: both ends of the spectrum meet. The classical conception of the synagogue as the effect and result of the community's religious dynamism converges with the American Jewish conception of the temple as substitute; for, in effect, this third interpretation of the role of the temple does present us with a synagogue that is truly a measure of the kedushah of the community -- and the thermometer registers near absolute zero. The emptiness of the temple reflects the almost total absence of sanctity in the community at large. If the modern temple is a shrine of vacuity, it is because the religious spirit has gone out of the community, because true religious inspiration no longer quickens in the hearts of the worshippers, because genuine commitment has become paralyzed and has withered.

What then remains for us to do? Obviously, we can never consent to the synagogue as a substitute, for this is a horrible and grotesque distortion of all of Judaism. Nor can we, in the context of contemporary sociological realities, expect to realize

the ideal of the synagogue as the effect and the result of the community, as the thermometer of sanctity. That was possible for the RaMBaM, it was possible in ancient Israel, it is possible in Europe or even the modern State of Israel, and in a few scattered communities throughout the United States. But by and large, the sociological facts preclude this ideal form from being actualized in our country. We have no kehillah or other viable social-communal structure, and all revolves about the synagogue. If the synagogue is going to be the effect and the measure of religious life throughout the community, it is going to reveal -- nothing, emptiness, profaneness.

So, if we will not permit the synagogue to become a substitute, and if the realities will not permit the ideal of synagogue as an effect, we must, באין ברירה, out of lack of alternatives, recognize the role of the synagogue as the source and cause of the religious life of the community.

Our synagogue, The Jewish Center, is based upon that philosophy of the synagogue as the center of Jewish communal life, as the source that generates Torah education and Sabbath observance, kashrut and charity and good deeds, throughout the entire community. If there is going to be any kedushah in the community, its provenance will likely as not be the synagogue.

That is why it should be obvious that the synagogue can not and must not and dare not reflect the Sabbath observance



of its members; it must present a level which is much higher, and inspire them to attain that level. It must be the source and not the effect, the origin and not the measure of community Sabbath observance.

For the same reason it must not and can not and dare not represent the ethical level of its worshippers; it must preach a finer and nobler level of morality. It must be able to reproach the man who exploits the laborer or the customer or the client, and it must hold up the Jewish model of modesty in dress or deed, or speech for all its people, and obstinately and forthrightly reject the contention that the kind of immodesty which is acceptable outside a synagogue is acceptable within its sacred precincts.

The synagogue as generator of religion and kedushah must therefore concentrate on three main areas.

The first of these is the study of Torah -- not just support but study, and not just for children but for adults, because the study of Torah is not a purely pediatric activity. After all, the real identifying mark of Orthodoxy is not "glatt kosher" and not the mechitzah, but the study of Torah. The Orthodox synagogue is a schul -- a school. Only through genuine study of Torah will we be able to realize when we have failed morally. When the synagogue is the source of the teaching of Torah, it will be able to bring its members back to a higher moral standard.

When the Temple was located in Shiloh, before it



came to Jerusalem in the days of David, the High Priest was Eli. The Bible (I Samuel 2) tells us that the children of Eli were corrupt; they committed lascivious deeds of crude immorality within the very walls of the Temple. Their horrible conduct was a scandal, a disgrace. And so there appeared a prophet, whom the Bible calls mysteriously and anonymously "a man of God," and he prophesied that the High Priesthood would be taken away from the family of Eli, and that, furthermore, his descendants for generations to come *ד'על חסד',* will die as young men. Some 1500 years later, the Talmud (*R.H. 18a*), tells us that there was a family in Jerusalem whose members generally died at the age of 18. They came to the great R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and pleaded with him for his assistance. He said to them: Probably you are from the family of Eli, which was cursed as punishment for their ancient immorality. What shall we do?, they asked him. His answer was *אלוהיך חסד' :* never mind business, or agriculture, or trades; go rather and spend your time in the study of Torah, and you will live. They did so, and they achieved longevity -- for which the family thereafter adopted the surname, "the family of R. Yohanan."

What the Talmud means to tell us is that when moral deficiencies and corruption actually penetrate the temple itself, the way to overcome it is by the temple or synagogue becoming a schul, the source of the study of Torah, healing the breach and purifying the impurity. If the moral and religious level of the

community is disgracefully low, the synagogue must not reflect it, but must rectify it by talmud Torah, by teaching the Jew how to conduct himself.

The second function of the synagogue must be tzedakah -- in both its senses, as charity and as justice, tzeddek. It must encourage people to give generously and openly to every good cause, Jewish or general. And it must always act as a goad, reminding people that exploitation is un-Jewish, that dishonesty is sinful, that bigotry is a violation of God's law.

And of course, the third function of the synagogues is always its primary one: a House of Prayer. We must never forget that this remains the main function of the synagogue. It is a place of study and a place of charity, but first and foremost a House of Prayer.

It is quite appropriate that a synagogue bear these three functions of study, prayer and charity. For as the source and the origin of sanctity in the community, the synagogue is truly a microcosm, a miniature Jewish world; and the world, as we know from the Ethics of the Fathers, rests on three pillars:

לעולם שלום צדקה, תורה, ושלום; על התורה, על הצדקה, על השלום, ושלום  
שלוש דברים -- on study, on prayer, and on charity or good deeds.

Of all of these, it is probably prayer which is most difficult. In our own synagogue, we make every effort to reconcile the two requirements of, on the one hand, dignity and decorum, and

on the other, warmth and zeal and participation. We simply do not agree that the two of them are incompatible. We are not prepared to give up either of them. We do know that endless conversation and idle chatter kill both dignity and kavanah. But we are determined to attain both. For if the synagogue cannot succeed in its primary function of tefillah, it cannot expect to succeed in talmud Torah and in gemilut hasadim.

All this is a difficult task -- to teach Torah and to encourage charity and to provide the opportunities for true prayer, in its highest sense.

There are people who attempt to study, who respond to appeals for philanthropy, and who make genuine efforts to engage in prayer. Yet, despite all these efforts, that magic kindling of inspiration seems painfully absent; the feeling of standing before the Presence of God somehow fails to possess them. Their complaint is: we cannot pray, we would like to, but we do not know how. We feel we are only taking up space, we are only sitting in the House of God, not doing anything.

To such people, who earnestly and genuinely yearn for a moment of true prayer, let me urge that they not be impatient with their spiritual progress. Those who are today only ישיבה בבייתך only those who dwell or merely sit in Thy House, will, if they are strong and patient and steadfast enough, yet learn to achieve true prayer -- אשר יושב בבייתך, those who dwell in Thy House will yet

praise Thee. And when this spiritual purpose has been fulfilled, and true prayer has been achieved -- then *mek*, happy and blessed are those who waited and tried and succeeded.

*is mek* *pran mek*, blessed is the people that this is their lot.