Synagogues Without Walls

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אין אומר לו בוא והתפלל אלא בא וקרב

Don't say to him, come and pray, rather, come and draw near.

Thesis: Modern clergy must find alternative ways to draw in members of their Jewish communities and to expand their opportunities to find meaning, connection, spirituality and community. In this paper, I will discuss issues around why people are not connected, what some clergy are doing to inspire and draw people in and recommendations for the future.

In a 2014 address on the future of Jewish prayer, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer said, "...in the 1950s people were showing up to synagogue and not praying. Today, people are not showing up to synagogue and not praying."

Despite Jewish people feeling connected to their Judaism, for a variety of reasons Jews have been joining traditional synagogues at a markedly declining rate, over the past several decades. According to a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Religion and Life Project, fewer than one-third of American Jews belong to a synagogue, and barely one-quarter say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56 percent of the general public. Jewish people are feeling disconnected from traditional synagogues. They are either giving up on synagogue affiliation altogether or they are seeking out alternative congregations, in order to feel more of a connection to Judaism. Reasons range from the high cost of maintaining a membership, to a disconnect between what happens in the synagogue and what is

going on in the rest of their lives to a feeling that there is not time to include synagogue participation in their lives. Rabbi Sharon Brous put it aptly when she said, ”No longer will young people invest in large organizations and institutions that do not move them as spiritual beings, stimulate their intellects, captivate them socially, or inspire them to be better citizens of the world.” Clergy must reevaluate how they are reaching out to potential congregants and work to infuse people’s lives with Judaism, without necessarily following the traditional model of synagogue life, i.e., weekly services in the sanctuary, praying predominantly in a language that the majority of congregants neither read nor understand, and classroom-based religious school that is no longer reinforced in the home. It has become clear that disaffected Jews are not giving up on their Judaism as much as they are giving up on how it is practiced in the mainstream. Jewish leaders must devise ways to meet the disaffected members of their Jewish communities where they are and to expand their opportunities to connect to Judaism.

Introduction

When I was a young child, I imagined that the whole city of Tulsa, Oklahoma was comprised of Jews. They were divided into two groups: those who went to the synagogue and those who went to the temple. I was fortunate because I was born into a mixed marriage. My mother was from a Reform background and my father grew up in a Conservative family. As a result, we went to both the temple and the synagogue, which made our community even larger.

Saturday mornings were spent in the synagogue, sometimes davening and sometimes schmoozing. Saturday afternoons were spent at the homes of friends with him we had just spent the morning at Synagogue. Political conversations that had begun in the synagogue continued in our private homes and vice versa.

My parents visited the ailing parents of their friends and then gathered together at the synagogue or temple, for funerals. And back again to their homes for Shiva minyans, cakes, cookies and the same yummy foods that we got to eat at the onegs, after services. Family friends owned the only kosher deli in town. I went to Sunday school with their daughter. Before the start of the school year, my grandmother would take me to Renberg's Department Store to get new clothes. We knew the people who worked in the store from shul.

In my eyes, Tulsa was a large community and Temple Israel and B'nai Emunah Synagogue were the hubs. People were named there, became bar and bat mitzvah there, married there and eulogized there. It was integral, not simply to Jewish life, but to life in the Jewish community.

What I did not know at the time, is that Jews were not allowed into the country clubs in town and were discouraged from living in particular neighborhoods. In Minneapolis, where I later lived, there were still town charters, in the 1970s, that forbade the selling of homes to Jewish people.

Today, we live in a far different world. Our communities are larger and options for where we live and how we spend our time are virtually endless. We are no longer banned from neighborhoods, gathering places and communities. We have more money than we have ever had. Our children are busier than they have ever been. We are

busier than we have ever been, pulled by the demands of work, children's activities, and social gatherings. As a result we depend less on our houses of worship for our day to day community. Synagogues are sometimes referred to as bar mitzvah factories because children attend religious school, become bar or bat mitzvah and then leave the community, either with their families or on their own.

Consequently, we are seeing a significant decline in synagogue attendance and engagement. Synagogue membership is both shrinking and ageing. Synagogues are being forced to merge or close altogether.

I believe that it is possible to draw unaffiliated Jews into synagogues. What makes me think so? Let's look at some statistics from the Pew study, published in 2013. As of 2013, 93 percent of Jews surveyed who were born between 1914 and 1927, the Greatest Generation, identified as Jewish, whereas for Millennials, who were born after 1980, the number drops to 68%. However, in the same study, when people who identified as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" were asked if, outside of being an atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular, they felt Jewish, they responded with a resounding yes. Many of these people expressed strong ties to Judaism. They felt pride in their Judaism as well as a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish People. When asked What is essential to being Jewish, {73 percent identified remembering the Holocaust as essential,} 66 percent of the respondents identified "living an ethical and moral life," as essential and 56 percent of the people identified "working for justice/equality" as essential. Of those surveyed 15% of Jews overall and 17% of Jews who identified as Jews believed that being Jewish was primarily a matter of religion.

Here we have people who do not identify as being Jewish, who do not attend synagogue, yet they are strongly connected to their Judaism. They maintain an attachment to their Jewish identity and Jewish values through ancestry, culture or in some other way that does not have to do with synagogue affiliation. As Jane Eisner, editor of the forward expressed in a panel discussion on the results of this study, there is a passion out there and there is a desire to be attached, but there are a lot of institutions that must build on that.

How might we build on this passion? How are some clergy working to build on it in nontraditional ways and how successful are they being?

Methodology

I knew at the outset of my research that the need for alternative communities is clear. I wanted to find out first and foremost what is out there. What are people doing to bring Judaism to people in alternative ways? Next, I wanted to find out what kinds of communities are out there and how successful they are. I wanted to know if Jewish people are receptive to such communities. Do such communities inspire commitment? In order to learn more about what is going on in the world of alternative synagogue communities, and how successful they are/have been.

I reached out to several rabbis whom I knew to be engaged in alternative ways of approaching a Jewish connection. In addition I listened to interviews of several other rabbis whose unique styles are well documented. Finally, I drew from my own experience as a student rabbi, for 5 years, of a congregation of approximately 35 families in a town of twenty-one thousand people, in southern Pennsylvania and my

experience as the rabbi of a congregation of approximately 125 families in a town of approximately twenty-seven thousand people in western NJ.

In conducting my interviews, I wanted to learn what is being done, in nontraditional synagogue communities, to meet the needs of Jewish seekers. I asked a series of questions, hoping to learn why Rabbis were drawn to their particular, at times unique, styles of meeting the needs of their communities, I wanted to know what drew people to each of the different communities. I wanted to get a sense of how stable each community is financially and in terms of regular attendance and terms of commitment. Do the communities resemble those of the 1960s when people saw their synagogues as second homes and synagogue communities as extended families or are they something altogether different? I wondered if people tended to go to particular kinds of events, for example shabbat services, social action programs, or musical programs. Were the communities attractive to Jewish seekers because they were specific in nature or did geography play a role? That is to say, do some people attend just because they want something different and this is close? Finally, I wanted to know how meaningful being part of these alternative communities feels to the rabbis and the community members. I recorded each conversation and took notes after the fact. I asked eleven questions, in addition to questions that arose out of individual conversations. In some cases, I was not able to ask all of the questions.

Interview Questions

1. What is the setup of your congregation?
2. How did it evolve?
3. How does it function? - communication? plans, outreach? financial? Is there a board? Formal / informal?

4. How is the synagogue funded?
5. Where do you gather? For special occasions? For Shabbat?
6. How often do you gather?
7. Does the community change depending on what you are doing? Is there a core?
8. Does geography matter?
9. What is the best activity you have done with you congregation? Why?
10. Are there activities that haven't worked?
11. Am I missing anything?

Personal Experience:

In 2013, I was hired as the student rabbi for a small congregation in Chambersburg, PA. The first services I conducted were for the High Holidays. The sanctuary had with close to 70 people. I was pleased to think that the community was committed. It made sense. Chambersburg is a small town and there weren't that many Jewish people who lived there. Of course they would stick together as a tight knit community.

But I was soon disabused of my idealistic theory. I quickly came to realize that, with the exception of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Congregation Sons of Israel had a devoted group of about 12 people. The others were divided into people who were strictly high holiday members and people who had an interest in Judaism but for a mix of reasons did not want to attend the synagogue. So I reached out to the people who seemed to disappear after the high holidays had passed and spent many hours talking with them, one to one, in small groups, at coffee shops, in living rooms, and in back yards.

Part of my work in Chambersburg took place in the synagogue and part of what I meet with people who are interested in Judaism but for various reasons did not (some

absolutely will not) want to be part of the synagogue community. They were happy to have members of the synagogue community join in when they invited me to lead a service or guide a session of Torah study. So, in a sense I became their rabbi without walls.

I was told from the beginning of my time there that there was a group of people who had left the synagogue for different reasons. Though I made phone calls inviting them to join us at services or events, they preferred not to do so. Some were married into non-Jewish families and committed to raising children in other faiths, some no longer had children at home. Some had fallings out with a member of the synagogue and because the community was so small they couldn't avoid having interactions with her.

But with a rabbi in the community willing to meet them outside of the synagogue, their interest seemed to increase. Not only were they willing to attend modified shabbat and holiday services, but they invited me into their homes to conduct Torah study. By making people, congregants and others who were interested in Judaism, the center of our community, our meeting space was able to expand and become more inclusive.

Over the five years that I worked in Chambersburg the number of people in the congregation who attended services waxed and waned. New people joined but long time members moved away for work or to be near children as they aged.. There were also several deaths in the congregation. Even keeping the number of involved members somewhat steady felt like an effort. But the people who were willing to be involved when we met outside the synagogue, at homes or on prayer walks added to the number of affiliated Jews in the community. That number increased by between

eight and ten. In the small community of Chambersburg, it felt like and accomplishment.

My largest group of congregants during my time in Chambersburg showed up at a healing service that I at the home of the house after the 2016 presidential election. This is likely the least traditional service I did the entire time I was in Chambersburg. People who had never come to a service in the synagogue came and then lingered long after the service was over. It was an opportunity to use some of our beautiful Jewish liturgy to bring comfort to people who were feeling a lot of pain and anxiety. (The few republicans in the congregation did not attend the service, but even so, it was not a political service; it focused on a desire to find common ground and to not feel alone.)

In looking back on my time in Chambersburg, it is clear to me that when I led alternative programs, such as the healing service, prayer walks in the summer, informal services at people's homes, followed by singing and musical jam sessions, Torah study under a maple tree in someone's backyard, and Havdalah at the parsonage, not only did core members show up, but people who otherwise would have not been involved at all showed up. At least one person in the community wouldn't come to the synagogue, but he would gladly participate in services that I led at his house. I was literally meeting him where he was, and he engaged.

I have kept in contact with many of the congregants and learned that their new rabbi is far more traditional, conducting services in the synagogue, with the exception of Havdalah which happens at the parsonage. Some people in the congregation absolutely love him. He reminds them of the rabbis of their youth. Other members of

the community have stopped engaging. Both of these changes are understandable. There will never be the perfect rabbi for everyone. But what it does suggest is that if people are given alternative ways of connecting to Judaism, they will be interested in engaging. Ultimately, the rabbi is a guide, but the people in the community must live out their vision of what they want the community to be.

Interviews

In an effort to find out how leaders of non-traditional Jewish communities are addressing the issue of dwindling interest in traditional synagogue life, I learned about a number of rabbis, some through conversation and some by listening to interviews and reading their writings.

Rabbi Jill Birkson Zimmerman is a rabbi in Orange County, California who works primarily on her own. She has an online presence and has a small in-person group that meets in her living room.

She worked in a congregation for three years, but found it unsatisfying. She explained, **"**I felt before I went to Rabbinical school that the structure of synagogues was really broken. And I knew that from a systems perspective, like on so many different levels. And I actually did think that the synagogue structure would have to crash and burn." Rabbi Zimmerman felt that she was not providing what her congregants needed and as a result she was not feeling fulfilled either.

"I was at [an established temple] for four years and I lost 20 pounds...I finally realized I could not do this. I felt like the work that I was called to do as a rabbI was at that time was around Jewish mindfulness... I wanted my whole rabbinate to be about teaching and working with people, about making Judaism real and bringing spiritually in

their lives…" Rabbi Zimmerman is a spiritual person herself and she identifies her spirituality as a way of coping with all of the tumult in the world today. Her desire to share this with others is a large part of her reason for going into the rabbinate.

Realizing that the traditional synagogue would not meet her personal needs and believing that it was not meeting the needs of many of her fellow Jews, Rabbi Zimmerman left her full time pulpit and began what she calls the Jewish Mindfulness Network. She began teaching in her living room and then expanded to teaching at various synagogues in and around LA. Rabbi Zimmerman, continues to conduct retreats, teach courses and to speak at various events, in her area. She reports that she "kind of gathered a following."

In addition, Rabbi Zimmerman had created an online community, which she calls the Hineni community. When she initially began the program, 60 people signed up, almost immediately. Three years later, there continues to be a core group of approximately 15 to 20 people who have been involved from the beginning. They have become close over their time together and have come to rely on one another to be present in their gatherings. Other people come less regularly. Some of the regular members of Hinini are also members of other synagogues, but feel that they don't get the spiritual experience that Rabbi Zimmerman offers, so they continue to attend both. For others, the Hinini community is their only connection to Judaism.

For Rabbi Zimmerman, What is most important is having a community of people with whom to work on Jewish mindfulness, of attaining a sense of peacefulness in our challenging world and helping others to do the same. She is happy for her community to

gather in a living room or a virtually. She saw a hole in what was being offered and decided to create an alternative to see if people would respond. They have, though not to the point that she can make a living doing what she does, which can be problematic for people who choose to step out of the mainstream. We all need money with which to pay the rent, buy food and support our families. Nevertheless, she is committed to offering her spiritual guidance in a way that is accessible to all who want to be a part of her experiment.

Rabbi Deb Smith wanted to build a community based on Jewish values and incorporating traditional davening, but whose primary work would be engaging with people one-on-one and in small group situations. “These are the ways we get to know one another well and can have a relationship.” Reb Deb, as she calls herself, spent many years in the field of social work. She was involved as a lay person in her Jewish world, but felt like what she was doing was never enough. In a sense, she said, she was being “pulled to the rabbinate. God was really pulling me to be here.” So, having been interested in the rabbinate since she was a child, she decided to return to school to follow her heart.

School was stressful for her as a second career student and she feels that her Hebrew skills are not as strong as she would like them to be. But she has what she needs to be a rabbi and she has been able to create energy and commitment in her community.

In addition to working with individuals and small groups, Reb Deb wanted her rabbinate to be centered around social action, “bringing meaning and food into the lives of people in need.” Or HaLev, the community which she has built and guided for the

past eight years, meets once a month on Friday evenings for Kabbalat Shabbat and another time each month Shabbat morning, for traditional Shabbat services. Reb Deb has put together her own siddur which the community uses for Shabbat services. They also gather for holiday services, healing services, guest speakers, interfaith work, and regular classes. But the primary activities of the community center around gemilut chasadim and tikkun olam. For the past eight years, they have purchased and prepared enough food to feed 200 people each month at a local soup kitchen. Another project, which began two years ago, is called the Thousand Meal Project, where community members make sealed packages of grains,legumes and spices that can be boiled in water to create a complete protein main dish. One thousand portions are made each month and donated to a food pantry. In addition, community members go to other communities, including traditional synagogues, and assist members in mixing and bagging the mixture. One of these programs took place with the religious school students at my own synagogue. In forty-five minutes, students bagged enough food to serve complete protein meals to 1000 people. The students were revved and one thousand people had full bellies for at least a bit of time. This is what energizes Reb Deb.

When Reb Deb, began Or Ha Lev, the community met in the club house of a condominium complex. It was complicated because having to cary all of the siddurim, the Torah, Aron Kodesh, chairs, etc. was too much for her congregation which has a number of older members. Now the community rents from a church where they are provided with space to pray, as well as space to store their belongings for a nominal fee each month. Reb Deb believes that having such low overhead enables them to give

more to the community. She believes that renting from the church provides the congregation with a space for davening, which is an important part of the life of the congregation, while allowing them to have additional funds to put toward programing and tzedakah, both of which are also central to the mission of the community.

There are several indications of the success of her rabbinate and how people are responding. One is that over the past seven years, there has not been a single service for which they have not had a minyan, nor has there been a single community service project for which they have lacked an abundance of member support. In addition, Reb Deb's has been approached by a handful of her congregants and told that even though they are also members of other more traditional congregations, "When our time comes, our kids know to call you."

Or Ha Lev is funded through a dues structure which asks for $360.00 per person and in addition a $150.00 High Holiday fee. Reb Deb and her husband Neil lead services at other congregations, for a fee, which adds to their income. She has no problem asking for congregations to pay when they lead services, because all of the money they make goes into social action projects. Reb Deb is fortunate that she does not depend on an income from her rabbinate in order to live. Her summation of her rabbinate, is that "in order to do this kind of work person must be creative, innovative and be fine with low profile. There are not a lot of rewards for this. Financially, it's not a winner."

Or HaLev taps into the desires/needs of its community members to actively work toward tikkun olam, while providing davening experiences at least twice each month.

Because the community does not own a structure which must be maintained, dues can be kept to a minimum. Money primarily goes into programming, and tikkun olam.

Rabbi Ben Newman is the founder and spiritual leader of Shtiebel. At Shtiebel, Rabbi Newman steps outside of tradition with the intention to "create Jewish culture, mixing and remixing it for our generation... We are writing our new chapter in this evolving ancient civilization..." The Shtiebel (meaning small room, in Yiddish) community gathers on the first Friday of each month, with the goal of "creating a meaningful, creative, and fun Jewish experience with low barriers to engagement for everyone" The gatherings are informal and always include music, food, movement, discussion, and ritual. The Shtiebel manifesto states that the community reaches out to:

> ...all freaky Jews, all misfit Hebrews, all fan boys and girls, all creepy, freakey. Deeky converse wearing semites from around the world, all bob kabbalah beatniks, all trangender peaceniks, all friends of Zalman, all the Maggdim, all the neo-Hassidim, all the "alternative" members of the tribe, all the Emma Goldman Scribes, all the people of the Book with an agnostic vibe, all of Juda's atheists, all believers in Ain Soph's infinite radiance, and inspiration and pure consciousness and pure love that's spontaneous and justice that's impervious and the balance which splits like a radius, the hazz between form and content, all who want to celebrate every meal, all who find their spirit in their jam, if that's your shpiel, all who want to mix and remix everything.

Shtiebel is a natural outgrowth of Rabbi Newmans journey. By his own reporting, Rabbi Newman grew up a seeker. The mainstream synagogue experience of his youth did not speak to his heart and he felt disaffected with all of it, except the music; that did speak to his heart. Rabbi Newman studied philosophy, Buddhism, and Taoism in school.

During these years, he also spent time studying in Israel and for the first time he was introduced to Kabbalah. When he was introduced to Kabbalah, he realized that

that Judaism does address many of the questions of meaning that had driven him from his earliest days. He says, "I realized that Judaism was an amazing system of spiritual technology that could help me flourish and infuse my life with meaning." This discovery, confirmed his decision not to pursue his interest in becoming a zookeeper or a superhero and set him on a path to the rabbinate with the intention of "showing people the viability of Jewish spiritual technology and how it can improve their lives." Following rabbinical school, Rabbi Newman worked for seven years in a traditional congregation. Like Rabbi Zimmerman, Rabbi Newman found the work unfulfilling, always seeing things that he would like to do differently. He left his pulpit and the idea of Shtiebel found him.

> "She came to me. This is what she said: Reach people where they are, creatively, physically, spiritually, intellectually. And offer them tools from the ancient toolbox of our tradition to help them grow, thrive, flourish, to meet their human needs for connection and inspiration, to express and nurture their creativity and intellect and make a difference. In the process it is not just them who will be changed. Judaism itself will be changed, remixed, as they add their voice to the generational chorus, Judaism becomes something new… I believe that through transforming ourselves and our small communities, we can help transform the world and help provide much needed healing."

Rabbi Newman offers a wide variety of access points, including classes in Hebrew, Kabbalah/Jewish Mysticism/Jewish magic, Torah/Haftarah leining, meditation, service leading, Jewish music, Lifecycle event leading, and Wellness Workshops. Shtiebel also offers Eco Kosher certification based on environmental awareness, animal welfare, health and wellness, ethical labor practices, being mindful of Jewish ancestral traditions and continued growth and education. Rabbi Newman is a passionate learner and teacher of "esoteric Wisdom, kabbalistic and musical" and each day he reads and

discusses a page of Zohar in both Aramaic and English. He has a website open to all seekers who are interested in connecting and learning with him.

Rabbi Newman intentionally designed Shtiebel to be inclusive of all Jewish people and members of interfaith families who want to become part of the community. He does not want simply a community of daviners or a community of people focused on social action, but rather a community of people who want to be connected to Judaism in whatever way works best for them. Perhaps the primary goal of Shtiebel is to expand access to Judaism.

Shtiebel does not charge traditional dues, but rather has an a la carte model of payment. Because of not owning a building and therefore not having a mortgage and maintenance costs the overhead costs for the community are far lower than they are in cases where there is a large structure to care for. There are also opportunities to contribute beyond the community offerings in which one partakes, This would fit into a fair share dues model, where if a family can afford more, they might contribute more, knowing that they will be subsidizing families that can afford less.

One thing that stands out about Shtiebel is that it was founded on with the tikkun olam in mind. It appeals to people who are less focused on Jewish ritual but still committed to Jewish values and culture. Given the fee structure, people can select the things they are interested in and not feel that in order to be part of them they must buy into an all or nothing model. The shared use of space in a church affords the community the ability to have most of its money go toward outreach and programming. This might be especially appealing to young families who are just starting out and don't have the money to pay a large dues bill, annually.

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie, the spiritual guide at Lab/Shul, describes his community as Everyone welcome God Optional. He gives compelling reasons for reevaluating how we reach out to Jews and how we engage with Judaism. Rabbi Lau-Lavie grew up in an orthodox family in Israel. As a gay teenager, he felt alienated by the God, Torah, and halacha, and as he says he "threw out the baby and the bathwater, the whole thing." He wanted to feel connected, but the community that he had embraced for his whole life, did not embrace him in his honest being.

As he grew older, Rabbi Lau-Lavie's soul felt like something was missing, so he returned to his roots, but when he did so, it was with a strong belief that they had much to offer as well as with his own enriched understanding and a new perspective. Rabbi Lau-Lavie did not set out to begin a synagogue. He saw himself as a storyteller with a deep love for and knowledge of Judaism. Initially, he wanted to integrate Torah, culture, theater and story. Gradually, it morphed from Storahtelling into a gathering of friends, supporters, community leaders and social activists, who wanted to gather for Shabbat and other special occasions. It was unclear what the gatherings would turn into and thus it was a kind of a lab. But rapidly it grew into a thriving Shul community. The premise of the community, as explained by Rabbi Lau-Lavie is as follows:

> "We are living in a complex post ethnic, post -modern, digital age that is redefining choice, identity, and belonging. It's a fluid reality that calls for radical solutions and paradigm shifts. That is what we at Lab/Shul have set out to do." The tagline for Lab/Shul is: "Everybody-friendly, artist-driven, God-optional"

The mission statement of Lab/Shul includes such terms as, inclusive, accessible, radically renewed Jewish ritual, deep communal connection, and societal

shift. Lab/Shul seeks to provide a new model for a “thriving, nurturing spiritual community where inclusive, accessible and radically renewed Jewish ritual promotes deep communal connection and broader societal shift..”

Lab/Shul sees itself as redefining the role of sacred gatherings, as an inspiration for other spiritual communities, in terms of how it is run, how people understand their connection to the community, and what the expectations are or are not at the intersection of each member and the all of the different aspects of community life.

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie reflected on a central tenet of his rabbinate in an interview with Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz. The bottom line, he said, is:” be a human. Maybe manifest Divine will by being a fully human and be a fully mensch self. Serve the world, serve the other. V’ahavtah lereiachaha kamocha. On one foot, love [the] other as you love yourself. Be in the service of [the] others.”

Rabbi Lau-Lavie, in this way, is meeting his congregants where they are and giving them what so many pulpit rabbis would love to be able to give to their congregants, but can’t because of being bound to tradition. The members of Lab/Shul are not expected to master Hebrew, davening skills, or specific prayers. What it seems that Rabbi Lau-Lavie is trying to achieve is for each member to find a way to be at home in the community and to make the community and its offerings diverse enough that there indeed will be a place at the table for all who want to join, without concern for any specific ideology outside of that which welcomes and embraces all Jewish journeyers.

The mitzvah, V'ahavtah Lereiachaha Kamocha, is the basis upon which Rabbi Lau-Lavie ultimately resigned his membership in the Rabbinic Assembly, the governing body for Conservative Judasim. In the same way, that the conservative did not embrace the rights of Jewish members of the LGBTQ+ community and still do in only a limited fashion, It does not accept interfaith marriages between a Jew and a person who is not Jewish. Not only are rabbis not allowed to perform interfaith marriage ceremonies, they are not allowed to attend them. Based on an interfaith marriage rate of 58% according to the Pew Study published in 2013, it seems clear that when forced to choose between love of another person who happens to not be Jewish and commitment to Judaism, people will choose the former. This drives home the point that if Judaism does not begin to embrace people where they are, we will lose them altogether. For Rabbi Lau Lavie the decision was not particularly complicated. He has traveled the road of not being accepted for who he is. He believes that when two people love each other and have a shared interest in being part of a "Jewish spiritual community" it outweighs the dictates of the religion into which they were born. If we lose young couples where one of the members is Jewish, we lose their children. Ultimately we will lose Judaism altogether. Rabbi Lau-Lavie was not prepared to perpetuate this trend. This is part of his effort to meet his congregants where they are.

Part of the "lab" side of Lab/Shul is that it does not have a permanent home. Rather, the rabbi and community members refer to it as a "pop-up" shul. Meetings happen in private homes, rented and donated spaces, such as the Sirovich Center, in The East Village, JCCs and even virtual gatherings, including once a week for Kaddish and special occasions such as Virtual Chanukah pajama playtime.

The Lab/Shul website describes their location, saying: "We create a home for soulful, spiritual, God-optional artistry wherever we go, transforming spaces of all types into temporary temples – from community centers to nightclubs to our own living rooms."

The Lab/Shul appears to offer its members benefits on many different levels. At its most practical level, having no permanent building and thus very low overhead costs, it offers synagogue community access for people who might otherwise not be able to afford membership. Having virtual programs is another practical benefit, as it too expands access to people who may not be able to get to a synagogue or meeting place, such as the aforementioned example of people wanting to say Kaddish.

On a more spiritual level, Lab/Shul seems to be a place where people are not judged for who they are, how they think , or what they believe. "Everyone welcome," is very clear, and with a rabbi who so strongly believes that religion should not stand in the way of love that he was willing to resign from the Rabbinic Assembly, it seems that he is truly walking the walk.

Rabbi Jill Hammer co founded the Kohenet institute, which trains women to be priestesses. Rabbi Hammer describes a priestess is one who is "a facilitator of the connection between worlds. She tends the relationship between human and divine. She may do this through ritual, through the maintenance of a sanctuary, through trance and prophecy, through creation of sacred words and objects, or through music and dance." As Rabbi Hammer describes it, "Kohenet isn't a synagogue community (we're more of a yeshiva, really) but we do have regular prayer at our retreats and we teach students to lead our style of prayer. We use ritual, chant, conversation,

movement, the making of sacred objects, spirit journey/guided meditation, dreamwork, and other spiritual technologies to tie the community to one another. We're welcoming of the sacred feminine as a God-image and of people's wide-ranging Jewish beliefs and practices." The priestess training is a three year program with one training on the East Coast and one on the West Coast. Kohenet ordains women as "Ritual Leaders in earth-based, embodied mode that celebrated the divine feminine

Kohenet has drawn many Jewish women, who have "felt alienated from traditional Judaism -- with its masculine depictions of God as king, father, master, lord." Many of the women who embarked on priestess training come to it having explored Buddhism as well as other Earth-based religions. With their training at Kohenet, they are encouraged to re envision God and reclaim their Judaism, in all of its fullness, embracing the female characteristics and contributions, power, creativity, and strength that are most often ignored, or at best overlooked in traditional Judaism.

'It's an antidote to some of the dryness people are experiencing in the Jewish tradition," said Rabbi Jill Hammer. "Modern Judaism is in deep need of new spiritual resources to inspire people.'" Those who have undergone priestess training, through Kohenet say that "by exploring a feminist perspective, they're actually drawing some women back, or deeper, into Judaism — not turning them away from it…" It is a beautiful thing to see women, who range in age from their twenties to their seventies, return to a new and inviting understanding of their Judaism.

Kohenet reaches out to people who have a strong desire for a life rich with spirituality and ritual, who have not found a home in traditional synagogue settings, those who seek to connect to their Jewishness, not only outside of the four walls of a

sanctuary, but outside of or in addition to the traditional, Jewish context. Queer people, who for so long, were questioned and judged for living out their lives in an honest way, women whose roles in Jewish history have been systematically ignored or discounted and continue to be, even in the increasingly “woke” era, in which we live, women who are drawn to spirituality that is found in nature, or who are more drawn to the spirit world that is not addressed in more traditional settings all might all be drawn to the teaching, guidance, and found at Kohenet.

In order to fund Kohenet, students/members are charged for classes, workshops and retreats. But as with other examples of alternative communities, Kohenet cannot survive financially without additional support.

Kohenet meets for two weeks on the west coast each year and another two weeks on the east coast. In addition, there are class that take place in between these meetings Even if that seems like the community isn’t together that much, it is exceptionally close and even perhaps family like. Rabbi Hammer noted that even though her community members are from around the country and even the world, the community is so cohesive that people will fly to one another’s cities to be with them to support them through sickness or other life changing experience. In this way, Rabbi Hammer’s community of Kohenet is the most like synagogue communities of the 1960s in that the community is an extension of family and the gatherings are grounding. Perhaps what is to be learned from Kohenet and its successes is that by looking at Judaism through a radically different lens opens doors to Jewish people who didn’t have any idea that they would find a place in Jewish community.

Summary of findings

All of the people I spoke to as well as in the interviews to which I listened, expressed a desire to expand access to Judaism as a primary reason for stepping outside of our traditional norms to begin an alternative Jewish synagogue style community. Individuals had different foci but at the center of their work is their desire to open the doors to Judaism wider and make the tent more welcoming to all who want to enter, to meet people where they are. Each of the rabbis I learned about expressed a feeling that something was missing from their mainstream rabbinates or from their own experience of Judaism that they wanted to create themselves. The idea is that if one person feels this way, there must be others out there who feel the same way, so let's see if we can create something that speaks to disaffected or unaffiliated Jews.

Some of avenues for enlarging the tent of Judaism include mindfulness, tikkun olam, new expressions of Jewish engagement such as magic, kabbalah, learning about Judaism from outside of the traditional patriarchal model, welcoming interfaith families, welcoming LGBTQ+ members and families. Davening in these communities is a part of a much larger picture. All of the rabbis I learned about hold Shabbat services or worship services, but four of the five communities I looked at hold nontraditional services and several of the communities only hold Shabbat services one or two times a month or services on a weekly basis. Some of the nontraditional services include dance, chanting, singing, Musical jam sessions, discussion, ritual, Jewish mindfulness spirit journey/guided meditation,the making of sacred objects, and dreamwork among other experiences.

Based on my findings it seems that spiritual leaders who lead alternative communities, tend to move away from traditional siddurim and use a variety of materials. Four of the five rabbis I interviewed have written their own siddurim and/or haggadot to make them fit the goals of their communities. The message is that the rabbis will embrace and accommodate their communities in all of their individuality. All of the rabbis of the alternative communities I looked at expressed that they felt unfulfilled or stifled in traditional synagogues. They expressed a desire to reach out to like minded people. In addition, they expressed a desire to reach out to unaffiliated Jews, with the belief that there are like minded people who might be drawn to communal Judaism if they can find a community that meets them where they are and speaks to their needs, desires, and concerns, rather than what they see as a more rigidly established community, into which they must fit. Many Jews who join alternative communities place a premium on their identities as independent, autonomous thinkers and want to be with people who will embrace them rather than ask them to think and be something that they aren't. It is difficult to feel spiritual when you feel like the proverbial square peg attempting to fit into the round hole. For the rabbis I spoke to, alternative communities enable them to speak to those people who want change without standing in the way of those who prefer traditional davening in traditional synagogue communities.

Each of the communities I looked into has a variety of access points including music, meditation, interfaith, Kabbalah, mysticism, Torah chanting, service leading, lifecycle event leading, wellness, kashrut, chanting, dance, and ritual creation for

examples. These access points enable members to avoid the one size fits all design and enables them to find their place of comfort within the organization.

Finances can be a concern in alternative synagogue communities. Each of the communities that I evaluated found that not owning a synagogue building substantially decreases overhead costs and this enables the communities to charge much less in the way of dues to their communities. However, each of the rabbis to whom I spoke expressed that they can not rely on their alternative rabbinates for financial stability. Some teach and some are in the fortunate position of not having to depend on their income from the rabbinate to live on. This is a problem which will need to be addressed if the number of alternative communities continues to increase.

With smaller communities there is a smaller amount of money that is donated and paid as dues to the community. In addition, Three of the five alternative rabbinates that I looked at charge only nominal fees and no one is rejected for inability to pay. One rabbi mentioned an “angel” who helps sustain the community, which in a sense could be considered fair share dues. Ultimately for such communities to be financially viable, they need to come up with a financial structure that compensates the rabbis and teachers without having the financial structure become the motivational factor for how the community is run.

Perhaps what is most exciting to the rabbis of nontraditional communities that I looked at is that because they are not bound by traditional synagogue community expectations They feel free to branch out and experiment with creative modalities of engaging members. It is appealing to rabbis and it is a draw to community members. All of the alternative rabbinates that I looked at are at the very least holding steady (outside of the

initial large response for one of the communities that dropped off early on) and most of them are continuing to grow and attract members. This is quite different from the mainstream synagogue communities written about in the Pew study. With some of the alternative communities stepping very far outside of the synagogue tradition, such as Kohenet ordaining priestesses, which may challenge the traditional norm of what is learned and how it is taught in rabbinical schools, and Lab/Shul where Rabbi Lau-Lavie has actively stepped away from the conservative movement in order to perform interfaith marriages and has a weekly "Virtual Kaddish" community, it seems that the world of Judaism is becoming far more diverse than it once was. It is often said that in Judaism change happens very slowly. But with the uptick in alternative communities, it seems that the pace of change may be hastening and this may be a good thing for the future of the People Israel. No community at which I looked gave any indication of casting aside the whole of our tradition, but rather they are seeking to rejuvenate it, and bring new life to our tent, by widening and enriching it. Time after time, throughout history, we have been forced to reinvent ourselves in order to sustain our people and tradition. As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, it seems that we are once again in need of radical change, though this time not because it is being forced upon us by a host community, but rather because we are being asked by our own people to think outside the box.

Conclusion

It seems clear that alternative synagogue communities reach out to and reach people who otherwise may not join traditional synagogues. Based on my findings,

people want to experience Jewish community and though some people prefer traditional davening, such as on Shabbat a growing number of people are looking for something different. Certainly for people who join alternative communities, traditional services are not as much of a draw as are alternative services. Jewish people want to be involved in Jewish communities, but they want to be able to explore, experiment and branch out in how they connect to their Judaism. If Judaism is to continue to thrive, or perhaps if Judaism is to thrive once again, in our country, we must be able to open our doors wider and we must be able to accommodate different ways of accessing some of the richness in our tradition that people may not connect to through traditional synagogue life.

Perhaps if the Jewish community would branch out such that communities would have a mixture of davening, including experimental davening and alternative programming, unaffiliated Jewish people may be more attracted to the communities.

Finally, it seems that the high cost of maintaining a synagogue building and all of the accompanying costs are a deterrent to people joining. We must be able to share spaces so that each congregation is not burdened by these costs.

It is heartening to see that if we dare to step out of the box of traditional Judaism and meet people where they are, we will find people who are interested in being engaged and willing to make a commitment. I do believe the trend of people leaving synagogue life and feeling disconnected from their Judaism can be reversed, but it will take a great deal of creativity. The communities written about in this paper are demonstrative of that kind of creativity.

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