CHAPTER 17

The TBZ Story

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The rejuvenation of Temple Beth Zion (TBZ), a moribund Conservative synagogue in Brookline, Massachusetts, into a vibrant independent congregation offers a model in achieving success beyond denominational labels and parameters.

Denominationalism may have served its purpose in the early and middle years of the twentieth century, but these models, which for the most part emerged out of the German Jewish experience, did a disservice to the vast majority of Eastern Europeans Jews who came to the United States between 1880 and 1924. The tripartite division of Jewish life in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe was less Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform than traditional, maskilic, and revolutionary. Within each of these divisions, it was possible to maintain still other distinctions: traditional—hasidic or mitnagdic; maskilic—observant or nonobservant Hebraist or Yiddishist; revolutionary—socialist or communist, Bundist or Zionist. While strands of all of these aspects of Eastern European Jewish life were maintained in the United States in various ways, the pressure of denominational affiliation ultimately defined and possibly narrowed the big tent of Jewish life that postdenominational or nondenominational Jewish life can offer.

Integral Judaism

Independent Jewish congregations continue to appear throughout the Jewish world. They are the models in the necessary transformation of the synagogue into its newest and most important role, as centers for integral Judaism, a Judaism not divorced from
our core identities. These centers will be inviting to Jews who are looking for a community without labels, who are seeking a home where they may bring all of themselves and find an environment where they can integrate all of their disparate parts. In the Jewish community, few addresses other than the transformed synagogue offer this opportunity. For most Jews, the questions they have are answered by local Jewish institutions, not specific denominational forms of Judaism.

The power of synagogues lies in their ability to provide the platform and vantage point to decipher the complicated nature of the world and its vagaries. The removal of “turf” is a prerequisite for the synagogue to continue to be the direct delivery system of access to Jewish traditions, their beauty, and their complexity.

A New Kind of Synagogue

There are no easy answers to the opportunities and dilemmas that freedom provides us in the United States and in the State of Israel. One positive response can be the collapsing of the denominations into a newly reconstituted Jewish people and redefined independent synagogue.

TBZ is a model of trying to create a community that is not defined by any adjective other than Jewish. The place of the charismatic rabbi is often central, but not always necessary, to the establishment of an independent congregation. In the case of TBZ, my role consisted of facilitator and motivator of intensive Jewish experiences through study and prayer. My ordination emphasized the “rebbe” aspect rather than the “ra‘v” aspect of my leadership. I often quipped that if you were looking for a rabbi to tell you if a chicken was kosher or not, I could refer you to a rabbi who does that, but if you are having a relationship with a chicken, come and talk to me. Along with the rabbi, TBZ brought together a wide array of individuals from different backgrounds eager to establish a community that went beyond the usual labels and expectations. The style of this lay group could be characterized as “chaotic,” that is, over a rumble of chaos order was maintained. The bubbling up of ideas from the bottom to the top, the creation of a consensus model of governance whenever possible, and the commitment of lay leadership to experimentation served the vibrancy of the TBZ transformation well. The lack of synagogue experience in most of these lay leaders was an important asset. This ability to see new things without preconceived notions added to the vitality of the TBZ transformation. We have capitalized on the nature and quality of the people we attracted.

The congregation began to grow quickly once we made it clear that we would not be affiliated with any of the existing Jewish movements. The Brookline community already had a fair representation of all of the denominational synagogues: two Reform, two Orthodox (hasidic and modern), and one Conservative. Surrounding areas provided both Reconstructionist and Renewal alternatives as well. Certainly, there was room for another congregation that would appeal to those who did not find full satisfaction in any of these choices.

When I began my part-time employment in January of 1998, the congregation had approximately 50 elderly members, with 12 or so of them actively involved in maintaining the congregation. By 2007 the congregation had grown to more than 600 individual members and approximately 140 children, including approximately 175 single units and 200 family units. Family units run the gamut of definitions and parameters: single parents, gay couples, elderly couples, families with children, and couples without children.

The older leadership of Temple Beth Zion, predominantly one or two members who were children of the original founders, had mixed feelings about giving up on revitalizing the synagogue as a traditional, preegalitarian Conservative shul. This led to a period of eighteen months or so when I officiated once a month at a “straight” davenning and once a month at what was then called a Nishmat Hayyim service. The other two weeks were lay led.

Soon it became clear that the Nishmat Hayyim services were growing while the traditional services remained stagnant. Seeing that change was on the way, a number of the older members began to feel threatened and voiced their dissatisfaction, particularly at the laxity in the dress code on the Nishmat Hayyim Shabbats. The regulars attended services every week. They were also show-
ing concern about the introduction of women into key roles in the services. A few of these members departed, others adjusted, and still others became strong supporters of our revitalization project. We are still blessed today by regular attendees in their eighties and nineties.

From Spectators to Participants

If any thread continues throughout the decade of TBZ transformation, it is the enhancement of the tefillah experience from a spectator model into a participatory and accessible model. This was helped greatly by reorganizing the physical structure of the sanctuary. The process was a difficult one, pitting old timers against newer members. For a period of time the sanctuary was only halfway “de-pewed.” By the end of 2003 the entire sanctuary reflected the new TBZ attitude: accessibility. Partitions between the bimah and the congregation were removed, the reading table went down onto the sanctuary floor. The rabbi and officers sat among the congregation rather that over and above them.

Physical accessibility was an important aspect of the congregation’s transformation and growth. A handicap accessible entrance and elevator were constructed that obviated the need to climb a steep staircase at the front of the building. Another important improvement was installing air conditioning in the sanctuary. As of the fall of 2007, we have raised more than a million dollars in the three renovation campaigns we have run.

Another example of accessibility was the decision to keep dues low and to provide abatements when necessary. The motivation for this was to maintain and encourage diversity in the congregation. The annual Kol Nidrei appeal looks to those with greater means to make up for those with lesser means. So far this deficit-defeating measure has been successful. In the fall of 2007 we were able to hire an assistant rabbi to help develop our family education programming.

Accessibility also meant choosing the right siddur, hazon, and maaseh. For Friday night and the high holidays we created our own prayer books. For Shabbat and festival mornings we decided on Siddur Hadash (A New Prayer Book, published by Prayerbook Press), mainly because of its gender-neutral translation and many transliterations. We did not assume our congregants were all fluent in Hebrew. We also introduced as much communal singing as possible so that within a short time the basic service would become familiar to regular attendees.

Transforming Worship

But the most important part of the transformation was to be found in the services themselves. The rabbi starts the service with a meditation, sitting on a stool in front of the reading table facing the congregation. This introduction of meditative practice was invaluable in giving the mitzvot the notion that l'hitpallel was indeed a reflective act, and that it was necessary to balance the transcendent nature of the tefillot with the immanence of listening to the small, still voice within. With the concentration on nesbim, one could be in touch with the neshamah.

Meditation leads to chanting, first in English, “Holy One of Blessing—Your Presence fills creation,” then either to candle lighting all together on Friday night or other appropriate parts of the liturgy.

Our Friday night siddur incorporates meditations on the text written by Rabbis Rami Shapiro, David Wolfe Blank z”l, and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Many of these meditations amplify the nature of the Ineffable and the limitations of language to encapsulate the experience of the Divine. Every service offers kavanot. On Friday nights, the service includes an opportunity to do a heshbon hashamah—a way of retrieving the positive from each day of the previous week and jettisoning the negative—to bring into Shabat the gift of our best selves to Shabbat Hamalka, the consort of the Jewish people. We frame the hymn “Lecha Dodi” as a wedding celebration and an opportunity for enthusiastic singing and dancing.

Encouraging participants to leave their seats on a number of occasions during the service is vital and enhances the psalmist’s notion that all of our limbs be actively involved in prayer and praise. We have also instituted a movement to fill the inner parts of the sanctuary during the silent meditation by offering congregants the opportunity to position themselves in front of either one of two magnificent quilts
representing the kabbalistic notions of besed and gevurah. Services are often capped by introductions of visitors and the practice of congregants blessing each other with the birkat kohanim.

Shabbat Torah services are marked by group aliyot based on content of the Torah readings that morning. This is another opportunity for getting congregants to be more active and less passive.

A Nexus of Tradition and Creativity

By being an independent congregation, we have leeway to be as creative or as traditional as we want to be. While this may be true of denominational congregations, we at TBZ have found it to be one of its motivating principles. TBZ has made its mark in this nexus of tradition and creativity. We are, in a sense, a feministic-hasidic shul, a shteibel, if you will. For some, this is a contradiction in terms. We also see ourselves as an unorthodox shul where attendees are open to surprises.

Could all of this have been done within a conventional denominational structure? Perhaps, but I doubt it for a number of reasons. The first is the most obvious—not being attached to any specific denomination immediately removed many preconceived notions of the way things should be. Second, it removed, for many, the discomfort they had experienced in the denominations they had grown up in and no longer felt attached to. This removal of a turf definition was vital in getting many of our congregants through the door. Many had not been affiliated at all since leaving their home of origin; others were seekers searching for more intensity than they found in conventional settings. Third, the absence of denominational affiliation allowed many congregants to feel more confident in articulating their Jewish worldviews, especially when they veered away from the denominational doctrines of their upbringing. A significant number of congregants had sought spiritual sustenance in other traditions (for example, Buddhism) before “returning” home. My acceptance of all those who had sought their connections elsewhere and a lack of judgment about their journeys added to the comfort felt by those seeking a spiritual home within Judaism.

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For many of my congregants, the question that TBZ’s independence answers is, Why be Jewish? When I was growing up in the 1950s and ’60s, the question was how to be Jewish. This search for meaning overrides any specific practices they will or will not take on. For most of my congregants, their belonging to an independent shul is a boost to their own sense of Jewish choice—the capacity to make intelligent choices in an ever-widening marketplace of ideas.

Another hallmark of TBZ has been its emphasis on Jewish learning with a wide and open lens. We study the entire gamut of Jewish expression. We are aware of the theological and practical nuances of the movements, but urge our congregants to reach their own opinions. As in many liberal congregations, we avoid doctrinarianism. This is reflected in our weekly Shabbat Torah study where we offer a multifaceted awareness of Torah and its multidimensionality. While choosing the Conservative movement’s Etz Hayyim (Tree of Life, published by the Jewish Publication Society) as our humash, we bring in commentaries from a variety of sources and leave our sessions often with more questions than when we began. This vital, unending questioning is the hallmark of our interpretative tradition.

As we approach the end of the first decade of a century inaugurated by the attacks of September 11, 2001, the congregation is grappling with redefining our community parameters. Recent studies have pointed to the generation of Jews in their twenties eager for Jewish expression, primarily through Jewish versions of American popular culture, in venues other than the synagogue or the Jewish community center. The phenomenon of “nightclub” Jewish gatherings raises still new challenges to the synagogue as both beit tefillah and beit midrash. While the synagogue cannot be all things to all people, it is possible to reintegrate the roles it plays in community building for twenty-somethings as they marry (later and later) and look for a rootedness not possible through one-time, feel-good entertainment events. Within the postdenominational synagogue, future generations of Jews will find their opportunity to continue shaping and reshaping our tradition. In the spirit of netzach yisrael lo-yishaker, the eternity of Israel is no falsehood; the Jewish people will continue to transform itself.