

The Country Club Synagogue and the Future of Orthodoxy

By: Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz

Why did the student choose Chabad over the Orthodox Hillel minyan?

At a panel discussion in our synagogue, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove related the following about a congregant. She was a freshman at an Ivy league university, and even though she was raised in a Conservative synagogue, she visited the Orthodox minyanim. The vibrant Hillel minyan seemed closed and cold to her; in the end, she felt most welcome at the Chabad minyan.

This would seem counterintuitive; after all, the Hillel minyan is Modern Orthodox, with a sophisticated and contemporary crowd. So why did she feel more comfortable at Chabad?

The answer might seem simple: Chabad is more welcoming; people prefer Chabad because everyone feels at home. But that answer only begs the question. Why aren't Orthodox synagogues more welcoming?

This question is critical. In the 2013 Pew study, Orthodox Jews make up 10% of the American Jewish population. While Orthodoxy has done a reasonable job of retaining the younger generation, and Orthodox Jews have large families, for the most part, Orthodoxy is not an attractive alternative for 90% of American Jews. Why? We should at least be able to reach 15% or 18% of American Jews?

Finding an answer requires a serious look at the culture of synagogues. In my experience, there are three types of synagogues: train stations, country clubs, and block parties.

The train station offers a full schedule for services. You can take a shacharit at 6:10, 7:15 and 8:30; you can take an "express", or a full stop tefillah. Like a train, you remain anonymous even while in public. (The best example of a train station synagogue is the shtibel, where there are multiple services in multiple rooms). One wonders if this truly fulfills the Halakhic concept of public prayer, because there is no sense of community, just a collection of individuals praying at the same time.

This type of experience can occur even in large, well established congregations. Gary Rosenblatt relates how a friend told him that when he was sitting shiva, he couldn't identify someone who visited several times. *"He looked familiar but I couldn't place him....I finally asked him who he was and he said, 'I'm the guy who's been sitting in your row in shul on Shabbat for the last six years.'"*

That's what it's like praying in a train station. You don't know the other commuters.

The open house is the exact opposite. All are welcome and warmly welcomed, and you are immediately included in the services, the kiddush and lunch invitations. Most Chabads are like this, but this attitude is not unique to Chabad. Any synagogue with sense of urgency will be welcoming. Small communities will also warmly welcome new families; without them, the synagogue will close. What Chabad recognizes is that we all should have a sense of urgency about American Jewry, and that the welcoming must be done by everyone, everywhere.

But most synagogues are not open houses; the vast majority of synagogues are “country clubs”. These congregations are there to serve their members. If you’re a member, the synagogue is yours: it’s your rabbi, your seat, and your friends. For an outsider, the experience is very different. There is actually a synagogue where most of the seats are owned by members, and if an outsider enters, he is told not to sit in those seats, even if the member is *out of town*. In country club synagogues, anyone who isn’t a “regular” doesn’t belong.

But why are there so many synagogues country clubs? Part of the answer lies in history. Many synagogues started out as clubs. In 1905, Charles Seligman Bernheimer described the emergence of new synagogues in Philadelphia:

“A few individuals, usually such as came from the same town or district, banded themselves together to form a beneficial society ordinarily bearing the name of the town or district whence most of the members came. The aim of such societies, in the first instance, was to assist financially any of the members who might be sick, to provide burial for the dead.... After the society became strengthened in numbers, a hall was hired for meeting purposes and was converted into a praying room.(and) the society imperceptibly turned into a congregation.....”

These synagogues were a slice of home in the new world. The synagogue was not just a house of prayer, but also a fraternal club where one could reconnect with old friends from the old country. This social club attitude has remained, and infiltrated many synagogues whatever their history, and now the country club synagogue is part of our DNA.

The main obstacle to changing the synagogue is that the country club model is quite compelling. Robert Putnam, in his book Bowling Alone, delineates two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital is what creates deep connections, whether it be in country clubs or synagogue sisterhoods. It molds people together into one cohesive community. Bridging social capital is when you reach out and network with new people and create new connections. Bonding will connect you to the friends who bring you chicken soup when you’re sick; through bridging you acquire the type of contacts that can help you find a job interview.

Bonding is exceptionally important, and the country club synagogue serves a critical social role. It is a place where everybody knows your name, and where your friends become a part of your family. And that is why it is such a difficult model to change.

But we must learn how to bridge. Putnam quotes Xavier de Souza Briggs who says that bonding capital is good for getting by, while bridging capital is good for getting ahead. Right now, the Orthodox community is getting by, but we are not getting ahead, and that is why we are stuck at 10%. We bond well with those close to us; but as a community, we are rather poor at building bridges to people of different backgrounds. And even on campus, Orthodox minyanim have a tendency to settle into old country club habits.

That must change. Orthodox synagogues must have a sense of urgency about the Jewish future. And we must build a Jewish future by building bridges to other Jews.