

Why We Still Need the Synagogue and Always Will

Once upon a time, I knew a young girl who loved her synagogue. Sometimes her family would frequently attend, and other times, it would feel like months between visits. This little girl was very busy with activities — sports and music, and later as a teen, honors and AP courses at school. One might say all of these activities kept her occupied, focused, and out of trouble. She had friends from her classes at school, but it was her friends from synagogue she looked forward to seeing the most. After all, it's not like she and her friends from school ever went very "deep" into their conversation. They mostly spoke about materials items, tv shows, and [cringe] other people. But her synagogue friends? They were with her when the rabbi asked them what they thought about God. They were there when the rabbi asked why they thought bad things happened to good people. They were there, with a look in their eye for direction, safety, and hope on the Rosh Hashanah after September 11th. Through this chance to gather in prayer, they grew closer. They were there at Torah study when they all had to crawl out of bed early on Saturday mornings to study some ancient text that was supposed to blow their minds...and some weeks it did! They were there during NFTY kallah screaming their heads off with 200 other Jewish teens. They were there on the confirmation trip to New York City and not only did they see the sites of the City, but as a class they spent a Shabbat together, packaging and handing out meals to those in need. This time together, doing sacred work, brought them even closer. Her synagogue friends were at the Confirmation service when the lights of the sanctuary were dim; only the sounds of their own breath could be heard as they

were called one by one to the ark to receive words of blessing from the rabbi. Those moments just do not happen without the synagogue.^[1]

All of those moments, those were the ones that sent this little girl down a spiritual path that brought deeper meaning to her life. Sure, there were the sports and the music that taught her discipline and the power of a hard work ethic. But as she grew older and those opportunities dissipated, she was left empty inside. Devoid of purpose. And so she returned to the one place she could find renewed inspiration and direction. She returned to synagogue. She returned to prayer. She returned to her sacred community. And no, she didn't recognize every tune, and there were even moments of discomfort trying to remember the motions of it all, but week after week, the muscle memory returned and the feelings of loneliness, life without a deeper meaning, and a lack of direction disappeared. Only this time, her peers weren't around her. And she longed for their return, reflecting on how much more powerful all of this could feel if simply a friend or two would join her.

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Years later, this girl went on to a new city and found herself celebrating Shabbat with her young adult peers in the same synagogue her father became bar mitzvah almost 40 years prior. She was married in that synagogue space, and she became a rabbi in that synagogue space — surrounded by history, family, friends, and the spirits of her ancestors.

In case you haven't figured it out by this moment, that young girl, that teenage girl, and that young adult were me. More importantly, maybe that was you too at different points in the

story, or maybe it's your child today, or maybe none of this was the spiritual path that you took or considered.

My parents gave me so much as a child, I was privileged to have material items, opportunities, and love, but making it a priority to belong and participate at synagogue, this was perhaps one of the greatest gifts they ever gave me.

On this Yom Kippur, the memories come flooding back as the melodies fill the space. This year, once again, doesn't look like years past, but the power of the day is no less present. As always, it is what we make of it. Even in the digital pixels of our existence your synagogue, our synagogue is here.

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I believe there are four reasons why we've remained strong and strengthened one another in these uncertain times: connection, continuity, culture, and community — let's call them the four Cs. These are the ways each of us can make the most of Temple Emanu-El.

Reason #1 to belong to a synagogue:

Connection

The synagogue connects us through meaningful relationships: to our ancient texts, to our community, to God, to something bigger than ourselves. If we've learned anything from the past 20 months of the pandemic, it's that deep relationships are what matter most in life.

I'm surprised and I'm not surprised by the number of young adults who have reached out to us in recent months to see what we're all about. Folks who just found us on the internet because they were ready to get out, connect, and meet people. They knew that the synagogue would be a safe and spiritual place to begin their search for connection. They feel safe because they know that once they walk through the synagogue doors they will have at least one thing in common with everyone in the room. They see the synagogue as a spiritual place because, in its simplest form, it is a designated space to talk to God, and they haven't touched base with God in a while. They recognized that there was something missing from their lives. They missed having a community. Maybe you have too. ^[1]_[SEP]

Perhaps you've asked yourself: "What can I get from my synagogue membership?" But Judaism transcends the consumerist approach of "what can we get for our money." We're not the gym you're either using or not using. We're not the car lease you're renewing or not renewing, and we're also not the country club where there are all of the trappings of community but lacking in the deep connection and sense of holiness. ^[1]_[SEP]

Ain kemach, ain torah — without sustenance, there is no torah, no Judaism. In many instances, including here, torah, with a small "t" is a generic catch all for all of Jewish text, not just the five books of Moses. *Ain kemach, ain torah*. But often not quoted, is the second part of the text, which reads in the reverse. *Ain torah, ain kemach*. Without torah, without Judaism, without a continual connection, there is no sustenance. Only through the synagogue does that lifelong torah-piece have the potential to begin and flourish. But you have to show up. The

edifice of a synagogue can stand for a lifetime, but if no one comes inside (even when the walls are online), then they'll miss all of that sustenance and all of that torah.

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Showing up inspires others to show up. Young children watch and listen to everything around them. They see when you've chosen to volunteer and spend time with your synagogue family over watching Sunday's football game that week. Torah is powerful, but connection is a two-way street. Both sides have to be active. None can be passive.

Reason #2 To belong to a synagogue:

Continuity

The continuity of the Jewish people is critical. The purpose of continuity shouldn't just be to continue. If we don't have a defined purpose, we should just pack up our bags and call it a day.

The teachings of our torah are a light unto the nations to build a better and more unified world.

I believe that we have brought light into the world because we were passed down a practice of study, of being in community, of discipline, of valuing human life, and working towards making the world a better place in our lifetime. The Jewish people's and Temple Emanu-El's mission is to move the world from where it is to where it needs to be. That is our purpose.{}
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And to move the world from where it is to where it needs to be we need sustained engagement.

We need generational connections. We need the synagogue.{}
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Today, I see lots of one-off experiences, pop-up events and attempts at à-la-carte Judaism.

These tactics capture a small moment in time — but they don't bring the brighter light of

torah. They aren't the solution to Jewish continuity. By contrast, the synagogue is designed to be the place where we find support and grow our Jewish identity from cradle to grave.

Reason #3 To belong to a synagogue:

Culture

The synagogue is the place for all who say: I believe in God, I have no clue what I think about God.. I don't believe in God, I'm not very religious, I'm more of a cultural Jew... I'm married to someone Jewish...but I'm not.

You don't need to fit into some perfectly prescribed box to be an active member of a synagogue. The synagogue is for all the ways you "do-Jewish." Many of us might identify as Cultural Jews. Cultural Judaism is an integral part of synagogue life. Our calendars are filled with things like cooking classes - where we learn about the history of Jewish foods as we cook; classes on the way Jewish writers influenced Broadway; semesters of Hebrew 101 and 102. God doesn't need to be present in every part of the synagogue for us to have a connection.

Maybe you have sat on the orange couch in my office and told me that "you aren't religious." To which I have responded: "It's not that you're not religious, it's that you are probably only looking at one definition of what it means to be religious." There's no reason that in 2021, when the largest Jewish movement in the United States is Reform Judaism, for the definition of "religious" to come from an Orthodox perspective.

Think about which aspects of Judaism you practice, the ways you are observant: Do you uphold responsible business ethics, do you treat your spouse with respect, are you raising your children in Jewish life, do you give back to those in need, when you encounter an injustice do you pursue justice? Do you celebrate with a wedding couple, mourn at a funeral...if you answered yes to some of these items, then I'd say you're religious, you're observant. By being here today you are religious — you're engaging with your religion. You are observant, you're observing Yom Kippur. `

Religious, observant, spiritual, cultural...all are welcome in the walls of this synagogue, wherever you are on your Jewish journey. Only through congregational life can we pass on that love to the next generation.

Reason #4 To belong to a synagogue:

Community

Perhaps you've overheard this conversation or seen it play out online: "Oooo Oooo, a synagogue? I'm not part of that—it's so expensive, I don't care for the rabbi, I'm part of this way cooler thing called: "fill in the blank."

Whether you have five kids, one kid, grown kids, grandkids, or no kids, the synagogue is your Jewish home as *B'ait Knesset*, the House of Assembly, *B'ait T'fillah*, the House of Prayer, and *B'ait Midrash*, the House of Learning ^[1]_[SEP]

From the *Beit Knesset*, The House of Assembly, our community decides how we will pursue justice in our world. When you move into action and volunteer with your synagogue, it's just not the same as when you volunteer with that friend of yours that you play tennis with every Monday. That's because, when you volunteer with your synagogue family, you're volunteering with people who have a history similar to yours; you've have traveled to Israel together; your kids became *b'nei mitzvah*; ya'll went through the conversion process at the same time; you sat next to one another at a service, and you offered a tissue to your neighbor as she cried trying to say the words of Mourner's Kaddish for her husband's first *yahrzeit*. That adds a whole other spiritual level to what it means to make the world a better place alongside people who have been on that journey with you.

The synagogue is also our *Beit T'filah*, our communal House of Prayer. Judaism makes it clear: We need ten people to recite kaddish and we need ten people to Read from the torah. We gather to mourn and to celebrate. It's the space where the tiniest in our community enter the covenant of the Jewish people, it's the space where our youth become bar and bat mitzvah, of weddings, all of these tremendously joyous milestones. And, it's the space we flocked to after the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Because we understand not only the power of the sacred space, but also the power of the prayers that remind us that we're not alone.^[1]_[SEP]

The synagogue is also our *Beit Midrash*, our House of Study. Here, we learn and bring those teachings into our homes so that our *mikdashai me'at*, our mini-sanctuaries, reflect the values

Judaism teaches us — because *ain torah, ain kemach*, without torah, there is no sustenance. If we don't start from the foundation of torah, then we will not be able to take our world from where it is to where it needs to be.

When we put together the recipe of those 4 Cs: connection, continuity, culture, and community, I think we've entered a wonderful synagogue, and I believe that this is the recipe that makes Temple Emanu-El so special.

Judaism is a journey that continues after one becomes *bar* or *bat mitzvah*. Unless you went into a science field, your knowledge of science remains at best the 12th grade level (though of course everyone on the internet is an expert these days). You wouldn't look for medical advice from people who stopped learning at age eighteen. The same is true of your Judaism! I'm not saying everyone here should become a rabbi. I am saying that if you've ever felt sad or embarrassed that you don't know how to answer questions your friends, co-workers, or children ask you about Judaism — then make understanding your holidays, your prayerbook, your theology, a priority! I'm being nudgey this year. I am asking that you move yourself, that we move ourselves from where we are to where we need to be on a Jewish level. We cannot do Judaism in a vacuum, it's not a solo sport. Let your synagogue community be your team. We're here.

“*Chaza Ve’ematz*,” “Be brave, and resolute,” Moses says to Joshua, come out of your comfort zone, rearrange your schedule, make the effort, make it an “uncancelable” event, and come to that 3-part class series on a topic of interest to you, join us for that inconveniently timed Simchat Torah celebration, come to a Friday night service once a month. I can’t tell you the number of times folks have come up to me after an event or service and said, “You know rabbi, I was so tired from work, I almost didn’t come, but I decided I’d attend, and I’m so grateful that I did. I feel refreshed.” That, my friends, is the combined power of those four Cs: connection, continuity, culture, and community. ^[1]_[SEP]

I’ll end with a story. It is said that in a mountain village in Europe many years ago there was a nobleman who spent a great deal of time contemplating what legacy he would leave to the people of his town. He decided to build a synagogue. At last, it was finished, and the townspeople came to inspect. No one could ever remember such a beautiful synagogue anywhere else in the world.

Suddenly one of the townspeople was troubled and spoke up. “Where are the lamps? Where are the lights? You forgot the lamps! How will we see?” The nobleman then pointed to brackets which were strategically placed all along the walls through every room and space of the synagogue. He then gave each family of the town a lamp as he explained, “Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp and light it. But each time you are not here,” he said, “a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you

are missing, some part of God's house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light."

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Bring your light to our community this year. Make 5782, under all the tricky circumstances we may face, a year of connection, continuity, culture, and community. We're here, don't just help us keep the lights on, come be the light.