

Who Are We to Become?¹

This past summer I found myself thinking a lot about the synagogue of my youth, where my family found *home* when we moved to a Philadelphia suburb when I was 10 years old. Congregation Or Ami, a small, young Reform congregation, led by an engaging modern rabbi, attracted families like ours, most of us recently situated in a sleepy, growing suburb that was on the brink of its contemporary becoming.

When my family joined Or Ami, the synagogue had a rather small, very plain building, as I recall it – several classrooms for the growing Hebrew school, a kitchen and social hall, and modest sanctuary. Sometime before my bat mitzvah the congregation embarked on a major building project, adding new space with a mid-twentieth century refined and beautiful sanctuary. That new sanctuary with the kitchen and social hall became a second home for us.

As the years progressed, my mother was sisterhood president and my father chaired various committees until he became the synagogue president. I taught in the Hebrew School from the time I was in high school and through my college years in the Philly area. Over time, my mother and father gained a lasting place of honor on the boards of small plaques honoring synagogue leaders. The “Tree of Life” installation in the social hall has a brass leaf inscribed to honor me, gifted by a bar mitzvah family whom I had taught.

1

When I say “home” synagogue, for me, this means all of what “home” connotes: comfort, connection, family, friends, history, stories. My three siblings didn’t follow me in becoming a regular synagogue person, but the experience of home influenced all of us profoundly.

I haven’t been to Or Ami in a couple decades, but I have a clear memory of my last visit there in the late 1990’s. By then the Jewish population of the area had grown and become more prosperous, and new needs and sensibilities about the worship space had brought about a second major phase of change—an expanded, redecorated sanctuary. It didn’t look the same as the synagogue of my youth.

While Or Ami is no longer home, it is a kind of home where my family’s memories are alive – while the space was the backdrop for all these memories, to me it was the connection to community that made it lasting home.

Those memories come with me here, to Ohavi Zedek. I have experienced synagogue differently from those of you who hold dear as precious the sacred space here as it has been since 1952. These differences reflect the diversity of our community and are a signpost for a much larger conversation we are having about what it means to be Ohavi Zedek, as a community. Who are we?

The answers to this question are complex, because like most synagogues, we are many things. And now we are asking, what is most important to us; what defines us as a sacred community? The answers are complex because

the landscape of American Judaism is shifting rapidly under our feet. What was meaningful, moving, inspiring and important to my generation, to the generation of my parents, of blessed memory, and to the generation of my children—all now in their 30's, has changed.

Our Imagine 2025 team has been listening and recording and shaping our vision. It is inspiring to see so many of you engaged in this process – it signals a bright future. And yet, none of this is happening in a vacuum. The Jewish community here in Burlington is evolving and the trends facing American Judaism and synagogues are felt all across the spectrum.

I recently read a stunning article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, entitled, “*Giving Up on God. The Global Decline of Religion.*”² It reports,

“Growing numbers of people no longer find religion a necessary source of support and meaning in their lives. Even the United States—long cited as proof that an economically advanced society can be strongly religious—has now joined other wealthy countries in moving away from religion. ... Modern societies have become less religious in part because they no longer need to uphold the kinds of gender and sexual norms that the major world religions have instilled for centuries.

² *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, “*Giving Up on God. The Global Decline of Religion.*” by Ronald F. Inglehart. September/October 2020

Since 2007, there has been a remarkably sharp trend away from religion. In virtually every high-income country, religion has continued to decline.”

This study notes that there is a dramatic shift away from religion in America. It used to be common to hear that the United States was one of the world’s more religious countries, as measured by affiliation with religious communities. But since 2007, “the United States has shown one of the largest moves away from religion of any country” which the authors have studied.

How is this explained? Some say this is the result of rising levels of economic and technological development. Yet, not surprisingly, they tell us that US politics accounts for some of the decline. ... “It once was generally assumed that religious beliefs shaped political views, not the other way around.” But recent trends are the opposite, where many people change their political views first and then become less religious.

As traditional religious affiliation and practice is declining, social and cultural norms are shifting to “fill the void.” As it happens, in “highly secure and secular countries, people are giving increasingly high priority to *self-expression and free choice*, with a growing emphasis on human rights, tolerance of outsiders, environmental protection, gender equality, and freedom of speech. “

These trends in who we are as Americans and American Jews are affecting us deeply. Earlier this year, along with Nat Lew and Jeff Potash, we presented a Lunch and Learn program on the changing face of American Jewry. I had collected two dozen recent articles on this topic, influenced by

recent trends, pandemic changes and the recent PEW study of the Jewish community, to help us be aware of the trends and the effects for us as a community.

In one, “*A Fresh Look at Who We Are and What That Means*,” Rabbi David Teutsch³ reflected on the notable category of increased numbers in the Pew report: **Jews of No Religion**. Teutsch advises, “We neglect the required reallocation of our priorities at our peril. Contrary to unhappy predictions about the future of the American Jewish community, the 2020 study of American Jewry recently released by the Pew Foundation shows that the size of American Jewry has actually increased.”

The category “Jews of No Religion” is now 40% of the population in the 18-29 age group. They name Jewish values and culture as the basis for their Jewish connections and in large numbers identify social justice as a focus of their concern.

How is this reflected in the changing landscape of Jewish communal life? Teutsch says that “There is a notable mismatch between what congregations do and what JNRs are interested in.” Most synagogues spend most of their budgets on worship, ritual and education. As the 20th century synagogue has evolved, staff time and building use are allocated according to the activities for which they are used.

Yet, JNRs also express interest in cultural activities. Jewish communities need to ask: What would it take to create vigorous, attractive cultural

³ A Fresh Look at *Who We Are and what the Means*.” David Teutsch. July 20, 2021 EJP.

programming? What time and energy from staff and volunteers? What financial investments? What marketing?

How can we build on the glory days of the past with lessons learned, while reflecting on the rapid changes advancing toward our future? Of course, our people's history and text speaks to this in many ways. In a recent devar Torah, Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, of JTS writes:

”Ideally, our errors become teachers and guides too. Of the many navigational technologies that the Israelites utilized in the wilderness, perhaps the oddest was the ark: “The Ark of the Covenant of Adonai traveled in front of them a three days’ distance, to seek out a resting place for them.” (10:33) This presents a difficulty. Elsewhere we learn that “the ark of the covenant of Moses and the Lord did not move from the midst of the camp.” How can the ark be in the middle of the camp, and also somewhere travelling by itself three days ahead? In solving the problem, the Midrash (Sifrei Bemidbar 82) offers a profound lesson in how we progress toward our goals. There were two arks: One (with the tablets) stayed in the middle of the camp. A second ark proceeded ahead to seek out the encampments. And what was in the second ark? The broken tablets, destroyed by Moses on seeing the Golden Calf (Ex 32:19).

“The path to the future moves through the past. ...The ark with our brokenness tells where we need to stop and wait—to explore the issues and places that need attention, rectification, and healing, in

order to move forward again in the right direction...It takes courage, patience and resilience.”⁴

Prominent historian of the American Jewish community, Jonathan Sarna, penned an article last year entitled, “***Enough Doom and Gloom: History shows American Judaism is much more resilient than you think***”⁵. Along with many other synagogues, we demonstrated our resilience by creating virtual experiences. And we are just beginning to learn the power of these tools. Sarna observes, “Zoom-services, classes, lectures and meetings are unlikely to disappear once the pandemic does. Instead, successful synagogues will likely offer both in-person and virtual services and events, thereby strengthening their reach and engaging shut-in or far-flung Jews previously excluded from synagogue life.”

These shifts to virtual and hybrid synagogue offerings that help us to connect are contrasted with shifting views regarding sacred space. Sarna observes, “Massive synagogue buildings, by contrast, are likely to be devalued after so many of them have stood shuttered for months.”

Change is afoot everywhere, and courageous leaders are breaking down barriers to create new possibilities. Sarna reports, “In the Boston area, for example, one synagogue transformed itself into an ambitious campus shared by multiple synagogues, Jewish organizational offices, and elderly housing, while another is contemplating plans to rent space to a local Jewish college.”

⁴ Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, “The Journey”, Devar Torah on Beha’atlotkha 5780.

⁵ “Enough Doom and Gloom: History shows American Judaism is much more resilient than you think”. May 2020. The Forward. Jonathan Sarna

Sarna imagines that perhaps other communities who once took pride in their beautiful synagogues may now “prefer to glory in how efficiently they use their space and find ways to trim back.”

“Mergers are inevitable in the wake of the current crisis.” Even before the pandemic began to transform Jewish community a trend was afoot in American Judaism for mergers. Not only is this happening for many synagogues, it is reality at the national level, with internal mergers within the denominational streams combining formerly separated arms serving congregations, rabbis, and seminaries.

These changes are not a demonstration of weakness or a disdain or disrespect for what the Jewish community built in the 20th century. Rather, they are a demonstration of resilience, strength, creativity, courage, and vision.

With all this change, what are *we* to become? In our May Lunch and Learn, the “New American Judaism” panel we asked these questions: “As we look ahead to life after the pandemic, many people are wondering what will be different in our lives. Will we go back to living the way we did before? And what if we do? Do we risk losing something we’ve learned from one long and terrifying year? For some the ordeal brought inner reflection about the meaning and shape of life. An awakening.”⁶

⁶ Emerging From the Coronavirus – The New York Times 4/21/21

A February article in the Jewish press⁷, ***The New American Judaism, How COVID, suburban migration, and technology are sweeping away legacy institutions and shaping a new 21st-century form of American Jewish identity***, told the story: “Today American Jews are in the midst of another epochal shift. In short, the classic 20th-century archetype of American Judaism as a culture concentrated in big metropolitan regions and organized around major institutions has come to an end.” In its place is the emergence of ad hoc or “fluid” religiosity. Younger Jew “increasingly seek to navigate their own paths to spiritual fulfillment outside denominational and synagogue loyalties.”

Having been a denominational leader for most of my career, the corollary impact on our national streams is a difficult, but very real truth: “the Reform and Conservative movements—vital for first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants who wanted to honor their traditions while fully assimilating into American culture —are now on the decline.”

In some sense they are victims of their own success. By providing a version of Jewishness that accommodated the demands and pulls of America’s modern commercial culture, they became less essential to subsequent generations that were already successfully assimilated.”

Millennial generation Jews are engaged in very different quests and questions than their parents and grandparent. “Depression-era Jews and their boomer children were both haunted and motivated by an overriding

⁷ The New American Judaism, How COVID, suburban migration, and technology are sweeping away legacy institutions and shaping a new 21st-century form of American Jewish identity By Joel Kotkin And Edward Heyman February 17, 2021

question: Will Judaism survive? But millennials ask, “why does it matter that we survive?” Their concern is for the future of humanity and their own spiritual journey.”

What constitutes Jewish identity today? The generational divide over this is dramatic. Andrés Spokoiny, CEO of Jewish Funders Network, suggests “Jewish identity” has become a useless concept, no more than a placeholder. Many have dropped it altogether and moved to a focus on Jewish peoplehood and mission. “The last update to our software was 100 years ago” leaving Jews, Spokoiny argues, in desperate need for a “reboot.”

In other words, what is needed now is for more than just a patch....toward a renewed conception of Judaism as integral to daily life and struggles.

“Often Jews discover Judaism through their personal quests and journeys—finding, as a seemingly belated surprise, that Judaism has something to say about their lives and circumstances after all.⁸”

“COVID-19 has opened “enormous opportunities to decide what comes next. There is loss but there is the possibility of what could be.”

Online Judaism, small “micro-communities” of learning and prayer are part of the new frontier. We are using our creative energies to engage and support our community in these ways. And in the coming years, our skill and success in these areas will be essential.

To continue thriving into the indefinite future, Judaism today, as in the past, must adapt to changing conditions, with synagogues playing a crucial

⁸ Rabbi Debra Ornstein

part in this evolution. “The role of Jewish institutions, most significantly the large communal synagogue, so critical to the movement and integration of newcomers to the society, will never be replaced entirely. Many of the most critical needs, including those of our most vulnerable groups, can only be fulfilled by strong capable institutions with the backing and logistical capacity to care for the elderly,” and families in need of our support in a variety of ways.

Who are we to become? Our Imagine 2025 team has been gathering reams of notes gleaned from dozens of meetings with you, our community. *They are inspiring!* The diversity of our community in age, religious background, religious needs and perspectives, and world view has been highlighted. Everything we are learning about ourselves will be essential to our planning for this year and the future. Along the way, we have the benefit of national reporting of trends and examples from other communities.

My motto for this year comes from Sarna, “Enough Doom and Gloom: History shows American Judaism is much more resilient than you think.” With resilience and courage, we will move forward in the right direction, as the Midrash imagines. Holding hands, with open hearts, we will find our way together, as we have begun to do. And the future will be bright, uplifting, and filled with joyous discovery. This, my friends, is and will remain *home!*

I look forward to the discoveries of the coming year as we work together for our future. Gemar Chatimah Tovah!

