

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO TRANSFORM THEIR SYNAGOGUES:

The Synagogue 2000 Approach

“The call for spirituality is a response to this age of freedom, where even the healthiest adults want to know that their lives have shape, that some values are eternal, that intellectual pursuit of ultimate questions is not in vain. It is the conviction that where once-mandated communities like extended families and long-term neighborhoods have largely collapsed, communities of choice called synagogues can be centers of vision, hope, insight, and care.”

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy, HUC-JIR/NY and co-founder of Synagogue 2000

Imagine a synagogue that is revitalized, personal, engaging even to marginal members, and genuinely welcoming; a synagogue with scores of support and study groups called Jewish Journey groups; a synagogue where everyone (not just the social action committee) can make a difference in the community. Synagogue 2000 is helping synagogues across the country become such communities of meaning, spirituality, and connectedness.

This innovative program, based at HUC-JIR/New York, was co-founded by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Professor of Liturgy at HUC-JIR/NY and Dr. Ron Wolfson, Professor of



Education, University of Judaism. Synagogue 2000 revisions synagogue life by wedding together a genuinely Jewish vision and a change management process; then providing demonstration conferences, curricula for synagogue study



teams, and change management consultants. It provides regular leadership meetings and seminars on such topics as sacred space, membership policies, and creating a healing community. Synagogue 2000 is increasingly being integrated into HUC-JIR's curriculum, so that future



professional leaders of congregations can become catalysts for positive change in Reform communities.



▲ *Students and congregational leaders at Synagogue 2000 conferences.*

Rabbi Hoffman conducts a year-long course on Synagogue 2000 which teaches 3rd year cantorial and 4th year rabbinical students the philosophy behind S2K (as Synagogue 2000 is

popularly known) and its path breaking approach toward realizing its goals.

Rabbi Hoffman prepares students to implement the ideals of Synagogue 2000 as leaders of their congregations. The first semester of his course focuses on practice and theory: the sociology of current American religion, general systems theory, and examples of successful religious organization along S2K models. The second semester turns to the theoretical and practical use of ritual, in particular, within the synagogue setting. Students participated in a one-day summer retreat with Rabbi Hoffman and their unanimous request for a third semester resulted in the expansion of the course.

Rabbi Hoffman transforms the class into his ideal synagogue setting. At the beginning of class (as at his proposed synagogue board meetings), students “check-in” and share news about their lives, building a caring community within a class which studies and prays together. Rabbi Hoffman emphasizes the importance of empowering laity (and students), rather than using a corporate model of hierarchical leadership. As a professor, he plays the role of the rabbi within a congregation. Rather than lecturing, he leads class discussions – setting an example for a rabbi dealing with a board. He promotes a flexible class which allows for changes in curriculum.

Students laud his efforts and the class, and explained how they intend to implement these processes into their future congregations – congregations that will be interested in transformation. Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk ('01) called the class a “learning lab for the [Synagogue 2000] curriculum.” Students praised the experience of rabbinical and cantorial students learning together. Cantor Kari Siegel-Eglash ('01) noted how “incredibly valuable the interaction was between rabbinical and cantorial students,” something that Nosanchuk

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A CENTURY AND MORE

Hebrew Poetry and the Swift Chariot

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This compressed history of ours—from the pre-historic ape to the techno man, to the reversal that the stopwatch is invented before chess—could probably only be believable in a poem. Just as the full strain of time's attack on each of us might itself best exist in the poetic heterocosm:

The Portrait:

The boy

Does not sit still,

And I can't quite capture his lines.

I draw one while the wrinkles in his face multiply

While I dip my pen

His lips twist and his hair becomes white

His bluing skin peels from his bones. And he disappears.

The old man is gone,

So what is to become of me.

Each of these poems exploits at least one glaring reference to ancient text: The portrait painter utters the very lines that jump from Reuven's self-concerned mind when he finds that the abused Joseph is missing from the pit. "Hayeled einenu, va'ani ana ani ba," The boy is gone, what will happen to me. (Reuven is the older brother responsible for his brother's well-being). Relying heavily on the gorgeous sound of that line in Hebrew, the poet not only appropriates a verse intended for a situation of the moment and powerful enough for a larger existential question, but he signals that the ancient lives within the present. "Likrat," even more elaborately mixes the ancient world with the present, and the port reminds us that the epoch (in Hebrew "Idan") was full of sun – an "Eden" indeed, which was perhaps not a garden, but an entire forest, not inhabited so much by people as by primates. But something happened, it began to get colder, and the apes have murmured their way towards clothing, stopwatches and chess – the tools of civilization that is modern life as we came to know it from the Middle Ages to the present. Modernity already?! Old age already!? Va-ani, ana ani ba? What of us? And what of us?

In Memoriam

John Bergreen, beloved son of Adele and Morris Bergreen.

Morris Bergreen, treasured member of the Board of Governors for more than three decades, member of the Executive Committee, Chair of the Library, Museum and Archives Committee, and President of the Skirball Foundation.

Rabbi Alan D. Bregman, esteemed alumnus of the Cincinnati School, Coordinator of Adult Jewish Living and Learning, and Director of Alumni Relations, HUC-JIR.

John Levine, beloved son of Aaron Levine, a member of the New York Board of Overseers.

Alter and Heschel on Jewish Time

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keeping the Sabbath was not only a ritual act: it was a statement of humanity's proper place in the world.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the Gerer *Rebbe* had looked with optimism at an almost unbridled human potential. Scarred by war and loss, Heschel kept faith with humanity, but held that we must acknowledge our submission to the passage of time, as we acknowledge the very presence of God who searches for us.

The style of Judaism reflected and refined at HUC-JIR over the last 125 years is far

away from Polish piety, but it has in common this same ambivalence towards human potential. We believe that humanity can make its mark on time, but we are alarmed at the idea of an all-powerful Superman, cut loose from the moorings of morality and the great anchor of time.

The story of the Jew in modernity is the story of this tension between the belief in human potential and the dread of human self-deification. Consciousness of time is not simply a mark of punctuality or an emblem of history. It is a safeguard for humanity.

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observed that they can extend to their synagogue lives. For applying what they learn in class, the students emphasized the importance of the details. Rabbi Philip Rice ('01) focused on the details for creating a friendlier environment in the synagogue by using a welcoming vocabulary, and placing signage that makes navigating within the building easier. He remarked that Synagogue 2000 is "really working. It's not just theory." Cantor Rosalie Will Boxt ('01) emphasized the process of taking people from where they are to where they want to go, stating that "each person needs to grow at his or her own level."

Synagogue 2000 speaks of a guiding acronym: "PISGAH" (literally, mountain summit), the initials which represent six areas where innovation is required – Prayer, Institutional Infrastructural Deepening, Study, Good Deeds, Ambience, and Healing. Reform, Conservative, and traditional congregations all across North America are currently implementing this unique cross-denominational approach to revitalizing the synagogue.

The class and the program are working. To become involved or for additional information, please contact Harriet Lewis at (212) 824-2228 or harriet@s2k.org.