

The American Synagogue Responds to Change

by Jonathan D. Sarna

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My assignment here is to trace the evolution of the American synagogue from the seventeenth century until the present — in forty minutes. By my calculation this leaves me just over seven seconds per year, which is not quite adequate for the task. So I have, of necessity, narrowed the subject to focus on how the American synagogue has, over time, responded to change. Within this context, I shall attempt to sketch out some of the major turning points in the history of the American synagogue in the hope that we can begin to understand how and why the synagogue changed over time, and how these changes shaped the American synagogue as we know it today.

The first American synagogue was founded in the late 17th century in New York City. Jews had settled in New Amsterdam (as New York was called under the Dutch) back in 1654, but by law, they could not worship publicly, only privately. This later changed, under the English, and by 1700, a rented piece of real estate on Mill Street

(now South William Street) had become known as the "Jews' Synagogue." The congregation's official name would be *Shearith Israel*, meaning "remnant of Israel" — an appropriate name (see Micah 2:12). The congregation still exists today and is popularly known as "The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue." In 1728, the members of *Shearith Israel* purchased a small parcel of land on Mill Street for a new synagogue. Consecrated on the seventh day of Passover, April 8, 1730, "it was the first structure designed and built to be a synagogue in continental North America." Appropriately, its name has gone down in history as "The First Mill Street Synagogue." Like all early American synagogues, and indeed most synagogues in Europe as well, *Shearith Israel* saw itself as a *kahal kadosh*, a holy congregation, an all embracing synagogue community. It was lay dominated — no ordained rabbis graced American pulpits until the 1840s — and it followed Sephardic (Spanish and Portuguese) ritual. This was maintained even though by 1720 the majority of American Jews were already of Ashkenazic (Germanic) descent.

The synagogue community had no legal standing in the colonies and Jews were not required to join it. As a practical matter, then, the congregation could, on many

issues, only act on the basis of consensus — a pattern that holds true for many American synagogues even today. But unlike our synagogues, the synagogue communities held a virtual monopoly on most aspects of Jewish religious life, including circumcisions, marriages and burials. This made it easier for them to enforce their authority through fines and threats of excommunication — the standard punishments meted out by synagogues throughout the western world. "In this phase of Jewish history," Martin Cohen writes, "the synagogue reinforced the basic values...which traditionally have shaped Jewish life. Socially it was the place where Jews met, commented on events, communicated their needs, planned their charities, adjudicated their disputes, and held their life cycle events. In the synagogue, bridegrooms were given recognition, mourners comforted, strangers fed and housed, and the *herem* or ban of excommunication, pronounced against recalcitrants."

The American Revolution brought about great changes in the American synagogue. By now America's Jewish population had grown to over one thousand, and there were five synagogues operating in the former colonies, one in each of the major communities where Jews

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lived. Jews themselves at this time were being buffeted by contemporary ideological currents. New values — democracy, liberty of conscience, church-state separation, and voluntarism — had won widespread approval. Synagogues, if they wanted to maintain their members, had to learn to adapt. I want to emphasize, albeit as an aside, that this is not just another case of Jews blindly following in the ways of the Gentiles, in conformity with the supposed rule of “as go the Gentiles so go the Jews.” Instead, here, and on many other occasions as well, Jews and Christians were both influenced by similar communal and cultural developments that all religions needed to respond to. We should be wary of dismissing as assimilation what might more appropriately be understood in terms of challenge and response.

How did synagogues respond? To begin with, they composed new synagogue constitutions. The very term constitution was an innovation; formerly, synagogues had called their governing regulations by the more traditional Jewish term of *Hascamoth*. The new documents contained large dollops of republican rhetoric and permitted more popular democracy within the synagogue than ever before. One constitution began, “We the members of K. K. *Shearith Israel*.” Another spoke of “we the subscribers of the Israelite religion resident in this place desirous of promoting divine worship,” and then proceeded to justify synagogue laws in staunchly American terms. Several synagogues also intro-

duced into their laws what they called a “bill of rights”: provisions that set forth members’ “rights and privileges” and made it easier for all members to attain synagogue office. Formerly synagogues had been run by a self-perpetuating elite that paid the bills and made the rules. In the post-Revolution era, at least at *Shearith Israel*, younger leaders emerged, among them, men of comparatively modest means. Interestingly, several synagogues now used a new term, “president,” to describe their leader, replacing the traditional Hebrew term *parnas*. At a very early stage, then, the American synagogue sought to harmonize itself with the values, traditions and even the standard vocabulary of the larger society.

With this in mind, we can begin to understand the next critical juncture in the history of the American synagogue — to my mind, the most important change that takes place from the beginning until now — and that is the move in the first half of the 19th century from synagogue community to community of synagogues.

Where for over a century each community had one synagogue and no more, a practice that unified Jews but stifled dissent, now communities would be divided among many different and competing synagogues. Philadelphia is the first city to have had two synagogues: a Sephardic synagogue, *Mikveh Israel*, was founded in 1771; an Ashkenazic synagogue, *Rodeph Sholom*, was established in 1802 (and possibly earlier). Why this second synagogue was founded is

unclear, but the name, meaning “pursuer of peace,” hints at the absence of communal peace; “shalom,” in most such cases, was more hope than reality.

More significant developments leading to the breakdown of the synagogue-community took place in 1824-5, when both in Charleston and New York, the power of the synagogue-community was challenged and effectively broken through secession. In both cities, the challenges came largely from young Jews, who were dissatisfied with synagogue life and worried that Judaism would not survive unless changes were introduced — a perennial theme. In both cases, they petitioned for change: the Charleston Jews sought fairly radical reforms, the New York

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Jews more moderate ones. In both cases their petitions were denied, and the dissenters did what religious dissenters of all kinds usually do in America: they formed their own congregations, *B'nai Jeshurun* in New York and the Reformed Society of Israelites in Charleston. This revolutionized American synagogue life and created the kind of synagogue pluralism that we know today. Henceforward, in larger communities, dissenters no longer needed to compromise their principles for the sake of consensus: they could withdraw and start their own synagogue — which they did time and again. In

New York, there were 2 synagogues in 1825, 4 in 1835, 10 in 1845, and over 20 in 1855. Some synagogues split several times over. Five important corollaries stem from this development:

(1) *De facto pluralism* — Although throughout the nineteenth century American Jewish leaders continually sought to unify Jews around a single custom, what Rabbi Isaac M. Wise liked to call *Minhag Amerika*, religious pluralism nevertheless became the reality that American Jews, like Protestants before them, had to contend with. Nineteenth-century Jews

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(like their Christian counterparts) considered this to be a great misfortune. In the twentieth-century, as American Jews embraced cultural pluralism as an alternative to the melting pot, many came to see the same development as a positive good, a key factor in preserving American Judaism from one generation to the next.

(2) *Competition* — The existence of multiple synagogues within one community naturally fostered competition for members. Synagogues thus had a new interest in minimizing dissent and keeping members satisfied. They emulated one another's successes, exploited failures, and instituted changes to

stave off membership losses. Synagogues that refused to compete disappeared.

(3) *The end of synagogue coercion* — Pluralism changed the balance of power between the synagogue and its members. Before, when there was but one synagogue in every community, it could take members for granted and discipline them, for they had no option but to obey. Now, Jews did have an option; in a sense, synagogues now needed them more than they needed any particular synagogue. As a result, by the mid-nineteenth century, synagogue by-laws listed punishments (fines) only for a small number of infractions — unexcused absences from meetings or funerals, unwillingness to accept proffered synagogue honors or gross breaches of discipline — and most fines were later remitted. The once much-feared *herem* (excommunication) virtually disappeared. Particularly where competition was sharpest, synagogues became more concerned with attracting members than with keeping them in line.

(4) *Ashkenazic predominance* — Sephardic synagogues suffered the most from the breakdown of the synagogue communities, for the conditions that had maintained Sephardic hegemony for more than a century after the *Sephardim* themselves became a minority now disappeared. Practically all of the new synagogues that arose were in one way or another Ashkenazic in custom (German rite, Polish rite, English rite etc.), and with the growing democratization of American Jewish life, the majority now ruled.

(5) *Communal reorganization* — Increasingly, American synagogues — autonomous congregations based upon ritual, ideological and region-of-birth differences — came to represent diversity in American Jewish life; they symbolized and promoted fragmentation. To bind the community together and carry out some of the functions that the now privatized and functionally delimited synagogues could no longer handle required new organizations capable of transcending these differences. So, beginning in the 1840s, philanthropic and fraternal organizations — *B'nai B'rith*, the Hebrew Benevolent Society, and others — moved in to fill the void. Henceforward, the community's structure mirrored the federalist pattern of the nation at large: balanced precariously in an eternal tension between unity and diversity. Within congregations themselves, the breakdown of the synagogue-community set off a period of enormous change. Pent-up dissatisfaction, fear for the future of Judaism, a desire to attract new members, the influence of European Reform Judaism and American Protestantism, a desire to win the respect of Americans for Judaism, and a sense that the synagogue had to come to terms with the realities of American life all resulted in a series of reforms that completely revolutionized synagogue life and worship. Throughout the country, synagogues moved more into line with Protestant-American religious norms in the hope that this would make them more appealing to the younger generation.

What kinds of changes were

introduced?

(1) *Rules concerning decorum and etiquette* — “The chaotic, self-governing congregation,” in the words of Leon Jick, now became “a training school in propriety.”

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Explicit rules, welcomed by most congregants, banned talking, spitting, loud kissing of *tzitzit*, walking around, standing together, conversing with neighbors, cracking jokes or “making fun.”

(2) *English language Bibles, prayer-books and prayers* — Most American Jews did not understand Hebrew; many could not even read the language. As a result, and probably influenced by the vernacular prayers of American Protestants, some expressed deep dissatisfaction with the traditional liturgy that contained no English whatsoever. Translations that individuals could read while the traditional Hebrew was intoned solved at least part of the problem. Many congregations also admitted selected English prayers into their worship service.

(3) *Regular vernacular sermons* — Sermons, the centerpiece of Protestant worship, were no more than occasional features of the traditional Sephardic liturgy, delivered only on special occasions, or when emissaries came from the holy land. The move to a regular weekly sermon in the vernacular

was inaugurated in 1830 by Isaac Leiser, the foremost traditionalist American Jewish leader of the early nineteenth century, and at the time the minister at Congregation *Mikveh Israel* in Philadelphia. His example was widely emulated.

(4) *Aesthetic improvements to the synagogue* — In an effort to make the synagogue more appealing, so that it might attract new members and proudly be displayed before Jews and Gentiles alike, architectural and aesthetic reforms were introduced aimed at transforming the synagogue from a simple house of prayer into a showpiece. The new focus on aesthetics affected not only the physical appearance of the synagogue, but also the worship itself, which now became more formal and performance-oriented. In addition to these reforms, which could still be justified on the basis of Jewish law, an increasing number of synagogues by mid-century initiated more radical changes. They feared that cosmetic alterations alone would be insufficient to preserve American Judaism for subsequent generations. Hoisting aloft the banner of Reform, these synagogues introduced far bolder innovations than had ever hitherto been sanctioned. The pace and extent of reform differed from synagogue to synagogue but generally speaking the changes included liturgical and theological innovations, increasing use of the vernacular, the introduction of an organ and a mixed choir, a shift from separate to mixed seating, and moves to abandon headcoverings, prayer shawls, and the second (“extra”) day of Jewish

holidays. For many Jews in the nineteenth century, the synagogue now became the central locus of religion, replacing the home where fewer and fewer ceremonies were observed. Indeed, traditional home ceremonies like candlelighting, *kiddush*, and *Sukkah* building were increasingly shifted into the synagogue.

This had particularly important implications for women, whose domain formerly had been the home. In the nineteenth century, they flocked to the synagogue, just as Protestant women flocked to church, and synagogues had to find ways of meeting their needs. Suddenly, and perhaps for the first time in history, some synagogues actually had more women in attendance on Saturday morning than men. The significance of all of this has only begun to be studied, but based on what we know already it seems safe to say that the impact of these women on the life of the synagogue was enormous.

East European Jewish immigrants, in the period of mass immigration (1881-1924), found the American synagogue alien, quite different from anything that they had experienced before. They therefore created their own *landsmanschaft* synagogues that at once linked them back to the old world, replicated many of the broad functions of the traditional synagogue-community (burial, sick care, etc.), and aided in their process of Americanization — in other words, the synagogue served as a “mediating structure” easing immigrants’ transition from old world to new. In time, these

synagogues underwent many of the same kinds of transformations experienced by the Sephardic and Ashkenazic synagogues of the previous century. Showpiece synagogues, performance-oriented Judaism, a heavy emphasis on decorum, and a liturgy spiced with English and highlighted by a weekly sermon all came to characterize the congregational life of East European Jews too, with further changes later introduced for the sake of their children.

By the end of the 19th century a full spectrum of synagogues dotted the American landscape, everything from traditionalist Orthodox to middle-of-the-road Conservative to innovative Reform. Synagogues proliferated, competing with one another and catering to different tastes and needs. For all the talk of unity, diversity had actually become institutionalized through different movements, although synagogues still preserved their own individual autonomy. What did unite synagogues — and what in my opinion continues to unite them — was the determination to preserve Judaism, to keep it alive for the next generation. There was, of course, no agreement as to how to do this. Instead, different synagogues pursued different strategies directed, in the end, toward this one common aim. This brings me, finally, to twentieth century developments in the American synagogue, which I can do no more than outline. Were more time available, these would be the themes that I would seek to explore in detail, keeping in mind that many of them have nineteenth century roots:

(1) *Professionalization* — Rabbis, cantors and synagogue administrators have all become professionals over the past century, complete with their own professional training schools and their own professional organizations. This has improved their status and pay, but has tended to create a “professional distance” between them and those whom they serve. It has also tended to make the whole atmosphere of the synagogue much more business-like — so much so that many contemporary synagogues are run on a corporate basis, with charters, board rooms, and a chairman of the board.

(2) *Synagogue involvement in social action* — Influenced by the Protestant Social Gospel and the challenge posed by Felix Adler’s Ethical Culture Movement, this movement in synagogue life has attempted to prove that Judaism is no less concerned than Christianity about the ills of our society, and that one need not abandon Judaism in order to become socially active. It also offers those who find regular worship unappealing a way of involving themselves “Jewishly” in a religiously-sanctioned manner.

(3) *The synagogue-center movement* — This effort to broaden the reach of the synagogue by turning it into a full-fledged community center, or *bet am* — a place where organizations could meet, recreation and education take place, and Jews could socialize with their peers — has deep roots in Jewish tradition, even as we have seen, in American synagogue history itself. It also was strongly influenced by the Protestant institutional church

movement, by a perceived need to involve the synagogue in the effort to solve urban problems, and most of all by the need to find some way of luring the disaffected children of Jewish immigrants back into the synagogue. The movement was championed

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(but not originated) by Mordecai Kaplan, and has had an enormous influence on all American synagogues, by encouraging them to broaden their activities into areas that they had previously neglected.

(4) *Pastoral care* — The allure of Christian Science, and the popularity of such books as Joshua Loth Liebman’s *Peace of Mind*, demonstrated the demand on the part of American Jews for psychological guidance from their religious leaders. Responding to this need, seminaries introduced into their curricula new courses in pastoral psychology, while synagogues encouraged their rabbis to use their new skills by setting time aside for pastoral counseling. This represented a further broadening of the synagogue’s role, and serves as an excellent illustration of the process by which the twentieth century synagogue confronted new challenges and met them successfully.

(5) *Child-centeredness* — One of the major objectives of the twentieth-century synagogue has been to

instill Jewish consciousness into school-age youngsters. More adults affiliate with the synagogue when their children reach school age than at any other time, and they do so in the hope that the synagogue can inspire their youngsters to maintain Judaism later on, when they grow up. To meet this challenge, synagogues have become increasingly child-centered. Activities, rituals, and even the worship service itself are frequently arranged with children in mind.

(6) *Feminism* — The feminist movement has affected American synagogues of all types in a wide variety of ways. More women than ever before play important roles in the life of the synagogue — as rabbis, cantors, officers, or in other capacities — and more women expect to be treated equally in all aspects of Jewish law and practice. Synagogues have become more conscious of women's issues, more sensitive to "sexist language," and more innovative in their approach to women's rituals and spirituality.

Indeed, feminism may well prove to be the most far-reaching of all the challenges that the twentieth-century synagogue encounters.

7) *Privatization* — While less noticed than any of the other themes that I have touched upon, privatization has made a major impact on contemporary synagogue life by emphasizing family at the expense of community and by elevating intimacy into a spiritual goal. This development is particularly apparent in architecture where "intimate settings," far back from the street and nestled among the trees, have become the favorite locales for new synagogue buildings.

Within the synagogue, joyous family celebrations are now more often than not private events, shared only with family and friends, not with other worshippers. The *havurah* movement and the proliferation of Orthodox *stieblikh* seem to me to reflect, in part, a similar search for intimacy. Indeed, Harold Schulweis, who sees "the primary task on the agenda of the synagogue" to be

"the humanization and personalization of the temple," once described the *havurah* as a "surrogate for the eroded extended family." This is a far cry from the synagogue-as-community idea that was for so many years pervasive. In conclusion, then, we have seen that the synagogue has been the staging ground for the some of the central dramas of American Jewish history. Challenges of every manner and shape arose over time, and for the most part synagogues responded to them — sometimes in distinctly different ways. Those synagogues that could not meet these challenges and did not keep pace with their communities did not long survive; perhaps they are deservedly forgotten. But those that did survive — and flourish — did so because they evolved as their members evolved. And, significantly, they evolved in diverse ways reflecting the diversity of the American Jewish community itself. □