

Rabbi's Reflections: There's No Business Like Shul Business

A synagogue is more than a building. A shul is as much a value as other values about which I've written. At the synagogue's core is God, of course, but as the name itself implies, it is based on its people: synagogue is Greek for the Hebrew *bet k'nesset*, assembly house. The leaders' obligation is to ensure that we fulfill this double function.

Running a shul is unlike running any other business. If we truly run it along commercial lines using business models, we will close our doors because a shul is, at a minimum, a people oriented business. We cannot calculate the benefit we provide; yet we must raise income and watch expenses or we will close. If we only run it like a business, we will turn off our members.

Two stories: one of my former shul's wanted to shorten the office manager's hours to save money figuring we did not need her during Hebrew School. At my request, she tracked donations from people dropping in to say hi and ask what is new during these hours. The donations easily paid for her time, and a quick survey found that they otherwise would not have contributed because either they had not known news or, if elsewhere when they learned it, would have bought a cheaper store card or phoned or written a note. With a donation on the spot, we received the money and they never put it on their to do list. A former shul wanted the custodian to stop helping people because he was a gabber and a slacker, though eventually he did the work. Members complained, noting that they stayed longer if he made coffee, more people came by, and they donated more to the shul and the rummage sale (especially if he shlepped).

Even in the early days, shuls, like other worship places, had other functions besides worship. One strange synagogue role was as a bank where people stored their valuables. Until recently, worship places kept open their doors all the time. People prayed, studied, connected with other people, asked the clergy or other peoples' advice (some people want a Jewish opinion but not the rabbi's). People came to the shul at various times for all sorts of reasons, not just "religious" ones, which is all that some people now see as legitimate Jewish business (seeing a difference between "religious" and "secular" is a very Christian idea, yet churches still open during the week for "secular" reasons). Jews come to shul to be part of a larger picture, because all Jews are family. What we do and who we are is being connected to Jews around the world and across time. As we become more transient, the shul becomes more necessary.

People come when things are bad, and good. They come for the Jewish answers and for the community. They find it in the people around them and in the Bible. Lost a job? Adam lost his, and Noah, and Abraham (once in Ur and a second time he lost a partner, Lot). Lost money and a child? Job lost his money, his health and his children. Jacob lost a wife and a son. Isaac stopped talking to his dad and wife about important things. Outlived your contemporaries, growing old and weak? King David needed the beautiful hired companion, Avishag, to attend him and keep him warm, and at his age he did not care. Few people have children like his. The synagogue is supposed to teach and then live certain values. Accordingly, people come to the shul to learn and to connect

because we are part of something larger and, as part of it, we are expected to practice what we teach, and to live it out in a community to which we all connect.

Reform Judaism in 1991 wrote about ethics, including “Ten Commandments for the Synagogue. 1) The synagogue is a teacher of values whose actions must take into account Jewish ethics. 2) Synagogue leaders shall view themselves not as business managers but as trustees of Jewish tradition. 3) Synagogues’ decisions and activities must respect and comply with appropriate laws. 4) Synagogue honors shall take into consideration the Jewish values of the recipients. 5) Synagogue staff shall receive fair wages and benefits and be provided safe work environments. 6) Synagogue leaders shall make decisions in an open and honest manner while providing reasonable opportunities for input. 7) Members shall be treated equally and with respect. 8) You shall honor and not overwork your leadership and staff. 9) You shall maintain private information in strict confidence and not engage in gossip. 10) You shall engage in tikkun olam within the community.”

In this, all congregations regardless of affiliation are alike. A recession does not ask about a shul’s view of revelation and law, its seating policy, its stand on musical instruments. We are all in it together. We cannot put a price tag on celebration and consolation, learning and practice, treatment of young and old, feeling connected and belonging. Precisely because we are a synagogue we cannot price the emotional good and the community we foster when we do these things correctly, or the cost of the harm we both cause and incur when we loosen these connections and displease people. Naturally we have expenses to fulfill these roles. Of course, the more we offend people the less money we raise, because their emotions color the request for funds, assuming that they do not quit. A shul must weigh the services we provide with the expenses of operating them, and strike the delicate balance between the value of things and the cost of things. This is why right after teaching Torah, with the scroll still out and before we put it away, we ask God to bless “those who dedicate synagogues for prayer and those who enter them to pray, and those who give funds for heat and light, and wine for kiddush and havdalah, bread to the wayfarer and charity to the poor; and all who devotedly involve themselves with the needs of this community and the Land of Israel.” Keep using the synagogue, but support it as well, always remembering that we are Jews, our values are Jewish, and, accordingly, we do things in a Jewish way.

----- Rabbi Michael Rascoe