

THIS MONTH'S CONVERSATION: **Settled & Unsettled**

SYNAGOGUE MEMBERSHIP: WHAT'S THE DEAL?

General

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SARA MOORE LITT

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I have been involved in synagogue leadership for many years as a board member, executive committee member, congregation president, and board chair. You can trust me, then, when I tell you that if you are a Jewish consumer looking for value in any traditional cost/benefit sense, don't join a synagogue. It is expensive and you can get almost all the benefits synagogues purport to offer members either for free or at a much lower cost if you buy them a la carte.

Think about it: You can attend Shabbat services for free and High Holiday services are generally available for individual purchase; classes are often open to nonmembers for an insignificant price differential; in any given year, you're unlikely to require a rabbi for a wedding or a funeral (and a recent trend is to have a layperson officiate at these milestones); and you can rent a rabbi for a private bar/bat mitzvah service for your child. So why fork over thousands of dollars every year to pay for something you can get otherwise for much less?

Why? This is the question that most synagogue membership committees and most rabbis fail to address. I have been privileged for the past 25 years to belong to a synagogue, B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) in Manhattan, which makes this the central question of its institutional existence.

The story of B'nai Jeshurun's explosive growth and of the regular, intense commitment of its members is known to many in the Jewish world. From a moribund congregation of fewer than 100 members in 1985, BJ has grown to almost 4,000 members today. More impressive than its size is the level of active engagement of its members. Every Shabbat, hundreds of people participate in BJ's services and about 1,000 members volunteer in some aspect of community life each year.

When I was president of BJ, other synagogue presidents would call and ask me how we did it. What was the membership strategy we employed to attract so many dues-paying members at a time when synagogue membership and participation were declining nationally? Could they get a copy of our membership materials? How could they fill their seats, not only on the holidays but every Shabbat?

In response to these kinds of appeals, BJ's rabbis wrote an article, "Take BJ from its Rabbis' Point of View."¹ In it, they explain that there are no tricks of the trade to improve synagogue membership. Rather, they had learned that synagogues must simply offer "a passionately held and expressed vision about the meaning of Jewish life and what it means to be a Jew." They point to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's teachings as a guide to embracing "a vision of a dynamic, vibrant, compelling Judaism that finds its home in the synagogue, but whose message is lived inside and outside the synagogue walls."

Reflecting on their years at the synagogue, the rabbis concluded:

No one cares about a Judaism that reflects just a habit or some pale version of the past... Only a Judaism that has something deep, meaningful and relevant to say about life — that challenges the mind and soul, that is open and tolerant — can have a chance.

While this would seem obvious, how many of our own synagogues and other Jewish communities offer such a vision? In my experience, we hear a lot about "continuity," but not much about why continuity matters. We hear a lot about the frightening trends of children of intermarried couples not identifying as Jews, but little about why any of our children should choose to remain Jewish.

Like all synagogue members, those at BJ love to complain. And, like all synagogue presidents, I have heard it all: The bagels at kiddush are hard; there is too much of this kind of programming and not enough of that kind; one of the rabbis said something with which they didn't agree. But what keeps all of us renewing our memberships despite the complaints is that we have found a place where we can confront the central questions of our existence. When that happens, the synagogue becomes a place where we connect to something larger than ourselves — to our community, to ideas that can transform our world, and even to a transcendent experience.

If you join that kind of synagogue, membership dues are a bargain and not a burden. They become, in consumer language, a value proposition. These intangible benefits of membership are the only ones that make the high dollar cost of being a synagogue member "worth it." Anything less is a bad deal.

¹ www.bj.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/bj_rabbis_article.pdf

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Sara Moore Litt is a lawyer and nonprofit consultant currently living in Park City, Utah. In addition to having been the president and chair of B'nai Jeshurun's board, she has served on the board and executive committee of the American Jewish World Service.

