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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
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Transforming Synagogue Member Relationship

A few years ago, Judy and I visited the Tenement Museum in New York City. The Tenement Museum is located on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is housed in an 1863 apartment building that was retrofitted to look as it did during the early years of European immigration to America.

There are several guided tours you can take. The tours are based on the lives of former residents. Judy and I chose to visit the apartment of an Eastern European Jewish family that immigrated to America at the turn of the century. It was a fascinating and informative experience. I highly recommend a visit to the Tenement Museum if you are in New York.

Toward the end of the tour, as we neared the exit, we passed several display cases filled with artifacts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One exhibit caught my eye. It was a High Holy Day ticket from the early 1900's. It contained the price of the ticket plus several tear-off stubs for each day of the holiday service.

I laughed and thought to myself: even back then Jews had to "Pay to Pray."

For as long as I can remember, synagogues have had a "love – hate" relationship with High Holy Day tickets.

What is the origin of this remarkably strange custom of demanding that Jews pay for and present tickets to enter High Holy Day service tickets, much as one would for a movie or play?

The High Holy Days are the one time of year that most Jews feel the need to be in a synagogue. Even my grandmother, who was about as secular a Jew as one could find, bought a ticket so that she could say *Yizkor* prayers on Yom Kippur. Otherwise, she never entered a synagogue.

Although there are “pop-up” services that only operate only on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, most congregations function all year long. Synagogues correctly assert that those who attend only on the High Holy Days are taking advantage of a structure that is sustained by synagogue members on a year-round basis. Boards of Directors want to insure that those Jews who attend only three or less days a year contribute to the community’s ongoing operation. Since these “three-day-a-year Jews” cannot always be trusted to make an appropriate donation, synagogues charge them instead. Synagogues issue tickets to insure that only those who have contributed financially to the congregation, either through membership or by paying an appropriate fee, are entitled to enter the sanctuary.

I understand the logic behind issuing High Holy Day tickets, but it saddens me that that this “pay to pray” or “pay your way” policy and mentality is an impediment for Jews who wish to worship on the holidays. Worse than that, “pay to pray” or “pay your way” has become an integral financial tenet of synagogue life. It is this philosophy that underlies the financial structure of most modern synagogues.

Today one becomes a member of a synagogue by paying “dues.” That is, synagogues set fees that Jews must pay to become members of the congregational community. To be sure, there may be different dues structures – that is, different amounts charged depending on your life status: single, married, widowed, senior, young

couple, young adult, young adult living at home, recent college graduate, parents of college graduate who has moved back home, etc., but membership is established through the transfer of money. The relationship between the congregant and congregation is defined in dollars. If one pays “X,” then one receives “Y.” Whether or not one is a member of a congregation has nothing to do with participation in congregational life. It is dependent on whether or not you pay your dues.

Almost every synagogue claims that no one is turned away because of financial hardship, but the methodology for dealing with financial hardship is often onerous and embarrassing. Those asking for reduced dues may be given forms to fill out, asked to detail their finances, and asked to justify their request for “assistance.” Some congregations require the individual to appear before a committee to plead their case. Some even ask for income tax forms.

The very names given to the committees that deal with financial hardships are foreboding, names such as the “Dues and Adjustment Committee.” It’s painful enough to be in difficult financial straits, without having to appear before a committee of synagogue officers who insist that you open your books and pour out your heart before they allow you to become a member of their religious community.

Synagogues often complain about the “fee for service” mentality that pervades modern congregational life. Today many Jews don’t want to support a community. They want to pay for the specific services they require: Torah School, Bar and Bat Mitzvah, weddings, funerals, *B’rit Milah* and baby namings. They don’t think of synagogues as religious communities but rather as McDonalds or Burger King, or any other business that offers something they need. They want to “have it their way” without the

inconvenience and cost of contributing toward the wellbeing of the rest of the Jewish community.

Truth be told, synagogues often operate in ways which reinforce and encourage this relationship. They do that by charging dues. By setting up obligatory fee structures for memberships, synagogues have helped create the mindset that a synagogue is a business or a club, where one receives benefits for fees paid, rather than a religious community.

In the first High Holy Day sermon I gave at Tifereth Israel during my second year as the congregation's Associate Rabbi, I asked the question: is a synagogue a business or religious community? I discussed extensively the Talmudic dictum: *im ein kemach, ein Torah*, "if there is no bread, there is no Torah." I went on to talk about the financial requirements of running Tifereth Israel, and about dues, High Holy Day appeals, fund-raising, etc.

Some of the leadership of the congregation was furious with me. They thought that my observations about the then public "out loud" High Holy Day appeal would lead to fewer donations. (Believe it or not, twenty-five years ago we used to stop in the middle of the Yom Kippur service to solicit verbal pledges from the congregation. You know, when Max Cohen would stand up and say, "I want to donate \$5,000 to the synagogue in memory of my wife, Ethel – anonymous!") Fortunately for my future here, the appeal did quite well that year.

At the end of my sermon I concluded that a synagogue is both: It is a religious community, but it also has to be run as a business in order to survive.

Many years later I have changed my mind. Today I believe that a synagogue is a religious community and not a business. Our mission is to serve the spiritual, educational, cultural, and social needs of our members. To be sure, synagogues need to bring in funds to meet those needs, but the business of operating a synagogue exists only to support, and is subsidiary to its mission of serving Jews and the Jewish community.

Dues structures obscure that mission. They direct congregants to focus on their financial relationship, rather than their spiritual and communal relationship with their congregation.

I believe that Tifereth Israel's change from a "fee-based" to a voluntary system of support has the potential of changing our members' relationship with their congregation. We are no longer asking Jews to pay a fee to support an institution, but rather to perform an act of goodness and generosity, to perform a *mitzvah*, to give *tzedakah* to support a religious community. Your contribution is an act of kindness and of love, and is accepted without challenge or criticism.

We named this approach *T'rumah*, based on the passage in the book of Exodus in which Moses charges the Israelites to build the *Mishkan*, the traveling Tent of Worship that accompanied them on their journey through the desert.

דָּבַר אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחֵהוּ לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל־אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנֵהוּ לִבּוֹ תִקְחוּ אֶת־תְּרוּמָתִי :

"The Lord spoke to Moses saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves them." (Ex. 25:3)

There are two key elements in this short passage that I want to emphasize. The first is that the Israelites were not taxed to build the *Mishkan*, but were asked to contribute gifts, to bring free-will offerings as their hearts so moved them, at whatever

amount they felt appropriate. Our tradition tells us that they were moved by the sacredness of their task and did not contribute minimally, but beyond the best of their ability.

Secondly, although these gifts were at face value for building the *Mishkan*, their true purpose was to honor God. The sole function of the *Mishkan* was to be a place to serve God.

This is something we don't emphasize enough when we ask Jews to support synagogues. We speak about educating children, *tikun olam*, about keeping the lights on and the doors open, but we forget to remind them that a synagogue is, first and foremost, a House of God. This is what the words of the prophet Isaiah, inscribed on the wall of our sanctuary next to David's Harp, remind us every time we enter here:

כִּי בֵּיתִי בַּיְתֵיכֶם יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים :

“For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.” (Isaiah 56:7)

Everything we do here should honor God. That goes not only for Shabbat and holiday services, and our preschool, Torah School, and Adult Education programs, but our social programs, as well. Whenever we gather, we need to be aware that God's Presence is here, and it is our coming together as a community that makes God's Presence manifest.

Tifereth Israel Synagogue exists first and foremost as a House of God.

I hope and pray that our change from a mandatory to a voluntary mode of supporting our congregation will help us to once again focus on “why,” on the holiness of the task, instead of the “how,” the methodology Jews employ to build and sustain synagogues.

Equally important, I hope that this change to a *tzedakah* and *mitzvah* form of support will help us refocus our concern from money to each other. Tifereth Israel membership should not be defined by money. It should be defined by how much we care about each other.

We are not members of a country club who pay a fee for a service, receive a service, and know and care little about our fellow members. We are a religious and spiritual community whose members should care about and love each other, who should support each other in times of need and celebrate with each other in times of joy. We should participate in each other's Shiva *minyans*, and send cards or gifts when we learn of an illness or a *simcha*. We should join together on Shabbat to pray and learn with the community and attend social events not because we are obligated, but because we want to be with each other.

Our membership in this community should not be a function of wallets, but of our hearts. Sure, giving financially is important, but not nearly as important as giving emotionally and spiritually, of truly connecting with one another, and loving our faith and our traditions.

This year our congregation is engaged in a grand experiment. We are redefining our congregants' financial relationship with Tifereth Israel Synagogue. But that's not enough. We also need to redefine our personal relationship with each other. When we say that we are members of Tifereth Israel Synagogue let us no longer only mean that we are supporting this congregation with our money, but that we are also supporting, caring for, and loving one another.