

The Binds that Tie:

Creating a Virtuous Cycle of Commitment through Communal Expectations*

A renaissance is occurring in Reform Judaism. Reform synagogues are not content to be a stepping-stone, a place to learn basic Judaism but from which one must “graduate” in order to live a fully Jewish life. Nor are they willing to allow the most committed liberal Jews, finding no movement both sufficiently intense and compatible with their progressive values, to abandon Judaism altogether for alternative modes of spiritual life. To counter such trends the Reform movement has worked to build vibrant religious communities that attract highly committed Jews and inspire ever greater levels of commitment among congregants.

Over a decade of innovative programming and hard work by Jewish professionals has sparked this renewal. Programs such as the Experiment in Congregational Education, Synagogue 2000, and family education have helped shape visions, inspire passionate worship, and revitalize education. Reaching out to highly committed Jews and fostering increasing levels of Jewish commitment requires creative programs and a complementary institutional design. Indeed, one of the six “spokes” of Synagogue 2000’s program is “institutionalizing change.”¹ And it is here, in creating institutional design that will lead to greater commitment, that insights from the economics and sociology of religion can teach important lessons.

How should a synagogue whose goals are to inspire high commitment among its members and to attract the most committed liberal Jews be structured? Social scientists argue that high levels of commitment are only sustainable in religious organizations when members are required to meet significant communal expectations.² This is a condition unique to community based organizations and is particularly important for religions because spiritual life requires not only personal devotion but a committed community.

When communal expectations exist, only committed Jews, who are excited about Jewish involvement, are willing to fulfill them. Uncommitted Jews, reluctant to devote additional time to Jewish life, look elsewhere for religious affiliation. Thus, a group that imposes such expectations will have a high level of commitment and enthusiasm among its members. These members benefit spiritually, not only because of their personal dedication, but also because they are surrounded by other committed people. This creates a virtuous cycle: as individuals increase their participation they get more out of participating, and the community becomes stronger and more attractive to other highly committed people. Further, the vibrancy of such a community may inspire those who were less committed to increase their involvement. Thus, while it is set in motion by the somewhat exclusionary act of establishing communal expectations, the virtuous cycle may ultimately create greater inclusion, energy, and commitment.

The communal expectations which kept traditional Judaism strong for millennia included restrictions on dress and food, communal insularity, and *halakhic* observance. Reform Judaism transferred these aspects of Jewish life from the realm of mandatory practice to that of autonomous choice, and did not replace them with other mandatory practices. Thus, as a by-product of Reform philosophy, a key institutional feature of Jewish life was removed. Reform synagogues have struggled with apathy precisely because there are no obligations associated with membership.³ New communal expectations, more consistent with progressive values than the *Halakha*, can play an important role in the ongoing revitalization of Reform synagogues.

Commitment and Communal Expectations

A religious community is formed and sustained by committed individuals. At a mundane level, committees must be staffed, programs planned, life-cycle events observed, etc. On a deeper

level, the Jewish religious experience is fundamentally communal. A Jew needs a minyan to pray, a *chevrutah* to study, and friends with whom to rejoice. There is a spiritual depth that can be reached only when surrounded by others who share one's religious commitment. Spiritual satisfaction is a function not only of one's personal level of commitment but of the commitment of one's spiritual fellow travelers as well.

The spiritual experience of the core group of committed Jews within a community can be undermined by the presence of a large group of uncommitted members. Examples abound in the lives of synagogues struggling with apathy. High-level learning that requires knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic is often not available because the majority of congregants could not participate. *Davening*, particularly at times when the entire congregation prays together, such as the High Holidays, is geared towards a congregation not familiar with the prayer service. Religious school is taught under the assumption that students have little experience of Jewish life at home. This can lead to frustration among knowledgeable and committed congregants (who are, additionally, often doing more than their fair share of organizational and administrative work) and dissuade potential new members, searching for a serious spiritual home, from choosing the synagogue community. This creates a vicious cycle in which low levels of commitment spiral into ever lower levels as the most committed are alienated.

How can a liberal synagogue achieve the high level of commitment that is essential to break this cycle? By building communal expectations into its institutional structure. When a community imposes expectations, the uncommitted cannot reap benefits without assuming responsibilities. Only the committed will join. Indeed, committed people who were reluctant to join other communities because of the low level of commitment among their members may be attracted to a community that ensures a high level of commitment through communal

expectations. The level of religious sophistication in the community will grow as members become more knowledgeable and involved. Further, as the community becomes increasingly vibrant, some people who were initially unwilling to fulfill the communal expectations will choose to make this greater level of commitment in order to join. Commitment will spiral into even greater commitment. Communal expectations are the lynch pin of this virtuous cycle.

In this sense, religious organizations are unique. Social scientists have generally argued that for an organization to be sustainable, members must receive benefits from which non-members are excluded and that those benefits must exceed the costs of membership.⁴ The implication of this logic, in general, is that organizations wish to limit costs. Religious organizations are special because they may not want to limit costs. This is because part of the benefit of membership involves being surrounded by other committed people and, as I have argued, a high level of communal commitment cannot be achieved without communal expectations (that is, costs). Thus, by imposing such expectations, religions actually increase the satisfaction members achieve by increasing the overall level of commitment in the community.

There is abundant empirical evidence that religious organizations that have more stringent expectations attract more committed members than do less demanding groups. This relationship has been identified among Protestant denominations,⁵ nineteenth century utopian communes,⁶ and the movements of Judaism.⁷

Indeed, many members of the burgeoning group of highly dynamic Reform synagogues—where worship is vibrant, education deep, and commitment high—encourage lay leadership of prayer, offer family education that requires adults as well as children to make a commitment to Jewish learning, or develop other such innovations. As will be discussed below, many of these programs already implicitly incorporate communal expectations, which partially

explains their success. Nonetheless, explicit awareness of how communal expectations contribute to successful programs is valuable both for further developing such programs and for learning how to effectively design new programs and institutions geared toward fostering high levels of commitment.

Where Have all the Communal Expectations Gone?

Judaism has, at least tacitly, recognized the importance of communal expectations for millennia. The tradition is rich with obligations that serve both to ensure commitment and to enrich our religious lives. As mentioned earlier, Reform Judaism transformed traditional expectations such as knowledge of Hebrew, wearing a *kipah*, *kashrut*, regular study and worship, and general *halakhic* observance into autonomous choices. The unintended consequence of this philosophical liberalization was to eliminate an essential institutional feature.

This does not imply that we must revert to *halakhic* observance. Instead, we should consider alternative forms of communal expectations with which Reform Jews would be philosophically comfortable but which would also provide the institutional structure to help build strong communities.

What communal expectations might look like in a Reform context

Obligatory communal expectations have generally been associated with conservative and fundamentalist religions. However, if chosen carefully, such expectations need not be inconsistent with liberal philosophy. Indeed, although they rejected *halakhic* obligation, the early Reformers were not hostile to the idea of religious requirements, as such. The 1885 *Pittsburgh*

Platform accepts “as binding only its [the tradition’s] moral laws.”⁸ Later Reform Rabbis, writing in San Francisco in 1976, went further:

The past century has taught us that the claims made upon us may begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including: creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days: celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogues and community; and other activities which promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence.⁹

The idea of religious obligations is not anathema to Reform Judaism. Personal autonomy need not be radicalized to prohibit all communal expectations. The challenge is to conceive of obligations that are consistent with the exercise of autonomy.

It is for people more familiar with Reform philosophy and synagogue life than myself to think deeply about the sort of communal expectations that might be both effective and acceptable to Reform Jews. However, I speculate briefly about some possibilities.

Education

Education is the ideal example of a communal expectation that requires real commitment and is spiritually meaningful in its own right. Reform Jewish life necessarily involves an educated interaction with the tradition. And, because learning implies no particular commitment to observance, there is no contradiction of the principle of personal autonomy in requiring a Reform Jew to study.

Imagine a synagogue in which every member was obliged to enroll in some form of Jewish learning that met, say, once a week. Certainly some people would be turned off by the stringent requirement and would look elsewhere for religious community. But those who joined would be committed to learning and interacting with the Jewish tradition. Every member would be engaged in study, which would foster discussion of Jewish thought within the synagogue, further strengthening the community and enriching each member's religious life. As members became more knowledgeable, they might desire deeper levels of learning, sparking study of Hebrew, pairing of *chevrutah*, and demand for advanced classes taught by clergy and learned lay leaders. Indeed, it seems likely that some people, who at first were reluctant to join because of the stringent education requirements, might change their minds upon observing the rich spiritual and communal life of the synagogue. And, membership in such a synagogue would certainly be a welcome opportunity for highly knowledgeable, liberal Jews.

A more modest proposal might focus a synagogue's existing educational efforts on programs that require real commitment. Ongoing adult or family education attracts members who are willing to commit themselves to a regular schedule of Jewish study. Congregants who take on such an obligation are likely to be among the most committed. Attracting these congregants will help to create an exciting learning environment and a satisfying educational experience. Further, this group of congregants is likely to build on the communal ties they establish, a process which can ultimately inspire and energize the larger synagogue community.

Social Action

As education is, for a Reform Jew, the fundamental religious commitment, social action is the fundamental ethical commitment. A synagogue could, quite reasonably, expect every congregant

to be involved in one of the community's social action projects. And there exists no more powerful mortar to bind a community together. A heightened intensity is created when religious community becomes intimately associated with the struggle to repair the world. A sense of shared purpose emerges. Time spent together seems more important. Friendships develop more quickly and more deeply. The community becomes increasingly attractive to those interested in a religion committed to progressive values, further strengthening the community's dedication to social action. The magic of performing acts of loving kindness breeds a culture of social action that is, perhaps, the realization of the ultimate goal of Jewish community.

Prayer Leadership

Another possible expectation of congregants (though one on, perhaps, more tenuous philosophical ground) is that they be involved in worship. Suppose each congregant were expected to participate periodically in leading services. This could involve writing a *d'var Torah*, serving as *shaliach tsibor*, or leading some other form of worship (a healing service, *Rosh Chodesh* services, *davenning* at *shivah* houses, etc.). Autonomy could be preserved by keeping the obligation general. Every member would be expected to take an active role in the spiritual life of the community. However, congregants could fulfill this obligation by choosing a form of worship and a leadership role that was consistent with their individual spiritual and philosophical viewpoints.

Congregants would have to learn liturgy, text, and *nusach* in order to facilitate worship effectively. This would necessitate both study and attendance of services. Perhaps more importantly, because their friends and fellow community members would be participating in

services, congregants would be inclined to attend. Eventually, the worship experience itself would become more dynamic and meaningful.

Organizational Work

Although more mundane, administrative service to the community is of vital import. If every congregant were expected to serve on a committee or help plan a program every year or two, members would become more involved in the inner life of the synagogue and strengthen communal ties through shared endeavors. People would attend their friends' programs to be supportive. Congregants would know each other better. Sharing the burden of organizational tasks more evenly would make burnout among the most involved congregants less likely. And, the time commitment would help to ensure that members put synagogue life high on their list of priorities.

Many other possibilities for communal expectations exist. Those outlined above give a sense of the functions these expectations serve. They increase the level of commitment within the community by requiring all community members to take on real obligations. This creates the virtuous cycle described above in which commitments are rewarded by membership in the sort of community that can only be achieved when all members are highly dedicated. This positive reinforcement leads congregants to even greater Jewish commitment and makes the synagogue attractive to other committed Jews, thereby creating an ever more dynamic community. Further, because of the nature of religious observance, these obligations take on independent spiritual meaning for those who fulfill them.

How this idea might be implemented

New Synagogues and *Chavurot*

The most direct application of this institutional idea is in building new synagogues or *chavurot*. A group that hopes to create a religious community that attracts and retains highly committed liberal Jews should write communal expectations into its charter. However, it is likely that the number of Jews that would be initially attracted to a community of this sort is quite small. Over time, the virtuous cycle created by communal expectations might help communities built on these principles to be sufficiently vibrant to attract those who were initially hesitant to accept the obligations associated with joining. However, building a new synagogue or *chavurah* is feasible, at best, only in large Jewish communities. It is equally important to explore how communal expectations can be, and are being, productively integrated into existing synagogue communities and programs.

Existing Programs

Communal expectations can play a crucial role within existing synagogues, if programs are structured to take advantage of the virtuous cycle. If joining a program necessitates agreeing to certain obligations, those who attend will be committed. Such programs will attract congregants inclined to volunteer to provide for the collective needs of the group and to take the program seriously. Ongoing programs that impose expectations will thus be the most vibrant because they will attract the most committed participants. This will, in turn, make them more attractive to other congregants, who may be willing to make certain commitments in order to participate in such an exciting part of the community.

As an illustration of how communal expectations might work within a synagogue program, consider family education. Many models of family education exist, including classroom education of parents and children together that serves as an alternative to Sunday school, one-shot programs, and series of programs focused on particular grades.

The logic of communal expectations suggests that family education which requires a high level of personal commitment will be most successful. A program in which parents attend religious school every week with their children will attract congregants who are serious about learning. This has at least three positive consequences. The program fosters community among the most committed parents, which will likely lead to other forms of Jewish activity such as communal *Shabbat* celebration. These intensified communal ties make participation in other synagogue activities more attractive, thereby building on the parents' existing interest in Judaism. And, the high level of commitment among the participants will make the program itself more rewarding, reinforcing the participants' dedication and inspiring others to join even given the high expectations.

Precisely this scenario occurred in the groundbreaking family education program, known as *Shabbaton*, that was developed at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California. Parents and children attend *Shabbaton* together three weeks a month as a substitute for Sunday school. The program started as a small experiment that attracted many of the most dedicated members of the synagogue, including both lay and professional leaders. The program developed a reputation as an exciting alternative to Sunday school in which people learned and established real community. Within four years of the program's founding over thirty-three percent of Beth Am families with children in elementary school were enrolled in *Shabbaton* and a waiting list existed. Parents who had never before enrolled in adult education committed to attending

religious school three weeks a month in order to have their families be part of the *Shabbaton* community.

One-shot or other short-term programs cannot provide the benefit of attracting the most committed congregants or the opportunity to build community, and so do not foster the same virtuous cycle. Nonetheless, such programs are the mainstay of family education. For instance, a survey by Boston's highly innovative family education initiative found that seventy percent of programs last only one or two sessions.¹⁰ Of course, one-shot and other lower commitment programs have an important role to play in synagogue life. However, we should be aware of the tremendous benefits that higher commitment programming can provide.

As suggested in the previous section, myriad possibilities beyond this example exist for communal expectations. And many highly successful programs—like *Shabbaton*, lay leadership of worship, etc.—implicitly incorporate such communal expectations. By being explicit about how such expectations foster commitment, we can further integrate this important institutional feature into our programs.

Synagogues with high communal expectations are not for every Jew. A large percentage of liberal Jews are content in a less intense environment and would resent the imposition of communal expectations. However, there also exist highly committed and educated liberal Jews who are searching for a more intense communal religious life than can be found in many Reform synagogues. In population centers, synagogues conceived with these people in mind could, and in some cases do, exist. Communal expectations could play an important role as we continue to build such communities.

As importantly, existing synagogues that are working to develop programs that foster greater commitment among all congregants and attract highly committed people can benefit from

incorporating communal expectations. Such expectations provide an institutional framework that fosters a virtuous cycle in which greater participation is rewarded by membership in an increasingly intense community. As Reform synagogues continue the ongoing work of synagogue revitalization, it is essential that we develop an institutional design that helps realize the goals of innovative programs: increasing the commitment and vibrancy of the liberal Jewish community. Communal expectations are a key institutional complement to creative programming in this important work.

* I am deeply indebted to Matthew Price for invaluable discussions of several drafts of this essay. I have also benefited from the comments of an anonymous referee, Rabbi Alexis Berk, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Charles Cohen, Noah Dauber, Rebecca Milder, Josh Miller, and Matthew Stephenson. Responsibility for all mistakes and opinions is mine alone.

¹ See “<http://www.s2k.org/Information.html>”

²Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives,” *Journal of Political Economy*, April 1992, pp. 271-291; Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology*, March 1994, pp. 1180-1211; Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986). For an application of this type of thinking to a Jewish setting see Eli Berman, “Sect, Subsidy and Sacrifice: An Economist’s View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, August 2000, pp. 905-954.

³ Other than membership dues.

⁴ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁵ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religions: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁶ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

⁷ Iannaccone, *Why Strict Churches are Strong*.

⁸ *Declaration of Principles: The Pittsburgh Platform* (1885), principle 3. Available at “<http://ccarnet.org/platforms/pittsburgh.html>”

⁹ *Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective* (1976). Available at “<http://ccarnet.org/platforms/centenary.html>”

¹⁰ Amy Sales, Annette Koren, and Susan Shevitz, *Sh’arim: A Report on Boston’s Jewish Family Educator Initiative* (Boston: Commission on Jewish Continuity, 2000), p. 10.