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Spirituality at B'nai Jeshurun: Reflections of Two Scholars and Three Rabbis

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Among the various disciplines that constitute the study of American religious life is the relatively new field of congregational studies. By now, researchers (largely sociologists and cultural anthropologists) have compiled many in-depth reports of individual churches, all of which combine to give us insight into the state of congregational life in North America today. Synagogues, however, have lagged behind this enterprise, yielding only a handful of similar studies.

Synagogue 2000 (the forerunner of Synagogue 3000) had long been fascinated by B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) as a significant model of synagogue life on New York's Upper West Side. Recognizing the paucity of synagogue studies, it procured a grant in the 1990s from the Righteous Persons Foundation to send Drs. Ayala Fader (a cultural anthropologist) and Mark Kligman (an ethno-musicologist) to BJ for nine months of intensive research.

Throughout that period of time, they worked closely with rabbis and laypeople at BJ, producing an initial study of their findings (Fader & Kligman, 2001), under the editorship of Sara Litt (Litt, 2001),

| Spirituality at B'ı | nai Jeshurun1 |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| The New Jewish | Spirituality and Prayer |
| BJ from its Rabb | is' Point of View12 |
| Sidebars | |
| About the Autho | rs 3 |
| Research Metho | dology |
| 7 Footures of the | BJ Service |

and a recently issued scholarly piece and presentation (Fader, 2008; Fader & Kligman, 2007). In

these publications and scholarly presentations, Drs. Fader and Kligman developed the view that BJ represented a cutting-edge foray into evolving forms of American spirituality. As a continuation of their pioneering work, we at S3K decided to publish this second report. Given our close relationship with BJ, we asked BJ's rabbis (J. Rolando Matalon, Marcelo R. Bronstein, and Felicia L. Sol) to comment

more broadly on the spirituality that Fader and

Kligman analyzed.

ישרון eshurun ישרון

The result is a two-fold commentary on synagogue life as it has evolved at BJ – one view from without and another from within. Fader and Kligman provide a scholarly perspective on the spirituality they observed at BJ worship – how it happens, what it is, and how it fits into the emerging patterns of American religion today. As the rabbis of BJ, Matalon, Bronstein and Sol give us their background philosophy that informs BJ in all it does – its worship being just the most evident part of a larger and deeper phenomenon – a Jewish equivalent, we might say, of "intentional congregations" as they have come to be known (Bass, 2006).

This Synagogue Studies Institute Report is therefore both a follow-up study of BJ spirituality and a response by BJ rabbis who provide what they see as necessary contextualization for that report. In both senses, it provides a snapshot of a synagogue that has enjoyed a good deal of attention since we first began studying it, and, we hope, a contribution to the literature on congregational studies in general.



The New Jewish Spirituality and Prayer: Take BJ, For Instance

Ayala Fader & Mark Kligman

Long lines to get into a Friday night Shabbat service; congregants standing up during the service to dance through the aisles; newcomers weeping without understanding the Hebrew liturgy; a cantor who plays the electric keyboard along with drumming rabbis and Middle Eastern musical ensembles; congregants swaying, humming or loudly joining in the singing; liberal Jews who claim that they can "feel God's presence" in the sanctuary. These are all part of what has made B'nai Jeshurun, a progressive, Conservative-style synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a laboratory for those concerned with dwindling membership at North American synagogues.

This report analyzes Jewish spirituality in prayer as it is talked about, learned and displayed by BJ's head rabbis, cantor, rabbinic interns, musicians and congregants.¹ More broadly, our study aims to comment on the changing nature of contemporary Jewish spirituality in the context of broader trends in North American spirituality.

Of course a synagogue is much more than its Shabbat and holiday services. BJ emphasizes activities both inside and outside of the sanctuary through a focus on learning, social action and prayer. Here, however, our focus is on the experience of God that so many congregants reported feeling during prayer. When we conducted our research (2000-2001), both congregants and rabbis described this unexpected experience of Jewish spirituality as what made BJ unique, and even today, despite changes in BJ itself, this spiritual fervor constitutes an apt indicator of the direction taken by much of American Jewish spirituality in general.

The BJ of today has evolved from what it was eight years ago. Families with children now outnumber singles; there is a greater engagement with social action than there was back then; a female rabbi (Felicia Sol), has become an integrated part of BJ's community; and BJ itself has become an established institution rather than a new and innovative phenomenon.

The spiritual turn at BJ that we analyze began in the mid-1990s when the two head rabbis, J. Rolando Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein (known by all as Roly and Marcelo) began to focus on what they called "turning inward" during prayer services. This was in contrast to the previous rabbi, Marshall Meyer, who, from the mid-1980s to his unexpected death in the early 1990s, emphasized an activist social justice agenda. It is important to note that the new emphasis on Jewish spirituality occurred simultaneously with the increasing gentrification of Manhattan more generally and the Upper West Side particularly (see Fader, 2008).

Jewish spirituality at BJ exemplifies a larger shift dating from the 1970s, when (despite sociological predictions to the contrary) North American religion exploded in new forms of religiosity (Roof, 1999). BJ shares many features not only with megachurches, but also with New Age spiritualities (e.g., Rothenberg and Valleley, 2008; Weissler, 2007).² The congregants and the synagogue leadership are largely baby boomers, famously characterized as a "generation of seekers" (Roof, 1993). Similar to their Christian counterparts who attend "seeker churches," congregants at BJ talk about wanting to experience God during prayer. Indeed, upon his involvement with Synagogue 2000 in the mid 1990s, Roly spent time personally studying megachurches and told us that he had been inspired by some of the worship he saw there.

However, Jewish spirituality at BJ is also distinctively itself, not just a measure of North American spirituality in general, but reflecting the textual tradition and contemporary politics of North American Jews. In contrast to megachurch prayer and New Age spirituality, BJ's rabbis and cantor/music director (Ari Priven) strive for Jewish authenticity while creating a Judaism that is personally relevant to each individual. They do this through a musically driven, emotionally engaged, and embodied form of prayer.

Central to BJ is the claim by members and rabbis alike that in order to experience God, individuals must "let go" of rationalism and the intellect. The goal is to access an emotional part of the self which opens the individual to experience the "energy" of God, something which is found within each person. When it comes to prayer, comprehension of Hebrew (*loshn kodesh*), Jewish ritual or traditional Jewish music is less important than *kavanah* ("sincere intention"). By privileging *kavanah*, the emphasis of prayer shifts from "obligation" (the *mitzvah*) to what congregants describe as the "freedom" to choose those aspects of Judaism that best speak to each individual's experience of God.

We focus here on religious language, music, and embodied expressions of emotions.³ Critical issues we explore are how, where, and whether change in prayer is accepted; why certain forms of Jewish prayer become symbolic of authenticity while others do not; how some musical genres are understood as "religious" in terms of facilitating closeness to God, while others, seen as just too "folksy or popular," aren't; finally, we examine the role of the body in expressing emotion so as to create a form of Jewish spirituality understood to be the experience of God.

BJ's Spiritual Leaders

The rabbis (Roly and Marcelo) and cantor (Ari Priven) all grew up in Argentina and were students of Marshall T. Meyer. Theirs is a rabbi-driven synagogue with a leadership style that can fairly be called "authoritative." Some in the congregation say that the rabbis have an Argentine *machismo* which Meyer adopted from his time in Argentina and his students perpetuated. The rabbis told us that theologically they have been influenced by what they describe as "Renewal," Abraham Joshua Heschel (Meyer's teacher), and, more recently, by Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi and neo-Hasidism. These influences, along with their own personal histories in Argentina, have shaped their conceptions of prayer, ritual and God.

Rather than a traditional sense of obligation, prayer becomes an opportunity for spirituality; through self-awareness, it has the potential to create an individual and intimate experience of God.

Roly and Marcelo say that their aim is to have religious practice create opportunities for what they call "spiritual experience," meaning the experience of God; but God must be re-conceptualized in order to be relevant in the contemporary world. Marcelo explains: "We have to change the paradigm from the idea of God to the experience of God." The

paradigm for today's Jews requires what the rabbis describe as a "God of love." Jews today, suggest the rabbis, need a "reason of love" or they will abandon God.

Roly and Marcelo's "God of love" is not necessarily a supernatural figure. As an entity found inside the self, God is, in effect, human. In an

About the Authors

Ayala Fader is a professor of anthropology at Fordham University, Lincoln Center. She studies religion, childhood, and Jewish language and culture. She has a book coming out in the spring, Mitzvah Girls: Bringing up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn (Princeton University Press). Ayala grew up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where she lives now with her husband, Adam and their children, Simon and Talia. Ayala sees her research on everyday Jewish life contributing to broader conversations ongoing about contemporary religion and spirituality, politics, and secular modernity in North America.

Mark Kligman, Professor of Jewish Musicology at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, teaches in the School of Sacred Music. His most recent book is Maqam and Liturgy: Ritual, Music and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn (Wayne State University Press). He lives in Highland Park, NJ with his wife Jessica, daughter Yonina and son Shmuel Nissim. He sees his scholarly work on the liturgical traditions of Sephardic and Orthodox traditions contributing to Jewish life by showing the vibrancy of Jewish culture through music.

Research Methodology

Analyses of spirituality have been notoriously difficult to pin down and inherently speculative, because, as Robert Wuthnow notes, spirituality in contemporary life is generally conceptualized as private and experiential (1998:3-12). But ethnography and participant-observation, the methods used by anthropologists and qualitative sociologists, can offer new insights into the ways that individualized, privatized relationships to God are publicly experienced and performed in prayer and ritual (see also Lurhman, 2004).

This research was supported by Synagogue 3000 (then, Synagogue 2000) and BJ itself. The authors are both Jewish ethnographers. Ayala Fader is a cultural and linguistic anthropologist at Fordham University and Mark Kligman is an ethnomusicologist at Hebrew Union College. Because BJ was interested in our findings, we had unusual access to the rabbis and the synagogue staff, lay leadership and the congregants. BJ itself used the research to produce a promotional piece for its website.

As ethnography, the data draw on openended interviews and informal conversation in which members and rabbis describe their experiences during worship and as members of the BJ community. We also draw on participant-observation conducted during services where we analyze the practice of spirituality. exchange with a young girl preparing for her bat mitzvah Marcelo clarified something the girl seemed to be hinting at: "You are saying that holiness is not supernatural...to be holy you are saying you have to be the most human being that you can be...." To find God, each person must search inside the self. This concept of God echoes humanistic beliefs, but is clearly distinct from secularism. The rabbis elaborate a post-rationalistic God, located in the emotional interior of each individual, not the intellect.

This conception of God has implications for understanding the legal (halakhic) aspect of Jewish ritual. Rather than a traditional sense of obligation, prayer becomes an opportunity for spirituality; through self-awareness, it has the potential to create an individual and intimate experience of God. The point of the commandments (mitzvot), claim the rabbis, is not to force us to "give up things" but to "open us up and purify us for God." Jewish ritual practice, particularly prayer, is an individual choice one makes in order to experience the divine. Roly explained, "BJ creates opportunities... for a spiritual experience...people want to be there (the Morning Prayer service). They feel it's a sacred occasion."

The other rabbinical staff at BJ, the interns, and the Hebrew school staff, similarly talked about the synagogue as a place to find spirituality defined by the experience of God – or, as one a rabbinic intern put it, a "willingness to have God's presence in your life, not only rationally but existentially, personally." The director of the Hebrew school defines spirituality as insight into how she personally can serve God. The only way to gain this insight, she continued, is to understand oneself.

This personalized relationship to God occurs in the exploration and cultivation of the interior self, particularly by attending to the experience of positive emotions that God's presence brings. Self-exploration is often expressed in therapeutic language, but with the goal of personal transcendence. When there is closeness to, and individual experience of, God, an individual can become more holy in the sense of ascending to a higher level of humanity. Despite its language, however, the search for spirituality is not just therapy: indeed, it critiques a purely psychological or self-realizational approach by acknowledging God as an important part of general mental health and well-being, characterized by the evocation of emotions such as joy and peacefulness. As the rabbinic intern said:

It's not separating the two, God and psychology. We're not going to pass it over to the therapists...it's about finding out where God is in your life... It's about how you can grow holy in this thing... It's co-opting psychology and lacing it in spiritual terms.

It is commonplace here to talk about God as a generator of "energy." It is the individual internal experience of emotions, positive emotions of hope and joy especially but also more subdued emotions like sadness or serenity, which are signs that God's energy is present. The rabbis see their role as facilitators of God's energy. Marcelo explained: "Rabbis are not the owners or the generators of energy. That comes from God. But we are very good cables." By accessing God's energy, prayer offers the possibility to transcend the conscious, rational, self and "let go," in order to experience the "joy" of God. This includes attending not so much to the meaning of prayer per se as to the emotions that prayer in any form or medium inspires. Roly described his experience of God as emotional, something beyond the intellect. He said, "When you actually experience God, it's something you can't speak about. It's something you just feel...know...." This emotional experience occurs when as he says, "[You] transcend your self and touch some of God." Both Roly and Marcelo equate touching God with "touching the essence of life," thereby making them "feel alive and able to live in the world and make it better."

Language and Prayer

The rabbis' insistence on the full traditional worship service as defined by the prayer book of the Conservative Movement, with its almost exclusive use of Hebrew/Aramaic, creates an historical connection among Jews over time and space. This link with the past supports claims to legitimacy and Jewish authenticity. But what are often assumed to be "traditional" components of Jewish worship serve a larger purpose at BJ: to search inside the self, beyond the realm of language, and to experience God. The goal of Hebrew prayer at BJ does not make the prayer content relevant to a contemporary congregation. The rabbis are not very interested in, for example, including feminine God language, or attending to the denotative meaning of the text. Instead, Hebrew is used in a meditative way to "let go" of the intellectual aspect of the self and to facilitate the experience of emotions that bring a person closer to God.

But authenticity does matter. For congregants with whom we spoke, the whole traditional text, exclusively in Hebrew/Aramaic, is an important sign of Jewish authenticity, regardless of whether they have access to Hebrew or not. A range of congregants, from the most fluent to those who did not know one word of Hebrew, claimed to feel that the Hebrew connected them to the past, either a personal past of childhood or a sense of Jewish history. Less expected, perhaps, is that for many, Hebrew is understood as a vehicle of an authentic form of prayer *because* it is not comprehensible. Its very inaccessibility allowed congregants to access what one very involved member and a Jewish professional called a "different me."

7 Features of the BJ Service

- 1. Prayer is Participatory: "Ownership of melodies is achieved through congregational singing. [Giving them melodies they can sing] is one of the most important parts of the service (Ari Priven)." Participation is enhanced by the services egalitarianism, which makes it accessible to all worshipers regardless of background.
- 2. Prayer Anticipates Novelty: "People learn to look for new melodies, prayers and spiritual exercises. People are extremely receptive to a little chaos.... to not knowing what will actually happen (Ari Priven)." The clergy discuss major structural changes to the service in advance, but leave some of the specifics to on-the-spot decisions.
- 3. The Prayer Aesthetic is Both Fixed and Flexible: "To accomplish spontaneity, melodic repetition is improvised as to length, tempo and style. But improvisation is also framed by prayers that are fixed, so as to balance surprise with predictability. Music shapes the service, it gives it energy and balance. . . . When we do tefillot with our eyes closed, there is a feeling of letting go of your own self into that dance, you hear your own music of the tefillah (Marcelo Bronstein)."
- 4. <u>Prayer is Clergy Driven</u>: "While the BJ clergy are open to congregational views, they make all ritual decisions themselves. There is no ritual committee. We are able to make the decisions that move the community in the direction we want (Ari Priven)."
- 5. Prayer is a Means of Inner Renewal:
 "BJ encourages an approach to prayer described as going deeper. Experiencing prayer with intensity is fundamental.
 To go deeper into prayer is to know that you allow yourself to be transformed, that your life changes with a growing awareness and consciousness of the divine (J. Rolando Matalon)."

(7 Features continued)

6. Prayer is in Hebrew: BJ rabbis point to other inspirational services (the Carlebach Schul, the Leader Minyan, Kol Haneshamah and Yakar [in Israel]) to demonstrate the importance of Hebrew. Unlike the congregants in these other communities, however, BJ worshipers have limited Hebrew facility. Nevertheless the BJ service is almost entirely Hebrew. Setting the Hebrew bar high motivates congregants to concentrate more on prayer, thereby enhancing their experience of it.

7. Prayer is Personalized: "Congregants are encouraged to see prayer as authentic only if it is intensely personal It becomes stale because people don't inject their own voice (Felicia Sol)." The clergy model a personalized approach to prayer and congregants are encouraged to follow.

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I don't like to pray in English...I think the Hebrew connects me to the past... It says that this is different. Even if you don't know Hebrew, you know that it is Hebrew, so it's separate and ancient.... When I first went to BJ's services, I didn't know a word of Hebrew. The service was ninety percent Hebrew...I was so moved. Everybody has that experience. I don't think that if it were in English, it would be that moving.

The Hebrew/Aramaic words themselves are important not so much for their meaning, but for their symbolic, connotative, value. Many described their belief that at BJ rote Hebrew/Aramaic prayer, even recited from a transliteration tucked into the *siddur*, could be used to express contemporary, individual intentions. For example, a less involved member coming from a Conservative Jewish background said, "You don't need to know what you say. You just need to know what you mean... You're just communicating with God."

For others, the choice of language, Hebrew or English, is not even relevant. Both can be vehicles for communicating with God – like music and dance. Indeed, one congregant suggested that within prayer in any language, he perceived music and melody, what he called "the internal music of prayer." Music and its production during Hebrew prayers allow some who do not understand the meaning of the Hebrew to interject their own interpretations. A number of congregants told us that it is the music which gives them access to the underlying purpose of the Hebrew, the *kavanah*. One congregant suggested that she only understood the meaning of prayer when she heard the music which modeled the "arc of prayer." It was the Hebrew and the music combined which allowed her to "let go and involve herself...to allow herself the joy of being involved."

While the rabbis will not change the structure of the service, they do, at times, make additions to it, so as to reflect their own personal backgrounds and politics: while both rabbis are Argentine, Roly is Sephardic and Marcelo is Ashkenazic. For example, during the traditional Hebrew song, Ein Keloheinu, the rabbis add a Spanish/Ladino translation which has become part of the BJ repertoire: Quien como nuestra dios, Salvador?" 'Who is like you, our savior, our God?' Similarly, the rabbis include the Arabic word, salaam 'peace' alongside the Hebrew shalom 'peace' when they sing the Hashkiveinu.⁴

A number of members reported that these unexpected additions to the liturgy made the synagogue experience more "exotic" and "exciting." Even the rabbis' Spanish "accents" in English were appealing, some reported, because it made the synagogue and the rabbis seem what some members called "cool" ~ different from other Ashkenazic synagogues they had experienced prior to coming to BJ. Exotic sounds and words are supplemented by the frequent use of Latin American instruments and Sephardic ritual

objects like the large, colorful *yarmulkes* which so many adopt at BJ. Indeed, at a "new members" meeting, a committee member joked that it was BJ's multiculturalism, both Jewish and non-Jewish, that made it unusual:

This is a very funny Ashkenazic synagogue, that's very Sephardic that meets in a church⁵ that has rabbis from Argentina...so you'll have to kind of learn Spanish. It's a very interesting place to be.

Jewish multiculturalism at BJ creates a Jewish sensibility where boundaries of time, geography and denomination are mixed and blurred and so, ultimately, available to all Jews who seek a connection to God, regardless of upbringing or religious knowledge. An individualized theism is achieved through an eclectic Jewish cultural experience of language and objects.

Yiddish and Ashkenazic culture generally is considered hegemonic among Upper West Side Jews - that is, it is the dominant liturgical form of the rising middle class. It is therefore the exception, the cultural style least likely to be integrated into BJ's multiculturalism. Though the majority of congregants come from Ashkenazic backgrounds, BI's rabbis do not, and precisely because they do not embrace this dominant form of Judaism, congregants find BJ so refreshing. BJ is "not like your father's Oldsmobile," explains one congregant, meaning that BJ offers a synagogue experience quite different from the suburban or even urban Conservative and Reform synagogues of the average congregant's youth. The rabbis are explicit that Ashkenazic cultural life is not part of their version of religious Judaism, perhaps a legacy of their own Latino backgrounds. When, for example, a few congregants asked the rabbis to include a Yiddish class among the other course offerings at BJ, Roly demurred. Yiddish, he explained, is not a religious language. One congregant noted that the only time there is any use of Yiddish in the service is on Holocaust Remembrance day. Despite a few grumblings, most congregants seem to find the turn away from Ashkenazic Judaism exciting. BJ claims religious, not ethnic or cultural, Judaism (e.g., Prell, 2000), but this religious Judaism is distinct from Orthodoxy with its obligations and demands. Many members understand the Judaism at BJ as a way to reject a past which many associate with the victimization of the Holocaust and to move beyond the Judaism of their parents without sacrificing any sense of authenticity.

The Music of Prayer

Music at BJ is important to the creation of an authenticity that contrasts with Ashkenazic norms of singing and performance. Marcelo, Roly and Ari Priven describe the music at BJ as part of BJ's Latin American lineage. In a sense, the music at BJ equates minority Judaism with other minority religions, all post-denominational, and suggests that they all share a quest for the experience of God.

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The Argentine synagogue music of the 1950s-1970s looked to Israel and used the Carlebach melodies found commonly elsewhere as well. Ari recalls an appreciation for *nusach* (the traditional modal phrases applied to the liturgical text), but not formal cantorial music. The liturgical aesthetic of their teacher, Marshall Meyer, favored dramatic highlights alongside more reflective moments, with alternating traditional synagogue melodies and Israeli tunes. Meyer especially loved opera, but (says Ari) the growing involvement of Argentine youth in services pushed him to include more popular music.

When Roly and Ari, and later Marcelo, inherited the leadership of BJ, they changed the music. Marcelo explains: "We started from there, but our addition was that we were the *Hasidim*. Marshall hated the *nigunnim*. Marshall's contribution was the drama. The celebration, the joy, the dancing, the clapping, that was much more our contribution."

The melodies at BJ today are a rich mix of styles that are explicitly not Ashkenazic and that draw instead on other ethnic Jewish traditions, and non-Jewish meditative traditions also, like Sufism or Native American religions. The preference, however, is for melodies that are Middle Eastern and, occasionally, Klezmer. Marcelo states that they avoid "folk music, jazz, and Israeli dance." Roly explains that these musical genres are "too American" and foreign to him; likewise he will not include Latin American folk music because "it doesn't belong in the synagogue." Marcelo will include "an occasional flavor" of folk music because, "Many people tell me that at BJ they are connected to the experiences of camp. That's positive, because a good camp has magic. But not to go to the commonplace." Stylistically, the Israeli and Carlebach melodies are certainly folk. But, folk music from other sources is avoided. The goal of a melody is its effectiveness in creating a prayerful experience. Roly explains:

There is such a thing as religious music, music that is more conducive to a spiritual experience. Anything that we know has served to touch the spirit in other religions we are immediately interested in. We are particularly drawn to Middle Eastern music, some Eastern music, and some chants.... We have an attraction to those things . . . to world music. 6

To accommodate prayer spaces at two separate locations for the nearly 2,000 participants each week, two configurations of leaders and musicians were formed. One ensemble has two clergy (consisting of a senior rabbi, an intern or the associate rabbi) and Ari Priven at the keyboard. The second ensemble consists of a trio (mandolinist/guitarist, percussionist on *dumbek*, and cellist) who sing and accompany two clergy, a senior rabbi, associate rabbi or intern. The configuration of clergy and accompaniment changes weekly so that each prayer space has a variety of leaders from week to week.

Another feature to the presentation of music at BJ is the attention given to the sound system. The sound is electronically manipulated through compression. This applies pressure to the sound so that the certain letters and words do not "pop" or "feedback." In both locations, a crystal clear sound is heard through speakers placed all around the congregation, producing an enveloping sound that many congregants describe feeling. Megachurches too use state-of-the-art sound equipment, which BJ employs on a somewhat smaller scale.

Melodies create the mood and shape *tefilah*. In discussing the technical aspects of this process, Ari gives particular attention to how the mood of each piece shapes the service into points of calm, increased energy and occasional drama.

The tendency at the end of the song is not to finish at the very high of the energy. I lower the energy either by not playing and allowing the voices to have a clear, nice, mellow harmony, or by changing the instrumentation to something more mellow and slow down the tempo. In general, I do that throughout the service. I am definitely more concerned about the timing, the tempo, and the texture of one particular song than about the whole service. Each song, individually, has its own life.

All service leaders agree that structuring prayer around music and encouraging congregational engagement gives members ownership of the service, a necessary component for prayer to become what so many call "a spiritual journey."

The music at BJ bridges tensions of authenticity and modernity, the past and the future, the familiar and the exotic. This harmony of opposites occurs through a combinative approach to the music, that is, different instruments and musical forms are juxtaposed throughout the service. A board member explains the power of unexpected juxtapositioning:

One thing I want to add about the music... it's eclectic, so it's respectful of the breadth of tradition, but it has evolved form there. It says that this is an evolving, living experience.

For many, music at BJ accomplishes or supports what religious texts often cannot, especially for the uninitiated. Through humming or singing, they are able to participate in the sounds of an authentic yet contemporary form of Judaism, one which does not require religious observance or knowledge, and is not the familiar tunes of "their father's shuls" but is exotically "different" from what they have come to expect from an American synagogue service.

Embodied Emotion and Prayer

For Jews at BJ, the altered awareness which signifies God happens when there is an outpouring of emotion, especially through crying or other physicalized expression, such as dancing and singing. There is a conflation of the individual's consciousness and God, so that when an individual is moved by prayer, the emotional experience is "read" as a contact with God. This happens during the frequent ecstatic embodied religious practice often framed as "energy," perhaps a borrowing from popular New Age religious discourse. The rabbis, however, reject any links to New Age religiosity, claiming that ecstatic emotional worship is something that they have adopted and transformed from Hasidic Judaism, just as they have the Hasidic niggunim. This neo-Hasidism, which emerged out of the Jewish Renewal movement, embraces the goal of individual transcendence but rejects the religious stringency which Hasidism today requires. Ecstatic worship is presented by BJ rabbis as just one more resource that members can select order to achieve that experience of God.

During services, the rabbis model for the congregation what the experience of God looks like. They close their eyes, move to the music while pounding out the beat on the podium with their fists, and, at times, raise their arms in a Hasidic gesture of heightening the excitement and being transported to a different spiritual plane. At a specific point in the Friday night Shabbat service, everyone stands up, joins hands, and dances through the aisles around the synagogue (a practice going back to the previous rabbi's time).

At certain points of the service, the rabbis ask congregants to display ecstatic experiences that require a certain level of emotional engagement even from even the least knowledgeable participants. When, for example, during the singing and dancing portion of a Shabbat ser-

vice, one of the rabbis deemed the congregation's energy too low, he stopped the service, complaining that he did not feel any special Shabbat energy; the congregation was merely going through the motions. He started them all over again, this time with more energy.

Religious feelings often arise out of being trained to use one's body. (e.g., Desjarlais, 1997; Csordas, 1992; Mahmood, 2005). BJ congregants who are new generally go through a socialization process, part of which includes a series of three meetings run by volunteer members with the support of the rabbis and cantor. There, they hear (and then repeat, themselves) stories which focus on emo-

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tional release, mostly crying. One thing they learn is that crying is taken as evidence of experiencing God. We call this the "crying narrative." The narrative begins with the narrator's search for meaning or

a traumatic life event that has been probative; then an unexpected emotional response to BJ prayer; and, finally, breaking into tears that become feelings of joy or peace. For example:

So we went [to BJ] that Saturday. There was a bar mitzvah...and my wife and I started to cry. We didn't know the bar mitzvah boy. We did not know anybody else in the synagogue...and we're crying. And we didn't know why we were crying. It had an incredible effect on us....We came back, and we couldn't stay away. We kept coming back.

Most new members mentioned the surprise they felt when their own early experiences at BJ resulted in tears. According to one new member:And one night I just went in. I cried. I cried for I don't know how many months. I kept going...there was this sense of spirituality that I felt. Even though I didn't meet people, I still felt like I was part of something when I was there.

These new members do not feel obliged to cry; but they see crying all around them, and are released to join in. By hearing it described positively at new members' meetings, they associate it with proper involvement at services.

Embodied religious practice comes also through the use in services of practices from a range of minority religions. A number of people talked about the use of "breath" and meditation techniques. Others adopt metaphors of "healing and wholeness" drawn from therapeutic contexts. Indeed, one of the rabbis, Marcelo, is a trained psychologist who has worked as a therapist. One member explicitly compared services to therapy and Eastern meditation, seeing them as ways she "works on herself." Another member described his prayer style as merging Judaism with Yoga and Zen practices:

Yoga, Zen breath. I do meditation at BJ. In the synagogue, in the amidah [a silent portion of the liturgy]. It's silent. I put the siddur (prayer book) down. I bend my knees slightly. I put my arms out...It's a very meditative experience... You can meditate on the Hebrew words, or the prayers or the kavanah (the intention). I usually just chill.

This kind of combinative religious practice is a common feature of New Age spirituality (Rothenberg and Vallely, 2008). Individualized picking and choosing from world religions in order to satisfy personal needs is a feature of postmodern religiosity, a "tradition" favored by Jewish baby boomers (Cohen and Eisen, 2000). But at BJ, combinative religious practice is institutionalized, not left to individual personal spiritual journeys; it is part and parcel of the synagogue, modeled publicly by authoritative spiritual leaders, and framed as the revitalization of Judaism's authentic and shared religious heritage.

Conclusion

Spirituality at BJ allows members to create a form of Jewish identity that is about God, but not the supernatural; religious, but not halakhically binding. This Jewish sensibility seeks Jewish authenticity, but rejects the dominant Ashkenazic tradition by looking to other Jewish (and non-Jewish) practices as alternative authenticities. BJ focuses on a sincere intention to experience God by searching simultaneously for a deeper meaning within the self. In moving terms, congregants describe their "freedom" to choose from among religious practices and express emotions of joy and sadness publicly and without constraint.

BJ shares many goals and practices with North American megachurches and evangelical seeker churches. These churches focus on Christian spirituality in large settings where members can be part of a growing, successful and innovative ministry (Thumma and Travis, 2007:158). Like so many at BJ also, evangelical seekers, predominantly baby boomers, decidedly depart from the denomination of their upbringing, searching out religious fulfillment through individual choice and a therapeutic ethos with an anti-institutional bias (Sargeant, 2000:163-4). Both BJ and seeker churches offer a non-judgmental approach to religion through a warm and inviting worship service which emphasizes the experience of emotion.

However, BJ has a distinctive definition of what individual fulfillment means. Seeker churches satisfy therapeutic concerns for self-fulfillment through an evangelical understanding of Christ's salvation (Sargeant, 2000). At BJ, individuals encounter God through individualized and, often, embodied expression of affect. Conceptions of God, too, differ of course. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrman's description of a "new paradigm" church (2004), for example, describes how congregants learn to conceptualize Jesus as a "buddy." BJ members, by contrast, find God inside themselves. However, God only enters the emotional, non-rational, vulnerable aspect of the self.

Further, in seeking to provide individuals with an alternative route to God, megachurches tend to eschew traditional textual practice and religious symbols. They limit traditional liturgical content, and favor innovation in text, music, and other expressions of faith (Sargeant,

2000:166). At BJ, the rabbis and cantor selectively reclaim the religious practices of those whom are today considered "traditionally authentic": *Hasidim* and *Sephardim* (but not the normative *Ashkenazim*). At BJ the traditional Hebrew text is maintained, but the meaning of the text is expressed in new ways through music, chanting or dancing. Ultimately the text serves as a tool for emotionalized expression.

BJ hopes that its form of Judaism can become relevant to, as Marcelo put it, "modern, intellectual people."

One congregant concurs: "They [the rabbis] are making Judaism not only relevant, but modern." Emphasizing a "modern" yet "authentic" form of religiosity contrasts with what has been reported for seeker/megachurches. Perhaps their historical experience of being on the margins of modernizing Euro-American nations makes this a particularly sensitive issue for diaspora Jews. Regardless, what makes BJ seem modern to so many is the way that the traditional liturgy is made to engage modern forms of self-construction, including introspection, self-cultivation, and personal freedom as the path to happiness. Marcelo explained it this way:

There is something powerful for me about making the effort of relating new energy with the old. I think our revolution is in the experience, not in the change. We are about the experience of the divine, not necessarily to change too much of the form.

At BJ, the "modern" and the "contemporary" are unexpectedly associated with greater affect and with an experiential encounter with religious practice rather than religious obligation on the one hand and rationalism or intellectualism on the other. Perhaps spirituality at BJ can be understood as part of a broader ongoing critique in North America — the claim that one does not have to be secular to be modern. At BJ, you can be a modern, cosmopolitan person who cries, dances and sings as you reach for the transcendent found within yourself.

בני ישרון B'naijesHurun



Take BJ from its Rabbis' Point of View

A response from Rabbis J. Rolando Matalon, Marcelo R. Bronstein and Felicia L. Sol*

We appreciate Synagogue 3000 asking us to offer our understanding of BJ. After the privilege of serving 23, 14, and 8 years respectively as BJ's rabbis we have seen BJ grow, change, and meet challenges- sometimes successfully, sometimes less so. We have witnessed the power of a synagogue to transform the lives of its members individually and collectively. While BJ will always be a work in progress, we want to share our understanding of the Jewish spirituality which has been at the core of making BJ central to the lives of so many contemporary Jews.

Jewish spirituality at BJ is about creating a community in which modern Jews can, through the tradition, reach into their souls emotionally and intellectually to find their unique purpose, and be inspired to live lives that reflect that purpose. It is not a slightly different twist on a therapeutic model for finding happiness. And it is far from the me-centered self fulfillment of contemporary consumer culture. It is the self fulfillment that comes from discovering our distinct responsibility in the world, of asking ourselves what God demands of each one of us, personally and as a community.

We wish we could fill the remainder of this space with a description of the formula we have discovered for creating this kind of spirituality at BJ and then give all those who so admire BJ's success a recipe to follow. But we can't. BJ is not about a formula.

Some may be disappointed by this conclusion. We hope that you find it liberating. It means that there is no prescribed technique you have to apply if you want to be "like BJ." BJ is not about the clapping, the choice of one particular melody for Lecha Dodi, the dancing, or a specific combination of musicians. You don't even need rabbis and a hazzan with exotic Argentine accents to have a vital, dynamic synagogue community. (You might have noticed that one of us was born and raised in the United States. If she has any accent at all, it's from Connecticut, and BJ is still going strong!)

What you do need is a passionately held and expressed vision about the meaning of Jewish life and what it means to live as a Jew is this world. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel — the teacher of our teacher, Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer and the new BJ's founding rabbi — is our guide in everything we do. Like Rabbi Meyer, we look to Heschel for our approach to prayer, our relationship with ritual and Jewish observance, and our engagement in social justice. We study Heschel's writings and the way he combined faith and activism in his own life and try to combine both into 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.

Heschel was a theologian and a social activist. He was not a congregational rabbi. We are, and our aspiration has been to translate Heschel's vision of Judaism into the language and life of a contemporary synagogue. When we talk about "spirituality," we are simply using a shorthand expression for the kind of Judaism Heschel espoused: a Judaism in which we live our lives as a response to the question "what does God ask of us?"

The key to understanding how Jewish spirituality manifests itself at BJ cannot be found by narrowly focusing on BJ's Shabbat services. Certainly, when visitors come to our synagogue on Shabbat, they typically comment on the intensity and beauty of the prayer services and the number of people.

But what they don't know, what they don't see, is that this experience is created by the myriad of deeds that take place daily, building and strengthening the fabric of the community and feeding back into the vitality of the service.

Much like BJ's famed dancing in the aisles on Friday night, hundreds of people are connected to each other — every day — and engaged in mitzvot such as bikkur holim (visiting the sick in our community), taharah (washing the body of the deceased), nihum avelim (comforting the bereaved), literacy programs, housing the homeless,

feeding the hungry at our lunch program, participating in the daily morning minyan, engaging in study, organizing Shabbat dinners, welcoming new members, and more.

Shabbat could not exist without this connection of what goes on in between services. Services become the culmination and the celebration of our week as a participatory community. At the same time, on Shabbat we seek inspiration and renewed vision for the week ahead.

Our experience at BJ has shown us that no one cares about a Judaism that reflects just a habit or some pale version of the past. What contemporary Jews long for is a Judaism that claims the authority to shape their consciousness and instills in them its values, as it has for centuries. 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.

And this Judaism cannot just be about Jews nor can it be contained within the walls of the synagogue. It must have something to say about the world in which we live and is not afraid to build bridges with other faiths and cultures.

Heschel believed that "religion declined not because it was refuted but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive and insipid." "The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions," Heschel wrote, "religion becomes irrelevant." To be the home of the relevant, passionate Judaism Heschel advocates, the synagogue cannot remain the place of moderation, docility and tamed emotions it has become. Instead, it must be the place where we confront the most profound questions of existence:

Who am I called to be, and what am I called to do?

When I am weak, where do I find strength?

When my vision is dim, where do I find insight?

How do I maintain my integrity in a world where power, success and money seem valued above all else?

How do I cultivate a sense of gratitude in my life?

How do I integrate the prophetic call for social justice—the demand to redress human suffering—into my life?

How do I keep the relevant questions of life perpetually before me?

What are the essential values that need to animate my existence so that I can be a Jew and act as a Jew in the world?

What is the Jewish people's role in humanity?

Discarding the distractions of day-to-day existence and looking honestly into our souls is not easy. And so Shabbat services are designed to be much more than a retreat from the world, which would only serve to shield us from Heschel's pointed calls for spiritual accounting. Rather, the synagogue should be a place where we learn how to live as our best and unique selves. Like the juxtaposition of Lecha Dodi's joyous welcoming of Shabbat immediately followed by welcoming the week's bereaved families into the sanctuary, we come to synagogue to face life: to celebrate but also be disturbed and unsettled; to find solace but also be shaken from our complacency and wrestle with our fate; to be comforted by our tradition but also to question it. As rabbis, our job is to make sure that happens – to court controversy and to raise the disturbing questions many would be more content to leave in the background – and certainly outside the synagogue.

Prayer cannot be a ritual we perform merely out of habit or by rote. Prayer must be engaged in with kavanah – deep intention and inner devotion – as a way for us to feel the full intensity of life that Heschel spoke of. Through this kind of prayer we can feel wonder, joy, comfort and gratitude. But we will also feel revulsion, outrage and righteous indignation about our lives and the world. These powerful feelings are unleashed when we pray with kavanah, which we call for in the service, whether by challenging words or sweet or discordant melodies. By making every effort to pray with kavanah from the bema ourselves (rather than merely "leading services") and by pushing congregants to reach inward towards a genuine intention, people are moved in often unexpected ways. Only this spiritual intention can take melody to such heights and prayer so deeply within. This is why many people at BJ cry or sing or dance, or clap with every fiber of their being.

Unfortunately, many observers of BJ have over-emphasized what has been described as the "ecstatic" elements of our service. Careful observation shows that that is just one part of a purposeful balance. We have designed services to be anchored by time for quiet reflection, especially at the beginning of Shabbat evening and during Shabbat morning's Shacharit and then again with quiet niggunim at the end of many climactic melodies. And a BJ service would not be complete without specific teaching of Torah by one of us or a visiting scholar or social activist to provoke the very explicit consideration of difficult personal and social issues.

But allowing ourselves to feel or be provoked, whether during contemplation, Torah study, or passionate prayer, is only the beginning. By itself, emotion risks becoming just another form of egotism. Always our feelings must awaken us to questions: What do we do with the feelings? Who are we in response to those feelings? How do we transform great joy into gratitude, and gratitude into an overwhelming desire to care and give back? How do we transform dismay into the uncontainable urge to redress and repair? How do we transform anger into the righteous indignation that propels each of us to take a stand? These are the questions whose absence from modern Jewish and secular life leaves a void in our souls. And they are exactly the ones that we continually ask ourselves and put before our congregants.

To live a life of meaning is to give ourselves over to these intense feelings, not for their own sake but for the purpose of being pulled out of slumber into action. The synagogue must infuse us with a vision of the world as it ought to be and propel us into action to change the world as it is. The serving of God begins before the prayer service starts and continues after the prayer service ends.

Justice is therefore a religious issue that belongs in the synagogue, at the center of our religious concern. "Social action" cannot be just another item on the menu of synagogue programs, nor can it be outsourced to the Jewish community's many fine institutions dedicated to innumerable good causes and of which we are justly proud. The same intensity and passion we bring to prayer and study must be brought to social justice. At BJ we explicitly raise troubling issues of social justice from the bema, elevating their consideration to the same level as the words of the siddur. And at the end of each service is an exten-

sive (some might say tedious) description of social action opportunities for the coming week. No one dances. No one sings. But many hundreds are moved towards spiritually informed action in their lives.

Neither can the study of Torah be just another item on the menu. Our tradition, by placing the text and its interpretation at its center, has sanctified critical thinking, analysis, and argumentation as a religious experience. Torah study is central to the life of our community and to our communal worship. At Shabbat morning services, for example, we have eschewed the conventional sermon. Instead, we offer a d'var torah strictly based on the parasha of the week, in which we analyze classical and modern sources which we frequently distribute to the congregation. But even taking these sources into account, our ancient texts sometimes contradict our modern sensibilities. In the tradition of Judaism's intellectual rigor, we neither ignore the disturbing aspects of our tradition nor apologize for them. Instead, we confront them in light of the sources and make every effort to learn from them. Even b'nai mitzvah are encouraged to grapple with their Torah portions and question honestly, sometimes with cynical but always hopeful hearts.

These are not programmatic decisions, nor are they some new interpretation of Jewish values. Rather, they reflect the ancient, well known teaching of Shimon HaTzaddik in Pirkei Avot that "the world stands on three things: on Torah, on the service of God, and on acts of loving kindness." Torah study, prayer, and acts of loving kindness are indivisible. They inform and nurture one another. The moment we remove one of them from the equation, the integrity of the whole collapses. One cannot be privileged above the others because it happens to be more popular, more likely to be met with enthusiasm. There is no BJ without the three pursued together.

We believe none of these values- Shabbat, learning, social justice, community- can be fully realized absent spiritual discipline. Contemporary Jews who are fully at home in the modern world need to freely embrace a system of religious duty — halakha — because meaning cannot be sustained without a consistent practice. In these days in which we are all Jews by choice, we challenge our congregants to choose the spiritual discipline of observance.

But we emphasize that halakha cannot be practice for its own sake. It must be a path that keeps the things that matter constantly before us. Halakha is not about what we do but how we live, and we challenge people to increase their observance from this perspective. So, for example, we stress that Shabbat is not just a set of arbitrary prohibitions and rules. It is about setting boundaries that help us transition from doing to simply being. Shabbat is about letting go of our usual weekday mode of working, acquiring and consuming, of power, control and domination. It is a day of contemplation and gratitude for what we have and a day for recalibrating our vision.

Similarly, we ask our members to practice kashrut because Jewish dietary laws are not simply about permitted and forbidden animals, separating milk and meat and the minutiae of dishes and utensils. On a deeper level, kashrut teaches us to be mindful of what we consume and how we consume it. It regulates our instincts and puts limits on our appetites. And it is about the conditions in which our food is grown, how the animals are raised and slaughtered, as well as the treatment of the workers who process our food.

We know that not all, or even most, BJ members are leading lives entirely guided by halakha. But they are choosing to be part of a community that takes halakha seriously and that is constantly pushing them to grapple with issues of observance. And, crucial to understanding BJ, this idea that we can strive to meaningfully increase our observance without feeling that observance "doesn't count" unless it is total is emphasized regularly in all areas of community life. Through this approach to halakha as a spiritual path that one can move along rather than an all-or-nothing decision, we have seen many, many BJ members move toward greater observance.

As BJ's rabbis we foster the type of community that we want to be a part of and that we want to daven with. The rabbinate can be a lonely place and we, too, crave community. Indeed, we are dues paying members of our own synagogue. We have deliberately created a model of leadership based on a spiritual partnership among ourselves, ourselves and the hazzan, the staff, and the members of our board of trustees, and finally our community. In those partnerships, which are based on trust instead of the all- too- typical competiveness and conflict, we work

hard to relate to one another and work together in the model of hevruta — supporting each other, challenging each other to grow, to risk, and to give the best of what we have to offer.

Even our communal understanding of what it means to be a "member" of BJ reflects this commitment to the importance of partnership. A prominent feature of BJ's new member orientation meetings is the explicit rejection of the popular consumer definition of membership as paying dues in order to be entitled to certain benefits. Instead, being a member of BJ is defined as belonging to a community and having the privilege to serve. And, in fact, many people who attend BJ services regularly are not even dues-paying members, though we invite them to become part of our community and many eventually do. We go to great logistical effort and quite a bit of expense to offer two services on Friday night and an adult and a variety of children's services on Saturday morning that are open to and attended by many who are not ready to join a synagogue but who want to explore their commitment to Jewish life.

Creating synagogues that are homes for a Judaism that passionately combines faith and activism, emotion and intellect, meaning and duty is neither simple nor quick. And, unfortunately, we in the Jewish community are too often obsessed with trying to figure out the next "sexy" answer to the continuity problem, the lack of affiliation, and the tricks that will deliver more people into our synagogues' services. At our peril, we ignore the real issue: the irrelevance and the vacuity of most of Jewish life. Contemporary Jews are indeed "spiritual seekers." They are seeking places where there is something meaningful going on, where God's Presence can be felt, where one can laugh and celebrate for real, cry real tears, where there is a compelling vision for a just and peaceful world that is inclusive and tolerant. And where each person matters and is called to serve.

Nothing more and nothing less explains what fills our seats, expands our membership, and has made BJ a spiritual home for so many.

* Special thanks to Sara Moore Litt, a past president of BJ, and Ron Taffel, a former board member, for their help in preparing this response.

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Endnotes

- ¹ For a more in-depth analysis of BJ as a religious organization see Fader and Kligman, Final Report, The BJ Way: A New Model for Synagogue Life (n.d.).
- ² Historically and culturally, the turn to spirituality at BJ is part of a broader spiritual revival in North America. Indeed North America has a long tradition of spiritual revivals, many of which Jews have participated in, for example, see Jonathan Sarna's book, American Judaism: A History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- ³ In addition, we regularly went to board meetings, steering committee meetings, and meetings for new members. We conducted ethnographic interviews with members from very different positions within the community, rabbinic and lay leaders, affiliated and unaffiliated, new and old, committed and critical. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed as were the majority of communal events.
- ⁴ The Israeli group *Sheva's* song *Od Yavo Shalom* is from the text of the *Hashkiveinu* prayer. The substitution of *salaam* for *shalom* is an effort to embrace peace between Jews and Muslims.
- ⁵ For some of its larger services BJ rents space from a nearby church, The Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, known as SPSA. More recently, BJ has moved to a different church on the Upper West Side.
- ⁶ Often they sing *Hallelu* (Psalm 150) to the melody of Nusrat Fateh Ali Kahn's Qawwali chant *Ala hu*.

About Synagogue 3000 (S3K)

Synagogue 3000 is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations and communities to create synagogues that are sacred and vital centers of Jewish life. We seek to make synagogues compelling moral and spiritual centers – sacred communities – for the twenty-first century. Our offices in Los Angeles and New York direct national congregational networks and the Synagogue Studies Institute. Sacred communities are those where relationships with

God and with each other define everything the synagogue does; where ritual is engaging; where Torah suffuses all we do; where social justice is a moral imperative; and where membership is about welcoming and engaging both the committed and the unaffiliated. We wish to change the conversation about meaningful Jewish life in our time.

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