

Doing Well Without a Spiritual Center

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It seems not long ago that there was more certainty about where religious influence resided in Jewish America. While no denomination could speak on behalf of all American Jewry, there were central headquarters that at least carried some weight locally or were perceived as loci of leadership. (Though the picture was more nuanced than that, it suffices for a comparison with today.) Except for the Reconstructionist movement, headquartered in Philadelphia, telephone exchanges of these centers began with area code 212.

That is less true today and increasingly likely to be less true in the future. The decline of national movements is partly a reflection of living in contemporary America, where we go our own way. In the congregational world, it appears that more synagogues are adopting labels such as “independent” and “post-” or “trans-denominational.” These congregations access a fairly robust set of placement, educational, and administrative resources that are unattached to the landmark denominational centers, while emerging spiritual communities draw upon the talents of their members to meet these needs. In fact, there are at least three post- or trans-denominational seminaries in the U. S., several unaccredited seminaries of dubious educational nature that ordain rabbis, and one Israeli-based online rabbinical program — along with the rise of independent ordination or *semikha*. As the needs of local synagogues are increasingly met through independent options, the strength of the historic centers of religiosity may be furthered weakened. This is an observation about the merits of this phenomenon, not a value judgment. Emergent spiritual communities, rabbi-led or rabbi-less, are another marker of spiritual diffusion. In an age of instantaneous communication, where local entities can have global impact, some of these communities generate national change as they create compelling models of spirituality — regardless of where their bricks and mortar rest.

Ironically, the denominations have contributed to a decrease in their own central relevance. The leaders of the Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform movements do not clearly demarcate the lines around a cluster of issues from Jewish ritual practice to relationships with Israel as they once did. True, a few significant differences remain, but this convergence of approaches within the liberal denominations has made them less distinguishable to the laity. Greater alignment of positions nationally raises questions about the uniqueness of central headquarters and may dilute allegiance to the mother ship.

Demographic realities have also favored decentralization. Over the past several decades, the migration of Jews from the East Coast and the Midwest to the South, Southwest, and West have created major new Jewish population centers. For example, in northern and southern California, where people already cherish individualism, an impressive array of Jewish cultural, educational, and spiritual institutions is flourishing. As these newer communities mature and the Jewish infrastructure catches up with the population, the number of centers of Jewish life will multiply nationally.

Additionally, the landscape of Jewish spiritual life has become a rich mosaic of ever-changing pieces. Kabbalah and Healing Centers, “centers” for Jewish life that in some ways are similar to synagogues but eschew the label of synagogue and any denominational affiliation, and people who hold *minyanim* in places off the radar, attract passionate adherents who may not care about the larger concerns of community. In this age of “i-control,” it is difficult to systematically document and maintain information about these emerging places of spiritual expression. However, they do affect how feasible it is to maintain the sense of centrality of Jewish religious life. And what does it mean when several virtual synagogues on the Web site “Second Life” claim large participation and appear legitimate? The value system of the Internet is nonhierarchical. What are the implications for real-time, structured religious movements as the younger generations, who have been weaned on the screen, come of age?

One exception to the trend of decentralization is Chabad, which strengthens its center perhaps to the detriment of the other historic centers. Having exploded the model of synagogue membership, Chabad attracts travelers who divide their time and resources between a Chabad house and a mainstream synagogue. Chabad’s outreach does not stop with “unaffiliated” Jews; it is equally aggressive toward the “affiliated.” It will be interesting to see if participation in multiple, local communities will increase as the number of emergent spiritual communities rise. These communities, which attract people who might never step foot into a mainstream synagogue, also draw people away from local denominational synagogues, people who then make their new communities their primary or exclusive place of spiritual involvement. The emergent spiritual community, however, is still fragile, often lacking the basic infrastructure necessary for long-term sustainability. Will mainstream synagogues and these emergent communities partner in ways that are mutually respectful and beneficial? Such arrangements might also weaken the ties between local synagogues and their respective national denominations.

A wonderful phrase in rabbinic Judaism describes the time around twilight, when it is no longer day but not yet night: *bein ha-sh’mashot*. From a Jewish legal point of view, it is considered a nebulous time; it is unclear whether it is the end of day or the beginning of night. Such a feeling of transition best characterizes the current environment of synagogues, denominations, and emergent spiritual communities and their relationships with one another.

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