

Additional Articles

The Tent Peg Business, Revisited

Lawrence Kushner and Noa Kushner

A. Almost thirty years ago (1984), when I wrote “The Tent Peg Business” for the first issue of *New Traditions* (it went belly-up after the third), we were pretty clear about who was a Jew (Jewish mother, conversion); we knew who was a rabbi (HUC, JTS, yeshivah—Recon was just an infant); and we knew what a congregation was (building, dues, rabbi). Now we’re unsure about how to define any of those categories. Indeed, even a print media journal like this may be on the way out. But, if you think that’s challenging, try living in San Francisco. Here, nine out of every ten Jews are unaffiliated. At The Bagelry near my home, the young woman flips the bacon with chopsticks. We ain’t in Kansas anymore.—LK

B. When some board members and I started The Kitchen as a place for disconnected Jews, everyone told us to avoid religion. “Too loaded,” we were told. They suggested we find something cultural, something “easier” for those who were already disconnected from organized religious life. They were right about religion being a tough sell: There is no larger acceptance here for signing on to an organized, Western religion. Yoga? Sure. Buddhism? Of course. Jewish and religious? Totally countercultural, and not in the good way. This doesn’t mean that we cannot still succeed. I think we rabbis have always been translators; in 2013 our work just takes a new turn.

In fact, I think the changes in the world make these parts of my father’s original “Tent Pegs” more relevant, not less. “Tent Pegs”

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was unabashedly in favor of making places for serious religious life. Its message still strikes me as honest, necessary, easy to say, and hard to do.

We edited the original list, removing items that no longer hold, and put what remained in bold. Then we wrote some new items that respond to the current Jewish reality and added them to the list. Some of these are fairly general and some describe my specific experience with The Kitchen. We added a few headings to help guide readers along.—NK

Building Jews

- 1. If synagogues were businesses, their product would be Jews. The more Jews they could manufacture from otherwise illiterate, assimilated, and un-self-aware members, the more successful they would be. That is (to continue the metaphor) the bottom line. Simply getting together with other Jews may be ancillary and even indispensable to this ultimate goal, but it can just as easily be—as is often the case when Jews get together to watch a movie, eat dinner, or play tennis—a pleasant way to pass time.**
- 2. Jews need one another, and therefore congregations, to do primary religious acts that they should not, and probably cannot, do alone. Doing primary religious acts is the only way we have of growing as Jews. Consequently, it is also the only justification for the existence of a congregation. Everything else congregations do, Jews can always do cheaper, easier, and better somewhere else.**
- 3. Jewish religious growth requires other Jews, teachers, and a community. But it does not necessarily require a rabbi or a congregation. There have always been differing venues for Jewish religious growth—chavurot, independent minyanim, camps, institutes, Hillels, community centers, and federations; now there are even more.**
- 4. There are three ancient kinds of primary Jewish acts: communal prayer, holy study, and good deeds (or in the classical language of *Pirkei Avot*: *avodah*, Torah, and *g'milut chasadim*). This is not a capricious categorization. Prayer (*avodah*) is emotional: song, candles, dance, meditation, and silence—a matter of the heart. Study (Torah) is intellectual reading, questioning, discussion, and rigorous logic and argument—a**

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matter of the head. And good deeds (*g'milut chasadim*) are public acts: helping, repairing, matching, fighting, and doing—matters of the hand. Only rare individuals are able to do all three with equal fervor and skill. And so our membership in a congregation and association with a broad spectrum of Jews will compensate for our personal deficiencies.

5. We can broaden the description of primary Jewish acts to include all mitzvot. Specifically, I (Noa Kushner) want to emphasize a religious connection to Israel as well as interpersonal ethics (*l'shon hara*, etc.).
6. One of the biggest challenges today, so common that it often goes unmentioned, is that there are a vast number of people who have never experienced the practice of mitzvot altogether. They have never had a powerful Shabbat. They have never been to a transformational seder or wedding. In the work of building Jews, there is no substitution for the firsthand experience. Mitzvot cannot be regarded from behind a screen or held at a polite distance.
7. The practice of primary Jewish acts is a nonnegotiable tool for building a Jewish life. Therefore, Jewish religious communities must first be living environments where people can practice mitzvot. This practice cannot be for display only, and it cannot be solely for educational purposes. It needs to be because we believe that Jewish religious experiences can transform: they can change lives, make meaning, and invest people in the world.
8. As well, while Lawrence Kushner was right that these mitzvot often require community, today we organize things differently. At The Kitchen, part of our vision is that our porous community is a part of a larger ecosystem that includes many overlapping communities, each with a different focus, that are designed to work together (e.g., Limmud, Hazon, Bend the Arc). We don't think of "Kitchen-ites" as "ours." Instead, our goal is to make them part of this larger ecosystem.
9. In order to maintain their congregations, Jews must do many other things that are not inherently Jewish. These secondary acts include maintaining a building, raising money, and perhaps forming a board of directors. (It should be here noted, however, that in the long history of our people there have been healthy, vibrant, and solvent congregations that had none of the above.)

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10. Congregations, unfortunately, often get so caught up in doing secondary acts that they actually begin to think that maintaining the building, raising money, or the board of directors is the reason for the existence of the congregation. Their members are busy at work, but because they have forgotten why they are at work, their efforts are hollow and come to naught.
11. We tend to think of owning a building as a given, an obvious and inevitable good (and there is no fun or glory in renting, that's for sure). But how many communities would actually be better off if they allowed themselves to sell? What percentage of a congregation's budget, for instance, is devoted to paying off the mortgage or maintaining the physical plant? How many communities cannot effectively change or update the way they practice because they are "trapped" in their buildings? Given that communal norms have changed, could those monies be more effectively spent in other ways that grow Jews?
12. It's so easy for everything attached to a Jewish organization (websites! dues!) to become sacrosanct. But supportive facets of Jewish communal life (what Lawrence Kushner calls the secondary acts) are ripe for experimental approaches precisely due to the fact that they are *not* inherently holy. In other words, because the stakes are relatively low, we can afford to swing and miss.

**"Irreverent Reverence": Purposeful Disruption
and Experimentation**

13. Precisely because they *are* inherently holy, we must also experiment with our approaches to Torah, *avodah*, and *g'milut chasadim*. At The Kitchen, we use "storahtelling" to translate all our Torah readings. We bring in members of the community who are improvisational actors to make it come alive. Yes, it's risky, but so is perpetuating a Torah service where no one is learning any Torah. Here, because the stakes are high, we can't afford to ignore possibilities. We've got to go beyond what's expected and accept that our leadership roles require us to take risks and be susceptible to new criticisms.
14. A goal of all institutions is stability and longevity. But, our question is: At what points do stability and longevity compromise the business of nourishing and enlivening Jews and Jewish experiences?

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15. Forty years ago, Dr. Eugene Borowitz wryly proposed the creation of biodegradable congregations—communities that had predetermined life spans. (This may now be happening in many communities even though it was not part of the original plan.) To be sure, some synagogues will continue successfully on their current trajectories. But for many, it may now be time to consider “disruptive business models.” Kodak, for example, lost sight of its primary mission of “capturing moments” and became fixated instead on its own technology. Our own “technology,” too, is only relevant so long as it builds Jews and those ready to practice Jewish life.
16. At the same time, to be sure, an innovative idea is not inherently successful by virtue of its novelty alone. There is only one test: Does the idea build Jews?
17. Just because it works for one generation does not mean it will work for the next. In fact, we might even say that if it worked for one generation, that is a good indication that it will not work for the next.
18. I (Noa Kushner) was struck one evening when, as an in-joke, our Kitchen musicians started playing a *nigun* based on the theme song of *The Breakfast Club* (a popular movie from the 1980s). The place erupted. At that moment I realized that it wasn’t hearing something secular that was surprising to the group—after all, how many times had we heard some Jewish twist on baby boomer favorites such as the Beatles or Joni Mitchell—what was surprising was that it was our secular music. The strong reaction was related to our surprise at the new feeling of having ownership over that cultural/religious moment.

Notes for Rabbis

19. **Rabbis should treat Jews more like rabbis. Jews should treat rabbis more like Jews.**
20. **Rabbis and congregants have it in their mutual best interests to encourage the rabbi to develop his or her own spiritual life and to discourage the rabbi from serving as a communal surrogate for religiosity or as a skilled but hollow performer. The leader of the prayers, in other words, must also pray.**
21. Every rabbi needs to create his or her own mission statement—not the fluff that customarily goes into resumes, but a mission

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(a *sh'lichut*)—the reason you do the work; what you'd be willing to lose your job over.

22. The principal task of teachers and rabbis is not imparting Jewish knowledge but helping Jews and those engaging with Jewish life learn how to edit and to filter the ocean of now readily available information. This would naturally include helping those interested find other rabbis, teachers, and experiences.
23. It's time to quit asking: "Who is a Jew?" and, instead, ask: "Who wants to *do Jewish*?" Enough with being gatekeepers; it's time to invite in the people who might well want to connect with Judaism but don't know that they are welcome.

No Substitute for Content

24. **There is no evidence whatsoever to support the notion that people who are drawn into the congregation for an innocuous nonreligious event, such as gourmet cooking, move onto activities of more primary religious worth any sooner than if they had been left alone to discover their own inevitable and personal religious agendas and timetables. Indeed, there is substantial data to suggest that congregations that run many "basement" activities in hopes of getting people from there onto upper floors, only wind up adding on to the basement.**
25. At the same time, much of religious practice is also deeply social. Creating substantive, culturally resonant, social Jewish experiences (the Shabbat table comes readily to mind) will do for many what twenty classes or services cannot. If we don't see Jewish life modeled in real time by peers or teachers, we cannot imagine doing it ourselves.

Money and the Marketplace

26. **The way a congregation gets its money may be finally more important than how much it gets. Consider the religious impact, for instance, between congregations getting, say, half their operating budgets from (a) bingo, (b) a few wealthy members, or (c) dues. There is a widespread misconception that because the congregation is nonprofit and tax-exempt, it is therefore a charity. Actually, even though the analogy makes us uncomfortable, a congregation is (with the possible**

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exception of offering membership to anyone with a financial hardship) precisely like a country club. And like all such clubs, you get what you pay for.

27. Today, in fact, most start-up communities do function like non-profits, especially those that serve younger audiences or participants that don't have the means to pay.
28. Asking participants to take financial responsibility for their community serves two critical functions: (1) This accepted responsibility can create ownership of a transformational experience. As the therapists say, "The payment is part of the cure." (2) The organization is less financially vulnerable and less dependent on foundational grants. Foundation money can help good ideas get started but will not carry them forever. As our Kitchen treasurer is fond of reminding us, "The foundation money is like heroin. Don't get addicted."
29. Membership dues are not inherently bad if the people paying for them are passionate about building the community. However, if the community is not valued, no dues structure (including making it free) can cover that up.
30. Rabbis and boards, fearing their congregations will get cheated by *schleppers* who merely want to use the community, have unfortunately responded by setting preconditions that preclude participation. But such preconditions limit everyone, even those with honest intentions. The reputation of Chabad, its responsiveness and institutional flexibility, is both a challenge and an inspiration to us. Should it really matter how long or if a person has been a member if he or she is ready to grow to another Jewish level?
31. In the contemporary marketplace, for-profit businesses are acting increasingly like nonprofits. For example, Lululemon is an athletic clothing company that, as part of their strategy, offers motivational materials and free communal yoga classes. Ben & Jerry's organizes groups around environmental awareness and activism. Jewish organizations must understand that we are now in direct competition with for-profits for our audience's time and attention, and act accordingly. Jews today will choose between Lululemon and shul. We know that our "product" is stronger than anything in the stores. But if we ignore issues of branding and strategy, we run the risk of our message going unheard in the marketplace.

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Democratic Approach to New Ideas

- 32. The amount of creativity within a congregation stands in inverse ratio to the number of people, groups, or levels in the institutional hierarchy empowered to prohibit anything. With the exceptions of spending a congregation's money or using its name, the members of a congregation should not need anyone's permission to initiate anything—be it a letter in the bulletin or an alternate religious service.**
- 33. The price of congregational vitality is the frequent appearance of confusion and even anarchy. The communal tolerance for such creative unpredictability is a learned skill. There can never be too many people trying too many things. If it's a good idea, people will keep coming. If it's not so good, no one will come. The committees, the board, and the rabbi ought not get into the business of approving or disapproving anything; they should only help whomever and whenever they can.**
- 34. Social media makes it exceptionally easy for people to initiate their own Jewish communities or group experiences. If we see this groundswell as an opportunity, we can be instrumental in helping to build more Jews.**
- 35. However, a caveat: the self organized events and ideas need to be in keeping with the mission. Ninety nine out of one hundred times they will be. But in the exceptional case, we don't direct resources or energy to things that people can find more easily elsewhere, and we don't try to be everything to everyone.**
- 36. We have seen the commitment to a democratic style of leadership that results in handing over the reins to several enthusiastic but unqualified people. There is such a thing as over-sacrificing the needs of the many for the needs of the few.**

Tent Pegs

- 37. Finally, the members of the congregation must nurture one another because they need one another; they simply cannot do it alone. Hermits and monasteries are noticeably absent from Jewish history; we are hopelessly communal people.**

When the wilderness tabernacle is completed, near the end of the Book of Exodus, we are told, "And it came to pass that the

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tabernacle was 'one'" (Exod. 36:13). Commenting on this curious expression, Rabbi Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (d. 1854) observes:

In the building of the tabernacle, all Israel were joined in their hearts; no one felt superior to his fellow. At first, each skilled individual did his own part of the construction, and it seemed to each one that his work was extraordinary. Afterwards, once they saw how their several contributions to the "service" of the tabernacle were integrated—all the boards, the sockets, the curtains and the loops fit together as if one person had done it all. Then they realized how each one of them had depended on the other. Then they understood how what all they had accomplished was not by virtue of their own skill alone but that the Holy One had guided the hands of everyone who had worked on the tabernacle. They had only later merely joined in completing its master building plan, so that "it came to pass that the tabernacle was one" (Exod. 36:13). Moreover, the one who made the Holy Ark itself was unable to feel superior to the one who had only made the courtyard tent pegs.¹

Note

A slightly modified version of the original "The Tent Peg Business" was most recently published in Lawrence Kushner, *I'm God; You're Not: Observations on Organized Religion and Other Disguises of the Ego* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 22–29.

1. Aharon Greenberg, ed., *Iturei Torah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1976), III.275.