

“Seeing Other Congregations”

I have a confession to make - I have been seeing other congregations. I had no idea this would happen when I first came here. I wasn't looking at other congregations. I really thought you would be the one congregation in my life. What can I say? Things happen. It is ***not you!*** And to be honest, even when I have been with other congregations, I was thinking of you the whole time! I am truly sorry how things have turned out because I will continue to see these other congregations in the future. But if it is any consolation, I can't help but feel that in the long run, what I am doing is strengthening our relationship together. Trust me. Give it time and our bond will only get stronger in the years to come.

Am I pulling your leg? Sort of. I **am** seeing other congregations and I have been doing so for quite some time. Let me explain.

I guess I started noticing this “straying” when a very active member came up to me during the High Holidays this year and asked me if I knew who a person was in a seat across from him. That other person had been an equally active member for years but they didn’t know each other. We are not a big synagogue but they rarely saw each other because they both came to different services and activities at B’nai Jacob.

At that point, I started to realize I really am becoming a rabbi for more than one congregation. And just how many was actually quite eye-opening.

First, I am the rabbi of **Congregation B’nai Jacob**. This consists of members that attend and are part of the

"traditional" aspects of our synagogue. By that, I mean those who join us for our Friday night Oneg services, Ladies' Auxiliary functions or Men's Club programs. They are part of B'nai Jacob as a traditional congregation and the role I play as rabbi for them is quite straight forward: deliver sermons, lead the late Friday night services, be an integral part of and a resource person for the events that make up our communal family. That's Congregation B'nai Jacob, my first pulpit.

But I have also been seeing another congregation: the "**Shul**". The Shul consists of those who are here and make up and maintain the daily minyanim (traditional prayer services) and our religious activities. There used to be much more of a crossover with these "two congregations"; a husband might have been part of the "Shul" and the wife more involved in the "B'nai Jacob

Congregation” but not as much today. More and more, I am the rabbi of a separate “Shul”, a unique and self contained aspect of B’nai Jacob. The Shul is a place where we daven (pray) every day, have breakfast together, ‘bench’ (recite the grace after meals) and meet back again in the evening. The Shul is a congregation within a congregation and while some members are part of both, there is a growing separation occurring.

And I serve as the rabbi of Congregation B’nai Jacob and the “Shul”.

On Sundays, I am rabbi of another congregation: B’nai Jacob Synagogue. That is a whole different congregation. This is a synagogue for those who are part of our community because they are here to raise their kids Jewish. You might see them occasionally on a weekday afternoon if their children attend Hebrew school or are

studying for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah but generally, I serve as their rabbi on Sundays and for special programming involving their children. These members come from Congregation B'nai Jacob but also from Parkersburg, Beckley, Hurricane, and from Temple Israel.

I also serve as rabbi for **B'nai Jacob /Beyt Midrash**, which is a congregation of both Jews and non-Jews, members and non-members who come here to study the Torah and Talmud. I see them regularly on Tuesdays and Thursdays and they are here for the intellectual aspects of our faith. They come to learn, to engage in dialogue, and to study.

More recently, I am with a new congregation, **Cyber B'nai Jacob**. This is a congregation I interact with on line through e-mails. This congregation consists of out of town members and former members who stay in touch, read

sermons, and keep up with our community through our weekly e-mails.

We now have synagogues within our synagogue, communities within our community and the only common denominator that they share is a rabbi. Now you understand what I mean when I say I am seeing other congregations! I sometimes feel like I have four or five congregations. The only difference is that they are all under one roof and the commute time is great!

When I began tonight, I said “seeing other congregations” is strengthening our relationship and I meant that. By being a congregation with several congregations, we find ourselves functioning on multi-levels and are an active place every single day, allowing people to experience G-d and Judaism in different ways. By making this a congregation, a synagogue, a shul, a beit

midrash, a 'cybergation', we are saying we are more than a building or a location; B'nai Jacob is a place of diversity. And we all come to G-d and our heritage from different angles.

I think synagogues must be reinvented to become places where people can come to find G-d in their own way.

There is a beautiful sentence in the opening chapter of this week's Torah portion. G-d says to Moses: "V'asu li Mikdash, V'shachanti B'tocham" (Exodus 25:8). Literally, the words are: "Build for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in them." Of course, grammatically that verse is incorrect. It should read "Build for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in it." But the rabbis teach that G-d and his Presence are not found in a building. They are found in the hearts and souls of the people in the building. G-d doesn't dwell in a

sanctuary; we do. And when we build a place for G-d, we need to do it in a way that people can find G-d in their hearts.

“Build for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in them.”

I understand that verse to mean that we don't make synagogues to house G-d; we build synagogues to allow people to feel His Presence in their lives. We fashion places whereby G-d can be felt among the people. And today, the way to make that happen is to allow a synagogue to be a place of dwelling for all, a place everyone can have a rabbi and a place to experience Judaism.

I end by telling you of something that has been in the Jewish media these past few weeks. A lot of comments have been generated as a result of a question posed by the ***New York Jewish Week***. The paper posed the

following question to its readers: Imagine you have won 100 million dollars but you have to donate it all to the Jewish community in 2010. Where would you have it go? There have been a lot of great responses.

But the more I thought about it, the more I kept coming to the conclusion that money is not the solution to the problems facing our Jewish communities. Sure, it helps and many congregations are struggling to meet their financial obligations, but the success or failure of Judaism in America will not be a lack of funding but a lack of imagination, the will to make a synagogue or a temple a place where everyone can dwell, a desire to make our houses of worship places where everyone can find their niche. We don't need more congregations or more rabbis, but we do need congregations and rabbis that are willing to become more than they are. We need congregations

within congregations fulfilling the needs of different congregants. We need shuls that allow G-d “to dwell in **them**”.

And when we learn to build sanctuaries for G-d that allows all to dwell, we will have Jewish communities where more people will direct their hearts and minds to G-d, to Judaism, and to the advancement of Jewish life.

AMEN