

The Future of the Jewish Home
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The Synagogue as Home **By Steven Exler, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale**

The word “home” conjures feelings of belonging, comfort, warmth and family. By contrast, the word “synagogue” evokes a sense of formality, impersonality, and even judgment. Can the two meet?

In a widely read 2015 article in *Times of Israel* entitled, “God is relocating”, Rabbi Dr Nathan Lopes Cardozo argued that God had left the synagogue because people had left the synagogue. He concluded that our community’s efforts should be directed to strengthening non-synagogue institutions, and taking our clergy and resources to the places where people are actually showing up. Should we, indeed, stop investing our religious and spiritual resources in the synagogue?

I believe the answer to this question is contingent upon an answer to my opening query: Can the synagogue and the home meet? If synagogue can feel more like home, then I believe we will return to the synagogue and reinvest in the synagogue. Because Rabbi Dr. Lopes Cardozo is not fully correct. Some people have not left the synagogue. They stay, but they do not invest. They attend, but they do not get involved. It is my belief that if synagogue feels like home, that will change.

Before articulating the core components of the model of synagogue as home, we must understand that this is not a new idea, but that a synagogue’s functioning as a home is in some sense a reclamation of the heritage of the Temple (the precursor to the synagogue) and ancient synagogues. The rabbinic work Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 17 describes two gates that were built to the Temple Courtyard by Solomon, the Gate of Grooms and the Gate of Mourners and Excommunicated Ones. As those in each category entered their gate, they would be respectively celebrated or mourned as appropriate. The text concludes that after the destruction of the Temple, the Sages decreed that these individuals now enter into synagogues (and study halls) to be connected to community¹. I believe

¹ The text is well worthy of being brought in its entirety:

פרקי דרבי אליעזר פרק יז : ... ראה שלמה שמדת גמילות חסדים גדולה לפני המקום, וכשבנה בית המקדש בנה שני שערים, אחד לחתנים ואחד לאבלים ולמנדים. והיו ישראל הולכין בשבתות ויושבין בין שני שערים הללו, והנכנס בשער חתנים היו יודעין שהוא חתן, והיו אומרים לו, השוכן בבית הזה ישמחך בבנים ובנות. והנכנס בשער אבלים והיה שפמו מכסה אז היו יודעין שהוא אבל, והיו אומרים לו, השוכן בבית הזה ינחמך. והנכנס בשער האבלים ולא היה שפמו מכסה, אז היו יודעין שהוא מנדה, והיו אומרים לו השוכן בבית הזה ינחמך, ויתן בלבבך שתשמע לחברך ויקרבוך, כדי שיצאו כל ישראל ידי חובתן בגמילות חסדים. משחרב בית המקדש התקינו שיהיו חתנים ואבלים הולכין לבתי כנסיות ולבתי מדרשות, ואנשי המקום רואין את החתן

this text makes clear that synagogues inherited from the Temple the responsibility to be the gathering place of those at their most joyous and their most bereft.

The idea that complete strangers offered joy to the groom and comfort to the bereaved and isolated suggests that this space (which the text strikingly abbreviates to *הבית הזה* – this house, emphasizing its place as a home) drew disparate individuals into a closeness that resembled family. Finally, we must note that the ancient synagogue served as a place of hospitality for wayfarers as well as a range of community center and other hospitality needs.²

Building off of this historic precedent of synagogue as home, what are the key elements of home that should manifest in our synagogues today? I propose three: comfort/belonging, ownership/responsibility, and family.

A home is a place of maximal comfort for all who live there. It is a place where every resident feels they can be their full and true self without having to put on an act. They are not judged by anyone for being who they are. Their default mode is belonging; no one questions why they are there or whether they meet some set of criteria to be there. This does not mean that demands or expectations are not made upon them; however, they are fundamentally valued simply by being present. Synagogues must cultivate the same sense, communicating to their existing membership – as well as to all – that simply by virtue of walking through the doors, they belong.³

A natural outgrowth of comfort and belonging is ownership and assumption of responsibility. Every member of a home naturally feels a responsibility for that which happens in their home. When a guest enters one's home, one naturally assumes responsibility to welcome them and connect with them because one feels a responsibility for that guest. Synagogues must cultivate the same sense. In a home model of synagogue, there is hardly a need for a Welcoming Committee – anyone and everyone would walk over and introduce themselves to anyone whom they did not know and invite them in, just as any resident of a home would for a visitor crossing the threshold into that home. Leadership and

וְשִׂמְחִים עִמּוֹ, וְרוֹאִין אֶת הָאֲבֵל וְיוֹשְׁבֵי עִמּוֹ עַל הָאֶרֶץ, כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּשְׁבּוּ וְיִצְאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל יְדֵי חוֹבְתָן בְּגִמְלֵי לִוְיָהוּם.
...וְעַלֵּיהֶם הוּא אוֹמֵר בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' גּוֹמֵל שְׂכָר טוֹב לְגוֹמְלֵי הַסְּדִים

² Babylonian Talmud Tractate Pesahim 100b-101a; See Levine, “The Ancient Synagogue”, Chapter 10.

³ This does not necessarily mean doing away with membership dues, but it certainly supports exploring other models as well as making absolutely clear that cost is never an obstacle to membership.

deep involvement naturally springs up in the home model of synagogue because of the depth of investment everyone has in their synagogue.

Finally, the most basic unit of connection inside the home is family. Even housemates who are not related share a deep bond. Synagogues must cultivate the same sense. They must transmit the message to their community that they are indeed family. Their care for and accountability to one another should create a network of bonds and supports that are as close as family. In an age of virtual social networks, the home model of synagogue creates a real social network that can truly add meaning and support to the life of every member. It also allows for a degree of vulnerability and honesty that paves the way for true growth and relationship.

A final benefit of the home model of synagogue is the possibility that this model will bridge the gap between synagogue and home, not only weaving the positive Jewish aspects of home into synagogue, as we have shown above, but also allowing for aspects of synagogue life to spill back into the home. If synagogue feels like home, and one prays in the synagogue, for example, one may then be more comfortable eventually praying at home. The dissolution of the sharp dividing line between synagogue and home ultimately allows for more fluidity and growth in Jewish life and practice.