

A Shul for All Ages

Many divisions plague the Orthodox Jewish community, and many efforts at solidarity work to unite us. We need one more such effort. It will not be a new organization, a new program or a new publication. It will cost no money. It will require a spiritual reorientation.

I've *davened* in a variety of shuls, in several cities and on two continents. The one thing I noticed in all these places was that in shul I felt part of the Jewish people. I didn't give it a second thought. Which other group would I feel a part of while *davening*? But over the past twenty years or so I developed what I can only call that "pre-conscious" feeling. On some remote level I became vaguely aware of a breakdown in the solidarity I used to feel when I went to shul. This feeling slowly rose to consciousness as I traveled around the country and observed a certain change.

That change was age.

More and more, I noticed that I was *davening* with people who were, more or less, my own age and that others—of my children's age, for example—were also *davening* with people who were, more or less, their own age.

With due allowance for exceptions, I noticed that new criteria seemed to have emerged for what is considered a "good" minyan. We are familiar with the old criteria: *kavanah*, geographical proximity, the level of scholarship or eloquence of the rabbi, the style of *davening*, the quality of the *Keriyat ha-Torah*, et cetera. The new criteria seem to be *davening* with people of one's own age, not feeling comfortable with

davening with people not of one's own age and gravitating toward shuls or *minyanim* of one's coevals.

This is not a good idea. Not good spiritually, nor pedagogically. How is a child supposed to learn to honor the aged, the seniors, the people connected to a previous generation, if he sees only a few of them—or none—as he *davens*? So much of what is passed from one generation to the next is unstated, non-verbal, a matter of spirit, of wisdom, communicated at least as much by gesture as by word. What possible benefit is there to cutting off a child (or, for that matter, an adult) from this in shul?

What kind of message are we sending to the Holy One, Blessed be He, if we must be with "our own" when we *daven*?

A generation is a fruitful category of historical analysis. *The Generation of 1914*, by Robert Wohl, is one of the finest books I have ever read. I come back to it, again and again. Here is his argument, vastly oversimplified: Wohl observes that the generation that went through World War I suffered a radical break in sensibility from their parents. In fact, the use of the term "generation" as a category of history owes much of its genesis to the generation of 1914. It set a new agenda for history, poetry, politics and more.

This is understandable. This is what generations do. It is no different today, and no different in the Jewish community. Nor need it be. To associate with people with whom one has a common tongue, an instinctive mutuality, is one of the joys of being alive.

But shul is different. Shul is where we grow, where we stretch our boundaries, where, by definition, our *davening* is supposed to take us beyond our inherent level of connection.

Shul is supposed to be the place where the different sensibilities of the different generations can instruct one

another and, yes—please forgive the cliché—unify us. Shul is supposed to enable generations to face and refine each other; it is the place where the very young learn how to look up to their elders, where the elders take joy from the very young and where those of the varying stages in between learn to benefit from both. Shul is the place where the people who encamped at Sinai, "as one person with one heart," can experience ineradicable solidarity.

In society, generally, age is feared. Old is bad. This is especially true as people live much longer, and as decrepitude occurs—and is visible—far more than when the expected lifespan was sixty-five. Now it is common for people to live into their nineties—and to decline slowly. The need to *daven* with "one's own" is, in part, an assimilationist impulse, an absorption of society's fear of aging.

No one denies that to age, or to witness others age, is sometimes difficult—which is all the more reason for the community to break down the emerging age-based barriers that separate us when we select a place to *daven*.

Not to mention that a weekly observation of the elderly and the process of aging provides lifelong lessons. One learns that a person may scale unimaginable heights—or may waste one's life. In observing how the children of the elderly treat their parents, one learns precisely how to fulfill the commandment of honoring your mother and father to the utmost—or the opposite. Lessons from the end of life illuminate the entire spectrum of life, at whatever point on the spectrum one finds himself.

A spiritually and pedagogically healthy place to *daven* is one in which all Jews, whatever their age, are welcomed and, indeed, embraced. It is not the family that prays together, stays together. It is the *community* that prays together, stays together. This is the spiritual orientation of the Torah, which we received "as one person, with one heart." ■

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