

Parking Lot Minyan

By Ilan D. Feldman

I have good news for those of you in despair about the *shtiebelization* of American Orthodoxy. I have inadvertently conducted a social science experiment in my own community, and the results suggest that—surprise, surprise—people will join bold leadership in countering this trend in American Orthodoxy.

My experiment developed when I found myself behind deadline (again) in submitting an article for our synagogue bulletin. As I sat before the blank computer screen under pressure to produce, it dutifully alerted me to the fact that I had received another e-mail. Faced with the choice of either ignoring its contents and focusing on producing an article or nibbling at the bait dangling before me, I chose, of course, to take the bait.

The e-mail was authored by a long-time member of the community, who complained about the length of the most recent Friday night service, during which the beginning of Lecha Dodi “sounded like a funeral dirge.” He went on:

Out of desperation, I'm frivolously talking about organizing a parking lot

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minyan. Don't worry, it won't happen. But there's no reason that Minchah, Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv should take longer than between forty-five and sixty minutes. My problem with Atlanta (and with most of the cities in the US) is that there are few shuls where I'm comfortable with the davening. The one exception is early minyan. Even weekday Minchah/Maariv has become a one-hour event when a devar halachah [short halachic discussion] is added. In [a particular Jewish community on the East Coast], the davening is too fast (thirty minutes for morning minyan), but it's preferable to the long, drawn-out services now taking root in most parts of the US.

I watched as, suddenly filled with creativity and energy, my fingers formulated this response:

There is a reason this trend you negatively describe is happening: most people like it. That is why we have a huge crowd, in spite of the longer service than you would like (the difference between a longer service and a shorter one is really maximum twenty minutes; is that such a hard thing to tolerate, when you see it works for other people?). One of the frustrations I have is that people want to have exactly their preference in length, flavor and color of yarmulke; otherwise, the davening is wrong, wrong, wrong.

When you organize a parking lot minyan—which I know you are not seri-

ous about—you will find that after several weeks, people will feel that the seats are not soft enough, or the lighting is imperfect, or you started five minutes too early or late, or davening is too slow, too quiet, too public or too fast, et cetera. They will also criticize those who use the parking lot for parking their cars while others are trying to daven. Eventually, you will have a lobby minyan, a parking lot minyan, a social hall minyan and several living room minyanim. Everyone will be happy with his own little fiefdom, and no one will even know that what he is missing is connection with others, and training in dealing with the needs and the world of the Other. Everyone will be totally happy in his alienation and separateness, secure that all his judgments about everything are right, never challenged by anything different than his own fantasy world. And when Mashiach comes, people will resist following him, because if they do, they will have to stand in line with “everyone else” and it will take too long.

Perhaps it is actually spiritually better for people to daven in a place where they are not totally happy, but aware that there is a big world out there with different individuals who are worth being with even though they daven too fast/slow/Carlebach/with a low mechitzah/high mechitzah?

The challenge—and opportunity for growth, for someone as accomplished and

as independent as you—is to learn how to value that which is valuable to others, and to learn how to play ball with an enterprise that is run by other people and their ideas. You are one of the brightest people I know, and you are not at all a selfish person, which only adds to my question: Why is someone with your abilities spending his time in the back of the shul dreaming about parking lot minyanim to save twenty minutes (OK, thirty minutes) on a Friday night instead of dreaming big dreams for this shul, empowering it by bringing your skills and imagination to the table to help the community grow, reach more Jews, save more lives, serve existing members, make a bigger difference and produce intensely devoted Jews who themselves will make a difference to others? Horrible thought: suppose Hashem made you as smart and as capable as you are in order to lead others in a huge

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common cause, and not to make a parking lot minyan of refugees from slow davening, whose only common commitment is to get davening done in their own way at their own pace?

After firing off this unedited outburst, I obtained permission from my pen pal to publish the dialogue while guaranteeing his anonymity, and, presto! I had met my deadline for the shul bulletin.

Now, I have published many bulletin articles over the years, addressing issues such as Oslo, Gaza, homosexuality, outreach, relations with the Reform and Conservative movements and other purportedly provocative topics where I took controversial positions. Many of these articles, which were written with painstaking care and required hours of editing, have been greeted with the communal equivalent of a collective yawn.

Not this time. People stopped me late at night at the supermarket. E-mails came in thanking me. My overnight voice mails contained messages of gratitude and enthusiasm. One person called to say that he had been angry at the shul for some frustration he had experienced and was wondering why he should continue paying dues, when he read this correspondence. “You reminded me why I am a member of a community. Thank you.” The reaction to this piece far outstripped anything else I had ever published.

All of which is very heartening to me. The trend to create micro-minyanim—meeting at the perfect hour and the perfect place, davening at the perfect pace, with the perfect group of like-minded friends, followed (or interrupted) by the perfect kiddush—is symptomatic of a larger disease plaguing Orthodoxy. Minyan splintering is only a symptom of the illness. We have become a group of religious consumers,

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When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all your undertakings.

Deuteronomy 24:19

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demanding services from our shuls and other organizations. “Me generation” self-centeredness has crept into the religious community, masquerading as religious fervor and sophistication, and the trend seems inexorable. I am sure I am not alone among rabbis in wondering if the only approach is to sponsor the splintering before the splintering renders any notion of community totally meaningless. When shul and davening and community are about meeting *my* needs, is it any wonder that most of our religious communities are closed spiritual communes that have not the slightest expectation of seeing a single newcomer or seeker entering our gates?

The outcome of my unintended and admittedly non-scientific experiment indicates that when leadership takes a stand for the concept of *kehillah*, community, when we give voice to people’s higher selves, they are then able to reject the appeal of fragmentation and accompanying alienation. It is time for rabbis and lay leaders alike to remind people that the point of religious life is to *give it away*, to be of service to others, not to be served. **JA**