

Why Kiddush Clubs Must Go

By Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb



The recent decision by the Board of Directors of the Orthodox Union to issue a statement calling for the elimination of so-called “*kiddush* clubs” from OU synagogues enabled the organization to take a giant first step in addressing two problematic areas of contemporary Orthodox Jewish life in North America. The first of these areas is the synagogue environment and the oft-bemoaned dearth of spirituality there. The second area, perhaps more troublesome, is the growth of substance abuse and other self-destructive behaviors in our community, primarily among adolescents but also among young adults.

In the past three years, I have visited many synagogues and communities across the United States and Canada. So often, I hear the following complaint: We are not successful in transmitting to our children the Jewish path that we have taken. Sometimes, the complaint is that our children and institutions have “flipped out,” “moved to the right” or in some other manner abandoned the “moderate, normal” path of Centrist Orthodoxy. On the

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other hand, I hear complaints about children who have “dropped out,” “gone off the *derech* [right path]” or, in extreme situations, have developed severe problems of substance abuse, promiscuity, eating disorders or other delinquent or pathological behaviors.

In speculating upon the roots of this problem, and in interviewing hundreds of young people and those who teach or treat them, various possible explanations emerge. One is the blandness or hypocritical lack of seriousness found in many, if not most, of our synagogues. Many of our children reject the large synagogue model, seeking a more intense and fervent service, closer to what they

have witnessed in *yeshivot*, Chassidic communities or Carlebach-style settings. But other young people move in an entirely different direction, seeking stimulation and companionship in risky and often treacherous settings and practices, which sometimes degenerate into full-fledged addictions and other maladjustments.

We must find ways to address the community mental health issues with which we are confronted. In addition, we must work at enhancing the meaningfulness of the prayer service in the Orthodox synagogue in order to keep our children respectful of their parents’ approach.

One phenomenon that is espe-



cially troublesome is the *kiddush* club. This increasingly common practice consists of a group of congregants, almost invariably men, who leave the main sanctuary at a key point in the service, typically the *haftarah*, and withdraw to a side room where they drink hard liquor.

This phenomenon destroys *kevod hatefillah* (the dignity of the service). And it is ironic that the timing of the *kiddush* club exodus usually coincides with the reading from the *haftarah*, which is a unique opportunity for most of us to encounter the prophetic message.

But the *kiddush* club stands for far more than a callous disregard of the sanctity of the Shabbat service. It serves as a setting within which adults drink immoderate amounts of alcohol and often return to synagogue more than mildly intoxicated. This behavior is not lost on the rest of the congregation, particularly the youth, including the very children of these participants. This practice glorifies and idealizes alcohol at precisely a time when alcohol and other addictions are clearly on the rise in our community.

The OU is committed to addressing both of these problems in comprehensive and far-reaching ways. Our call for eliminating *kiddush* clubs is just a dramatic first action in what will be a long and complex battle, which will entail the use of community resources, parent education, special programs in schools and a change in the cultural climate of our synagogues and homes.

A recently convened group of sixty-five pulpit rabbis and day school educators from across the Greater New York area confirmed our diagnosis of these social ills, and welcomed the OU's leadership in coordinating efforts toward ameliorating these problems. Many rabbis told us of their struggles to put an end to the disgrace of the

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OU CALLS FOR END TO KIDDUSH CLUBS

LEADERS OF THE ORTHODOX UNION have called on all synagogues to completely eliminate Kiddush Clubs. This nationwide initiative will be launched on **Shabbat Parshat Mishpatim, February 5, 2005**. Recent years, says the OU, have seen the growth of these "clubs," in which congregants leave shul during the *haftarah* reading to make Kiddush, often on hard liquor.

Citing the negative impact on synagogue services that these clubs have, the OU points out that the synagogue serves as a *mikdash me'at*—a place for prayer and *kedushah*, sanctity. Any behavior that detracts from the *kedushat beit haknesset* is insulting to the entire congregation.

These clubs also have a harmful influence on young people, because of their idealization of alcohol. This is particularly disturbing, says the OU, because it is emblematic of the larger dangers of alcohol consumption and substance abuse in our community.

Rabbis have responded enthusiastically to the OU's call, echoing the urgent need to restore dignity to the shul and to combat the abuse of liquor and other substances. Indeed, the OU intends to widen the campaign in the near future to include "Safe Homes, Safe Shuls, Safe Schools."

The Orthodox Union is assisting synagogues by providing educational materials, workshops, scholars-in-residence, and other programming to creatively and comprehensively address these issues.

As Rabbi Dr. Trvi Hersh Weinreb, Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, has put it, "Since the influences of the world around us inevitably invade our *dalei amot*—we as a community can sweep this behavior under the rug, or we can isolate it and respond to it. We have chosen to respond."

More information can be obtained from the Orthodox Union by calling 212.613.8225 or emailing safeshul@ou.org.

kiddush clubs but felt that they alone did not command sufficient authority to eliminate them. They have welcomed the support of the OU and its lay leadership.

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Not everyone has been so supportive, of course, and we have been the object of anger and even ridicule in some circles. Perhaps those critics should keep in mind my own experiences. I was at the deathbed of a youngster who died as a direct result of the liquor freely available at a *kiddush* club, and I have been in emergency rooms with three others who suffered toxic reactions because of alcohol in

shul. Yes, there are cynics out there who will ridicule us, but dozens of rabbis, mental health workers and—believe it or not—shul lay leaders who have participated in *kiddush* clubs have responded to us with thanks and praise.

If one shul discontinues its *kiddush* club as the result of the OU's efforts, I will be proud of our accomplishment. We are at war against substance abuse, and we are fighting for *kevod beit haknesset* (the honor of our shuls). This is the first strike; there will be many more to come.

One key aspect of the OU response will be through the work of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY). Thankfully, drugs have not been a major issue in NCSY. Nevertheless, NCSY National Director Rabbi Steven Burg has initiated a three-part program of drug awareness and education (with special attention directed toward high school seniors, who must be prepared for the new challenges they will face in college or as yeshivah students in Israel), which will be featured at NCSY events and on its web site.

A final anecdote: A particularly vehement opponent of our attempt to stop the *kiddush* club practice happens to be an officer in one of our regions. He was an avid member of a *kiddush* club at his synagogue until several weeks ago when he took his sons and their friends to a basketball game. Some people in the row in front of them were drinking and beginning to show the effects of the liquor. When the father muttered about how poorly behaved those people were, the kids spontaneously answered, "But they look just like you guys when you come back to shul for Musaf after the *kiddush* club." This one incident was enough to convince our friend of the wisdom of our campaign. **JA**