

A SYNAGOGUE WITH PRINCIPLES

Sidney H. Schwarz

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Students of American Jewry often speak of our community's nonideological nature, and certainly there is much evidence that our community tends to avoid ideological extremes. Sometimes, the trait is attributed to the nonideological nature of American society in general, but that explanation has never made me resign myself to the situation. As a disciple of Mordecai Kaplan — who combined pragmatism and utopianism — and as a Reconstructionist rabbi, I have been conditioned to act on the belief that ideas can matter to American Jews.

After serving as the rabbi of a Reconstructionist synagogue for some years, I acquired the confidence to introduce ideas into the day-to-day workings of a Jewish community. As a college student, I had worked as a youth director of a large Conservative synagogue. What I remember of the few board meetings that I attended are a protracted discussion on the price of wholesale toilet paper and a debate about assigning spaces in the parking lot to staff. Those earlier recollections shaped my behavior as a rabbi, and at synagogue board meetings, I made a point of introducing some topic that would bear on the quality or content of our synagogue program.

The willingness of synagogue members to discuss such issues emboldened me. When I suggested that, as a community, we undertake a project to develop a Statement of Principles, there was a general sense of excitement. Our members had long taken pride in being a unique synagogue — one that served as

an alternative to many of the larger, more conventional congregations in the area. Here was a vehicle to articulate just what made us so unique.

The Process

The process by which the Statement of Principles came into being can be explained fairly simply. The ideological and interpersonal dynamics behind the document were more complex. As for the process, I delivered a sermon at a service (an unusual practice — I most often choose a teaching format) advocating the development of principles for the congregation. My message was that a synagogue should stand for something and not simply be an institution that provided a set of services for anyone who paid the price of membership. I then articulated ideas which I thought had become *de facto* principles in our operation, and proposed other ideas that are suggested by Reconstructionist philosophy.

That ended my involvement with the development of a Statement of Principles. Before I delivered the sermon, I had already recruited some members to work on the committee to draft the document. More people came forward after the sermon. Though I attended the first meeting of the committee, it was simply to present an outline of my remarks and some ideas that they might want to consider. My next contact with the committee's work was four months later when a draft of the Principles was circulated throughout the synagogue membership for comment.



The makeup of the committee was fairly representative of the congregation, and its size fluctuated between five and twelve persons. The primary division in the committee, and the congregation at large, was one of age and background. The older members of the congregation are in their forties and fifties, with children either in our school or already out of the home. They were people who were raised with strong commitments to Judaism and for whom membership in a synagogue was never in doubt. Many of them were already members when I came to the synagogue and prior to our Reconstructionist affiliation.

The younger members, on the other hand, are in their twenties and early thirties. Among them are singles, divorced, and young couples without children or just starting families. They are the kind of Jews who would not join most synagogues because they would find the program irrelevant to their own needs and interests and the socio-economic makeup too distant from their own lifestyles and values. Many of these young people are recent additions to the congregation and are strongly drawn to the Reconstructionist ideology that animates us as a community.

Eric and Joan, a married couple who chaired the committee, were typical of the younger members of the synagogue. Neither Eric, a 30-year-old psychologist, nor Joan, a 28-year-old audiologist, had a very strong Jewish upbringing. Joan was drawn to Judaism during a visit to Israel; Eric had to skip over a generation to find a positive Jewish model in his grandfather.

They joined the synagogue after a lengthy process in which they had investigated several synagogues, looking for a community to which they wanted to belong. To get to Beth Israel, they would drive forty minutes, past most of the synagogues in the Main Line Jewish section of Philadelphia.

For both Joan and Eric, the development of a Statement of Principles was a high point on their road back to Jewish commitment. In addition, they saw the document as giving a more definite direction to a synagogue that was different but that had

congregation were Stan and Helen. Stan, a chemist in his forties with children who had just finished our Hebrew School, felt that it was too idealistic to think that many people in the synagogue would care about principles. As he saw it, people join synagogues because of personalities, both of the rabbi and of other members that they meet. While people might take an interest in the Principles after they join, he couldn't imagine that anyone would join solely on the basis of an ideological statement. Interestingly, although he joined the original committee

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not yet found a clear voice. When the document was finally ratified by the entire congregation, Eric submitted a long list of possible uses for the Statement. Not only did he see it as the philosophical basis for the synagogue. He also hoped that it would raise the consciousness and commitment of less active members of the synagogue and even be of interest to the general community.

When Joan and Eric later had their first child, they left the synagogue because the distance became too great a barrier. Yet, in shopping for a more proximate synagogue, they took the Beth Israel Statement of Principles to their meetings with rabbis to explain what they were looking for in a congregation.

Two members of the committee who reflected the attitudes of the older segment of the

somewhat skeptical of the whole endeavor, he found himself increasingly drawn into the process, because the issues discussed helped him clarify his own thinking on matters of Jewish concern. On the whole, Stan believed that members of the committee benefited far more from the experience than did other synagogue members.

Helen is a housewife in her fifties who, together with her husband, is involved in more Jewish volunteer work than anyone else in the synagogue. One of the longest standing synagogue members, she is often at the heart of congregational undertakings. Helen tends to be cynical about the Statement of Principles because she thinks it is more representative of what the committee wished Beth Israel would be than what it actually is. Since her involvement in the



synagogue long predates Beth Israel's Reconstructionist affiliation and the attraction of younger members, she finds it hard to believe that anyone would join a synagogue because of a set of ideas. Yet she cannot deny the phenomenon and tends to believe, as Stan does, that our growth in membership has more to do with personalities. Her involvement in the committee, besides being part of a habit, was also activated by her desire to be an anchor representing what the synagogue always has been. She neither fully understands nor trusts what motivates the younger members.

Despite these differences in perspectives and expectations, the committee functioned quite smoothly, with a minimum of conflict. Because the Statement that emerged was well-balanced between what we already were doing as a congregation and what we hoped to become, there was virtually a pre-existing consensus. Some differences of opinion did arise, however, highlighting the generational/ideological gap.

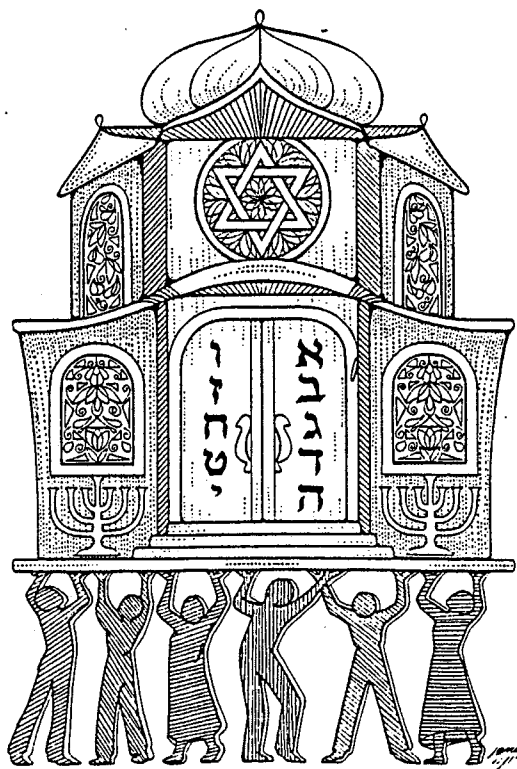
Standards

The committee disagreed about my initial proposal to create standards for synagogue members. This would have entailed minimum requirements for a combination of committee work, attendance at services, and time given to the congregation. Among our core members, this had long been held up as an ideal. One member of the committee, Burt, a thirty-one-year-old organizational consultant, particularly seized

upon this idea and sought to have it incorporated into the document.

Part of what motivated him was a disdain for the huge Conservative congregation where he was raised in Baltimore, in which he hadn't set foot since his bar mitzvah ceremony. The only way for a synagogue to avoid becoming an impersonal institution with hundreds of

principle — accepting all members at varying levels of commitment and involvement. It has been borne out that a member with a low involvement one year can take a leadership role the next. The committee thus decided to make a general statement about involvement instead of imposing any membership standards, hoping to convey the ideal.



uninvolved and unaffected members, he thought, would be to impose a strict membership requirement. Since our physical plant at Beth Israel constrains our ability to grow, such a membership standard would be useful as a natural way to limit growth.

The conflict over this issue was that the principle of involvement, when taken to the extreme of an imposed membership standard, went against another

Denominationalism

A second issue of disagreement had to do with denominationalism. How much, it was asked, should the Statement of Principles be tied to Reconstructionist doctrine? Harry, a twenty-nine-year-old physician and a member of the committee, came to his strong identification



with Judaism only as an adult. When he found Beth Israel, he embraced the Reconstructionist philosophy, which answered many of his doubts about religion and Judaism in an intelligent, reasonable way. For Harry, the creation of synagogue principles was very much a challenge to see how Kaplan's ideas could be applied to a particular synagogue setting.

Other members of the committee, by contrast, felt that it was inadvisable to make the document too partisan. Just as some people joined and changed their degree of involvement, so

too people joined with greater and lesser affinity to Reconstructionism as a philosophy. Again, the idea of full acceptance precluded an overly specific statement about what could and could not be believed. This problem was resolved by indicating in the document an endorsement of Reconstructionism as a process which allowed for flexibility and change over time.

Israel

The third issue had to do with Israel. I was pleasantly surprised to see the statement of support

included, in view of the dominance of younger members on the committee. For many of these younger members, the search for religious meaning has been an inward search. The responsibility towards world Jewry — second nature for those of us raised in committed homes — is not a priority for latecomers to the Jewish community. The paragraph on Israel and world Jewry was proposed by Helen and her husband Joe who run our annual UJA and Israel Bonds campaign. None of the younger members of the committee would have thought to include it. Once sug-

Statement of Principles

Preamble

Beth Israel is a community that works together to explore ways of living that enhance Jewish survival and lend meaning to our individual and group lives. Although the religious beliefs and practices of our congregation cover a broad spectrum, we endorse the concept of Reconstructionism as a process. Inherent in this concept is the recognition that people take precedence over doctrine, and communities over institutions, as well as the recognition of the equality of opinions of congregants and professionals. As part of the process of Reconstructionism, decision making includes the entire synagogue community as well as the opinion of legal religious experts. The congregation insists that the essential guidelines of our faith be judged by standards of feasibility, morality, and justice which members of Beth Israel feel to be relevant to their lives. Based on these concepts, religious observance at our synagogue is performed in a

meaningful, traditional manner which is consistent with evolving Jewish values and culture.

Principles

The Beth Israel Congregation accepts members at all levels of commitment and observance to Judaism. We view Judaism as conveying a sense of peoplehood. As Jews, we share a common history and are committed to a common destiny. Therefore, our unity as Jews is derived from our history and peoplehood, as well as from our religious beliefs.

Beth Israel strives to be a community where Jews at all levels of observance are encouraged to express freely their Judaism and themselves. This freedom of expression encompasses differences of opinion.

We strive to maintain a consistency between our values, our beliefs, and the ways in which we conduct our daily lives, both in and out of the synagogue. This means that we place human needs over material

needs, and we should expect no more of others than we are willing to do ourselves. We should also be prepared to take actions which, while socially responsible, may be difficult or unpopular. Ultimately, the true test of our commitment is revealed through our actions, more than in our words or prayers.

Active participation is a necessary and integral part of the workings of our synagogue. All members are encouraged to participate, and the extent of the participation is limited only by one's imagination, initiative, and energy.

Beth Israel works to foster a sense of community through the active commitment of its congregants. We recognize the necessity of ongoing commitment to one another and attempt to evoke mutual caring and responsibility among members of all ages. We appreciate and utilize the individual talents, skills, and experience of our members.

At Beth Israel we recognize that learning produces growth — intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. We experience the rich variety of traditional and contemporary Jewish belief and practice through our exposure to a wide range of religious, social, and educational pro-

gested, however, nobody objected, although there was a strong feeling that support should be expressed for Israel generally, and not for the specific policies of any government.

Using the Statement

Since the completion of our Statement of Principles two years ago, we have made use of it in several ways. It has been very useful to give the Statement to prospective members. Even though we have imposed no membership standard, such a document does facilitate a self-

selection process. One member of a neighboring Conservative congregation attended Beth Israel for a bar mitzvah, read the Statement (no doubt during the service), and said to me at the *kiddush*, "If I took Judaism more seriously, I would join your synagogue." I took that as a compliment.

I found myself referring people to the Principles quite often, especially during orientations I would hold for new members. Our more involved members are aware and proud of the Statement which is available at the table in our foyer. But I know

that our older members could care less and, though we mailed the Statement out to everyone, we have not done much to make them interested in it. The Statement was used when the bylaws were recently rewritten, and we have referred more than once to the Principles at board meetings when tackling particularly thorny issues.

The committee originally recommended that the Statement be reevaluated every two years; in retrospect, that is probably too frequent. It would be fascinating to see how much such a Statement of Principles would change if rewritten every five years or so. Inherent in the Principles is the belief in change and development — of ideas, programs, and structures. Also, the composition of the committee shaped the document, so that a different committee might arrive at substantially different formulations. I believe, however, that even if a completely different committee had worked on the Statement, the basic ideas would be the same.

I suppose this is what surprises me the most. Within our synagogue, the Principles are quite unremarkable. Certainly there is pride in having produced the document — and especially in the fact that it was done by a totally lay committee — but the ideas contained in it found almost no objection when we circulated the Statement throughout the congregation for approval. When I speak at other synagogues, people express shock and amazement that I, as the rabbi, could actually allow my members to produce such a

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grams. These opportunities to learn are available to members at all age levels and are often shared among different age groups.

Additionally, Beth Israel maintains a unique relationship with the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. We provide rabbinic interns with the opportunity to share their varied and often fresh ideas with our congregation, and, conversely, we welcome the opportunity to share our ideas with them.

Beth Israel strongly affirms the principle of sexual equality in all areas of Jewish life. Women and men are equally encouraged to participate in the responsibilities and voluntary activities of the synagogue to whatever level they feel comfortable. This principle extends to such religious and life cycle events as bar/bat mitzvah ceremonies, marriage and divorce proceedings, calling to the Torah, counting of the minyan, and selection of rabbinic leadership.

In recognition that the Jewish family is central to our survival, Beth Israel provides many opportunities for family enrichment and growth. Shabbat and holiday services, children's seders, and educational classes are designed to facilitate family interaction and involve-

ment. It is our hope that family participation in all facets of synagogue life sets examples necessary for the perpetuation of our Jewish heritage.

We feel connected to Jews everywhere by our religious beliefs, our traditions, and our history. We support the State of Israel and recognize its importance to Jewish renewal and survival. We encourage our members to form ties to the land and its people through study and personal visits, as well as offering financial and emotional support. We believe that all Jews must have the freedom of religious expression which we consider a basic right, and support efforts to gain this right.

The future shape and direction of our synagogue community depends primarily on what we do and the decisions that we make. At Beth Israel we operate on a democratic model with decisions made by the community as a whole. The congregants and rabbi work in responsible concert, with final authority for decisions resting with the congregation. By engaging actively in the design of our own worship patterns, synagogue practices, and policies, we are creating a Jewish community that is relevant, fulfilling, and ever evolving.

Rather than Wait

Rather than wait for the King
Better that I walk
The road of my days
And from this day and forever
Forget my dreams.
So let it be — it is known now
And I will not refuse. . . .
No one will understand, why
With all this my heart rejoices;
What is this secret I was guarding,
Is it more precious than all my life?
— My word, a small thing spoken:
It may be the King lives.

— Elisheva Zhirkova
Translated from Hebrew by Lisa Altman,
Marcia Cohn Spiegel, and Mahlia Lynn Schubert

Elisheva Zhirkova Bikhowsky was known as Ruth of the Volga. Although she was not Jewish, she was attracted to the growing Zionist movement, learned Hebrew and in 1925 settled in Palestine, where she died in 1949.

Principles

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Statement. Most Jews believe that such Principles ought to be the job of a national committee of rabbis — a document produced by experts which lay people most frequently ignore.

This is where Beth Israel and Reconstructionism parts company with other sectors of American Jewry. I don't think that ideology and principles are solely the domain of rabbis. Quite the opposite. If ideas are to matter they must be developed, discussed, and approved by lay people. Had I written the document myself — or even attended all the committee's meetings, ex-

erting the influence of my position — I might have been happier with the formulations. The goal, however, was to produce a statement which reflected what congregants believed and could realistically live by. Long after I leave, the synagogue will be a community that stands for something.

Reconstructionism advocates a lay-rabbinic partnership in decision making. That principle is reflected in our congregational Statement and was operative in its development. I think that American Judaism has grown beyond the stage at which rabbis

can dictate a particular brand of Judaism from behind the safety of their robes and pulpits. The challenge to religious life today is to make Jews care about the content of Jewish life — something members of the committee were forced to do, as they struggled with the issues inherent in the Statement of Principles. The final product was secondary to what the people gained through the process. When rabbis stop infantilizing their congregations, they may find that their congregants care enough and have ideas enough to help chart a survival course for our future.