



The Emerging Spiritual Paradigm

J. Shawn Landres

The past few years have witnessed a renaissance in Jewish religious life through the formation of new spiritual communities unbound by conventional expectations about the roles and parameters of a synagogue. These new groups — led mostly by Generation Xers (born 1965-83) and Millennials (born 1983-2000) — crave spirituality, but they aren't interested in rote rules or in lightweight worship. Instead, they focus on devotional experiences that move beyond the walls of the synagogue, build community, and, perhaps most of all, create what they call an authentic connection to their traditions and to God. De-emphasizing the 20th-century themes of Holocaust memory and “Israel right or wrong,” the leaders are formulating a community-based spirituality through a return to Judaism's sacred pillars of Torah, prayer, and social justice.

My colleagues and I at Synagogue 3000 call this phenomenon “Jewish Emergent,” because of similarities with a Christian movement known as the Emerging Church. Partly in response to the “church-growth” and “seeker-sensitive” movements that have fueled the expansion of megachurches such as Willow Creek, Saddleback, and Lakewood, “Emergent” Christian theologians and pastors have united to create new spiritual communities based on ritual innovation (including a return to traditional liturgical forms) and a renewed commitment to social justice.

Three broad streams of Jewish leaders and communities are emerging: independent minyanim, “parashuls” (analogous to parachurches), and congregational communities of practice. The independent minyanim tend to be organized around lay-led Shabbat worship, while the parashuls are led by charismatic entrepreneurs creating connections beyond traditional institutional boundaries; leaders of the third type, whether they admit to it or not, are reinventing or replacing the synagogue. While all three types attract unaffiliated individuals looking for more episodic individual spiritual expression, the independent minyanim and the new congregational communities of practice seem to be magnets for highly-educated but disaffected Jewish summer camp and Hillel alumni.

Both Jewish and Christian emerging communities practice what one leader called “orthoparadox” — the creative tension that arises when doctrine and intentional practice are given equal weight in organizing a community's priorities. Congregation Tehillah's Rabbi Shoshana Leis describes it as having “Kaplan on my left and Heschel on my right.” Like their Christian counterparts, Jewish Emergent communities are blurring the line between the “sacred” and the “secular”; they are ignoring traditional institutional boundaries to do their work wherever it is, especially in local urban neighborhoods. Put another way, the institutions are driven by actions, not defined by an address. And perhaps partly as a result, there is room for serious Jewish theology as the ground of both prayer and activism.

Relationship, not contract or program, is the driving metaphor for many Jewish Emergent communities. As Rabbi Dov Gartenberg of Panim Hadashot notes in his blog [and see essay in this issue — ed.], “hospitality is making a huge comeback as a central religious ideal. The shared meal, the open door, the nonjudgmental acceptance, the care for the other is a central overarching aspect of a spiritual life.”

To be sure, much of the outreach and hospitality characteristic of Jewish Emergent is reminiscent of strategies employed by Chabad, Aish HaTorah, and other Orthodox outreach organizations. Hospitality is not exclusively an Orthodox trait, and when it is combined with a nonjudgmental approach to personal religious practice and an attention to social justice not normally found in the ultra-Orthodox world, it becomes a potent spiritual practice with major implications for the way Jewish institutions engage with Jews of all kinds.

To some observers, the recent ferment appears similar to the chavurah movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are three key differences. First, while both are intentional communities, the 1960s chavurot were far less concerned with traditional ritual practice: many chavurot were created to engender ritual freedom. Almost all Jewish Emergent minyanim and congregations, as well as many parashuls, devote considerable time and energy to worship. Second, from a broader sociological standpoint, chavurot were vehicles for a more individualistic seeker spirituality characteristic of baby boomers; their organizational heirs are the small groups prevalent in many evangelical churches and often found in synagogues as “Jewish journey groups.” Third, as Rabbi Andy Bachman, co-founder of the Brooklyn Jews community, has pointed out, unlike the 1960s chavurot, today’s Jewish Emergent groups are decidedly non-utopian in their pragmatic approach not only to social justice in an imperfect world, but also to the instability and uncertainty that has come to characterize the post-boomer life course.

“We’re all standing on the threshold,” remarked IKAR’s Rabbi Sharon Brous at an S3K gathering of Jewish Emergent leaders, “but not necessarily of the old doors.” Jewish Emergent resists easy definition: its postdenominational cant reflects an attempt to find the essence of Jewish spiritual commitment, one free of labels or packaging. “We’re creating new doors, we’re creating windows, we’re knocking holes in the wall,” Brous continued. “We hear the voices from the outside differently than they may have been heard before.” Though its leaders exhibit a rich diversity of approaches and philosophies, they do share the values they practice and an emerging vision of Judaism as a relational conversation aimed at spirituality in intentional community.

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