

One of my strongest High Holiday childhood memories is about blowing the shofar. In my synagogue, it seemed like all the kids felt that the shofar was the highlight of the entire service. At a time when Judaism wasn't necessarily "cool," being able to blow the shofar could nevertheless nudge one's social status in a positive direction. I could blow that shofar. Not to brag, well; only a little, I could blow it the loudest, longest and most consistently of any of the kids in our junior congregation. I blew it for the junior congregation; but of course the "big leagues" was the service in the main sanctuary.

The adult service in the main sanctuary had a man who blew the shofar. There was not even a question of "taking turns," that man blew it every year and it was expected. To protect the innocent, and because I don't remember his name anyway, let's call him "Mr. Schwartz."

Mr. Schwartz managed to blow his shofar; but, at least from my childhood perspective, not terribly well. His tone lacked clarity. Really, it seemed as much puffing air as it was blasting sound. And his *tekiah gedolah* sounded pretty lame too. I knew I could do better. Much better.

After services, outside on the sidewalk in front of our synagogue, I said to my grandfather, Avram Kanof, of blessed memory, "You, know, Grandpa, I could blow the

shofar much better than Mr. Schwartz. Why don't they ask me to blow it?" Like it was only yesterday, I recall my grandpa bringing his face slightly closer to my ear, and he said, "The congregation does not ask Mr. Schwartz to blow the shofar because they think he is the strongest at blowing it. They ask him because they have confidence that he is most qualified to fulfill the mitzvah on their behalf. The congregation has no such confidence, in you."

Those short words from my grandfather changed my entire view of the world. True, at the time I reacted with silliness and immaturity. I think I said something like, "No! Really! Listen to this!" and I blew my shofar loud enough to stop traffic. But my grandfather's words stuck. Even at the time, I realized their profound importance. I left shul that Rosh Hashanah a different person than I was when I had entered it. I've remembered the episode ever since.

I want to talk about what I think my experience meant, and how it figures into the type of experience we should be striving for in our synagogue, Agudas Achim. I call it "transformational shul experience." To understand what I mean by "transformational," I have to first talk about two other elements of contemporary synagogue experience. I think we experience synagogue on three levels, which I conceive of as a pyramid. The first layer is the most basic. It is also the most important, in the sense that it supports

the other two. I call it the “professional” level of shul experience.

The aim of a synagogue which aspires to treat its members with a high degree of professionalism is to ensure that every member’s interaction with the synagogue, its leaders and staff, reflects a standard of competency and comes across as well managed. This may sound obvious, but it is harder for synagogues to pull off than you might imagine. Synagogues are heroic in our efforts not to disappoint. We want to be here for you whether your needs are religious or social, or even to be your therapist. We want to offer you meaning and a sense of purpose; whether you are affluent or struggling, working or retired, a toddler or a senior citizen, a marathon runner or in ill health, a PhD or a Bat mitzvah student, a Republican or a Democrat or someone who has had enough of politics altogether. Simultaneously, we see ourselves as relevant to your life only if you are Jewish. Jews are as diverse, by practically any measure, as the general population, but constitute less than 2 percent of that population. Aside from a handful of converts, we are “in business” only for people who may have nothing more in common than the biological fact that mom was Jewish. Imagine the challenge this way: Redheads constitute about 2 percent of the general population. In every other respect, they are like everyone else. What if a church said,

“We welcome all beliefs, passions and lifestyles, but only redheads may be a part of our church.” Never mind that many redheads will choose some other church or no church at all. We begin to appreciate the problem. Stretching far in what we have to offer but narrowly focused in who we offer it to, synagogue rabbis, leaders and staff can end up feeling desperate to please. Nevertheless, in our consumer culture, failure to please is symptomatic of unprofessionalism, a deficit of professionalism erodes trust, and distrust weakens and severs relationships. This would be a death spiral for the Church of the Redhead. Could we reasonably expect a different outcome for a synagogue?

As vital as the professional treatment of constituents is to modern synagogues, they won't succeed if professionalism is all they offer. Synagogues must be relational. This second tier of the pyramid means that cultivating personal relationships must be inculcated into the culture of the synagogue for it to flourish as a synagogue community. Indeed, relationships are what make a congregation into a community. Relational shuls are like the bar in that old show, “Cheers.” We are a place where “Everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came.” Achieving this tier is also easier said than done. “Cheers” succeeded with a mere handful of characters. Like most suburban synagogues, we have

hundreds. Back in the 1990's Robin Dunbar, an Oxford anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist, proposed, based on his research on primate groups, that the maximum number of relationships a human being can meaningfully maintain is around 150. To achieve social stability beyond that number, Dunbar suggests groups need rules and enforced norms in order to maintain cohesive, stable communities. It follows that synagogues and other organizations will have policies and rules. The problem is we are awash with them and we tire of them. Rules make a cumbersome and blunt tool for shoring up human relationships. When I am being dealt with "by policies and rules," instead of as a unique individual with my own set of needs and desires, I am prone to get frustrated and turned off. Folks have plenty of rules at work and school. Synagogues compete for people's discretionary time. Too many obvious rules feel impersonal and can deprive us of the agility to earn a share of that discretionary time. Emerging technologies can help bridge the relationship gap and soften the need for rules, but these technologies encroach upon privacy, arouse suspicion, and can be creepy. Our fallback is professionalism. Even if we occasionally miss who you are as a unique individual, we are prepared to earn your confidence through being proactive, appropriate, and consistent.

In the context of synagogues, professionalism and relationship building are not ends in themselves. We also have to set the stage for transformational experiences. These are experiences about which a person says, “Because of what happened, I feel a little differently about my life; I’ve changed; I’ve grown.” Churches call it being “reborn,” but that implies it is a one-time ultimate event. I don’t think Judaism offers a comparable word or concept. In shuls, we aim for more modest life altering experiences. In acknowledgement that their brilliance may dim over time, we seek to cultivate an atmosphere where they occur with greater frequency. These experiences may happen in a synagogue social, educational, or social justice setting, but for most of us the first place to look is the sanctuary. A reasonable person might feel skeptical that synagogue services are capable of offering a positive life altering experience, so I asked two of our members to share their stories to accompany my own about my grandpa and the shofar.

Tamar Gur shared with me that though she has attended countless b’nai mitzvah, some of which made her laugh and some of which brought tears to her eyes, not one touched as profoundly as Stanley Maybruck’s honorary “third” bar mitzvah. It struck her that, for Mr. Maybruck, [Judaism] is a living, breathing, guiding force. One that he took with him to battle in WWII, one that he carries by him

to this day. It is not for show, or only tradition, or even 'only' religion, it is all encompassing. And that was evident with every prayer, every phrase he chanted that day." She writes, being in the room allowed [me] to feel connected to the Jewish people "throughout our generations," and to Mr. Maybruck, though "[we] aren't relatives." The experience was reminiscent of the admonishment of the Passover Haggadah, that "we must see ourselves as if we, too, were liberated from Egypt." As he spoke [I] felt as if [I], too was "carried with Mr. Maybruck, in some form, during WWII, as he carried his prayer book." Tamar left synagogue that morning resolved to do what it takes to imbue her children with what it means to be Jewish, to become a Stanley Maybruck level Jew.

My other story is from Stephanie Wapner. Like many young parents, Stephanie initially was nervous about bringing her young children to shul. It's traditionally a fairly adult place and kids can seem a little unruly. She writes that, "One Shabbat morning when the boys were with me in the sanctuary, an elderly guy beckoned me over and I assumed I was going to be told off for their making too much noise. Instead, this lovely man grabbed my hand and said "You listen to me. I don't care how much noise they make, kids belong in shul. Anyone gives you a problem, you send them to me." From that day on, Buzzy was one of our biggest champions. Despite their age

difference, he and the boys became pals. Thanks to him we started coming for morning minyan one day a week. Buzzy brought them quarters for the *tzedakah* box and let them sit next to him and listen to him daven while he showed them the siddur. David and Leo looked forward to seeing him and ran to greet him every Shabbat morning, even when they eventually had to duck under his walker for a hug.... Every so often, my son David will stand up during Mourner's Kaddish and when I ask him why he replies "I'm just thinking about Buzzy."

For both these stories there is a great deal of expert professionalism, behind the scenes, creating and maintaining the conditions which made them possible. Our synagogue office, Maintenance, and volunteers do an outstanding job. Remember to thank them. Note too, that both stories draw heavily on a strength which we can all take pride in; Agudas cultivates the relationships; the bonds of trust and affection, which enable a well-run synagogue to have warmth and to flourish. In both cases, individuals experienced a *transformation*, a change in how they see themselves because of what they saw in another. From the shofar and my grandpa, I learned it isn't just about me. The "who we are" cannot remain oblivious to the "who others understand us to be." That's growing with and from one another. That's transformational. That's what great synagogues do.