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Show Up to Synagogue

*It is time for Jews to gather together once again.
And Jews who gather do so in prayer*



THE TORAH'S TALE of Moses's heroism is a rather unlikely one. Saved at birth from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh's executioners, he comes to maturity in the house of Pharaoh himself, raised in worldly privilege as a prince of Egypt only to escape once again to the wilderness after killing an Egyptian slave-master.

It is only when he stumbles upon the preternatural burning bush, which burns yet is not consumed, that God speaks with him, charging him "to lead the Hebrews out of bondage." His immediate reluctance and protest is genuine, not to mention legitimate, for he is "slow of mouth and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10)—variously interpreted as referring to a speech impediment or an inability with words.

This line of Torah often comes back to me at moments when I feel a bit tongue-tied during the Shabbat prayer service; when I am, amid my fellow congregants, less than fluent in the liturgy and alienated

from those with stronger Jewish backgrounds than mine, those who can read Hebrew faster and seem to know every tune without hesitation. I remind myself that God chose Moses in spite of his impediment — or maybe because of it.

Although our Jewish tradition, unlike other monotheistic faiths, shies away from imitating the lives of our prophets, I think there is something to Moses's biography as an unaffiliated Jew-turned-leader that is relevant to the current generation of young American Jews as we face the rising threats of violent antisemitism and the spiritual vapidness of our time.

Our technological era has distanced us from our neighbors and torn the traditional fabric of social bonds. The most recent social schism, the Covid pandemic and our collective response to it, significantly increased both our personal isolation and the divisions we face.

This century, the United States has also seen a steep falloff in religious observance, with church and synagogue attendance declining precipitously and the number of the religiously unaffiliated rising, especially among younger people. For American Jews, the most privileged and fortunate Jewish community in history, this great secularization has been in the works for decades, if not centuries; our grandparents and great-grandparents came here and assimilated, exchanging the Old World's cultural and religious identities for a chance at the American Dream — to succeed and to blend into the multicultural oasis around us.

What their living descendants now face is not just the harsh return of the antisemitism they thought had been left behind, but its coupling with the same troubles experienced by their non-Jewish peers: alienation from neighbors, resultant mental-health issues, and a profound sense that we've lost our way in a new wilderness.

There is a framework to respond to these twin threats of dangerous Jew-hatred and soul-eroding social-media consumerism, one that has

been developed over millennia of wanderings. Like Moses’s burning bush, it stands on the path, burning and not consumed, waiting for our curious approach. That framework is Jewish communal prayer, and the vessel that houses it: the synagogue.



While I was blessed with a Jewish upbringing and some understanding of our faith and holidays, I did not regularly attend synagogue until I became an adult.

I felt called back to the idea of Jewish worship—something I had done, but never enjoyed, growing up—in my early twenties. Emerging from a college bubble into work-life in a world that appeared deeply unstructured and increasingly fragmented in the social and political decay of America in the 2010s, I felt adrift. In a daily rise-crash cycle of cellphone notifications, I yearned, as many of us do, to feel “present” in the world, so I found my way to synagogue as a weekly reprieve from the buzzing stimulation of the everyday.

Synagogue offered much of what was missing from an increasingly noisy, petty, and spiteful environment: stillness, depth, knowledge, and a sense of the holy. The people I met there valued these things as well, and our participation in this ancient practice was a quiet, worthy response to the culture around us. Incorporating it into my return made it feel like a weekly homecoming, an escape hatch from the profanity and evil we witness all around us.

This practice allows me, at least temporarily, to put the outside world on mute and immerse myself in a ritual that has been practiced, in one way or another, for an inconceivable 20 centuries (at least), in every corner of the globe, in the least hospitable political environments. That we repeat the same prayers our ancestors uttered millennia before is, to me, reason enough to compel my curiosity in

this burning, yet not consumed, fire. It is a reminder that I, like every Jew, have a role to play in the most extraordinary story humanity has ever known, of an adaptive and unique exiled people, whose journey has been so strange, shocking, and uncertain, it could hardly be an accident that God promised Abraham and Isaac that their descendants would be “as numerous as the stars in the sky” and just as scattered.

There is a pleasant rhythm to the service, an aspect of communal meditation, and an activation of synapses that fire off with synchronized activities—areas of our brain that have atrophied in us, social animals degenerated by device-curated individualism. Just as certainly, areas of the brain *deactivate* as one enters spiritual space: specifically, whichever part of it that has been conceptually retrofitted to contain our phones as appendages that command our minute-by-minute attention. All that falls away as I sit, stand, and chant together with my brethren in shul.

I now attend Shabbat morning services most weekends and have grown more and more familiar with the structure of the service, which at first bewildered me—when to stand and sit, which lines to repeat, when to exclaim “I’chaim!” with the full congregation during the rabbi’s kiddush. And after a decade of striving, I can mostly keep up with the Hebrew chanting.

On the way to becoming more fluent in Jewish prayer, I have discovered the beautiful tribute to the *Eshet Chayil*, the woman of valor, whose worth is more than rubies. I have contemplated the longing couplets of the *Anim Z’mirot* hymn, composed in the 12th century and sung at the end of services: “He adorns Himself for me and I adorn myself for Him; He is close to me when I call.” I have experienced the righteous justice that Joseph, sold into slavery before rising in Egypt, shows his jealous brothers, his bitterness turned to strength: “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? What you intended for evil, God meant for good.” I have uttered the potent, Zen-like

prayer at the conclusion of the silent *Amidah* meditation, so applicable to today's grievance-driven culture: "Let my soul be silent to those who curse me; and let my soul be as dust to all."

I have also met and befriended people across political, age, and geographic divides. Our divisions dissolve at the kiddush table after services. The structure of group worship, the sitting and standing and noshing together afterward, is an antidote to alienation.



I have had to trade very little of my secular life to become more engaged and involved in synagogue. I don't keep kosher. I have a tattoo. I return to my phone on Saturday afternoons and do not cover my head in public. My life would probably appear quite similar on the outside had I not embarked on this journey, but I would feel more scattered and less grounded by an ancient and enduring spiritual identity—one that binds me to my great-grandparents and, I hope, to my great-grandchildren to come.

I don't always feel "God" because of it. I do feel—in the warm greetings from fellow congregants whose names I can't quite recall or as I join the other voices to support those saying the mourner's kaddish, thinking of my grandparents—much more than myself.

There are millions of Jews with backgrounds like mine in our country: people with vague memories of Hebrew School, a rusty concept of the synagogue service, and a lingering sense of something missing. They are disconnected from our birthright, what God promised to our ancestors: "I make this covenant... not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day... and those *who are not with us here this day*" (Deuteronomy 29:13–14, emphasis mine). It is impossible to measure how many unique talents exist among this group that could greatly benefit our people—and the world.

What has felt like a vague memory of home is now tugging at us. We must gather as Jews, and Jews who gather do so in prayer.



While antisemitism had lain dormant for many young American Jews, it is a menace that has never left us, and never will as long as there are Jews left to hate.

As individuals and as institutions we have mobilized: organizing marches, calling out antisemites from Congress to campus, and shepherding resources for Israel’s humanitarian and military needs.

But the reflex to act against antisemitism will not matter if American Jewry does not exist in any concrete way to replicate itself.

Because if Jews, and particularly *non-Orthodox* Jews, are not willing to tend to the flame of actual Judaism, to be passed on tangibly to the next generations, our collective outrage about antisemitism will be a footnote at the conclusion of a long and winding story. Hamas and the mullahs and the white nationalists and the raging “from the river to the sea” leftists will have gotten their wish. Modern Jewry will have disappeared into the whirring fog of modern life, the flame kept alight only in Hasidic and other Orthodox enclaves.

Owing to lack of observance and demographic trends—namely, a low birthrate and a high intermarriage rate—non-Orthodox Jewry could face a “significant collapse” in our lifetime, according to Pew data. The community of affiliated, non-Orthodox American Jews may dwindle by the end of this century. Opposing trends, including greater engagement from interfaith families and renewed interest since October 7, may combat these trends. But to reverse them entirely begins at the individual level—and perhaps today, with you.

We must not be satisfied with rallying against antisemitism, donating to Israel-related causes, and sharing social-media content;

we must make plans, too, to return to synagogue and to ensure that our children and theirs receive a Jewish education. Those who are already engaged in religious life must call back our unaffiliated friends and family.

Even those who feel alienated from Jewish observance must hear that call. Even those who are living totally secular lives. Even those who have never been to synagogue in the first place must return, for, as the Torah teaches, each of our souls was born at the creation of the universe.

And our Jewish leaders, our Federations and our nonprofits and our influencers and our rabbis, must be unafraid to call us back to synagogue, remembering that the worst nightmare of the antisemite is a thriving, growing Jewish population.

Like Moses the Prince, so many of today's Jews are worldly, privileged, and exposed to the best of our culture, but are slow of tongue when it comes to our traditions.

To remedy the disconnect, the powerlessness, the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to be, the best thing to do is to be a Jew, joyfully or haltingly, with or without reservations. And being a Jew means practicing Judaism, in a Jewish community. There is no other way to do it.

Come, pray for our world's salvation and better days for our people and all people, as our ancestors have done for millennia, in times of light and more frequently in times of darkness.

Connect, whether it's with God or the scripture or the memory of your late grandmother whose parents fled the Pale of Settlement when she was a child.

Sit, too, with your embarrassment and alienation and awkwardness at the whole ritual, your nonexistent grasp of the Hebrew, the confusion of when to rise and when to sit back down, when to speak and when to be silent, when seemingly random words are repeated

and melodies are abruptly changed. Your discomfort will be the source of spiritual growth, for nothing valuable in this world is easy, and the Jewish journey—singular, painful, enduring—has been anything but.



On a recent summer night in Charleston, South Carolina, I was driving home over one of the city's stunning marshlands when I saw a dense, vibrating cloud that hovered neither near nor far away from me. As my car arched over the bridge, the cloud passed directly in front of a blazing full moon. I was struck by its ethereal, strange quality; it seemed to be placed there for me, and yet I was among a dozen cars that passed by that minute at 50 miles per hour. What if I had pulled over and looked, and listened? Would I, like Moses, have received some Divine revelation? Driving at full speed on a Saturday night, I did not find out.

And what if the burning bush that awaited Moses had been ablaze for years, or had not been the first light in the wilderness? What if there had been many burning bushes, generations of them, passed over by countless shepherds and traveling merchants and watermaids, waiting for the person who would notice?

There are clouds of smoke and fiery pillars and slow, still voices in each of our lives. And there is an eternal light burning right now in every synagogue, for us to seek out if we so choose. *