

Here's Who Loses When Synagogues Join 'The Resistance'

For many years, every population study has shown that the American synagogue is in trouble. The demographic collapse of non-Orthodox Jewry has affected every aspect of U.S. Jewry, but none more so than the Reform and Conservative movements. While the bar and bat mitzvah business has kept many such institutions afloat, the notion that joining a synagogue is normative behavior is fading.

An aging and increasingly assimilated Jewish population has shown decreasing interest in the traditional synagogue paradigm, and the result has been empty buildings and shrinking membership lists. While many talk about the need to reinvent Jewish life to better serve the needs of 21st-century Americans, with few exceptions the response of the Reform and Conservative movements to the crisis highlighted by the 2013 Pew survey on American Jewry has been a head-in-the-sand approach that would embarrass an ostrich.

But there is apparently one piece of good news for synagogues, and his name is Donald Trump. As Haaretz reported, the Trump presidency has produced a surge in attendance and membership at those synagogues, where a social justice agenda rules and rabbis are outspoken critics of the president. This "Trump bump" is the result of disheartened liberals looking for a place to vent their angst about the administration as well as an outlet for activism.

Whether it is "sanctuary synagogues" that have thrown open their doors to illegal immigrants or merely shuls whose Shabbat services are spiced up with anti-Trump sermons, the sense that politics is, at least in this case, mixing nicely

with religion is clear. This sense of purpose and shared values among liberals seeking affirmation for their feelings of disgust about Trump is attractive to Millennials who normally have little interest in religion, let alone organized Jewish life.

If that gives some synagogues a new lease on life, that's fine. But there are two clear downsides to the Trump bump that ought to trouble everyone.

One is that the same liberal movements that long decried the evils of mixing politics and faith, when it was evangelical Christians who were infusing their churches with partisanship, are now exposed as hypocrites. One can make reasonable arguments that some elements of Jewish law buttress modern political liberalism, and there may have always been some truth to the old quip about Reform Judaism consisting of the Democratic Party platform with holidays thrown in. But once synagogues are dedicated to making religion serve partisan ends, it is always faith that gets the short end of the stick.

While Torah and Jewish peoplehood are eternal concepts, the anti-Trump resistance will come and go no matter who ultimately wins in the struggle between the president and his critics. Millennials searching for meaning may find a momentary haven in "sanctuary synagogues," but like previous attempts to sell Jewish institutions to secular audiences, the idea that one can be a "green" Jew or one rooted in any other trendy topic is not one that is likely to survive in the long run.

Yet an even more serious drawback to infusing partisanship into Jewish life is that rather than draw Jews together, this is something that will only push us further apart. It is bad enough that in our bifurcated society driven by social media, we can delete and de-friend anyone whose views don't conform to our pre-existing beliefs and prejudices. Once synagogues take the leap into open political activity—and the Trump bump

means the line between apolitical social justice and the partisan resistance is being erased by some liberal rabbis—they are, in effect, declaring those who don't agree with these views persona non grata in the sanctuary.

In addition, the shift of liberals into anti-Trump mode will only widen the already yawning chasm between Reform and Conservative Jews and the fast-growing number of their Orthodox co-religionists. The Orthodox are not only more likely to be political conservatives and thus more inclined to back Trump. For them, Trump's greater sympathy for Israel has far more appeal than any stance on social justice.

The most important thing synagogues and other social institutions can do at a time of increased polarization would be to make themselves places where political divisions are de-emphasized, not exacerbated. Preaching politics from the pulpit will do just the opposite and ultimately will turn off far more than it will attract.

At best, the Trump bump is a temporary shot in the arm for liberal synagogues that will fade. At worst, it is a sign of growing division that sensible Jews should deplore no matter where they stand on Trump or any other political issue.

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