

Synagogues are dying.

Just look around. There used to be a Conservative synagogue right next door to us in Bethpage. It was “consolidated” in 2007. There was a Reform congregation on Round Swamp Road in Old Bethpage. It was “consolidated” in 2013. Not all that long ago, there were Conservative synagogues in Farmingdale, Levittown and, of course, Hicksville. Not any more. It's happening to the north of us too. Every time I drive up South Oyster Bay Road toward the LIE, I see the empty shell of East Nassau Jewish Center in Syosset, which one day might become a Korean church. And just last fall, another Conservative synagogue, the Oyster Bay Jewish Center, was “consolidated” into a Reform congregation.

It's not just on Long Island. Our parent organization, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, includes about 600 synagogues. In 2009, there were 675. In 1985, there were 850. The Reform Movement has done a little better, but still has 40 fewer congregations, and 80,000 fewer members than it had in 2001.

Plainview Jewish Center, on the other hand, is very much alive. Our congregation is as vibrant and active as ever. Our religious school enrollment is up. In fact, we are in the process of adding two extra teachers. Our calendar of events is so full on some Sunday mornings that every usable space is filled with a class, event or meeting. Our building bustles with activity almost every night. If anything, we have picked up our pace over the last few years and become an even busier congregation than we were before.

We can all be proud of our congregation's vitality. To be sure, we are blessed with good demographics. Jewish families are still coming to Plainview. But demographics would mean little without the dedication, commitment and energy each of us give to our congregation. Demographics also don't account for the atmosphere of harmony, caring and cooperation we have fostered in recent years. Together, we have worked to

shape our synagogue into a warm, welcoming congregation where we value every person, work as a team, and keep the best interests of our entire community close to our hearts.

Yet, in spite of our many successes, we still face some real challenges. I outlined some of these challenges in the High Holiday letter you received over the summer. Our first challenge lies in the inescapable reality that, like most synagogues, our numbers are declining. Our membership has fallen by more than half since its peak in the 1990s. Some of you remember when it was standing-room only in our sanctuary on Rosh HaShannah. Take a look around you now. There are plenty of empty seats. There was a time when we ran double sessions of religious school to accommodate all of the students; when b'nai mitzvah were all doubles and triples.

Those days are long past. There are fewer Jews in our community than there were twenty years ago, and many fewer Jewish kids. It's no longer unheard of for Jewish families not to affiliate with a synagogue. There are plenty of rabbis out there who are happy to conduct lifecycle events for a fee. And there are a growing number of “alternatives” to traditional synagogues like ours that cater to those who want to choose their Jewish experiences from an “a la carte” menu. In the meantime, many of our longtime members are aging. Fewer than a third of our families have children in religious school.

As I explained to you in my letter, our membership decline has consequences. We are still a pretty large synagogue. We provide a full array of services, classes and programs—even more than we did six or seven years ago. So we still need a full staff. We have twenty five employees, including six full-time staff. Several of our part-time employees fill multiple roles. We also need a well-maintained building that will serve the needs of our active congregation. The last phase of our building was completed around 1970. How many of us here live in houses that were built before 1970? The

older a building is, the more often things need to be repaired and replaced. We put off our recent roof repair for ten years; patching and praying. But when it started to rain in our sanctuary, we had no choice but to replace the whole thing.

It doesn't take a degree in accounting to see that a declining number of members are going to struggle to support a full staff and extensive, dynamic programming. While we have worked hard to identify areas where we can cut costs and do better fund raising, it has been a challenge to break even. And for the last six years, we have not. We have run deficits that have depleted our reserves. Last year, we came close to breaking even. This year, we hope to do even better.

There is a new buzzword for the challenge our congregation faces: "fiscal sustainability." It means, basically, setting ourselves on a course to be able to balance our budget each year, and stop draining our reserves. We have all been asked to increase our yearly contributions to our synagogue as a part of our effort to achieve fiscal sustainability. If you are here with us today, you are among those who answered the call. I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you have committed again this year to support our congregation.

We have a lot more work to do in the area of fiscal sustainability. We need to work even harder at fund-raising and to look for opportunities beyond our very successful one-time events. We need to continue to evaluate our budget and try to bring our expenses more in line with our revenues. We need to continue to look for grants and for partners who want to share in some of our programs. We need to find ways to bring even more of the many talented people among us here today in to help us with this important endeavor.

But there is also something even more fundamental that we need to do. We need to change the way we think about what it means to be a member of our synagogue. As suggested in my letter to you this summer, the very word "dues" symbolizes everything

that is wrong with our current way of thinking. Dues implies an obligation; a payment made in exchange for a privilege. Think about it? Where else do you pay dues? Unions and Professional Associations. Country Clubs, Health Clubs. All of these are private associations. Pay your dues and you can benefit from their services or facilities. Don't pay and you are shut out.

Plainview Jewish Center is not a private association. Almost everything we do is open to the public. And for the few things that aren't, we never turn anyone away because they cannot afford to be a member. We are not an exclusive club. Just the opposite. We aim to be as inclusive as possible.

In that sense, we more closely resemble other non-profit institutions dedicated to providing a public good. Our congregation has more in common with a museum or a charitable non-profit than with a country club. Like many museums and charities, we have a mission to serve both a particular group of people and, in doing so, the public at large. We appeal to you to become--and remain--members because you believe in what we do and want to be part of it. Your support may entitle you to privileges. But, ultimately, that support is a charitable gift, not the price of admission.

As I have pointed out to you before, there is something healthy and liberating in thinking of your membership this way. Asking you to pay your dues so you can get High Holiday tickets is a losing proposition. There are many less expensive alternatives. As I often say, "we're good, but we're not that good." For that matter, if your goal is Bar Mitzvah for your child, there are also cheaper options. We are not in the business of selling High Holiday tickets. And we are not, God forbid, a Bar Mitzvah mill. And if we have ever given out that impression in the past, we committed a serious error.

Like every charity and non-profit, our congregation has a mission. We express this mission in the following statement:

Plainview Jewish Center is a forward-looking, family-friendly, Conservative synagogue, which respects and incorporates traditional Jewish values. We are completely egalitarian and inclusive in all aspects of synagogue life. We strive to provide a distinct, positive Jewish identity through worship, life-long education, enrichment, and community involvement. These practices ensure a congregation in which every member matters.

On the most basic level, we ask you each year to continue to support our congregation because you believe in this mission, and because you believe in the work we do in service of this mission. Your contribution is a charitable donation, a gift made to our congregation to help make possible our service to our families, our community and the Jewish people. Being a member of our congregation means being a donor, a supporter a contributor who generously enables us to teach, to inspire, to aid those in need and to perpetuate our tradition for the next generation. Being a member is an act of faith and a gift of the heart. Being a member is something to be proud of.

Being a member also means being entitled to accountability. And here is where we finally touch on Rosh HaShanah. God grants us each year the gift of life, and many other gifts as well. But these gifts come with a condition. God expects us to be accountable for how we use God's gifts. The question we face each Rosh HaShanah is not just "what did I do wrong last year and how can I make up for where I fell short?" The bigger, weightier question God asks us to consider is "did I make good use of the gift of another year of life?"

For the 62nd year in a row, you, our members, have given us the gift of another year of life. And now, more than ever, we need to be accountable to you, and to each other, for using this gift well. Did we earn your vote of confidence and support this year?

Before you answer this question, let's take a look at what PJC actually does for our community.

We begin our commitment to our community with our youngest children--babies and toddlers--inviting the entire community to join us for monthly Tot Shabbat services, special kid-friendly High Holiday services, and our PJ Library program. All of these programs are free and open to all. We continue our commitment through our dynamic religious school program. As a member of the Coalition of Innovating Congregations, we are at the forefront developing new and more effective approaches to Jewish education. We are hard at work using technology, innovative classroom strategies, and cutting edge teacher training to transform the experience of our students and reach them on multiple levels. Our teen program, which is open to all, is also undergoing an exciting transformation, as we are encouraging our teens to explore their capacities to be leaders, mentors and agents of social change.

For the adults in our community, we provide top quality Jewish learning through programs like Lunch and Learn, the Bible Class and our Adult Institute of Jewish studies. For seniors, we have created a weekly drop-in program called Senior FAN, open to anyone in the community. We have also strengthened our partnership with POB Cares to help connect seniors in our community with the assistance they need to remain in their homes

We also help foster spiritual growth through our wide variety of services. Our twice daily minyans attract people from all over Nassau County who count on us when they need to say Kaddish, or pray for a loved one who is ill. Our regular daily and Shabbat services provide those seeking a traditional prayer setting with an inspiring experience; our Family-friendly and Klezmer services offer a those seeking a more contemporary experience with a place to go. We are a pluralistic, inclusive synagogue that attempts to serve the wide variety of Jews who might walk through our doors. In

this same vein, we have made real efforts in recent years to spread the word that interfaith families, gays and lesbians, and non-traditional families are welcome in our synagogue.

Finally, we have increased our efforts to engage our congregation in helping provide needed services and programs in our community.. We have partnered with Hazilu not only on our annual High Holiday food drives, but also in collecting food and funds throughout the year to help feed those in need. We have also begun to work with the Mary Brennan Interfaith Nutrition Network to provide sandwiches for homeless clients on a number of occasions throughout the year. At the same time, we are engaged in partnerships in our community with the Plainview-Old Bethpage Interfaith Council and the Mid Island Y JCC to provide much needed programming and promote understanding and collaboration in our increasing diverse community.

Now that I have shared with you some of the important contributions we make to our community, let me ask you again, “did we earn your confidence and support this year?” I have given you a lot of good reasons already, but I still haven't touched on the most important one: community.

Our lists of programs, services and events might make us look like a non-profit. But we are much, much more. We are a group of people bound by ties of tradition, reverence, love and caring. We support each other in times of need and sadness. We celebrate each other's simchas. We serve as each other's listening ears and helping hands. We become friends—often for life. We encourage each other to be our best selves, and to learn and grow as people and Jews. We are hundreds of friendly faces waiting to greet each other and to share good times. We are a community—a community that strives to make everyone feel welcome and connected to each other. Membership in this community cannot be purchased with a check or a credit card. It is acquired instead with an open heart an open mind and an open hand. And that sense

of well-being that comes from being part of a community like ours is, as that famous credit card commercial would put it, “priceless.”

So now let me pose my question one final time. “Did we earn your confidence and support this year? I hope that we have earned it this year, and that you will always feel that we have earned your support. If for some reason, you don't feel we have earned your support, come talk to me, talk to our leadership. I promise we will listen with an open mind and an open heart.

Because of all the good work we do, because of the community we create, and because of your support and commitment, Plainview Jewish Center is very much alive. And if we continue to work together, and to grapple honestly and energetically with the challenges we face, we can remain an active and vibrant congregation for many years to come.

Last spring, our Patio Players mounted an amazing production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was one of our most successful shows ever. There are many wonderful songs from *Fiddler*. But it seemed to me that the one that energized our audience the most was Tevye's song *L'chayim*—to life. *L'chayim* offers a very Jewish point of view on the blessings of being alive. Sure, the song tells us, life can be challenging, sometimes hard. But God wants us to rejoice in life itself and in the joys it brings. *L'chayim, l'chayim to life*. The life of a synagogue, even a busy active one like ours, can also be challenging. But like Tevye, we too should rejoice in the wonderful community we have built together and the joys it brings us every year and every day. To our own Plainview Jewish Center, we lift our metaphorical glass and proclaim, “to life, to life *L'chayim, l'chayim l'chayim to life*.”