



Money in Synagogues

Mordechai Liebling

The typical synagogue board devotes more time to issues relating to money than anything else. But, then, more of the 613 mitzvot relate to money than any other subject. This is indicative of the central role that money plays in our lives, evidenced by Rabbi Yishmael's comment in Bava Batra, "One who wishes to acquire wisdom should study the laws of money, for there is no greater area of Torah study than this. It is like an ever flowing stream...."

A congregation sends messages to members and potential members about money in myriad ways: structuring dues and tuition, fundraising, setting catering policies, maintaining the building and property, paying staff, caring for members in need, allocating funds for programs, relating to other organizations in the community. The financial decisions that synagogue leaders make impact the culture of money. Does this culture reflect the Jewish values this leadership professes to hold?

Like Americans in general, Jews don't like to acknowledge and articulate differences in socio-economic status. And yet, the differences in wealth and income in the United States are the greatest in over 100 years. While recent statistics on poverty from the National Jewish Population Study surprised many people, few congregations addressed the implications of the data or created policies and a community climate where people of widely different economic means could feel comfortable.

Many congregations state that dues payments should not be a barrier to membership, and reduced rates are available. But studies show that the process of applying for a dues reduction is humiliating. In some congregations the process itself is unfriendly -- even to the point of asking for income tax forms. Increasingly, congregations are examining fair share dues, a structure based on income that alleviates the need to apply for a reduction.

Other challenges to creating a comfortable financial climate in the synagogue community exist: How obligated is the institution to help members feel comfortable? Little can be done about the cars members drive, the schools children attend, or the vacations families enjoy. But a great deal can be done about the assumptions that the synagogue makes. The synagogue needs to be very conscious of the underlying economic assumptions made vis-à-vis programs and public statements. Presuming that everyone is at least "middle class" and won't have trouble spending the extra \$10 or \$20 for a special program or school event is incorrect.

Celebrations are perhaps the most visible manifestation of wealth differences. Synagogues can set standards or guidelines about the lavishness of a kiddush or even a bar or a bat mitzvah party. I know of at least one synagogue that has a policy that meat can not be served because there are some families who can't afford to serve meat at their simchah and these families shouldn't be made to feel poor. Hundreds of years ago medieval Jewry created sumptuary laws to regulate conspicuous consumption; perhaps we need to reconsider them.

Synagogue membership, like religious school tuition, raises several ethical questions: Should individual synagogues ensure that anyone, regardless of economic means, can be a member? Is the wider Jewish communal structure responsible to subsidize membership for those in need? Does money change the culture of the community?

Ethics play a part in other synagogue financial decisions. For example, the synagogue employs professional, administrative, teaching, support, and janitorial staff. While rabbinical associations have fought hard for rabbis

to receive good salaries and benefits, most synagogues don't provide the same benefits to clergy and non-clergy. Is the synagogue responsible to pay for pension and health care for staff that work half-time or more? Does the synagogue pay a living wage to its lowest paid staff? In the Washington D.C. area, the responsibility to pay a living wage became a contentious issue in the Jewish community. One synagogue that contracted out its janitorial staff learned that the contractor did not pay its staff a living wage. The synagogue made a special arrangement that for the tasks the contractor performed at the synagogue, the workers would receive a living wage. Judaism has very strong values that protect the rights of workers; synagogues, as employers, have an obligation to uphold these values.

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling is Torah of Money Director at The Shefa Fund and teaches "Congregational System Dynamics" at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. .

(c) 2004 Sh'ma. All rights reserved. The information contained in this article may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of Sh'ma.