

Bowling Alone

In 2000 Robert Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of the American Community*. Basing himself on hundreds of thousands of interviews, Putnam concluded that Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends as well as community. His overarching metaphor for this phenomenon was bowling. Although many, many Americans bowl, many are doing so alone rather than in the bowling leagues that used to be so popular.

I think a great deal about the issue of community, especially as it relates to the synagogue. We Detroiters are very fortunate to have many strong institutions which make up our city and our Jewish community. Perhaps not surprisingly, I believe that the synagogue is among the most important institution in the creation of community. I believe this for several reasons:

- 1) The synagogue is inter-generational by nature. This means that the synagogue has a mission for people of all ages. Even better, this means that young people see and interact with people young and old within our walls. The young learn from the old(er) and our seniors enjoy the presence of the young.
- 2) The synagogue community is diverse. You might think that it is odd to call a community made up almost entirely of Jews diverse. When you consider the fact that we are not only from the U.S. but from Europe, Argentina, South Africa, Canada, Israel as well as elsewhere, you start to get a sense of our diversity. We share much—especially our love for the Jewish people, but we differ in our politics, our interests, our professions, as well as our personal experiences. These differences are a strength for our community, making our conversations more interesting and the opportunities for learning about others (and ourselves) that much richer.
- 3) The synagogue is a community for life. Statistics show that many American Jews are members of a congregation for only part of their lifetimes—especially in those years when there are children in the home. But it need not (and should not) be so. As our children age, so do we. We stop coaching little league, and eventually stop driving car pool to birthday parties. But we never stop needing a community that we know and that knows us.
- 4) The synagogue is multi-faceted. There are many valuable organizations that focus on one issue. The synagogue is not one. Our programming is religious, social, educational, charitable, and communal. This variety is part of the beauty and challenge of the synagogue.

Some might think that writing an article stressing the importance of the synagogue to current synagogue members is superfluous. It isn't. There is much in the Jewish press about the problems with the modern synagogue. What some of these articles fail to

notice are some of the strengths listed above. For additional proof, all you need to do is look at the non-synagogue communal organizations with 'synagogue initiatives' such as Federation and AIPAC. Why do they want to connect with synagogues? Because many have come to the belated realization that the most committed group of American Jews are the Jews connected to synagogues. Do we need Hillel, Tamarack, BBYO, and all of the other pillars that make up our community? Absolutely. But at the base of this pyramid of organizations stands the synagogue, ancient and contemporary at once. Why bowl alone?