

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE IN A SMALL CONGREGATION

·Ellen Jay Lewis

I am reminded all the time of how life in a small congregation is unique, especially a small part-time congregation in rural northwest New Jersey. Recently, I was asked to lead a Focus Group at the CCAR convention in Greensboro. The rabbi who issued the invitation thought the session might be held on Sunday afternoon. That Sunday morning in Greensboro, when I realized that I had not heard back from him, I called his room, left a message and then went out to take a walk. He called me back a few hours later, at 1:57 p.m. to be precise. “Am I leading a group today?” I asked. “Yes,” he said. “When?” I asked. “Now,” he said; “It’s scheduled for 2:00 p.m.” Still clad in my T-shirt and sweat pants, I asked, “What do you want me to do with them?” “Just ask them the questions in the letter,” he replied. “Letter?” I asked and then realized that if he had sent a letter to me at my congregation the previous week, I had never received it.

I had never received it because, at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey, the mail goes directly to the local post office as it has for over fifty years. The congregation just did not feel safe at the idea of installing a mail slot in the front door of an isolated synagogue that is largely empty Monday through Friday. The founding member who religiously picked up the mail for those fifty years died this past summer. The irregularity with which the mail now is retrieved testifies to the community’s sense of loss at his absence. So I tell people to write to me at home. I also tell them to call me at my home office. Even though both my laypeople and I call

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in to retrieve messages during the week, we cannot guarantee that our retrieval will be timely enough. All of my members know to reach me at home. In order for local and regional Jewish organizations not to wait a week for a return phone call, I also let them know in advance to call my home office and to send my mail there.

For some reason, however, my words are to no avail. When I arrive in Washington early on Sunday morning, it is not unusual for me to pick up a message like this one from an employee of a local Jewish newspaper regarding an ad they wanted us to place: “I am calling on Monday morning. It is urgent you call us back today.” I find myself sighing as I push “3” to erase the now moot message and replace the receiver on the phone. I wonder what I always wonder when I hear that kind of message on the Center machine: What kind of a place does the caller think she is calling? Does she envision a secretary sitting by the phone, a rabbi ensconced in her office, fax machine and copy machine and computer? Does she think of parking lots and preschools and large sanctuaries that open on to multipurpose rooms?

Whatever that caller envisions, we are not it. Small congregations rarely are. My first pulpit after ordination almost twenty years ago counted twenty-three hundred families in its membership. My second pulpit had four hundred families. The Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey has eighty-five families. I joke that there is no place to go from here; but there is also no place I would rather be than here. The fact that our dues are so low is only one reason that I call us the best-kept secret in Warren County, New Jersey. I will let you in on our secret. Fifteen dedicated people routinely attend our adult education programs. The monthly Shabbat morning Torah study was lay-inspired and is exclusively lay-led. A new member who is

eighty-one years old teaches a midweek adult Hebrew class. Two years ago, eight women from the ages of thirty-nine to seventy-five studied for and conducted their own adult b'not mitzvah. Our Men's Club meets regularly. Our classrooms are full to overflowing and our own dedicated homegrown teachers teach our children.

Unlike larger synagogues, there is no dramatic difference between who comes on the High Holy Days and who attends the rest of the year. In a small place like ours, everybody comes around during the year. New members soon find out that part of their membership obligation includes hosting at least one Oneg Shabbat and taking home the trash afterwards. Before an industrious house chairperson dug out the drains downstairs, I used to tell people that membership came with a mop. Members attend the biannual congregational meetings; they even read the monthly newsletter. What is more, they know each other. If a member does not show up for a while, somebody is bound to notice and pick up the phone.

That there is no one to pick up the phone during the week is, admittedly, a minus. I have discovered, however, that what some people consider to be the minuses of small congregational life can also be seen as pluses. Our Friday night services, for instance, are held every other week. That is one of the very reasons I even interviewed for this position. The previous rabbi had told me, "The services are only every-other Friday night, but they come!" That seemed like a utopian schedule for someone like me, a rabbi who had been accustomed to conducting weekly Friday night and Shabbat morning services for fifteen years, yet I know that there are those among my colleagues who might wonder why a rabbi would not push for weekly

services. I understand the conflict, having once pushed a congregation to institute minyanim each Shabbat morning even when there was no bar or bat mitzvah.

And yet I also understand that this had been the congregation's tradition for the fifty years before I arrived and that those biweekly services are attended regularly by fifty to sixty people of all ages. The previous rabbi also reported that b'nai mitzvah in this congregation were unusually low-key: "They finish the service, look at each other and say, 'now where should we go for lunch?'" But the selling point for me was when that same rabbi told me their reaction when she told them she would not be finishing out the second year of a two-year contract. They said to her, "What did we do wrong?" I was intrigued with a place that could ask itself that question, even if their services were only every other week; their response seemed so mature. I would have thought that a small country congregation would have been more likely to be dependent upon that rabbi and angry at being abandoned a year early. Instead, they wanted to know if they had had any part in driving her away (they did not, as far as I know).

At the time I heard all of this about the Jewish Center, I had not been sure I would continue in the pulpit rabbinate. But how could I not investigate a place like this? I drove and drove to my initial interview, wondering where on earth this place was. I had grown up in New Jersey and had never been anywhere near northwest Jersey. I do not remember a lot of what they asked me when I finally did get there. I do remember they told me unequivocally that I would not be hired if I planned to hold Adult Education discussions during the Oneg Shabbat, since that was the only time during the week most of the members got to see each other. They were not prepared to place study over community. They also seemed to be happy with who they were.

They did not want to be any bigger. They did not want to add on to their building. They did not even mind mopping up the leaky Oneg room and taking home trash when it was their turn to host the Oneg. They did not seem to mind the myriad of other problems that come with being a small place: that they have to work a little harder to get things done since they must rely only on themselves; that they have to work harder to feel a part of the larger Jewish community since they are geographically so distant from the larger Jewish centers; that they have clear space limitations, which have required them to agonize over their decision to cap the size of the religious school classes. Despite all of these conflicts, the character of this congregation shone through. I thought to myself: they like who they are.

So I took the job. And then I asked myself: Who am I to tamper with what works? Instead of going to the congregation to try to change them, as I had in previous positions, what if I just went and tried to enjoy them? Maybe I could learn something from them. And I have learned from them. As I have respected them and tried to help them be the kind of congregation they want to be, so have they respected me and helped me to be the kind of rabbi I want to be. I get to do the things I entered the rabbinate to do. I teach children on a weekly basis; I lead both the reading and the singing parts of the worship service; I get to see most of my members on a regular enough basis that I know what is going on in their lives. I do not get bogged down in supervising staff because there is no other staff to supervise. I do not get stuck doing a lot of administrative work because they consider that their job, not mine. My Torah chanting skills have improved since I have no cantor to whom to delegate. Most importantly, I get to do my job as the rabbi because they do their job as a congregation. They struggle with the guilt of whether they devote enough time to the Center; they are frustrated with those members who do

not participate fully. They understand as only a small congregation can that they are responsible for their own survival. They do not look to me to shoulder the responsibility they believe is theirs. They do look to me to teach, lead, guide and inspire, but not to be their life support. That is an enormously liberating experience for a rabbi.

Oddly enough, because I neither set out to change them nor they to change me, we have both changed. I find myself thinking of new ways to meet their needs even though we both try to remember that I am officially part-time. They have begun to think in new ways, too, although I did not plan it that way. Last year, I told them I would not be able to conduct the usual Friday night service at the end of February since it was Parents' Weekend at my son's college. They asked: Is there any reason we cannot lead the service ourselves? And they did. I am only sorry I was not there to see it. They have begun to attend regional UAHC events and to bring back requests for what we might do: Could we ever have a songleader come to an event, they asked recently. And so we did. For the High Holy Days last fall, fourteen people read Torah, not bad for eighty-five families. I have learned from them that, by not trying to change them, they seem to feel empowered to initiate changes on their own. This year, for the first time in the congregation's fifty-five-year history, we celebrated Purim on the right night instead of the nearest Friday night or Sunday morning. We even plan to observe Shavuot on the right night this year.

These changes might seem like small ones if you come from the perspective of a large congregation with a real staff, but the congregation is a small one, after all. The changes have to be proportionate to the place. That is something else I have learned from them: how to be

much more patient in understanding the change process. They have also taught me to be more accepting of limitations, both theirs and mine. There is a built-in limitation of time and resources in a small congregation. While that conflict never gets resolved, it can be managed. In my case, it is complicated by my being part-time, working at another profession during the week and living an hour away from the congregation. By mutual agreement between the congregation and me, I do not visit congregants in the hospital. I would like to, but given the parameters of my position, I cannot. I cannot officiate at funerals unless the family is willing to be flexible about scheduling. But that is what this small congregation is used to because that is the way they have always lived; dependent on themselves, partners with the rabbi.

Every congregation makes a decision about what it needs in a rabbi just as every rabbi makes a decision about what she needs in a congregation. Life in the small part-time congregation is no different that way. You are always deciding what you can live with and what you can live without. So I can live with the fact that here is no one to answer the phone and we do not have a fax machine. I can live with the fact that, when I finally get the mail, it is sometimes too late. And I can live with the fact that what happened that Sunday in Greensboro is rare: ripping off my sweats, spraying on cologne, throwing on a dress and dashing out to conduct a Focus Group where I do not know what the questions are. The topic of the Focus Group was, by the way, Stress in the Rabbinate. That is something that in the small congregational rabbinate I thankfully and gratefully can and do live without.

Not everyone understands life in a small congregation. Not everyone would like it. Not everyone would approve of a place that holds services only every other Friday night. But what I

would tell them if they asked what I like about it is what our President said to the congregation from the pulpit these last High Holy Days: We may be a small part-time congregation, but we are full-time Jews.