

"No More Edifice Complex: How Do You Build Communities of People, Outside of Brick and Mortar?"

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Here are a few examples of Jewish texts that teach about building a religious community:

1. Pirkei Avot - A collection of ethical teachings and maxims from the Jewish sages. One relevant teaching from Pirkei Avot is *הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לִהְיוֹת אִישׁ*, "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" (2:5). This can be interpreted as a call to take leadership and initiative in building a holy community, even if those around you are not doing so.
2. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Sanhedrin 17b - This text teaches that each person is responsible for the well-being of their fellow human beings. This means we should actively work to build a community that is caring and supportive of one another.

Sanhedrin 17b The William Davidson Talmud (Koren - Steinsaltz)	ותניא כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה בית דין מכין ועונשין וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת בשלשה ובית הכנסת ובית המרחץ וביהכ"ס רופא ואומן ולבלר (וטבח) ומלמד תינוקות משום ר' עקיבא אמרו אף מיני פירא מפני שמיני פירא מאירין את העינים:	And it is taught in a <i>baraita</i>: A Torah scholar is not permitted to reside in any city that does not have these ten things: A court that has the authority to flog and punish transgressors; and a charity fund for which monies are collected by two people and distributed by three, as required by <i>halakha</i>. This leads to a requirement for another three people in the city. And a synagogue; and a bathhouse; and a public bathroom; a doctor; and a bloodletter; and a scribe [<i>velavlar</i>] to write sacred scrolls and necessary documents; and a ritual slaughterer; and a teacher of young children. With these additional requirements there are a minimum of 120 men who must be residents of the city. They said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: The city must also have varieties of fruit, because varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes.
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¹ <https://www.exploringjudaism.org/holidays/shavuot/tikkun-leil-shavuot-5783-2023/>

3. Leviticus 19:18 states, וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ "Love your neighbor as yourself." This can be interpreted as a call to build a community based on mutual love and respect for one another.
4. Proverbs 27:17 states, בָּרֶזֶל בְּבָרָזֶל יַחַד וְאִישׁ יַחַד פְּגִי-רָעָהוּ "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." This can be interpreted as a call to build a community where we challenge and inspire each other to be our best selves.
5. Exodus 25:8 states, וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְתוֹכָם "Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them." This can be interpreted as a call to build a physical space that is holy and welcoming to all, where people can come together to connect with God.

Here are a few examples of Jewish texts that teach about building religious buildings:

1. Exodus 25-31 - These chapters describe the construction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary the Israelites built in the desert. This text offers detailed instructions on how to build a sacred space, including the materials to use, the dimensions of the various components, and the design of the furnishings.
2. 1 Kings 6-7 - These chapters describe the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon. This text offers a more elaborate and permanent model for building a sacred space, including cedar wood, stone, and precious metals in the construction.
3. Talmud Bavli, Tractate Yoma 54a - This text offers insights into the spiritual significance of the Mishkan and the Temple. It discusses the symbolic meaning of the various furnishings, such as the Ark of the Covenant and the Altar, and explains the rituals performed in these sacred spaces.

Yoma 54a The William Davidson Talmud (Koren - Steinsaltz)	אָמַר רַב קֵטִינָא: בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עוֹלִין לְרֹגֶל, מְגַלְלִין לָהֶם אֶת הַפְּרוֹכֶת, וּמְרַאֲיוֹן לָהֶם אֶת הַכְּרוּבִים שֶׁהָיוּ מְעוּרִים זֶה בָּזֶה, וְאוֹמְרִים לֵהּ: רְאוּ חֲבֵרְתְּכֶם לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם כְּחֵבֶת זָכָר וְנִסְתָּבָה. ...	Rav Ketina said: When the Jewish people would ascend for one of the pilgrimage festivals, the priests would roll up the curtain for them and show them the cherubs, which were clinging to one another, and say to them: See how you are beloved before God, like the love of a male and female. The two cherubs symbolize the Holy One, Blessed be He, and the Jewish people.
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	רב אחא בר יעקב אמר: לעולם במקדש שני, וכרובים דצורתא הוו קיימי, דכתיב: "וְאֵת כָּל קִירוֹת הַבַּיִת מָסַב קִלְעַ כְּרוּבִים וְתַמְרוֹת וּפְטוּרֵי צִיצִים וְצִפָּה זָהָב מִיָּשָׁר עַל הַמְּחוּקָה".	Rav Aḥa bar Ya'akov said in the Second Temple... As it is written: "And he carved all the walls of the house round about with carved figures of cherubs and palm trees and open flowers, within and without" (I Kings 6:29), and it is further stated: "And he overlaid them with gold fitted upon the graven work" (I Kings 6:35).
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4. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Beit HaBechirah - This text offers a comprehensive guide to the laws and customs of the Temple and its precincts. It discusses topics such as the consecration of the Temple, the role of the Kohanim and Levites, and the various offerings and sacrifices that were brought.
5. Isaiah 56:7 - This verse states, כִּי בֵּיתִי בֵּית-תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל-הָעַמִּים "For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." This text emphasizes the inclusive and universal nature of the sacred space, which is meant to be a place of worship and connection for all people, regardless of their background or station in life.

Dismantling Our Edifice Complex: Embracing Vibrant Communities Over Decades-Old Synagogue Buildings

Eric M. Leiderman

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In the heart of our Jewish communities, we find synagogues that symbolize our faith, culture, and heritage. However, the time has come for us to reevaluate our priorities and shift our focus to what truly matters: building communities of people. It is essential to recognize that while impressive structures may have their place, our devotion should lie in nurturing our members' spiritual, educational, and communal needs. Therefore, let us embark on a journey to transform our Jewish communities, transcending the confines of decades-old synagogue buildings.

Our Jewish heritage is rooted in community, where shared experiences, values, and traditions bind us. As physical spaces, synagogues should serve as vibrant hubs that nurture these connections. Rather than pour excessive resources into maintaining extravagant structures, let us channel our energy toward cultivating warm, inclusive environments that foster genuine engagement. By prioritizing our members' needs, we can create a sense of belonging and ensure everyone feels embraced and valued.

The pursuit of grandeur in synagogue buildings often brings financial burdens that hamper our ability to address vital aspects of community life. By reevaluating our approach, we can free ourselves from the shackles of excessive spending. Redirecting financial resources from costly construction and maintenance projects enables us to invest in essential areas like education, social services, and outreach programs. Doing so can create a lasting impact extending far beyond the confines of physical structures.

Synagogues should be more than just architectural wonders; they should be beacons of spirituality, learning, and growth. It is crucial to shift our focus back to the core of our faith and the experiences of our members. By fostering a sense of community, providing meaningful programming, and addressing the evolving needs of our congregations, we can reignite the flame of Jewish life. Let us place our energies where they truly matter, ensuring that our synagogues are centers of spiritual nourishment and personal transformation.

No matter how grand, a space cannot replace the vibrant pulse of a thriving community. When synagogues boast large seating capacities that remain largely unoccupied, they create an atmosphere of exclusion and disconnect. We must prioritize creating warm, inviting, and engaging environments that resonate with our members. By embracing a communal ethos rather than focusing on filling empty seats, we can attract and retain individuals who seek genuine connections, making our synagogues come alive with vibrant Jewish life. Embracing

Our traditions have evolved over centuries, so we ensure our continued relevance and vitality. By embracing change and adapting to the demographics of our communities, we ensure our continued relevance and vitality. We can foster a sense of connection and belonging through meaningful engagement, inclusivity, and innovative programming. Let us focus on building communities that inspire and empower individuals to live out the values of our faith in their daily lives.

The time has come for us to release ourselves from the grip of the edifice complex that has often overshadowed our true purpose as a Jewish community. Instead, let us redirect our efforts, resources, and passions toward nurturing vibrant communities of people. We can forge a path towards a more meaningful and fulfilling Jewish communal life by prioritizing our members' needs, fostering inclusivity, and embracing change. Together, we will build a future where the power of our community transcends the limitations of mere bricks and mortar, enabling our faith and culture to flourish.