



Family matters

It's a matter of some personal pride, in these post-denominational times, that I am involved in three shuls; one Masorti, one mainstream Orthodox (United Synagogue-style, although unaffiliated) and one Federation (Orthodox, but slightly further to the right, although this distinction is basically historical).

Why do I want to join a shul at all (many of my friends haven't)? I like belonging, I love community, I want to stand up and be counted.

I have a friend who tells me that she tried to join her local shul, but the single-person rate was the same as for families. That's whether you're a couple or have half a dozen kids. Some research threw up that most shuls charge single people 50 to 60 per cent of the family fee, but this – *heimishe*, if idiosyncratic – community seems to give the message to single people: 'You're welcome, but only if you pay a premium.'

Of course, it's not just about the never-married. It's about the divorced and the widowed too. I heard tell about another shul where – unbelievably – women didn't get the vote. When one long-standing female member got divorced, her husband took the vote with him when he left.

I looked into this some more. The United Synagogue feels there's a problem, and has developed its four-division Tribe programme for kids, teens, campus and 20s-plus. When you're 30, the programme stops. 'You join as a kid, go right through to 20s-plus and then you get married and eventually your kids join,' I was told. It's a virtuous circle. Unless you're non-standard – although on reflection every married person I know must be non-standard, since I hardly know anyone who got married before they were 30.

It seems like there's a problem with the normative model. Shuls are struggling. The old match-hatch-dispatch model said you join when you get married, you have kids and need a cheder, and then you die. But what happens if you don't fit the jigsaw puzzle?

It's not just about synagogues, of course. Some mutter that cultural Judaism – despite its recent funky-punky rebirth – has something of a 'marry them off' hidden agenda. And of course there are the charity committees. We're a community of people desperate to make a *shidduch* and get our en-suite room in heaven.

But isn't that all pretty last century? We live in the era of lifestyle customization: the days of saying there is only

one life path to follow are over. Communities include the married and the single, the divorced and the widowed, people who don't want children, and people who can't have children. Family members may have non-traditional arrangements – with single parents or same-sex partners – alongside the more conventional model.

In the 1997 Jewish Policy Research report on the social attitudes of unmarried young Jews in contemporary Britain, only one in six respondents considered the Jewish community more welcoming to single people than British society in general. Four in ten marriages in the UK end in divorce, a figure apparently replicated in the Jewish community. This week, the UK Office of National Statistics stated that the proportion of children born outside marriage is now 42 per cent. There's been recent debate in the UK media about the increase in single women having children. This is a brave, new, diverse world of serial monogamy, divorce, long-term cohabitation, civil partnerships and lone parents. The days of entire communities consisting of two parents and 2.4 children may be over.

We know Jewish communal life is drama-driven. There's a statistics obsession that at its silliest focuses on how many people came to your supper quiz or how many members your shul has. More seriously, it focuses on important questions about marrying out and whether we will we have Jewish grandchildren. This numbers fixation has driven synagogue and communal policy to focus on the 'What do we do with single people?' problem.

Yet it seems to me that that's the wrong question. A lot of things have changed from how they were in *der heim*, and we have a choice; either we dray and moan about the good old days, or we embrace this new world, for all its confusions and contradictions.

The question really is: how does our community respond to the challenges of modernity? How, in fact, do we become the community that I think we want to be: one that finds a place for everyone, irrespective of their idiosyncracies? 🗨️

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