

# A House is Not a Home

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## A House is Not a Home Reactions to the Pew Study of the American Jewish Community by Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor

In the past days, more electronic “ink” has been spilled explaining, decrying, spinning and analyzing the results of the [Pew Study of the American Jewish community](#). There is nothing like the Jewish community when it has something to agitate about – we are at our best. Perhaps in the “sturm und drang,” the necessary kick in the pants we all received will compel the best of Jewish thinking, planning and doing. The future of Judaism on these shores deserves nothing less.

I am a big believer in “beshert,” so it was ‘in the cards’ that insight into the problems of our community would come from an unexpected source. On Sunday, I attended a lecture given by Amos Gitai, noted Israeli film-maker (Kippur, Kadosh, House, among many others). Gitai, who received a PhD in architecture from the University of California, Berkley, is currently a visiting professor at Jewish Theological Seminary and presented selections from an his Israeli television series, “Architecture in Israel”. It was during the screening of the first episode, “The Tabernacle and the Temple” that I saw the Pew study in a different light.

Gitai is in conversation with Dov Elbaum, well-known Israeli author, scholar, editor and one of the founders of the secular Yeshiva in Tel Aviv. Elbaum and Gitai point out that the Torah begins with the letter “bet” which is a symbol for “bayit” or home. They go on to describing how the Torah instructs with great detail how the Tabernacle was to be constructed, and how the Biblical text also describes what the first Temple required. Even so, they argue that the physical structure of the Tabernacle is beside the point. Gitai poignantly urges that a “home” is not tangible place, but rather is an emotional space “in which you see yourself through your mother’s eyes.”

A place in which one sees oneself through the eyes of a parent – what a revelation! For more than 150 years, the American Jewish community has been involved in the enterprise of building structures: synagogues, community centers, cultural and educational institutions, hospitals – bricks and mortar. And we have honored the folks who paid for these buildings by naming them after the benefactors. For years, synagogues would rally membership to build new wings, new extensions, renovate tired spaces. And as I thought of all the money that went into structures, I realized that a pittance of those funds went to develop the kinds of programs that would strengthen the ability of each one of us to see ourselves as part of a dynamic past. {nb – I am speaking only about the American Jewish community, our efforts in Israel and the rest of the world still require our efforts to build our physical presence as well} Our teachers and leaders are not compensated appropriately and materials and resources to build community are always wanting. Imagine if a synagogue’s youth budget was the size of the budget needed to renovate the social hall!

In religious architecture, there are requirements for building a church and there are requirements for building a mosque – but, there are no requirements on how to build a synagogue. What makes a synagogue is the *minyan* – the presence of people bound together inextricably by faith, family, community and destiny.

Would that we were to undertake the biggest building project in the history of the American Jewish community – turning our communal funds over to those who would teach and create opportunities within and without structures to find Jewish identity. Some of most successful Jewish educational experiences take place in the rustic environs of summer camp; some of the most successful *kehillot* were founded in borrowed churches or community spaces. And in my 30 plus years of service to the Jewish community, I have never once met a person who joined a synagogue because of the building.

I shudder to think about how long we Jews would have lasted had the Temple not been destroyed two millennia ago – what kept us together was not the building, but the community – the abstract concept of “bayit” – a place in which we discovered and cultivated our Jewish identity. The challenge presented by the Pew study is simple: we have enough physical places already to contain our community – and as we learn, most are vastly under-used; let us harness the great resources in our community to create the educational and cultural programs that will cause the many to identify more fully with the Jewish community. Bringing our Jews home is all about creating opportunities in which we see ourselves, identify ourselves, with our Jewish past and future. And when we see ourselves “through the eyes of our mother”, let us hope that she is not weeping for her lost children, but rejoicing that we have come home.

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- See more at: <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/a-house-is-not-a-home/#sthash.D0vK2WMq.dpuf>