

## YK – 5772 – Predictions

Predicting the future is a tricky business. But as January first approaches, any number of people predict specific events for the coming year. While even those prognostications seem to sound more like guesses than prophecies, a twelve month look into the future is not very bold. Certainly, it is not as daring as the article I found in the February 1950 edition of Popular Mechanics Magazine. In that issue, Waldemar Kaempffert, the Science Editor of The New York Times, [from 1927 to 1953] authored an article, “Miracles You’ll See in the Next Fifty Years.” Mr. Kaempffert writes about a fictional family, the Dobsons, who live in a fictional town of 100,000, Tottenville.

Here are a few of his thoughtful predictions. “Tottenville is as clean as a whistle and quiet. It is a crime to burn raw coal and pollute air with smoke and soot....

Tottenville is illuminated by electric ‘suns’ suspended from arms on steel towers 200 feet high.... The Dobson house has light-metal walls only four inches thick.... Some of ... [the house] is poured plastic – the floors, for instance. By 2000, wood, brick and stone are ruled out because they are too expensive....

There are no dish-washing machines,... because dishes are thrown away after they have been used once, or rather put into a sink where they are dissolved by superheated water. ... The plastics [for these dishes] are derived from such inexpensive raw materials as cottonseed hulls, oat hulls, Jerusalem artichokes, fruit pits, soy beans, bagasse, straw and wood pulp.

When Jane Dobson cleans the house she simply turns the hose on everything. Why not? Furniture (upholstery included), rugs, draperies, unscratchable floors – all are made of synthetic fabric or waterproof

plastic....” Too bad he missed on the dissolvable plates and hosing down the inside of the house. But he did better with this line. “Cooking as an art is only a memory in the minds of old people.” He missed on a few more, like sugary foods manufactured from saw dust and wood pulp and one my favorites, more accurate weather predictions, but he did better in predicting the phone fax machine and that cancer would not yet be cured.

I am particularly wary of predicting the future, because I was reminded in my early years in Bethlehem that about a decade after Mr. Kaempffert wrote his article, one of my predecessors decided that there wasn't much of a future for the Bethlehem Jewish community. About 25 years later, we invited that rabbi back for the ground breaking of this building and his view had changed. So while I want to make some predictions of more than one year, I am not so bold as to try to look ahead decades, but just a few years.

Brith Sholom will be a strong synagogue and community over the next many years. Both our leadership and our membership have virtually guaranteed that reality. We have embraced our south side roots, where we were a community center as well as a synagogue, and welcomed weekly bridge games into our social hall. If only those who come to services were as devoted in their attendance and as quiet as those who come to bridge twice a week! We have also demonstrated our commitment to the value of *klal Yisra-ayl* by inviting Congregation Am Haskalah to share our space. It is easy to **talk** about Jewish unity, as many do, but it is something different, something more challenging and far more profound, to **act** on Jewish unity. But I want to be clear on one point that we made initially and remains the case today. We are two different congregations, with two different

approaches to Jewish tradition. We each intend to maintain our independence and we each are committed to mutual respect.

But we cannot and should not ignore that the presence of the bridge games and of Am Haskalah, in addition to being philosophically appropriate and making better use of our beautiful facility, also serves a very pragmatic purpose. This aspect of the relationships was summarized beautifully by the ancient rabbis in the short phrase from Pirke Avot (chapter 3): “*im ayn kemach, ayn Torah,*” “if you don’t have the bucks, you won’t have Jewish teaching, Jewish learning or Jewish living taking place!

But beyond rental income, Brith Sholom’s immediate future is secure because so many of our members responded generously to our L’chaim campaign. Our Endowment is our bulwark against the brutal forces battering the American Jewish community. One of my predictions is that any small synagogue that does not have a sufficient Endowment, let alone no Endowment, will not survive for long, cannot survive in any form other than a merged institution. We need only look into our chapel to see the first hints of this reality. The ark comes from a Conservative synagogue that closed in Connecticut; the readers table and surrounding railing from Agudas Achim, the closed Orthodox synagogue that was on Second St. in Allentown.

And lest you feel these examples are episodic and not representative, let me call your attention to an article that appeared this past July in The Forward entitled “Struggling to Survive” with the long and ominous subtitle: “Small Jewish Communities Across the U.S. Are Fighting To Stay Afloat, but How Long Can They Last?” The article, by Howard Shapiro, begins:

“There were Hebrew school classes and youth activities, bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings and a full roster of minyanim in Butte, Montana. There

were three synagogues — two Orthodox and one Reform. There once were upward of 1,000 Jews. **There were....**

And that is a problem for synagogues in small towns like Butte and in smaller hamlets, too: **There were.** Jews settled in these places more than a century ago because of business opportunities. In Butte, it was mining, in other places a manufacturing boom or some reason to serve people by supplying clothing or food or furniture and the like, as the American population was spread across its states.... Now, the Reform congregation, B'nai Israel, is all that remains, with fewer than 20 families and an aging membership of about 30 people.”

Howard Shapiro goes on to report: “In possibly 150 or so communities across the United States, a decline in Jewish numbers mirrors Butte’s, and although congregants may be in denial, the responsibilities of running synagogues will eventually force them into taking action.” This depressing, sobering article also described declining, small Jewish communities in the south like Sumter, South Carolina which has gone from 225 families in 1965 to “30-plus members ... mostly in their late 70s and 80s, and ... 90s today.”

If you go to [The Forward](#) online and look at the blog following this article, you will quickly see that there is no consensus on why Jewish communities and synagogues are disappearing, especially in small communities. We surely can agree on some of the factors: more Jews not marrying than previous generations, a low birth rate, below replacement numbers, the decline of small businesses and the lack of attractive jobs, especially in this tough economy, and a major issue that I predict will grow in size and complexity in the next few years: unaffiliated Jews.

People of all faiths want religion and religious services, especially the High Holy days, whether they be Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur or Christmas and Easter, to be free. God, of course, is free. Religious values are free for the taking. But synagogues, churches and mosques are buildings – and buildings and their staff cannot be free. I was reminded of this issue when Toby and I toured the beautiful synagogue in Florence, Italy this past June. The synagogue is so extraordinary, that the city of Florence contributed to cleaning its sanctuary walls after they were covered with mud during a flood in 1966. We went the first time to check out the route from our hotel and to see the synagogue in advance of our attending Shabbat services. It is a magnificent structure, inside and out. We paid a few dollars for the official tour and then checked out the gift shop. We bought a few items to be supportive. As we were getting ready to leave, I noticed a guest book on a little table just outside the gift shop. I decided to write in our names with a short, positive comment. As I am sure you all know, one cannot help but see the names and comments of others when signing in. To my amazement, and anger, someone had written: “No one should be charged for entering a synagogue! [exclamation point] It’s a place of worship for Jews.” It was signed with only a last name and “New York City.” Now the synagogue in Florence, like many in Europe, has security. We had to hand in our passports to a woman sitting in a glass booth and go through a security gate before entering for the tour. There was a tour guide, who was obviously busy all day long showing around foreign tourists. Exactly who is supposed to pay for the security for these tourists and their tours? Is that the responsibility of the aging, dwindling Florence Jewish community? I don’t think so! I was so upset by the comment in the guest book that I wrote it down, because I did not want to forget it.

I have come to realize in the past few years that many unaffiliated Jews want to be treated as synagogue members when they have a need. This most commonly manifests itself when people arrive at one of the two local hospital networks. I and my rabbinical and cantorial colleagues receive phone calls from the hospital chaplains with requests to visit Mr. or Ms. Unaffiliated Jew and in essence to treat them as though they have supported a synagogue or a Jewish community their whole lives. And we do.

Recently, I was faced with a far more complex situation that began as a series of hospital visits. As a few of our members know, a Jew who lived in Bethlehem for decades, but never belonged to any synagogue or Jewish institution in this area, was dying of cancer. I received a phone call from a hospital chaplain saying the person was going to die soon and wanted to be buried as a Jew. And, of course, this particular Jew had no funds for a burial plot, for a funeral, nor for a tombstone and nor was the family willing to support the effort financially. Can you imagine how awkward it feels to have a Christian clergyperson call me and essentially ask: will the Jewish community take care of one of its own? Providing a funeral plot was no problem. Under the circumstances, Long's Funeral Home would do the funeral at cost, as a favor to the Brith Sholom community. But with a tombstone, there would still be a financial expenditure of a couple of thousand dollars. Who do **you** think should pay? Or do you think this is even our problem? And what will we do if this situation begins to repeat itself over and over? And even if someone has the funds for a plot, and a funeral, and a tombstone, how much should we charge? After all, if you belong to Brith Sholom for a few decades, many of you will contribute tens of thousands of dollars just in "voluntary" dues. If we charge more than a few thousand dollars for a plot, it will be viewed as gouging. But if we

charge only a couple of thousand dollars, does that make up for decades of non-support, not necessarily of money, but also of time and effort on behalf of the community? Are we prepared to give our all to someone who never shopped for a Kiddush, or helped cook a Friday night meal, or participated in making a minyan? In this last instance, a disaffected brother resolved the issue. He had the legal right to make all the decisions and he was not interested in a Jewish funeral or internment. But I predict, with great certainty, that these kinds of dilemmas await us in greater numbers in the years ahead. If your parents, children, siblings, cousins do not belong to a synagogue, they are contributing to the demise of the American Jewish community as we have known it. It's as simple as that.

I predict that as time goes on, synagogue buildings and staff will become real liabilities if declining numbers come to services, classes and programs. We are still in the early years of the internet and online programming. As each generation grows up with more advanced technology, when any service, sermon or cantorial rendition can be streamed by the best talent we have in the Jewish world, what will make us attend or support a local building or staff? If we do not think that community means spending time with each other in person, then what will we do in all the synagogue buildings we have, no matter how few remain?

“In 1440, German inventor Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press.... The new printing presses ... spread like brushfire through Europe. By 1499 print-houses had become established in more than 2500 cities.... [Approximately] fifteen million books had been flung into a world where scholars would travel miles to visit a library stocked with twenty hand-written volumes. Scholars argue about the number... But the output of new books had been staggering by any reasonable estimate. The people had

suddenly come into possession of some thirty thousand new book titles.” Printed books will soon be as outmoded as written ones. What do you think it means when Borders goes out of business and Barnes & Noble filed for bankruptcy this past February? Their only hope seems to be digital books.

Do you think such developments do not impact Jewish life? Perhaps you missed the article by Dr. Jonathan Sarna, one of the best known American Jewish historians of our time, that appeared in the September 30<sup>th</sup> edition of The Forward. The first sentence tells the story. “The University Press of Nebraska’s purchase of the unsold inventory and publication rights to all of the Jewish Publication Society’s books effectively rings down the curtain on the oldest and most prestigious active Jewish publisher in the United States.”

I want to conclude by sharing some thoughts from Rabbi Aaron Bisno of Pittsburgh. He is the senior rabbi of Congregation Rodef Shalom, a 150 year old Reform congregation. I do not know him, but Adina Preis and her husband Aron, moved to Bethlehem from Pittsburgh not long ago. Adina still receives and reads The Jewish Chronicle, Pittsburgh’s Jewish community newspaper. I met Rabbi Bisno and his very significant concerns there. Rabbi Bisno wrote in May of this year:

“What are ‘courageous conversations?’ Simply, they are conversations that take place in a period of sustained uncertainty, wherein the most challenging and important topics are discussed forthrightly. After all, the reasoning goes, when reality gives way to a new normal, one cannot afford to shy away from talking about matters of ultimate import and significance. Certainly, we have reached such a time in Pittsburgh.

In recent years significant national Jewish institutions have shut their doors; others have merged or now pool resources; still others are exploring

collaborative arrangements that would have been unthinkable only a short time ago. Long-held denominational loyalties are fraying, mergers between institutional bodies of our major Jewish Movements' are being openly discussed, and new partnerships and paradigms are being explored and tested in nearly every Jewish community across the land.

[On a tour of congregations I took this year] ... I listened to some of our nation's most insightful rabbis and Jewish leaders discuss their dreams, as well as their concerns for the future, three common themes emerged. (1) The Jewish community's infrastructure has been forever altered by late-20th and early-21st Century demographic, sociological and economic forces. (2) In a search for relevance and meaningful self-expression, a new generation of Jews with vastly different expectations than that of earlier generations is all but leaving the established Jewish community behind. (3) In spite of any present-day successes we may be enjoying, we fail to recognize the nature of our entire community's circumstance at our peril.

Bottom line: We live in difficult and challenging times, and we are all in this together. Not a single Jewish institution is immune from these pressures, and therefore any success currently being enjoyed is necessarily temporary....

Let us begin by acknowledging that every expectation upon which Jewish life has long relied is now suspect.... The sacred ground upon which we have built our house is shifting beneath our feet.”

I can easily predict, and so can each of you, that if the Pittsburgh Jewish community has to face new realities, even with its major hospitals and universities, so does the Lehigh Valley Jewish community. Brith Sholom, in my mind, remains secure for the immediate future. But it is clearly time for the larger Lehigh Valley Jewish community to do some

serious and urgent planning. We need the active participation of committed Jews and some visionary leadership by Jewish professionals. We need a plan that is so attractive that every Jew who moves to this area will want to be a part of the organized Jewish community. I think it is possible to create such a plan, but I am reluctant to predict that we will. There is still time to be successful, but we need to push ahead and make prudent changes. I pray that we do so expeditiously in the year ahead.

AMEN