

SYNAGOGUE LIBRARIES

The Synagogue Library and The Housebound Reader: A Suggested Outreach Program

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Rationale

One of the major concerns of synagogue librarians is how to bring the adult reader into the library. Looking at this issue in the reverse, i.e., bringing the library to the adult, can provide an opportunity to look at the problem in a new light. This perspective will generate the desired result of bringing adults to the library.

Often the public library can serve as an example to the synagogue library. In this case, the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), which has a program for shut-ins, will be used. Shut-ins are people who are physically unable to get to the library. The LAPL serves this part of the population by providing a trained volunteer who meets with the shut-in on a regular basis, and does the checking-out and returning of books. This is a valuable service that can be adapted to the synagogue library.

In developing this idea, three positions will be discussed: those of the library, the synagogue, and the housebound individual.

A person who is confined to home for any length of time often looks for things to do to keep busy. In many cases this activity must be non-physical, and reading fits the bill. Reading is an enriching experience, and can help to take one's mind off the physical problem. Finishing a book gives the reader a sense of accomplishment.

The issue is how to get the books to the person who cannot come to the library.

Many synagogues have a Hesed Committee, a group of people who visit the sick and perform acts of kindness to those in need. Members of the Hesed Committee can serve as the liaison between the synagogue library and the confined individual.

How would the program work? The Hesed Committee members would come to the library, check out books, and bring them to the individual. After the books have been read, the volunteers would return them to the library.

Outcomes

Several outcomes may result from this program:

1. The library increases its circulation to adult readers. It is entirely possible that the volunteer will check out books for herself, in addition to those that she checks out for the housebound individual.
2. The library receives additional publicity. More people are made aware that the synagogue has a library.
3. The library has a new source of volunteers.
4. Since more people are using the library, it is possible that greater funding (in the form of a larger budget) will be made available by the synagogue.
5. The program shows that the synagogue cares about the individual member. This could result in increased donations by that member to the library and synagogue.
6. After recovering, the now healthy individual may become more involved in any one of the many aspects of synagogue life.
7. Visiting the sick is a mitzvah. It also makes both the volunteer and confined person feel better. "Rabbi Acha bar Hanina said, 'One who visits the sick takes away from him one sixtieth of his pain.'" (*Nedarim* 39b)
8. Reading gives the confined person something else to talk about, besides the reason for the confinement.
9. Friendships can result from the contact between the volunteer and the housebound individual.

Implementation

Prior to implementing the program, the Hesed Committee volunteers should have an orientation to the library and its collection. The librarian would train the volunteers to locate and check out library materials, and also review with them the sort of questions to ask the shut-in, so as to determine the type of library materials to be borrowed.

This is a program that requires very little effort from the librarian once the orientation has been completed. It would be up to the Hesed Committee to keep the program functioning.

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