CATERING IN THE SYNAGOGUE

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INTRODUCTION

I chose this topic because as the Administrator of a Metropolitan New York synagogue, I find much of my time is spent in this area. It also proved to be one of the more provocative topics at a regular meeting with my colleagues, indicating that for those of us serving in this field, in this area of the country, it is a subject of some importance.

In spite of this, it does not seem to have inspired much written material. There are not many books on the entire field of Temple Administration, and the one most read and quoted "Successful Synagogue Administration", co-authored by Myron Schoen and Irving Katz does not treat the topic of "Catering" at all.

While many books on Judaism speak of food, they do so only in relation to the festivals and holidays in our calendar. Therefore, anyone wishing to discuss catering, as it affects the modern synagogue from the perspective of the Administrative entity, is confronted with a meager supply of accumulated and recorded knowledge. This may be a third contributing factor for my selection of the topic.
The much talked of Jewish preoccupation with food dates back to Biblical times, when certain foods were proscribed, and the rules of Kashrut were proclaimed. Kashrut concerns itself not only with acceptable and unacceptable foods, but also with rules for preparation, storage and service.

Our calendar contains many holidays, each of which boasts a traditional food (or no food at all). Passover, perhaps the most popular holiday of the Jewish people, has not only prescribed foods, but a specific order for serving, and a pattern for displaying them on the table. The ritual includes a special set of dishes, an exceptional cleaning of the entire house, shopping for special foods made from special ingredients, and a specific ritual for eating these foods.

It does not seem unnatural, therefore, coming from such a heritage that joyous moments in the lives of our people would engender feasting, and, that in turn, would lead to someone to prepare and serve the feast. Since the joyous times of life are so often synagogue centered;
I proceed cautiously, therefore, with feelings akin to those which Abraham must have experienced when he advanced, defended and lived by his belief in one, invisible God, as opposed to the many idols that his father made, and his peers worshipped.
over the years, it has become common practice for the
Temple to provide facilities, and, in some cases, the
personnel for the celebration that has become part of
the joyous life cycle events. Thus it is that ritual
and tradition have combined to add catering to the
administrative function of the synagogue.

In most cases, each congregation has already
established a modus operandi for meeting the catering
needs of its members. The system has evolved prior to
the advent of the present administration. However, as
each administration should evaluate, and periodically
reevaluate the "in place" systems for dues collection,
filming, purchasing, housekeeping, etc., so too, must
the relationship with caterer or caterers be considered.
Furthermore, if we are discussing an administration
that does not have an operating catering capacity, but
is seeking to establish one, they should be seeking all
the good advice and assistance they can get.

It is important therefore, in either case, to know
the overriding consideration of the congregation regard-
ing catering. Obviously, no congregation will turn away
from income generated by a profitable catering operation,
but that may not be the prime consideration. A congregation
may wish to insure that its members will have the widest possible latitude in the selection of menus, styles, prices and personnel. Similarly, they may be more concerned with maintaining maximum use of their own facilities for the programs of the synagogue and its affiliates. This is not always possible when there is an active and profitable catering program.

Generally speaking, if income is of greatest importance, an exclusive caterer will best serve the needs of the congregation. Conversely, a panel of caterers will be more suitable if the congregation is more concerned with giving their members the largest selection, and also if they wish to retain use of their facilities for their own programs.

There are many other factors to be considered in making the choice between an exclusive caterer and a panel. An exclusive caterer will require considerable space, in addition to the kitchen and reception areas. He will need storage facilities, both refrigerated and non refrigerated for food and beverages. He will also need storage space for dishes, pots, pans and cleaning equipment. Furthermore, he will require office space. There will have to be provisions made for the waiters, waitresses and others to change clothes,
and bathroom facilities specifically for his employees. There will have to be a bridal room and a check room, and a place for the groom and other male members of the bridal party to change clothes. These last three spaces would be desirable under either system, but in the case of the panel caterers, since almost all receptions will be those of members, the wedding party could use their respective homes and arrive at the temple already dressed. Whatever system is used for checking coats during regular services would be deemed satisfactory for the catered receptions as well.

The congregation will benefit, however, from use of equipment, when the caterer is not using it, that would otherwise represent a considerable expense to the congregation.

Exclusive caterers have a greater stake in helping to maintain equipment, such as carpets, drapes, painted or papered surfaces, dishwashers, stoves, drains, etc. that belong to the temple. They must show reception areas to prospective customers, and it is difficult to perform their function while contending with equipment that is malfunctioning, or at least not giving the service for which
it was designed. However, if the contract doesn't call for the caterer to be responsible for damage caused by the abuse of equipment by his staff, it is more than likely that proper usage will not be insisted upon.

Much friction may be caused by the condition of the premises when the caterer receives them, and their condition when they are returned to the temple. As with the determination of cause for malfunctioning equipment, words used to describe the appearance of the premises upon transfer from one party to another are difficult to arrive at, and even more difficult to translate into into actuality. "Clean" - "good condition" and similar descriptive words and phrases are subjective in their definition, comparison and judgement. Furthermore in extreme cases, when agreement is difficult, a long term contract with an exclusive caterer denies the congregation the ultimate weapon of barring him from further jobs.

Caterers, exclusive or panel members, are business people who are concerned with profits. While not a great profundity, it is a fact which must be borne in mind. Anything that lessens the caterer's overhead, even if it
increases the Temple's, is to his advantage. If he can
dispose of his trash through the temple's system, leave
cleaning to be done by the temple's custodial staff, or
utilize the temple's facilities for preparing or storing
food and/or other items to be used for a reception to be
held at another location, he increases his profits.

More often with an exclusive caterer, but true, albeit
to a lesser degree, with a panel, no discussions will
prove more frustrating than those concerning refurbishing,
as it becomes needed. It begins with a definition of the
very word, NEEDED. It would seem to be simple, since both
parties seemingly want the same result, a neat, clean
facility; so where is there room for disagreement? Let
us consider some of the most obvious. The caterer is
seeking "a look", trying to establish an ambiance that will
be inviting to prospective customers whose interest is
party making. The temple will be concerned with an appear-
ance that is more reflective of the institution. The
party most responsible for housekeeping will be looking
for materials and patterns that will most easily be
maintained, which may not be compatible with the aim of
the other. The caterer, concerned with a bright, new look
every few years will be mainly interested in facade, while the synagogue will strive to use more durable materials so as to avoid repetitive redecoration and repair expenses. Emphasis and investment of money will be placed on different areas of the temple, based upon differing perspectives.

The caterer will benefit from beautiful landscaping and will, therefore, urge the temple to provide and maintain the same, but, along with snow removal, will not participate in the related expense, unless provided for in the written agreement.

However, while a panel of caterers will produce less income, and will not display any greater regard for temple facilities, as members of a panel of caterers, they may be made to post bond, and can be barred from further activity, if it becomes necessary. Furthermore, a panel may consist of Kosher and Non-Kosher caterers, which could be an excellent solution to the next major consideration facing the congregation that has not yet made its arrangements. This, of course, is a unique concern of Reform Congregations.

Here again, two factors may be in direct contradic-
tion to each other in reaching the answer. Which serves
the needs of the individual congregants, and which will prove to be more profitable for the congregation? While a majority of the members may not be concerned with kashrut, either in their homes or in the temple, we do not wish to deny the rights of the minority who are concerned with this custom. Furthermore, even those who do not observe kashrut may have guests who are important to them (parents, other relatives, etc) who would not wish to be present at a non kosher reception. This in turn may cause many of our members to be denied the pleasure of celebrating simchas in their own temple. Those who do not observe dietary laws would not be faced with similar problems if the caterer is kosher.

Should catering income be of major importance to the congregation, experience indicates that more "outside" receptions will be generated by a kosher caterer. (Please note, this is based upon a Metropolitan New York perspective, it may not be true in other communities throughout the U.S.)

When providing for catering, it is equally important to make provision for the ancillary services that accompany catering. This includes florists, photographers,
game rental companies, electricians (decorative lighting is on the increase), entertainers (musicians, clowns, mimes, portrait artists, and others) and more recently, moving pictures and T.V. taping. Their participation during the religious ceremony should be considered by the Rabbi and the Ritual Committee, and their role should be in writing so as to be communicated to the respective vendors well in advance.

A suitable rental fee to be paid to the temple must be established, and a procedure for collection must be maintained. In many of these areas it may be desirable to establish a panel from which the host family will be able to select, rather than allowing a free market. It will simplify collection of fees, and familiarization with procedures so that proper behavior and adherence to rules regarding set up and clean up will be the norm.

Insurance coverage is of vital importance. A conference between the Legal and the Insurance Committees should establish the parameters. A "Hold harmless clause" accompanied by certificates of co-insurance should be obtained from each vendor supplying a service on the premises of the Temple. These should be adequate for
the service which is being supplied, i.e. florists and photographers do not need Product Liability insurance which the caterer does need. The Temple should ascertain that the limits of protection are satisfactory, and that not only the family and guests are covered, but also that employees are provided with statutory coverages, and that property damage is covered as well. This too, is most easily administered if the number of possible vendors is limited.

In summary Catering may be said to be a necessary program which will, if administered properly, be of great value to the synagogue. It will provide a source of income and a source of satisfaction to members. It will require a great deal of time, thought, and effort by those responsible for the administrative function, but will prove itself worthy of the investment in the long run.

1. We have purposely avoided a lengthy discussion of methods used for computing the temple's commissions from the caterer, since there are so many possibilities, it could be a subject in and of itself for another paper.