

OPINION

What will it take for me to go back to synagogue?

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(JTA) — When I was very young, what motivated me to go to shul on Shabbat morning was the fire station two houses away from the synagogue.

My dad was the rabbi of the only congregation in Annapolis, Maryland, and shul attendance was a family affair. If I behaved during services, my big brother would take me to the fire station afterward, and sometimes the firemen let me sit at the wheel of the hook and ladder truck. That made my week.

In recent days I've been thinking a lot about my various experiences with shul attendance over the years. The sad truth is that though I am

fortunate enough to have received my second COVID vaccine more than a month ago, I haven't been back to shul, and I'm not sure why. But the weather is getting warmer and I'm running out of excuses.

It's ironic because these last few years I've really enjoyed shul – the services, the rabbis, the people, the singing. In my early years, not so much.

As kids, learning to read Hebrew and becoming familiar with the prayers, the goal at services was to be the fastest.

When I was about 10, I attended a family wedding in New York and stood in awe as I took in the sight of what seemed like hundreds of men in black hats and dark suits swaying fervently as they recited the afternoon Mincha prayer. I zipped through the silent Amidah and was waiting for the service to continue. A few minutes went by and then a few more minutes until it seemed everyone had finished.

I asked my brother what the holdup was, and he pointed to a very short older man, eyes closed, still in fervent prayer.

"That's Rav Aharon Kotler, the head of one of the biggest yeshivas in the world," he told me.

"What's taking him so long?" I asked. "Can't he read Hebrew?"

As I got older, I learned about the importance of kavanah, or intention, putting one's heart and mind into the words we were saying as we prayed. But during my teenage years, prayer for me was associated more with obligation than choice.

Starting when I was 11, I attended a yeshiva in Baltimore through high school and lived during the week at the home of my maternal grandparents. My grandfather, a European-born, Yiddish-speaking Talmudic scholar, had his own shul on the first floor of the large cottage house. I lived in the attic, and once I became a bar mitzvah, I was needed most mornings to help ensure a minyan of 10 men.

I'd know my presence was required because one of the shul-goers would ring a loud buzzer and hold it down for what seemed like minutes while I got up, less than enthusiastically, and dressed in a hurry. I attended out of a sense of duty, and I admit that if an 11th person showed up, I was tempted to go upstairs and back to bed.

The association of annoying alarms and shul attendance continued when I got to Yeshiva University. I soon learned that loud "minyan bells" were rung every weekday morning in the dorm to wake us up for services; attendance was mandatory. The first couple of weeks we would wake up with a jolt from those bells. But somehow, after that we didn't seem to hear them anymore.

One teenage bit of mischief came about in Annapolis on Rosh Hashanah when I was about 15. The shul was packed, and my friend Michael (whose father was the cantor) and I chose an arbitrary spot in the service and stood up from our front-row seats. There was a rustling and stirring behind us as, gradually, the entire congregation of several hundred rose, following our lead. As soon as everyone was up, we sat down, and they did the same. We did this a few times before my dad, seated facing us in his white robe on the bima, subtly signaled his displeasure

Over the years as an adult, with shul attendance no longer coercive, I have been blessed to have belonged to three synagogues (in the three states where we lived) that were true houses of prayer. Each in its own way was special, but they all had active and devoted members committed to Torah and led by learned, exemplary rabbis. And in each of the shuls, what I have enjoyed most in the service is when our joined voices blend in song, stirring a kind of transcendent feeling of collective prayer and community.

Those peak moments make the shul-going experience something to cherish.

Then came COVID. Houses of worship were closed, the virus was all around us, and we had no choice but to stay home. I missed the rhythm of walking to and from shul on Friday evening and Shabbat

morning, feeling part of the spirit of the kehillah (congregation), and often lingering after services to catch up with friends.

But I became accustomed to staying home, and that had its own pleasant pattern: sleeping later, praying at home, spending more time with my wife and, when the weather allowed, meeting up with friends – six feet apart – on a bench outside.

I know I'm not alone in my ambivalence about going back to shul now. I've talked to friends about it and they, too, seem a bit mystified about what keeps some of us home. We know that going back would be good for the congregation, and probably for us, even though the prospect of COVID-limited attendance, singing and socializing is less than appealing.

Are we just lazy or fearful of becoming sick? Or have we become dependent on the safety and security of keeping close to home?

What would get me back to shul? No, it's not the prospect of visiting a nearby fire station after services. It's the chance to ignite a spark of faith and commitment, and time to take the next step back on the long path toward normalcy.

So there I was, on Saturday, back in synagogue. Sitting alone, at least six feet away from others, and wearing a mask, felt isolating at first, like praying alone in a room despite the others around me. But gradually the mood lifted and the familiar comfort of the prayers – and the warm (if muted) greetings from fellow congregants – made me feel at home again. I could get used to this.