

Community  
Kol Nidrei 5771

Being on Sabbatical is a very Jewish experience! A great deal to enjoy, a great deal of worry!

On the one hand, it gave me the opportunity to relax, to reconnect with my family to a depth that has been difficult in the normal run of things. Also to read and study in a far more concentrated way and in greater quantity than I am usually able to from day to day.

On the other hand, it also gave me a whole lot more time to think, to evaluate where I am at as a Rabbi and where we are going as a Congregation. It turned out that this part of it was far more challenging and much less fun that I had anticipated!

I soon realized that although every year I have tried to take the process of *teshuva*, repentance seriously, talking about the process of *teshuva* and actually honestly confronting one's life and the choices that one has made, is far more difficult than it sounds.

In a way, it was a pretty scary exercise!

Listing the positives was relatively easy, as was giving myself credit for the places where I have grown and changed. But along with that came the much more painful process of facing up to my shortcomings - the areas in my life that are still incomplete, the actions that I have taken or not taken, the excuses I have made to myself and others to avoid taking responsibility for those actions or that inaction and more.

While this is somewhat depressing, even with the positives to offset the negatives, being honest with myself was and continues to be very rewarding and gets a little easier every day, especially if one can develop a sense of humor around it.

Part of what this whole process has taught me, is that whether I like it or not, whether it is healthy or not, I am unable to compartmentalize my life. While I have done a reasonable job of allowing my family to determine their own level of involvement here at Beth El, I do not have that choice.

What happens here on day to day, hour to hour and even on a minute to minute basis deeply affects my mental and physical being. While I briefly revel in the joy, I also carry the pain and scars of the hurt that I have caused, some of which I have been with me for a long time.

Now before I get a bunch of offers of help from all the mental health professionals sitting out there, this is nothing new to me. What reflecting upon it did, however, was give me

greater insight into my relationship with you and Beth El and put into perspective yours with both me and with this Congregation.

We call ourselves a *kehilah kedosha*, a holy or sacred community. But what does this mean?

In their recent book “Sacred Strategies - Transforming Synagogues from Functional to Visionary”, Isa Aron, Steven Cohen, Larry Hoffman and Ari Kelman describe the attributes of a Visionary Congregation, which they maintain is synonymous with a *kehilah kedosha*.

These are:

Sacred purpose:

Holistic ethos:

Participatory culture on all levels

Meaningful engagement;

Innovative disposition;

Reflective leadership and governance;

Larry Hoffman’s co-founder of Synagogue 2000, Ron Wolfson, in his “The Spirituality of Welcoming,” defines a *kehilah kedosha* more succinctly.

It is a congregation in which:

Relationships are paramount

Worship is engaging

Everyone is learning

Repair of the world is a moral imperative

Healing is offered

Transformation is embraced.

In very many ways their assessments are the same and while all will admit that there is probably not a single synagogue around that has succeeded in every area, there are some who have come remarkably close after years of hard work.

So where to begin?

During the past summer we received a resignation from a couple who had been members of Beth El for over twenty years. It was my fault! I had not visited her when she was in hospital and I failed to reach out to her thereafter.

“We haven’t needed anything from Beth El in all the time that we were members, and when we did we were let down” was the comment that accompanied their resignation.

I truly feel terrible about this and still carry the guilt with me day in and day out.

Rationally, I can justify why it happened. We found out that she was in hospital through the Chabad Rabbi who is the volunteer Jewish Chaplain at Fairfax hospital. She was discharged before I was able to get there.

I did call a number of times and left at least two messages. I never heard back from either spouse and only much later learned that she did not feel it was her responsibility to return my calls, but it was mine to continue to keep trying until I did reach her.

Over a few weeks of unsuccessful attempts to reach her, it faded off my radar and admittedly I stopped trying.

I bring this example for a couple of reasons. It is a very painful one for me, especially because, although I have tried very hard not to disappoint congregants, it sometimes happens.

When on Kol Nidrei I stand here and apologize, please know that I honestly mean those words, I am not just saying them for effect. It is very hard, as has happened recently, to hear of a congregant who is still upset about something that happened eight years ago, that is within the first few months of my arrival here, something by the way that I was absolutely unaware of, and yet that grudge is being held against both me personally and Beth El.

Would it not have made good sense to speak to me?

There is a deeper dimension here that often goes unmentioned.

It is summarized in the statement "We never needed anything from Beth El and when we did we were let down."

To be quite honest, I did not know the couple that resigned. I remember meeting her at a shiva service one evening and perhaps one other time since 2002 but I am not sure that I would recognize either of them. Other than names in our roster, I had no relationship with them.

Now, thank God, that doesn't apply to the vast majority of the congregation. We have connected through life cycle events, both joyous and sad, we have studied and learned together, we have eaten Shabbat dinners and celebrated festive occasions here at Beth El and in some of your homes.

We have met at neighborhood coffees or pot-luck dinners and similar events. I know a lot of names and many more faces, but there are still some of you whom I do not know, and who do not know me. I would very much like to change that.

Relationships are obviously a two way street and while I will continue to try to reach out to you, I invite you to do the same to me. One of the saddest comments that I hear is "If

only you had known...before she got ill, or while he was alive..." Please help me to remedy that in as far as it is possible.

If relationships are of paramount importance, as Ron Wolfson's vast experience has proven, then it is certainly worth our time and effort to create an atmosphere here at Beth El that is conducive to the forming of relationships, not only with the clergy but indeed with other members of the congregation as well.

Healthy relationships are founded on mutuality. It takes an effort from both parties - if we want this to happen, it has to be a priority for both of us.

Forging relationships with each other is only one aspect of relationship.

I am not Beth El nor is Cantor Steinberg, nor is our President, Marsha Kaufman, or any other individual for that matter. We are merely part of it, just as each and everyone of you is. If we are to make of Beth El a kehilah kedosha, if we are to be a participatory culture which espouses as our ideal meaningful engagement, it is going to take a joint effort!

You are an incredibly talented group of people. Each of you has something unique and important to share with this congregation. Dues and financial contributions are obviously vital but your individual talent and expertise are as important.

All too often I learn too late about gifted individuals who could have made a significant contribution to lives of members of our congregation, but the possibility that they could do something here never occurred to them.

All too many underrate their abilities or, because they are never directly asked, think that they are not needed. Nothing could be further from the truth!

I know that some have offered and that we been slow in getting back to you, please don't give up on us even as frustrating and aggravating as it might be. With you help and feedback we can continually improve and ensure that no offer goes unanswered.

But it goes beyond this.

A participatory culture and meaningful engagement rests as well on three further criteria according to Ron Wolfson:

Engaging Worship  
Everyone is learning and  
Repair of the world is a moral imperative.

These too are the qualities of a Visionary congregation.

If we are to be a visionary congregation we must work to ensure that each of these are done in concert with the others - ideally a holistic approach to *tefilah*, *limud*, *tikkun olam* and *gimilut chasidim*, worship, learning, social action, caring and healing.

We have began to take small steps in this direction in our religious school, but in reality each of these has been a disparate activity that only very occasionally will intersect with any of the others.

There is so much potential here. So much opportunity for learning, doing, creating relationships with each other, with the wider community and yes, even with God!

Integrating everything we do here at Beth EI under one overarching vision would allow us to focus our energy more specifically. It would certainly not mean that everyone had to do the same thing!

Instead, each of our affiliate organizations like Women of Reform Judaism and Brotherhood, the Social Seniors, Renaissance group and the Young Professions would work in concert and coordinate their activities with each other, as well as with the Social Action Committee, the Religious School and Adult Education Committee. Our vision would guide our programming, inform how we structure our budget and determine where we channel our energies.

This takes very careful planning and perhaps a willingness to relinquish some proprietary interests for the sake of the whole, but the rewards of doing so far out weigh any minor loss of control that each of these entities may have to endure.

It would strengthen Beth EI. It would encourage more of you to engage and thereby provide more of "the inspirational experiences that bring genuine meaning to our lives" . That is how Sacred Strategies so eloquently describes meaningful engagement, one of the prerequisites of a *kehilah kedosha*.

If we choose to proceed, we will need to work on an overarching vision for Beth EI, the sacred purpose which will inform and shape what we do and how we will do it. That is a big "we".

It is not sufficient for the Executive Committee, or the Board or some small select committee to determine this vision. Any or all of them can help coordinate the effort - but the vision itself must come from and through you.

What do you want your Beth EI to look like?

What would be needed to transform this building into sacred space for you?

What would it take to get you to become more engaged and want to spend any or more of you valuable time building relationships here?

What are the questions, the deep and sometimes troubling questions, that you would like to explore within Judaism?

Can three thousand years of human experience and understanding help you gain insight and wisdom?

Have you wondered about your relationship with God? Do you have one? Do you want one?

What avenues can be opened and made available to you to fulfill that innate desire to help others, to be of service to the community, to have a sense of real purpose in your life?

Some of us are fortunate to have found some of the answers but very few will have them all and there is always, always room to grow and learn as we travel further along life's path.

This is invitation. It is an invitation to you to explore your own spiritual vision. But even as you do so, I invite you to help us shape a vision of what this congregation can become.

Together we can move it towards becoming a true *kehilah kedosha* - a sacred congregation imbued with sacred purpose, moving each and everyone of us toward an understanding of the holy dimension in our lives.

Rabbi Tarpon in the Pirke Avot reminds us: The day is short, the task is great....”  
But I know we will find that the rewards are greater still.

Amen

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