

Coming Home: Rosh Hashanah I 5783

The Chasidic master, the Ba'al Shem Tov, tells the story of the beloved son of a king and queen who left his parents' empire to find glory and adventure in the outside world. Returning to the castle after many long years, the prince found the guards didn't recognize him, so much he had changed. He couldn't remember the secret password and his newly deepened voice was no longer familiar. Overcome with despair, he began to weep. From inside the palace, the king and queen heard the wails of their son and recognized them immediately for who can ever forget the sound of their own child crying? They embraced him with love, welcoming him home.

How painful it is not to be recognized! This year, many of us come back to shul feeling a bit like the prince, having wandered away over the last few years from our spiritual home here at TIC. First there was the pandemic, of course, but there have been so many other things too - from falling out of the habit to adopting new routines, missing old friends who no longer come, finding it hard to figure out our place now that children have grown, being away so long that it feels hard to get back. Sometimes it seems as if the shul has changed so much, filled with new faces we don't know, that we no longer quite recognize the place. Other times it feels like we're the ones not recognized which hurts even more. Wherever you have gone, however long it's been, whatever brings you back – we welcome you home this High Holiday season! How very good it is to be together.

On Rosh Hashanah, the blasts of the Shofar are meant to echo the cries of the human spirit – reminding God, our Divine Parent, that no matter how far we have strayed – still, it is us on the inside! The powerful words of the *machzor*, the stirring music of the *chazzan*, the fact of another year gone by; the presence of those whom we sit amongst – and perhaps the absence of those no longer here, the deep pull of tradition, the gift of a few quiet moments to sit and reflect – all of these help orient us towards

our core, our center, the place that we feel most nourished, thriving, and whole. *Teshuvah*, the sacred return that is the primary goal of this season, is all about coming back to our best selves, to the people we most wish to be in this world. *Teshuvah* is about finding our way home.

My colleague, Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, describes *teshuvah* a little bit differently, explaining that we return this season not necessarily to something that ever once was but rather to something precious and hopefully new. She writes: “We return to who we have always been, and are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that have lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone.”¹ For Uhrbach, *teshuvah* is not about *going back* to our best selves but rather about *going forward* to them, imagining that what comes next has the potential to be even better than the very best of what has come before. It is this bright sense of optimism that carries us into the new year!

Coming home to who we have always been while re-inventing ourselves into something new. It is not surprising that Uhrbach’s words were inspired by Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro, Rabbi in the Warsaw Ghetto, who served his community during one of the most intense periods of trauma and upheaval ever known in the course of human history. I’m not sure that it’s ever really possible to return exactly to where one once was, but certainly Shapiro couldn’t have imagined or wished for that; to lift his community he rather painted a vision of a different kind of future, albeit one with roots in the most important and meaningful parts of the past. Today we, too, stand at an inflection point as a Jewish community, not one which threatens our physical safety, thank God, but one which causes us to confront radical new realities which make going back to what was unwise if not impossible. We, too,

¹ Uhrbach, Rabbi Jan. “Teshuva – A Creative Process,” in Rosh Hashanah Readings edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, 2006.

must return to growth and possibility that have not yet flourished within us. We, too, need to find a new way back home.

For decades, the power of synagogues lay in offering macro-community, a central meeting place to study, pray, celebrate, and mourn with fellow Jews. And macro-community was the norm in other realms too: people joined bowling leagues and Knights of Columbus chapters and Hadassah groups, participating in all kinds of different civic and professional associations as a way of identifying, connecting, and belonging. Over the last many years, patterns of affiliation have changed dramatically, with younger generations often feeling less inclined to sign-up and pay simply to be part of a large organization and instead opting for micro-communities – smaller, more intimate gatherings where individuals, perhaps, share specific goals or interests and where joint experience can be more easily customizable to fit individual needs and preferences. Long before any of us had even heard of Covid, we were seeing this trend start to create significant change in the Jewish world, forcing us to re-think our worship, our engagement strategies, our membership models, our fund-raising. We were just starting to imagine this work when Covid hit. Then, suddenly, rather than either macro or micro communities there was no community at all with each of us studying, praying, celebrating, and mourning alone. I do not need to tell any of us how utterly disruptive and disorienting the pandemic has been. Since 2020 many of us have come to feel disconnected from people and places we once loved, struggling with a lingering sense of loneliness and isolation. The pandemic has inspired us to ask big questions and reconsider some of our most fundamental truths – where we live, how we work, what gives our days purpose – and has left us with a nagging sense of languishing or not necessarily living our best lives. Our world seems to be moving in the wrong direction with many of us feeling like our most deeply held values are in jeopardy and the future of our democracy, our homeland, and our planet unsure. And

then there are our children and the precarious state of their mental health, as they struggle with all of these same weighty issues as less experienced and fully formed human beings.

Given this existential state of being, we might imagine that religion today would be having a comeback, for indeed faith-based institutions stand uniquely poised to address the deep yearning for belonging, meaning, and hope that we so desperately seek these days. And yet, organized religion is on the decline, with most churches and synagogues experiencing a marked decrease in membership, giving, and engagement over the last many years. I can't believe that this falling away is about the *substance* of Judaism – indeed, our tradition is overwhelmingly about creating community, leading lives of goodness and purpose, and bringing light to darkness – precisely those things that so many of us crave in these difficult times. Rather, I would like to suggest that we haven't yet found the way to deploy all that is most powerful about Judaism, offering it in ways that are so nourishing and compelling, dynamic and relevant that individuals feel themselves magnetically drawn towards its wisdom and beauty. Thinking together about how to do that here at TIC will be the focus of a year-long strategic planning process we've just begun, working on a series of priority areas such as ensuring that our members feel seen and involved, that we are inspiring the next generation of Jews, and that we are running our organization in a responsible way that plans for a strong future. As we reinvent ourselves into something new, however, we also need to be anchored by a strong sense of home – a core vision that animates our strategy. I cannot think of a better time to explore this than Rosh Hashanah, a day that is about return to our sacred center.

Often when I tell the story of my journey into the rabbinate, Camp Ramah in New England has the starring role, but before there was camp there was Temple Emunah in Lexington. My family started attending services at our synagogue right around the time of my bat mitzvah, a time that frankly had not

been all that great for me as a shy, studious middle-school girl dealing with all the normal stuff that often makes that age so hard. At shul, somehow, I felt embraced and accepted just exactly the way that I was. It made me want to spend as much time there as humanly possible.

The reason that people join synagogues, and for sure the reason that they stay (or don't) in them, is in order to experience a deep sense of connection and belonging - to feel seen and heard, valued and known – by their clergy, staff, and fellow congregants. We all want to be recognized, and this is a much harder thing than it sounds! My friend and colleague, Rabbi Mike Uram, describes one of the ways in which synagogues, despite best intentions, can inadvertently miss the mark when he talks about the difference between Yom Kippur and a Pesach seder. Yom Kippur is all about community on a macro level: we get in through tickets and membership fees, we join because the synagogue is in our neighborhood or our friends go there or we've heard the religious school is good. We show up and (hopefully!) feel moved and inspired, delight in seeing dear friends and in feeling part of something greater than ourselves, but it doesn't really connect us in deep and meaningful ways to other people. There is no personal invitation to attend. There is no intimate conversation over food and wine. We are largely passive recipients of an experience rather than active co-creators with the opportunity to contribute, customize, and bring our full selves. Yom Kippur services, for sure, have their place but too often they become the default model for all synagogue programming - we throw out an idea, expect folks to come, and judge our success either by how many people showed up or by how "good" the event was. We put the institution at the core, rather than the individual.

Pesach seders, on the other hand, are all about micro community and I don't just mean that in the sense of being a smaller group of people although certainly helping members at a large synagogue such as ours find a sub-group with which to connect is also an important way to build belonging. More than

that, however, seders are about individuals (or really groups of individuals) who come together to share an experience, connect with others, ask questions, tell stories, and make Jewish memories. The seder is planned with the specific needs of those attending in mind and everyone is seen as equally valuable and welcome; there are no “insiders” and “outsiders” at a seder and everyone plays an important role down to the youngest child who asks the Four Questions. We would never judge a seder by how many people were there or the caliber of the singing or the sophistication of the food being served. Seders are centered on people and we know they’ve been great because of the vibrancy of the conversation and the intensity of the bonding.

Perhaps it’s no surprise then that attending a Pesach seder consistently ranks as the most observed ritual by both affiliated and secular Jews, while synagogue attendance is on the decline. Shuls offer so much in the way of services, programming, education, and more – much of it very good! – but it isn’t always effective at reaching new people and doesn’t necessarily offer the depth of relationship and experience that many of us crave. One of the shifts that we’ve already started to make at TIC is to put people and relationships first: by planning immersive experiences like the Teen Civil Rights and Morocco trips which organically build a powerful sense of community, by getting out of the building and meeting people in places and around activities where they naturally congregate whether it’s CrossFit or ice-cream meet-ups or a local bar, by offering things like our “On Demand” adult education program that let members customize learning, through developing age-based cohorts like Sr. Connect, Empty Nesters, Parents with Young Children, and more that offer smaller, more natural ways to foster connection. Most importantly, we’re prioritizing not only programming but also one-on-one active outreach: phone-calls, coffee conversations, walks, Shabbat dinners and more – for that is the way to truly deepen relationships and create the kind of intimate, rich, meaningful web of belonging where, in a paraphrase

of Dean James McLeod from Washington University, “we know every Jew by name and by story.”

Relationships, not programs, are the way to build a community.

But it’s not enough! One-on-one outreach and engagement is far more powerful than programming but it’s far more time-consuming, too, which means that some of our other structures and expectations may need to shift if this is indeed where we want to put our collective energy. And it can’t just be the staff and clergy, for relationships with a shul are about one’s entire experience of a place and all the people we encounter there. Great relational work can be so easily undone when someone shows up at Kiddush with nowhere to sit or hears the Jewish choices they’ve made invalidated or doesn’t come to shul in a while and feels that no one noticed. Relational work can be destroyed in an instant when a person is snubbed or judged or made to feel lesser and unwelcome in any of a million different small ways which means that we need to do much better here, too, building a culture of radical warmth and kindness. I dream of Temple Israel Center as a place of refuge for all, no matter our story or circumstances, a place where we can appreciate and take advantage of the exceptional content for which our synagogue has always been known because we feel so deeply seen and heard, valued and known. Temple Israel Center should feel like home and participating in our community like attending the warmest, sweetest, most dynamic Pesach seder.

“We return to who we have always been, and are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that have lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone.” There is so much that is already extraordinary about our congregation whether it’s our deep commitment to learning for individuals of all ages, our vibrant Shabbat and holiday community, our emphasis on inclusion, or our reputation in Westchester and indeed the larger Jewish world as a place of excellence. One had only to attend last week’s Back to Shul

celebration to witness the vibrancy, energy, inter-generational spirit, and yes – growth! - of our synagogue with Shorashim having increased by a net of over 20 students this year and our community welcoming many new members. There is so much about which we should feel proud! As we begin this new year may we go forward to our even better selves, putting people and relationships at the core.

Today we are like the prince who, after a long period of wandering, have come home.

Wishing you and your families a very sweet and meaningful new year! Shana Tova.

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