

Rabbi's Sermon
Rosh Hashanah 2009 / Day 1
By Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank

I want to start with a story about why I became a congregational rabbi.

Of course, it starts with heartache. My girlfriend Michelle and I broke up. As part of the breakup, she got Harvard Hillel. Since she was a new graduate student, and I had just finished my B.A., it made sense for me to give up going to Hillel. The last kick out the door of the place where I had worshipped throughout college. I had not always felt connected to the organization, but it had given me a place to worship, learn, and meet potential girlfriends, including Michelle. Time to find a new place to go.

I decided to check out another synagogue in town. I had heard of it, but I did not know anyone who had ever been there. I made the walk for the first time on what must have been the second day of Passover. When I walked in, I found only two other people in the synagogue: A man named Seth and his pre-school aged daughter. Seth was reciting the haftorah while his daughter sat on his lap. He apologized that there was no else there. In a warm voice, he suggested that I come back another time, when there would be more people. I was welcome anytime.

I did come back, again and again, for approximately the next six years. Later, I would find that welcoming attitude shown by Seth was embedded in culture of the community. The couple that had kept the synagogue open even during its worst years had set this expectation. They would later become something like a third set of grandparents to me.

Interestingly, the shul was not lead by a rabbi, but rather a philosophy professor. He had an incredible ability to identify topics in the Jewish tradition that related to our daily lives. The synagogue attracted many people who had not been raised in traditional Jewish households that wanted to reconnect with their heritage.

Truth be told, my twenties were not the best years for me. I floundered in some ways trying to figure out who I was. I was even more high-strung that I am now, if you can believe that. My greatest support was my wife (sitting over there). But I also had the synagogue. It gave me a chance to feel needed and help in the lives of others. It gave me a place to examine my beliefs while being supported by close friends. We were all trying to work together to find meaning in our lives, and maybe get a little closer to God. Through the community, I gained a whole set of new friends whom I deeply treasured. The synagogue became a second home for me.

Why did I become a congregational rabbi? Because I wanted to help others find the same sense of community I experienced. Help them find their own home.

I want to stress something about the synagogue about which I have been talking. The couple I had mentioned before had kept the shul open by their skin of their teeth, even after most of the Jews in Somerville, MA had moved to the suburbs. They waited for the younger generation to walk back in the doors. The funny thing is they eventually did.

The synagogue was making a strong comeback.

Yes, I said a comeback. I think that when many of us talk about synagogue life, we can only imagine it going in one direction: down. As if the doors in a synagogue can

only serve as exits, not entrances. People leave, new people do not come in and no one comes back. The synagogue is a dying institution, a museum whose doors are already halfway closed. Why invest in synagogue life? No one wants to invest in a failing institution.

You will not be surprised that I do not buy into this idea. I have staked my family's future on it. I have not done this out of false idealism. Rather, I have based it on the fact that I have seen that a synagogue can come back to life, even after it had been written off as dead.

Why focus on the synagogue? Organizations like the federation, AIPAC, country clubs, and homes for the aged provide crucial services to Jewish people. Some were formed at times when Jews had limited access to parts of the greater society. These institutions have continually strived to make it possible for American Jews to thrive in America. Why focus on the synagogue in particular? Can't we find connection by affiliating with these institutions instead?

Only partially. **Synagogues are the best structures for creating a particular type of community: spiritual community.** In my mind, a spiritual community is a community created to give people the opportunity to work with others to satisfy spiritual needs. Let me explain what I mean. People not only have physical and emotional needs. They also have the need for spirituality, however you define it. Now, when I say "spirituality" I am not necessarily talking about something mystical or deep. Though not always at the forefront of our minds, we all try to find meaning in our lives. What does it

mean to be a good person? Why do bad things happen? Is there more to this world than what we see on TV and at the movies? Do we have a purpose?

This search for meaning usually is not a simple process. **A spiritual community gives us support and provides us with some type of context for exploring.** It also affirms our times of doubt and understands that there are times when the answers to our questions feel incredibly distant. It also gives us an opportunity to learn from and teach others.

At the same time, a spiritual community operates in way that affirms the basic worth of all who join. We have the concept in the Jewish tradition that all people are created in the image of God. Every person has worth. A spiritual community upholds this principle in the ways it functions. For example, the community needs to be welcoming to all people who enter its doors. I am not suggesting that everyone in our synagogue will be holding hands and singing kum-ba-yah all the time, but we have to continually feel that all of us are urgently needed. Not for numbers, not for money, but for the fact that all of us are needed for our spiritual community to reach its true potential.

In a community like this, members approach each other with an attitude of caring. The members know what is happening in the lives of others, not from gossip, but through the fact that the community provides a space for people to share both their triumphs and concerns. This attitude crosses generational boundaries. My close friends at the Somerville, MA synagogue were not just people my age. They were professionals in their forties, artists in their fifties, and retirees in their eighties.

I firmly believe that the foundation of any congregation is not the physical location where its religious services are held. Rather, its heart is made up of the connections formed between members. The connections are created when the members pray together and eat together. When they celebrate together and when they mourn together. Often sharing a laugh is the key to building connections.

Simply put, we at Tifereth are in a period of revitalization. Though not in a dire situation, this is the time for our comeback. Fortunately, we are building on a solid foundation created by past generations. We are launching a number of new and improved programs, including a variety of educational and worship opportunities. We are striving to provide more and better programming for young families. We plan to do more outreach to interfaith families with open arms. Even a new website was launched yesterday. The cantor and I take to heart our responsibility as Jewish clergy to continually lend support to seniors and other community members who are facing illness, bereavement, and other life challenges. Our cell phones are on, and our office doors are open.

We ask you to join in this effort. Sign up for a class. Try a service again. Serve on a committee. Welcome new members over for a meal.

All of us can work together to help our community continue to develop as a strong spiritual community. As referred to on the new banner outside, Tifereth is our home, our spiritual home.

Friends, as we start this new year, I say to you, **welcome home.**