

The Creation Of Torat El as a Kehillah Kedosha

Last night we spoke about honoring our past histories while at the same time writing our new stories. This morning, I would like us to take some time to think about what story we would actually like to write. What is the story of Congregation Torat El that we are creating as we begin this New Year together?

This holiday has many different names in our tradition. It is called *Yom Teruah* (the day of sounding the shofar), *Yom Ha Din* (the day of judgment), and *Yom Hazikaron* (the day of remembrance). Each of these names is connected to a theme of the holiday that is relatively clear. But perhaps the most ambiguous name for the day is the one that we use most frequently: ***Rosh Hashanah***.

The Mishnah discusses four different types of new years, and calls the first Day of Tishrei, "*Rosh Hashanah La shanim*", "The New Year of Years." In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer explained that Rosh Hashanah is the time when we celebrate the creation of the world (RH 8a, Genesis Rabbah 22:4). Another midrash posits that the creation of the world actually begin in the month we just concluded, Elul, but the first human being, Adam, was born on this day. ***Hayom Harat Olam***, we say repeatedly throughout the Mussaf service—***Today is the Birthday of the world***.

Essentially, Rosh Hashanah is about birth and creation. How appropriate it is that we gather together this morning, celebrating the birth of the world and the birth of the Torat El community. As we individually look at what this next year may hold, we communally can look forward to what type of new congregation we might create together. And what are we creating? We are creating kehillah kedosha, holy community.

In a very important book entitled: "*This House We Build*" *Lessons for Healthy Synagogues and the People Who Dwell There*, we are reminded that:

Judaism presumes community. Consider the minyan. We cannot begin our prayer service until the requisite number of Jewish people arrive and take their places as worshipers...Holiness thus involves community. We can be holy through solitary acts as well, of course, but we are strengthened when we pray and practice with others. As b'nai mitzvah, we enter into Jewish covenant in the presence of the community of our people. We are married as Jewish in the context of

our community. When we are sick, or hurt, or dying, or grieving, we are held by others; our pain is absorbed and dissipated through communal prayers and rituals that hold us steady. We celebrate the passing of seasons and our days within the extended community of the Jewish people. As Jews our experiences of God are bound up with our experiences of being with one another in prayer and study and the living out of our faith.

At their best, synagogues are villages where we can come to be reminded of God's role in our lives and in the world around us. They are places where we experience holy community, rooted in our Jewish values, and strive to bring God's presence into our lives and into our world.

Creating this type of *kehillah kedosha*, this type of holy, relevant, and meaningful community through the work of a synagogue has always been incredibly demanding. But it is obvious that this task is more challenging now than ever.

My friend and teacher Rabbi Hayim Herring notes that the 21st century brings a unique set of challenges to a synagogue looking to create holy community. He identifies 4 A's that define our contemporary culture noting that: **Anyone** can get **Anything** at **Anytime** and **Anywhere**. Herring suggests that while creating *kehillah kedosha* in this culture is extremely difficult, this type of environment does raise: "*profound issues of meaning, making existential questions about life more insistent*" ("Synagogue Renewal in an Age of Extreme Choice: Anything, Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere," in Heller, *Synagogues In A Time of Change*, 118).

Similarly, JTS Chancellor Arnie Eisen has reflected that although individualism is pervasive in American society:

"The sense of collective obligation is alive among many American Jews, [and its bonds are] formed with people one gets to know week by week, the individuals one can count on to help out in times of trouble and whose faces one wants to see sharing moments of rejoicing...[Community] can purvey the mysterious Jewish sense of connection and obligation to people one has never met, to generations past and future, a sense that wells up from feelings of gratitude and obligation to those close at hand." (*Rebuilding Jewish Communities*, Sh'ma).

As members of the burgeoning Torat El community we have the exciting opportunity to nurture, create, and sustain something incredible- a community that seeks to make Judaism a meaningful, relevant, and essential part of people's everyday lives.

So where do we start? Rabbi Herring raises a really fascinating concept called the "third place." Quoting Urban Sociological literature, Herring explains that we have three places in our lives:

The first place is home, and the second place is work. Then there are venues called the third place... The third place is the informal public space between home and work that connects people to each other, allows them to recharge, pause, and then reengage the world. They are places in which participants feel a strong, positive, emotional ties because they create rewarding, meaningful social experiences and a warm community environment...

Herring Continues:

A synagogue that re-envisioned itself as a third place might have a vision statement that reads:

Our synagogue aspires to become a place of relevance, where people will want to experience the joy of community and be inspired by enduring values. Between a hectic home life and a pressured work environment, our synagogue will be the Jewish place where people renew their minds and spirits and create rewarding Jewish connections. (125)

Again, there is no doubt that the 21st century is fraught with challenges to creating holy community, but it clearly also a time filled with tremendous opportunity.

I have my own sense of what such a *kehillah kedosha*, a holy community might look like that I would like to share with you. First and foremost this community is rooted in my understanding of Jewish "values." And before we can understand our vision, and get to our mission as Congregation Torat El, we must discover our common Jewish values. We must discover those things that we stand for, so that we can understand who we are, who we might wish to become, and how we might get there. Mine is just one voice in a sea of many that I offer as we embark on this incredibly exciting, and spiritual act of creation.

I would like to invite you to imagine with me for a moment. The year is 2015 and we are all gathered together again to celebrate Rosh Hashanah 5776. At its core Congregation Torat El of 2015 has held on to the many strengths and traditions that were established over the years that Congregation Beth Torah and Congregation Beth El flourished. But this new entity, the 5-year old community called Congregation Torat El, is something stronger than ever, thriving, growing, and transforming lives.

Torah: Torat El of 2015 is a community rooted in Torah in all senses of the word. We understand that everything that we do and everything that we are in every moment of our lives is rooted in Torah. Our members are dedicated to life-long learning. Everyone in this community is a learner, everyone is a teacher, and everyone understands that our commitment to Torah has ramifications on the ways we behave in this world.

Tzedakah & Tikkun Olam: The members of Torat El of 2015 are actively engaged in the work of increasing justice and healing the world. Both within our community, and in the greater community, country and world around us, our congregation is guided by the notion that we have a responsibility to acts as God's partners in this world, continually seeking to repair the brokenness that surrounds us.

B'tzelem Elohim: In 2015, Torat El's membership exemplifies one of our most important and central beliefs: that all human beings are created in God's image. We continually strive to treat our members, and ourselves, with the respect that comes along with the understanding that every one of us is indeed holy. Our community values and respects all of God's creations, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. And we are egalitarian congregation that creates equal space for men and women in all areas of Jewish practice.

Am Yisrael: Torat El 2015 embraces our identity as "**Yisrael**," as a people who literally "wrestle" with God in order to discover what role God plays in our lives and in our world. Our community encourages its members to ask the types of questions necessary to develop personal relationships with God. We value our *berit*, our collective and individual covenant with God that dates back thousands of years and reminds of our unique relationship with God and with one another. And we celebrate *Klal Yisrael*, the understanding that as Jews we are part of a diverse people with a tremendous range of beliefs, practices, and worldviews, and with the potential to work together with a shared sense of purpose and peoplehood.

Tefilah: Prayer, both for individuals and as a community, is an essential part of Torat El in 2015. Our clergy and our members continually work to make prayer relevant, meaningful, accessible, and inspirational, both at home and in the synagogue.

Mitzvot: Torat El of 2015 prioritizes the integration of Jewish law, practice, and custom into the daily lives of its members. While respecting each individual's "Jewish Journey," collectively this congregation works to nurture its members and foster a supportive step-by-step approach to Jewish practice. The community understands the importance of *simcha shel mitzvah*, the joy of performing mitzvot, and continually works to make Jewish practice both meaningful and joyful in the lives of its members.

Gemilut Chasadim: In 2015 Torat El is a caring community that looks out for its members in good times and bad. Both friends and strangers are visited in the hospital, brought food in times of need, and are given a space to mourn, to celebrate, and to share the joys and sorrows of daily life.

Shemirat Halashon: Torat El in 2015 prioritizes "the guarding of our tongues," as a place where gossip, rumors, careless, and harmful speech simply have no place. We walk in *Darchei Shalom*, the paths of peace, continually attempting to ensure that our members are treating one another with respect and pursuing peace in all of our interactions with one another. We understand the connection between shalom and *shlemut*, wholeness, for no community cannot be whole unless it is filled with peace.

Hachnasat Orchim: Torat El 2015 recognizes the critical importance of being a welcoming community and is filled with members who, like our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, rush to greet and welcome others into our proverbial tent. Our "regulars" go out of their way to make guests, newcomers, and infrequent visitors feel comfortable. Families invite one another over for Shabbat and holiday meals, and go out of their way to include newcomers. Barriers to entry are low and the community values inclusivity and diversity on all levels.

Keruv: In 2015 Torat El reaches out to the unaffiliated, disenfranchised, and unconnected Jews of our community in the hopes of sharing the wisdom, joy, and meaning of Jewish daily living. Our community is willing to think outside of the box and go, literally, where people are, in order to help connect them with the Jewish community. Our congregation opens our doors to the unaffiliated and invites them in, without judgment and without any immediate expectations.

Medinat Yisrael: Torat El 2015 recognizes the centrality that the state of Israel plays in the lives and the history of the Jewish people. We encourage a love and support of Israel, but are not afraid to talk about the challenges of the modern state in a healthy, respectful and constructive manner. We are committed to supporting a pluralistic Israeli society where Jews of all affiliations can express Judaism freely and comfortably. Members of Torat El are educated about Israeli life, society, and politics. We create opportunities for all of our members to visit Israel and we are outspoken advocates of peace among Israel and her neighbors.

This is where I imagine us to be in 2015. Some or all of my descriptions of this "Torat El 2015" may remind you of the shul of your childhood, or of Beth Torah or Beth El of the past. And I hope many of you feel that the picture I drew resembles or represents parts of our congregation's current reality. But there are decades of history behind the unification of our two congregations, and while we are one in name and in structure, we still have many questions to answer and much work to be done before we become one in earnest, before we no longer feel like a piecing together of two communities, but one strong and unified whole.

I'm sure some of you may ask, "Why 2015? Why not 2011, or even 2010?" I wanted to draw a picture of Torat El 5 years from now because research on transition and change within synagogues and similar institutions shows that any major change takes 3-5 years to take hold. As much as we many want things to settle quickly, this type of change cannot, and will not, happen overnight. But 3-5 years is a short period of time in the long combined histories of our congregations, and the work we are engaged in now is for the future of our unified congregation, a future for us, for our children, and for future generations. And with your commitment to the place that Torat El can become, and your **active** participation in the process, we can do amazing things.

I know that Torat El of 2010 has all the ingredients necessary to become a model congregation and a leader of the local and national Jewish communities. I have had incredibly useful and inspirational conversations with many of you over the past month, and it is my hope that by next Rosh Hashanah **ALL** of you will have added your voices to our Torat El Story as we work together to celebrate our past accomplishments and create the vibrant, dynamic, and holy community that will be Congregation Torat El 2015 and beyond.

I leave you with the following story as told to me by Rabbi David Widzer:

The story is told that: In a mountain village in Europe many years ago, there was a nobleman who was concerned about the legacy he would leave to the people of his town. He spent a great deal of time contemplating his dilemma and, at last, decided to build the community a synagogue. He determined that no one would see the plans for the building until it was completed. He spent many hours and a great sum of money working with contractors and builders to create the perfect structure.

At long last, the construction was finished. The townspeople were excited and curious about what they would find upon entering their new synagogue. Early one morning, they came into the building for the first time and marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. There were rooms of every shape and size, suitable for worship services, classes, meetings, parties, gatherings, and every other conceivable function. And no one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world!

Then, noticing a seemingly obvious flaw in the design, one of the townspeople asked, "Where are the lamps? What will provide the light?" Everyone looked around and, behold, nowhere in the entire building was a light or a lamp. The proud nobleman pointed out brackets that were strategically placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. When we are all here together, our synagogue will be illumined. But when you are not here, the lamp will remind you that some part of our building will be dark. I have built for you the structure, but YOU must bring the light. You must share YOUR light with one another so we can all be a community together."

And so it is with us- we are building a community but we can only do so if everyone is willing to join us and bring your unique light into our midst. By sharing your gifts, talents, thoughts, values, beliefs, and vision with our community we will surely be able to create something amazing. We will surely be able to create a *Kehillah Kedosha* together, a holy community, a village in which God's presence is easy to discern and in which the Torah of "Torat El" shines brightly forth for many generations to come. *Ken yehi Ratzon*- So may it be God's will and so may it be ours.