

TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

There is a story told of a man who found himself wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him. His heart filled with joy. "Now I shall certainly find out which is the right way," he thought to himself. When they neared one another, he asked the man, "Can you tell me which is the right way out of the forest? I have been wandering around lost for several days?!"

The man replied: "I do not know the way out either. And I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been taking for it will lead you astray. Let us, instead, look for a new way out together. (Adapted from, Agnon, Days of Awe, 22)."

The message of this story is simple, and critically important. No one can go through life alone. People need to be in relationship with other people to help navigate the forest that is our daily life. And religious communities are no exception.

This past spring I read an incredibly insightful book about the crises and opportunities facing the organized Jewish community today. Written by Dr. Ron Wolfson -- an incredible teacher who we were honored to have here as

a speaker a few years ago -- the book is entitled *Relational Judaism*, and its premise is that **the key** to revitalizing the American Jewish community is building communities that center on relationships.

Dr. Wolfson points out that the American Jewish community is currently experiencing a number of significant challenges. Institutional Judaism is on the decline, we are experiencing lower birth rates than in years past, and the "young adult" stage of life keeps getting longer. People are choosing to get married and start families later in life. We are engaging with the challenges and opportunities of multi-faith families, and we are seeing an exodus of an aging baby boomer population from synagogue life. In addition, we have the challenge of the Millennials, those born between 1980 and the early 2000's, who are fiercely independent and uninterested in labels or denominations. And these are not just problems for the Jewish community.

As Wolfson explains:

This assertion of individualism has impacted all religious communities. The fastest growing segment in North American religion is the "Nones." The "Nones" report they have no religious preference, they belong to no spiritual community, and they feel no particular loyalty to a political party or ideology. In a world of unlimited choice, they are choosing the sidelines. Despite all the attempts of engagement, despite all the aggressive work of evangelicals and recruiters of all stripes, more and more people, both young and old, are opting out.

We can no longer count on a steady influx of young Jews with young children in tow entering synagogues and JCC's. If they come at all,

they arrive in their late thirties and early forties, necessarily busy with two careers to make ends meet, with little or no time to volunteer in a volunteer-driven system. Even when the young become empty nesters, the institutions barely know what to do with them...the question of how to reach young Jewish adults between the ages of twenty-one and forty-something rages.... [and] compounding the challenge exponentially is the current economic climate. (Wolfson, Relational Judaism, 14-15)

In a word- Oy!

Fortunately, all is not lost. After reading this book and thinking about it over the past few months I have come to really buy in to Wolfson's message. The Jewish community, and synagogues in particular, must get better at re-discovering the power of relationships.

Dr. Wolfson sums it up succinctly:

It's not about programs. It's not about marketing, It's not about branding, labels, logos, clever titles, websites, or Smartphone apps. It's not even about institutions. It's about relationships. (Wolfson, Relational Judaism, 2-3)

Programs can certainly attract a crowd. But crowds do not necessarily reflect the creation of a meaningful experience. The real question to ask is about what happens to those people who come together for a program? What happens during the experience and how has the person been affected, or even changed, because of the experience? Has the person's relationship to the community, to God, or to Judaism, been shaped in any way by this

experience? These are the questions that Jewish institutions are failing to ask.

Although the challenges facing the Jewish community are daunting, all of us members of this Torat El community should feel very proud of our kehillah kedoshah, of this holy community. In just three short years, thanks to the hard work of our lay leadership and staff, we have established ourselves as a unified community with a set of values, a mission, a vision, and a sense of direction- complete with a strategic plan containing both qualitative and quantitative metrics.

And at the heart of our strategic plan lies the Torat El mission statement. A mission statement is a statement of purpose, a statement that summarizes our values and our reason for existing. A mission statement tells us how we will get from where we are, to where we would like to go. Here's how our mission statement goes:

We are a community building relationships with God, Judaism, and each other; through prayer, study, discussion, and action; guided by Torah, our traditions, those who came before us and our vision for the future.

What is our purpose? What is our reason for being? It's all about relationships. Let's consider the ways this plays out every year around our congregation:

- Every weekday morning and evening a very small group of dedicated, caring, and soulful individuals come together to pray. Some come out of a sense of gratitude towards God for the good things in their lives, others come for the sense of inner peace that they receive by being in that space, and still others come to mourn a loved one, pray for someone who is sick. But rather than praying at home, alone -- something that is certainly permissible in Judaism -- they all come to minyan to gather together, to practice in an incredibly holy way what it means to be in relationship with one another and with God.
- Similarly, every Shabbat and holiday, our community gathers for beautiful singing, for Torah learning, for time to celebrate and mark the seasons together, and a time to be together with our friends, neighbors, and fellow Jews, building and strengthening relationships with Jews of all ages and stages of life. In the past year, our shabbat morning services have been enhanced by an almost weekly shabbat lunch following services. And our monthly "My People's Torah" program has presented an incredible forum for members of our

community to share pieces of their personal Jewish journeys-- something that all who have witnessed would attest has been an incredibly powerful relationship builder, as people are getting to know those they have seen but never really known, and as even our oldest and closest friends have learned something new.

- Every week, our community offers opportunities for members to engage in study and learning. There is the informal study we do before and after minyan each day, the “living room learning” classes that take place in congregants’ homes, special speakers, programs, lunch and learn programs on shabbat, and classes organized by our adult ed committee, Hazak, Sisterhood, and others, in addition to the learning that goes on in our schools for children starting at age 3 and continuing through high school graduation. By coming together to explore the ways ancient wisdom plays a role in our daily lives, our community is filled with ways for people to connect to Judaism in relationship with one another.
- Our lifecycle events are all about relationships. Judaism insists that at each of these pivotal moments in our lives, we celebrate, commemorate, or ritualize the moment while in relationship to those around us. We are called to the Torah in the midst of our community

to mark the arrival of a baby or an approaching wedding. We gather together in homes for shiva minyanim to comfort those who have lost loved ones. We recite kaddish aside the grave of our loved one, surrounded by community. And we gather with family and friends to celebrate our Community Passover Seder. We cannot mark these occasions alone -- we rely on our relationships with others to support us in the difficult times, and to increase our joy in the happy times.

- Torat El is filled with groups who come together for social and recreational purposes. Our youth groups and our sisterhood and men's club and Hazak are places where strangers become friends, and friends become family. Whether it's baking, eating what was baked, dancing, mini-golfing, traveling for a show or special exhibit in NY, watching a football game, or volunteering across the community, these groups are an essential part of the relationship building that is at the heart of our community.
- Our growing Chesed (caring) committee reaches out to members who have been in the hospital or sends food for a shiva. This extra support and loving care at a time when people are at their most vulnerable is something essential to what our community can and should provide. There is so much more we can do, but we are off to a wonderful start,

and I am grateful to those Chesed community members who have made these relationships a priority.

- We just wrapped up a really wonderful summer for our congregation, one where our Shabbat community in particular began to blossom: we all learned from each week's "guest speaker"-members of our congregation who shared their own reflections on the parsha; we were led in davenning by lay leaders who stepped in during the Cantor's vacation; we celebrated simchas including anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, and retirements; we welcomed guests who were visiting for the summer, many of whom are making Torat El their "shul away from shul"; and we watched our youth thrive through their lively participation in junior congregation and as beautiful torah readers in our main service. The Shabbat experience of this summer was an incredible time of flourishing relationships, and I hope the energy and warmth will spill over into the year ahead.

These are just some highlights of the ways our communal relationship drive all we do and who we are.

And here's the thing-now, *more than ever*, we **need** to be nurturing these types of relationships. We are living in a time where we are so connected

from a technological standpoint, that we are not connected at all. As Sherry Turkle, psychology professor at MIT and author of "Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other, wrote:

We've become accustomed to a new way of being "alone together." Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected to wherever we want to be.... We have gotten used to the idea of being in a tribe of one, loyal to our own party....

In today's workplace, young people who have grown up fearing conversation show up on the job wearing earphones. Walking through a college library or the campus of a high-tech start-up, one sees the same thing: we are together, but each of us is in our own bubble, furiously connected to keyboards and tiny touch screens...

As we get used to being shortchanged on conversation and to getting by with less, we seem almost willing to dispense with people altogether. Serious people muse about the future of computer programs as psychiatrists. A high school sophomore confides to me that he wishes he could talk to an artificial intelligence program instead of his dad about dating; he says the A.I. would have so much more in its database. Indeed, many people tell me they hope that as Siri, the digital assistant on Apple's iPhone, becomes more advanced, "she" will be more and more like a best friend — one who will listen when others won't.... (4/21/12, NY Times, The Flight From Conversation)

You get the picture. We are living in a time when the idea of the importance of relationships is being attacked under the guise of creating stronger "networks." **Networks are important, but relationships are more important.** I am not against technological innovation and networking. But it seems clear to me that, as the world grows smaller, and our attention is in such high demand, we must not forget the importance of human interaction.

Today there are fewer and fewer places where one can create face to face, meaningful relationships. Our shul, our congregation, is THE place. This is what it's all about. To be Jewish is to value relationships and community. Judaism is not a religion that stops at the question: "What's in it for me?"

But why do I need the synagogue, rabbi? I often hear. *I can build relationships at the gym, or at the golf club, at work, or at my children's school.* Being a rabbi, I will answer that question with some questions of my own: You may be able to have social interactions in each of these instances, and some of these interactions may even be deep relationships- **but where are you nurturing your soul**, your relationship to God, to our tradition, and to the Jewish people? Where can you come to meet Jews from different walks of life, who are older, younger, the same age, and all of whom have stories to share and Torah to teach? Where can you nurture your relationship to Jewish history and connect with those who came before you? Where can you build the foundation of the relationships that your children will have with their Jewish tradition, and where can you go to ensure that your children will make Jewish choices as they enter into relationships with others. There is only one answer to that question- and that is the synagogue.

Meaningful relationships take work. Meaningful relationships are not one sided. Both participants in any relationship have to work hard to create, build, and sustain something healthy. Over these past few years we at Torat El have worked hard to begin focusing more on relationships and on creating a community in which each of us can feel a sense of belonging, connection, and ownership. We are well aware that our members have many choices of where or whether they choose to belong. Living in the year 5774 you can choose to get Jewish knowledge over the internet, you can choose to not "belong" anywhere but instead embrace fee for service Judaism by hiring a rent-a-rabbi, or getting involved with a group to fulfill a particular need -- whether it be a bar mitzvah or a funeral or a random class -- at any given moment in time.

But we invite you to continue making a different choice. We invite you to enter into relationship with our *kehillah kedosha*, our holy community. As one of my teachers, Rabbi Ed Feinstein taught, holiness is defined by a sense of connection:

What is the opposite of holiness? In Hebrew, the opposite of kadosh is hol. Translated as "profane" or "ordinary," hol, literally means "sand." Sand has no cohesion, no connection, no bonds.... It's this world of hol, sand- of atomized individuals; of sovereign; lonely, unconnected selves- that you come to community to escape. When you tire of being a consumer, you seek intimacy, friendship, trust. When you weary of transactional relationships, you seek belonging. When Jewish institutions become places of sacred community, you discover kadosh (Wolfson Relational Judaism, 48, Feinstein, Yom Kippur, 2005).

Our congregation has so much to offer and each one of you has so much to contribute in this holy work. We hope that you will join us in relationship throughout the year and we are always open for new ways to build and strengthen the relationships in our community.

On a personal note, I have decided that I need to do a better job at developing personal relationship with members of our community, so that I can better understand the lives, dreams, hopes, and values of our community, and so I can better help each of you continue to build a relationship with our Torat El community. Beginning this year and continuing over the next few years, you can expect a call from me. We have over 500 families in our congregation. Some of you have been to our home for Shabbat dinners, some have been to our Sukkah during the Sukkot open house each year, some have been to one of my classes or met with me in my office, and others have gone out with me to breakfast, lunch, or coffee. Some of you even know some of my favorite local places to eat and shmooze. But there are so many of you that I have yet to connect with for more than a quick handshake on the holidays. So, consider yourselves all invited to breakfast, or lunch, or coffee over the coming years. We all have to eat during the day, so why not spend some time together? One of my goals for the new year is to meet with a different member of our community

at least twice a week. I hope that you will consider meeting me for one of these one-on-one "shmooze sessions" so that we can get to know one another a bit better.

In our Torah portion tomorrow we will read about the moment when God called Abraham to enter into a relationship with God. Abraham's response was simple, and direct: "Hineni," Here I am. Your congregation is calling you to enter into a brit, into a covenantal relationship. The question is: Are you going to answer?

Shanah Tova U'metukah. I wish you and your families a sweet and good New Year!