

Twenty Years Later- Returning Back Home

When I was in school, math was never my favorite subject. I managed, making it all the way through calculus in high school and breathing a sigh of relief when I was able to end my math education upon arrival at college. But the one type of math that I always enjoyed was Algebra. Perhaps it was my teachers, Mr. Puffpaff in seventh grade, or Mr. Flynn in 8th grade. Or perhaps it was because, for whatever reason, Algebra just made sense to me. There were variables, quantities that changed depending on their value (x,y, or z) and **constants**, numbers with a fixed value that did not change in the equation.

In the equation $2x + 18$, for example, it is eighteen that is the constant. Why choose eighteen in my example? The Jewish symbolism of 18 is chai, life, and it is those things which we hold constant, which propel our lives. It is those things that are *constant*, that nurture us, sustain us, and help us live meaningful, productive, and purposeful lives despite the changes, challenges, and general tumult of the world year in and year out.

May was the 20th anniversary of my ordination as a rabbi. In some ways, so much has changed in these past twenty years. There have been so many unanticipated variables that have entered into the equation of our lives that I could not have even dreamed of when I started rabbinical school in 1998.

Let's take technology as an example. At that time, the internet and email were still tools we were learning how to use and smartphones and social media didn't yet exist. By 2004 when I completed rabbinical school, things were starting to shift rapidly in the world of technology and they were about to explode. Myspace was just taking off, and became the first social media site to clear one million users. Facebook was launched in a now infamous Harvard dorm room just three months before I became a rabbi. That year was also the year Gmail was introduced, and when cell phones began to offer expanded tools, including color screens and cameras. There were no iphones, Skype was in its infancy, and the idea of a platform like Zoom was not even on the radar screen of most people in the world (let alone streaming synagogue services and programs via zoom)!

When I stop to think about it, it is quite dizzying just how much has changed in just the past twenty years (never mind when we go back forty, sixty, or eighty years)! But even with all of these ever-changing variables that have transformed our lives over the past two decades, many of the most important things have not changed, and have remained constant.

Twenty years ago, in 2004, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, many of you were sitting right here, or in a similar sanctuary, marking the new year with prayers and the sounds of the shofar. Jews around the world were gathering to

reflect on their lives over the previous 12 months, to work on themselves and their relationships, and to connect to their past and allow it to inform their present. The synagogue and the community here today may look different. Men and women are sitting together, we have new melodies and traditions, and our machzor has evolved. But with all that has changed, over the past twenty years, one hundred years, even one thousand years – many of us are doing what our people have always done, what our parents did, what our grandparents did – gathering together with our community for these *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe.

So we can consider Judaism, Jewish tradition, and Jewish community-constants; things that have survived and thrived for generations. The challenge, however, is that this constant can no longer be considered a given for most American Jews.

When I was first ordained, before I even got out to my first pulpit in CA, I attended a conference about Jewish outreach, strategies and creative programs to reach out to the unaffiliated and bring them into the “tent” of Jewish life and living. It was a time when the organized Jewish community was starting to realize that many people were disengaging from active Jewish life, from institutional Jewish life, and from synagogues. Religious affiliation was on the downward slope, and has continued to slide over the past two decades.

According to a study put out last year by PRRI (the Public Religion Research Institute), in 2023 “around one-quarter of Americans (26%) identif[ied] as religiously unaffiliated,” a number that “has **risen** five percent in ten years.” Over the past decade, the importance of religion has decreased across all age groups and education levels.

Fewer people are affiliated with religious communities, fewer are regularly coming to the synagogues, churches, and mosques, fewer people are prioritizing community. And the world is doing great, right?!

What happens when a society in general, and Jews in particular, let the things that have kept them constant for thousands of years fall by the wayside? What happens when that which had always been constant, grounding, guiding, **essential**, is dropped from the equation of so many lives? What happens when Judaism becomes something that is just another variable, an optional “side” on the menu instead of the “main dish”? What happens when we loosen our grip, or let go entirely, of the life raft that has kept us afloat for centuries?

We know what happens- we find ourselves at best, set adrift, and at worst, sunk.

I don't mean to sound like a fundamentalist preacher or anything, but there does seem to be a correlation between the decline of religious affiliation in

America, and the fact that studies show that people are angrier and lonelier. Our lives have become grounded in manipulated algorithms and data that serve only the companies who are in control, and do not give much, if any, consideration to the well-being of their users.

The equations driving our lives today are things that I believe can be changed, at least in the Jewish community, if we return to the constants, if we reconnect with our roots, if we turn back to our Judaism and our religious community, if we come back home.

Anecdotally, I would say that the challenging events impacting the Jewish people over the past year have reawakened a Jewish spark for many. Many people have focused more the importance of their own Jewish identities, have sought ways to connect in meaningful ways to other Jews and the Jewish community, and have given significant philanthropic dollars to Israel and the Jewish community.

But I question whether this phase of return back to our people will stick. Does this return, this *teshuvah*, have any thickness to it? As I said yesterday, returning to Judaism, or becoming active Jews, solely in response to tragedy and crisis – whether it be in response to the Holocaust, October 7th, or campus anti-Semitism – does not have staying power. Yes, we can and should bravely live

proud Jewish lives to help find meaning in the senseless loss of lives, and in defiance of those people who wish to eliminate our people, state, and communities. But this is not sufficient. Jewish guilt can only take a person so far.

There are incredible gifts, wisdom, beauty, depth, and relevance to this spiritual tradition. Gifts that inspired me to dedicate my professional life to Jewish education and community as a rabbi. Gifts that I am blessed to share with so many of you, day in and day out. Gifts that, when prioritized in our lives, can bring tremendous meaning and purpose.

But being open to these gifts, accepting these gifts, and integrating them into our lives in significant ways is a choice. There is a reason that we say that the Torah is a “tree of life” (Etz Hayim), to those who hold onto it (*l'makhazikim ba*). One has to actively hold on to Judaism and Jewish community. To choose to take hold, breathe life into ancient texts and traditions, and allow them to nourish our souls.

And so here we are again, on Rosh Hashanah, in the space where Jews have chosen to be for generations, listening to the timeless sound of the shofar that urges us to do teshuvah, to come in out of the cold, and to return to the warmth of our tradition.

While it won't solve all of our problems, or fix all of our struggles, coming to synagogue regularly, building more Jewish tradition into our daily lives, and re-connecting with the Jewish community can actually help. And this is not just me saying it because I'm a rabbi! A Pew Research Center study of 35 countries found conclusive evidence that, *"People who regularly attend a house of worship are more likely to be happy and civically engaged than those who do not."*

Unfortunately with all of the advances our society has made over the past two decades, there is still so much pain, so much struggle, and so much loneliness in our world. There are many varied strategies that people use to cope with life's challenges – exercise, therapy, meditation, medication, and more. But we do ourselves a disservice if we forget the centering and stabilizing power of constants like Jewish community and tradition.

People often ask what it was that "inspired" me to become a rabbi. In truth, there was no one thing. But there's no question that being an active and involved member of my synagogue community played a big role. Not only was I exposed to Jewish teachings, traditions, prayers, and beliefs, but I was exposed to what it meant to be a part of a caring community, a community that really became more like an extended family.

As a teen, I always felt welcomed when I would occasionally join my synagogue's Sunday morning minyan. The "older people" (who I now realize were not much older than I am today) were always welcoming, eager to share some life wisdom with me, and encouraging me to participate. They would speak to me about my mother after she passed away, they would tell me about their own families and lives, and they taught me, in unassuming, quiet, and comforting ways, what community is really about.

Regularly attending synagogue services taught me many basic Jewish skills, and helped me feel at home in our spiritual tradition. I used to go to services every Shabbat morning with my Uncle Larry, and I would always nudge him to sit close to the front so I could see what was happening on the bima and maybe learn something new, even as I eagerly awaited the end of services when I could run to kiddush to be first in line to get my weekly slices of cake (one yellow lemon slice, and one chocolate). I learned from the rabbi and cantor, but I also learned so much from my uncle and the other adults surrounding me. My uncle modeled for me what it meant to pray and to sit patiently and attentively in shul. A community member, Sam Cohen, taught me how to cut the challah and lead the hamotzi bracha for the community. I think of my uncle and Sam and many of the other regulars from my childhood synagogue every week.

Over the 48 years of my life, and the 20 years I have been honored and humbled to serve as a community rabbi, this has been the biggest constant that has supported and sustained me, while also challenging me to continuously learn and grow. Shul. Coming to synagogue. And not just because it's my job.

You do not need to be a rabbi or a "professional Jew" to benefit from a deep and consistent connection to the synagogue. For generations, synagogues have served the Jewish people as places of learning, places of refuge, places to connect to our history, our heritage, to God, and to one another. The synagogue is a place where we have the opportunity and space to focus on our values, on our character, and on the kinds of people we want to be in this world. Synagogues are one of the few intergenerational spaces left in contemporary society, a rare space where people from all ages and stages can gather in common cause and fellowship.

Last year, one of our best friends, Rabbi David Levy, published an article about sending his oldest child off to college, and the article was entitled "Everything my college student needs to know, he learned in synagogue."

Dave shared the many ways his son had grown and learned and benefited from his 18 years of regular synagogue participation. Here are some of his examples:

1. *How to speak to people of all ages.* Our kids would seek out their friends each week, but after services, we [also] always found them at tables interacting with adults and seniors in the community...[this] ability to comfortably navigate and make the most of those interactions will take them a long way.
2. *How to sit with people you disagree with.* Synagogues comprise people who share their Jewish beliefs but not necessarily their politics. Over these last few contentious years, we have seen that people have a lot of difficulty sharing space with those with whom they disagree. We are proud that our children learned that, despite our differences, people in our community shared a common faith, which was a place to start...
3. *The importance of standing up for Judaism and Israel.* With the rise of anti-semitism and anti-Israel [activism], it is as important as ever for our students to know how to advocate for the Jewish community and to have a sense of pride in who they are.
4. *How to work a buffet.* Kiddush is an amazing educator. First, the experience of eating together with so many people leads me to believe that our students will be ready for the dining halls, receptions and parties they will attend. They have learned from kiddush about manners and food safety and how to gently chide the person who puts the tuna spoon in the egg salad. They have also learned the art of small talk. The ability to chit-chat with people you don't know opens doors to friendships, making seemingly big places a little smaller. As a parent, it doesn't hurt to know my boys can make a plate and clean up after themselves. Most of the time.
5. *Caring for others.* Children who grow up in synagogues learn how a community cares for its people. Each week, they hear a "Mi Sheberach" list, where the names of those who are ill are shared, and remember that there are people who need visiting or friendly calls. They know from shiva that we take time and sit with those suffering from loss. Our students going off to live in a community of their peers will be ready by knowing both that we need to and how to care for others.

These and other examples Rabbi Dave included beautifully highlight some of the ways synagogue participation can help young people learn how to be a part of a community. But they do not, and in fact cannot, apply *only* to our kids. **We all** need a space to continually work on being with others, to continually learn and grow, and to regularly give and receive love and support from others outside of our immediate family and friend circles. And it's never too late.

But we have to acknowledge the fact that the synagogue cannot have this important or powerful impact on each one of us if we don't each show up. This is not meant to be a guilt trip, rather it is meant to be an invitation. The world has changed since I became a rabbi 20 years ago, and since most of us were children. But the constant in my life, and in the lives of Jews around the world for generations, has been the synagogue.

This central address to Jewish life and living has always held the key to Jewish survival, has always been essential to the Jewish story, and has always played a prominent role in the lives of Jews seeking to gain meaning, purpose, and intention rooted in the story and traditions of our people.

I just finished a wonderful book entitled "*Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing and Underliving*," by Celeste Headlee. In it, she

explains that part of the reason our society is seeing a decrease in empathy is because we are not making space to hear each other's voices. We spend so much time trying to be efficient that we have lost the ability to be empathetic. Our lack of connection to good-old-fashioned in-person social networks like the synagogue, is literally making us sicker as a nation. Headlee writes:

"Human beings are at their best when they are social, and human minds work best in connection with other human minds. It may not be the most efficient way to live, but it's the most likely to foster well-being... Avoiding social contact is making us sicker, and seeking it out will make us healthier. It really is that simple."

The synagogue is a millenia-old Jewish social network that is, quite literally, good for our health and wellbeing. Attending regularly, especially in person, can be transformative, even life-saving. Sure, we can log in to or stream all sorts of community experiences, from attending services to taking classes. Streaming tools certainly have a place and purpose, and have been particularly helpful for those who have trouble physically getting to the synagogue. But streaming into a community is not the same as being a part of it. To really benefit, we each have to show up – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Come to a class, come to weekday or shabbat services, come to a social program. You can come to just sit quietly, or come to meet up with someone from the community or with me. Figure out what will work for you. Do me a favor, when you go home, after the holiday, just put one synagogue program or service in your calendar. Make the time. Give yourself that new year's gift.

On this Rosh Hashanah, twenty years after becoming a rabbi, I marvel at just how much has changed. But then I take comfort in the synagogue, the space and community that has remained constant. The space that helps so many people connect, and offers access to wisdom and guidance in these troubled times.

It is here. Right where we left it the last time you were here, whether it was last week, or last Rosh Hashana. The synagogue, the community, and I are all waiting with open doors, open arms, and an open heart to welcome each of you back home. We look forward being with you.

Shanah Tova.