

Telling Our Synagogue's Story
Kol Nidre 5780
Congregation B'nai Jacob
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On the first day of Rosh Hashana, I talked about the importance of the stories we tell. I said that we can choose the story we tell among many possible stories, and that when we choose a more growthful story about the past, we can radically transform the present and the future.

Tonight I want to take a closer look at the story we are telling about our synagogue. When I arrived here, people told me about the glory days of the synagogue, when we had 900 families, when the pews were full on Yom Kippur and we had to hold two kol nidre services, when organ music filled this room and you had to get on a waiting list to get into Gan Hayaed.

Today, my sense is that we are mostly telling a story of decline — our numbers are less than half what they were, Gan Hayaed is gone, as is the organ, and you just have to look around to see that the pews are not full. The story I hear goes something like this: Once we were a great synagogue and we built a beautiful building in Woodbridge which was the center of an amazing Jewish community. Today, we are in decline, and it is only a matter of time before we close our doors and close up shop.

That story, like most stories, contains a grain of truth, but it is not the only story we could be telling. Most important, it is not the only honest story, nor the story that will take us where we need to go.

I want to suggest another story today. I want to begin with a story told by the great hasid, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, which I told you seven years ago on my first high holidays here. I'm counting on the fact that you might not remember it perfectly.

Once there was a beloved king whose court musicians played beautiful music for him. The king loved the music and the musicians felt honored to use their talents to bring him joy. Every day for many years the musicians played enthusiastically, and the king and the musicians grew to love one another.

But eventually after years of dedicated service, all the musicians died. Their children were called to the king's court to take the parents' place. Out of loyalty to their parents, they began to appear every morning to perform. But, while they could play the basic tunes, they did not understand the hidden power of the music, and in their hearts they believed they had better things to do than to spend time trying to please the king. Each day that they played, their resentment grew. And each day the king became more and more frustrated by their attitude and ineptitude.

After some time, for reasons nobody really understood, a few of the children developed a renewed interest in serving the king. They realized that playing beautiful music was the way to connect with him and bring him joy. But because they had abandoned serious practice for so long, their instruments were rusty and out of tune, and their skill was embarrassingly inadequate.

So these children set out to remember what their parents had known so well. They arrived early each morning and found a remote corner of the palace in which to practice together. They began to experiment with sound, rediscover harmony, and lovingly rededicate themselves to service. In the evening, after the other musicians went home, they would practice more, trying desperately to make their instruments sing.

The king saw their efforts and was deeply moved. Their music was different from their parents', but like their parents, they were driven by dedication and love. And for this reason, their efforts were received as a blessing.

We cannot make the music our ancestors made here a generation or even a decade ago. But the instruments are still in our hands. What story are we telling? Are we telling the story of trying to replicate our parents' music, failing at it, and drifting away? Or are we telling a story of renewal, even when that renewal is different than what came before? How will **we** serve the king?

I would like to suggest that although our numbers may not be what they used to be and are unlikely to grow, there is a new and important story for us to tell.

Spirit

First, God is part of the conversation in this synagogue. What is happening here is not what songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote about in 1964: "The absence of God in our midst is a deep rotten cavity that has killed the nerve of the people...we must face that despair that none of us dares articulate, that we no longer feel we are holy..."

We are, in this congregation, exploring God and what it means for us to be holy. We don't have simple or easy answers, but the exploration is alive. The cantor and I seek to offer prayer services in which God's presence is manifestly felt; we offer these services in a variety of venues to people of varying needs and interests: our regular Shabbat service, our Friday night Shabbat Ruach with the Sweet Singers of Bnai Jacob, our Shir Hadash service once a month — a songful, soulful, prayerful hour; Shabbat morning meditative walks in the woods, our children's services every Sunday morning, our outdoor service during the summer, Shabbat on the Shore. I teach Torah throughout the week as another mode in which we can experience God's presence. I talk to our kids about God. Sometimes, like the children in the parable, we try modalities that don't work. That's OK too. I would very much prefer to try and fail, then not to try at all.

All of these different modalities are attempts to deepen our access to the richness and profundity of our tradition and to God. They are not meant, though, to provide "easy access" to a superficial spirituality. We try to offer a rich banquet, where there are choices. None of it is fast food.

We can't serve up spirit in bite-sized chunks. So often when people try to do this, it can have the effect of making the Torah into a silly storybook or a little cute lesson and we leave people wondering whether that is really all we have to offer. The Torah and rabbinic literature are so incredibly deep and rich. Our prayer tradition is deep and rich. Our community is deep and rich. We have to make sure that people experience that — we have to teach and pray on the highest level and bring everyone up with us — not turn it into baby food.

Too often something bad happens, someone suffers a loss or goes through something difficult, and I am asked why God caused this or why God has failed this individual. At those moments I feel saddened — I feel that we have given people a 3rd grade notion of God and now that they are facing real, adult problems, their 3rd grade God has failed them. No one has taught them that doubt is part of faith, that absence is as real an experience as presence, and that we are heirs to a tradition rich with responses, if not answers, to questions of suffering and meaning. That when bad things happen, that is not proof that God doesn't exist, but an invitation to dig

deeper into what it means to be spiritual beings. That essential to living a spiritual life, a life deeply rooted in Jewish spirituality, is to know that human beings suffer, but that human beings can also transcend suffering. Our grapplings with God are part of such a life, and this grappling is alive here.

Creativity

A close cousin of spirit is creativity. If we are not going to sing our parents' music, we will have to figure out how to make new music. One of my favorite texts is from Exodus 10; Moses is arguing with Pharaoh about letting the Jews leave Egypt, and Pharaoh says, "Alright, you can go. You just can't take the livestock." Moses says no dice. He says he is traveling out into the desert with the people and he doesn't know what God will want, how we will worship God, until we get there and figure it out. In other words, we have to be ready to do what the moment calls for, not what yesterday dictated. We can't assume we know what will work. We can only find out by trying new things. That means we need a willingness to think outside the box, we need to let 1000 flowers bloom, we need to create a culture that says "yes" much more often than it says "no." That means that we can't say, "we tried this, it won't work, we used to be great but now we're not." We need to give up all those words.

Nostalgia for the past, however glorious, will not help us get where we need to go. I am so pleased that today there is an outpouring of creative energy at our synagogue — from got shabbat to the Power of Ten to the Shir Hadash service to Elm City Kallah to our Shabbat walks to Purim baskets, props to Judy Taylor, and sukkah hops, thanks Leslie Zackin, to the newly revived CBJ players to gospel concerts for MLK weekend to the Big Read and our new book group, thanks Lani Bernstein— so many of you are doing so much to make our synagogue vibrant and exciting. Let's keep doing it. We have a program that we should be very proud of even as we keep innovating and making it better. (BTW, I will be calling out a handful of additional names and I ask your forgiveness ahead of time for the many names I don't call out — there are so many of you who do so much for our synagogue, and I appreciate all of your contributions.)

Learning

I am exceedingly proud that our congregation has truly become a learning congregation. I was at a shiva recently and someone from another congregation came up to me, told me how fabulous our adult education program was, that it is heads and tails the best in the area, and then reiterated it. I was proud. Equally important, when leadership of the congregation was recently surveyed, the vast majority said that our synagogue helped them to grow as Jews. I was told by the consultant who ran the survey that most congregations don't respond that way.

I am very proud of our well-attended Bread and Torah every Saturday morning and the fascinating discussions we have had over the last 6+ years. People from other congregations have heard about it and join us. I am exceedingly proud of our adult ed offerings, props to Roz Atkins and her able crew — not only the beauty of the brochure — thanks, Jeanette — but the depth and variety of the program and its high levels of attendance. I am very proud that our congregation started the Elm City Kallah, now in its 5th year. This program brings together 200 Jews across three congregations for a weekend of learning, praying, and celebrating Shabbat together. I am proud of all of you who have, over the years, taken on new skills — learning to read Torah or haftarah for the first time; others have learned Hebrew or started to light Shabbat candles. Dana Schwartz has almost completed leyning the whole Torah. And I am proud of our religious school, Yahad, now in its third year, and growing... did you hear that... growing! Ours is the only combined religious school in the county and it's working. We've got more kids, better programs, and a feeling of belonging to a larger community than we used to.

I don't know what exactly the learning edge is for each of you — but I know that if I had a magic wand and could accomplish one thing at Bnai Jacob it would be this: I would like each member of our synagogue to see him or herself on a Jewish journey. I would love it if everyone asked this question, especially at this time of the year: what is my next step on this journey — what is the place of growth for me Jewishly? Maybe it is coming to minyan once a week; maybe studying with my child for her bat mitzvah. Maybe it is learning to read Hebrew or lead a service; maybe learning to bake challah or attending a class. I would love to help each person figure out what his or her next step is, and I would be delighted to sit with anyone who wanted to create your own IJP — an individualized Jewish plan for you this year. The important thing is — whether you know a lot or a little — we are all somewhere on this journey together!

Doing Good

When I arrived here six+ years ago, we had a small number of social action programs that an even small number of people were bravely lifting up, hoping to gain support and too often feeling defeated. Today, under Kate Ezra's leadership, we do a lot: we gather food for Isaiah's Fast and this year, under Alex Klee's leadership, we will beat Mishkan Israel. We pack food and deliver meals for 340 kids in New Haven public schools, week in and week out; we serve food to the hungry at Sukkah on the Green and again at Christmas time, twice a month at DESK, and once a month at Martha's Place; we work with other congregations to shelter the homeless through Abraham's Tent; we join with other congregations as part of JCARR to welcome refugee families into our community and to help them begin their new lives in this new haven, and we host HIAS Shabbat where we share a meal with our refugee families and hear their stories — just last week one of our Syrian refugees taught congregants to bake special treats for the holidays; we gather clothes for Ken's Closet; our hesed committee, under Stacey Perkins' leadership, delivers meals to bereaved families and our Chicken Soup Brigade cooks and delivers soup and brownies to congregants who need a little TLC.

We should be proud of how far we have come. I still want all of you to go into the hallway tonight and tomorrow and put your stars up again on the big star board. It was hugely successful last year and each committee got tons of new support. We saw people we never saw before turn out. All you have to do is put a star next to your name and whatever project you want to work on, and the team leader of that project will contact you with details. Your social action pledge is at least as important as your financial commitment. Let's fill our board and our congregation with stars.

When I came here, I was told that B'nai Jacob is a snooty congregation on the hill. Well, I am here to say it isn't. We have changed that story because we have listened to Isaiah's words, to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin." The measure of our community, the measure of any community is not the beauty of its building or even the spirituality of its services or the quality of its educational offerings. It is how it cares for the least among us.

Love Finally, it is all about love. Don't think we are in any other business. This is it, this is all there is. A synagogue is not a building or a budget, not a membership roster nor a program calendar. The beating heart of the synagogue is love. This is the most important thing I have learned in six years here and 12 in the pulpit. The measure of our success is the love we share. You see it when congregants give of themselves selflessly to work on a big project, like getting jars of honey to all of you, or mounting a huge theatrical production. You see it when someone is ill or God forbid dies and people rally around. You see it at morning minyan in the jocular but loving way everyone supports one another.

My husband often says that I have a front row seat on life, and I do. It is a privileged seat. Sometimes, unfortunately, I see people at their worst. But more often, I see them at their best, extending themselves. When I think back over the last six years, I think about when Ken died and when we prayed that morning together at Shir Hadash and our tears washed us as we walked through the valley of the shadow of death alongside the Sperling family; I think about when Pittsburgh happened and how we shared our shattered hearts; I think about a reluctant child, struggling with her haftarah but ultimately standing proud on this bima and sharing her journey with us; I think about Tzvi, davening hallel, teaching us what it means to praise God's name even through pain; I think about Adam Dworkin and his crew lovingly grilling burgers for us throughout the year; I think about Lauren Faith Miller and Joanna Cooper and all the women who help them take such good care of our gift shop, always finding the perfect gift for each customer and wrapping it beautifully; I think of Marty Halprin dedicating himself to the care of our building, his sacred service to our synagogue. I think about babies, and children, and parents and grandparents, and old and young under one roof together sharing joy, laughter, learning, pain, and love. That's a rare treat in the atomized, age-stratified world in which we so often find ourselves.

What the synagogue means in people's lives will never be about the fabulous program they attended. It will be about how much they feel part of something bigger than themselves and how they are sustained through good and hard times by one another.

Jewish communities have faced serious challenges before today. The Temple was destroyed — twice; European Jewry was virtually wiped out less than a century ago. According to the Book of Kings, even when we were in our own land and the Temple stood and everything was supposedly hunky dory, the people had stopped observing Passover until King Josiah found a torah scroll and read it to them and told them that that is what they were supposed to be doing.

We are not the first community to face real challenge. But just as surely as we keep Passover, we can write a new story. We do not have to tell a story of decline, despite our shrinking numbers. We can tell a story of growing in spirit, in creativity, in learning, a story of doing good and making a difference, and most of all a story of love. It is just like what Michelle Obama said about her childhood: she could either tell the story of a disabled dad, a too small house, not too much money in a starting to fail neighborhood or the story of love and music in a country where an education can take you far. It all depends on which story you want to tell. I am proud to be part of our story, a story of love and learning and hope and spirit — it is a story I hope will be told here in Woodbridge and in New Haven long after I am gone. If we have inherited anything from our ancestors it is the moral courage and the tenacity, to keep telling our story and to recreate that story in each generation. It will be told in ways I cannot imagine, perhaps in locations not yet envisioned, perhaps in shared spaces with others. But I think it is vital that our story be told. And the story we choose to tell now will determine what our future holds.

And one more thing. You can't tell a new story if you are not part of it. More than that, I am not sure the story will unfold without your participation. Each and every Jew stood at Sinai because each of us heard something slightly different — each of us has our unique contribution to make and we are not whole without each of us. If you are not already, I warmly invite you to get involved. Find your niche here. Check out one of our many new programs. Learn something. Help someone. Help us write our new story. I am sure that you will be glad you did.

I know it is easy to feel grim. But when someone asks you about the synagogue, don't tell them the story of decline, even if it is easier or more obvious. Tell them the story I just told you, the story of love and creativity, of learning, and growing in spirit and making a difference. I think

you will feel proud and they will feel impressed that this is who we are and what we are about. This is the story we are telling. This is the synagogue we are becoming.