

Who Needs a Synagogue?
Kol Nidre 5781
Congregation B'nai Jacob
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People sometimes say that God has a sense of humor. I think that might be true. Last year I told the story of our synagogue. I said that the stories we tell matter, and I encouraged us to eschew the story of decline and instead tell the story of a synagogue growing in spirit, in creativity, in learning, a story of doing good and making a difference, and most of all a story of love.

Almost like magic, throughout the fall last year, there was a wonderful feeling at the synagogue. The Power of Ten was a beautiful evening filled with learning, community, creativity, chamishness, and friendship. Spelling Bee rehearsals got under way and the synagogue was abuzz with the promise of another CBJ Players show, after long absence. We gave out hundreds of meals at a beautiful Sukkah on the Green event in New Haven and after Alex Klee's moving appeal, we broke our record and beat Mishkan Israel with donations of over 2,000 pounds of food. We hosted the inspiring Woodbridge Interfaith Thanksgiving Service in our sanctuary, an annual moment when Woodbridge becomes Lake Woebegone, and for Hannukah we enjoyed a beautiful and uplifting cantor's concert with over a dozen cantors from Connecticut! Who knew we were so blessed with musical talent!

And then, on December 7, our world changed in an instant. Our daughter, Hallel, fell from a second story balcony, breaking her jaw and knee although miraculously, she was spared more grievous injuries. After six weeks our family began to gingerly peek its head back out from our cocoon. Already during that time, there were distant rumbles from China, from Europe, that all was not well. Then, on March 12, two months after we took Hallel back to school, our world turned upside down again. We locked down, we closed the synagogue and life, for all of us, has pretty much been unrecognizable since that day.

When I spoke on Yom Kippur last year, I thought I knew what a synagogue was. The fall filled me with hope that we were living just that story. As it turned out, I had no idea what a synagogue is. I had never suffered personally within a synagogue community before. I had never suffered with a synagogue before. You have taught me so much.

The strongest feeling I had during Hallel's injury, after fear, was love. I felt more deeply the love of our family — David and I nursing, holding, sustaining Hallel — and our love was sustained and supported by your love. You texted me incessantly in the hospital. You sent emails. You called. Some of you reached me at moments when my heart was broken; some of you called and made us laugh. When we got home, you sent meals. You sent presents. You checked in on us. You made sure we were OK. On a cold afternoon, there would be another random knock at the door and someone would be outside shivering in the cold with a kugel or flowers. Hallel, who for five weeks could eat only liquids, devoured your delicious chicken soup from the synagogue freezer. You

prayed. I had no idea how much it means when someone asks you for a sick person's Hebrew name, and tells you that they're praying for you. Each email, each text, each call, each prayer, was like a tug on the net, a tug on my heart reminding us, "You are not alone. We are here with you."

I had no idea how much all this meant until I was on the other end of it. I realized that one should never say to oneself — I am not close enough, I am not important enough — so I won't call, or email, or text. I don't want to disturb them. I know I didn't answer every email, or even many, and we didn't always pick up the phone, but it all mattered. I will never forget your kindness. I also understood how important it is for people outside of your story to be holding you at a time when you can barely hold yourself. The Talmud teaches that every person who visits a sick person alleviates 1/60 of their illness. I can testify that it is true. Each of you lifted us up and reminded us that we were part of something larger than ourselves and that there was a world still spinning out there.

Through it all, I also felt a deep sense of gratitude. Gratitude for your love and gratitude that with everything that could have happened to Hallel, the truly terrible did not happen. Gratitude that with it all we are sometimes so lucky. Gratitude to nurses, to doctors, to all of you, and to complete strangers who took care of us and held us and walked the path of healing with us. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Our lives, as I said on Rosh Hashanah, hang over the abyss, but, in the face of it, we have one another, and that makes all the difference.

Ironically, Hallel's accident in some ways prepared me for the pandemic and in some ways did not. We had learned that life was contingent, that planning was provisional, that things could change on a dime. We were not prepared, so soon after her recovery, to be slammed again, nor did I have any idea what it was like when everyone was suffering together, when there was no one outside of the pain who could offer perspective and comfort.

A synagogue is all about connection. Could we connect when we are apart? Well, we found 1001 ways, from services and classes, to lectures from Israel and New York, to joke nights, cooking demos, bartending classes, support groups, movie and book groups, and so much more. Over 50 older congregants have buddies who check in with them regularly and keep them company on the phone. Some shop for them or run errands. We sent out haggadot and videos for Passover and invited zoom guests to our seders from near and far. Our social action work has continued with Chapel on the Green and the JFS Food Pantry as we continue to reach out to those in need, sharing our bounty with them. I gave you all cheesecake for Shavuot and the synagogue provided goody bags with more cake and more haggadot for Rosh Hashanah. When Malachi left, we had a car parade. Had you told me a year ago that congregants were going to line up in their cars at the synagogue to greet us, and that I would stand there outside and talk with them, and they would willingly come — 100 strong — and I would not only be there, but look forward to it and enjoy it, I would have told you you were crazy. But it happened and it was wonderful. And when Cantor Barbara arrived we had

a fabulous tailgate pizza party to welcome her. In the warm weather, we have enjoyed our tent — Ohel Ya'akov — where we have held Shabbat services, Tuesday night foodtruck dinners, and other programs. In the face of great challenge, our community demonstrated caring, creativity and resilience. When Hallel fell, I understood so much more deeply the power of our connection, but during the pandemic I have witnessed that net extend so much wider and our roots dig down so much deeper. We are powerfully connected. I thought of the Marge Piercy poem, Connections:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.
You cannot always tell by looking, what is happening
More than half a tree is spread out in the soil under your feet....
Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.
Live a life you can endure: make a life that is loving.
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in, a thicket and bramble
wilderness to the outside, but to us it is interconnected with rabbit runs and
burrows and lairs.
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always.
For every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long
season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

We are harvesting what we have sown.

I am reminded of a kabbalistic text I taught this spring about how God is like white light refracted through a prism into the myriad of colors that are the created world, each animal, each plant, each tribe, each letter of the Torah, each of us, a color in the spectrum. We are not separate at all — each of us a dash of color in the great spectrum of life. When each of us shines our own unique light and color, God's glory is manifest. The world, in its diversity, testifies to Divinity in its brokenness and its wholeness. And just as God's white light comes down and is refracted in us, when we join together in acts of love, we return the light, refract it back, as it were, to God.

In this pandemic, we have also learned painfully how precious human presence is, how something ineffable happens among us and between us, that doesn't happen on the phone or on the screen, however grateful I am for technology. We have learned that a handshake is not perfunctory — it means something — it is an expression of friendship, of connection, and that a hug can heal. One night this spring we were sitting at dinner discussing how long this would last when Hallel said, "So you don't think we're going to hug anyone outside of our family until next year..." She burst into tears. How precious our physical connection is. How much we manifest God's presence not only in our voice or image, but in the not quite tangible but very real presence we offer one another. I can't wait to sit in this room with all of you again and hug you.

There is no question in my mind that everything I said last year that synagogues do, we did in abundance this year, in ways we could not have imagined. We manifested God's presence; we were creative; we learned; we did good and most of all we loved.

As high holidays rolled around, and with them, the opportunity to renew your membership, many people were worried. They thought people wouldn't renew. I wasn't worried. OK, maybe a little. But I believed that you all are powerfully held here, just as you powerfully held me and my family when we were suffering. Why would anyone give that up?

Our synagogue is not a building. It is an extension of our homes where Jewish life is marked and celebrated. "Synagogues," to quote my colleague Rabbi Stephanie Kraemer, "are the people who show up at your door with a meal, the phone calls when you have lost someone you loved, the rabbi who is there to listen. For our children, synagogues are the place where they are nurtured and loved without the pressures of secular school. Synagogues are where we grapple with big ideas. ...A place where ethics are upheld, and love and kindness prevail. Through our synagogues the world is healed. Synagogues bring families together to honor sacred time. During hard times, they are where we learn to handle challenges and where resilience is built." Synagogues hold sacred space. Synagogues are where we show up in our full humanity. Synagogues are where we show up for one another. Synagogues are where we show up.

Why would anyone give that up?

I have often told the story of a young man seeking God. He travelled to many villages but was unable to find God and each time, despairing in his quest, he quickly moved on to the next village. One day, he arrived in a small village, where he was sent to the rabbi's house. Impatient to speak with the rabbi, he burst in on him in his study and asked, "Rabbi, How do I find God?" He wondered which of the many answers he had already received he would be told this time, but instead, the rabbi simply smiled and said, "My son, you have come to the right place, God is in this village. Why don't you stay for a few days; you might meet Him."

He didn't understand the answer but he was sufficiently intrigued to stay. For the next several days, he wandered around the village, asking all the villagers where God was. They would smile at him and invite him for a meal. From time to time, he would run into the rabbi who would ask him if he had met God yet. Sometimes he knew he had; other times he could hardly understand the question.

The man stayed in the village, weeks and then years. He became part of the village and shared in its life. He went to the synagogue on Friday night and prayed with everyone else and sometimes he knew why he was praying, and other times he only mumbled words. Each Friday he would return home with one of the families and join them for a Shabbos meal. Whenever conversation turned to God, he was always assured that God was in the village.

Over time, the villagers' love and quiet faith, overcame the man's doubts. He came to understand that God was within him, and within everyone else. He learned that God

was not uniquely in this village, but rather that God dwelt wherever people chose to let God in.

On Rosh Hashanah, I asked where God is in the pandemic and I spoke about God in the whirlwind and also about God's presence in our acts of hesed, in our connection to one another. Like the rabbi in the village, I say to you, "You have come to the right place. God is in this shul."