

I thought the koala would be a crowd-pleaser! But rather than cuddly Australian wildlife, what I really want to write about this week is a lesson shared by my teacher, Rabbi Shai Held, at a class for clergy taught earlier this fall here in Chicago. Speaking to a group of colleagues during the week immediately preceding the High Holidays, Held encouraged us to fight against our better instincts and to listen to his lecture not with sermons in mind but rather with a spirit of *Torah lishma* (Torah for its own sake), something that Jewish professionals don't always experience amidst the constant pressure to preach and teach.

Held explained that he leads a learning conference for rabbis each year in New York and that he always begins by offering an intention, inviting colleagues to be and to experience, to think and to wonder for the week, all without any particular goal or output in mind. And? When asked to fill out evaluations at the end of the program, participants consistently cite these words, the explicit permission to consume rather than to produce, as being the most meaningful part of the retreat, even as they still ultimately emerge from the workshop with rich Torah to bring back to their communities. Human beings need time to re-charge and replenish, to renew our minds and spirits, and this kind of break from the routine often makes us all the more creative and productive for it. How very grateful I am to have spent the last ten weeks on a meaningful sabbatical of learning and exploration. And how very happy I am to be back again with our community here in Wilmette!

Over the next months I look forward to sharing different aspects of my time away, and a short Erev Shabbat message can only scratch the surface. But below are three goals that I had for my sabbatical along with a few early reflections:

I. To Visit and Learn from Other Synagogues

One of the limitations of being a pulpit rabbi is that there isn't much opportunity to experience Shabbat in other communities. Over the weeks of my sabbatical I chose eight different congregations -- ranging from the far left to the far right of our movement and including one Orthodox synagogue -- in order to learn what other rabbis are doing, get new ideas, and bring a fresh eye back to worship here at BHBE. The communities I visited differed in their approaches to egalitarianism, use of musical instruments, how much of the Torah reading and liturgy are recited, and much more. Many offered meditation or other services concurrent with the traditional one; about half had a Cantor and half used lay worship leaders; one housed both Reform and Conservative services in the same building while another featured a "Ruach (Spirit) Rally" complete with rock band! The largest congregation I visited (Temple Emanuel in Newton, MA) has over 1200 families while the smallest (East Melbourne Synagogue) just barely makes minyan. The full roster of synagogues - in the order that I attended them - includes: Congregation Shirat HaYam (Swampscott, MA); Temple Emunah (Lexington, MA); Temple Emanuel (Newton, MA); Congregation Beth Shalom (Teaneck, NJ); Emanuel Synagogue (Sydney, Australia); East Melbourne Synagogue (Melbourne, Australia); Kehillat Israel (Brookline, MA); and Moriah Congregation (Deerfield, IL).

I return from these visits with a number of new ideas on everything from better using our microphones to offering multiple service options to creating a stronger sense of welcome to increasing congregational

participation and singing. And I also return from these visits with a new perspective as to what it's like to experience worship as a member of a congregation rather than as a service leader. Sitting in the pews rather than on the bimah certainly made it easier for me to focus, but it also made the service feel longer and slower and less full of momentum; it was easy to become disengaged or to sit back and listen rather than praying myself. Being in unfamiliar services in unfamiliar places also helped me to better understand how foreign and overwhelming our worship might seem to someone who is not accustomed to it, how alienating it can feel to be sitting in a loud, energetic room full of people yet to not really know a single soul. Over the next year I hope we will work together to continue creating a prayer environment characterized by participation, connection, and joy! I look forward to discussing many of these ideas – and hopefully many others – together.

II. To Explore Burning Questions

How much should rabbis take public positions on issues of the day? What are best synagogue practices – for dues, for membership, for staffing, for engagement? How do we contend with the demographic shifts facing the Jewish community? What is the role of spirituality in prayer and beyond? How do we teach deeper and more inspiring Torah, both to adults and to children? What will the American synagogue look like in 2025?

These questions, and many more, were at the top of mind as I developed my sabbatical reading list and made time for intentional conversations with all sorts of people – rabbis, cantors, lay leaders, millennials, unaffiliated friends and family. From intermarriage to fund-raising, afternoon religious school education to empty nester programming, strategic planning, change management, lay-professional partnership, social justice work, and more I had the opportunity to reflect on issues both practical and ideological with good friends and dear colleagues. Many of these conversations gave me important new insights which I know we will discuss in time to come. Many of them, too, left me feeling very good about the fine work we are doing at BHBE and the congregational health and growth we are already experiencing.

My full sabbatical reading list is as follows: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (fiction, a meditation on race, identity, and the immigrant experience), *From Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* by Edwin Friedman (applying principles of systemic family therapy to the life of congregations), *Nudge* by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler (on behavioral economics and decision science), *The Point of Vanishing* by Howard Axelrod (on solitude as spiritual practice), *The Purpose Driven Church* by Rick Warren (founder of Saddleback mega-church), *Radical Candor* by Kim Scott (about management and supervision), *The Secret of Chabad* by David Eliezrie (an analysis of the movement's success), and *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green (Young Adult fiction recommended to me by one of our teens about a girl with severe anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder). And just for fun two novels: *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng and *Mrs. Fletcher* by Tom Perotta. I'd be happy to talk about any of these books together!

III. To Replenish Intellectually and Spiritually

Spending time in nature. Experiencing different cultures. Pushing one's comfort zone and trying new things. Engaging in learning. Being surrounded by loved ones. Seeing the world through the eyes of a child. Feeling a sense of connection with Jews half-way across the world. Reading powerful words. Hearing powerful Torah. Witnessing great beauty. Being inspired by stirring worship. Taking time for sacred pause.

I feel grateful to have had these weeks away in order to experience the above, bringing me back to our congregation with a renewed spirit of energy and purpose. I want to thank all of the many people who made this sabbatical possible: our guest service leaders Elysa Fisher, Rabbi Barry Friedman, Steve Harris, Bruce Hershman and Rabbi Allan Kensky; our guest *darshanim* (sermon givers) Dan Cedarbaum, Fran Diamond, Gail Eisenberg, Sandy Goldberg, Cynthia Lerner, Sarah Pila, Sarah Rodin, and Jeff Roth; Marcie Eskin for teaching between Mincha and Ma'ariv and Rick Eskin for running Saturday night services; Heidi Friedman and Dianne Lehman-Goldman for covering Wednesday night minyan; Debbie Ebner, Rick Eskin, Peter Friedman, Sheila and Vern Gideon, Judith Karp, Shale Lapping, Larry Layfer, Dalia Ness, and Allan Rodin for leading Bible BaBoker; and especially Elly Bauman and Aaron Frankel; Ritual VP Jay Goldstein and President Marsha Lyons, Rabbi Kensky and Cantor Roytman for covering things so exceptionally well in my absence.

It is so very good to be back home and I look forward to seeing everyone soon!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker