

Replacement Relatives: Kol Nidre 5779

Earlier this summer, during a trip out West to visit a good friend, I happened upon the town of Buford, Wyoming. Nestled in unincorporated Albany County between Cheyenne and Laramie, Buford is known for two unusual features of its existence - its elevation, which at 8000 feet above sea level makes it the highest populated settlement along transcontinental Interstate 80, and its population: exactly one. You see, even in our country's least populated state Buford is an aberration, housing a convenience store, a gas station, a modular home, and what is rumored to be some seriously good coffee but only a single resident, a Vietnamese entrepreneur named Pham Dinh Nguyen who purchased the town at auction for \$900,000 after its original owner decided to move away a few years ago. "PhinDeli" brand coffee, imported by Nguyen from Vietnam, is now sold in the convenience store making Buford the ideal location to load up on both java and juice during the long drive towards Yellowstone.

Perhaps it is possible to have a town of just one, but as Jews we know that it takes far more than that to create a community. And I was again reminded of this fact while reading a recent article in *The New Yorker* about an unusual phenomenon taking place in Japan, something that is called the rental relative industry. Almost exactly as it sounds, this new model allows people who are lacking in family to hire replacement relatives – sometimes for a particular purpose (one mother, for example, hired a “husband” to accompany her to private school admissions interviews, knowing that institutions sometimes discriminate against single parents) but often for the sole purpose of companionship and human connection. Kazushige Nishida, a Tokyo resident in his mid-sixties, began renting a part-time wife and daughter after his real wife died and his only child became estranged from the family. While initially the interactions between Nishida and his hired relations were superficial if pleasant, the replacement wife and daughter coached to dress and speak and adopt mannerisms that would remind

Nishida of his actual family members, greater depth and connection soon developed as the women brought more of their true selves to the encounter, eventually even convincing Nishida to reconcile with his daughter. As author Elif Batuman described: “People who are short on relatives can hire a husband, a mother, a grandson. The resulting relationships can be more real than you’d expect.”¹

Reading Batuman’s article I was simultaneously struck by how odd it seems to outsource something as intimate as family and yet how clever it is too, given that family is what the majority of us value most. In this age where families do not always live together in the same place, where death and divorce and serious illness can separate us from our loved ones, where we’re constantly short on time and juggling both career and personal obligations, how nice it would be to have an extended network of people upon whom to rely, people with whom to celebrate the good times and receive support in the bad, people to watch our children grow and share a sense of vicarious pride in their achievements, people to notice if we haven’t come by so often lately, people to offer us a seat at their holiday table, to share a Shabbat meal, to sit together with us in shul. How nice it would be to have people to serve as surrogate grandparents for our children or grand-children for our parents, as surrogate siblings, cousins, trusted uncles and aunties. I don’t love the term “replacement relatives” because I don’t believe that anyone can ever fully substitute for members of the family we’re born into or create on our own; these relationships are absolutely sacred and unique. But here at BHBE I think that, in some ways, we have actually created our own version of the rental relative enterprise, going on informally and without fee for service. We simply call it being part of our community.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/30/japans-rent-a-family-industry>

One of the perks of having a synagogue president who is also a philosophy professor is that it leads to many existential conversations, including one that Sandy and I had recently about the definition of the word “synagogue.” I found myself moved by Sandy’s description of a synagogue as “a community of shared values” thus making it different from a neighborhood association or sports club or PTA group or professional organization, all of these joined by common concerns and interests and perhaps even common goals but usually lacking in the kind of shared commitment to overarching ideals that give life meaning and purpose which characterize religious life. Journalist Stuart Schoffman, in a recent *Jerusalem Post* article, spoke about the sense of stewardship many of us feel towards Jewish tradition when he writes: “I like to think of Judaism as a rare violin, handed down in a family for centuries. Not every generation will have the talent or desire to play it, but no one would dream of selling or hocking it. You never know who might want to learn to play.” At its most basic level, synagogues are places that guard and preserve the precious heirloom that is Judaism while also encouraging individuals to play out its beautiful music. But it goes so much further than that!

As a community, there are many shared values which make BHBE unique. We have a deep sense of commitment to traditional ritual and practice evidenced by our robust twice-daily minyan and strong Shabbat service attendance, balanced with a modern, progressive stance when it comes to things like educational innovation in our Academy, the use of contemporary music in our worship, our pledge of radical inclusion when it comes to gender, sexual orientation, religious background, race, family composition, physical or mental ability, and more. We endeavor to be accessible to all regardless of capacity to pay, believing that money should never be a barrier to participating in Jewish life. We try to organize and interact within our congregation in a way that puts people first, valuing relationships above all else and empowering members to actively engage with their Judaism in whatever way is most meaningful to them.

While I could certainly go on, and hope that we will have future opportunities to discuss shared ideals, what I'd like to do in this last portion of our time together this evening is to talk about one particular commitment that we have as a synagogue and what we will be doing this year to elevate and amplify our efforts in this area. As Jews, one of our deepest values is that of justice, knowing all too well the experience of being vulnerable, persecuted, and oppressed and thus dedicating ourselves to ensuring that no other people ever know a similar fate. "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" – the Book of Deuteronomy tells us – "Justice, justice shall you pursue," emphasizing that righting the world's wrongs must be an active, and not a passive, endeavor (Deuteronomy 16:20). Proper treatment of the stranger is mentioned no less than 36 times throughout Torah, more than any other single category of law, reminding us that this sacred obligation towards those who are other takes absolute primacy.

"If your church is silent right now, you may want to leave it," the Christian pastor and activist John Pavlovitz wrote earlier this summer at the height of the family separation policy crisis.² "You may need to leave the church to find your religion." Faith communities exist for so many different reasons – worship, study, fellowship, celebration of holidays, passing on sacred values to the next generation – but if they do not also exist to bring more justice and good into the world, then they are not living up to their highest call. While those within our community will surely disagree at times about matters of policy or politics or leadership or sometimes even values, we are united in our desire to work for right. At this time that our world is so broken, we cannot remain either silent or inactive.

Certainly, there is no shortage of places, causes, and people that could benefit from increased justice efforts on the part of our congregation. And our Social Action Committee, under the dedicated

² <https://johnpavlovitz.com/2018/06/19/if-your-church-is-silent-this-week-you-should-leave-it/>

leadership of Jeff Roth along with an excellent team of volunteers, has been doing great work in this area with signature projects such as Family Promise, Uptown Café, the community garden of H.O.P.E., sandwich making, and so much more. But given the difficult state of our country, many of us are feeling an even more urgent desire to serve justice through projects that are targeted, impactful, and promote systemic change. Hence the launch of BHBE Acts – a new initiative organized this year around the four pillars of Disaster Relief, Food Insecurity, Immigration, and Inclusion. More information can be found on the fliers on your seats tonight.

Through BHBE Acts we will be continuing with many of our current efforts, some of which touch upon the justice themes we've chosen for this year, and we are also venturing into important new areas of work. Join us for a second relief mission through Nechama, this time (tentatively) scheduled for mid-December where we will help families whose homes were destroyed by the ravages of Hurricane Harvey. Get involved in our new partnership with MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger through which we'll be working to create real, permanent change in greater Chicago through advocating for effective hunger policies. Come to the HIAS Chicago Jews for Refugees Assembly, of which BHBE is a co-sponsor, held on October 28th at Anshe Emet with buses from our congregation to make travel easier; plan also to participate in our Winter Warmth clothing drive through Refugee One. Add your efforts to our terrific Disability and LGBTQ inclusion committees, chaired respectively by Anita Miller and myself, or our new Keruv (Interfaith Outreach) effort being led by David Mogul. Contact information for the individuals overseeing all of these projects can be found on the flier previously mentioned. We are always looking for new volunteers!

In addition to these concrete, specific efforts we are also looking to create more of a culture of justice here at BHBE. So many of us are already involved in good works as individuals, as families, through our jobs or with our friends. Acting for right is also something that we should be doing as a synagogue, precisely because we are a community of shared values and this value is amongst our highest. Join the conversation at our BHBE Acts Havdalah and organizing meeting on November 10th. Or feel free to be in touch with me personally if you have further thoughts and ideas.

In this day and age, it may indeed be possible to have a town of just one, to rent replacement relatives for the occasional function or moment of loneliness, to gather on our own to make the world a better place. But through a synagogue, our sacred community of shared values, we can do but so much more.

G'mar Hatimah Tova – Wishing all of us to be sealed for a year of goodness and of action!

Erev Tov.

