

P'ru Urvu: A Year in Pursuit of Fruition and Growth

Rabbi Soffer's Remarks at the JRC Annual Meeting

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I'd like to center my own remarks on a single text that speaks to what I see as this moment in our story as a synagogue, and a Jewish community as a whole. Two words we find in Genesis 1:33: *P'ru urvu*. "Be fruitful and grow."

It's not lost on me how inhumanely this biblical mandate has been hijacked to subvert reproductive justice. But it's as critical as it is timely for us to set the record straight and lay claim to this beautiful Divine wish—*p'ru urvu*, "be fruitful and grow." Looking back and looking ahead, this is a period *fruition and of growth*.

Many things have come to fruition. A return for most- not all- into physical proximity. This was part of last year's growth and all the more so in 5783. Being in the sacred collective state of *panim el panim*, face to face, is a fruit that most of us have appreciated this year. Our appreciation doesn't diminish our empathy for those whose health still denies or limits their on-site presence. You are with us online, we see you, we care about you, and we hope to be closer soon.

This year, our pursuit of *p'ru urvu* has bore the fruit of proximity—of being close and responsibly connected to one another. We felt this in the Fall when we joined with our friends at St. Joseph AME to mobilize citizens to vote, to participate in the state and fate of this very fragile polity of ours. We felt this throughout the year in moments of worship, kicking off a High Holy Day season with full rooms and full voices. We felt this on Shabbat, as we returned to First Friday gatherings, which never engaged fewer than a hundred worshippers—and always with an age range of 9 decades. (Where else does that happen in society?!)

We felt this in varying the times of our services as well. We reintroduced a 7:30pm service once a month, and we returned to our Community Shabbatot, Saturday morning.

Next year we will be doubling the number of those gatherings, to do so most months.

P'ru urvu, be fruitful and grow. We've been doing this step by step—never as quickly as any of us would like, but wisely. We want to do it *well*, making sure we're both effective, and also caring for the *wellness* of our leaders, especially staff, who are making this happen.

Speaking of staff, *P'ru urvu*, we have been blessed by the addition of such extraordinary leaders to our staff team—both full-time and part-time. It's hard to believe that it's been less than a year since we hired our Director of Youth Education and Family Engagement, Michelle Crosbie.

We'll hear from Michelle shortly. Quite simply, there is no richer garden for fruit and growth than youth education. We've already exceeded our pre-pandemic numbers, and not just quantity but quality of learning. Personally, I could not be more delighted that Michelle's overseeing the Jewish education of our kids— and what our team is planning under her leadership is something we can be so proud of.

It's hard to believe that Jordan Wade has been with us less than a year as well, bringing their gifts in communications and engagement. We're so lucky to have Jordan's presence, spirit, and gifts on our staff team. In but a few months we have really felt the deep impact of Stacy Lubov in her "latest iteration" of leadership at JRC. Stacy is helping us with development and supporting our Campaign to expand the Clergy team.

We've been so fortunate to have Bev Shieman in the administration of religious this last year, and we could not possibly overstate how outstanding our school faculty is. *P'ru urvu*, we've also felt a multitude of blessings from our veteran staff members. Our Executive Director Emily Young's heart and devotion infuse and bless her leadership. As my partner, it's such an honor to be leading through this period of "smart growth" with her.

P'ru urvu, so much has come to *fruition* within the Presidential Term of Heidi Tyson, whose relentless drive for growth and improvement is behind every step we've taken. (Don't tell her, but we'll be honoring her more directly in the final Board Meeting!) But I'll say here and now: Heidi Tyson, this will always be a defining chapter of Judea Reform's history, and this congregation owes you a tremendous "thank you."

The same goes to all our lay leaders— our board, our committees and chairs. So much has come to fruition. We felt this in the recent Board meeting. All the work that went into our Constitutional review, led by Eric Muller, really matters— and really will matter in the years and even decades to come. All the work involved in the transition and growth of this campus—making sure all the agreements that help make this place a holy ecosystem—is fruit bearing.

While I could touch on countless other mitzvot, I do want to lift up and celebrate one particular fruit, and that is the fruit of the Ethics Code that our Board just adopted. So many of the fruit of our labor can be enjoyed immediately, and because of the immediacy of their fruition, those who watered the tree get immediate thanks. When it comes to an Ethics Code, this is different. The fruits of this labor present down the road, and gratitude is often overshadowed by the difficulty or pain or work involved in whatever circumstances arise. To that team, led by Ziva Raney, we offer our gratitude—*modim anachnu lachem*, thank you. Thank you for helping this community define and hold each other accountable to our Jewish values.

P'ru urvu, be fruitful and grow. This is not only about the past year but about the year to come. We are growing this campus in partnership with Jewish for Good. We will *feel* this growth together, for instance, when we sit and sing and celebrate in our outdoor amphitheater—a fruit of pure generosity from the Premingers. We know about population trends; we expect a thousand more Jewish families in this area in the decade to come. We have always seen it as our job to be forces of Jewish welcome, of authentic friendship. And the most important leadership task we have now, I believe, is to make sure that as we grow, we do not diminish nor dilute the quality and depth of Judaism we all experience.

That's why we are recommitting ourselves to have the clergy team that every other congregation our size has. Everyone who walks through synagogue doors should expect a rabbi in their lives. And just as our leaders in generations past stepped up to make that happen, the call of this moment is to pick up that mantle. Fruitfulness and growth have to be about real relationships, rooted in the soil of our tradition, grown with our Tree of Life that is Torah, and felt within the hearts of each and every one who calls this place “home.”

Eloheinu Veilohi Avoteinu V'imoteinu,

Our God and God of our ancestors,

On this day when we express such deep gratitude for the blessings in our midst, we ask for Your blessing as we move forward.

May our community grow in the mission of improving lives through the richness of Judaism.

May our community be a model for embrace, as we pursue the mitzvah of welcoming.

May we honor our past with a commitment to the present,

and may the mitzvot *p'ru urvu*, of fruitfulness and growth, become blessings for years and years to come.

Amen.