

Rosh Hashanah 5774/2013—Rabbi Edward Elkin

“Narayever at 100”

On this holiday, as you know, the traditional greeting is L’shanah Tovah Tikateivu—may you and your loved ones be inscribed in the Book of Life. Recent and exhaustive studies reveal some startling statistics on how to live a good long life:

1. Don’t ride in an automobile. They cause 20% of accidental deaths.
2. Don’t stay at home. 17% of all fatal accidents occur in the home.
3. Don’t go for a walk. 14% of all accidents happen to pedestrians.
4. Don’t travel by train, plane, or ship. 16% of all fatal accidents happen on them.

However—you’ll be relieved to hear that only 1/10,000 of 1% of accidental fatalities occur during a service of worship. So today, I not only welcome you to our High Holy Day services, I also welcome you to one of the safest places on earth. Being in shul not only adds in countless ways to your Jewish life, it might actually even *save* your life!

I don’t know if they were motivated by a desire to save their lives or not, but almost one hundred years ago, a group of Jews who had immigrated to Toronto from a small town in what is now western Ukraine, and who were living about a kilometer south of here, met up and started something new. The shtetl they had come from was called Narayev. A small place, near Lvov. Very few people had heard of it, but for them—it was home. Having left that home and crossed a wide ocean to build a better life here in Toronto, they still missed it. They missed the familiar sights and sounds and smells of home, and most especially they missed the people they had left behind. Still getting used to the unfamiliar clamor of the big city, working non-stop just to make ends meet, living several families together in cramped flats—there was little time or energy left for matters of the spirit. Indeed, many who had been religiously observant in the old country simply let it go in the radically new context of the North American big city.

But the group of Narayever who gathered in 1914 wanted to do something together that would honour their common heritage as Jews from that same town-with-the-hard-to-pronounce-name that no one else had ever heard of. At first, they were just an association, a landsmanschaft that provided for mutual support when times got tough. Records show that a doctor was hired in those pre-OHIP days to be on call to take care of members of the landsmanschaft as necessary. Money was collectively raised to send back to Narayev, when word filtered across the ocean that folks there needed to buy a new cow. A landsmanschaft—that’s what this organization might have

remained, and if so it likely would have ultimately withered and died, as so many others did, once the immigrant generation had passed.

But one factor saved the Narayever association from that oblivion—within the group of Narayev expats, there were some who wanted something more. They wanted a shul, whose melodies and traditions would be like those they remembered from their town. It would be a modest shul; the founders were poor and couldn't swing any more than the bare minimum. A place where they could reconstruct, after a fashion, the feeling of community that was so natural and organic back home. A place where they could honour the traditions of their ancestors on soil that was still so unfamiliar, amidst people speaking a language they still struggled with, a place where they could give thanks for their blessings and petition the Master of the Universe concerning their many pressing needs. They wanted—a shul. And so was established Die Ershte Narayever Congregation, The First Narayever Congregation, our beloved shul, celebrating its Centennial in the coming year.

It couldn't have been easy in those early years. The needs were great, resources were limited, people were busy, and there weren't very many volunteers. (Sound familiar?) And yet the founders persisted, and in time they built a community that welcomed other folks from the neighbourhood who weren't from Narayev itself, but who simply found the shul to be an attractive community in which to daven. By the early 1940s, they had prospered enough to be able to buy the little house on Brunswick where the shul remains to this day, still proudly bearing the name Narayever even though we don't have anyone left among our membership who traces his/her ancestry back to that town in Galitsia.

In thinking about our founders, I am so impressed by their vision. They knew what they wanted, they observed that it didn't exist, and so undeterred by their very limited resources they set out to create it. Absent their commitment to their faith and community, we wouldn't be sitting here today, 100 years later, welcoming the new year together under the banner of that name. Yet even our founders, with all their amazing vision, could not have imagined what we've become as a community during the ensuing century. They could not have imagined a congregation 600 members strong, combining with guests to fill 1000 seats in the gym at the JCC plus another couple of hundred at the shul itself, a congregation where women lead davening and read from the Torah, a congregation where two people of the same sex can get married under a huppah. They couldn't anticipate that 100 years later one of our top synagogue priorities would be to make our heritage building fully accessible, so that those in wheelchairs or with other mobility impairments can attend and participate equally in our services. They couldn't imagine a Narayever rabbi who doesn't speak Yiddish, doesn't

have a beard, and who seems to derive perverse pleasure from publicly agonizing over issues of Jewish faith instead of telling people what they're supposed to do and believe. They couldn't imagine that a day would come when there would be no more Jewish community in the shtetl Narayev itself—no more shul, no more school, no more mikveh, no more cemetery, no more Jews—all destroyed by an enemy more diabolical than the Jews had ever known, so that the congregation that they created on this distant shore would be the last *zekher*, the last remembrance of a once small but proud corner of the Jewish Diaspora. In 1914, these powerless, stateless Jews surely couldn't imagine that a day would come when the congregation they established would be celebrating a thriving independent Jewish state in Palestine already 65 years old, or that that Jewish state would be facing the quandary of how to deal with an entire population of non-Jews living unhappily under Jewish military occupation. Our forebears from 100 years ago couldn't imagine that their poor, modest, ethnically based shul would have the wherewithal to concern itself with people in need in far-flung places, such as civil war victims in Syria, flood victims in Alberta, genocide victims in Darfur, and earthquake victims in Haiti—raising tzedakah money each Yom Kippur at least in part to help people who have never heard of us, simply because we are all human beings and it's the right thing to do. Living in an era of widespread anti-Semitism on both sides of the ocean, they couldn't imagine a scenario where most of our Gentile neighbours would actually come to see Jews as not only tolerable, but actually *desirable*, matches for their children, that society would become so open that one third or more of our young people would be intermarrying—and that many of those interfaith couples would be deciding to raise their children as Jews. And the founders who felt so cut off from the town and people they left behind certainly couldn't imagine that 100 years later, their descendants would possess amazing electronic devices that make connecting with other people across town or on the other side of the world so much easier on one level, and yet in a strange way so much harder on another.

So yes, much has changed, so much so that one may reasonably ask, are we really their heirs? Is our retention of the name Narayev anything more than just a quaint bit of nostalgia? Aren't our issues and challenges and our day to day reality in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so fantastically different that we're actually kidding ourselves to link today's Narayev to those who established this community in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>?

Perhaps. But this Rosh Hashanah, as we gather together in our vast numbers to celebrate our New Year once again, I'd like to focus on four areas of continuity, of commonality between us and those Ukrainian immigrants who decided to form a community a century ago. I'm going to identify four challenges that we struggle with no less than they did. In each

area, I acknowledge, many of the details a century later are different. But I'm going to make the case that surprisingly, when we dig down a little deeper, the fundamental issue remains the same now, as it was then. And in each of these four areas I believe the shul community now can play a significant and positive role in the lives of its members, just as it did then.

The first of these four points of continuity I see in the ongoing question of how to be a good Jew on the one hand, while meeting all one's other responsibilities on the other hand. To choose but one example among many—our Narayever founders faced enormous economic pressures as they sought to establish themselves on these shores without resources, without education, without skills, without knowing the language. Many of them felt they simply *had* to work seven days a week, because their labour was all they had to sustain themselves and their families in the present, and to build something for the future—and obviously the world didn't stop on Shabbat and Jewish holidays. Besides the economic pressure, the immigrants also encountered new ideas in the new country, not all of which were consistent with the understanding of Judaism they had grown up with. How does one remain a Jew if one cannot observe Shabbes fully? How does one hang on to a sense of Jewish connection if one is no longer entirely sure about the truth of the received tradition?

These were questions faced by our forebears, and in very different circumstances, they are questions we face today. Our economy may have changed, some of us (though certainly not all) may have prospered—but all the other claims on our lives remain no less powerful. We also face economic, and cultural, pressures that seriously impact on our Jewish lives. The 24/7 economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may lead many to the conclusion that they can't not work one whole day of the week. And besides work, all the recreational opportunities and enticements of the North American weekend may make it hard to choose Shabbat. Can we honour our Judaism in a serious and substantial way while also honouring the expectations of our own generation and the surrounding culture in which we live? How much are we prepared to, or able to, give up personally in order to be a serious Jew—when the other claims on our time, our energy, our attention, our resources, and our minds and bodies are so great?

This dilemma reminds me of a joke I heard this summer in Jerusalem: One day two friends, a chicken and a salmon, were out for a walk. They passed a diner advertising a lox and eggs breakfast special. The chicken suggested they go in, but the salmon hesitated. When the chicken inquired why, the salmon replied—"from you, they want a contribution; from me, they want a commitment!"

Given all the other claims on our time and our resources, what is the commitment we're prepared to make to Jewish life? How do we deal with our fear that, like the salmon, stepping inside the door of the community will ultimately prove to be a sacrifice beyond our ability to absorb? The folks from Narayev worried about that issue 100 years ago as they contemplated getting involved in this new landsmanschaft. How much could they give? What kind of contribution or sacrifice would be required by the organization, when they were already coping with so much, and what would they get in return?

We think about this issue no less today, and knowing that there are no simple, cookie cutter answers for everyone, we aspire for our shul to be a place where individuals across a wide spectrum of responses can find a home. Some will choose to immerse themselves in the life of the shul across the year. Others will be involved at certain high points during the year, like the holidays we are observing now. Of course we all know that the more we put into something the more we get out of it, and as your rabbi I hope that you will be motivated by your experiences in shul—whether coming to services, or taking a class, celebrating a life cycle milestone, mourning a loss, or engaging in a mitzvah to help others, whatever the access point is—to deepen your connection and participation in the community. But we are diverse. The shul now, as then, can be a comfortable and supportive and joyful Jewish community for people at many different points in their Jewish journey to learn about their Judaism, to grow in their Judaism, and to consider these deep questions in a way that is both affirming and healthily challenging at the same time.

The second area of continuity I see has to do with the ancient human struggle with our own limitations and failures. If we have progressed in extraordinary ways in the last 100 years in technology and science and medicine and art and music, I'm sure we can all agree that we are no less spiritually challenged when we bump against our own human frailty and fallibility. For all our ability to look up the capital of Uzbekistan in half a second on one of our electronic devices, we still make mistakes, sometimes doozies. Errors of fact. Errors of judgement. Mistakes that hurt ourselves. Mistakes that hurt others. Not only do we err just as much as our forebears, I would venture that our modern technology only amplifies the mistakes that we inevitably make, and our much vaunted progress sets up expectations of perfection that can be impossible to achieve. How do we understand our own propensity to fail, our own weakness? How do we strive to be the best that we can be, without becoming so perfectionist that we are paralyzed? How do we learn from failure to become more resilient, instead of becoming so stressed about the prospect of failing again that we avoid taking chances? And when we do achieve success, whether educational, professional,

creative, or social, how do we learn the right lesson from that success, holding on to our honesty and humility?

If one needs any convincing that the spiritual challenge of failure represents an area of continuity for Jews, one only needs to open the Bible. Starting with Abraham and his extraordinarily dysfunctional family, down through the sorry record of the Israelites' almost ceaseless rebellions against God and Moses in the wilderness, and the prophets' harsh criticism of their brothers and sisters for their betrayals of God and their exploitation of the most vulnerable members of their society—the Bible can be read as an anthology of Israelite failure. In response, the rabbis created the system of Teshuvah and set up these holidays that we're observing right now as a focal point during the year for our consideration of where we've messed up and where we could do better. Our forebears of 100 years ago needed these yomtovim for that purpose. We need them no less if we are to understand and transcend both our personal failures, and our communal and societal failures, such as the persistence of abject poverty, environmental degradation, racism, and corruption. How do we address these failures? How do we learn from them? How do we cut ourselves appropriate slack for our imperfections, without letting ourselves off the hook too easily?

And if we are speaking about our human limitations, we must mention as well the ultimate limitation, the eternal challenge of sickness and death. Continuity #3. Again, so much has changed. Our forebears a century ago couldn't have imagined chemotherapy, or liver transplants, or the harvesting of stem cells, or anti-depressants, and we're lucky to live in a time which has seen all those advancements and many more. But with all that progress, we still get sick, and we still die. Some of us long before we or our loved ones are ready. An ever increasing number of us long *after* we or our loved ones are ready. We are still fundamentally powerless in the face of death, and we still fundamentally do not understand death. How do we cope with our physical limitations? How do we cope with our own decline? How do we cope with our own mortality? Can we learn how to die well? Can we let the process of dying teach us anything about ourselves and our relationships with others?

I'm reminded of a New Yorker cartoon in which a middle aged woman is standing at a lectern next to a casket addressing those in attendance at a funeral. The caption says, "Mother wouldn't have wanted us to feel sad—she'd want us to feel guilty." I'm guessing that would have been funny 100 years ago, just as it is today. Human relationships are complicated, family stuff is complicated, especially at a time of loss. Jewish ritual can help. One of the first things our Narayever forebears did was buy land for a cemetery. They knew they'd need the support of the community at times of loss as

they worked through the theological and interpersonal issues death inevitably gives rise to. Our ancestors derived comfort from ancient Jewish ritual in regard to illness and loss; one hundred years later, we need it no less and perhaps even more since we face so many agonizing ethical and spiritual dilemmas brought about by modern science and culture. The Hebrew word for funeral is *levaya*, from the word “to accompany.” It’s a mitzvah to accompany the dead to the cemetery, it’s a mitzvah to allow Jewish tradition and community to accompany us when we face these big questions. With apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, I hope that the last century has been for those associated with the Narayever not “100 Years of Solitude” but rather the opposite—100 years of community, 100 years of accompanying each other through life’s difficult moments of suffering and loss.

The final area of continuity I’d like to mention lies in something I’ll call renewal. I don’t know whether our founders articulated it this way or not, but when they took the step of establishing first a landsmanschaft and ultimately a shul, they were making a declaration that no matter how far they had travelled, and no matter how different the culture was in which they lived from what they had known back in Europe, and no matter how different their lives were here from how they had been back in the shtetl, they were determined not to abandon their Jewish identity but to renew it. On these shores, 100 years ago, they started something new, something that had continuity with what went before but which was also reflective of the new reality in which they lived. In the 1980s, 70 years after our founding, that impulse for renewal became manifest in the then-radical decision made by the Narayever to adopt gender-egalitarian practice, and in 2009 the impulse to renew played itself out in the decision to embrace the principle of equality in marriage for same-sex couples. Jews have always responded to changing times by renewing their communities, reinventing themselves even while hanging on to a core identity. Figuring out how to do that, where changes should be made, and where something involves the core which may not be touched—that has been the central challenge of every generation.

As we enter our second century, I hope that the Narayever will be at the forefront of deep conversations about Jewish renewal among its members as individuals, among ourselves as a community, and in our interactions with the wider Jewish world and non-Jewish world. What will be the focus of Jewish renewal in the coming years? I can’t be sure of course, but my hunch is that it’ll have something to do with a response to the technology that has come to be such an overwhelming part of our lives. Our technology is exciting and wonderful in many ways for all the amazing things it allows us to do, and scary in many ways because of all the terrible things it allow us to

do. Some of us embrace it with enthusiasm; others of us are afraid of it and in various ways try to resist it. But no matter where we are along the embrace/resist spectrum, I believe that participation in Jewish life, tradition, community, and faith can provide much needed balance so that we are not overwhelmed by it. I believe we will come to appreciate the wisdom of a tradition that asks us to turn off our gadgets one day a week. That simple act of unplugging on a weekly basis is the most counter-cultural statement we can make in our generation. Yes, it will distance us from our work, and that's a good thing. Yes, it distances us from far-flung friends and family and I maintain that once a week, that is also a good thing—because it helps us to maintain the skill of just being present with the people who are physically with us, and the God who is always spiritually with us. Building a community around the idea of periodic, ritualized, joyful unplugging may be the new egalitarianism, the new Big Idea that renews our community in its second century. I firmly believe that there are human needs which will never be addressed by any app or any bot—perhaps in the coming years the shul can be a place that allows us to engage with those other aspects of our lives in a deep and serious and thoughtful way. Our founders would of course be completely baffled by this as an animating idea of Jewish renewal (at this point we have only a dim understanding of it ourselves), but the general notion that institutions need to be built and renewed in response to changing circumstances and needs would not be surprising to them at all, nor would the notion that Judaism has something important to say in response to changes and developments in the wider society. It was their commitment to renewal on these shores, their belief in the value of maintaining a vibrant independent Jewish voice in the context of an often overwhelming surrounding culture, that led them to found the shul when they did.

So much has changed in the last 100 years but fundamentally our questions are still the same. How do we reconcile our Judaism with the claims of the contemporary world in which we live? How do we deal with our failures? How do we face death? How do we transcend our loneliness? And how can we renew ourselves with ideas that are important for our generation, while still holding on to the core identity which shaped us?

I feel very privileged to be the rabbi of a congregation with such a unique and illustrious history. Many of you are already members of our shul and I invite you to consider new ways to deepen your connection to Judaism in general and the shul community in particular during the new year of 5774. Some of you are not yet members, and we're delighted you're here to celebrate these ancient holy days with us, and invite you to join us during our Centennial year. I am excited about our Centennial and I look forward to continuing the conversation begun by our founders a century ago. I hope that regardless of your level of connection to the shul at this time, you'll be a

part of it. Look for information in the coming weeks about the various celebrations being planned by our Centennial Committee chaired by Micky Fraterman.

Shanah Tovah. May we and our families be inscribed for a healthy, prosperous year ahead, filled with many opportunities to grow, and learn from each other, and give to each other, and may our Narayever community grow during its second century from strength to strength.