

Congregation President Sandy Spatz

Personal Reflection

Rosh Hashanah, 2018/5779

Last December I got a tattoo. The word hineni, here I am. For me it's both a declaration and an invitation; I'm open and ready for what life may bring. The word is a touchstone for me. Several years ago I heard a powerful d'rash about hineni, and it left a lasting impression; then Rabbi Rachel, on this very spot, illuminated the power and the possibility that hineni holds and I felt instantly connected with her and reinvigorated by this magical word. It succinctly expressed the feelings I had as I began my tenure as your president, the prayers of my heart as we launched our youngest into his freshman year of college and the strength I felt as a woman on the precipice of her next chapter. I felt strong in who I was and also open and able to adjust and bend. I was not a fan of tattoos-ask our kids- but something about the hold that hineni has had me considering something completely out of my comfort zone. The thought circled round and round my brain; should I or shouldn't I? Last December, when I was finally able to participate in a Rosh Chodesh observance after months of conflicts that kept me away, I walked in and discovered that the theme for the morning was Hineni. That was that. By coincidence, **perhaps**, our kids we're going to get tattoos later that day, and I told them I was coming with them. I am so glad I did.

When you have a chance to reflect on a particular chapter in your life, sometimes a theme emerges, and if you pay attention, you discover liturgy to frame it. Rabbi Rachel in her recent article for Evolve re-introduced me to Psalm 92; a psalm for Shabbat.

The righteous shall flourish like the palm trees; like the cedar trees, they shall be firmly planted

These words resonate deeply with me as I reflect on my first year as President, the year we created and shared together at JRC and the vision of what's ahead. The message of this psalm is if we are to be righteous, we are to be like the trees. The challenge is that we are being told to be like two opposing kinds of trees. The palms sway and bend in the wind and respond to the elements. Cedars plant themselves firmly and grow straight up into the sky and do not move. So we are taught to be flexible and adaptable to our surroundings like the palm and to be firmly planted in our convictions like the Cedar. This is Reconstructionist Judaism. One foot planted in tradition and one foot planted in the contemporary world and balancing between the two of them.

The year we have shared as a congregation illustrates this beautifully. With Rabbi Rachel's guidance, we are re-imagining how committees are run and how committee work is done, and we are asking different questions. Instead of "why didn't we" we ask "how might we?" The Ritual Practices Committee members were our pioneers. Life cycle events, study, holiday celebrations and davening are still at the core of who we are, but we must consistently evaluate how these practices serve us and our diverse community. This new model not only brings new energy and ideas to our committees but with less time required to participate, new volunteers.

We have hired our first Assistant Rabbi for Education who will with a deeply rooted Reconstructionist lens continue to develop and grow the re-visioning of the Religious School through the Chidush process.

Religious Education has been stagnant since the 1950's. We must continue to ask the right questions so that we can engage and inspire our children in meaningful ways. We remain steadfast in our desire to share our values with our children while understanding that engaging children in religious education demands a new model.

Despite the seemingly endless onslaught of storms that our government continues to rain down on us JRC has continued our work in Tikkun Olam while remaining alert and engaged so that we can be responsive to the ever-changing needs of our wider community. We have supported our Muslim and Immigrant friends and neighbors. We have spoken out against Gun Violence, supported women's rights, dedicated this upcoming year to exploring and understanding the ongoing struggle towards racial equity and strengthened our relationships with other faith communities.

I recently completed a grant application to support JRC in exploring ways to reach Jews where they are. It can no longer be assumed that belonging to a synagogue will be a priority for Jewish adults. If it is a priority, it often is not the only Jewish organization that people engage with spiritually and financially. This is the challenge across religious institutions as people continue to expand their definition of community, respond to the myriad of opportunities to be and to do and grapple with how they were raised versus how they choose to experience a spiritual life. Make no mistake; we still need synagogues to offer places to pray, to celebrate, to learn and to mourn. As the new tagline for Reconstructing Judaism states, we will remain deeply rooted in our commitment to Reconstructionist Judaism and this community while continuing to be boldly relevant.

The metaphor of Psalm 92 also beautifully frames my 1st year as your president: I have stood firmly for what I believe is best for JRC while having to engage in difficult conversations and participate in decision-making around complex issues. I have learned that I too get caught up in my ideas and vision--and I am grateful to my trusted advisors who are patient with me--so I understand that we are a congregation full of smart, savvy, creative people who represent a rainbow of passions and projects. I have aspired to be a leader who does not simply say "no" but rather "yes and." I have aspired to remain open to the changing needs, ideas, and opinions of the congregation and I have endeavored to improve the ability of the congregation to respond to the community and the world in which we live. I have done this while remaining cognizant of our values and our desire to live them inside JRC and in the wider world.

I have also kept my focus on the fiscal health of JRC—which is my charge. Last year I stood before you and challenged us to retire the building loan by, well, today. Like the palm tree, I had to bend and adjust my expectations and respond to the reality in which we live. Like the cedar, I hold firm that retiring the building loan is our #1 priority. Realizing that we were not able to accomplish our goal on our own, I pushed to hire a consulting firm to help us across the finish line. With their expertise, and guidance alongside the dedicated work of our campaign committee, we have re-focused, re-assigned roles and have rebooted our campaign. I am confident that we can achieve our goal: since last Rosh Hashanah, there have been almost 1 million dollars in pledges mad. We are well on our way.

Some of you may not know that in the early stages of building it was determined that there would need to be 18 pillars embedded in the foundation for support. **18 Pillars**. Without much time to respond before the concrete was poured, Rabbi Brant decided to seize the opportunity to create a meaningful moment. He had conversations with our then 4th and 7th graders about what pillars or values they thought supported JRC. The builders ground up the existing foundation and used it in the new foundation, and before it was poured, we inscribed 18 values on the very pillars that literally hold us up. Like the cedars we are strong because we stand on the foundation of those who came before us who had the courage to take their community from a Chavurah to a permanent home and like the palms we knew our original building no longer served us; we needed to update our home to match our vision of what we wanted JRC to be, and we had the courage to pioneer the first platinum Leed certified house of worship in North America. With this history behind and below us--supporting us, along with our desire to see JRC thrive for years to come we felt it only fitting that we re-name the campaign that will carry us the rest of the way to our financial goal; the Pillars of Chai: JRC's Campaign for the Future.

It is with these pillars in mind that we will move forward together to support our building and our future.

This is a powerful time of year; a time to recommit ourselves to all that we hold dear and all that we hope to be and do.

We actually have this opportunity every day, each moment of each day, and if we slip, every Shabbat we can remind ourselves of this opportunity --this beautiful opening that exists for us.

There are moments when we stand strong and moments when we are asked to bend--perhaps shouldering more than we thought was possible. Both are opportunities to express and explore who we are; as individuals, as members of JRC and as citizens of the world.

May the righteous flourish like a palm tree
Grow like a cedar of Lebanon
In the house of God
We shall flourish
We shall bear fruit
Even in old age
Always vigorous and sturdy
As we sing:
To seek godliness is just
Let it be my rock
Let me do no wrong

Shana Tova!