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Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
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The year was 2002, and I stood before you on Erev Rosh Hashanah. I was your student rabbi, and I was really well-prepared. I had written and rewritten my sermons. Several times. I had taken copious notes at the seminary's sermon-writing workshop – start out with a story or a joke or a memory. Transition to your main idea, make connections, work in liturgy or Torah. Elaborate, but don't go on for too long; no one wants to sit through a 25 minute sermon.

In my pulpit supervision class we had talked through every aspect of leading these services – the regular sort of thing: themes of the day, points to emphasize, places to hold back – as well as the underside of service-leading: If you start singing the wrong tune, do you fake it or start over? What if you have to go to the bathroom in the middle of services? If you're pregnant on Yom Kippur, how do you snack in secret? Are open-toed shoes okay on the bimah and are pantyhose a must?

So I stood before you, and I was terrified of you. What would you think? Was I smart enough? Funny enough? Political enough...but not too political? Could I lead a four hour service without wearing out or getting bored or saying something stupid? Would you find out that I couldn't sing, and if you did, would you care? How many mistakes would I make in my student year, and would you ask me to come back? Would you agree to my crazy plan of letting me commute back and forth from London so that I could be with my partner who was studying abroad?

It is hard to believe that I am celebrating my tenth year as the rabbi of Shaarei Shamayim. I muddled through my student year, survived two years commuting back and forth every few weeks from London to Madison and then Philadelphia to Madison, signed three contracts, weathered political controversy regarding Israel from time to time, and had a wedding and two children.

This community has been a spiritual home and a caring community for me. It all began when, as an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin, I saw a flyer in a coffee shop that Shaarei Shamayim was looking for a Hebrew school teacher. I got the job, and I became Shaarei Shamayim's very first Hebrew school teacher. A month later I was a full-fledged member of the congregation's Coordinating Committee and helped start what became the Bet Sefer children's education program. Before I knew it I was applying to rabbinical school. My undergraduate years at Shaarei Shamayim were so formative, and they shaped how I understand Judaism, Jewish life, and Jewish community to this very day.

Partly out of luck and partly out of persistence I ended up back here with all of you after finishing after rabbinical school.

Spiritually, this is where I learned how to hold a dying woman's hand. This is where I learned how to mentor a depressed bat mitzvah student. This is where I learned to call the police after meeting with someone who was suicidal. This is where I learned how to sit and pray and meditate.

Organizationally, this is where I have grown up. I have learned from so many of you – how to write budgets, create a strategic plan, facilitate difficult conversations, prioritize my workload, and schedule in down-time.

I was attracted to Shaarei Shamayim ever since I was an undergraduate student, but I was not always certain I would stay here. Figuring out where to make your home is complicated – is this the community that I want to be part of? Is this the work that I want to do? What kind of work would my partner do? Is the grass greener on the East Coast, or maybe the West Coast?

As the years went by I have realized that this is my community and this is my home. It's hard to believe that I have been here for ten years. Not only was I inexperienced when I first started, but there was so little infrastructure when I came – there were certainly policies, but they were often difficult to find. The Bet Sefer curriculum was one page. Our website was brown and orange. My first year I navigated crisis after crisis, some better than others. Without a more defined structure and firmer foundation, it was challenging to build community.

But that's what we did, and we did it together. Each year we developed a little more infrastructure, and as new people came they offered their particular gifts that helped us grow and thrive. We now have many comprehensive policies, our Bet Sefer curriculum is full of interesting topics and lessons, and our website is nice shades of blue.

Twenty-three years ago our congregation's founders and then early leaders had the conviction that there should be a third Jewish congregation in Madison. They held firm ideals of inclusivity and communal participation, of ritual experimentation, and of living out their values in an authentically Jewish way. They had a sense of purpose and vision, and those creative and deeply committed people became a sacred community. Some of our founders and early leaders sit among us today while others are here in spirit.

Over the years we have celebrated baby namings, bnei mitzvah, conversions, and weddings. We have watched babies grow into teens and then adults. We have mourned with each other when our loved ones passed away. We have studied, prayed, and sang together. We have eaten, laughed, and danced together. We have sat through long meetings together. We have held on to our ideals of LGBT and interfaith inclusion, of opening our doors to everyone on the High Holy Days, of tackling difficult issues openly and honestly, issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the role of non-Jews in a congregation, and dual-faith households.

Our community is not perfect, and sometimes we fall short. We do not always know how to best welcome visitors and new members. We are not always able to provide for all of our members in the ways that we would like. We have room to grow spiritually, ritually, and in how we educate our children. We need more financial resources and our leaders need more support.

But looking over these past ten years, I cannot help but be amazed by how far we have come. I have witnessed such kindness and generosity from our members, such tremendous dedication to our community, such determination to get it right.

I sit through a lot of meetings, and I am one of those rare people who genuinely enjoy meetings. We often disagree with one another, and it can be frustrating to figure out solutions to difficult problems. But one of the things that I have learned from Shaarei Shamayim is that at our best we put our individual interests aside in order to best serve all members of the community, and we share the hard work that it takes to keep our community healthy and strong.

Many of us are members of Shaarei Shamayim because it provides a genuine means through which to express our Jewish identity. We belong because we want to ensure that there is a progressive Jewish religious institution in Madison that is responsive to the issues of our day. We belong because we want all people, regardless of income level, to have access to a rabbi and congregation.

Sixteen years ago, when I was applying to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, I sat in a boardroom in Philadelphia surrounded by rabbis and professors. In that interview I casually mentioned that I had never really thought much about God or Torah. For me, Judaism was about sacred community, and I excitedly shared with them stories of Shaarei Shamayim. I suspect that they were perplexed – how could you want to be a rabbi and *not* think deeply about God or Torah? But they accepted me anyway, and I had six long years to struggle with my own spiritual development and understanding of ancient texts.

What I have learned from this journey is that the core of what we do is to provide for each other, to learn how to be open-hearted and generous, to work for a just world, and to build sacred community together, in our generation and in generations to come. This is what Jewish identity means.

Together we will walk down new paths and together we will write the next chapter of Shaarei Shamayim's history. As part of our strategic planning process in this new year we will have the opportunity to help craft the future direction of our congregation. Our voices, our ideas, and our very presence in this community matters. I hope that you will join with me in tending to the needs of our community in whatever way best suits you. May we be blessed with the sweetness of appreciating how far we have come, and may we be blessed with the exhilaration of imagining where we can go.

L'Shanah Tovah – may it be a good, sweet year for us all.