Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
September 26, 2022

Twenty Years at Shaarei Shamayim: Looking Backwards and Towards the Future

I first learned about Shaarei Shamayim when I walked into a coffee shop on State Street in 1995. I was 21 years old, a student at the UW, and I saw a sign on a bulletin board that the congregation was looking for a Hebrew school teacher. Little did I know that after applying for the job, and being offered the job, that I would be the *only* Hebrew school teacher. And that my students were ages 1 to 13. And that parents would drop their kids off to me at random times so they could enjoy services upstairs. Little did I know that there was no curriculum, no books, and no supplies.

It didn't go so well. But it motivated one of the parents to step in and create a six-week class with five kindergarteners. I must have done a pretty good job, because soon after the president of Shaarei Shamayim asked me if I would join the board as the children's education chair. (I suspect I was the only one who was willing.) I stayed for a while and then went to rabbinical school in Philadelphia.

Shaarei Shamayim was founded in 1989 and had about 30 individual members. In the mid-90s the congregation grew to 40-50 households, and a few years later they hired Rabbi Brian Field as their first rabbi. He was with the community for six years, and when he left, the congregation decided to look for a student rabbi as a transitional position.

I had fond memories of Shaarei Shamayim, so I eagerly applied. And I got the job. I am now beginning my twentieth year at Shaarei Shamayim. It wasn't an obvious choice. Had my rabbinical school done a yearbook I'm pretty sure my classmates would have voted me "least likely to ever be a congregational rabbi." Most congregations were dysfunctional, or stuck in their ways, or run by an old guard. I couldn't imagine working in that kind of environment.

When the time came to consider whether we would continue our relationship after I completed my student rabbi year, I was in a tough position. My partner, Renée, was in rabbinical school, two years behind me, and she was planning to go to London for the year. I didn't want to be apart from her for a year, and the

congregation was only offering me a half-time job. But I thought, hey, instead of working 20 hours a week for a half-time job, why not work 26 weeks a year? I could fly back and forth from London all year, in three-week stints. This was long before hybrid or telecommuting or Zoom were part of our lexicon, and somehow you, and Renée, agreed to this crazy plan.

My first five years at Shaarei Shamayim, from 2003 to 2007, were rocky. The office administrator worked five hours a week. Volunteers poured hours and hours of time into the congregation and burned out. One crisis unfolded after another. The website was orange, brown, and green.

But slowly we created a bit of order out of the chaos. We created policies – and even followed them. It was also a time of significant professional growth for me. I was young, and I had never really had a professional job before.

One week we had a particularly large bat mitzvah. And – I don't think I've ever told anyone this – I overslept! You know that sense of dread when you realize that you are in a very unfortunate position, and you fly through the house in a panic. When I arrived at the bat mitzvah, I was so flustered that I dropped all my papers on the street. I walked in just as we were supposed to begin. The congregation was very gracious. I learned that sometimes we make mistakes, we apologize, and we move on.

At one point during that time, I officiated at a funeral in Janesville. It was just me, the son of the woman who died, and the gravedigger. There's usually a cement liner in the ground and the casket is lowered into it. When the gravedigger started to lower the casket, it didn't fit. He looked at me incredulously. I looked at him incredulously. Then I sat down under a tree with the son for an hour, while the gravedigger took a hammer and pounded off the handles of the casket so it would fit. It was awkward and painful and there was nothing I could do. I learned that often we can't fix other people's problems, but we can sit quietly with them and offer our care and support and presence.

These were also the years of controversy. In my first year, a group in Madison wanted to create a sister city between the city of Madison and the city of Rafah, in Gaza. Suddenly, alders who were accustomed to overseeing budgets and approving construction projects were thrown into a sharp, sometimes vicious debate that got national and even international attention. Jews, unsurprisingly, were on both sides of the debate.

I wrote a letter to the Common Council explaining my support for the project. It was bland and innocuous. I wrote, ''Our hearts must be big enough to hold the tears of both peoples." That line ended up in the *New York Times*. It was the first time I was publicly called an antisemite and self-hating Jew, and it wasn't fun. I learned that as much as I might want to be a people-pleaser, it's not always possible to do so and stay true to my values. Sometimes we do need to take sides in order to do what we believe is right.

The second phase of my time at Shaarei Shamayim began in 2008 when we moved from the Prairie Unitarian Universalist Congregation to the First Unitarian Society. It made a huge difference for our congregation. This space is beautiful and flexible and in the heart of Madison, and we have built a warm relationship with FUS, which has given us stability and helped us grow.

This was also the year that my oldest daughter, Eliana, was born. A couple years later, my younger daughter, Meytal, was born. I had never been so exhausted. In 2010, I was newly pregnant on Yom Kippur, and I left during the service to eat and drink in the pastor's office down the hall, almost falling asleep, and wondering how I was ever going to make it to Aleynu. I learned that if I could lead High Holiday services while newly pregnant I could do almost anything.

At the beginning of 2011, Madison witnessed the occupation of the State Capitol. We held a large Shabbat service in the rotunda. It happened to be the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. We said Kaddish for the young women who were killed in the fire. Rarely had I experienced public, protest Judaism like that. I learned that Judaism can be relevant, creative, powerful, and speak to the times we are living in.

From 2011 to 2015 we commissioned a Torah, one of the few written by a *soferet*, a woman scribe. Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli was not your ordinary scribe. Her contract with us was probably the first in the world that contained a clause for maternity leave. She was brilliant and intense, and unabashedly Orthodox and feminist. She drew comics about the Talmud, and she quoted Judith Butler when we dedicated our Torah. She insisted on using a Yemenite script because the Yemenite Jewish community had been marginalized in Jewish history. Yonah's boundary crossing dislodged many of my assumptions. I learned the power of old Jewish traditions and rituals.

During this time, we completed a strategic plan. It involved many charts. And many conversations. It was a lot of work but not a lot of pain. We made a decent plan, and we followed it.

The congregation had become stable enough that I could take a six-month sabbatical. I spent half of it in Israel, and I became particularly interested in how we teach about Israel and Palestine. I realized how unique Shaarei Shamayim is, that we could teach our kids to think critically about complex issues and help them understand both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. We could upend orthodoxies in the Jewish community that promote a rigid discourse that ignores or even disparages the Palestinian people.

The third phase, 2016 through the beginning of 2020, were the years of Trump. The congregation became more engaged in working towards social justice. We wrote the Madison Jewish Pledge of Solidarity and Sanctuary and 200 Jews in Madison signed it. We took on significant projects, like preparing a home for a refugee family through Jewish Social Services and raising $100,000 for Wisconsin's immigrant rights organization, Voces de la Frontera. We went to Milwaukee, with our Torah, for a Jewish protest against ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

During this time, we also celebrated our 30th anniversary. Shaarei Shamayim had come a long way. Our strategic plan had actually worked. We had grown, we had created more financial stability, and we were flourishing. We hired our first cantorial soloist. We had become a Jewish community that was creative, interesting, experimental, and meaningful.

And then in March, 2020 I drove to FUS for a Shabbat service. And when I arrived, no one was there. I waited and waited. And then a few people came. And we talked for a few minutes. And then we decided that perhaps we should go home. Covid had arrived.

Everything was canceled. I wrote the word "canceled" so many times that I will never again spell it with two "l's." We learned how to use Zoom. It was clumsy. And awkward. That next Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I led 17 hours of Zoom services from the kitchen next to my office. It had pretty blue walls and decent acoustics, but oh my God, was I lonely in there.

It was a time of heartbreak. So many people were isolated and scared. Our congregation was spared the worst. My colleagues in New York officiated at funeral after funeral after funeral. It was the time of mourning, and delayed mourning, of malaise and burnout.

We tried to be creative, but a Simchat Torah celebration over Zoom left a lot to be desired. The Passover Zoom seder was fine, out of necessity, and it beat sitting home by yourself, but at times it felt too staged, even forced. I learned that we can adapt when we have to, and creative moments can arise when we're not expecting it. We are now able to be more accessible to people who are disabled, elderly, vulnerable, or caring for a loved one because we offer online services. We can invite rabbis from anywhere to teach classes for us virtually. It opened up possibilities that I would never have imagined a few years ago. I learned that living into these possibilities takes a lot of work.

And now, the present. We are at a crossroads. When we weren't paying attention, we grew. People came to us because they wanted community after the isolation of the pandemic. We had been planning to increase our staffing, and then last month, Joy, our long-time office manager and bookkeeper, resigned.

There were some dark days when I started to comprehend what it would mean to plan High Holidays and our kids' program, during the member renewal drive, without Joy. One day an email arrived that said we owed money to some company and our account was going to be shut down, and I thought, "I am a total failure." So I desperately texted Joy: "You didn't tell me about this one!" And she texted back and said, "Laurie, it's spam, throw it away."

At times like this, I thought, "Maybe I need a distraction – I should join another Facebook group!" A colleague had recommended one for synagogue staffers. People shared all sorts of problems, and they had all sorts of solutions. "Help!" wrote one person, "There is a bird stuck in our sanctuary. What do I do?" The answer: "Give it a bar mitzvah, it will never come back."

In all seriousness, we often think of congregations in terms of "Do I agree with the values it upholds?" or "How good is the rabbi's sermon?" or "How much Hebrew do the kids have to learn for their bnei mitzvah?" We come because we get something out of it. We come to make friends, find spiritual meaning, or challenge ourselves intellectually. We attend services, celebrations, programs, and classes. We enroll our kids in the children's education program. We turn to

the rabbi when there is a crisis or a death or we are just looking to connect with other people.

We don't usually think about how we *contribute* to the community, what the organizational challenges are, and what staffing and structures will support what we want to do. Reading the postings of synagogue staff from all sorts of places made me see different possibilities for our community, and given that we are at a crossroads, at the new year, it's a good time to think about these things.

Most obviously, we contribute financially, through membership dues and other donations. When our leadership asks us to donate, they give us an opportunity to express our values. If we value a community like this congregation, then we can express that through financial support, which provides stability for the congregation. We need stability to provide Jewish programming, rabbinic support, and beautiful space. We each have a role to play.

There's a classic Jewish story where everyone is supposed to pour a bottle of wine into a large barrel so that there will be enough wine for a big community celebration. For two weeks everyone brings a bottle and pours the contents into the barrel. When it's time for the celebration, the rabbi pours the first cup from the barrel – and out flows a crystal, clear glass of water. You see, everyone thinks that everyone else will contribute a bottle of wine, so they contribute a bottle of water because they think their one bottle of water won't make a difference.

We also contribute by volunteering. Three people lifted the ark onto the bimah last night. Another greeted you when you walked in. And another handed you a prayer book. Volunteering builds commitment to a community. If you're one of the few people who knows how to run the sound system, you make yourself indispensable. If you sign up to wash dishes after a bat mitzvah, you are helping a family to celebrate.

The next way we contribute is through our leadership. Many of us have joined a committee or served on the board or worked on a project. The congregation is so dependent on knowledgeable, thoughtful, and skilled people to step up and offer their time. Leaders support the congregation by listening well, guiding the decision-making process, and acting in ways that serve the needs of the entire community. Our leaders have the opportunity to collaborate with other people, share what they know, and give to a community in their own unique way.

The last way we contribute is through our participation. The congregation needs everyone to show up – not always, but enough. It needs our energy, voices, presence, and laughter. Otherwise, it's empty and lifeless. If no one comes, we may as well just shut our doors. We have a Torah study group that meets regularly. They contribute by breathing life into the community, welcoming new members, teaching Torah, and creating cross-generational relationships.

We give and take in different ways. Some of us give more and some of us give less. Some of us take more and some of us take less. We have different life circumstances, have different needs, and have more or less money, time, and energy to share. And over the decades, as our lives change, the way we give and take will change. What matters is that we bring intention and act thoughtfully when we consider what and how we can contribute.

We've grown to almost 200 households. As we look around there are many new faces. But with the pandemic, so many of us have not met each other or seen each other in quite some time.

The congregation has several havurot, small groups of people with similar interests or demographics who get together regularly. We need more of these, and we need to strengthen the ones we have. People in different havurot can also get to know each other at the winter retreat and holiday celebrations throughout the year.

We need to make sure that when our members have surgery or need meals or rides, or there is a death, they get the support they need. Showing up for each other matters. Fighting individualism and isolation matters. Bringing a lasagna matters.

Our community is really committed to taking our Judaism out into the world, drawing from its teachings about caring for the vulnerable among us and creating social change. There is so much we can do. It just takes some organization and commitment and energy.

For many of us the Judaism we grew up with was stale and uninteresting, but Judaism doesn't have to be that way. Our holiday celebrations and Shabbat services, life cycle rituals and text classes, can be rooted in deep spiritual exploration. They can be meaningful and speak to our lives in profound ways. They can be vehicles to connect us to each other.

Our congregation is changing, the Jewish community is changing, and our world is changing. We have to learn from each other, adapt to new landscapes, and make real commitments to each other.

A year ago, just after Rosh Hashanah, my dad died. I left for the funeral expecting that I would not be here for Yom Kippur. But the timing worked in a way that I was able to come back in time. I edited my not-finished sermon with Renee's dad on Google Docs when he was 35,000 feet in the air, flying home from the funeral. My dad would have been so proud.

This was really when I learned about community. So many people brought meals, and sat in our backyard, and built our sukkah for us. It wasn't that any one act was so huge or complicated. It was just so kind. I learned that we can do this for each other. It's countercultural to reach out and accept help. It takes courage from the giver and the receiver. But this is how we build community. And it matters.

On this Rosh Hashanah, I invite you to think about how you can get involved in the congregation, how you can contribute and participate, and how you can add your intention and thoughtfulness. Each of us can bring our unique selves to the congregation and make an impact through our relationships, our ideas, and our actions, whether we were a founding member or we are here today for the first time.

May this be a year of exploration, rebuilding, and weaving together a Judaism and Jewish community that we can feel proud of, one that enriches our lives for years to come.

L'shanah tovah – may it be a sweet, healthy new year.