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### Moving Forward With Vision, Passion, and Leadership

When I think of my job description, the words teacher, counselor, organizer, community-builder, administrator, director, mentor, collaborator, and storyteller come to mind...But really, the best word that best describes my work is cheerleader.

That's weird for two reasons. The first is because when I was 12 years old, I was determined to be a real cheerleader. I went to the rehearsals, learned the cheers, and practiced diligently. But unfortunately, the competition was stiff, and I lacked coordination, and it all ended in tears.

But the second reason it's weird to think of myself as a cheerleader—of Judaism—is because I consider myself one of Judaism's biggest critics. You know, someone comes into my office and tells me that they are uncomfortable with a prayer or with a piece of Torah, and I say—"You think that's sexist? Let me show you some real misogyny."

But still, I do think of myself as a cheerleader, because I believe that Judaism, and this congregation, are really important. With so much change over the past four years—from the pandemic to staffing changes to our congregation's growth—I have reflected quite a bit on *why* it matters.

I have three answers: community, identity, and values.

At the heart of Judaism is community. Judaism requires us to build community. At its best it leads us to foster complex and overlapping relationships, to deepen our understanding of one another, and to reach out to support one another, even if we are strangers.

Our society is in the midst of a loneliness epidemic—so much so that this epidemic has been named as a public health crisis. Loneliness damages our physical and mental health and harms us individually and collectively. Most of us will experience periods of loneliness in our lives, but for some of us loneliness is chronic.

Community can address the pangs of loneliness. Community is a source of friendship and connection. Sometimes the connections are loose—you say hello to a familiar face at services, you sit next to someone in a discussion, you see the same people at a monthly committee meeting. And sometimes, the connections go deeper—people get to know you, share different parts of their lives with you, and show up for you when you are in need.

And importantly, they expect that you show up for them if they are in need.

We often think of obligation as problematic, like it's synonymous with being overburdened or overwhelmed. But obligation is central to community. When you are obligated, it means that you are important. You are needed. You have gifts to offer. What could be a better antidote to loneliness?

As many of you know, my partner, Renee, is the rabbi at Jewish Social Services. This summer she was contacted by a funeral home in Dodgeville. A developmentally disabled Jewish woman had died and she had no family, no friends, no community. Rabbi Renee wanted to hold a traditional funeral for this woman and therefore needed a minyan. She asked me if Shaarei Shamayim could help. I sent an email to some of our members, and within an hour a group of ten people had committed to making up a minyan for this woman's funeral service. A month later, I heard one of our members say this woman's name during the Mourner's Kaddish.

This was a profound act of kindness, and it mattered. The ten people who showed up to witness the burial of a stranger who had no one to mourn her honored her life.

The second reason this congregation matters is because being Jewish defines who we are. We are Jews, or we are family members of a Jewish person. We are here because our Jewish identity and Judaism is important.

For those of us who grew up surrounded by other Jews, being Jewish might be something we have always taken for granted. Belonging to a congregation perhaps felt less important elsewhere, because we were immersed in Jewish culture on a regular basis. But here in Madison, with such a small Jewish population, finding a Jewish community becomes more important.

Others of us are in the opposite position. We have no Jewish memories because we became Jewish later in life. We are looking for a Jewish community to help us shape our Jewish identity, to give us Jewish experiences so five years from now we can look back on our newer Jewish memories. We found Judaism because we were searching for a meaningful spiritual path and we were drawn to the religious traditions. We are intent on learning and growing Jewishly.

Of course, many of us do not fit easily into either of these groups. We are here because a loved one is Jewish. Or we want to learn Hebrew or study Torah. Or we want a welcoming space where we can celebrate Jewish holidays and debate Jewish politics.

I might be critical of some aspects of Judaism, but I do believe that Judaism can be a deeply meaningful spiritual or religious path. It can ground us when our lives feel chaotic or unstable. It can give us meaning when the world feels meaningless. We can engage with Jewish texts across the generations and add our own insights to these ancient conversations. We can steep ourselves in Jewish meditation and prayer. We can frame important life events with Jewish rituals that speak to moments of transition, celebration, and loss.

A month ago, I was leading Torah study, and we were focusing on the nature of forgiveness. As we were talking, I was struck by how intergenerational we were. Our group spanned almost

every decade from the teen years into the nineties. How often does a group like this sit together and talk about the nature of forgiveness? We had many different reasons for giving up yoga or brunch so we could discuss Jewish texts with people we had just met. But coming together to talk about substantive issues mattered.

Living a Jewish life can be hard. Hebrew can make services feel inaccessible. It takes work to integrate Jewish practice into our lives. We have to grapple with the challenging parts of ancient Jewish texts that can be alienating. For many of us, feeling Jewish is in our bones. But practicing Judaism as a religious tradition is not. It requires learning or relearning many rituals and observances.

The third reason this congregation is important is because the community's values align with our personal values. That doesn't mean that we all agree with one another on political issues. Or that our members sign onto a particular political platform. But we are largely united in our belief that this congregation should be welcoming and inclusive. That working towards social justice is important. That Jewish texts and values can guide us when faced with the most difficult issues of our lifetime.

Rooting our actions in ideas drawn from Jewish tradition can make Judaism much more relevant: our ancient texts have much to say about the just treatment of immigrants and workers; the protection and equitable use of our natural resources; and the right to an abortion. These are core Jewish values. What could be more important than working on social justice issues as a community?

Four years ago, a group of Shaarei Shamayim members traveled to Milwaukee to protest the Trump administration's inhumane treatment of migrants at the southern border. It was a Jewish protest. We carried a Torah. We marched with the activist organization, Voces de la Frontera. We felt that our uniquely Jewish experiences, and the stories we had learned from our parents and grandparents, required us to raise our voices in protest.

It was powerful to march as Jews, and to march with other members of Shaarei Shamayim. Not all of us are going to attend a protest. But others of us will organize walks to raise money for an organization, serve meals to people in need, or prepare an apartment for a refugee family moving to Madison.

Our congregation matters because of community, identity, and values. But it takes real effort. Sometimes you end up at a potluck and you sit awkwardly trying to make small talk. Or someone makes a slightly offensive comment. Or you don't really feel like you fit in. People are too traditional or not traditional enough. They are closed and reserved or they share way too much. Their children are annoying. They only talk about their work. It happens. It's part of the messiness of community. But the alternative—that we surround ourselves by a small group of people who are similar to us, or we live solitary lives—is much less appealing.

Over the years at Shaarei Shamayim I have gained a few insights that might be useful in thinking about our congregation, especially when it feels challenging.

Number one: This is not middle school. There is no cool kids' group. I know how difficult it can be to walk into a room and find somewhere to sit when you don't know anyone, but there is really no fixed center, no popular cohort, no in-crowd. Many people have created interlocking, overlapping relationships with others, some thirty years old and some that began in the last month.

Number two: No one is checking your tzitzit. This one might need some explanation. Tzitzit are fringes that traditionally Orthodox men wear at all times. The custom is to check them every day to make sure that they are tied properly. Figuratively, when someone is checking your tzitzit it means they are making sure you are observing the commandments properly and perhaps judging whether you are a good Jew.

At Shaarei Shamayim, for those of us who are Jewish, no one really cares if you are a "good Jew." And if someone is judging you, it's not the community norm and it's not appreciated. Certainly, we have some practices and policies around keeping kosher and celebrating Shabbat and holidays, but so many of us worry that we are not Jewish enough or we do not know enough. We worry that someone will scold us for doing something wrong. And to go back to my first point, this is not middle school.

Number three: No one is going to call your mother if you don't show up. Some of you are here today because you think you're supposed to be here, and maybe your mother actually told you to come. But you're thinking about your to-do list or wondering when we'll be done. I get it—it's long, it can be unfamiliar, you don't really relate to the liturgy, you're tired of standing up and sitting down.

But showing up is critical, because being present builds community, meaningful connections, and friendship. It provides an opportunity for growth, learning, and celebration. It strengthens the collective.

This is my twentieth year at Shaarei Shamayim, and when I look out at our community, I see a community that is strong and healthy. It is filled with thoughtful, creative, caring people who take seriously Jewish values and integrate them into their lives, who are committed to helping others in need, who uphold the principles of social justice.

When I first came in 2003, the congregation felt too small. There were not enough volunteers, our services did not have enough energy, and we did not have much capacity. And so, I created growth plans. Many different, color-coded growth plans. We put advertisements in the newspaper, hung flyers around town, even thought about standing on the street offering apples and honey to people as they walked by. And we grew, slowly but steadily. Throughout the pandemic, we kept growing, at a bit of a faster rate, but we were all so preoccupied with putting

our chairs six feet apart and debating if we should check vaccination cards that no one seemed to notice.

And now I hear the old-timers say that they walk into services or a gathering and they don't know anyone. There are so many new people. It's wonderful that we've grown—we have enough volunteers, our programs and services have energy, and we can create so many different Jewish micro-communities, or havurot. But still, I have sensed a little uneasiness. Growth—and change—is hard.

Our little congregation is not so little anymore. This is the time that we have to be more intentional about creating community. We have to strengthen the connections among different groups within the congregation and also on an individual basis. Because more than anything, it's being a community, and really knowing each other, that matters.

We are at a crossroads, and it's an exciting time. In this next year we will be able to shape our community for years to come. We are building the infrastructure and organization to meet our growing needs. We are hiring an associate director to provide us with more stability. We are bringing in new leaders who want to help steer the congregation. We are laying the foundation for increased financial health.

But we need your help as we try to catch up to our growth.

Some of us have only five minutes a week to spare. We are pulled between taking care of our parents and our children. Work is all-consuming. Illness prevents us from engaging. We have other obligations.

Others of us are looking for a way to be involved. We have a solid five hours a week to spare, and we would love to commit ourselves to some kind of project or take on a new leadership role. We are looking for a purpose. We want to feel obligated.

Most of us are somewhere in the middle. But if the right task, or project, or position came along, we would consider it.

No matter how much time you have, we need your vision, your passion, and your leadership.

Some of us can balance budgets, raise money, draft a strategic plan, and give legal advice. Others of us can clean out cabinets, wash dishes, and write thank you notes. It doesn't really matter what our skills and interests are. We all have something to contribute. I hope that you will get involved, meet new people, take on a small task, or join a committee. It is a gift to the congregation, but it is also an opportunity for meaningful engagement.

Rabbi Tarfon, in the ancient Jewish text, Pirkei Avot, teaches: "It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

For us, the work is weaving connections amongst each other; living a Jewish life; and creating social change. We have a responsibility not to desist from the work, whether we define that as

not turning away from the most important social justice issues of our day or caring for others in our congregation.

Obligation is a part of community, in the best and most sacred way. We are important. We each have gifts to offer. We do not need to do the work alone.

On this Rosh Hashanah, and throughout the year, let's join together, welcome others in, and show up to strengthen our community for the future.

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