



Rabbi's Report
Temple Aliyah Annual Meeting
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Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA
May 18, 2020

I have been giving annual reports to the congregation for 29 years. Each year, it has been fascinating for me to look back and explore what I've been doing and what our shul has been doing over the past year, to reflect on what we do well, and what we are still striving to achieve, and to look forward to the challenges ahead.

But this year is certainly unique. I can't think of a programming year (September to May) which has exhibited greater contrast between its beginning and its end.

This past Purim—which isn't that long ago—we were all gathered in person in our social hall enjoying a shpiel entitled, "Shmaltz." (Remember that? It seems like that was a long time ago, doesn't it?)

Within days, we decided to close our building, and that weekend, we held our last in-person bat mitzvah, with only 25 permitted to attend.

Within days of our closure—actually, within one day—we became a virtual shul.

That first week, I introduced several new weekly classes: including one on the Parashah of the week and another on Daf Yomi, the daily Talmud page. I invited Eddie Phillips, a long-time member and a physician specializing in lifestyle issues, to come and speak about resilience. I offered sessions on how to prepare for Passover during an epidemic, and how to host a virtual Passover seder.

Our minyans became virtual virtually overnight, and the Ritual Committee began a months-long effort to initiate and support step after step to enable us to continue to support the ritual needs of the congregation. The Cantor and I began offering weekly Kabbalat Shabbat services, and Gil and Margie Brodsky began offering weekly Havdalah services. We brought back meditation and yoga and other programs. And we offered virtual seders on both nights of Passover. All of this required much learning, thinking and training.

Mercaz Aliyah and Gan Aliyah became virtual very, very quickly. Debbi Fendel and Alisa Levine showed remarkable nimbleness, flexibility and skill at marshalling their staffs, who gave it their all. And Eitan immediately transitioned to communicating and gathering with our youth via Zoom.

Our pastoral needs multiplied rapidly during this period. More than the usual number of our members became ill or underwent medical treatment during this time. And some sadly succumbed to their maladies. Just to give you an idea, since Purim I have been involved with 19 deaths involving 16 families. (Three families suffered multiple losses during this time.) This has entailed conducting funerals, shivas, and shiva minyans under vastly different circumstances than any of us had ever encountered.

Fortunately, happy occasions have gone on as well. Within a few days, the Cantor and I had to determine how to celebrate the coming of age of the young people scheduled to have bar or bat mitzvahs during this time. Three families chose to celebrate their simchas virtually; seven chose to postpone them. In addition, I've been involved in several brisses—not as the mohel, which would have been difficult to fulfill virtually—but as a rabbi. The Cantor hopes to conduct his first virtual wedding in one week.

The Cantor and I had to learn how to use Zoom effectively. That's a lot harder than learning how to use Zoom. We then had to learn how to deal with Zoom Bombing. We had to learn a lot of things. Using technology is, at least initially, complicated. And Zoom is no exception. Moreover, as we all learned this past Sunday, Zoom can disappoint us too. (Zoom went down worldwide this past Sunday.) Fortunately, that didn't happen during the early stages of the pandemic.

This was a demanding time. I will put it this way: I think I took one actual day off between Purim and last week. I'm not saying that to boast. I'm sure it's true of many of us in this room. I'm saying it to capture the essence of this era.

What made it all worthwhile is that this was work being done in order to keep our community not only **functioning** but **flourishing**. Frankly, it was stimulating to think outside of the box and to continue, notwithstanding the dramatically altered circumstances, to pursue our communal goals.

One thing that became clear during this period is how important it is, **especially** during times like these—for us to continue to adhere to the basic rules—“meta-rules,” you might call them—that have kept us

functioning cohesively for so long. One of them, for example, is that we should always be open, honest, and direct with our feedback. That's critical, in order for us to operate effectively.

For, like democracy, community is fragile. Maintaining good communication and working collaboratively are essential for our community to flourish.

For ultimately, a shul is not its programs; it's not its activities or its events. A shul is—or should be—a community.

Some people have expressed concern about the future of shuls in this era, the age of the coronavirus. Here are my thoughts on that, based in part on our experience during these past two months and in part on essays written by, among others, Barry Shrage, past president of CJP.

Shuls have become not less but more important to some of our members during this time. This past Shabbat afternoon, we had 35 people participating in our Pirkei Avot class—twice as many as in the pre-Zoom era.

The same thing is true of our Daf Yomi class on Monday mornings. We have close to 20 regular participants in that class from far and wide. And we have about the same number coming to the Parashat HaShavua class that Rabbi Gordon and I are alternating teaching on Friday mornings.

Of course, we can and we should do more. For although many are connecting with our community, many are not. In this era in particular, we can't reach out too much to our members. Reaching out needn't involve a program; it can start with a phone call or a card, and can and should move on from there, in a variety of ways.

It's all about community.

Throughout this period, I've tried to communicate regularly with the congregation. Periodically, I have written letters to the congregation, and have created several videos. Some of these were for the grownups in our shul, and some were intended for our littlest ones, in Gan Aliyah—and their parents, of course.

Let me add that none of what I've described would have been possible without the help of our hard-working, capable, skilled, congenial, devoted administrative staff: Marie, Linda, Caroline, and Elisa, led so ably by

Melissa. (What a first year Melissa has had!) All of them have had to adjust to a new reality. And they have done so with generosity and good spirit.

Let me add that in the middle of all of this we have been conducting searches for successors to Alisa and Debbi. Many thanks to those involved in those searches. From the hours that Alisa and Debbi have been putting in during the past two months, you wouldn't have known that they were leaving their professional positions. On behalf of all of us, I am truly grateful. And I'll have more to say about them at a suitable occasion in the future.

I also want to thank the lay leaders of our congregation, who have devoted countless hours during this extraordinary time. You know who you are. So many people have done so much in so many different ways: whether it's calling congregants or delivering food, or dropping off masks, or hosting Zoom calls: the acts of hesed, which are the backbone of our shul, have continued unabated.

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I have been asked many times, **“What will happen on the High Holidays?”** I know the answer to that question—but it depends on what you mean by the question.

If you mean: **“Where and how will we gather in worship?”** I don't have a clear answer, although let me state that I have heard nothing that suggests that it will be safe for us to gather as we have in previous years. Clearly, in determining what we should do, we will have to listen to **(A) the medical experts, (B) governmental authorities, and (C) the wisdom and guidance of our tradition.** One thing is clear: pikuach nefesh, saving a life, is an extraordinarily important value in the Jewish tradition. It would be inappropriate for a shul to set in motion procedures that would risk the health, the safety, or, of course, the lives of our members. There are other values at stake as well, such as “marit ayin”: we mustn't engage in behavior that could be interpreted as encouraging or condoning unsafe behavior. I have spoken about these values in a dvar torah to the Board a week or so ago, a text that I hope will be made available to the entire membership.

But if the question is, **“Will we have the opportunity to repent?”**
“Will we have the opportunity to reflect on our deeds during the past year and to resolve to behave differently in the future?”

“Will we be able on the High Holidays to renew ourselves and our purpose?” To that I want to give a resounding, “Yes.”

We are a shul committed to providing opportunities for all of our members to connect with our tradition, our history, our faith, our community and our future.

Of course we’re going to have the opportunity to pray on Rosh Hashanah.

Of course we’re going to have the opportunity to hear the shofar blown during the season of repentance.

Of course we’re going to have the opportunity to fast on Yom Kippur.

Yes, much will be different; yet much will be the same.

I for one—and I’ve said this on more than one occasion—am excited by the opportunity to adapt what we have always done to the extraordinary circumstances in which we now find ourselves.

We can rue what we have lost.

We can try to replicate the way we’ve done things in the past.

And/or ... we can open ourselves to new ways of achieving our goals; and we can celebrate our innovations.

I invite us all to embrace these challenges. Let’s try our best, in this era, to be not only the best **virtual** shul we can be, but to be the kindest, most responsive, most **virtuous** community we can be.

Thank you!

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