

The Synagogue @ 25:
Looking Back at the Past and Forward to the Future

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Walking through the rubble of the remnants and the still smoldering ashes of the ruins of the Beit HaMikdash two thousand years ago, Rabban Yohanan's student lamented, "Woe to us. The place which once atoned for our sins lies in ruins." It is difficult for us to imagine the extent of the sense of loss and anguish experienced by the generation that witnessed the destruction of the Temple, but the Talmud's description is so graphic I can picture the scene, sense the despair and almost smell the still smoldering embers still smoldering.

The shock of seeing a vacuous void where God's abode once stood presented a serious theological challenge to their understanding of the power, or lack of it of the God they worshipped. On a practical level something had to be done to assume the role of the place that had served as the center of the nation's religious, national and personal commemorations. The rabbis of the first century had to struggle with a catastrophe that exposed the limits of God's omnipotence. In response, Rabbinic Judaism instituted a number of rituals to mourn the loss of the Temple, some of which we still practice to this very day, the most familiar of them being the breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the Jewish wedding ceremony.

But our sages did not just lament their predicament, bemoan their circumstances and agonize over the theological implications of being deprived of a place where their sins were expiated. They found ways to respond that allowed people to continue to encounter and sense God's presence in their lives.

The rabbis asserted that God had not departed from the world, but that His presence could be found in acts of holiness, in the performance of *mitzvot* and *gemilut hasadim*, commandments and deeds of loving kindness. Since the Temple, the Beit Mikdash, the House of Holiness, was gone, the Jewish home was transformed into a *mikdash m'aht*, a place of holiness for each family. And finally, they realized that in order to have a connection to *clal Yisrael*, the larger global Jewish community, something more tangible than a nebulous concept had to exist to unite Jewish households scattered in different countries.

For the Jewish people to survive and have a sense of unity a place was needed where Jews could gather to study and pray, and celebrate Shabbat and holidays. And so the Beit Knesset, the synagogue, evolved to take the place of the vanquished Beit Mikdash and ultimately became the central place for the Jewish community, wherever they lived.

This is an appropriate place to insert a classic story, which bears being told in this context, about how important a synagogue is, even if as I suspect, many of you may know it. It is the story about a man who was rescued from a desert island after years of being stranded there. His rescuers were amazed to see the habitat he had created, especially since he was the only human on the island. He proudly showed

them a beautiful building he had built which was a synagogue where he prayed every day. And right next to it, just a few steps away, stood another equally large and impressive edifice, also a synagogue. The rescuers were puzzled why two synagogues were necessary, since he was the only Jew, and in fact, the only person on the entire island. The guy explained with the immortal words, "One is the shul I go to, and the other is the one I wouldn't be caught dead in."

On this beginning of the new year, when we as individuals and as a community, contemplate and consider our priorities, our fate and our values, review the past and look to the future, I would be negligent if I did not take this opportunity to reflect upon our synagogue, its achievements and its future, as B'nai Tzedek celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

At our festive congregational Shabbat dinner earlier this year that launched our year-long celebration I spoke about the formative years, prior to our acquiring land. When I look back on the steps that led to where we are today, I truly feel the hand of God was present every step of the way.

After holding services and religious school in various locations for a few years, with almost 100 members, our search for land became more intense and focused. The site where our beautiful facility currently sits was acquired in 1992. It was owned by a bank in Texas which had gotten it from the RTC, a government agency created to take care of foreclosed assets during the savings and loan crisis of the late '80's. They must not have had any idea of the property values in our area. We were able to purchase this prime piece of real estate, a little more than five acres, for less than \$500,000.

As has been the case throughout our history, we were blessed with outstanding lay leadership. Gary Berman chaired the capital campaign, and the Building committee was chaired by Sam Bergman and Bruce Genderson. One of the first decisions we had to make was whether to build a place of worship, a place for our classes, office and administrative space, or a social hall. We decided that since all were important, we would build them all, but on a smaller scale at first, with the capacity to expand as we grew. In the fall of 1995, with about 200 members we held our first High Holiday services in our new building. Within a year we had outgrown the facility and finished the space below the social hall for additional classroom space. In 1999 we began work on the expansion to add the Berman Sanctuary and the Holt Chapel, as well as the classrooms below the sanctuary. Our architect and member, Salo Levinas conceived of the design. I still remember his vision and him saying that the first thing you should see upon entering the synagogue is the sanctuary.

Around this time Dr. Samuel Burtoff, a client of Randy Weiss wanted to donate 12 condominiums in Northern Virginia worth \$1.2 million to his synagogue in appreciation for some work Randy had done for him. Randy suggested that if he really wanted to honor him he should make the donation to the congregation where he was a founding member instead. Shortly after I met Dr. Burtoff, the donation was made, and that is why half of you are sitting in the Burtoff Social Hall this morning.

The world has changed dramatically in the 25 years since we started the synagogue in 1988 and held our first High Holiday service at the Potomac Community Center. While most of us or our parents grew up on a steady diet of gefilte fish and kugel, today's young people prefer sushi and sake. They prefer miso soup to chicken soup. They are more familiar with tacos and salsa than kreplach and kneidelah. In

other words it's Whole Foods over Mom's food. They probably have no idea what a Polaroid is, but are comfortable using Photoshop and Snapfish. They are more at ease with Facebook than reading a book, and they would prefer texting, Google chat and Google hangout to schmoozing, kibbitzing and family reunions.

Indeed, the changes we have witnessed in our lifetime are profound. The new modes of communication affect how we interact with each other and the nature of our relationships. Our already complicated lives have become not less, but even more complicated and bifurcated as more activities compete for our time and attention, as well as the interests of our children. Jewish organizations around the country are struggling to find ways to survive and retain and recruit members in this new environment. No longer can we merely assume that people will affiliate and join a synagogue. The competition is not another synagogue or organization. It is apathy. We lose kids to soccer, dance, cheerleading and other activities that compete for people's time because they seem to be important at the time.

B'nai Tzedek is fortunate for we continue to grow, adapt and thrive, with our membership at an all time high. Children who were in our first religious school classes are now becoming parents and joining on their own, as we make the transition to being a second generation congregation. I have had the pleasure of officiating at a number of weddings of these young adults, some of whom I have known since their families first joined almost 25 years ago, including one couple who met here in 4th grade in our religious school. The popularity and large turnout for my annual get-together in New York with children of members, along with other programs, including a Shabbat dinner we will hold this year for the children of our Founding and First One Hundred members is a testament to the deep connections and role we have played in the lives of our members.

A tribute to our outstanding lay leadership and professional staff, and a product of the enthusiasm and support of our members is the warm and welcoming atmosphere that we have succeeded in creating. The ideal which is espoused by every synagogue, but is an integral part of our culture is apparent from the moment you first enter B'nai Tzedek and are greeted by members on Shabbat or our office staff during the week, or our executive director, Alan Blank, who goes out of his way to make people feel welcome.

Members forced to relocate because of jobs often tell me that one of the most difficult things about moving away from the area is leaving B'nai Tzedek, because they say they will not be able to find another congregation like ours, and members who move in the area have told me they base their purchase on proximity to B'nai Tzedek. A member who recently relocated to our community and joined last week told me that a number of people told her that B'nai Tzedek is where she should affiliate -- even those who belong elsewhere advised her that this was the best synagogue in the area.

One of my goals when my wife Symcha and I first began thinking about starting a new congregation was to create a place where people would know they were in a shul, where our services would be clearly recognizable as in the conservative mode, preserving Jewish tradition, while being egalitarian and incorporating contemporary elements that foster a search for meaningfulness, services that would be participatory, not passive. I wanted it to be a place where people would grow in their knowledge and

practice of Judaism, where the centrality of Israel would be appreciated and where we would play a role in the greater community as well.

To give you just a small sense of what we have done in the 25 years since our founding, we have raised funds for earthquake victims in Haiti and come to the aid of victims of other disasters. JNF recently sent me an email asking me to let you know that the fire truck we purchased for Israel has saved hundreds of lives and was used 175 times in the first six months of this year alone. Our annual Mitzvah Day activities attended by hundreds of members, as well as preparing meals for shelters weekly have had an impact on the lives of many. We have had an impressive array of speakers and scholars, often at extremely well-attended Shabbat dinners who have enlightened us on Judaism as well as contemporary issues, stimulating classes for adults, including our Shabbat afternoon study sessions and summer divrei torah led by congregants. We offer a full array of creative educational and social programs for young people of all ages, including a wide range of kid-friendly shabbat programs and services. We take our programs beyond our building, such as our annual lighting of the Chanukah menorah in Potomac Village, or a trip to Eastern Europe. Lasting friendships have been formed here, some among the over 100 congregants who have gone on one of our congregational trips to Israel, and which you can join this summer.

B'nai Tzedek has been a gateway to a meaningful Jewish life as many have discovered their Judaism here, including some who were not born Jewish. I will never forget the pride I felt one Saturday morning when I looked at the Torah table and noticed that the person who was laining Torah, one of the gabbayim and the person having an aliyah were all Jews by choice, and all had undergone their conversions as a result of what they had discovered here at B'nai Tzedek.

We have been spared the divisiveness that characterizes too many synagogues, in part because we have had such talented and visionary lay leaders who genuinely enjoy each other and being together. Unfortunately, that is not the case in all synagogues. I am reminded of the synagogue that debated a proposal brought forth by the rabbi to buy a new chandelier. After considerable debate the President got up and put an end to the discussion. First of all, he said it's too expensive. Second of all we can't buy a new chandelier, because Sam, who is taking minutes can't spell it. Third of all, we don't have anyone who can play it, and finally, we can't buy a chandelier, because what the shul really needs is more lighting.

So how do we view the future and what is our vision for the next 25 years?

A beautiful passage in the Talmud says that when one who comes to shul on a regular basis misses a day, the Holy One inquires about his welfare. Can you imagine how many calls I would have to make if I had the same policy?! But the truth is I often do call those I have not seen in awhile. That's because that is who and what we are, and because I recognize that relationships are a crucial part of what it means to belong to a synagogue.

A book that is being widely read and discussed by lay and professional leaders in synagogues and Jewish organizations is called, "Relational Judaism" by Ron Wolfson. He contends it's not about programs, marketing, or branding. It's about relationships. He is right. Relationships and having connections to each other are crucial to creating a sense of belonging. I think one of our hallmarks and keys to our

success is our dedication to creating the means to build those relationships. People who join a synagogue want and deserve to know that someone cares about them.

It is after all, in our nature. We are a covenantal people who stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, as one, and entered into an eternal, binding covenant with God. Although we did not need any flyers or emails to get us to the mountain, God did use some pretty heavy fireworks such as thunder, lightning, and an exploding mountain to be sure we got the memo to show up. In other words, marketing is important.

And let's not forget the other critical factor -- the content of the message was uplifting, awe-inspiring and eternal. So while I agree with Wolfson that "sharing experiences are the glue that keeps people together", as critical as relationships are to the welfare of the synagogue, you cannot ignore the content. In order to thrive, a synagogue must provide quality programs for its members and children in a way that is interesting and compelling. So while it is about relationships, it is about much more than that. Being affiliated with a shul is different than belonging to a club. It should provide fun social programs, which bring people together and may or may not have a Jewish orientation, but there must be quality programs with Jewish content. The synagogue is a place to learn, to find spirituality as well as community, to both say kaddish and enjoy a nosh at the kiddush. It is where we celebrate life's joys and offer comfort and support to each other in times of need.

I think Wolfson would agree that we dare not overlook what we do, how we do it, and how we let people know what we are doing. One of the reasons we offer such a broad array of so many different programs and activities is so you can come and make those connections. We strive to connect you to each other, as well as to our Jewish heritage, to the Almighty and to the Jewish people.

As I said 25 years ago, here is a place to ask the great questions about meaning, to explore our heritage and to understand its relevance and how it applies to our life today. The synagogue is where the intellectually stimulating ideas of Judaism, Jewish philosophy and theology are taken seriously, studied and explored. It should be a place that challenges you to grow in the ways you express your Judaism, to explore its significance, and to appreciate its beauty and relevance so you can incorporate more of it into your life and be a part of a community which shares those values. As a result, in addition to being a center of Jewish life, the synagogue must now be a mentor of Jewish life, showing how to bring Judaism into the lives of our families.

Rabbi Gerald Zelizer in an article in *The Forward* laments that whereas the primary thesis of institutionalized American religion used to be, "How do we serve God?" it has increasingly become, "How do God and religion enhance my life?" He laments that the emphasis has shifted from challenging worshippers to serve God to emphasizing what God does for us. We approach religion like other commodities we purchase and downplay the demands it places upon us when we promote it as something we should do because it is good for us. He candidly confesses, "Like many clergy today... I talk less about religious obligation and more about religion as a means to self-fulfillment." We urge people to build a sukkah "as a way to integrate nature into suburban living" and encourage children to come to religious school because it "provides them with an important identity and emotional shield in an often scary world."

Personally I think there is nothing wrong with suggesting utilitarian value in observing Jewish traditions and using whatever hook we can to get people to introduce ritual into their lives and to increase their level of observance. But he challenges us and asks: “Why can’t the message be to both serve God while at the same time allowing religion to improve our lives?” This is why the synagogue is a place where we not only become educated and conversant with our tradition, but encounter how Judaism challenges our mind, our soul, our beliefs and our practices, where we grow as Jews and deepen those ties.

B’nai Brith, AJC, Aipac, the JCC are all important, and I belong to and support all of them, and hope you will as well, but the synagogue is the pathway to connect people to each other and to Judaism, and to create a sense of community and of belonging to the Jewish people.

The vision of Congregation B’nai Tzedek as articulated in our recently adopted mission statement is “to be a leading Conservative synagogue committed to perpetuating Jewish traditions and values. We seek to be a place where people can grow in their knowledge of Judaism and deepen their level of observance and commitment to Judaism, to God, mitzvot, study of Torah, and the Jewish people.” To sum it up in a few words, here is where we seek to educate, celebrate, uplift, inspire, enhance and connect to all we cherish and our ancestors bequeathed to us. Hopefully in the process we help people become better people, better Jews, more connected to Judaism and thereby strengthen the Jewish community.

Not content to rest on our laurels we have formed a new young professional community who will hold a Shabbat sushi dinner in the sukkah in two weeks. This past year, under the leadership of Lisa Cordell, Heather Sacks, Les Ulanow and others we have added a number of special needs programs, not just for individuals with special needs, but to help to sensitize the whole congregation to this issue so we can be a truly inclusive community. On December 13 we will again have our popular Shabbat across B’nai Tzedek where members will be matched and host each other for Shabbat dinners across our community. A congregational retreat, a Day of Study, Annual Spring Gala and other events are all being planned in the coming year, and we welcome your help as it is a great way to get involved, feel a part of the community and meet other congregants. A task force headed by Beth Swibel and Devorah Berman is devoted to continuing to bring in young members and to make membership affordable. Coupled with the extraordinary generosity of the 40 families who have already made a 5 year commitment to contribute to the Rabbi’s Circle, we are well on the way to providing the foundation for a sound future for B’nai Tzedek. (By the way, we can make the Circle larger, and hope some of you who have not yet done so will join). I will forego further specifics and just say check out this year’s program guide and you will see why we are a congregation that has something for everyone.

But in the spirit of the honesty and introspection the holiday calls for, we cannot ignore the areas where we need to improve. For despite all we have done, and all our success, it is not enough, and I am not content. I encourage you to come to services on Shabbat. Drop in, become a part of our Shabbat community, and see how beautiful it can be. We need your participation to help us develop an even larger Shabbat community. I will let you in on a secret – our services really are terrific, and the cantor makes them beautiful, but they are even more so when you are here. Members and visitors tell me how much they enjoy and how much they get out of our services.

I am reminded of the rabbi who was trying out for a new position. He thought services went pretty well, as everyone complimented him, except for one ornery woman who told him the service he led was boring and the sermon was meandering and meaningless. When the rabbi pointed out to the president of the synagogue the woman who was critical of him, the president told him, "Don't worry about her. We all know she doesn't have a mind of her own and just repeats what she hears everyone else says."

And while speaking about services, I ask you to please take the invitation to usher and to attend our weekday minyanim seriously, as we count on our members to serve as greeters. It comes out to about once every two - three years congregants are asked to attend services and help out. Please fulfill your responsibility to each other and your obligation as a member of a sacred community.

The other area I hope we can work on is education – specifically, I wish more of you would come to take our classes. Those who come to my Thursday morning Torah class or any of the other ones we offer find it enriching and intellectually stimulating. And the other goal I would like us to have is to get more of our kids to stay beyond bar or bat mitzvah. I have spoken previously about how important it is that children maintain ongoing contact with the synagogue, their rabbi, their peers, and Jewish education. We will do our part to provide quality education for your children. We ask you to do your part and get them here.

With all we have going on, I hope that each and every one of you will recognize what an extraordinary synagogue this is and that you will find something for you at B'nai Tzedek. If not, then let me or Amanda Katz, who is in charge of our programs know, and we will see if we can, with your help, create it. And if you cannot come to anything, I want you to know, I appreciate that you are members. Just being a member is a statement. Your financial support, at whatever level, even if you pay reduced dues helps us do all we do and to be the vibrant synagogue we are.

With all we have going on in honor of our 25th anniversary I would like to ask each member to pledge to dedicate 25 hours living, learning, leading and enjoying with CBT this year. Record your family's activities. And in so doing, we will form, strengthen and develop new relationships as well.

At this time I would like to ask our Founding Charter Members and Founding Members to please rise. When I look out and see them I think of a story told in the book "Merchant Princes", a historical work which chronicles the rise of the great department stores in America, most of them started by Jewish peddlers in the late 1800's. Growing up in Baltimore, I remember Stewart's, Hoschild Kohn, Hutzler's and Hecht's. Stores such as Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Rich's in the south, Neiman Marcus, and others had similar stories with Jewish roots.

The book tells the story of an immigrant who had started the business with nothing, and it now had grown into a big, bustling enterprise. One day the founder, who was in his 90's came in to his office and asked his son what was going on. The son explained that they were working on year end reports, and taking inventory so they could determine the profits. The old man reached into his desk and took out some pens and pencils, paper clips, and other things that he used to sell when he started the business. He said, "Son, don't ever forget -- this is the inventory. Everything else you see out there, that is the profit."

On this Rosh Hashana I look out and think of that simple peddler and how far he and we have come since those early meetings in people's living rooms with a handful of families, dreaming about creating a synagogue to become the active, vibrant congregation we are today.

While we should all take tremendous pride in what we have built and accomplished, my plea to you is don't just belong, but become active, contributing members. A few years ago after the High Holiday services my son, Micha said to me, "You know Dad every year after the high holidays I think this is the year your sermons really moved the congregation. I feel like they got it and will come out to services and adult ed classes and get involved and do all the things you want them to do." I ask you, please don't disappoint my son.

Take advantage of the tremendous resources we have here so that you are not just exposed to Judaism, but that you let it become a part of your lives. I urge you this Rosh Hashana -- take your journey, your Jewish Journey here at B'nai Tzedek so that it may be the gateway to a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling life and venture.

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