

## Why We Still Need Synagogues

Some who are here today were teenagers, or even younger thirty years ago. Some were in their 20's, while others were in their 30's, or 40's and so on. Regardless of how old we were then, one thing is certain --- we were all younger then. Those who were in their teens were concerned about getting through high school and where they would go and what they would do after graduation. Others may have been concerned with life-determining choices about family, jobs, or potential spouses -- decisions that would have a long term impact on the path their careers and lives would take.

And some who are here today dreamed 30 years ago about starting a new synagogue in Montgomery County and banded together to form what was to become the beautiful vibrant and dynamic place we call B'nai Tzedek.

The New Year when we come together as a community to reflect on our spiritual journeys is an appropriate time to reflect and recall what motivated us to start the synagogue? What were our goals and our dreams? What was our vision? And what is the vision for our future?

The desire to create community, a caring community, a learning community, a community where we would come together, to have fun and create relationships, where we would express and deepen and learn more about our Judaism, work for Tikun Olam, celebrate life's passages and milestones, a synagogue which would be supportive of Israel and of clal Yisrael -- were some of the salient features which brought us together as we sought to establish a synagogue rooted in tradition, yet open to change, a place where individuals would connect with their roots and with each other, and where people would grow Jewishly.

At a time when the very viability and sustainability of Jewish institutions is being challenged, we have grown from a handful of families to an active synagogue widely recognized as a leader and trend-setter locally and nationally. With our unique embrace of encouraging involvement in the broader community it is no coincidence that the Presidents of the Federation of Greater Washington, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Greater Washington region of Hadassah, the Jewish National Fund, the immediate past president of the JCC of Greater Washington, as well as local and national leaders in Aipac, Federation, the Holocaust Museum, FIDF, and many other Jewish organizations are all members of B'nai Tzedek.

The world has changed a great deal in thirty years. In 1987 we had a divorced star of movies and television as president, who said he wanted to make America great again -- well, maybe some things haven't changed too much.

It seems that almost daily new technological advances such as self-driving cars, gene therapy, and artificial intelligence, innovations no one could have imagined 30 years ago are uprooting long-standing institutions and professions, disrupting society and radically altering our way of

life. With so much change going on all around us, and with it all happening so rapidly, I cannot help but wonder what if anything is permanent, enduring and worth preserving?

The American Jewish community of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not immune to the transformation taking place in the world around us. It continues to evolve and has become increasingly diverse and spread out. We no longer live in shtetls or concentrated, homogeneous neighborhoods. And that is precisely why we need synagogues to come together to find and to create community.

I have fond memories of the one room *shtiebel*, a small shul I went to with my grandfather when I was little. To this day I often nostalgically recall that simpler time, but the synagogue of today is not the same synagogue of my grandfather, nor is it the synagogue you grew up in, nor should it be.

That is especially true here at B'nai Tzedek, which meets the needs of our members and serves as both a center of Jewish life and as a mentor of Jewish life. The synagogue is the place where Judaism is transmitted, and where it comes alive. We offer interesting programs and speakers. But since we are a synagogue we do much more than that. We seek to connect you to your heritage, community and people, to offer you the chance to grow and learn, to encourage your curiosity and nourish your soul, to offer meaningful relationships and bring you into a deeper appreciation of the Divine blessings in the world around you.

Like many Jews of her generation, Katie Colt a freelance writer living in Chicago had little to do with the organized Jewish community after her bat mitzvah. She admits it may have been because she thought being Jewish wasn't particularly cool, or because she wanted to blend in and be like everyone around her. Although she experienced the embrace of the rabbi and synagogue community after the sudden unexpected passing of her first child at a very young age, she did not join. She even acknowledged that "the rabbi and congregation showed up for us in a way that no one else in our lives could". Yet surprisingly, despite this she chose not to affiliate. Like so many of her contemporaries, she neither felt the need, nor the desire to do so. Even though she was the beneficiary of the largess of the synagogue and the comfort offered by its rabbi, which helped her get through a very tough loss, she did not connect the dots. For whatever reason, she did not understand the importance of or feel compelled to join.

All that changed however, after the march by neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia. Feeling vulnerable, unsafe, and alone, she decided she needed to join a congregation. She recognized that although she belongs to many communities, she realized that being part of a synagogue community is different. It was her response to orchestrated efforts to intimidate Jews. She wrote in a blogpost about her symbolic gesture of defiance, "After Charlottesville, I don't want to feel alone (anymore). I don't want to mourn in isolation. I have a community — a network of

intelligent, kind, thoughtful people — but I need a Jewish community, too... I want to raise my son with people of all backgrounds and beliefs, but allow him to feel rooted in his family's traditions. I want to raise him so that he knows love in his heart. Most of all, I want to belong to a group of people who know this struggle.”

We humans are social animals. We live in community, communities that we create. We may belong to many groups and subgroups, but as she came to realize, none can claim to be a *kehilah kedosha*, a holy community, a place where we sanctify life's special moments and milestones.

The march by Neo-Nazis and white supremacists in Charlottesville also led Rabbi Nathan Weiner to write a blogpost for the *Times of Israel* about the importance of being a part of a synagogue community. He noted, “The Jewish community of Charlottesville is centered around its synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel. Its spokespeople are the synagogue's members, board, and clergy.” As the convener which brought people together in the face of blatant hatred and vile anti-Semitism, he concluded that, “Synagogues are vital to a vibrant Judaism in America...”

In a very different context and setting, we have witnessed unprecedented destruction wrought first by Hurricane Harvey which decimated Houston and then the aftermath of Hurricane Irma in Florida, resulting in severe damage and tragic loss of life coupled with untold loss of homes and property, damaged schools, with stores and places of business closed, lost tax revenue, obstructed roads, uprooted trees, destroyed cars, lost photos, lives left in shatters and whole towns devastated.

Clifford Krauss whose home was destroyed by Hurricane Harvey in Houston wrote about the economic impact in the business section of the New York Times. To his article about financial matters he added words that had nothing to do with business or economics. “I am not particularly religious, but on the first Friday night after the flooding I went to my synagogue to find some solace.” He found congregants were drawn to shul because they wanted to be together, to embrace and be embraced. In the face of such terrible loss and destruction all around them, they did not want to face whatever they were dealing with alone, in solitude. A few days later an elderly woman knocked on his door and handed him an envelope from the synagogue with a gift card to replace towels and other household goods.

In each of these instances the synagogue served the purpose it has played for generations. Members of a synagogue community come together to support and draw strength from each other. We heal each other. We give each other hope. Whether it is in the face of assaults from natural disasters or threats posed by anti-Semites, the synagogue helps sustain us in times of need.

Rabbi Weiner warns that if people did not pay dues or make contributions to support synagogues they would not exist and would not be able to do all the things they do. It would not be possible to have the funds necessary to support a facility or employ a staff.

Speaking of dues and support for a synagogue, a rabbi, minister and priest were discussing how they raise funds for their places of worship. The minister said that after the Sunday collection he draws a circle on the floor, tosses the money that has been collected in the air, and whatever lands outside the circle is for his personal use, and whatever lands inside the circle is for God and the work of the church. The priest said he had a very similar method, except whatever lands inside the circle is what he uses for his salary and personal use, and whatever lands outside the circle is for God and the church. The rabbi explains that he also draws a circle and tosses money in the air. He explained, "Whatever God wants he grabs and keeps. Whatever falls to the ground is mine."

Synagogues need to receive adequate funding to sustain their work, for were there no synagogue there would be no permanent place for Jews to come together to pray and worship, to support one another. There would be no place for non-Jews to come when they want to show solidarity with Jews in the face of intimidation and anti-Semitism, or in times of need. It would be much more difficult to galvanize support for other Jewish communal institutions which serve the needs of the community, as well as for Jewish education and cultural programs for young people and adults.

As many have come to realize in the face of natural disaster and other external threats, without synagogues, there would be no permanent, stable, organized, Jewish community. People would not have access to a rabbi to perform life cycle events, or to serve the needs of the Jews in the community. There would be no Jewish professionals to comfort and console, to lead, inspire, teach and transmit our heritage. There would be no clergy to represent Jews in the broader community and to interact and form alliances with non-Jewish clergy, or to welcome and teach those interested in becoming Jewish.

While Jews can gather in small groups without a building or a rabbi for a period of time and still be a Jewish community, the role the synagogue played as the rallying point and voice of Jewish Charlottesville during the ordeal was crucial. Rabbi Weiner observed, "The fact remains that for the vast majority of us, if we want a Jewish community with the size and scope necessary to stand up and be a voice for the Jewish community, then we need synagogues."

I will let you in on a secret: You don't need to be "religious" to join a synagogue. Whether you are religious or not, you are a critical part of the Jewish people. My colleague and friend, Rabbi

Sid Schwarz commented in a recent article that when Christian colleagues ask how it is that Jews stand in greater solidarity with one another than Christians when we have the lowest “belief in God” quotient of any religious group in America and have low rates of attendance at worship services. He suggests it is “because for Jews, belonging has always been more compelling than believing.”

I am reminded of the guy who noticed that his Jewish friends were all accomplished golfers. He thought if he converted and became Jewish, he too would be a good golfer. Sometime after converting, he was frustrated because his golf game had not improved, and he was still shooting in the low 90’s. His friend, Moe Greenberg tried to help him diagnose why converting had not helped his game. He asked him which shul he had joined. The guy told him – “B’nai Emet.” Greenberg sighed and said, “That explains it. “B’nai Emet?! That’s the shul for tennis. For golf you have to belong to Anshei Emet.”

Belonging to a synagogue may or may not help your golf game, but it probably won’t hurt. It may help with finding a foursome – because the synagogue is a place to meet people and form relationships, as is the case for many who belong to B’nai Tzedek.

A unique feature of Judaism is the emphasis on peoplehood, that we join with all those who came before us, and those yet to come after us, that we are bound by a common fate. We stand as part of a continuum, as part of a transcendent spiritual community bound together by fate and three thousand years of shared history. Each generation forms an indelible link in that chain – a connection I feel and am conscious of each and every time I am in services here at B’nai Tzedek.

You should never feel intimidated by the paucity of your knowledge or lack of familiarity with Jewish rituals. Although we are each at different points on the path in our journeys, we all have much to learn and all of us can continue to grow. You should not be embarrassed if you have the literacy of a seventh grader when it comes to Judaism, nor should you hesitate or be afraid to admit your ignorance, for that inquisitiveness and curiosity is the starting point of knowledge and growth.

Hillel told us 2,000 years ago the bashful cannot learn. Here, is where you come to learn. Do not be afraid to ask questions about God or theology, as the synagogue is where we explore the various and contrasting concepts of our sages. Membership is not predicated upon a litmus test of faith. Nor for that matter is it defined by financial wherewithal, as those who cannot afford to pay dues are always welcomed as full members. The important thing is to belong and be part of the community.

On Erev Yom Kippur, right before the chanting of the Kol Nidre prayer, there is an unusual line in the liturgy. The *arvayonim*, the sinners are invited to join us. The summons is a way of indicating that all are part of the community, and all are welcome. In fact, The Talmud says that we are required to have them in our midst for the prayer to be recited, because on a fast day, no prayer will be accepted unless sinners are included. (Fortunately it usually is not too difficult to find someone who meets the requirement.)

Rabbi Alan Lew explains, we invite them because, “We are incomplete and imperfect and cannot survive without a spiritual community that can make us whole... That sense of wholeness, of completion that we have been chasing after all of our lives, but that always eludes us as individuals... can only be found in a whole community... (which) we create when we come together and acknowledge that we need each other.”

It is for the same reason that the “Aveenu Malkenu” prayer concludes by admitting, *ein banu maasim*, we have no deeds. We are acknowledging that we fall short as individuals. But when we come together we have plenty of resources and good deeds in our collective account to draw upon.

Let us never forget we are members of a people that seeks to find meaning in existence, to create a *kehilah kedosha*, a holy community so we can live out the mandate issued 3,000 years ago: “*kedoshim tehiyu*: you shall be holy.” That commandment did not come with a statute of limitations, and significantly, it is expressed in the plural “*Kedoshim teheyu*, not *kadosh teheych*, in the singular. The Torah is teaching that it is in community that we find holiness.

When I visited Communist Russia in the late 1980’s, before the collapse of the Iron curtain I clandestinely met with and taught Soviet Refuseniks. One of the stories I shared was the Hasidic teaching that the letter yud, which in Yiddish is pronounced yid, meaning Jew, is the first letter of the word Yehudi, Jew. When we put two yuds together, side by side, it forms the name of God, “Adonai”. When Jews stand together, we bring the presence of God to earth, implying that your participation in a congregation helps to bring the *Shekinah*, the Divine Presence, into the world.

Rabbi Weiner wrote, “If you do not support the synagogue until you have a transactional need, you take for granted that others will be there to do it for you.” That is why to be perfectly honest, when a family drops out of the synagogue after their youngest child has had a bar or bat mitzvah, I feel that they look upon their membership from a self-centered perspective, thinking only of their immediate needs. Somehow we have failed. They do not have a sense of the historic obligation to contribute to the upkeep of the community. Lacking an appreciation of the importance of tzedekah and community, they look at it from the perspective that once they have gotten what they need, they are done. Not realizing that as they get older is when they will get

even more out of being members. Especially disturbing is that it is as if they have no sense of responsibility to help share the burden to provide for others and the greater community. To be brutally honest, when this happens, I feel disappointed and that we and I have been used.

There is a well-known story from the Talmud of an elderly man, Honi HaMa'agel planting a tree. He was questioned by his friends, "Why would you bother to plant a tree when you will not live to see it bear fruit?" The wise man, in his 70's replied, "Just as those who came before me planted trees so I would have them when I came along, so now I plant trees for those who will come after me."

This is the Jewish approach! Not just to care for and about ourselves, but to think of, to care about and to prepare the way for others and for future generations. We should not assume that someone else will ensure there will be a Jewish community for us. Rather, it is incumbent upon each of us to do what we can. A vibrant Jewish community needs vibrant synagogues, and that happens when members are engaged, involved in and supportive of the synagogue.

B'nai Tzedek is a community of communities, offering something for everyone. The old adage is true – the more you put into it, the more you get out of it. A number of people who have relocated out of our area because of jobs have told us that the hardest part about moving is leaving B'nai Tzedek, and how difficult it has been for them to find a place as warm and welcoming as ours.

I want to share with you an excerpt from a note I received from someone who attended a young couples retreat this past year. It reads:

"Dear Rabbi Weinblatt,

I wanted to thank you for taking the time to participate in the Couples retreat. I especially wanted to say thank you for taking the time to talk to my wife and me separately from the group. Being a non-Jew at other temples, I've sometimes felt ostracized, but not here. Since our son started school here at B'nai Tzedek we have found a great sense of community ....(which helps) strengthen both our family and our marriage..."

In thirty years we have grown from a handful of families to this overflowing sanctuary accommodating approximately 1500 people at our holiday services. We have succeeded in building a wonderful foundation, with many exciting programs and a beautiful facility, with an outstanding hard-working staff, and dedicated lay leaders. There is much to be proud of, but we cannot rest on our laurels.

That is why we are launching a campaign to secure our future. We hope that all will participate in the holy task of contributing to this effort. Regardless of where you were 30 years ago, we are all here today, and so we all will have the opportunity to participate in the campaign for our future, a campaign which will allow us to meet the challenges to serve the next generation.

When I think about how the world has changed so drastically in 30 years, and the predictions of futurists, I realize how difficult it is to make predictions, as Yogi Berra said, *especially about the future*. None of us have any idea what the world will look like in 30 years. But one thing is clear – we will still need places of compassion, places to come to comfort and console each other, places to teach our children our heritage and to celebrate holidays and milestone events. The stability and certainty that comes from a place that anchors us to our moorings and reinforces our identity is why synagogues are more important than ever. It is a partnership -- you need us, and we need you, regardless of your level of participation.

In the beginning of the twentieth century people came to shul to assimilate and to become part of the fabric of America. People came because they were Jewish. In the twenty first century they come to become Jewish, to find the path back to Judaism and to discover the richness of the traditions cast aside by earlier generations. The sacred work of synagogues to create strong Jewish communities rooted in a shared history and shared values remains crucial to the survival of the Jewish people.

Tomorrow we will hear the powerful and dramatic story of the Akedat Yitzhak, the Binding of Isaac. When called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice, to offer his beloved son, Avraham replied, without a moment's hesitation, "Hineni". To the most difficult demand that could be made of a father, he said, "Here I am." When summoned by God to lead the people, Isaiah replied, "Hineni. Send me." When God called out to Moses at the burning bush to lead His people, Moshe responded, "Hey, I'm too busy. Call someone else. I've got all these kids and sheep to worry about. I have to drive cart-pool. I am busy with my PTA – Pyramid Tablet Association meetings." Of course that is not what he said. He said, "Hineni. Here I am." It is a response of being present, of being involved, of being willing to step forward, pick up the gauntlet and be counted. It is the Jewish response, and it is the response we hope to hear to our invitation to be a part of the sacred and noble task of securing the future of B'nai Tzedek, a calling more important than ever. We are reminded in Pirke Avot that it is not incumbent upon us to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it. The question is – how will you respond when called upon to do your part? I hope you will respond, "Hineni. Here I am. I am ready to do my part."

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Rosh Hashana 2017*