Standing at our synagogue door, I hear the hustle and bustle of Jewish life everywhere. The smell of corn beef sandwiches, delicious baked goods, and latkes frying in oil hits my senses. I can hear the cantor’s voice singing familiar tunes, kids bouncing and swinging joyfully, while Judaica sales take place in Shalom Hall. A rabbi leads tours around the temple for visitors. The temple is alive, a true Jewish community coming together to partake in the biggest event in Shomrei Torah history.

Standing in the oblong circle outside in the museum door in the center of Berlin singing prayers and songs in Hebrew, I took it all in. It was hard to believe that we were gathered in Germany. Gathered in the front of a huge Jewish museum dedicated to telling the Jewish story, a museum that was carefully planned and constructed, every decision agonized over. The bustle of German life moved around us, the familiarity of tradition and the strangeness of a foreign land as the sky faded into darkness.

We were on a rabbinical school trip that was organized and paid for by reparation money Germany had set aside to improve their image after World War II. The entire trip was to show young Jewish professionals “the new Germany” — the non anti-Semitic, multicultural, all accepting Germany. We visited monument 1
after monument, universities and the amazing Jewish Museum, which is so huge it takes days to truly see everything. The red carpet was officially rolled out!

But it was hard to convince our group that Germany was completely “new” when our group inadvertently ran into neo-Nazis walking down the street or when a German police car turned on its siren and all of our hearts started to race. You probably can’t think of the German police siren while you are sitting here. But take my word, you all know the sound: it’s in every World War II movie!

Our group met up with students from our sister rabbinical school Geiger and decided to have Shabbat together the following Friday night. This was made possible through our tour guides and a HUC professor who was then teaching at Geiger. The only problem we faced was finding a place big enough to comfortably have services and dinner. That’s when The Jewish Museum opened its doors…

Standing at “the synagogue” door in Córdoba, I felt sadness, loneliness, fear, disbelief. It is the only synagogue still standing in Córdoba and it is falling apart. In history class, one learns about the Golden Age of Spain when Jews Christians and Muslims lived in harmony. Yet, looking around at the walls of this synagogue that are falling apart, it was hard to believe in the Golden Age of Spain.
The synagogue was tiny bleep on the tourists’ path, down the street from the newly built Casa De Sefrad, the Jewish museum.

The museum was so nice. With our camera battery dying, Adam was instructed to take a picture of every little thing in the entire museum. The battery had just enough power to last through the very modest museum. One of the rooms upstairs is currently used as the community’s sanctuary. I tried to interpret a cue sheet left on the podium. It was exhilarating to enter a room that is dedicated to Great Spanish Jewish Females. I felt very proud that the current community is so progressive.

After we looked around the museum, the curator informed me that there are currently 25 Jews living in Cordoba. 25! He didn’t stutter; he didn’t have to think about it. He didn’t give the answer in family units or distinguish between affiliated and unaffiliated. There are 25 Jews, all belonging to a liberal Jewish community. My heart sunk. Honestly I felt like I might be sick. A community that sports a bronze bust in honor of being the home to Rambam, one of our greatest Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, has only 25 Jews today.

**Standing outside the Jewish Museum** in Berlin, celebrating Shabbat was the defining moment of the trip. Young Jewish professionals were able to be Jewish completely openly in the middle of Germany. Germany is the fastest
growing Jewish community in Europe today. Through their efforts and struggles, they are finding their own path to move forward post-World War II. This is not an easy process. Germany cannot solely make a few reparations, construct memorial sights, and move forward. They know this better than anyone else. That is why they are constantly thinking and re-thinking ways in which to improve.

Do you worry whether Judaism is alive or dead? For me, Judaism is very much alive. I have been fortunate to live in cities with extremely vibrant Jewish communities: Houston, Arad, Jerusalem, Los Angeles and now Santa Rosa. In every city in which I have lived, there have always been a multitude of Jewish outlets for me to choose from, a smorgasbord of options. One could even argue that the condition of the Jewish community in the United States is in desperate need or reconfiguration since there are often too many organizations duplicating similar work. But this is definitely not the same scenario worldwide.

**Walking through** the diaspora museum in Israel, visitors learn about each great Jewish civilization throughout time. The museum emphasizes how well the Jews during each time period were treated. How secure we felt. How assimilated we became. How embraced we were. Then it slowly shows how, in every situation, we have been persecuted, exiled and treated as the “other.”
So how do Jews survive these tragedies? That is one of the most intriguing questions about Judaism. Rabbi Sacks, the chief rabbi of England, says, “It is an iron law of history that civilizations rise, achieve greatness and appear indestructible, but, in the end, they fail and fall. Only Jews and Judaism have experienced catastrophe after catastrophe, exile after exile, but have endured. Each new defeat inspired resilience. Jews wept, but then rebuilt their lives, often in new and strange places. More remarkably still, each tragedy inspired a new burst of creativity.”

You and I right here right now are writing the Jewish story. We are the authors of history books yet to be. It is all up to us, every single one of us. This means that Judaism’s story will be written here in America. On Yom Kippur, our liturgy has us pray to the All Mighty for our lives, which are in God’s hands. But it is equally true that God’s future, story and legacy, is in our hands. The future of the Jewish story is in our hands. Yours and mine, right here right now.

This is frightening news. Both exhilarating and frightening. Frightening because what if we fail? America could love us to death. Rabbi Steven Leder of Wilshire Boulevard temple in LA warns that in America, we are free to shorten our names, shorten our noses and disappear. We are a shrinking people. In some ways,
it is terrible news that the future of Judaism is in our hands, because America might just love us to death.

But it is also the most hopeful and wonderful news in all of Jewish history that the Jewish story is in our hands. Why? Because we are the luckiest, most blessed Jews who ever lived. Right here, right now. We are the most creative wealthy, free, powerful and capable generation of Jews who ever lived. The combination of freedom, capitalism and Torah that America affords us is unprecedented. We can create the greatest renaissance of Jewish learning, culture and faith in all of human history. Right here, right now.

Rabbi Akiva, the greatest rabbi of the Talmud, and his colleagues stood on Mt. Scopus after the destruction of the temple looking down at Jerusalem, contemplating the ruins of what had been Judaism’s holiest place. But while the others wept, Rabbi Akiva smiled.

“Why do you weep?” asked Rabbi Akiva.

They replied, “How can we not weep when we see a fox walking through the Holy of Holies. The question is: how can you smile?”
Rabbi Akiva replied, “The prophets foresaw Jerusalem’s destruction and they also foresaw its rebuilding. I have seen the first prophecy come true. Now I know the second will also come true.”

I think the real question here is what did Rabbi Akiva have that his colleagues didn’t? It is noteworthy that Rabbi Akiva could see the ruins and smile. This is because he had hope, and from that hope he took a courageous leap of faith. Rabbi Akiva had the courage to hope. Hope is not a mere instinct. It is born in faith. A people that never loses hope cannot be defeated. The Jewish people keep hope alive. Hope keeps the Jewish people alive.

Our Jewish community in Santa Rosa has so much to be proud of today. We have an excellent preschool, many active temples, an array of Jewish nonprofit organizations. And at CST, we are blooming with excitement. We have wonderful infancy to adult learning opportunities. We have become a place for spirituality, technology, community, social, environmental and ethical action. We try and celebrate each holy and holiday with fervor and festivities. We study together, pray together, play together and support one another like a true community. We are well on our way to making our community strong enough to pass the test of time.
Return back with me to the streets of Spain, the country left with very few traces of Jewish life. We definitely do not want to end up like that. What about Germany, reinventing itself after the unthinkable? No, actually we want to be who we are, aren’t we lucky. I sure feel lucky!

The thing to remember though is that nothing stands still. We can not count on the vibrancy of today without investing in tomorrow. “Yes and more” is who we need to be if we want to “be” in the years ahead. So what can we do to ensure our future? We need to stay nimble, think big, remain committed to our causes and connected to our community. Our community is so strong! It’s so important that you keep coming, and giving as you do.

Close your eyes and imagine standing at the synagogue door in Santa Rosa 15 years from now. As you imagine this, are you in services? Maybe. Are there any prayer books or is everyone using a tablet or “the wall?” What is the current social or environmental action issue?

Now try and imagine even further out...500 years from now in 2512. What does Jewish Santa Rosa 2512 look like? Are you consuming food at an annual Food Fest? Or are you only virtually there? What kind of condition is our building in? Is the building alive with the sounds of community or is it merely a relic of the past?
One thing is for sure. Our actions this year will impact the years ahead. Let us use this year as a year to pause while standing at the synagogue door, pause for just a second to see beyond ourselves and to envision a Jewish future beyond our generation. Let’s think big, let’s think of the unimaginable, let’s think wisely and let’s come together as the strongest community we can fathom in the year to come.