



Rosh HaShanah AM Late Service 5783/2022

Maddie Metz - Meaning

Good morning everyone, Shanah Tova.

I was so honored when Rabbi Bekah asked if I would share a reflection with you all today, because I know that I owe a great debt to the community at Beth El. In my first year of high school and the wacky year that followed, it was really difficult to maintain connections to both Beth El and my Jewish identity more broadly. Sports and schoolwork began to take precedence over the community that raised me, it all just felt like too much. It took some time away for me to truly realize the importance that the constant of Beth El played in my life. It was sad and somewhat isolating to see the people I had spent years growing up with now pass as just some faces in the hallway. I knew that I needed to feel some connection to Beth El again, so in eleventh grade I joined the Judaism and Justice class. Not only did I learn about advocacy and justice as it appears in the Torah, but it initiated a re-introduction to the familiar walls of this synagogue and some of the people that I longed to connect with again. I feel a stronger connection to my identity now than ever, and in turn I've spent a lot of time reflecting on my journey with Judaism, and how my relationship with that part of my identity has grown to where it is today.

Growing up, I often felt like a fraud in my Jewish identity. I never understood Hebrew as well as my classmates, didn't know every prayer at services, and often found myself questioning some of the fundamental ideas we're told Jews are supposed to believe. I found myself in a place where I believed I was "not Jewish enough" to consider it a real part of my identity. Like there's some threshold for Jewishness that we reach, some prayer we know or idea we believe that can bump us from "technically Jewish" to "actually Jewish".

One of the first times I began to break through this barrier was in 8th grade at Makom. Rabbi Kahn sat us down for a lesson just right there in the sanctuary, and he was talking about how Judaism is all about interpretation. The stories that we read in the Torah are all the same, but the way we understand it or



lessons we take from it can be completely different. Having dialogue and sharing those different interpretations is what Judaism is all about. This idea was quite radical to me at the time. That there wasn't one idea that I had to align with to be Jewish, but that the act of interpreting and questioning the Torah for myself is what made me Jewish.

I took that idea and ran with it, deciding for myself that my Jewish identity didn't have to be defined by what I know, but instead by how I interact with this community.

Now, I look out at the Beth El community and how they were consistently there for me even when my life got too busy for me to reciprocate. Rabbi Bekkah consistently informed me of opportunities, and checked in when we hadn't spoken in a while. Cantor Elayah taught me how to play my favorite prayer on the guitar on her own time when she could've just sent me the sheet and called it a day. Brianna always carries the best snacks for anyone who's having a tough day. That's just what the community of caring people here are like. Beyond the staff, everyone I've met here seems to genuinely care about the people around them. So when I reflect on this community I think: That's Jewish to me. The music and songs that I've fallen in love with and which make me feel at peace: Those are Jewish to me. Celebrating shabbat at my camp, Friday evening services dressed in white followed by our tradition of Israeli dancing and campfire: That's Jewish to me. Rosh Hashanah dinner with my family and neighbors, eating my mom's homemade challah, and taking time to reflect on my past year and show gratitude for everything that has brought me joy: That's Jewish to me. Traditions, community, reflection, questioning, and shared values are the parts of my life that tie me to my Jewish identity.

This community at Beth El is what has provided me a sense of meaning, of what my identity can mean to me. This strength in my identity has been the root of my growing confidence which allows me to say "yes" to new opportunities, make new friends, and get up to speak in front of you all today. I'm so nervous but so excited for the rest of my life, and if I never had the Rabbis that I had growing up to shed a new light on the identity I was longing for but unable to belong to, the person I am now and my attitude towards life could be very different. When I look out at the children of Beth El as a madricha I can picture



myself a few years ago, sitting in the same chairs in the same classrooms. What seemed like an involuntary eight years at Kadima was actually a formative experience in shaping the values I hold close today. The people who surrounded me, my rabbis, friends, and the overarching community contributed to an unmatched support system that has guided me through my years growing up in Berkeley. Some of the kids I see may not relate to this yet, but I hope that when they grow up it will be all the more meaningful to them too. And I hope that I have some part in creating the same warm, welcoming community for them as it was for me.