

Rosh Hashanah 5784:

Be-naareynu U-vizukunaynu: Moving Forward Together

This past year has been one of two major milestones in my life.

The first is a milestone birthday that reminds me how old I've become since I arrived at Etz Chaim. No one tells you when you are in your 30s that your body and your brain come with a "check engine light" and your warranty is about to expire at around 39 ½ years. I keep waiting for a Telemarketer to call and say, "We've been trying to get in touch with you about renewing your Mortality and Mental Warranty." Wait, but there's more! Right after I turned 40, I was at a local restaurant, and I got carded. I said to the waiter, "I am so excited. I haven't been carded in years!" He looked at me and said, "I'm sorry sir, I wasn't asking for your ID. I was asking for your AARP card! For your discount."

In addition to having turned 40, what makes this sermon a *shehechyanu* moment for me personally is that this *Rosh Hashanah* now marks the 7th year I have been in this synagogue.

Now, I know for some of you it seems like I just got here. I know this is true because every few months I meet someone who says to me, oh you must be the new rabbi at Etz Chaim. Rabbi Lewis, how many years does it take until I become the "OLD Rabbi"? Earlier this year a congregant whose identity because my brain is out of warranty, I have long forgotten, stopped me. "You know Rabbi, I have to say you still seem new to me because in all of the years I've been here, I haven't met your wife." I said, that's funny: she comes every Shabbat morning...

Yet getting serious now, let's look at seven years in the framework of the Jewish tradition. The *Torah* teaches: *Shesh Shanin Tizmor Karmecha*. Six years you till your fields. And on the seventh year, rest, reflect, dream big about your future.

Which is why at long last, as the "no longer so new" rabbi, having left the days of my wearing light up sneakers long behind me, I want to dream big with you, and I want to share what must be our collective vision for our community. Not only where we are now, but where we will be together, in seven years and beyond.

And to do that with you this morning, what I want to talk about is not this *Rosh Hashanah*, but the other *Rosh Hashanah*: which for the Jews living in the Torah, was almost certainly *Pesach*, which takes place during the Hebrew month of Nissan, what the Torah calls the first month of the year.

Now hold on a second rabbi, *Ma Nishtana*: Why would the Jews of the *Torah* celebrate *Rosh Hashanah* at Passover, and not Tishrei? It's because while the creation of the world happened today, the first of *Tishrei*, what the Jews of the *Torah* understood was that it was the Exodus that first made us a community: and for those Jews, the creation of community was tantamount to creating a whole new World.

Some of us, when we think of *Yetziyat Mitzrayim*, think of a dashing Charlton Heston and an erudite albeit also good looking, bald Yule Brenner demanding that the Children of Israel go free.

But for the Jews of the *Torah*, *Rosh Hashanah* was the moment we were finally, for the first time we called *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. *Pesach* was the moment we came together in a common cause.

And it is the moment when Moses says what to me is the defining vision of Jewish life, my vision for this synagogue as we move forward together.

Moshe, in that moment, tells Pharaoh with conviction, *benaareynu uvizkaynaynu nelech*. We will leave Egypt. We will get to the Promised Land. But only if we walk with our young and our old together.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz once defined a Jew not as someone whose grandparents were Jewish, but someone who desires that their grandchildren also be Jewish. Friends, that's also Moses' point. Jewish community, synagogues, only thrive when we create a community where our young and old care about one another. Think the Pesach Seder, today, the most practiced ritual among all American Jews. Why is that? It's because in a time of increasing ageism and lack of understanding between generations, the Seder is the quintessential Jewish ritual when grandparents celebrate grandchildren, and grandchildren honor their grandparents.

Yet it's no secret: among the Jewish people and certainly in our country, we are increasingly becoming a society that segregates by age. When I moved to East Cobb, one of the first friends I made was a preacher from Dallas, which until that point I thought was a city in Texas. We got to learn a little about one another's communities. And that's when he asked me: "Are you a young church or an old church?" I had to laugh. What on earth was he talking about? Main Line Protestants run old churches. Young Christians were gravitating toward non-denominational Christian houses of worship. So, which were we? I told him *Benaareynu Uvizkunaynu*: Etz Chaim would be a community for all.

Only in that moment I must admit that his words reminded me of a story of several elderly *chasidim* who met with their *rebbe* to complain. The children, the elderly *chasidim* said, are disturbing our *kavana* and our davening. Can you have their parents remove them from the *beis medrash*. The *rebbe* nodded. Hours later a number of parents met with the *rebbe* and complained that their children felt unwanted in the shul. The *elders* were pushing them out the door. The *rebbe* nodded. The next day the *rebbe* invited both delegations into his study. Our *shul*, the *rebbe* said, needs the older members to reach up to the top of the shelves to gather what is holy up there. Our shul needs our youngsters to reach down to gather from the floor what has tumbled to the ground that is holy down there. We cannot have true holiness without both reaching up and reaching down together. How do we know this? *Moshe* told Pharaoh: *Binaareinu uvizkayneinu nelech*.

Thousands of years ago, when we left Egypt, young and old coming together was the rule: now, it is the exception. And in particular, I have been thinking about this since last *Sukkot*, when I was witness to both a beautiful and concerning interaction that took place in our shul. A more senior congregant came to a younger one who had brought her two young children to services and thanked her for coming. Why, asked the younger parent, would you possibly thank me for coming? The older congregant said, "I am grateful that you came to hang out with a bunch of old fogeys like us." That's when the younger congregant turned to me and said, "Rabbi, I don't get it. I grew up on a *kibbutz*. There, we have a deal. The young take care of the old...and the old people are supposed to look after my kids. "Why," she observed, "are American Jews failing at this so badly?"

Friends, she's right. We are failing at this badly. Maybe it's because people of different generations struggle to understand one another and see the world differently. Maybe it is our age. The latest PEW forum data on American religious life reported that Jews are the oldest religious group in America. We have an average age of 67. Maybe it's our differing priorities. My parents and grandparents were married in their 20s and only then settled into their careers. Among 18–40-year-olds in America right now, only 32% even see marriage, and building a family, as key to their fulfillment.

Their careers come first.

I get it: we are not always going to see things the same way. We are not always going to want to practice Judaism the same way. But here is my point in all these stories: can you imagine what a country, what a Jewish people we could create if we put aside the ageism, the complaints about millennials, the “Ok Boomers” and we could be part of that *Kibbutz* style deal? Literally, *Kibbutz* means gathering together. *Benaareyunu Uvizkunaynu*. Can you imagine what we could do if we would only listen to Moses, who taught us that for the Jewish people to thrive, you need the wisdom and experience that comes from an older generation, the holiness up here, coupled with the vibrancy and enthusiasm that comes from a younger generation, the holiness down here.

Folks, I will tell you how I know at *Etz Chaim* we are on the right track. Because friends, in the same day, I swear to God, *bli neder*, I was the *rebbe* in our story, having had these two conversations only hours apart:

The first person walked into my office. She told me, “Rabbi, our synagogue is too old. We are an aging congregation. You must do more programming for young people like me.” I told her about *Sukkahfest*, our rapidly growing preschools and religious schools, targeted family programs, thriving youth groups, and she agreed that she was full of misconceptions, that she needed to come to Tot *Shabbat*, we were a synagogue for young people.

Not an hour later, the person's mother walked into my office. She said, “Rabbi, our synagogue is too young. There are so many new young families, I don’t know half the people on the holidays. You must be neglecting old people like me.” And so, I told her about our thriving partnership with Agewell, adult learning opportunities, *chavurot*, partnerships with Huntcliff, our Prime Timers, and the like. And she agreed she was also misinformed, and that we were a synagogue for mature Jewish adults.

Only here, at that moment, was my mistake. Here’s where I messed up. I should’ve called them into a room together and told them the story of two Jews discussing how their synagogue might change with the selection of a new rabbi. One search committee member said: “I want a rabbi who will create an environment where my grandfather would feel comfortable,” The second one thought, then said, “I want a rabbi who will create an environment where my granddaughter will feel comfortable.”

I should’ve told them how we here at *Etz Chaim*, not only under the old rabbi, but under the new rabbi, we will do both of those things together. I should’ve told them about our Better Together Grant, which this year will have students and seniors learning about the Holocaust together. I should’ve told him about our *Bubbes* and *Zaydees*’ volunteering in the preschool, and the hugs and kisses given to Papas and Nanans and *Bubbes* and *Zaydees*. I should’ve told them about our Sisterhood Kickoff event, organized by women in their 30s and attended by people in their 90s. I should’ve told them about the joy of seeing people of all generations celebrate Blue Jean *Shabbat* or *Shabbat* in the Park. Or about kiddush tables and buffet lines filled with people on *Shabbos* from different generations connecting. *Be-Naareynu U-Vizkunaynu*, all founded on the belief that all of us, no matter what our age and experience are part of a deal: where we care about one another.

My ask of you is simple. In the waning days of COVID, now is the time to re-engage with us. Continue to be a part of creating this meaningful, purposeful, multi-generational family. Tell both your children and your parents that this is a place for all of us. It doesn’t mean we are going to always be interested in the same kinds of things or see Judaism the same. But let us never forget that what has always made this synagogue strong are the depths of our intergenerational relationships.

It's hard to believe it's been seven years. Not seven years of an old church or a young church, but seven years of *Am Yisrael*, a nation of Israel. Not an aging congregation nor only a young one, but a community of grandparents who sit for a *Seder*, and grandchildren who sing the *Ma Nishtana*. Seven years of holiness both above and below. Seven years not only of ID cards but AARP cards thriving together.

Ledor Vador. Together, over the next six years we will till our fields and get down to work: so that in another six years, we will once again celebrate the fruits of our labor. Please join me in reciting the *Shehechyanu*....

Rabbi Daniel Dorsch