

From Buffet to *Brit*, Part 2: Building our Jewish House

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about the challenge of creating “Jewish houses” for ourselves to live in. I posed the question, what would it look like if the basic frame, the basic structures of our lives, were rooted in what Mordecai Kaplan called our “Jewish civilization”?

I also spoke about Judaism as at its core a transformative project. Our great “master story,” the narrative that shapes the Jewish imagination, is the journey described in the Torah—a journey from slavery in Egypt to the borders of the promised land—a journey in which a newly freed people struggle to create a covenantal community in service to the Source of Life itself. Our tradition speaks of the work of “*tikkun*”—the imperative to repair and heal a world that is broken in so many ways. This *tikkun* is called for on all levels—emotional, spiritual, physical; social, political, and economic. The obligations traditionally placed upon a Jew make no distinction between ethical and ritual, between public and private—all of our actions flow into this work of transformation.

The implication of thinking about Judaism as a transformative project is this: If we really want our Judaism to make a difference in the world, then things will probably change. We will change, in some ways—hopefully all for the good! We will need to shift from thinking about our Jewish commitments as one more obligation to squeeze into an already overcrowded schedule, into thinking about how our lives might look different if our priorities and commitments were shifted around. And when we start thinking about how our lives might look different, then we’ll start wondering how other things might have to look different for that to happen—our work schedules, or how our neighborhood looks, or the ways in which work and family and community are structured in our society. We may have to start thinking about how it’s hard to shift our own priorities if the priorities of the society we live in aren’t also challenged.

So this is a big project. We need to approach it in small, manageable steps. What I would like to do today is to lay out some possibilities of what it might mean to build both our individual Jewish houses, and our collective congregational house—those structures that serve as the home base for our work of repair.

Some of the things I say may not interest you in the least, and that’s fine. My hope is that each of you will hear at least one thing that sparks you in some way. Maybe it will be something that makes you excited, or that speaks to your own gifts and talents. Maybe it will be something that terrifies you. Terror and excitement are pretty close on the emotional scale—or else why would all those people be watching “Fear Factor”?—and so sometimes it makes sense to pay attention to something that scares you—perhaps that is what you are being called to take on. But however it happens, if something I suggest resonates with you, I hope you will take that moment of recognition seriously, and think about next steps. And again, my intent here is to not to add to that large burden of “shoulds” that you’re already lugging around, not to give you one more thing to feel guilty about not doing. It’s simply to help spark your own imagination about the possibility of what you, of what we, might do.

And I also want to make it clear that while I've been speaking about creating Jewish houses for ourselves as Jews to live in, I do not mean to exclude in any way the non-Jewish members of our community from this project. While it is always a blessing when someone formally joins the Jewish people through conversion, I also know that not everyone wants to take that step. Whatever our personal backgrounds or history, I hope our communal Jewish house can be a place for all who wish to join in this transformative project.

So, what are some steps in "reconstructing" Jewish life, Jewish community, Jewish civilization, in a way that feels meaningful for us?

Shabbat

I'd like to start where the haftarah left off—with the prophet's call to the people to meaningfully observe Shabbat. The concept of Shabbat is probably the Jewish people's greatest gift to human civilization. More than just a day off from work, Shabbat is a time each week when we are called upon to "rest" from the need to control, to change, to create or destroy. It is a caution about the dangers inherent in limitless growth and endless activity. There is in fact a Shabbat-inspired movement growing, called "Take Back Your Time," in which churches and other organizations are coming together to address "the national epidemic of overwork, overscheduling and lack of time." The Take Back Your Time folks cite these statistics:

- Americans work an average of nine full weeks more per year than European workers, and have the shortest paid vacations in the industrialized world.
- In the last 25 years, children have lost 50% of their unstructured outdoor time.
- The average American parents spend 38 minutes a week in meaningful conversation with their children.

This campaign is encouraging its members to take four "windows of time" during this September and October for "rest and balance." I think it's a great campaign, and would love for the congregation to get involved, but I was struck by this goal of just four "windows of time" over two months. As Jews, we're supposed to inhabit 25 hours of Shabbat time every week! But what is great about the Take Back Your Time campaign is that it restores the social transformation aspect of Shabbat. Shabbat isn't just about having a nice meal with your family and friends, although it is also that—it's about how we deal with time as a society. And if one theme echoed loudly throughout our Community Conversations, it's the overwhelm so many of us experience in the realm of time. We've become profoundly disempowered when it comes to time—we tend to feel oppressed by it. Shabbat is a weekly reminder that we are not servants of time, but of something greater—something that is greater than work, greater than soccer games, greater than our own constant sense of urgency. If even God had to rest, then we do too. As a society, we need to feel empowered to create policies, workplaces, an economy, that respect something other than endless economic productivity.

On a personal level, we can feel empowered to make Shabbat a reality in our lives if it's not already. Lighting candles and having a nice meal on Friday nights is a great step, but shouldn't be the end of the process. Here are some other things you might do:

- Turn something off. From Friday evening through Saturday at sunset, experiment with turning off your computer, or your phone, or the TV. It's amazing what happens when people in a house need to talk to each other, need to play, need to be creative, because there's no TV or e-mail or videogames. Make a rule that it's okay to play music or watch a movie as a family, but nothing else. See if you can do it for Friday night and part of Saturday if you can't do it all day. But turn something off.
- Don't spend money. See what it's like to not participate in consumer culture for one day each week. Plan ahead, buy your groceries, put gas in the tank on Thursday night. Look for things to do that don't involve spending money on Shabbat.
- Make Shabbat together as a community. A nice leisurely lunch after Shabbat morning services is a wonderful traditional Jewish practice. I would love to see Dorshei Tzedek members in each other's houses Friday nights or Saturday afternoons, sharing a meal together. We have tapes of the Friday night blessings at the school office if you need a little help. And there are other things to do together on Shabbat afternoon – take a hike, go on a communal dog walk, get together and discuss a book, bring the kids to a park.
- And finally, my personal favorite Shabbat afternoon activity – take a nap. Real rest is important. Naps are great.

The basic idea to get used to about Shabbat is that it's a day on which nothing needs to get done. Shabbat is a day just to be—with yourself, with family, with friends, with the outdoors. It's a transformative practice if there ever was one. It's tempting to say, "but given the way my life is, I can't." That's why Shabbat is a commandment—one of the 10 big ones. Our ancestors knew that people might not do Shabbat without some significant prodding. Shabbat is a serious practice, but don't feel you have to take it on whole hog (as it were). Bite off a piece that feels do-able to you and your household, and go from there. A little bit of Shabbat is better than no Shabbat at all.

Our Kids

The second thing I'd like to talk about is how we raise our kids—as a community. Many of our members join Dorshei Tzedek largely or primarily because we're seeking something for our children—a sense of identity, a grounding in ethics and values. Educating children is one of the central *mitzvot* in traditional Judaism—the rabbis say that to teach a child is like giving birth to that child. In my own parenting experience of these past 3 years, I have come to see that raising children in contemporary America isn't just about trying to instill good sense and good character in them—it's also about holding at bay cultural forces that are actively toxic. It's quite natural, as a parent, to feel somewhat helpless in the face of a continual onslaught of television, peer pressure, and just generally unhealthy messages about everything from food to gender roles that seem to be beamed in from everywhere.

I think a vibrant Jewish community can have enormous effect in shaping who our children are and who they become, and not only during the two or four hours a week that they are in religious

school. This is a place for parents to get support and to explore together the challenges of healthy parenting. This is a place where kids can learn what the hard work of creating community really means, and have role models, beyond their parents, of folks striving to live their values. Ideally, I would hope that we can make the nurturing of our children not a lonely parental task, but a joyful communal one.

One challenge is how to continually expand kids' engagement with and involvement in our communal celebrations and activities without infantilizing those programs. Kids are not stupid, and they know when something is just for kids and the grown ups aren't interested. But when the grown-ups are having a good time, or doing something that seems important, then becoming a part of that can be incredibly alluring to kids. A great example is our Purim celebration. When I arrived here, I outlawed children's plays for Purim, because I had a goal of making Purim an enjoyable holiday for adults—which I think we've accomplished! One great result are our fabulous Purim spiels, which many kids love to do along with adults. We need to continue thinking as a community about where it makes sense for kids and adults to learn and experience things separately, and where and when we can come together.

It would also be wonderful if we could better mobilize the amazing skills and talents among our adult members to help support our kids' Jewish education. For example: our religious school, as wonderful as it is, is not fully able to accommodate all of our kids' special learning needs—we just can't afford the kind of education specialists that a large synagogue can. But we have members who are gifted educators, or who are knowledgeable in this area, or who maybe have a couple of hours a week available to accompany a special needs kid in his or her classroom, to give them the individual attention that our teachers just can't. It should be a congregational goal that every child here be able to receive a Jewish education, be connected to Jewish community, be able to celebrate bar or bat mitzvah—and that responsibility should not solely rest with our education directors or with individual parents.

Building a vibrant youth group, figuring out how to make it financially possible for our members to send their kids to Jewish summer camp, creating new programs and thinking creatively inside the programs we already have—these are all ways that we can work together in this holy work of raising the next generation of Jewish mensches.

Judaism as a Civilization

We've taken some wonderful steps in recent months in beginning to fulfill Mordecai Kaplan's understanding of Judaism as not just a religion, but as a religious "civilization" that includes music, the arts, literature. It's been wonderful to see Elaine Bresnick initiate our chorus, to see the film series that Emily Sper and Stan Fleischman have organized. I've also been thrilled to see the ways that folks have come together around cultural endeavors that aren't necessarily Jewish in content but that can be supported and nurtured by this community—whether it's the independent artists' support group that Cindy Rivka Marshall organized this past year, or the writing group that James Kaplan has initiated. Let a thousand flowers bloom! I hope our many visual artists will come together and make good use of the stage space in our sanctuary—a great spot for a little art gallery! I hope folks will create even more venues to explore Jewish literature, art, music, dance—to create together, discuss together, enjoy together. Ideally, Jewish

living should engage our whole selves—our bodies and minds, our hands and our hearts. And ideally, it should also be fun.

Chesed

Another area of Jewish life that we've done some great work in, but where we can continue to build, is in the realm of *chesed*—acts of lovingkindness. How we deal with death and mourning as a congregation will be one focus of communal attention this year. How do we, as a community, become more educated in and comfortable with the Jewish approach to mourning—from burial practices to comforting mourners? Do we want to take on the mitzvah of the chevra kadisha—the holy community that prepares the body for burial? How do we do a better job of remembering, as a community, our loved ones who have passed away, and how do we help our members make the practice of remembering a part of their lives?

Another realm of *chesed* is supporting one another during difficult times—times of illness and loss. This congregation does a great job of helping to care for folks with physical illness, but there is still a whole shadow area where many of our members suffer largely alone, whether they're dealing with mental illness, or divorce, or infertility, or job loss. There are too many areas where folks feel some kind of shame or for other reasons don't feel comfortable reaching out. How do we help one another emerge from this shadow place, how do we help each other with problems that feel complicated or potentially shameful, problems for which traditional Judaism doesn't always provide us with models?

There is one other important aspect of *chesed*. In medieval Jewish communities, the phrase *gemilut chasadim* came to be associated primarily with the communal obligation to financially help those who had fallen on hard times, usually by making available interest-free loans. In a modern-day American culture which exalts the myth of self-sufficiency and discourages any open discussion of personal finances, what would it mean for this community to say that it is willing to address the financial needs of its members? The Jewish answer traditionally has been the creation of free loan societies, which operate with utmost respect for the dignity of those who apply for help. There is a communal free loan program here in Boston, but might it be possible for our own congregation to do something along these lines? Do we trust one another enough to create a loan pool that would help a family that is suffering job loss, that would help cover emergency medical expenses if necessary? What would it mean to be committed to one another in this way?

Tzedek

This leads me to another area of communal concern—the issue of *tzedek*, social justice, and how we promote that as a congregation.

I am thrilled that we joined the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization this past year as a congregation, because it provides a great venue in which to take action on local issues as a community. It also gives us the opportunity to reach out beyond ourselves and connect on issues of mutual concern both with folks who are like us and folks who are quite different than us. I hope that in 5765 our participation in GBIO will continue to deepen—not just as we continue our

own one-on-one conversations, an initiative that grew out of, and with the support of, GBIO—but that CDT members will continue to take leadership within GBIO, and that we can establish closer relations with other congregations in the organization. I hope by the end of this year that every Dorshei Tzedek member will have experienced at least one GBIO “action,” and seen for yourselves what it’s like when people of all different backgrounds come together on issues of shared concern.

And what would it mean for us to take seriously, as a community, Jewish teachings about *tzedakah*, obligatory giving to those in need? Perhaps this could be the year that we start a *tzedakah* collective here at Dorshei Tzedek. A *tzedakah* collective provides the opportunity for those who are interested to learn and wrestle together with questions of how we decide how much to give and how to prioritize where to give. It’s an opportunity to take what is usually a very private act, often done in a less than methodical way, and make it into a mindful, organized, communal endeavor.

It would also be interesting to think together more about how we as a community support our members who do social justice work full-time. How do we nurture them, so that they don’t suffer burnout? And how do we inspire our kids, in order to create the next generation of social justice workers? How can we inspire each other, and bring our expertise and insights from our work and activism outside the congregation inside? And even more—how do we do all that without making the assumption that we all share the same political views?

Israel

As I mentioned during my talk on Rosh Hashanah, Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, believed that the renewal of organic Jewish community was fundamental for the revitalization of modern Jewish life. For that reason he was a dedicated Zionist before that was a mainstream American Jewish commitment. He believed that a Jewish homeland was necessary for a renewed Judaism that would once again have a living language and vital cultural life. I think that much of the current reality in Israel would give Kaplan great pain—whether the deep divide between secular and religious Jews, the dominance of a reactionary Orthodoxy in Israeli religious life, or the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But his response would be to urge us to stay connected, to not give up, to remember the fundamental fact that as Jews we are connected to the Jewish people around the globe.

I don’t have the time here today to speak adequately about what it means to stay connected to Israel in the midst of the ongoing crisis in the Middle East. But I do want to say that our efforts to build a Jewish house can’t ignore our connection—whether we personally desire that connection or not—to that land, to the peoples living in that land. Israel is the only Jewish country in the world, and so in some way we are responsible to it, and implicated in all that goes on there.

A few years ago, Louise Enoch, Betsy Hinden, Ellen Hemley and others did some wonderful work in trying to create space for more open, honest discussion about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict both within our congregation and in the greater Boston Jewish community. Perhaps it is time to get some discussion going here again—not with the objective of everyone

coming to political agreement, but for the sake of not ignoring what has become one of the greatest challenges to the collective Jewish soul. If you don't feel you know enough about Israel, then find or organize opportunities to learn. If you want to take action, then find like-minded folks to take action with. If you've never been to Israel, then perhaps this should be the year that you consider taking a trip, and seeing first-hand the complexities, the beauty, the history that can't be adequately conveyed second-hand. Let's be brave in our willingness to confront this complex and emotional issue together, and compassionate in how we approach one another. Let's not assume that everyone else in the congregation either disagrees with us or agrees with us, or that we're alone in our opinions or our confusion.

Spiritual Life

The last topic I'd like to address is the whole realm of spiritual and religious life. Jewish tradition demands that we put our individual lives in a greater context, that we understand ourselves in relation to something both beyond ourselves and profoundly a part of ourselves. The issue here is not so much one of belief, but of how we better attune ourselves to what Kaplan called "the Power that makes for Salvation." How do we best align our own energies with the creative, positive forces at play in the universe? How do we open ourselves up to the wonders of Creation? How do we better deal with the adversity, the challenges, that life hands us? These are all questions of the spirit, and each of us, no matter how rational or secular we consider ourselves, has a spirit.

There are of course shelves of books taken up with the topic of Jewish spiritual practice, and I can barely begin to touch the surface here. But I would like to suggest some areas where Judaism has well-developed resources to offer, and to encourage you to think about one step you can personally take in this new year.

- Eating—Judaism is very good with eating. Not the over-eating that characterizes some of our holidays, but the traditional Jewish path of making the act of eating a sacred one. Judaism teaches that what we put in our mouths, and how it gets there, are important issues. Trying to eat more responsibly, more in line with Jewish teachings, with more respect for the earth and our bodies, is a great Jewish practice to take on. So is slowing down and saying a blessing, acknowledging where something comes from, before we eat it, and saying a blessing after we eat, to acknowledge the great gift of having enough to satisfy ourselves.
- In thinking about what comes out of our mouths, there is a well-developed Jewish ethical tradition around the uses and abuses of speech. The avoidance of *lashon harah*, negative or destructive speech, is a powerful practice to take on. This is something that we can help each other with—to gently remind one another, to leave the room when *lashon harah* is being spoken, to think about the kind of speech we want to be putting into the world—whether we're talking about our neighbors, our family members, or even our political adversaries. Jewish tradition holds the power of the word in awe—we believe that words created this world. That is something to think about.

- As a model of positive speech, Jewish liturgy offers an incredible wealth of blessings and *kavvanot*, words that help direct our awareness in healthy ways. Cultivating a Jewish spiritual practice can be anchored in saying blessings every morning that give thanks for waking up, for the created world, for the souls and bodies that we've been given. One great goal for the year: memorize the blessing that is traditionally said when you take a poop, and then remember to say it every time! A great activity to do with the kids...
- And finally, learning Hebrew. I know that many people find their inability to read Hebrew to be a major obstacle to engaging more fully with Jewish prayer and learning. I can't promise fluency to anyone who starts to learn Hebrew after the age of 10, but I do think basic Hebrew literacy is a great and achievable challenge to take on. Lisa Schneier and the Adult Ed Committee have organized two beginning Hebrew classes that start this fall—take one! You'll see information in the adult ed brochures out in the lobby. If you already have some basic Hebrew, there are myriad opportunities in the greater Boston area to deepen your knowledge. There are so many people in this congregation who have taken on the challenge of learning Hebrew as adults, and who now can lead our services and chant from the Torah. May they serve as an inspiration to all of us!

Conclusion

So, that's my suggestion list for today. I know there are things I left out, and I hope you'll fill in the blanks yourselves. And I imagine that you're now sitting there thinking, "Great, she gives us all these ideas for this year, just when she's about to leave!"

But it's actually my sabbatical that is prompting me to give this talk this year. There is a story in the Talmud that I love. It's about a rabbi, Rabbi Hiyya, who claims that he has kept Torah alive in the Jewish community by going to towns that don't have any Jewish teachers, and by choosing a few kids to work with. He takes five kids, and teaches each one one book of the Torah. Then he finds another six kids, and teaches each one one book of the Mishnah. Then he says to them: 'Until I return, teach each other Torah and Mishna.'

I've always been intrigued by that last statement—"until I return." When does Rabbi Hiyya plan to return? And what does he expect to see when he does? The Talmud leaves those questions wonderfully open. I am similarly going away for a few months with a great sense of openness about what I'll see when I return. I hope it's not exactly what I see now. I hope that there will be new initiatives, new projects, new practices that individuals have taken on. I hope that in my absence you'll have the space to explore a bit, to try new things, to take the initiative. I hope, for the sake of transformation, that I am made a bit uncomfortable when I return, that there are some new realities that I may have to adjust to. And I hope likewise that I will have some new things to bring to you.

May this be a good, fruitful, and abundant year for us all!

Rabbi Toba Spitzer
Yom Kippur 5765

Resources

SHABBAT

Take Back Your Time Campaign—www.timeday.org

Books on Shabbat:

- *The Sabbath*, Abraham Joshua Heschel—the best introduction to the conceptual basis and revolutionary nature of Shabbat
- *A Shabbat Reader: Universe of Cosmic Joy*, edited Dov Peretz Elkins—an excellent anthology about Shabbat, from classic texts to “how-to’s” to contemporary reflections
- *The Art of Jewish Living: The Shabbat Seder*, by Dr. Ron Wolfson—a guide, including blessings, readings, and background, to creating a Friday night Shabbat experience
- *How To Run A Traditional Jewish Household*, Blu Greenberg—an excellent introduction to traditional Shabbat observance
- *Down To Earth Judaism*, Arthur Waskow—the section on “Rest” is the best exploration of the socially transformative aspects of Shabbat

CHESED

Books on death and mourning:

- *Saying Kaddish*, Anita Diamant—excellent introduction on traditional and contemporary Jewish approaches to what to do when a loved one passes away.
- *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*, edited by Jack Reimer—anthology of texts from myriad perspectives, including traditional rabbinic teachings, contemporary rabbinic insights, personal experiences, therapeutic perspectives, and more.
- *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*—a guide to burial practices and mourning that includes reflections from people who’ve been through a variety of experiences of loss.
- *Mourning & Mitzvah*, Anne Brener—a “guided journal” to help the process of mourning, especially when the loss has been traumatic in some way.

TZEDEK

Tzedakah:

- A great on-line resource for teachings about the traditional practice of tzedakah is www.just-tzedakah.org.
- The Shefa Fund (www.shefafund.org) has very good resources on Tzedakah in general and for creating a tzedakah collective in particular.

SPIRITUAL LIFE

- The “bathroom blessing” (also know as *Asher Yatzar*) can be found on page 163 of the *Kol Haneshama Shabbat* prayerbook (Reconstructionist).

- For a general website that deals with all topics of Jewish life, practice, and learning, I recommend www.myjewishlearning.com
- For a Reconstructionist approach to kashrut and eating issues, see *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Kashrut—The Dietary Laws*, David Teutsch, with commentary from a variety of Reconstructionist rabbis. Available from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, www.rrc.edu.

A few useful books on Jewish practice, from a variety of perspectives:

- *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*, Michael Strassfeld—by the author (a Reconstructionist rabbi!) of *The First Jewish Catalog* and *The Jewish Holidays*, this is an excellent introduction to all aspects of living a Jewish life and how to find meaning in those practices.
- *Jewish Family & Life: Traditions, Holidays, and Values for Today's Parents and Children*, Yosef Abramowitz & Susan Silverman. A great intro to making a Jewish home and living a Jewish life whatever your level of knowledge or observance, oriented especially towards families with kids, but useful for anyone.
- *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, Blu Greenberg—written by an Orthodox feminist, a guide to traditional observance. Includes sections on Shabbat, kashrut, and the Jewish year.
- *The Journey Home: Discovering the Deep Spiritual Wisdom of the Jewish Tradition*, Lawrence A. Hoffman, a Reform rabbi and author of numerous books on Jewish liturgy. This book includes chapters on Torah, blessings, theology, and other topics.