

Bullseyes and Minds' Eyes

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Temple Beth El, Tacoma

One day, one the most renowned marksmen in the Russian military was riding through the town of Chelm. As he passed by a barn, he saw the most remarkable sight: all along the side of the barn were painted targets, and in the middle of each target---a perfect bullseye---was an arrow. The marksman was impressed. Even he couldn't shoot with such accuracy and perfection!

He got down off his horse and went to look closer---perhaps he could learn something just by looking at the way the arrow entered the wood. He inspected the arrows, imagined the bow in his arm, felt the tension of the bowstring and the alignment of his wrist, elbow, and shoulder. As he made slight adjustments, trying to see how he might improve his aim, he noticed a child coming around the corner of the barn.

"Hello!" he called. "Can you tell me who shot these arrows? I have to meet this marksman. Perhaps I can learn from him and improve my own skill."

"Oh," the child said brightly. "That's me. I shot those arrows."

"You!?" exclaimed the marksman, surprised and, now, more curious than ever. "How do you do it? I've been practicing almost my whole life and still I can't shoot with such precision."

The child broke into a wide grin. "Oh, easy. First I shoot the arrows and *then* I paint the targets on the barn."

If you don't have a target, every shot can be a bullseye. Likewise, as one of my mentors, Rabbi Jamie Gibson, would often say: "If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there."

Sometimes, not having a specific destination is freeing; you get to explore, try new things, and enjoy the journey. A couple whose wedding I officiated a number of years ago loves to travel. Neither was happy in their jobs, so they quit, did some planning and budgeting, and then spent the next year traveling around the world. Along the way, they picked up some freelance work to get a little income while they explored. They spent a number of months in Southeast Asia but only a few weeks in Europe. They enjoyed hiking and climbing through various parts of South America and then relaxed on the beaches of Mexico. When they finally returned to the US, the one proposed to the other at a random stop along the side of the road on one of their back-road road-trips.

During one of our premarital counseling meetings, I asked how they felt about settling down and working in more stable, long-term jobs, especially after having been unfulfilled by that lifestyle. They were quite thoughtful in their response and shared that, as much as they enjoyed having the freedom to go wherever they wanted, try new things, and meet new people, they missed the structure of life back home. They wanted to maintain some of that flexibility and spontaneity, but they also wanted to be able to see friends and family more regularly and find meaningful work. That year of travel actually helped them clarify their own goals and destinations in life.

"If you don't know where you're going, any path will take you there."
So where are you going?

While some people are great wanderers, most of us need the structure and responsibility of a target or goal to give us some direction or purpose in life. For some, that target is a career path or professional role. For others, it's a lifestyle or life experience. Others might find that structure through a behavioral or mindset goal. For many of us, it's a combination of all three and more. We have some vision in our mind's eye of where we want to go and then figure out how to get there.

For me, for as long as I can remember, I have had three goals: to be a parent, to teach, and to help. I knew the first one was going to take a little longer to bring to fruition, so, throughout school, I considered various professions that would allow me to teach and/or help. (Yes, I know teachers help, but as a kid, they were distinct in my mind.) As I got older, there was a little more of a trend toward specifically being a doctor or teacher. Or maybe something that blended the two. There were some different programs and career paths that I was looking into in high school, until I started meeting young, cool rabbis through temple youth group events and my first experience at Jewish summer camp.

By the time I was 16, I knew that I wanted to be a rabbi. I gave myself various opportunities to choose differently---my college degree is in Health: Science, Society, and Policy, and I looked into the possibility of going into public health---but clearly the rabbi thing stuck. Having that goal, that destination, has not only given me a clear path forward, but it has also helped me push through some of the health and personal challenges that threatened to derail me. With a vision of who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do, I could navigate through difficulty without becoming hopelessly lost.

Not all of us have a goal or vision so clearly defined, and I know people who worked toward a particular goal only to find that it didn't bring the purpose or direction or fulfillment that they had hoped. And that's OK---our journeys are full of twists and turns and times when we went in one direction thinking it was the right one only to find that it wasn't. Maybe it was a necessary detour. Or maybe curiosity led us down an interesting path, even if we're pretty sure it's not the right one. As the Wolf sings to Little Red Riding Hood in *Into the Woods*, "Any path, so many worth exploring, just one would be so boring." Even when we stray, having that vision in our mind's eye of who we want to be gives us a path to follow, steps to get there, a way forward so we're not wandering aimlessly, and even a way to return when we stray.

Luckily, we don't have to find our paths on our own and, if we get lost, we have guides to help us get back on track. That's part of what Yom Kippur is about---giving us an opportunity to check in on whether we're upholding our vision of ourselves or if we need to make some changes. And if we don't know where to start, our prayers, our Torah and Haftarah readings, and maybe even the rabbi's sermons offer some ideas. Flip through the pages of the machzor---there are insights and sparks of vision on almost every page, not to mention reminders of how we might return to our paths.

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So where are we going?

This yearly review of our personal vision parallels the work we need to do as a community and a congregation. How are we doing at upholding our congregational mission, vision, and values? What needs to be

changed? What needs to be improved? What have we been doing successfully? What do we want to focus on? Are we still on the right path for our congregation or do we need to make adjustments? After all, in our Torah reading this morning, we were reminded that we are all standing here this day, with a vision of what will bring us personal and communal life and blessing. Are we as a congregation still choosing life?

Another of characteristics that drew me to Temple Beth El was the clear sense of mission and vision and the intentional effort to embody them. During my interviews, I also heard that it's coming time to review and refresh the vision, a process that typically happens every five to seven years. For good reasons, including leadership transitions and the realities of COVID, that process has been delayed. That's true of many congregations, by the way. My last congregation had a 2020 vision that was set in 2013 and hadn't been updated by the time I left. I've heard the same from my colleagues across the country as well. As we enter this new chapter of Temple Beth El's story, though, it's time to review.

Over the course of these holy days, I've already begun to share some of my vision for TBE---a community where we listen to each other's words and each other's voices, a community that honors and welcomes everyone's gifts and strengths, a community where we can ask for help and, more often than not, receive it. I envision a congregation that is intentionally inclusive and provides a framework for folks in similar cohorts to gather while deepening intergenerational bonds and relationships. I envision a congregation that hungers for learning, that meaningfully engages in *tikkun olam*, that has a robust spiritual life in its many different forms.

I can almost hear some of you saying, “Rabbi, those are nice ideas, but what does that actually look like?” So let me break it down a little bit more. It’ll only be a little bit, though, for two reasons: First, each piece is a full sermon and, let’s be honest, not only don’t you want to listen to me for that long, but also, we don’t have time for that. Second, I actually need your input. A congregational vision cannot just be the priority of the rabbi, it has to be shared by the lay leadership, the staff, and the congregation as a whole. We need you to share your visions for the congregation to help guide us.

But when I imagine Temple Beth El in its next 5-7 years, I see a diverse community of individuals with different ages, backgrounds, experiences, abilities, talents, and interests, all of whom are drawn together by the recognition of our inherent worth having been created in the Divine Image.

I see us interacting in our sacred spaces and online with more ease and flexibility, so that we can be one community with give and take wherever we are. While I know that there are limitations to the interactions we can have online---at least until we can teleport food from one place to another---I do not want to have an interactive community in-person and a secondary virtual community that mostly just receives a lesser experience of what we do in-person.

I see us noticing who’s been missing for a while and reaching out to check in and offer support, not just to friends but anyone. I see us making sure that no one sits alone or separately unless they want to.

I see wiggly, not totally quiet children, lovingly respected and kept respectful by a community that values their presence; parents who can find their own spiritual connections knowing that they’re supported;

elders whose wisdom, insights, and experiences are solicited and honored; child-free couples who are recognized as whole families; singles who can find chosen family; and everyone else in their various life stages and experiences. And I see classes, services, programs, events, tikkun olam opportunities, and more that bring people together, building connections and strengthening our congregation.

I could go on about what I envision for Temple Beth El, now that I've been here for a whole three months, but I won't...for now. Because the next step is actually to hear your voices, to understand your visions of this community. As your rabbi, I have the privilege and responsibility of being one of our congregation's guides along the journey, but you all help set the destination. So where are we going?

And where are you, as an individual, going? Are you shooting arrows and then painting the target or do you have a destination in mind? Wherever you are in your journey, we can walk together and support each other. And though I know there will be twists and turns, peaks and valleys, obstacles and pitfalls, I hope that you find blessing on the way. *G'mar chatimah tovah!*