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Rosh Hashanah Morning 5782: 150 Years of Growing

In the Fall of '71, my fifth-grade class took a trip to the Field Museum of Natural History for the hundredth anniversary of the Chicago Fire. When we left the museum, we were asked to create a scrapbook. As it happened, that scrapbook was one of the highlights of my elementary school career, earning me a third-place ribbon from the museum which I've used ever since, to claim to be an expert on the Fire.

So, speaking as an authority I can state that, while there are reasonable doubts about the legendary claim that Mrs. O'Leary's cow started the fire, there's no question why the damage was so extensive. In 1871, Chicago was a town built of wood. Not only were most of its structures wooden; but much of the wet, marshy land the city was built on was covered by wooden streets and sidewalks. In fact, the city used so much wood that it became a manufacturing hub, as logs were floated down the Chicago River directly into sawmills. This is why the fire was so destructive. The entire city was flammable; a disaster waiting to happen.

When I entered Rabbinic School, a dozen years later, I learned a secondary outcome of the fire. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who founded Hebrew Union College in 1875, believed that America's future would come from the West. So rather than found his seminary in a more traditional city like New York, he wanted modern rabbis to train out west. Unfortunately, the fire put Chicago out of the running, so the "western" city Wise chose was Cincinnati.

Now given the magnitude of the fire's destruction, it's understandable how those outside of Chicago might have believed its time had passed. But Rabbi Wise misjudged the character of our town and the heart of our people, a point amply illustrated by the story I'll share now.

On the same night as the fire, 150 years ago this October, fifteen Jewish businessmen gathered to celebrate Simchat Torah. For months, these men had been worshipping in each other's homes. But before they headed home this night, with the air already filled with smoke, they pledged to establish a new congregation. And true to their word, on the next Shabbat, they founded a shul called Gemeinde Rodef Shalom (a gathering place for pursuers of peace).

Yes, even before the flames were out, these men and this city were already looking forward. Instead of destruction, they saw opportunity. Instead of despair, they envisioned the future. And somehow, their attitude and outlook were instilled in the DNA of the community they formed, which has time and again faced challenges. Yet, in every generation, leaders rose up to carry us forward.

So, when the flames were extinguished, it's no surprise that the congregation secured funds to purchase the frame of an old church building to use as their sanctuary, which they moved to a nearby lot. But just a year and a half later, in the spring of 1873, a twister knocked that building down. Undeterred the congregation issued bonds and raised enough money, not only to pay off what they owed, but to construct a new building at the corner of May and Huron Streets. And on the day it was dedicated the congregation took a new name – and Temple Beth-El of Chicago was established.

While our earliest years were tumultuous, the congregation settled down during the tenure of our sixth rabbi, Julius Rappaport, who arrived in 1891. During his 30 years on the pulpit, he began to shift the style of worship, using a prayerbook called Minhag America, which was created by Isaac Mayer Wise. This marked the beginning of a slow transition for Beth El, away from its Orthodox German roots. During this same period, Beth El opened its doors to large numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants who were making Chicago their home.

As the congregation grew it looked to the future. In 1902 a lot was purchased on Crystal Street where two buildings were raised – a sanctuary for worship, and a gymnasium called Molner Hall, which became a social hub for the Jews of the Northwest Side, hosting sporting events, socials, music and theatrical performances, dances for young adults, and Chicago's first temple youth group. Even more groundbreaking, it was the first Chicago congregation to welcome girls to learn alongside the boys. Under Rabbi Rappaport, Beth-El grew by thinking outside the box, by focusing on the needs of their surrounding community, and by shifting religious practices to meet the spirit of a new age – the 20th century.

And yet despite these notable achievements, by the time Rabbi Rappaport retired, change was in the air, as the neighborhood surrounding Beth El was becoming more Orthodox. In response, with the wind of the roaring twenties at their heels, the congregation sold their building and purchased land on Palmer Square. It was here in 1923, during the tenure of Rabbi Gusfield, that Beth-El formally associated with Isaac Mayer Wise's Reform movement, voting to join the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (today, the URJ). It was a decision that had consequential ramifications as a significant number of members continued to observe Orthodox practice. And in this new community, that was trending in the same direction as Crystal Street, (where they

had just moved from,) there were other congregations more suited to member's needs. And many left.

It was this declining environment that Rabbi Mayer Lipman faced when he assumed the pulpit in 1927, a situation that was exacerbated when the stock market crashed two years later, leaving the congregation deeply wounded. In the years that followed, Beth-El barely limped along. But by 1937, after the bank had foreclosed on their property, the congregation was left with no choice but to accept a purchase offer from a local branch of the Jewish People's Institute. And yet, with our fate seemingly sealed, we experienced a miraculous salvation.

On Purim we celebrate the heroism of Esther who saved the Jews of Shushan. Beth-El owes a debt of gratitude to our own "Esthers". For without anyone's knowing, the Sisterhood managed to raise enough money to purchase the school building, which was deemed "a separate fiscal entity" from the rest of the temple. Thus, while the sanctuary was sold to the JPI, Beth El's identity was sustained through the school. How fitting is it that the first congregation to open its classrooms to women was ultimately saved through their efforts.

In the years that followed, Beth-El continued to be sustained by the generosity of its members. In this case, it was Nathan and Anna Joffe, who were introduced to the temple by their neighbors, the Weisz's – whose ties to Beth-El extend back to its earliest days, (and whose granddaughter, Barb Ender and her husband Art, is still a member.)

The Joffe's suffered a tragic loss when their daughter, Adeline, died of blood poisoning. Their neighbor Joe, saw the depth of their grief and invited them to join him at services so they could say kaddish and be supported by the community. Friends, you never know the impact that a small act of kindness can have. Joe's mitzvah of comforting the mourner created a bond between Nathan Joffe and the congregation that he never forgot. In 1936, he became the Temple's president, a position he held for 10 years, enabling Beth-El to return to a position of stability.

In 1939 a new rabbi came to Beth-El, Rabbi Paul Goren, who was a recent graduate of Hebrew Union College. Rabbi Goren remained on the bimah until 1943, when he enlisted in the army as a chaplain, and provided distinguished service to servicemen across Europe. During these years of turmoil and tension, the congregation relied heavily on Joffe's leadership, and was ministered by Rabbi Joseph Straus, who filled in until Rabbi Goren returned in 1946.

It was in those years that Beth-El took in an immigrant family, which fled Poland during the Nazi invasion and lived in Siberia during the war. The husband, Morris Marbell,

became the temple's caretaker, and his wife, Rivka, was a Bubbie for every child in the congregation.

As an aside, a few years ago I received a note from a daughter of the Marbell's, along with a photograph of a young girl holding a beautiful fabric that had come from the temple. Most likely, it covered the pulpit on Palmer Square and was also used to cover the Torah between aliyot. Following a bit of correspondence, that antique fabric made its way back to us, and now adorns a small table in the Mishkan alongside the pulpit, physically connecting us to our congregation's journey.

As we return now to 1946, we find that neither the temple nor Rabbi Goren felt secure, because an old challenge was returning in a new form. There were rumors that Chicago was planning to redistrict its schools, which would change the demographics of the neighborhood. Rabbi Goren called for Beth-El to once again pick up and move.

While in the end, Rabbi Goren was right. But I can understand why a congregation that had already moved several times, and had expended so much time, energy, heart, and soul into building out its campus, would have resisted calls to start over again. That said, knowing in his heart what was to come, Rabbi Goren left Beth-El for a congregation in St. Louis.

Unfortunately for the congregation, his successor, Rabbi Joseph Buchler, reached the same conclusion as Goren had. And though the congregation continued to grow and had some of Chicago's largest youth and young parent groups, he also decided to move on.

This brings us to 1954, when Beth-El hired my predecessor, Rabbi Victor Weissberg who had spent a year as an assistant rabbi at Temple Isaiah Israel before taking this pulpit. Although still a young man, he had experience beyond his years. This Clevelander was a brilliant scholar who earned a degree from the University of Chicago and had enlisted in the Navy during the war. A fervent Zionist, he took a year's leave from rabbinic school to study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he met his wife, Tamar.

One of his first acts at Beth-El was placing an Israeli flag on the bimah next to the American flag; an act that was followed by a financial request. Rabbi Weissberg called for Beth-El to hold an Israel Bond Drive, a major shift for a Reform congregation of that era. Nonetheless, after more than a bit of persuasion, the drive was a success. It was the first of many changes that were to come.

Friends, I have to tell you that a book should be written about Rabbi Weissberg, who brought his strength, faith, and boundless energy into the congregation. He spoke passionately about his beliefs, whether they were spiritual, Zionist, or political, (although

he always stepped off the bimah when he talked politics.) Like the Lubovitcher Rebbe whose portrait hung in his office, he raised many Chassidim, many followers who supported his causes, and he lifted Beth-El to a period of growth and stability.

Thus, it is no surprise that a year after his arrival, the congregation agreed to a move. Beth-El purchased a half lot at the corner of Touhy and Albany Avenue, and the other half was donated by Irving and Fern Naxon, who joined the congregation soon after. (Their daughter, Eileen (and Art) Eisenberg are still members today.) In the years that followed, Beth-El grew to over 800 families, and boasted a large religious school and a highly successful youth group, the Hi Club, led by Rose and Bob Brown, for whom our sanctuary is named.

While the temple flourished on Touhy Avenue, eventually that same old pattern returned. The surrounding neighborhood became more Orthodox, while temple members were moving away to suburbs like Northbrook. Rather than passively wait and see what might happen, Rabbi Weissberg, with his powerhouse wife Tamar, opened a satellite school in the suburbs, which in a short time had a larger enrollment than their school on Touhy; a clear sign that another move was imminent.

During his 41 years as Senior Rabbi, Rabbi Weissberg brought several young rabbis into the congregation: Rabbis Barton Lee, Steve Bob, Robert Goodman and Eitan Weiner-Kaplow, all of whom helped to nurture and grow our community. He also achieved a remarkable feat in influencing 17 students to enter the rabbinate.

For the last major achievement of his tenure, he organized the congregation to move out of Chicago to the northern suburbs, into a building that housed a Japanese restaurant named Ichiban. Rabbi Weissberg took the lead as the principal fundraiser in a capital campaign that remodeled the building into a religious school and chapel.

My journey at Beth-El began in that remodeled building in 1995. And one day, many years from now, when we gather to celebrate the end of my tenure, I'll share my stories with you. But for now, let's take a moment to appreciate a grand achievement that few institutions, let alone congregations, manage to achieve – 150 years.

My friends, how does one measure time? In the ancient world time was viewed as a circle that floats around the seasons and returns back to the same starting point year after year. In the modern age, we see time as a line that moves forward each day, progressing towards a better tomorrow. As Jews, we see time as a spiral. We still circle the seasons, experiencing the promise of spring and fulfillment of summer, followed by the fragility of fall and the retrenchment of winter. But rather than returning to the same place we left the year before, our view is from a higher vantage point, a place of experience.

Having passed, not through years, but through the decades, we've seen patterns emerge, time and time again, and gained knowledge through previous struggles; learning what works and what doesn't. This knowledge allows us to look ahead with hope, as we recall our celebrations and triumphs; to look ahead with gratitude, as we recall the memory of so many who walked beside us along the way, lifting us on their shoulders and paving the way for those of us who have followed in their wake, creating a congregation, a community that spans the generations and now towers at one hundred and fifty stories tall.

Embedded in each of those stories are the values of our community. More than survive the years, we have persevered, responding to the ever-changing world we live in. We are a generous community, ready to support and give; striving to build a Jewish future for the generations to come. We are a community of purpose, who at every step of our journey has opened our arms to those around us, whether they were Russian Jewish immigrants in the 1900's, Holocaust survivors in the '40's, or LGBTQ, Jews of color and those who are Jewish adjacent today. We are courageous, standing up for our values, supporting Israel, caring for immigrants, feeding the hungry, keeping Judaism alive across the globe, in places like Yekaterinburg Russia.

More than a congregation, Temple Beth-El is a community of people who want to know each other, help each other; coming together in times of celebration, holding each other up in times of challenge. Opening our arms in support and welcome, joining hands with our neighbors to build a community and a better world for our children and the generations to come.

Friends, let us build on the heritage we have received, knowing that our best days are still to come. Let us be proud and celebrate, not that we survived the challenges of the past, but rather, as God promised Abraham, that this Beit El – this house of God, this community will continue to grow and flourish; that we will ever be and bring blessings to our world.

May 5782 be a year of good health and blessing for us, our families our community and country. And may Temple Beth-El continue to grow from strength to strength. Amen.