

Yom Kippur Morning 5780
Spiritual Measurements
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin

When my kids were in preschool, they had one of those memorable teachers who stands out and makes a lasting impression on minds young and old. Her name was Teacher Jamie, and her class was called Mitzvah Mutts.

Jamie had a yearly ritual in her class. On the first day she would measure all the children and chart their heights on a poster. Then at the end of the year she measured everyone again, to show them how much they had grown.

Looking back on this simple exercise, I realize a deeper meaning. Children grow and change so much in a year, not just physically, but in all matters of learning and development. The same could be said for each of us.

The playwright and Nobel Prize recipient George Bernard Shaw said, “The only one who really understands me is my tailor. He takes my measurements anew each time he sees me, and does not just assume that I am the same size as I was the time before.”

The lesson is clear: we are not static; we all need to learn to take our measurements anew from time to time. We all continually grow and change. Not just physically. Throughout our lives we are also stretching spiritually. Our character and inner qualities expand and grow.

On the High Holy Days we take our spiritual measurements. Yom Kippur is the day to look into the mirror of our souls, and see how we measure with each passing year.

On Yom Kippur, the generations dwell together. Our Torah reading this morning shows us a complete community -- old and young and everyone in between. “*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* – You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of God – your elders and leaders; every man, woman and child...” (Deuteronomy 29:9-10) It is a full picture of the life span. Can you see it? Can you hear it? The voices of those who have come before us, the voices of those yet to be, and all of us here today.

This spiritual growing and maturation happens at each age and stage of life, as Rabbi Alvin Fine captured in his poem,

Birth is a beginning and death a destination;
But life is a journey. A going, a growing from stage to stage:
From childhood to maturity and youth to old age.
From innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing:
From foolishness to discretion and then perhaps,
to wisdom.... (excerpt)

Each step that we take is a new rung on the spiritual ladder of our lives. How do we attain the kind of perspective that Alvin Fine is talking about? Faith which we can grow into, faith that comes with wisdom, with maturity, and inner strength. This morning I would like to explore some of our spiritual measurements.

“Life is a journey. A going, a growing from stage to stage.” The bible instructs in Proverbs, “Train a child in the way he should go and he will not turn from it even in old age.” (Proverbs 22:6) Or you might be more familiar with the words from the Torah in the *V’ahavta* prayer: *“V’shinantam l’vanecha—You shall teach them to your children.”* (Deut. 6:7) Whether we have our own children or are part of a community, we are commanded to teach and model Torah to the next generation, pass on its wisdom, and help shape the next link in the chain of our tradition.

As you might imagine, Micah and I brought our kids to services from a young age. For us, every Shabbat was “bring your child to work day.” But it became much more than that. As they grew, and the more we brought them, the more they enjoyed it and felt comfortable. I have a memory from their toddler years in California that makes me smile. Whenever we would open the ark during a service, they would point and yell out, “Torah, Torah, it’s the Torah!” They also learned from a young age that there was yummy challah and really good cookies after the service.

“Train a child from a young age and she will not stray from it.” A strong Jewish foundation from an early age shapes a person’s life. Research shows the importance of early childhood experience – from birth through 5 years – on a child’s future growth and development. (Caron Blau Rothstein, “Jewish Education in Early Childhood”)

Early connections to Jewish life are key to spiritual growth. Rabbi Micah and I have been engaging more with families with young children through Tot Shabbat, Mazel Tots, and holiday celebrations. The reality, though, is that many of these families are not yet integrated into the fabric of our temple life. Our community has taken some small steps to make our temple more welcoming to young children. Perhaps you’ve noticed the “7 Tips for Praying With Your Kids From the Rabbis Citrin” or the popular toy box at the doors to our sanctuary.

It is wonderful to see so many families with school age children engaged in meaningful learning and growth on Sunday mornings, and now on some Shabbat evenings as well. Your rabbis would like us to welcome people in even earlier, and think there is more that we can do to help families who are just starting out on their Jewish path connect with all that we love about Temple Beth David.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah our temple president shared about a task force that is exploring the possibility of an early learning center here at our temple. We all know there is widespread need for quality childcare and preschool in our county. And this would fit with our synagogue’s mission of lifelong learning. Dedicated members of our community are considering many questions, and if we decide to move forward, we will share more with you. If it does come to be, and I hope it will, I imagine we might take a

page from teacher Jamie's mitzvah mutts class and measure the children on their exciting first day entering the halls of Beth David.

"Life is a journey. A going, a growing from stage to stage." Jewish tradition teaches that the most precarious time in a person's life is the age of thirteen. Come next month I will have two 13 year olds. Did you know there is a verse in the Torah that permits stoning a wayward and defiant son? (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) The Talmud goes on to comment that it never actually happened. The rabbis said there was never a child so wayward and defiant who would have warranted being stoned to death. What is a relief. But the rabbis asked, then why did the Torah mention it? Because it could have happened, they said; when a child was 13, and we should learn from this. (Sanhedrin 71a) Years ago Judaism understood this stage as a major step in our spiritual measurement.

Rabbi Laura Geller writes in a commentary on this Torah passage how Judaism got it right placing the bar and bat ceremony at this precarious stage of development. ("Reflections on an Impossible Age") And nowadays, teens are experiencing more anxiety and mental health challenges.

Spirituality can be the foundation of a young person's sense of stability and purpose in the world. Psychologist Lisa Miller writes that adolescents who have a personal sense of spirituality are less likely to suffer from ongoing and recurrent depression and are less likely to become heavy substance users. According to her studies, teens who participate in a spiritual community feel a sense of peace and love. (*The Spiritual Child*) Our teens find this kind of meaningful community in synagogue, youth groups, and summer camps.

I see strong spiritual measurements taking place in our sanctuary on Shabbat mornings. A chain of generations stands on the *bima* in front of the open ark, as grandparents pass the Torah to parents, and hand it to a 13 year old. They stand here bracing themselves under the weight of the heavy scroll. They hold onto the Torah, sing the ancient words, and then set out, leading the procession, carrying the Torah through the congregation.

We are all aware, in these moments, that we're witnessing a significant symbolic act. What matters is not that a heavy object covered in colorful fabric is handed from person to person. What matters is that our young adults become an important link in the chain, and that they are warmly welcomed into our community, recognized and honored, just at the time when they need it most. (inspired by Rabbi Janet Marder)

Spiritual nourishment comes from feeling part of something bigger than ourselves. Spiritual growth doesn't come from one special day on the *bima*, but rather a lifetime of inheriting a beautiful tradition, honoring it faithfully during the span of your life; and transmitting it to the next in line. When done right, becoming bar or bat mitzvah is a solid step on the spiritual ladder to adult Jewish life.

"Life is a journey. A going, a growing from stage to stage." We tend to think about our adult years as the years of maturity and understanding. As it says in the Book of Job, "For wisdom is with the old, and understanding is with length of days." (Job 12:12)

I've encountered countless adults who discovered the depth of Jewish wisdom in their later years. Sometimes people apologize. They'll tell me, "Sorry, rabbi. It's been awhile. The last time I studied anything Jewish was at my bar mitzvah."

We all know that a thirteen year olds understanding of Jewish tradition is not necessarily the most mature perspective. Whether a beginner or more seasoned student, there is a well of Jewish wisdom to help us attain Rabbi Fine's sense of growth and awareness. This is why here at Temple Beth David, we are known for our wide array of adult learning offerings. Adult engagement enables us to cultivate what Professor Carol Dweck calls a "growth mindset," the desire and ability to continue to develop throughout life. If you are an adult who has not yet become bar or bat mitzvah, and are interested in taking this step on your spiritual ladder, please let Rabbi Micah or me know. A new class is starting soon. Or consider attending another adult program and get to know people in a smaller group.

Sure, spirituality may come from different sources – yoga, hiking, the ocean air, a good bottle of wine. But Jewish life is up there on the spiritual ladder. And as Rabbi Micah and I like to tell the kids, it keeps getting better and better, moving us along even higher.

Adult spirituality is the ability to make personal meaning out of the wisdom that has been passed down to us, and out of the messiness that life throws at us. And when we engage in deepening our own spiritual life as adults, the next generation sees this. We pass it on.

But life is a journey. A going, a growing from stage to stage.
From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love,
From joy to gratitude, from pain to compassion.
From grief to understanding, from fear to faith;...

Where does this kind of faith come from that can help us face our fears? Perhaps it comes from understanding that the final rung on our spiritual ladder is not so final. Our spiritual measurements keeps stretching in the memories and legacy we leave behind.

There is an aspect of my mother's funeral six years ago that has stayed with me. She is buried in a beautiful cemetery in the misty, rolling hills of the California Bay Area. It is not only the beauty of the place, though, that brings me comfort. It is the voices of children. The cemetery is located next to a school. From the height of the hills surrounded by tall redwood trees, you can look down on a playground, and hear children playing. My mother was a teacher, so this seems fitting. When I think about this resting place, I can still hear small voices rising over the mist.

I want to leave you with one last image of spiritual growth – a playground. Karina Zilberman, director of Jewish family life and culture at the 92nd Street Y said the following, "I believe that Jewish life can be a playground. Only when you can play it, you can create a Judaism that's yours – you are part of that game, that script." (92Y.org)

I love the imagination and playfulness of young children. Adults could learn a thing or two from children's spirituality. Playgrounds are filled with a sense of wonder. On a playground, children explore their surroundings, take their own steps, and grow in a bright, contained space. In a playground, children fall and learn to pick themselves up. Playgrounds teach all of us, including the caregivers watching cautiously, how to move from fear to faith. With increasing anxiety, playgrounds can help ease fear and build friendships. In the face of hate, playground rules can help both children and adults embrace much needed civil discourse and kindness.

Imagine an outdoor play area here at Temple Beth David. Think about other synagogues and churches that have playgrounds. Why? Because it is inviting to people who are starting to shape their spiritual life. Because religious life should be fun and engaging. Because we could all enjoy a picnic table, a shady spot under a tree where parents, grandparents, and adults can gather and meet one another while children play nearby. Because it would be another way to plant for our future, and for the generations to dwell together. Because families and communities that pray and play together, stay together.

Hailey Murstein, a 7 year old member of Temple Beth David, agrees. Last year Hailey was waiting at temple with her mother while her older sister was in Hebrew school. It was a beautiful spring day, and Hailey asked me, "Rabbi Karen, why don't we have a playground at the temple?" I asked her to say more about her vision. Here's what she has to say: "If I saw a playground here and was driving by, I would say, Daddy, can I go to this temple?! I would be able to play and would be more excited to be here." Her sister, Samantha, added, "It would be great for all the kids who go to temple to be able to play and get our energy out." Hailey is the granddaughter of a Temple Beth David past president, the next link in our chain. If you would like to help make this dream a reality, please talk to Rabbi Micah or me in the days ahead. If we build it, they will come.

Today is Yom Kippur, one of the most somber days of the year. A time to look at how we measure spiritually. Around the corner, Sukkot and Simchat Torah will follow, *z'man simchateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. What if we could all see our lives as a playground, where we can explore and grow, imagine and play, create and climb, slide down and pick ourselves back up, laugh and rejoice?

Teacher Jamie died too young in her 50s from a brain tumor. She was filled with spirit. I think about the generations of mitzvah mutts out there who are living her legacy. How much have they all grown? How tall are they spiritually?

We can *all* ask ourselves: In what ways are we reaching higher? How will we measure next year?

Birth is a beginning and death a destination;
But life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage,
Made stage by stage... To life everlasting.

Sing Circle Game (Joni Mitchell)