

Future Dreams; Lasting Legacy

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Shanah tovah. Happy new year to you all.

Tonight, I would like to begin a conversation on the idea of how each and every one of us, regardless of means or stage in life, can create a Jewish Legacy.

Creating a Jewish legacy is an act of faith and an act of hope. During the prayer *Avinu Malkenu*, one of the central prayers of this season, we end with the *kavvanah* or conviction that while each of us has many shortcomings, we pray that we find life and blessing in the year to come, if not for ourselves, than for future generations. One way of understanding how are we to secure that future is by focusing on our current actions. What we will ensure for the future generations is a foundation that allows for freedom of thought and expression, as well as a secure foundation of financial support.

Where can we look in the Jewish tradition for inspiration? In the Mishnah, early 1st century writings, we learn of Honi who plants a carob tree. When asked in jest, “Who would plant a tree that would give fruit in only 70 years?” Honi gave a wise and deep answer. He said, “I did not find the world desolate when I entered it. And as my parents planted for me before I was born, so do I plant for those who will come after me.”

This text is an important foundation to the idea of the Jewish legacy. The fruit trees of our time are the Jewish institutions such as our synagogues and JCCs, day and overnight Jewish Summer Camps, Jewish Retreat Centers, Jewish studies

University degree programs, Jewish Family Services, Centers of Education, health and end of life care. For our continued success as a congregation through the 21st century, we need to establish a regular Jewish legacy funding and working to create the means to have a lasting Jewish future that is strong and sustainable.

I hope that this year you will be inspired to register to create a Jewish legacy in Temple Beth El. To do this, you do not make a financial commitment now, but a statement of intent that in your Will that you designate a certain percentage of your estate. You will find the Jewish Legacy intent forms in the entry hallway distribution area throughout the High Holy Days. Members of our TBE Jewish Legacy team will be able to answer your questions.

Joining Jewish legacy at TBE, will help plant seeds for the future and helps this Jewish community be blessed in the future with words of Torah. It is to our community that we turn to help create the sustaining support to allow the future generations—your children’s children-- to be a part of this Jewish synagogue and community. You can create the foundational support now for the future. Later in the High Holy Days, you will hear more about this topic and I together with the board of Temple Beth El hope that you will be inspired to help make Temple Beth El’s legacy a lasting one for many years to come.

Creating a Jewish legacy is an act of faith and an act of hope. A short story in the form of Jewish legend or midrash may help shed some light on this idea.

The scene is Moses at Mt Sinai. When Moses asks God essentially, “how will I know that all this work will last and will make a legacy of this Torah’s teaching?” God answers, “It is in the future that I will now show you.”:

When Moshe ascended to heaven [to receive the Torah] he found the Holy Blessed One sitting and fashioning crowns for the letters.

[Moshe] said to God: "Master of the world, who requires you [to do this]?"

[God] replied: "There is a person who will come to be after many generations, called Akiva ben Yosef; he will one day expound heaps upon heaps of laws from each and every crown."

[Moshe] said before God: "Master of the world, show him to me."

[God] replied: "Turn around." He turned around and [found himself] behind the eighth row [in the Talmudic academy--behind the regular students arranged in order of excellence in the first seven rows]. Moses did not understand the discussion and was dazed. When [Akiva] came to a certain point, his students asked him "Where do you know this?" Akiva replied, "[This is] a law [given] to Moses from Sinai." (*Halacha l'Moshe miSinai*). Then Moses was calmed.

This first part of the midrash may be familiar to some-- that Moses is shown the impact of his work in the future, and even as it seems completely foreign to him, it is still based on it. The second part is less so, and I find that it is here that we get the importance of our conversation today:

But Moshe turned back and stepped before the Holy One and said: "Master of the world, You have such a person, yet You give the Torah through me?"

God replied: "Be still, that is how it entered my mind."

Constant evolution of thought and practice. That is what God imagines. What Moses laid as the foundations of Torah becomes that basis of Akiva's later reasoning. The work of Akiva, as radically different as it was, could not exist except for coming after Moses. And we need both of them, and more.

This story is an excellent example of how essential change has been in Jewish life. Jewish life is rooted in Torah, based on Torah, **and** has continued to evolve into the various expression in Jewish communities today. Moses does not recognize the language, the content, or the interpretation, not even how the students of Akiva were acting. Nothing. God shows Moses both the future impact of his work, and that God embraces the infinite possibilities of interpretation, not just one. Moses has reassurance and hope; renewed faith in the future. How much more so then that we, the people of this generation should be able to create a legacy for a congregation that may look radically different than today—as radically different today as we do from when 30 some years ago the congregation moved to this location, or changed practices to be welcoming to interfaith and later LGBTQ families. Who knows what the Jewish future will have in store? Yet our charge is to make sure that there is a viable future for the next generations. Like Moses, we do not know for certain what lies ahead, but we need to have the faith and conviction in the foundations that we will lay for the future and faith in our future generations.

Faith in future generations is at the heart of this enterprise. Gratitude for the past generations is as well. There is a great midrash about the faith of generations. In it, there is a description of a scene where Jacob is with his sons close to the time of

his death. It is here that we get the ritual practice of reciting the Shema aloud for the first line and then whispering the second line.

R. Eleazar b. Achavay said: From [this passage] here, [the people of] Israel merited recitation of the Shema'. When Jacob our Patriarch was departing from the world, he called to his children and said to them:... Is there perhaps division in your hearts about the Holy Blessed One?' They replied: '*Hear, O Israel* (Deut. 6:4a) our father! Just as there is in your heart no division from the Holy Blessed One, so too is there none in our hearts. On the contrary—*The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!*' (Deut. 6:4b). [Jacob] likewise uttered with his lips, saying, 'Blessed be the name of God's glorious sovereignty forever and ever. (Genesis Rabbah 98:3)

He understood and heard that his legacy of faith would continue.

To retell it here— when asking how will Jacob be assured that the children will carry on the legacy they say to him, “*Shema Yisrael*, Listen Israel (his name) God is One...” and he replies in a whispered voice, “*Baruch shem kavod le’olam va’ed.*” Or “then I know God will be forever and ever.” A prayer of continuity and legacy.

There is something real and powerful if we can find the words of this prayer in our hearts today. When grandparents and children can be together, the generations embrace each other in a mighty chain of continuity. I want to encourage all of us to find a way and a time to say this prayer with your children or grandchildren, nieces, nephews. Talk about what “Shema/Listen...God is One” means to you. Ask them what they think it means. I think that this could be a simple moment that can help open the lines of interconnection in our generations and to our legacy, just as with Jacob.

In a sermon delivered at his grandson's Bar Mitzvah in May 1962, Rabbi David de Sola Pool, British Sephardic rabbi who served many years in New York City at the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue, spoke of the need for the generations of Jews to live their Judaism actively. He wrote, "We must not allow ourselves to become decrepit veterans dreaming of past victories in the struggle for holiness. We have to be something more than feeble survivors of once glorious days...Our life as Jews must be the result of something more than inertia based on the physical fact that we were born into the Jewish people....Within every one of us who is worthy of bearing the Jewish name there must be a conscious sense of a divine call to serve our fellow [humans] for today and tomorrow.... [Some] among us may fall away as they have done in every generation. But the true spiritual descendants of Abraham, of Moses, and of all our heroic sages and saints keep the Jewish light kindled, and hand it down from generation to generation."

When Jacob and his offspring offered the words of *Shema* and Baruch *Shem Kavod*, it was a symbolic gesture to the continuity of the legacy Jacob had sought to establish. Even in Joseph, who appeared to be a well-assimilated Egyptian, the legacy still held strong. This statement of faith and continuity created a way that the generations were being united in a profound spiritual bond. We, their modern-day descendants, must also strive to say the *Shema* together; must strive to create Jewish Legacy together so our community, this congregation, and Jewish communal life has a lasting and secure future even when that future appears as different as Rabbi Akiva to Moses.

In addition, there is the mitzvah of supporting Jewish communal life. In our social hall that was renovated some 10 years ago, there is a quote. It is a blessing for those who help support the synagogue by providing for its needs. This mitzvah, this idea, is well framed within our tradition. The very establishment of Temple Beth El, was an act of creating a Jewish legacy here in Newark, DE.

I would like to take a moment and recognize those in our community who founded this congregation some 61 years ago. While there are fewer of them alive and present with us, we are blessed to have a number of active and vibrant members who can recall the evolution—the ups and downs— from no congregation to where we are today. Thank you for having the vision, the aspiration and the faith that we needed to be here. And those here at Temple Beth El sixty years ago had a different way of living Jewish life, and they knew that it was important to create a Jewish Legacy and to provide a Jewish home for this community and area. Their vision to create an institution that will be a legacy to Jewish life in this area cannot be overlooked nor their bravery overshadowed. Thank you. From all of us here today to those who built this institution and who are no longer with us. Thank you.

How do we ensure its successful future? Your presence here in our our community is a demonstration that you have a value for Judaism, there there is a place in your heart for Jewish life. The idea of the Jewish Legacy is to create a little room in your Will, as well. So that your family and community are assured that Temple Beth El will be endowed and sustained into the future, even as the means and finances of communities are changing.

May we all know a strong and lasting future together. May our community grow stronger in this season and may we be inspired to take action and ensure a strong

legacy for Jewish life, Jewish community, for our Temple Beth El. Like Jacob, Moses, Honi, and Akiva, and like the founders of our synagogue, may we all have the fortitude and vision to build that future together.

Shanah Tovah and a gut yontif.