

Third Place: It's a Win at B'nai Chaim

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When I was in second grade, I came in third at the class spelling bee because when asked to spell “thank-you,” I spelled it T-H-A-N-K (pause) Y-O-U. It was incorrect, the teacher said, because I had not placed the hyphen in between “thank” and “you.” Of course, she had not said it was the noun form, rather than the verbal expression to someone, but while I was a little disappointed that a technicality knocked me out of the bee, I did come in third place.

Just a few months ago, at Camp MissFits, the women’s gym I go to, I participated in a nutrition challenge. To win, there were certain expectations one had to meet. I worked really hard and came in third place.

The psychology of winning and losing is fascinating. In our culture there is so much pressure to win ... at everything. According to psychology professor Ian Robertson of Trinity College in Dublin, "Winning's probably the single most important thing in shaping people's lives." An excerpt I found from Robertson’s book *The Winner Effect* describes how winning increases all those feel-good hormones and chemicals that activate the reward network in our brains, making us feel that extreme joy that comes from winning. Research shows that winning even makes us live longer.

A study of Nobel prize winners, Academy Award winners, and hall-of-famers showed that these individuals live anywhere from two to four years longer than those who did not take the top prize or who were nominated but turned away. Think about the drastic difference.

The Oscar winner will, of course, be in great demand for other films, the Nobel Prize winner will be offered the most prestigious teaching or research positions, and the hall-of-famer will probably have their number retired and be called a hall-of-famer forever.

What of second and third place, though? Things get even more interesting here. Duke University neuroscientist Scott Huettel talks about a study of Olympic athletes conducted to see how happy the athletes were when they won. In the study, a group of non-biased observers were shown photographs of the faces of athletes on the medal podium. The observers had to decode the facial expressions. The results of the study were not at all what the researchers expected. "You'll see the common pattern," says Huettel, "The gold medalist is very happy, the bronze medalist is very happy, and the silver medalist often had this sort of blank expression on his or her face -- sort of staring out into the distance." The study showed that those who win the bronze medal are actually ecstatic because they made the podium, when so many of the other athletes did not. The athletes who garnered the silver medal, the second best in the entire Olympics, were disappointed because they were so close to the gold but fell short. Third place is a good thing!

A couple months ago I got into the car, and on NPR a program called "On Point" was in progress. The guest was talking to the host about "third places." Since I'd missed the first part of the interview, I was a bit confused about the topic they were discussing, so when I arrived home, I googled "third places." The only third place of which I was aware was, as I discussed above, a place on the winner's podium. The term "third place," as described on NPR was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in the 1980s.

His most famous work is *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day*. Oldenburg applies to these kinds of places that term “third place.” A third place essentially refers to a physical location other than work or home where conversation is the primary activity and there are little to no obstacles to coming there.

The historical examples that Oldenburg cites in the book are places like pubs, French cafes, and German beer gardens. I think of the television show *Cheers*, where, as the theme song goes, “everybody knows your name.” Oldenburg writes that third places “host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.” When I lived in the Park Slope area of Brooklyn during cantorial school. I loved all the neighborhood mom and pop shops and restaurants to which I could easily walk. Oldenburg laments the crisis that living in the sprawling suburbs has caused us. “What suburbia cries for,” he writes, “are the means for people to gather easily, inexpensively, regularly, and pleasurably -- a 'place on the corner,' real life alternatives to television, easy escapes from the cabin fever of marriage and family life that do not necessitate getting into an automobile.” Today, most of us drive to work, maybe run some errands, and drive back home. It has become an insular existence, and we are often missing what Oldenburg calls “public balance” to contrast with the privatization of our lives. Third places help to bring us out of our suburban caves and aid us in weaving ourselves back into the broader fabric of community life.

Kathy Giuffre, a professor at Colorado College, says that “a world made up of atomized, physically-isolated people is a world without a true shared reality—which is a recipe for civic disengagement, misinformation, and

perhaps even political extremism.” Friends, that’s where we are now. Lines have been drawn between family members, colleagues, and friends. We are living in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, and alcohol and drug dependency. It is affecting more and more of us, and more and more of our youth and young children. A colleague recently shared a post from a child counselor who recorded some of the things her young patients had told her.

From a 16-year-old: My mom says, ‘in a minute’ and hours go by. That’s why I yell and demand. She forgets me.

From a 9-year-old: My parents are always busy or on their phone. Why am I here? Makes me want to leave.

From a 13-year-old: When I annoy my mom, it’s because I want attention. I don’t get it any other way.

From a 7-year-old: My dog gets more attention. Dad says it’s because dogs can’t talk, so I stopped talking.

From a 13-year-old: Telling me you are disappointed in me kills me. I didn’t do what I did to hurt you. I was just learning.

From a 6-year-old: I wish I was as important as their phone.

A few weeks ago, NPR was interviewing a doctor from a hospital emergency department who sadly reported that they are seeing children as young as six years old talking about killing themselves. The rate of children coming in for mental health issues, he said, has exploded from 30 in one week to 30 in one day. We are finding ourselves living in a time of tremendous societal upheaval. Of course, there have always been cycles of change and stability, but there are times when change is so systemic and deep that we find ourselves in an entirely new era, an entirely new way of living. The changes we are experiencing are actually redefining how we live our lives, even in many aspects that we assumed would never change. The Jewish world is not impervious to these changes, which have been compounded by the pandemic. Priorities have changed, and it's harder to get motivated to come out, especially on Friday nights after a long week, or on Saturday mornings when there are any number of other things going on.

In the book *Synagogues in a Time of Change: Fragmentation and Diversity in Jewish Religious Movements*, edited by Zachary I. Heller, reference is made to our contemporary era as the Age of Four A's: anything, anyone, anytime, anywhere. Jewish life is being newly shaped and recast in this mold.

The Age of the Four A's applies across all ages and demographics. The Four A's may be described like this:

Anything – Today, almost any product or service can be modified or created rather easily.

Anyone – Today, anyone, regardless of credentials or status, can be their own expert in many fields that were usually left to specialists (for example, we can buy and trade our own stocks, publish our own books,

make our own films, teach our own courses, provide consulting services, and become influencers on TikTok and YouTube.)

Anytime – Today, we desire – no, we demand – that products and services be available to us at our convenience, exactly when we want them.

Anywhere – Today, whether in real time or virtually, at home or across the world, we can experience almost anything, anywhere, at any time.

These Four A's certainly leave us pondering some interesting and pressing issues, which lead us, especially as Jews, to ask some deep, empirical questions:

1. If I live in a time when I can get whatever I want, how do I decide what is ultimately the most important thing?
2. If I have unlimited control over my life, how do I use this control and my time wisely?
3. If I may decide to be a part of any community, which one is best for me or most important for me to join?
4. If I live in a world that is always “on,” how can I ensure that I find ways to disconnect so that I do not lose myself or my relationships?
5. If I live in an age of unlimited power, how do I remain humble, not exploit others, and work to ensure that all people are treated fairly and with basic human dignity?

6. If I live in a world where I can take whatever I want whenever I want, do I have a responsibility to give something back?

7. If I live in an age of individualism, do I need to think more about civic responsibility? Is supporting institutions like synagogues necessary?

I think that a vicious cycle has been created, with these Four A's leading us to behaviors that inevitably bring us right back to them. So many things feed the cycle – phones, social media, obligations and activities, longer work and school hours, excessive homework, FOMO (the fear of missing out), and perhaps one of the major catalysts, the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which are leading to unprecedented stress and isolation. We and our children and grandchildren need a place to go that is not within the confines of home or work or school – a place where there is commonality, where there is comfort, familiarity, and emotional support – a place where there is a smile or a hug waiting for you and a kind word to be shared, where people of like mind and values can gather and talk to one another without fear of judgement, where ideas can be thrown around, where someone will listen to your troubles and offer to help you during difficult times, and a place where you feel like you're among family, but without the drama. In these times, we need one another and a place where we can be Jewish, do Jewish, and talk Jewish safely without worry.

What if your third place were B'nai Chaim? Here there are people who get you and understand your needs as Jews. There is kindness, friendship, and the reassurance that you will always see someone you know. If there are those you don't know yet, or if you're new, after being here enough and saying "hello" or "Shabbat shalom" enough times, you **will** know them.

You will see that these casual exchanges of “Hey, Shabbat shalom, how are you?” can forge bonds that are stronger than you might expect. I remember hearing one time that a community can be defined as a place where you can be sure that you will see someone you know, and that’s a really good feeling. I recall the first or second year after we moved here how excited I was the first time I ran into someone I knew at an event or the grocery store. Coming to temple brings a little deliberation than that, but choosing to come still fosters that kind of unexpected relationship. In just brief interactions we can learn how things are going, how the kids or grandkids are doing, who may be ill, who is mourning, who is struggling, and who is celebrating. Over time you will see families change, sometimes growing larger and sometimes growing smaller. Kids will grow up together. Maybe you’ll find a ski buddy or someone to confide in.

There are so many ways to connect here in the way that works for you. We are a house of gathering, a house of learning, and a house of prayer. Whether you wish to talk to God or to talk to Goldberg, as the joke goes, you can find your place here. Whether at Book Club or Wine & Dine, Shabbat on the Trail or choir, Judaism Through the Lens of History or Lunch Bunch, Shabbat services or social action projects, there is not one path, and eventually you will find your niche. If you’ve been with us a while, maybe try out some new things – cross pollinate. Share your energy with a new group and let them share their energy with you.

One of Oldenburg’s criteria for a third place is also that the place not have financial exclusions. Unlike many other synagogues, B’nai Chaim does not charge for High Holy Day services, and we do not demand certain dues

payments, with Sandy going to check out your car and the size of your house. You are welcome here as you are, regardless.

And there's this. Just as winning adds years to your life, so has research proven that participation in a religious community generally correlates with better health outcomes and longer life as well. Third place is good, and **A** third place is even better.

Let's take a few moments to think about why you are here at this moment. What is it about THIS night of Kol Nidrei? Of course, you may be here because it's the holiest day of the year, you may be here because your parents or your Bubbe guilted you into coming, or you may be here for the incredible sermon and glorious music...but let's go deeper. As I was writing, I took a moment to consider why I would be here on Kol Nidrei were I not the clergy. There is, of course, the knowledge that this day is the holiest of all, but it's more than that. Yom Kippur is a day to be real, to be stripped of the trappings of the world, to allow our hearts – pierced by the sound of the shofar – to open wide, bringing light in and allowing our love to pour out. It is a day of hope and encouragement. I DO have ultimate control of my life; therefore, I can make the decision to direct my life toward the path that will lead me to better relationships, to time spent making the world a better place, and ultimately, to the self I know I can be. I am at the wheel of my own destiny. I feel so good that I and those with whom I am sharing the service are working towards achieving at-one-ment, and that all of us have the opportunity to experience wholeness and t'shuvah – as individuals, as families, and as a community. And there's this place – this sweet little place with its beautiful olive branches on the walls that reach out to us in peace, its loud swamp coolers, and its leaky roof. I love it all; but what I love most are the people

here — kind, genuine, appreciative, welcoming, and caring. Were I not the rabbi, I would most certainly be a congregant here.

Now consider why **you** are here at Congregation B’nai Chaim? What brings you through those doors? Is it for a specific, tangible reason? ... Think about it through the lens of those Four A’s. **Anything**... You can get any product or service you want. Are you here for a particular product or service, like b’nai mitzvah? **Anyone**... Are you here to network or make contacts? **Anytime**... Are you here because we’re close by? **Anywhere**... When you can watch services from anywhere in the world, why have you chosen to come to ours? Now consider other reasons that may be less quantifiable. How do you feel when you enter B’nai Chaim? How do you feel when you leave? Did you come for a particular reason, but decided to stay because of other motivators? Consider what those may be. Has B’nai Chaim become a third place for you and your family? If not, what can we do to make it feel like a third place?

We would like to be your “coffee shop that shall not be named,” though our coffee selection is much more limited. We do have pumpkin spice available now for after Yom Kippur.

We want you to know that you can come here and feel comfortable and safe, even if you’re at your worst and feeling worn down. You can be yourself with others who have similar values and goals, learn in an informal environment, and pray in a way that speaks to you. The “coffee shop that shall not be named” didn’t invent coffee, but they reinvented the **experience** of having coffee. We didn’t invent Judaism, but we try to recreate it in a way that is authentic, yet organic, more casual, more relevant, and for real people — people like you, people who want to be themselves without pretention,

people who are on a variety of Jewish journeys, people who are seeking, people who just want to be among other Jews, people who want to talk to God, and people who want to talk to Goldberg. You may have found us while searching for your “ANYTHING, ANYONE, ANYTIME, and ANYWHERE,” but we hope you will find a second home here, your third place.