

Rosh HaShanah 2 2019/5780: Tzimtzum

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Earlier this summer, when it was time to begin thinking about these holy days, I found myself getting hooked on... a Netflix special. Have any of you watched the nature documentary series “Our Planet”? It’s an incredible exploration of 8 habitats across our beautiful world, filmed over 4 years by a staff of 600 people. I’d never really been into nature documentaries before, but I was mesmerized by the beauty in our world--the immense variety of wildlife on our planet, and the elaborate interconnectivity within each ecosystem. It’s amazing to consider that all of this exists within our own unique planet Earth.

However, the series also points to the disturbing trends in every habitat in our world--climate change, pollution, overfishing, to name just a few. The beauty that we’re seeing, the narrator tells us, is but a percentage of what was. It’s what’s left. In each episode, viewers are asked to consider what we might do to stem the trend of destruction.

This is perhaps the greatest possible narrative of decline today. The wellbeing of our planet affects every single human being alive, not to mention our children, grandchildren, and generations we can’t even imagine today. And we must attend to it. It’s also a full sermon topic for another time. And I promise, this is in fact a positive, forward-looking sermon--stick with me.

Climate change is not the only narrative of decline at play in our world. Businesses the world over confront increasing chances that their companies will fold or will be bought out within a max of 30 years.¹ And any number of studies have demonstrated the decline in affiliation with organized religion in our country, including with synagogues.² The 2013 Pew Research Study provides some stark statistics: while 93% of American Jews of the Greatest Generation identify as Jewish, that number drops to 81% in the Boomer generation and down to 68% in the Millennial generation, those now in their (or our) 20s

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/martin_reeves_how_to_build_a_business_that_last_100_years

² <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>

and 30s. A growing percentage of young Americans do not identify with any religion--the study calls them the "Nones", as they have no religion. Another relevant stat for us is the breakdown among Jewish denominations in our country. Whereas the Conservative Movement used to be the most populous several decades ago, we now comprise 18% of American Jewry. Reform Judaism is currently the largest denomination, and Orthodoxy, unsurprisingly, has the youngest adult population and the highest birth rates of all Jewish streams.

I'm sorry for starting us out on a downward note two days in a row. My intention here is to provide some context for a trend I know many of us are sensitive to--the decline in membership in our own Beth El community. But I also hope today to offer a positive framing, so I ask you right now not to write me off and not to write off our community. Stay with me.

I know from conversations with many of you--in passing, at kiddush, over coffee--that you worry about the future of our shul. It was clear from last year's High Holiday survey that many of you were dismayed by the many empty seats in our sanctuary on these very holy days, and that was of course the impetus for the idea we floated to sit closer together this year. You may be feeling that today, too.

Rather than leaving it vague, I'd like to provide some concrete numbers about our Beth El community today, with a comparison to 5 years ago:

- In 2015, when I first came to Beth El, we had 225 member units. Today we are 183 member units.
- In 2015, we had 50 students in Navasky, Kindergarten through 7th grade. Today we have 23.
- In 2015, we had 15 students in our Nitzan Nursery School. Today we are at 14, and we expect new students to start school as the year progresses.
- In 2015, our morning minyan was more like 1.5 minyanim, about 15 people. Today, we range from 6 to 13 individuals on a given weekday morning.

- In 2015, we began Shabbat on Friday evenings with 20-25 beautiful souls. Today, approximately 12 beautiful souls gather in our chapel to welcome in the Shabbat.
- In 2015, we averaged 35-40 attendees on a Shabbat morning. Today, approximately 27 bright and friendly souls, ranging in age from 1-90 years old, come together to pray, hear the words of the Torah, and study together.

While it can be worrisome to consider these changes in our community, I urge us all to remember that we are not unique--not in the American northeast, and not in Conservative Judaism. That might not fill us with joy either, but it's crucial to place ourselves in the greater landscape of American Jewry.

We tend to get anxious at the words "shrink" and "contract"--I get that. These words also bring to mind an incredibly beautiful concept in our tradition about divine contraction that occurred on this very day. Let's jump back to the 16th century in the land of Israel. That's the height of Jewish mysticism, or Kabbalah. And the most revered thinker in Kabbalistic circles was Rabbi Isaac Luria.

In his teachings, Luria tackled a philosophical problem that you too may have considered. He said, and I'll paraphrase: On the one hand, the essence of Creation is that God created the universe *from nothing*. That means that there was no space, no time, no matter--nothing except for... God. On the other hand, we know that God's being fills the entire universe. How is it, asked Rabbi Luria, that God found the space for the light and the darkness, the sky, the seas, and the land--and all that would fill them? Luria's answer was a new and radical concept: God must have *contracted God's own self* in order to make room for the universe to come into being. Think about that for a minute (or a lifetime)--God, whom we usually understand to be everywhere at all times, unchangeable, unmoveable, made this enormous self-change, with one goal: to make room for Creation, creativity, eventually for human companionship. It's a concept that the rabbis of the Talmud could never have envisioned... nobody did, until Rabbi Luria came along. And he called that divine contraction *tzimtzum*, from the Hebrew verb *l'tzamtzem*, to contract.

Tzitzum has become a classic concept in Jewish tradition. But rarely do we connect it to this sacred day, the anniversary of *tzitzum*--the "birth day" of the world. *Hayom Harat Olam*, says our machzor--today the world was born. This is when it would have happened. Without it, none of us would be here, and neither would our ancestors or our beautiful planet. God's *Tzitzum* literally made room for life.

This teaching is essential for us as we, too, are experiencing our own *tzitzum*--sacred, holy contraction. Let me be clear: I don't mean to imply that God somehow decided for us that our members would move, or disaffiliate, or change congregations, or, sadly, would die. Those things have happened over the years, just as they happen at every synagogue. **What I do believe is that this is our moment to explore, and truly embrace, what our *tzitzum* means for us.** What a gift being a small congregation can be for each of us. I'd like to share 3 implications:

First, identifying as a small congregation is a **positive, affirming identification**. It's not an urgent situation requiring a call to the fire department, the ambulance, or the funeral home. There are small congregations of every denomination--Jewish and otherwise--that are thriving and doing great things. Back in April, I got a glimpse into 15 other small Conservative congregations at a conference for rabbis of *small Conservative congregations!* The experience was truly affirming. While there were several practical takeaways, the essential message I brought home is this: Size matters--not as a point of comparison, not as a data point on a downward spiral, but as an indicator of what we can do together when all of our members are engaged.

A second implication of being a small congregation is that **each of us has the very real potential to know and be known**. I don't just mean that we can put a name to a face--you can do that in any size group if you practice enough. I mean, we can really *connect* here.

Allow me to illustrate with an anecdote. Last month, our board welcomed KB Goodkin, the Director of Engagement for the Federation of Northeast NY, as our guest teacher on the topic of engagement. As we entered, KB doled out little pieces of paper, each with a colorful shape on it. There were yellow lightning bolts, red stars, and purple hearts. When the activity began, she asked us to “find our people” without talking. Everyone got up and started looking around. Some of us held up our papers so others could find us; others looked around more tentatively. As we debriefed the activity, we articulated: It’s really nice to have a group, and pretty nerve-wracking to walk into a place and not know if you’ll find that, if you’ll be accepted.

On the most basic level, of course, this activity urged each of us to be welcoming, whether we held an official leadership position or not. Truth is, I like to think that being welcoming is already essential to Beth El’s ethos--we do so much of it well. And there’s room to grow. What we learned to consider that evening was to set aside our own need for a group and to begin to wonder how we might find a welcoming connection, a hidden yellow lightning bolt, with anyone who comes through the door.

I love this way of thinking, and I’d really love to see each one of us embrace it in the context of our small congregation. What if we made this year the year we chose to invest in our fellow congregants? What would it be like if we chose to linger a little longer, to ask another question, to elaborate a little more about ourselves--every time we come to shul? What if we found that we could make new connections in this very sacred space? Let’s try it starting today. If you find yourself in need of someone’s contact info after the holiday, just call the office later this week and we’ll hook you up.

Being a small congregation has a third and final implication for us, directly connected to God’s *tzimtzum*. Just as God’s *tzimtzum* literally made room for creation, for creativity, **so does our *tzimtzum* make room for our--for your--creativity.** Like all small congregations, ours has always relied heavily on members of the community to serve on committees, chair specific events, and work with our professional staff to get the good word out to the rest of us. So many of you have given countless hours to our Beth El, and all

of us have been enriched by your dedication. And while we learned from KB last month to place people above programs, let's face it: Sometimes we come because the event is just what we needed.

I've noticed a shift over the last couple of years, particularly in the last year, that I believe indicates an exciting future for our small congregation. In the last year alone, our Beth El benefited from 7 initiatives that happened because a community member had a need, came up with an idea, and wanted to try it. There was a Mom's Night Out (which was repeated already this year!)--that was Marguerite Felsenfeld's idea; remember that amazing Sukkot Farm to Table dinner last year? That was all Michelle Fanwick, and we'll be having another one in 2 weeks--sign up tonight!; there was a women's Chanukah fundraising lunch at Stephanie Gordon's home; there was a Hamentaschen Swap at Dina Fleischmann's home; we hosted a community-wide panel discussion with the ADL regional directors from New Jersey/New York and Connecticut--that was also Marguerite's idea, and Andy Meyers quickly jumped on board; we hosted an afternoon of klezmer music with Rabbi Greg Wall for the children of Holocaust survivors--that was all Helen Chodroff; Barbara Lencheck felt a need for connection and suggested a women's group--and people joined her in planning a wildly successful holiday challah bake; and we're about to bring back mah jongg lessons and game nights--that was Rhonda Ginsberg and Kathie Oberst's program that grew out of a social committee brainstorm. And if I'm not mistaken, this same type of individual initiative is how Stuart Garrelick got going with the first-ever Beth El Comedy Night... 6 years ago. I share all of these details because they began the same way: in each instance, one person had an idea, bounced it off a fellow congregant or told me about it... and off we went.

There are plenty of things our Beth El could be doing that we're not--yet. As a small congregation, we have the agility to support almost any idea you have and make it happen. And so I ask you: What's your need? What shall we create together this year?

There's so much potential in embracing our *tzimtzum*, from affirming our size as a positive identity marker, to the possibility of really knowing and being known, to co-creating our social-spiritual home.

Now, I told you I was setting out to offer a positive frame, and I hope I've done that. There's one other crucial aspect to our *tzimtzum* I must share, and it comes from a 2013 New York Times article by Bruce Feiler entitled "The Stories that Bind Us"³. I highly recommend the entire article, but I'll highlight just the most relevant part. Feiler highlights some research on what makes families strong, even in times of crisis. The answer: Develop a strong family narrative, with lots of detail, to help newer family members develop a sense of belonging. And then he takes it a step further, and this is key for us: Among strong family narratives, there is indeed a hierarchy. You've got your ascending family narrative, a classic rags-to-riches story, which places a lot of pressure on the younger members to succeed. You've got your descending family narrative, a riches-to-rags story, which can be rather depressing. And then you've got the gem--the oscillating family narrative. An example, in the words of the researcher, Dr. Marshall Duke:

'Dear, let me tell you, we've had ups and downs in our family. We built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks. You had an uncle who was once arrested. We had a house burn down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together as a family.'

If you hold on to one thing from me this second day of Rosh HaShanah, let it be this last point: Our Beth El has had its ups and downs. Every congregation does. We've welcomed new folks and said goodbye to others, and welcomed new folks once again; we've been a medium-sized congregation and now we are small. We've come to this beautiful space year after year to pray, to laugh, to befriend, to mourn, and to celebrate. Through it all, we work

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>

together to engage our minds, our hearts, and our souls. We are part of each others' chosen family.

I believe that's where we are in our oscillating family narrative: We're finding our groove as a small congregation, and, I gotta tell you, I feel the energy. I hope you do too. Baruch Atah Adonai, Blessed are You, Adonai, Whose *tzimtzum* created space for our universe and Who continually creates space for each one of us, and for creativity itself. May this be our best year yet. Amen.