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## Build Your Own Furniture

This summer my husband Dan and I moved out of our closet in Brooklyn into an apartment with six windows, none of which face the bricks of the building next door. And we realized just how little furniture we owned. So, we did what anyone who needs lamps, chairs, and bookshelves quickly, does, and we made a pilgrimage to Swedish paradise, that endless blue and yellow maze of home furnishing heaven, IKEA. We selected what we needed to set up our new home, and having just finished reading, “Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less,” we decided that this time we would pay for someone to help us build these new pieces. Oh, how we wish we could go back and just do it ourselves.

Just 24-hours after our glorious jaunt through that beautiful, minimalist dreamland, four of the five pieces we paid to have assembled were damaged or misassembled. Solid pine split by a screw drilled too deep, scratches in the brown/black veneer revealing the light yellow particle board below, and gapping holes where screws were meant to be, leaving behind that wobble of instability.

After a week of back and forth, finally, our damaged furniture was scheduled to be picked up. Then, at the last minute, we were told they couldn’t take assembled pieces. So, we did what anyone who suddenly realizes that lamps, chairs, and bookshelves are overrated does, and we got scrappy. We decided to fill our Honda Pilot to the brim. Thank goodness for that one summer I worked on the ropes course at Kutz Camp, I remembered my knots, and secured that bookshelf to the roof with ease.

After two trips back and forth, we finally managed to rid our apartment of the unwanted stuff. The lesson here? Build. Your own. Furniture. On that final leg of the drive home, I turned to Dan and said: I know what my Rosh Hashanah sermon will be this year. Build your own furniture. What a lovely metaphor for Jewish life. Jewish Education gives us all the pieces and tools we need to build our beautiful Jewish lives. And ultimately, it works best when we use those tools and put the pieces together ourselves.

Seeking out a Jewish Education, here at Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester and beyond, is how we get these pieces and the tools to create a Jewish life of connection, meaning, and purpose. Just like base frame connectors, butterfly hinges and an allen wrench, there are three essential pieces we need to build Jewish life: Israel, Torah, and God. Israel—Community is core, Torah—We live by Jewish values that help us to thrive, and God—We have something to aspire to.

First, Israel. We are blessed to live in a time when Israel refers to a land and a state, but here I am talking about “Israel” as in *am yisrael*, the Jewish people—the Jewish community. Community is the first essential piece of Jewish living. On Rosh Hashanah, we remember the story of God’s creation of the world. When God creates *Adam*, the first human, God says, “*lo tov adam l’vado*—it is not good for a human being to be alone.”<sup>1</sup> Judaism is not dependent upon place or time, but rather upon people. We depend upon each other for carpools, and companionship, for a listening ear and

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 2:13

validation, for recommendations and courage. We depend on each other for communal prayer, for pursuing social justice, for sharing our Jewish stories, for learning together, for good arguments, and book discussions, for singing, for traveling, for continuity, and for *l'dor vador*, teaching the next generation.

Each and every individual matters in Judaism. Community is core to Jewish life. We don't just talk about it, we practice it. Last May we all showed up for each other on Mitzvah Shabbat. Maybe it was the pizza, but I'd say the building was almost as full as it is now. This community showed up to eat together, pray together, and to engage in supporting our local community and those most in need. Mitzvah Shabbat brought together the many generations of our congregation, including even the local Hillels of Westchester.

Not only did we serve our community, providing care, love, and advocacy, but every generation learned more about the meaning of community. Parents of high school and college students learned that a whole team of young adults will take a Friday night away from campus to be part of a synagogue community. Grandparents learned that the social hall, sanctuary, and hallways can be filled with young families and children running, smiling, laughing, singing like this building is their second home. Our students learned that Jewish life doesn't begin when you enter a synagogue, or end after 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it continues at home, long beyond when we finish school, around the shabbat dinner table, in college, in every helping hand we extend, in every aspect of our lives.

Judaism calls us to pray together, requires us to reach out to others, to welcome the stranger to our sukkahs, and seders, obligates us to give of what we have received, to comfort, accompany, and *sh'ma*, listen. We gather around pizza, in classrooms, to stock the food pantry, sort medical supplies, and tutor. We gather around the bowl of chocolate in Rabbi Goldsmith's office, and we gather in this sanctuary. Knowing that our community is here for us, and that we need each and every person to be there for one another, is a core component of Jewish life.

The second essential piece of Jewish life is torah, and contained within torah are the Jewish values that help us to thrive. There is a Chassidic teaching that each of us must have two pockets. In one pocket we should keep the words, "for my sake the world was created," and in the other, "I am but dust and ashes."<sup>2</sup> On Rosh Hashanah, we remember the creation of the world, that we are here to till and tend it together. And in the days between now and Yom Kippur, we reflect on our finitude and fallibility, we are only dust and ashes.

Knowing that we are but dust and ashes teaches us to live with humility. Our madrichim, teen classroom assistants, practice humility each and every Sunday. They assist our religious school teachers, and become mentors to our youngest students. They see that it takes a whole community to bring up the next generation, and they commit themselves to being a part of this great project. I've watched them listen intently, show empathy, compassion, and understanding, help one student at a time feel seen, valued, and welcome here. They chose to continue to learn because of their own interest, and to be better guides for their students. They give up sleeping in, delay brunch plans, choose to come here to the temple, to give back to a community that gave to them. Through these acts of service, our madrichim learn that Jewish education and community are great gifts.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 249-250.

Torah teaches us to be humble, honest, loving, empathetic, brave, forgiving, careful, and wise. And, in every blast of the shofar, we are awakened to our ability to be our best selves. In every Hebrew letter, we are challenged to persevere and learn more. In every prayer internalized, we are called to attend to our spirituality. On Yom HaShoah, we know that we are resilient. At the Passover seder, we feel the weight of our responsibility to care for others. With every bite of matzah, we practice these values. We are but dust and ashes.

And still, the world was created for our sake. Knowing this teaches us to live with gratitude. The Women's Study Group gathers for an annual weekend retreat. When I attended this retreat for the first time I was awed by the love of learning, curiosity, and appreciation for this time together. We don't always have the opportunity to travel to a cottage in late January, to spend the weekend learning together. Nor is it easy to travel anywhere in the northeast in the bitter icy days of the early winter. Yet this group honors the opportunity to take the special, sacred time for study, prayer and community.

Torah teaches us to be hopeful, creative, curious, courageous, filled with wonder, kind, and thankful. And, in every lulav shake, we attune ourselves to the wonder of the diversity of creation. In every unrolling of the whole Torah, we become curious to know more about the traditions we've inherited. With every Chanukah candle lit, we feel hope rise within us. With every Tu B'Shvat tree planted, we give thanks for the things that sustain us. With every Purim shpiel, we practice courage and remember to live lives of integrity. And with every taste of Shavuot cheesecake, we stand together at Sinai knowing that we are each one, small, but vitally necessary link in a long chain. For our sake the world was created. All of these values, learned, lived, and practiced in Judaism, stay with us and guide us for life.

Finally, the last essential piece for Jewish life is God, in other words, knowing that there is something beyond us. A sense of the divine in our lives gives us something to aspire to. The great Jewish mystic, Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that at the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe with light. When God decided to create the world, in order to make room for creation, God contracted God's light into vessels. With the creation of the world, those vessels were shattered and sparks of God's light were scattered across the whole earth, in every living thing and every person. According to Rabbi Luria, we are not just here to be partners for each other, or to care for the world and all who inhabit it, we are here for a greater, sacred mission—to find the sparks of God in everything and everyone, and to uplift those lights. Only then, will we have fulfilled our purpose, *tikkun olam*, partnering with God and with each other to repair the world.

We all do this here at Emanu-El, in every act of loving-kindness, in every visit to Don Bosco, on every midnight run, in every gift we give, person we take time to talk to, every time the Temple Tones sing, Single Malt Torah meets, Majong and Canasta are played, reflections are written and shared, different views are discussed, we uplift those around us, and honor the sparks of God in each of us, and in so doing, return fragments of God's light to its singular source.

As this is my first time addressing this community as your new assistant rabbi, I don't want the only thing you remember about me to be that time I bought and later returned a bunch of furniture from IKEA. I want to leave you with another story about how these three essential

components of Jewish life, Israel, Torah, and God, came together years ago in my own Jewish journey.

During the last rehearsal, the day before I became bat mitzvah, my cantor told me that I sang nicely and should join the choir. I was astonished. I had no idea that singing was something I had an aptitude for. With encouragement, I joined the choir. Each week I came together with this little, multi-generational community, teens, parents, and grandparents singing together. A small piece of *am yisrael*, Jewish community, together as one. I learned the torah of humility, spirituality, and wonder, in this choir, through melodies and harmonies, through the words of the liturgy, which we were taught not to *sing*, but to *pray*. Together, all of our voices created something that uplifted the greater congregational community, something that seemed to draw sparks of light together and lift them to some divine, listening ears.

Jewish education isn't just the aleph-bet or memorizing *v'ahava*, that the Jonah story includes a whale, and the Noah story involves an ark. Rather Jewish education takes place in Jewish life. When we come together as a community we are inspired by each other's presence. We learn from seeing each other, from eating together, praying together, singing together, learning together, restoring the sparks of God's light, together. Jewish learning happens when we take these three essential pieces of Jewish life, Israel—community, Torah—Jewish values, and God—something to aspire to, engage with them, and bring them together ourselves.

So it's time to find that white and orange FIXA Toolbox, it is a new year, and we all need to fill our Jewish new year, not with lamps, chairs, and bookshelves, but with Jewish living and learning. The essential tools, Israel, Torah, and God, are here for you, ready to be assembled. Build. Your own. Furniture.