

Kol Nidre 5779

Rabbi Alan Freedman

For just a few minutes, I want to follow onto Seth's call for us to envision a Temple Beth Shalom that will not only meet our current needs but also bring meaning to the lives of its membership a decade from now. In the spirit of these Yamim Noram, the Days of Awe, we must look both to our past and to the future for guidance in formulating a vision of who we might be as a synagogue community. Just to let you know, my vision for 2028 is being on a Disney cruise with my wife and grandchildren. While Lori and I always expect to be members of this congregation, and we have the cemetery plots to prove it, I don't expect to be on this pulpit 10 years from now. This envisioning process is all about you and those yet to be. The synagogue world is changing, and it is changing rapidly. The very notion of Jewish community, particularly in the non-Orthodox world is totally up for grabs. As with every other institution in modern life, synagogues either move forward or they die.

Before venturing into the future, however, let's look at a few things from our past. The Jewish world has changed in ways that once made the rhythm of synagogue life easy and predictable. If you were a member of a synagogue in the late 20th century, most likely so were most of your friends. Synagogue was the center of social as well as ritual life. Often one became interested in temple activities, and then leadership, because it was one's natural and expected contribution to an institution that was an integral part of everyday life. Friday evening services was where you met your friends and parents cultivated relationships between religious school classmates because they already were friends with the other parents. Ritual

participation and synagogue leadership were viewed as an honor, not a burden. Board positions and certainly officer positions were coveted as rewards for years of temple service, and there was a clear path for rising in leadership. Affiliation rates were high, particularly where the Jewish population was small and the secular community did not support Jewish life. In part, this reflected the position of Jews in American society; further along than being the objects of overt anti-Semitism but not quite in the mainstream of secular life. This was also a time when the accepted rules of institutions of all kinds were less likely to be questioned, more regard given to tradition and more willingness to wait one's turn to lead.

Now there was also plenty wrong in this system. Temple politics were often contentious. The agenda for the congregation was usually set by the professional staff with the laity rarely consulted. Sisterhoods and Brotherhoods were service organizations for the congregation offering little substance of their own. Dues and fund raising were a major pre-occupation for the leadership; and synagogue life too often become stale; doing the same things year after year in the name of tradition.

Yet, for all of its faults, synagogue life of 25 years ago had a more pervasive sense of family and more centrality to the life of the individual members. In the case of this congregation, layer onto these more general observations the fact that we have emerged from those beginning years of a being a small group of dedicated families into a much larger community. But numbers are not destiny and we can make the choice to preserve what was nourishing about "the old days" without sacrificing the opportunities that exist in this congregation not only because of our increased size and financial stability but, more importantly, the values and many talents of the people who now comprise this congregation.

Like every modern institution, synagogues must vie for the time, energy and financial support of its members. Temple membership is no longer obligatory, rather the majority of those who identify as Jews do not belong to any Jewish institution. That does not mean that the unaffiliated do not practice Judaism or are not proud to be Jews. Studies show the opposite to be true. During the High Holy Day season, there have been multiple articles not only in Jewish publications but in the mainstream press about the changing nature of Jewish life; how alternatives to synagogue observances have been springing up in cities across the country. Our young people, particularly, are telling us that they value their Judaism and are moved by the message of the High Holy Days but that the power of that message gets lost in the traditional prayer service. The issue is whether the synagogue and, by extension, the Jewish community can adapt itself to the increasing individualism of the times. Tonight is one of the very rare times during the year where the vast majority of our community gathers as one but, yet, even on this night we have a service in a South Austin location for the convenience of our members and in a style very different than the service we are enjoying here tonight.

Synagogues can no longer be extended traditional families with a traditional family structure because the very nature of Jewish family life and associations has changed. We must recognize that a modern Jewish community requires simultaneously being a place for nourishment of the individual while exemplifying the values of community. What makes an exceptional congregation? An exceptional congregation recognizes the hunger of its members for tradition and a link to the Jewish past while providing opportunities for new ways of living Jewishly. An exceptional congregation provides an atmosphere where adult learning takes place because what is being learned there brings Judaism into everyday life. An exceptional

congregation is one that cultivates a sense of commitment to and among its members. It has flexible ways to participate in synagogue life and, while having enough of a set structure to maintain its basic functions, mostly provides avenues for governance that are tied more to getting the job done rather than having monthly meetings. An exceptional congregation provides paths to leadership based on one's dedication to the congregational mission and values; and then honors those who take on that mantle. In short, an exceptional congregation is one in which its members experience an exceptional Jewish life.

Here is the essence of the Envision 2028 project. This temple needs every congregant to envision what it would mean to live an exceptional Jewish life within this congregation. The question is not what activities this congregation should be pursuing in the decade ahead, the question is how would you like to be living as a Jew? What would be meaningful enough to you about being Jewish that you are willing to make the choice to engage in temple life? Each of us must ask ourselves, what do I need to realize from synagogue life to remain committed to this temple when the last of my children have become b'nai mitzvah? What does the post b'nai mitzvah program and youth group need to look like for me to prioritize my child remaining active in the congregation after their bar or bat mitzvah? What type of learning, formal or informal, would attract me? What would have to be true for me or my family to attend a temple retreat? What would convince me that it would be rewarding to assume a leadership role in some area of temple life? How can this temple help to cultivate meaningful relationships among its members, adults and children? What are the barriers to my being involved in temple life and what would need to be true about this congregation to overcome those barriers?

Most of all, please bring to Envision 2028 only a vision of a congregation that is compelling to you. This is not about what might interest other people; as I said at the outset this is all about you. For in the same way that Temple Beth Shalom does not exist as an entity outside of its membership, so it is that our congregational vision is comprised of our combined individual visions of an exceptional Jewish life. The statements we need to share with each other begin with Heneini, for such a temple, I will be there; I will be involved. Dream big, so that together we might envision a future so compelling that it will be said of this congregation, as Abraham said of Mount Moriah, Adonai yireh, on the mount of God, there is vision!