

Rosh Hashanah 5775 –
A Love Letter for Your Birthday:
39 Years and Discernment Ahead

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“They’re an inherently warm and welcoming bunch. Nothing showy. Nothing insincere. Of course, when I first joined, I had to come out as straight over and over again. But it was good. If more straight people had that experience, the world would be a better place.”

“I’m so sad to go. I just found my spiritual home, and now I’m graduating and leaving... But don’t worry rabbi, I’ll be back as soon as I make some money and find a nice Jewish guy. L.A. is no place to raise kids, so hold a spot for me.”

“I could never go anywhere else. I can’t leave my friends. Back in the day, there was no place else to go. Now, I can go anywhere, and sometimes I do. But it’s just not the same.”

Those are all real quotes from real members. It’s a love letter of sorts. Why do we love this *shul*?

For this *drash*, I started typing out my own love letter to our beloved Bet Mish?

I know. I'm supposed to call it *Bet Mishpachah* in formal address, but who writes a love letter in formal address.

But there was a problem with my love letter. It was much too long and sappy for a Rosh Hashanah sermon. So here's the abbreviated version.

My Dear Bet Mish,

Oh how I love thee. Let me count the ways.

Number One:

Every synagogue says they are a family. Most of them are lying. You, my darling, are not. You behave like a family of choice. When people are in need, you show up, my darling. And sometimes, showing up literally includes drafting emergency legal documents, blowing *shofar* at the bed of a stranger, or in one case, actually driving a recent widow to NJ. At first, sweetheart, I thought you only did these things for your longtime friends, and that was remarkable enough, but then I noticed things when you thought I wasn't looking. You are very good at adopting new family members.

Number Two:

It's no secret that few rabbis enjoy praying at their synagogues. The Reform rabbis complain that the liturgy is too classical. The Conservative and Orthodox rabbis object to mindless speed *davenning* merely to fulfill an obligation. I love *davenning* with you. You, my dear, offer the perfect

blend of tradition and change, heart and mind. The perfect example of this is the *Ahavnu* liturgy that you wrote and composed. I mean, really honey, it takes *chutzpah* to add to the confessional prayers, but now it just isn't Yom Kippur without it. Okay, honey, I must admit, I really don't like your habit of responsive reading. But no relationship is perfect. I can let that one go.

Number Three:

You're an adult. I've dated those *bar mitzvah* factories, and they were not for me. You do love it when those kids you *b'nai mitzvahed* 15 years ago come home to visit, and indeed, there's a time and place for young children, but I love the fact that nobody comes just to drop off their kids. Together, we make serious study, prayer and community for adults.

I'll stop there, because I really can get sappy and long-winded. Just ask my sweetie, Mira.

I love to listen to our members – old-timers and newcomers alike – tell me why they love *Bet Mishpachah*.

I also spend a lot of time listening to our members complain.

To outsiders it may appear as if we complain because we don't really love each other. But we complain, *davka*, because, we love each other.

We love whining so much that we give ourselves a new justification every decade or so, by doing periodic studies of the American Jewish community, just to confirm how bleak things are. So earlier this past year, the Pew Study came out, and we once again began wringing our hands.

But worse than the handwringing was the feigned surprise.

On October 1st, a New York Times headline read:¹
Poll Shows Major Shift In Identity of US Jews.

The first line of the article declared:

The first major survey of American Jews in more than ten years finds a significant rise in those who are not religious, marry outside the faith and are not raising their children Jewish...

Apparently the New York Times didn't have any actual news that was fit to print, so they stated the obvious.

And every time we fall for it.

We panic, but we don't know what to do about it, so after a few months of handwringing, we move on, with no actual solutions to our obvious problems.

So I'm going to speak about the Pew study, and I'm going to speak about us – about *Bet Mishpachah* - where we have

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/01/us/poll-shows-major-shift-in-identity-of-us-jews.html?_r=0

been and where we are going. It's a love letter, albeit not one from the early days of infatuation, but one that reflects true love over time, strengthened by the realities of a relationship between imperfect partners.

First, the bad news. It is true that twenty-two percent of Jews who identify as Jewish describe themselves as having "no religion." Among millennials, a full third identify as culturally Jewish, but of no religion. And, of course, of those Jews without religion who have children, two-thirds are not raising their children as Jews. No wonder that two-thirds of American Jews do not belong to a synagogue.

For these and many other reasons, experts have said that the synagogue as we know it is dying. I believe, truly believe, that synagogues as we know them will not exist in forty years. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

A lot has changed in the past forty years. Today, if the cops harass you at a gay bar, there's a hotline to report it. When I filled out the new patient form at Whitman Walker I had so many choices of gender categories and marital statuses that I literally had to make sure to check the correct box.

Congratulations! You've succeeded beyond your wildest dreams!

If we do our jobs right, we will reinvent what it means to be an LGBT synagogue.

What if the solutions to our problems were buried in the Pew study? For brevity, I will share only two examples.

First, denominations are in decline. Forty-one percent of Jews under the age of thirty have no denominational affiliation. I wonder if any of those nondenominational Jews might be interested in an independent synagogue?

Second, we Jews are spiritual seekers. In his response to Pew, my teacher, Art Green, wrote:

Jews love to ask questions; we take pride in not being passive followers of our religion... But this is America... There are Jews...who have looked elsewhere for spiritual satisfaction... And in this age of free choice... there will be many non-Jewish seekers [also] attracted by such an open-minded yet powerfully spiritual Judaism.²

Spiritually seeking is in. Independent/non-denominational is in. Out-of-the-box is in. We know how to do that. This synagogue was independent and out-of-the-box before those things were cool. We can be out-of-the-box again - though not if we fall into the usual Jewish pattern of kvetching, arguing, and declaring our doom.

Remember, that's why we got stuck in the desert for so long. Sure, we could have gone straight from Sinai to the

² Green, Arthur. "From Pew Will Come Forth Torah." <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/from-pew-will-come-forth-torah/#sthash.Iy6BZCLK.dpuf>

Promised Land, but instead we panicked, and wound up spending another 40 years wandering the wilderness, waiting for the generation that had left Egypt to die. During which time, what did we do – we whined, we rebelled, we told God how much better things were in Egypt.

Bet Mishpachah counts its official founding to Rosh Hashanah 1975. Today our community turns thirty-nine years old. According to the Talmud, forty is the age of discernment.³

Recently, on Shabbos, I sat with a congregant who has been a fixture of *Bet Mishpachah* for 33 years. He argued that our history was irrelevant - that our community simply needed to change. I respectfully disagreed. I told him that we'll never know where we're going if we don't take our past with us.

Our community has been blessed by many wonderful leaders - some still with us, and some long gone. Barrett Brick became a fixture at *Bet Mishpachah*. His contributions are innumerable. Barrett died this past year. His husband, Antonio, blessed me with a great gift on old yellow legal pads – the opportunity to read every one of Barrett's many sermons.

As I recount some of our history, I will share with you just a few quotes from Barrett's *drashot*. I know that many of

³ Avot 5:21

you weren't there for most of what I am about to share. Neither was I. I will use the royal we, because it is our collective story. For without it, we couldn't be here together today.

In a Rosh Hashanah sermon exactly 13 years ago, Barrett said: "It can be a delicate balance: recalling one's history, without being held hostage by it."⁴

Of 1981, Barrett wrote: "like most 6 year-olds, we were still getting our feet wet."⁵ We had a Torah, but no money for an ark to hold it. We didn't have a full day of Yom Kippur services, but we had weekly Shabbat services, a monthly women's potluck, Hebrew classes, and a new kashrut policy.

Soon, there was the first time that over 200 people came for the High Holidays.

Then there was the year the AIDS Quilt came over Yom Kippur, and *Bet Mishpachah* hosted a *Yizkor* service for 700 people.

Of 1988, Barrett recalled that there was uncertainty around the "then seemingly radical idea that *Bet Mishpachah* should have a formal policy for *kiddushin*,"⁶ for Jewish

⁴ Barrett Brick, Rosh Hashanah 5762/2001.

⁵ Barrett Brick, Simchat Torah 1995.

⁶ Ibid.

marriage rituals. Barrett remarked that it was a new idea that “we’re worthy of public and spiritual affirmation, that our love is an achievement to be celebrated.”⁷”

For our sweet sixteen, we published *Shabbat Vayinafash*, which was the first ever published *siddur* to be gender-neutral in English and gender-inclusive in Hebrew. Also that year, Rabbi Bob joined us, and what a blessing he has been.

On a personal note, in 1995, my friend, Darcie, visited *Bet Mishpachah* and she bought me a copy of *Shabbat Vayinafash*. With our *siddur* and Our Bodies, Our Selves, I survived the gay bashing of high school, and had my first girlfriend. Much gratitude to you. You truly made a difference in my life.

All these years later, we have so much to be proud of, but we have some catching up to do. Our *Yizkor* books speak only of partners and lovers, not spouses, husbands, or wives. Our printed liturgy uses the term transgendered, which was an accepted term at the time of publication, but isn’t any more.

For those and many other reasons, the liturgy committee met several times this summer. We’re committed both to a continuity with our liturgy, and to a new stage in our prayer life. We’re asking big questions. The Liturgy Committee

⁷ Ibid.

member whose opinion is most sought-after is under the age of thirty. When she speaks, the old guard listens.

We are beginning to plan for the next 40 years. Nobody ever said that change was easy, but it is inevitable. Our approaching fortieth birthday is an opportunity for true discernment.

We are a family of choice. Like any family, we sometimes show up when you don't want us around. Every family has the crazy uncle that nobody wants for Thanksgiving, but is always invited anyway.

Today we are called to account. How have each of us missed the mark? Sometimes we err because we're tired. Sometimes we err because we're scared. Sometimes we err because we just don't know what to do.

Karl Schwartz, a long time member of our congregation, told me the sad story of how he lost his brother, Donny, to AIDS. Donny chose to die at home, alone, rather than tell anyone that he was gay. When Donny died, not one member offered Karl condolences. Most of them didn't know, and the ones who knew feared they weren't supposed to know, so they kept the secret, and Karl mourned alone. So Karl spoke up at an annual meeting, and *Bet Mishpachah* got its first bereavement committee, which Karl was a member of for many years.

We are not perfect.

I'm notorious for needing to be reminded that people read lips, and that I need to change the angle of my body to the microphone.

Years ago, *Bet Mishpachah* made sure that the JCC had a gender-neutral bathroom. The problem is I don't know how to publicize its location without making it seem like we're telling our transgender and gender queer members and guests not to use any restroom they choose. Any ideas?

But some challenges are solvable. That's why our synagogue is partnering with the community *mikvah*, and the local Board of Rabbis, to better address the needs of transgender and gender-queer Jews regarding *mikvah* in generally, and conversion in particular.

This morning we read:

“Preserve justice and do what is right.
That will bring my salvation close...

For thus said Adonai,
“As for the Eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths...
I will give them...
a monument and a name,
better than sons and daughters;...

As for the foreigners who...
hold fast to My covenant –
I will bring them to my holy mountain....

...for My house will be called
a House of Prayer for all peoples.

Thus said Adonai...

“I will gather still more to those already gathered.”⁸

We have been gathered here as a rainbow of races, sexual orientations and gender identities. Those with kids, those happily without kids, and those who might someday have a kid. Jews-by-birth, Jews-by-choice, and those of other faiths and no faith at all.

We are all foreigners and eunuchs before God.

“It can be a delicate balance: recalling one’s history, without being held hostage by it.”⁹ But that is what Jews do – we keep our values, while we reinvent new forms of Jewish life.

The realities of surviving slavery are distinct from the realities of entering the Promised Land. But our values and our vision never change.

The Israelites all died in the desert. We don’t need to. All we need to do is to bury certain things that don't belong in the Promised Land.

⁸ Isaiah 56:1-8.

⁹ Barrett Brick, Rosh Hashanah 5762/2001.

We do it for those of us who died in slavery.

We do it for ourselves.

We do it for those who will come after.

We can choose to trust in ourselves and in each other.

We can choose life.

May the Power that desires life, remember us unto life and inscribe us in the book of life, affirming the living God.

Zochreinu l'chayim melech chafeitz b'chayim, v'chotveinu b'sefer hachayim l'maancha Elohim l'chayim. (actually chant zochreinu)