

25 years ago, as a newly ordained Cantor, I joined Rabbi Melanie Aron as the clergy of Congregation Shir Hadash. As many of you know, pastoral care has always been such an important part of our congregation. Within the first couple of months of being here, Rabbi Aron sent me off to the hospital to go visit one of our congregants. I had never really done a hospital visit before and admittedly had no clue what I was doing. I walked into the congregant's room, introduced myself and had a conversation with them. I wished them a good recovery and I left. This is not the way that I do things now.

In 2008, I participated in a unit of CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, at Kaiser Santa Clara. It was there I learned that when you are invited into a patient's room, you are also being invited in to hear their story. Their story may be who they are, who their family is, and the story is often centered around the reason they are in the hospital. Their story might involve God or their own spirituality and if it does, then it opens the door for prayer. This allows me as the pastoral caregiver to see if they would like a prayer; And then if comfortable, I would sing Mi Shebeirach, adding a prayer for a *r'fuah sh'leima*, a complete healing. The interaction between people changes when you are being welcomed into the personal, into their story. And while it may at times feel like a conversation, it is much deeper than that.

For many of you who experienced an illness or a loss, you know that your family and your clergy are here to support you. This personal touch happens at every congregation, but pastoral care is such a cornerstone of who we are at Shir Hadash. This has been true for 25 years. It means that as a clergy team, we strive to be there to help our congregants in all manners of life cycle events including illness and recovery. As we have grown in size, and have more programming, we also reach out to different segments of the congregation, sometimes with success and sometimes with some reimagination of how to reach the members of our congregation.

As we are now close to 550 families, we have tried to maintain both the programming and the pastoral. I think they go hand in hand. It is all about the relationships, our stories that bring us together. It is connecting with individuals even when among a group. It is reaching out to someone new at services, introducing yourself, and sitting with them so they are not alone or even social distance sitting with them. When we can return to some sense of normalcy, it could mean inviting someone from your child's class to a Shabbat dinner. Getting to know another family that you can interact with and create personal as well as Jewish moments. It is all about the relationships and the stories.

Our Chavurot are a great example of creating community. Each chavurah figures out how they want to interact with each other. Social events abound and can include the whole family or just an evening out for adults. It could be a girl's or a guy's night out. It is a celebration of holidays and Bar and Bat Mitzvah and it is a group to grieve with at a funeral or a shiva minyan to help mourn the loss of a loved one.

We have other groups in our synagogue that help us make connections and add to our stories. Our sisterhood and Men's Club are a way to connect and experience Jewish and social activities with one's own gender. We hold many adult ed programs of varying topics in the hope that one of them may be of interest to you. Social Justice is another core value of our congregation and is a way for us to find a way to repair the world, both in our community and globally. Our Kulanu education program will engage our children and if they are engaged, our hope is you will become engaged as well.

One of the mitzvahs that we do as a congregation is to be a caring community. When we have members in need of food and rides, we have volunteers who are willing to help. We have members who are willing to help by being the 10th person in a shiva minyan. Through our caring committee, we have reached out to many of our seniors in our friendly

caller program and have sent our seniors birthday cards. Programs such as meditation, chair yoga and our Alzheimer's support group helped expand our scope. I would like to see us do more. What if we could also help set up one's home for a shiva, have people ensure attendance and lead a shiva when our clergy are not available to do so? When we step up to help others, we are invited into their story and they become part of ours.

And who says that you need to fully join a committee. Yes, it would be great to have you be a part of the core group, but each of our committees is also looking for people who may only have time to do one thing or who feel passionate about food drives and volunteer to chair it. If you like to cook, just let us know and we can call upon you to cook a meal for someone who is ill or in need of food. Like to drive, calling all teens. If you want to do a mitzvah, people often call us for rides. Like to shop, specifically grocery shopping, we sometimes need volunteers to help our seniors with that. The point is you can become involved in a small way or in a big way. How you engage is up to you.

Since May of 2020, as one of our clergy team, I have sent a little personal note wishing people a happy birthday or for couples a happy anniversary. I have reached out to former students, connecting with them and reminding them of time at Shir Hadash. The return notes are the

best! Some are a simple thank you and some are an opportunity to catch up. It is a reminder that someone other than their immediate family or friends is thinking of them as well. It is connecting, it is hearing their stories.

Our stories continue to be told in other ways as well. In this past year, we participated in a Benchmarking Study of the congregation. All stakeholders were asked to participate: our members, our board, our staff, and our clergy. Some of the questions specific for the board and clergy asked about our Shir Hadash mission statement; which is:

Congregation Shir Hadash is an evolving, vibrant, growing Reform Jewish congregation dedicated to providing a sense of community for its members as well as opportunities for spiritual growth and developing a strong Jewish identity.

I would note that while many of us conceptually know our mission statement, we may not be able to actually cite it. And it would be helpful to have our mission statement in mind making it an integral part of any program that we plan. Who are we programming for? How will it create or foster community? Does it allow for spiritual growth and does it add to our own sense of our Jewish identity?

In my 6th grade Hebrew class, I teach the students about structure, specifically leading to the structure of prayer. The structure of prayer began with a foundation and it is that structure, that prayer foundation, that makes us comfortable wherever we go to services, since it doesn't change. Music changes, though many of you would be happier if we just sang the traditional melodies. It is up to us to build on that foundation. We are an evolving congregation. Rabbi Aron created a strong foundation and legacy for us to continue to build and rebuild upon. We cannot do it alone. We need to think of our congregation as a partnership, each of us in a relationship with someone else, with each other. Invite us in to hear your story so that you can become a part of our story. We aim to provide moments for you to join us in the community. Sometimes, it may involve adding to your Jewish identity, but any time you engage with someone on a personal level, you are adding to your own spiritual growth.

While our mission statement is important, it is actually the words that we find on the opening page of our website that defines our why and who we are:

Passionate individuals founded Shir Hadash to be a safe haven for a diverse community that celebrated each other's individualism. Today that tradition is kept alive through an actively involved community that

promotes connectedness, exploration, social justice, individualism and lifelong learning.

This statement is an accurate description of Shir Hadash and yet, there is always room for growth and improvement. As clergy and as a board, we talk about what a diverse community we are, but it is quite possible that some of you don't feel that way. My request is for you to help us so that we can become the true diverse community that we are meant to be, welcoming to all those who walk in our door no matter who or where they are in their life story. Perhaps, someone walks into our doors on a Friday night and we might sense that they don't belong. Our first inclination may be to approach them and ask if they are in the right place or what are you doing here. Thinking of how I might want to be approached in a new place, the approach may be, said with a welcoming smile, "Hi, my name is Cantor Felder-Levy, what brings you to our community tonight or today"

Rabbi Richard Address in his book Seekers of Meaning: Baby Boomers, Judaism, and the Pursuit of Healthy Aging said the following:

Slowly, there is a developing recognition and understanding among many synagogue leaders that the primary means for the establishment and continuity of community is not an emphasis on

programming, but a renewed dedication to creating sacred relationships within that community.

We are listening to what you have to say, after all, this is your congregation, our congregation. This is a year of transition, of introspection, growth both as an institution and individually and as we begin these High Holy Days, I invite you to think about your story. How are you part of Shir Hadash's story? And how can Shir Hadash be a part of Your story?

Dr. Ron Wolfson, author of the book The Relational Judaism Handbook says: "Engagement is about creating relationships and deep connections that inspire personal growth and cultivate meaning so we can transform ourselves, our communities, and our world. Engagement is about developing stakeholders, members who own their own Jewish lives and feel intimately connected to other Jews."

Dr. Wolfson then describes engagement in 6 different small groups of people: those who *learn together; pray together* (forming some type of spiritual connection); *act together* (through social justice); *play together* (activities that are social in nature, such as picnics and happy hour and havdalah); *care for each other* (not just through our caring committee, but caring as individuals for each other); and *accountable to each other* (having

transparent and communicative leadership working toward for the best of our community).

Engagement comes from each of you. It is your choice how you become engaged in your congregation. It isn't about the programming but how one is engaged in the program. Programs should help form relationships. And through this engagement, new leaders may emerge, new stakeholders to guide our congregation truly into a New Song. It is what helps us become a *beit t'fillah*- a house of worship; a *beit HaTorah* - a house of study; and a *beit haK'hilah* - a house of community. When all of those intersect with each other then we are truly a *kehillah kedoshah* - a holy community.

Two days ago, I helped to officiate at a bris for a former Bat Mitzvah student from 22 years ago. Her parents are still members at Shir Hadash and they chose to have their son's bris here, her home synagogue, with our community. Synagogue is home for many of us. It is my hope that you feel that way about Shir Hadash and if not, help us find the ways that can help you become more engaged and make this feel like your home too. As a community, we are only as strong as those who are a part of us. The congregational leaders cannot do this alone, we need your involvement, your suggestions, and maybe a little of your time. Earlier this evening, our

President Andy Altman, talked about the formation of affinity groups. Our hope is for you to find your place in this synagogue, in this home, in this *kehillah kedoshah*.

For these past 25 years, I have been invited into many of your homes and thus have become part of your story, just as you and your families are a part of my story. Together, we fit in the story and the home of Shir Hadash. I look forward to the continuation of the Shir Hadash story. May the story of 5782, be a year of good health and happiness for all of us. Shana Tova.