

A friend of mine told me about a weight loss plan that included weekly weigh-ins. If she maintained her weight or lost a pound, great. But if she added a pound, she made a commitment to make a donation to the reelection campaign of a politician she absolutely despised. She found it necessary to make that contribution only once – after that, she did great on her diet! Perhaps you have your own examples of little ways you use to keep you focused on something that might otherwise slide off of your radar screen? I certainly do, let me give you an example: Last year I told you I'd be doing a lot of listening this year to create a vision for Sinai's future and that I'd have more to share this holiday. Well, in part, knowing that you would all be waiting on pins and needles for this sermon (or at least that I had promised it) helped me keep it on my own to-do list amidst all the other responsibilities of my role.

I committed that this was a community project – not simply a Jay Knows Best effort of one. So, I spent this year interacting with you. I did one-on-ones with millennial children of our members and asked them to tell me their truths – what worked in their Judaism and what didn't; What they planned to do in their Jewish lives and what paths they did not expect to follow. I led multiple town hall meetings with the parents of our youngest children and listened to them describe what had brought them back to the synagogue with their new families. I worked with Betsy Stone as we facilitated a series of congregational conversations about the new Book Awakenings and its implications for the future of the Progressive Jewish World. With assistance from Wynd Harris, I crafted a survey of our members' beliefs to gain clarity on where we are theologically at this moment. And, I worked with our Religious School parents and asked them what they're expect we'll be able to create for their children – by the way, here is the word cloud that they created together – the larger the word, the more responses we

received. And, I can only assume that the word Cinbection is the “connection that is developed while eating Cinnabons.”

Here is what I learned. Congregations everywhere are wrestling with this. And Temple Sinai is *way* ahead of almost all of them. We are vibrantly growing having added more than 40 new families this year alone – Last I checked, we count 391 homes in our membership! We are authentically inclusive and affirming. We are actively living our Judaism in the world as participants, as students, as donors and as doers. This is great news – I wish all my colleagues could claim the same blessings at their own congregations – and it certainly is not because I’m a better rabbi – it is a credit to you, to our staff and to our community.

This process though, has also refocused me on some other trends that we need to focus on. For almost 2000 years, since the end of the animal sacrifices and the centrality of the priests’ role, Judaism has followed the leadership of rabbis. Rabbis were the spokespeople for the Jews, they were often the source of information from the outside world, and they guided the community members on how to interpret matters – even how to vote. But, as the world around us changes, and as we are evolving in our relationship to power and leaders, the focus of congregational Judaism continues to broaden and our relationship to our rabbis changes with it. Allow me to paint this picture for you in tangible terms.

It looks like more congregants reclaiming their own Jewish expressions with an engaged confidence. This past year, I invited families to lead their own unveilings with all the support they want. I celebrate the family members who choose to deliver eulogies themselves for their loved ones. Congregants are encouraged to write their own liturgy and create their own rituals to speak to needs that no other could fully understand. This is best demonstrated in the Poetic License Circle led by Cantor Micah – and we will be using prayers written by your peers throughout this holiday season. I’ve had congregants accept the invitation to lead a ketubah signing this year and another who joined Cantor Micah and me on a beit din as we welcomed new members into the Jewish community thru conversion. I have a new team of members

serving as mentors to our bnei mitzvah students who are busy writing their d'verei torah. We are even thrilled by another congregant who serves on the chevra kadisha or burial society in Stamford. Each of these individuals has realized the power in taking on their own role in delivering Judaism to others and, as a result comes back deeply affected by its impact on themselves.

And of course, this isn't factoring in all the households where shabbat candles are being lit, havdalah is being said, bedtime sh'ma is being recited and challah is being baked. These are not moments in which we relied on rabbis but they're in the same category of ways we are doing our own Jewish living. And these examples are just the ritually-focused parts of being Jewish. We cannot forget how many people have stepped forward to serve as Leaders of a Sinai Circle and how many others have carved time out of their schedule to participate. Or to participate in committee work, leadership, building our sukkah with brotherhood, polishing our silver with sisterhood and nearly countless other examples. Hundreds and hundreds of people at this point. None of the examples on this list have the rabbi at the head of the effort.

One might sit back and say, "Rabbi, it sounds like you're trying to talk yourself out of a job!" I'll use a little-known story from the Torah to answer that thought. Moses is speaking to the Israelites one day when he is told that two men, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the center of town. His protégé, Joshua says, "Moses, you should stop them!" But rather than get upset about these guys encroaching on his prophetic turf, Moses responds in a prescient way. "Why are you upset on my account? It would be great if all of יהוה's people felt the divine spirit!"<sup>1</sup>

Those who spent time with Rabbi Spratt's book, Awakenings, know that he exhaustively demonstrated examples in which this kind of vibrant Jewish living is happening in exciting new ways. I am reassured that our children and grandchildren are proud to be Jewish, they just don't find fulfillment in the same ways we did at their age. Our young adults are expressing the

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 11:26.

values you taught them - Universal Human Rights and judging others on the deepest, truest measures. This is good Torah, and you did a good job following the examples of your own parents, the messages of your religious upbringing and the Still Small Voice in your head that told you what was true.

It also means they are out there in the world working side by side with people they respect and are therefore falling in love with and marrying the kinds of people you'd have wanted them to – and, of course, many of them are not Jewish. It means that a great many of them are marking Jewish time, they're just doing at Shabbat bar nights with other young, city-based Jews. They are proud of their Jewish heritage, but they just aren't letting it veto their values - for instance when it comes to the State of Israel. They would click “like” on the words of Rabbi Rami Shapiro when he says that we should be asking ourselves not whether religion is “true or false” but rather “is it healthy or unhealthy?” About healthy religion, he writes, “Healthy religion is about universal wisdom and love, about providing meaning, in a way that opens your heart, sharpens your mind, and unclenches your fists. Healthy, religion, invites you to meet those of other religions and ask, ‘what can I learn from you?’ Rather than, ‘how can I get you to think like me?’” They would almost certainly agree with Shapiro’s description of Unhealthy Religion:

“unhealthy religions are about power and control, imposing meaning in a manner that inhibits questioning, doubt or learning from those labeled as other. Unhealthy religions, worship conformity... Healthy religions welcome the truth, wherever it is found.

Unhealthy religions, have rigid boundaries and obsess over who is in and who is out, who can marry whom, and who can pee where. A religion is often and healthy and unhealthy at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Shapiro, Rabbi Rami. Holy Rascals. p.35.

We need to ensure that Sinai, remains focused on delivering only healthy forms of our ancient religion. Nothing else will do.

Some *schrei gevalt* over this erosion of Jewish tradition and the evolution of the community. Some are working to control their racing heartrate as they wring their hands and hope for it to pass as if a bad dream. It won't shock you to learn that I think the opposite: I am enthusiastically celebrating and encouraging this, and I invite you to join me. The couples I marry under the chuppah all make a commitment that they are going to be a part of building the Jewish future by bringing our tradition into the lives of their family. We celebrate that everyone who is here, has come by choice. Whether we are Jews or living embedded as a valued and welcome guest in this Jewish family, you are a member of the Choosing People. It is working so effectively for so many individuals today and, just as with most of the important choices in life, we will continue to follow the path we've chosen until some clearly preferable alternative guides us differently.

A progressive Jewish community like ours must therefore stay vigilant to ensure that what we provide for our family is of the highest quality, delivering the most relevant message using the most accessible vehicles. The synagogues who cannot achieve this are likely to see tomorrow's Jewish families make choices to spend their valuable time, attention and resources elsewhere. And yet, some of that dynamism is the secret to the success itself – change, for change's sake keeps us nimble and relevant.

That means that our organizational model isn't going to work forever. Sinai's elders inherited a cultural expectation from their parents that taught them to be involved and support the community - that is just what one does. And that is just what you have done. You built institutions for us like Temple Sinai and here we are benefitting from the fruits of your labor. Every generation raises their children to think a bit differently than the ones before and this emerging wave of young adults is oriented to question authority. They have been raised knowing they possess the entirety of humanity's knowledge literally in the palm of their hands.

They do not need the rabbi to tell them which foods are kosher for Passover or from which direction we light the chanukah candles...Rabbi Google is ready 24 hours a day with those answers.

They have been raised knowing that the most precious commodity they possess is time. This means that when they determine that a job or a relationship or a religious affiliation does not demonstrate its worth, that life is too short to waste their valuable time and resources and they will walk away.

But don't dismiss this as simply a generation with a short attention span and a selfish need to be entertained. Rabbi Art Green writes, "The Hasidic teachers, at their best, used the tradition and its language as a resource for awakening us to the inner life. They saw this task as the very core of religion, the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent, to something larger than ourselves."<sup>3</sup> That is as true today as it was 250 years ago. So, as leadership is transferred into the hands of the next wave of leaders at Sinai, we are going to need to find new, creative ways to grant members that access to their own inner life.

Noah Yuval Harari, the Israeli historian that everyone should read, argues that what allowed humans to move to the top of the evolutionary process was our ability to create shared stories. "We rule the world because we are the only animal that can believe in things that exist purely in our own imagination, such as gods, states, money and human rights."<sup>4</sup> Some readers might feel uncomfortable when they read Rabbi Shapiro boldly state:

"Religions are made up. This isn't a bad thing: everything we humans do is made up. Religions are made up the same way Beethoven's ninth Symphony is made up, and the same way Margaret Fuller's transcendentalism is made up, and the same way Freud psychotherapy is made up. This is what it is to be human - we make things up. Some of what we make up is liberating, and some of what we make of is enslaving; some of what

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<sup>3</sup> Green, Arthur. *Judaism for the World*. p. 29. Yale University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Harari, Noah Yuval. *Sapiens*. <https://www.ynharari.com/book/sapiens-2/>

we make up is utopian, and some of what we make up is dystopian; some of what we make up can be proven by science, and some of what we make up can be proven by poetry; but it's all made up. The problem isn't that religion is made up; the problem is that religions can't admit they are made up."<sup>5</sup>

Here is what I think is next, here at Temple Sinai. We need to continue to experiment with and beyond traditional worship models, but slowly. We will not be changing rapidly nor in ways that are disorienting for those who still love our traditions just as they have looked until now. We will expand our expressions of authentic Jewish spirituality and we'll be honest about what religion can and cannot do for a person. We will focus not on Jewish victimization nor on Jewish guilt but on Jewish pride - I know, for some of the *yiddishe mamas* in the room, things just got scary. How are we to communicate with our children if not with Jewish Guilt?!?

We will be renovating our curriculum so that we ensure we teach our children our Healthy religious traditions according to their ability to understand - not shying away from the fact that much of our collection of Toraitic legends are myths. They remain the sacred stories of our peoplehood and they help us know who we are and how to live but trying to convince teenagers that the supernatural events in the Bible actually occurred as written, when they're learning about the natural sciences in High School is a recipe for rejection.

We will continue to empower. Our theme this year is "Do-It-Yourself Judaism." We're teaching adult classes and focusing here on our teens' education. I will continue to invite participation, like that of two of you who will be leading shabbat services this coming Friday without the clergy even present. I know it could look like Cantor Micah and I are just looking for ways to get out of doing our jobs, but I assure you, (and anyone who works with volunteers knows this to be true,) it would be *way* easier and more efficient to just do these things myself.

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<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, Rami. Holy Rascals. p.40

The time and attention required to train one to reclaim the power and access which is rightfully theirs is far greater than just showing up and doing what my training has made easy for me.

We will continue to develop opportunities that provide transformational moments. Phil Zuckerman, a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, put it this way:

“I can go play soccer on a Sunday morning and hang out with people from different races and different class backgrounds, and we can bond. But I’m not doing that with my grandparents and my grandchildren.” A soccer team can’t provide spiritual solace in the face of death, it probably doesn’t have a weekly charitable call and there’s no sense of connection to a heritage that goes back generations. You can get bits and pieces of these disparate qualities elsewhere, he said, but there’s no “one-stop shop” — at least not right now.<sup>6</sup>

I might say, “There ain’t no app for that!” This is central to the methodology behind Sinai Circles. We identify individuals who have an interest and would like to find others who share that interest within Sinai. Then, we lovingly hammer into the heads of all the Leaders that the purpose of their Circle is *not* the stated activity – that is the vehicle to achieve the purpose. The reason for the Circle to exist is the relationships that will be created. One could form a Cinema Club or a meditation group anywhere but, doing so through Temple Sinai means

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<sup>6</sup> Grose, Jessica. What Churches Offer That ‘Nones’ Still Long For. NY Times. June 28, 2023.  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/opinion/religion-affiliation-community.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=3Fh6fq5nXJ1DIhoSBNHdeWRZdJYVOC\\_p8ZmsJt47E3b31bznUngAaExVRCNb1codZZ4kKEvMxAN77pxtXZLycdHtSZxnc7\\_iavngCg3Smdu9TbR6apBs5WnsOn5PNc4WDF8wX6PqaTz26V3tQBR0JClhEttNBn1JJabGm0\\_1aD9rSWDUP7il4v-Ttcer2Qr7NohTnRtPDiuFrioX0HalWLBf0Hhblj5cix9do8ZCQRil\\_zyyGvbCIREqY8Gj\\_hajjs2ALuP-PE7oW5kDTb6TE-0C5yHutlle3p-LfTaTPonsvkd1e41g6mdQ5RRtMwCJCjUQRo6AgIUspZYyHwTAiRlrnyqKmcFi&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/opinion/religion-affiliation-community.html?unlocked_article_code=3Fh6fq5nXJ1DIhoSBNHdeWRZdJYVOC_p8ZmsJt47E3b31bznUngAaExVRCNb1codZZ4kKEvMxAN77pxtXZLycdHtSZxnc7_iavngCg3Smdu9TbR6apBs5WnsOn5PNc4WDF8wX6PqaTz26V3tQBR0JClhEttNBn1JJabGm0_1aD9rSWDUP7il4v-Ttcer2Qr7NohTnRtPDiuFrioX0HalWLBf0Hhblj5cix9do8ZCQRil_zyyGvbCIREqY8Gj_hajjs2ALuP-PE7oW5kDTb6TE-0C5yHutlle3p-LfTaTPonsvkd1e41g6mdQ5RRtMwCJCjUQRo6AgIUspZYyHwTAiRlrnyqKmcFi&smid=url-share)



you're connecting with the Jewish Community, *as* a member of a really special group of people. This transforms the activity into something additionally sacred.

I've been working with a large number of thought partners to create some core values that will guide us on this next leg of Sinai's journey. These values are:

1. Every single person is the co-creator of their own Jewish Journey
2. We commit to honesty and transparency in our theology
3. The two-way relationship between each individual and the congregation is of enormous value
4. We are guided by the principles of Reform Judaism
5. There must remain a careful balance of Tradition and Innovation
6. We seek to create infinite on-ramps to participation in congregational life
7. Those wishing to make meaning of their lives come from all peoples and all varieties of practice. All are welcome.

Despite what it sounds like I've said, the Rabbi's role is not going to become obsolete. Rabbis and Cantors will continue to be valuable. We will need highly trained individuals with Jewish knowledge and the ability to bring it into the lives of the community members and AI will not be replacing us anytime soon. And, this won't conflict with you taking more control and ownership over your Judaism. One of my favorite values on that list is that each of you will be a co-creator in your Jewish journey. I will be right there, waiting for you as a madrich to walk alongside as together, we chart the next leg. Together, we will realize this vision. Together, we will raise up the next generation of the Jewish People and, before we know it, together, we will look back, just as you elders may be doing right now, and smile about how much good we created in the world.

Good yontiv,

And speaking of a prayer that reminds us that it is Upon Us – Aleinu," we now rise, if we're able and continue on page 81.