

New People, New Passions, New Future

Rosh HaShana 1 5782 Rabbi Neil S. Cooper

Hinei ma tov u'ma na'yim.... How beautiful are your homes, O Jacob, your sanctuaries, O Israel.

We are a beautiful people, rich in heritage and tradition, deeply rooted in values of kindness and decency. I begin, today, with the realization that to remain beautiful takes will and takes work. We must constantly evaluate, improve, and change. We make changes not simply to keep up with our changing world. But we change so that future generations will sing the words we have just sung, as they continue to see the beauty of the Jewish People.

I begin today with questions about change, the kinds of questions which cause me sleepless nights and restless days. Questions which are difficult to answer, questions which inquire about the future, about where we are going: How shall we best prepare for what is ahead? And how must we change to be ready? These are the kinds of questions which have been addressed in some of the most recent surveys and studies of the American Jewish Community. Surveys which identify trends and provide statistics which, I believe, are relevant to us, as a synagogue, and to the larger Jewish Community. As a synagogue community, it seems to me that we have no choice but to look to these studies to plot our course and recalibrate our focus on the future.

I am here on this pulpit, as you know, for my last High Holidays as your rabbi. I will not be here as your rabbi to carry our congregation in whichever direction it chooses. But, having been your rabbi for more than 30 years, I have put my blood, sweat and tears into this congregation. When it comes to the future, I feel that I have "skin in the game". It matters to me which direction this community will next travel. It matters to me which choices you make, and it matters to me that this congregation remain vibrant, strong, and confident as it takes the next step into the future.

Thirty years ago, our synagogue and the American Jewish Community, looked very different than it does now. There were, on the horizon, various indication of what might lay ahead. But, from that far away vantage point, thirty years ago, I doubt that any of us could have seen the issues on the horizon which would arrive more quickly than any of us expected. I doubt that

any of us could have predicted the changes that have occurred. From such a distance, who could have known this is where we would end up?

In that context, I am reminded of a story.....

Thirty years ago, the challenges we face today seemed far away, barely visible. And the synagogue I inherited was focused, and rightly so, on the here and now. Thirty years ago, the synagogue was built to protect us from the external forces, ready and waiting to pounce on us, physically and spiritually. Marshall Sklare, the pre-eminent sociologist of American Judaism at that time, described the synagogue as a religious “fortress”. The synagogue would provide for us protection from the ravages of assimilation. It would be a place capable of motivating our children and educating them for so they would be prepared to engage in the modern world while resisting the lures of the world which might pull them away from Judaism. In short, the synagogue would be a foil against Jewish attrition. When I began as your rabbi, my desire was to continue to build, strengthen, and reinforce the synagogue as a fortress protecting us from the encroachment of the non-Jewish world.

But, early on, it became clear to me that this concept would not suffice, nor was the model appropriate for us. Sklare’s notion was certainly descriptive, but it lacked the imagery and imagination needed to move the Jewish Community beyond the walls of the fortress. Today, the fortress is gone. Today, we need new ideas, new images, and different policies which can help reformulate yesterday’s synagogue into an institution which can address the needs of younger Jews today and, for that matter, the next generation after that.

It should come as no surprise, that the next generation of Jews will, once again, require new models of synagogue life in order to continue to appeal to it. What will this synagogue need to do for the future? I have no idea...Good luck!

But seriously, I believe that the synagogue of the future , and the future of this synagogue, will neither be a copy of your grandparents’, your parents’ or our synagogue as it is today. The next generation will, to be sure, need to maintain enough continuity with the past in order to maintain its appeal to those of us who have come to appreciate and enjoy what we have. After

all, we are, the old dogs who either cannot, and, for some, are determined not to learn new tricks. But the next generation is something else. They will need ideas and constructs different from those we use today. Something different. This is what we are being told by today's sociologists of the American Jewish Community.

Prof. Lawrence Hoffman, among those to whom leaders of the American Jewish Community today look, describes the new synagogue not as a Religious Fortress but as a Spiritual Center. He is, undoubtedly correct, but that concept needs to be defined and expanded. We must be prepared to incorporate some new ideas to fit new models, so that we can remain a young and vibrant community. But, first, we must look at some of those surveys and for guidance.

One of the most recent surveys of the American Jewish Community was commissioned by the Pew Research Foundation. The results of the survey came out earlier this year, in May. I take this opportunity to share a few, relevant statistics and some observations.

New Jews and Non-Jews

Numbers in the Jewish Community appear to be stable, more or less. But statistics reveal that we are growing more racially and ethnically diverse. Although the Pew Survey does not tell us why and how this trend has emerged, it is clear that this phenomenon is the product of several factors, first and foremost, by way of interfaith marriages.

The Pew Study reports that, among Jews who married since 2010, 61% of those marriages included a non-Jewish Spouse. Given the incidence of intermarriage, given the fact that, unlike in the past, there is little stigma attached to interfaith marriages, we must adjust our thinking to this new reality.

Several years ago, we began a process of reconsideration of our approach to interfaith marriages and our response to these marriages as a congregation. As you may be aware, that process resulted in changing the constitution of the congregation to allow a family, which defines itself as a Jewish family, to join our synagogue when one spouse is not Jewish. But we need to do more.

The issue of interfaith marriage and conversion are representative of the changing make-up of the Jewish Community. We must now re-consider the place of non-Jews, as well as those racially and ethnically different from what we might be used to. Jews today, as confirmed by the Pew Study, look very different than we pictured Jews thirty years ago.

Addressing the particular issues and needs of interfaith families is an absolute necessity. We need more explicit programs which will attract and integrate these families into our community. We need an atmosphere of welcome to attract them, and an environment of acceptance to retain them. We need to let non-Jews know that we want them and that, if they want us, conversion to Judaism is a possibility.

Having been deeply involved in the institutions connected to conversion in this community, serving for the past twenty years as both the Director of the Conversion Academy of the Rabbinical Assembly and as Rabbinic Supervisor of our Mikveh, conversion has become a beautiful and meaningful process by which one can join the Jewish Community. And, truth be told, we need them: We need more Jews. We need more committed Jews. We need more knowledgeable Jews. Converts to Judaism bring that to us.

We have no statistics regarding the incidence of conversionary marriages and families in the Jewish Community. But I can attest to the power and the benefit to the Jewish Community when people convert. Their involvement and membership as Jews has already, and will continue, to change even more the face of the Jewish Community of the twenty first century.

The face of the Jewish community changed dramatically in Israel with the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry, but it has not and will not stop there. Our congregation has been in touch with a small Jewish Community in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, connecting with those who are ethnically identified as Igbo. I had hoped to visit that community in August and help with the formal conversion of dozens of Igbos, more than 100, who have been living Jewish lives and who want to convert to Judaism. Unfortunately, travel restrictions issued by our State Department here warned that, at this moment, it was too dangerous to travel there. Several of my colleagues, however, did make the trip and formalized the conversions. I look forward to a time when I can welcome this new group of Jews. In addition to Blacks who convert to Judaism are Asians,

Indians, Hispanics, and others. It is clear that the Jewish Community of the twenty first century will look very different than it looked in the past.

LBGTQ+

In addition to the visual changes to the face of the Jewish Community, we are changing in other ways as well. Gender Identity in society at large has become an important aspect of one's overall identity. Years ago, as the LBGTQ+ community became vocal and, indeed, proud of their sexuality, we embraced the notion of variations in the ways people were self-identifying. I and we have been proud to embrace every Jew regardless of their gender orientation, their preferred pronoun, or their appearance. For several years, we have joined the larger community in expressing solidarity with and pride in the LBGTQ+ segment of the Jewish Community. They are part of our community and must be recognized, embraced and reassured that here they are accepted. Here they are welcome and here they will find safe-haven, respect, and protection.

At the beginning of the summer, we hosted our annual Pride Shabbat. This yearly event has been one way we can inform, sensitize, and remind our congregation that all Jews are welcome here. And our participation in this and other programs of inclusion must continue. We do not look at color or skin tone. We do not separate Jews by ethnic identity. We do not single out those belonging to the LBGTQ+ community. We welcome, include, and embrace, as well, those who may have physical, perceptual, or cognitive differences or impairments. These are all parts of who we are. Although we have started, there is work yet to be done.

Israel

Israel must remain a centerpiece of our Jewish Identity. I will speak more about Israel tomorrow, but I want to share another statistic: A different, recent survey, reported in Times of Israel, that 22% of American Jews believe that Israel is committing genocide. How can we reach out to Jews who believe that Israel is committing genocide? That, as well as the claim that Israel is an Apartheid state are simply untrue. These are little more than inflammatory

statements made by people who have either not visited Israel or are more interested in a radicalized agenda than they are about the reality of the modern State of Israel.

But something else about this 22%: this is a group which is generally disconnected from Judaism. Members of this group spread their falsehoods because their allegiance is not to Israel. They have no desire to engage with Israel or become involved in Israel-related events of a positive nature. Frankly, I hope that members of this group will moderate and reconsider Israel by looking at facts, and by visiting Israel, for a clearer and more realistic perspective. Any legitimate tour of Israel would serve to refute the lies they spread. But I cannot see how we can directly change a mind and heart filled with such venom and hate.

But it is important here to note that 78% of the American Jewish Community does not harbor such negative views of Israel. And it is this group on which we must focus, lest the lies and distortions of the 22% go unchallenged and unrefuted. Our goal must be to focus on the 78%. Our goal must be to train our next generation to separate fact from fiction, to separate American politics from internal Israeli matters, and to bolster Israel's unique Zionist sense of mission.

If someone is untroubled, either by negative remarks regarding Israel or untroubled by their own estrangement from Judaism, I don't know how to bring them back. But for the remaining 78%, we must provide for them a more compelling and, in some ways, more nuanced narrative. We can emphasize balance over bias. We can offer facts to enhance perspective. There is a world of difference, you see, between criticism of Israel when motivated by love, and criticism by those Jews troubled by certain aspects of Israel but not committed to her well-being. We need those with commitment and with a desire to engage and to work through these issues from within. The difference between being inside of the issue rather than outside looking in, is huge.

Judaism as a Religion

The Pew Study revealed something else. Jews are becoming less religious. Only 12% of Jews attend a minimum of one service a week. 27% of all adults in the US attend at least one service weekly. Whether we compare Jews to all others or if we simply look at the raw numbers, we

have a problem, religiously speaking. And our problem may relate to the model with which we began. When the synagogue is a fortress, charged with the responsibility of safeguarding what is inside, we may keep our precious legacy intact, but unwittingly shut out those who are seeking access.

If the synagogue is to be a Spiritual Center, as Prof. Hoffman has it, we must figure out the meaning of spirituality and find a way to assure that spirituality resides in the center of everything we do. And that spirituality must be created in the context of Jewish Law and Tradition.

Over the years, I and we have infused innovation and creativity into our religious services while preserving the authenticity of that which we do. This fidelity to Jewish Tradition is crucial, not simply for the sake of tradition but for the sake of authenticity. As we welcome, embrace and expand our community, we must never forget our mission as a congregation to expand and deepen our commitment to Jewish Tradition.

And here, I share with you another result revealed in the Pew Study. In answer to the question regarding what Jewish activities respondents have participated in, a number of interesting answers emerged. The answer chosen first by the largest number of respondents was... engaging in cooking and eating “Jewish food”. At the top of the list, 72% of respondents cite cooking and/or eating Jewish food as their primary connection to Judaism. Eating Jewish food, ordering corned beef instead of roast beef, is the most popular and most common way that Jews today connect to Judaism! Now, I like corned beef, but preference for cuisine and salt levels will not be sufficient to retain a connection to Judaism.

But on that list, albeit at the bottom, I noticed that 16% of respondents have participated in a Chabad activity. What is so remarkable about this figure is that the number of participants, 16% of those interviewed, represent a very large number of young people. Most of these Chabad activities are “low threshold” activities: attending a Shabbat dinner or a Chanukah or Purim Party. To encourage people to return or re-connect, programs must be well conceived, organized and, for college students and others, promising plenty of food. But it is the sense of timeless authenticity and ease of participation which draws them to Chabad. There is no

attempt by Chabad to indoctrinate or to teach theology or *halacha*. None of those who responded go to Chabad initially because they have had a revelation during which they want to change their theology or their Shabbat observance. They come to eat and to enjoy. And we need to learn from this model.

We need programs which are easy to join in on, low threshold, programs. We need to have, always, lots of good food and little judgementalism. If 72% of the respondents identify Judaism primarily with food our programs, we had better provide food. But food must be an attraction to greater involvement, not an end in itself. Food can become the means by which we attract those who may be interested, a way to connect them to a community which is easy to connect with, filled with joy, meaning and depth, a community which is authentically and timelessly Jewish. If we do that, I believe that we will win the battle for the sake of American Jewry

Passion

For over twenty-five years, David Bernstein has been guiding Jewish groups touring Poland and Auschwitz. In a recent article he spoke about how his work and his tourists have changed. Some changes have occurred as a result of changes in Polish society. Poland is becoming a more democratic country. Over the past several years they have joined NATO and the EU. They see themselves as a post-Communist state. But this government is also responsible for some troubling new policies. Most prominently, the government has criminalized language which blames the Polish people for being complicit with the Nazis in the attempt to eradicate the Jewish People. This is not a case of new information discovered which can undo or refute false narratives. This is a case of trying to retroactively legislate history.

What interests me today are not the laws and the attitudes being promoted in support of Jewish Life or in defiance of Jewish History in Poland. What interests me today is that there are very few Jews left in Poland. The Nazis murdered over two million of Poland's Jews. And so, the public displays of Jewish Life returning to Poland are populated by non-Jews:

1. A Jewish Studies Institute at the Jagiellonian University, focusing on Hebrew, Yiddish and Jewish History, has not registered any Jews in the program.

2. A group of non-Jewish Polish “hipsters” recently assumed the responsibility, voluntarily, to preserve Poland’s Jewish cemeteries, buildings and other places of historical importance to the Jewish Community which have been sorely neglected.
3. 75 people each week volunteer to serve meals at Krakow’s JCC. Not one volunteer is Jewish.

Each year, in Krakow, there is a several-days-long festival of Klezmer music. Bands from around the world are invited to come and play, as a way of preserving Jewish Culture in Poland. But here is the thing: there are no Jews in the audience, at least none that are recognizable as Jews. This is a society of non-Jews assuming upon itself the preservation, not of Jewish Life *per se*, but of the memory of Jewish Life.

Bernstein points to another change. Today’s students and young adults seem to be less shocked by what they see and experience. These young people, according to Bernstein, arrive with less knowledge of the Holocaust and of Jewish History. They come with less familiarity with Hebrew. They have little awareness of Jewish Culture. Fewer arrive with knowledge of grandparents or great-grandparents who lived in Poland before the war. But those who visit, have also been prepared to see what they will see. They know what happened. They view Auschwitz, however, with less shock, with less horror. And I wonder if this also foreshadows the future of Judaism in this country.

Bernstein also notes that young people who come to Auschwitz shed fewer tears. This is not the conclusion of a scientifically controlled survey. But the observation is crucial: A red flag goes up when Auschwitz does not elicit tears, when Auschwitz becomes another place to visit and check-off of one’s bucket-list. When we no longer feel pain or outrage at Auschwitz, when tears no longer flow, when the preservation of Jewish Culture is spearheaded by non-Jews, the passion for Jewish Life evaporates. There is no substitute, no program, no cemetery, no Klezmer Music Festival which can restore passion to the Jewish Community.

The prospect of Poland’s renewal of Jewish Life becoming a model for American Jewry is frightening. Our goal is not to preserve the memory of Jewish Culture. Our goal is to ignite , build and strengthen our community for a new generation of Jews. It is our goal to create a

vibrant and passionate sense of identity to carry our tradition forward with faith, with hope and with passion.

Passion comes from a deep and personal investment. Arising from one's sense of Self and from one's deepest emotions. Passion provides the impetus, the stamina and the desire to persevere. Passion for Jewish Life must be a motto for the next generation of Jews. And inspiring our members and filling our synagogue with people motivated by passion, inspired by passion, laughing and crying out of passion, is our challenge to assure the future of this congregation.

Jewish Life in America is alive and well. I believe that our synagogue has added substantively to the well-being of Judaism in this country. And I am confident that, with the right leadership, we will maintain our hold on Jewish Life. I am confident that we will attract seekers, questioners, and lovers of Jewish Life, those like us and those not. I am confident that, for the next generations of Jews, we will bring to them joy and passion for Jewish Life .

When the non-Jewish Prophet, Bilaam looked over the encamped Israelites in the desert, and spoke these words which reflect not simply an overview of Jewish Life. They describe ageless beauty. They suggest joy and passion. They express the optimism and hope of every generation of Jews, from the time of Bilaam the prophet, to this very moment

MaTovu ohalecha Ya'akov, Mishkenotecha Yisrael / How lovely are your homes, O Jacob, your sanctuaries, O Israel.