

Lessons from “*Ba-Asher Hu Sham*” to Create a Welcoming Community
Rosh Hashanah 5774
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Wow! Today marks almost exactly six months to the day that I first met Rabbi Cooper and began this journey that has led me to stand before you as your new Associate Rabbi. These past six months have been an absolute whirlwind of activity, as my wife Abbey, my children, Elianna, Micah and Oren all prepared to move from our familiar place in the Greater Washington DC area, where we had lived for the past 16 years, to start fresh in a new house in a new city, with a new synagogue, new schools and a new community. It has often felt as if we have been running a marathon, but trying to do so at the pace of a sprinter.

While the numerous logistics that needed to be tackled were a challenge, the hardest aspect of moving was uprooting ourselves from a community that had been our home for the past 8 years. In that community, we had shared laughs and tears, births and deaths and many, many close friendships. We had come to see our world as a little village, and it was a village that helped raise our children. As we were packing and preparing to move, I often found myself humming the melody to Fiddler on the Roof, thinking “Soon I’ll be a stranger in a strange new place, Searching for an old familiar face.”

However, we have been overwhelmed by the warm embrace we have received. Before the moving truck had arrived, invitations for Shabbat and weekday meals were forthcoming, flowers and other treats were delivered, offers for playdates for our children. Whatever our needs have been, there have been members of the congregation here to help. We are already recognizing more and more new “familiar faces.”

In addition to the personal extensions of outreach by individual members of the congregation, Rabbi Cooper, Cantor Rosner, Ken Krivitzky, Judith Scarani and the rest of the staff, Tobi Mallen, members of the executive committee, chairs of the youth and the religious school committees have all been self-less in helping to ensure a smooth transition.

I provide this information because I believe it is important background to my thoughts this Rosh Hashanah. Throughout the summer, I have given a great deal of thought to what goes into the creation of a community, not just any community but a *Kehillah Kedoshah* – a sanctified community. As I wrote in my article in the Pharisee:

For many members of our congregation, the slogan “Our House, Your Home” resonates strongly - whether they come to minyan, bring their children to the ECC, attend Shabbat services or participate in our Men’s Club, Sisterhood, USY, Boomers, or L’chayim, groups, they feel that Beth Hillel-Beth El is a second home and that their fellow congregants are the people who they can count on in good times and bad. They may study together, pray together, eat together, laugh together and sometimes even cry together. They feel the sense of *Kehillah Kedoshah* every time they walk through the doors.

Our goal must be to expand this notion of community for all the members of our community.

Within a few short weeks, I find myself in the very fortunate position of being in that first group – those who “study together, pray together, eat together, laugh together and sometimes even cry together.” I can honestly say that my sense of Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El as a *kehillah kedoshah* has been reinforced on an almost daily basis. I recognize that my perspective as a Rabbi within this community makes my experience somewhat unusual. However, in talking to many families, it was this warmth and sense of community that drew them to Beth Hillel. And, I have already had opportunity to watch as some families, even more recent than we, have been similarly embraced.

But I am also aware, painfully sometimes, that this experience is not shared by all. There are families and individuals who have shared their experiences with me in which they have walked in these doors, took part in various activities, and then left, often without anyone acknowledging they were even here. Their experience of coming through the doors that I and others have experienced as warm and welcoming has left them cold and empty. Some of them are probably sitting here in this room right now. Somehow, this community, which many perceive to be welcoming, appears to be just the opposite to others.

When it comes to creating a warm and welcoming community, Abraham and Sarah are often evoked as the archetype of hospitality. We tell our brides and grooms that the wedding *chuppah* has no walls to represent Abraham and Sarah’s tent, in which they stood actively seeking strangers to provide a warm welcome. We learn the *mitzvah* of *hachnassat orchim*, welcoming guests, from Abraham and Sarah rushing to greet and provide food and shelter for the three visitors who come to see them. We understand the Torah’s reference to the *nefesh asher asu v’Charan*, literally the soul which they made in Charan, to be a reference to the people who were drawn in by Abraham and Sarah and then converted. All of these images of Abraham and Sarah are meant to convey this notion of hospitality and drawing people in.

And yet, in the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we are confronted with a very different image of Abraham and Sarah, as we read of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. While the Torah records Abraham’s protestation to Sarah’s desire to throw them out of the tent, the fact remains that Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with nothing more than a bit of bread and a flask of water. This couple, which has been our model for hospitality, acts in a way that is completely contrary to the images that we have previously seen.

So what happened? Why does Sarah demand that Hagar and Ishmael be banished? In a play on words, the rabbis attempt to justify her actions by saying that Ishmael was mocking Yitzchak and that Sarah was just protecting him. But it is apparent from the plain meaning of her words that the driving force motivating Sarah is fear, a fear expressed as jealousy – the same fear that we saw in Sarah when Hagar first bore Yishmael. Sarah feared that Abraham would love Hagar more than her after Ishmael was born, and even after Yitzchak was born, she still feared that Ishmael would steal Yitzchak’s inheritance. While one might have thought that God’s explicit promise that Yitzchak would inherit would dissipate her fear, it did not. Sarah’s fear of Yishmael and jealousy of Hagar caused her to forget who she was as a model of *hachnassat orchim*. Instead of making room for everyone in her tent, she shut herself off. I don’t think it is a coincidence that we do not see Sarah mentioned again after this incident until her death. When she changed from welcoming guests to shutting them out, she removed herself from the story. I

would suggest that perhaps it is this very moment, the moment that Sarah allowed fear to overtake her, to change her essence, that Sarah began to die.

And it is important to note that the rabbis acknowledge that there may have been reason to be fearful – they note that Ishmael’s descendants later attack Yitzchak descendants. But Sarah doesn’t know that yet.

I can imagine the scene as Hagar is forced out, crying, screaming for mercy, for pity, but Sarah does not respond. She remains impenetrable, uncaring. In the desert, as the food and water soon disappear, Hagar despairs as Yishmael cries of hunger and of thirst. And in a key verse, when no one else is there to hear, we are told that God heard the cries of the boy, *ba-asher hu sham* – from the where the boy was at that moment.

Overwhelmingly, our commentators understand this phrase to indicate that whatever may be Ishmael’s future, at this moment, he has done nothing wrong – he is an innocent boy starving to death. A Midrash portrays the ministering angels challenging God, who is about to act on the boys behalf. They cry out to him, calling:

“Ruler of the universe! Will you provide water for this boy whose offspring will one day kill Your children by denying them water?”

The angels question God based on their fears for the future – legitimate fears, but nonetheless, fears yet unrealized.

In a poignant moment, God responds to the angels with a question:

‘What is he now righteous or evil?’

The angels are forced to concede that at this moment, he is “Righteous.”

And the defining text comes in God’s response:

“I judge a person *ba-asher hu sham* – where he is at that moment.”

This response by God, resonates with the rabbis for it confirms that God’s mercy prevails over God’s sense of justice. Likewise, the rabbis teach, this is the very message of these holidays and the central request of our prayers. We stand before God at this time of year like Ishmael – knowing we will again sin, but asking for God’s mercy to prevail.

But, in these same words, we should begin to question how well we imitate God in this regard? If we want God to see us *ba-asher hu sham*, don’t we owe it to the people who enter our community to see them in the same way – to try and understand where they are coming from and what are their needs?

When someone new enters our synagogue, what is their perspective – where are they at that moment? They enter and are wary of a new building, a new community and unfamiliar people.

They bring with them whatever baggage, positive or negative, from previous synagogue experiences. Perhaps they appear to be distant or stand-offish. We may see that person as unfriendly and assume that they are not interested in talking to us.

Perhaps we should also consider how do we appear to them? Does the group seem “already formed” and “impenetrable,” or cliquy? Do people smile and greet one another or just politely nod.

When we take the time to consider the newcomer’s perspective, we can understand the important point the midrash is making. We must consider where the stranger is in his life, what is her journey? As members of this community, it is each of our responsibility to respond to them *ba-asher hu sham*, to consider, philosophically and emotionally speaking, where they are coming from. We can all list the litany of reasons why we may avoid doing so – our own fears and inhibitions in meeting new people, our own desire for familiarity. But when we allow our inhibitions to overtake us, we become like Sarah. When we shut ourselves off rather than welcome people in, we, and our congregation, begin to die.

Beyond the new person entering our building, consider as well the person who is newly choosing to join the Jewish people or one who is not Jewish but married to someone who is. Are we able to see them *ba-asher hu sham*?

Some have expressed to me their concerns about welcoming non-Jews, believing that if we are too welcoming of inter-married families and especially the non-Jewish partners that we will send a message to our young people that it doesn’t matter whether or not one marries a Jew. When I hear this, I hear someone who has a genuine fear for the future of the Jewish community. We know that even in Jewish communities that are accepting of intermarried families, there is a significant decrease in every measure of Jewish commitment, education and involvement of the next generation.

But a message that God provides for us each Rosh Hashanah in this passage is that we must not give into our fears for the future, even though they are legitimate. We must rise above that fear and see the families *ba-asher hu sham* – in the place and situation where they are at that moment. When a couple who has intermarried approaches us, if we are truly to be a *kehillah kedoshah*, we must find even more ways to welcome in these families and especially the non-Jewish partner and let them feel the warmth of our community. And who knows? They may just like it here!

Here at Beth Hillel-Beth El, I was pleased to learn that there have been significant changes in recent years and months to apply this principle of seeing these families *ba-asher hu sham* – responding to the needs of the people who are coming to us and seeking a Jewish community and not giving in to the fear of what messages our welcome might send to future generations. Rabbi Cooper has led a process to count non-Jewish spouses as members of our congregation and is continuing his efforts to find meaningful ways for non-Jews to participate in their family’s lifecycle events. This continues a long tradition in working to ease the ramp for non-Jewish partners who want to be a part of our community, a tradition exemplified by our housing the Goldblatt Academy here and establishing the only non-Orthodox mikvah in Philadelphia.

But in talking with some of our intermarried families this summer, along with some who are no longer members, there is more work that must be done to ensure that intermarried families feel welcome. We need to actively publicize the changes in our policies, seek to create support networks within the community for families who are intermarried and offer ongoing and periodic classes aimed specifically for inter-married families that address their specific concerns and needs. To be sure, there will be some people who oppose such efforts claiming that these policies are diluting our congregation or sending inappropriate messages. But for me, the message of acceptance, the message that we take a person from where they are, not from where we are is the lesson we must learn.

Intermarriage is only one area where we can apply this notion of *ba'asher hu sham* - rising above our fears and inhibitions to help build and strengthen the community. I recognize that there are many people who are already doing this on a regular basis, people who have become engaged in this community most deeply by pursuing those activities here which speak to them, where “they are at”.

I would like to pause for a moment to ask people to please rise and remain standing if you have done one of the following activities at Beth Hillel during the past year:

- Attended a daily minyan when you were not saying Kaddish
- Made soup for those who are ill through our “Soup for the Soul” program
- Attended a class or a lecture just for the sake of learning?
- Helped ensure there was a minyan at a shivah house?
- Invited someone new to your house for a Shabbat or weekday meal?
- Reached out and welcomed people you didn't know at a Kiddush?
- Offered a ride to someone who couldn't drive to an event?
- Reached out to a new family in your child's ECC or Religious School class?
- Attended a Shabbat service when you weren't invited to a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or have to attend for Shabbat school?
- Reached out to members or guests of the congregation in ways that I have not yet mentioned?

Take a look around and see how many people are standing and take a moment to wish one another – especially someone you may not know and with them a Yasher Koach. Let's take a moment and celebrate that this is a community that already knows how to create a warm community, let's celebrate a community which knows how to make people feel welcome by taking each person from their own starting point, *ba-asher hu sham*, and building from there.

My challenge for each of us, individually and as an institution, is to not rest on our laurels but to build on our strength:

- Lets build upon our Bright Horizons preschool program and examine where else we can be actively engaging those with physical and emotional disabilities
- Let's find ways to expand our “Soup for the Soul” that provides soup for the ill to also provide several meals for parents of new babies

- Lets extend our youth programs to find ways to bring students who attend day schools and students who attend our religious school together in meaningful ways
- Let's think about how we, as a community, can ensure and not leave to chance that a bereaved family has meals during their period of shiva.
- Lets engage children and young adults in our services to a greater extent.
- Lets consider the programming interests of adults without children
- Let's explore the possibility of creating a chevra kaddisha to help families in the event of a loss and ensure that their loved one has a dignified death and burial.
- Let's create a culture of retreats, both for our youth and for the congregation as a whole, where we can spend extended time together away from the hassles of everyday life.

I also want to share one initiative that we will be launching on October 4th. In addition to our current Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat service, we are going to be starting a weekly Shirat Shabbat service. Recognizing that for some, Friday night is a time that is most conducive to celebrating Shabbat, we aim to create an energetic service that will feature strong congregational participation, leadership, singing and perhaps even dancing! We will be reaching out to our teens, families with young children, empty nesters and seniors – in short, anyone who would enjoy a 45 minute service filled with energy and spirit. We will offer light refreshments prior to the service at 5:45 for those who are able to gather and spend some social time together. We encourage people, whether they are coming from home, straight from work or even from soccer practice, to “come as you are” - there is no need to dress up for this service. We will make the various melodies for the service available on our website. It is our hope that in offering this service in addition to our current Friday night service, that we will provide opportunities for even more people to feel the warmth of our community as we transition from our weekday worries with the break of Shabbat. The only requirement for this service: welcome someone at that service, someone who may seem reserved or even intimidated. Greet them from where they are.

Whether it is through attending this new Friday night service, participating in any of the activities that I mentioned earlier, or just reaching out to people you don't know, I hope that all of us will use these coming days to consider ways that we can move beyond whatever has held us back in the past and find new ways to deepen our sense of community. My family and I have already been the beneficiaries of this great warmth and we are extremely grateful. I look forward to working with all of you to ensure that everyone who enters our doors is made to feel welcome.

May 5774 be a healthy and happy year for you and your loved ones; may it be a year in which we all learn to deepen our connections to our community. *Shanah tovah!*