

Rabbi Clifford Kulwin— Yom Kippur Evening (Kol Nidre) 5771

Rabbis read texts. Seeking inspiration on what to discuss these High Holy Days, I recently read through a number of texts and among those I looked at were some of my own, old sermons. I came across one from the first Rosh Hashanah I stood on this bimah, in the fall of 1999, and as I reread that sermon, I was struck by something. It was really good!

In that sermon I described what I hoped I would experience at Temple B'nai Abraham. It was something to which I looked forward eagerly. That something, was a feeling. The feeling I recalled from the synagogue in which I grew up. It was a warm feeling, a positive feeling, the feeling of being someplace I felt at home.

In my case, the synagogue was Sinai Temple in Champaign, Illinois. But as I learned afterward, it was also the Congregation Anshe Sholom in New Brunswick, New Jersey. It was also Temple Beth Sholom in New City, New York. It was also Temple Israel of Scranton, Pennsylvania. We get the idea.

A dozen years ago, when I delivered that sermon, I could have told you the specific melodies, the specific rituals, the passages from the prayerbook that would take me back, and bring tears to my eyes. But I could not have told you exactly what made that place special. After a dozen years here, however, I think I know. Because now this place has become special too

Last spring, Temple B'nai Abraham's annual Bloom lecturer was Prof. Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Prof. Wertheimer is one of the leading scholars of the American Jewish community, and he has a reputation — well earned as became evident! — for candid, objective analysis of what he sees.

Prof. Wertheimer spoke about what he considered the challenges facing the American Jewish community. He began with some of the more obvious ones: assimilation, lack of Jewish education, Israel as a turnoff for the less Jewishly connected. Unpleasant realities, but no surprises.

Then he talked about money. He suggested that one of the biggest dangers facing the Jewish community is that Jewish life is getting more and more expensive. He talked about school tuitions in the Orthodox community that, in New York City, were leading to unprecedented numbers of Orthodox children attending public schools...if you have four or five or six kids...any of us can do the math.

He talked about dues and Hebrew school tuitions at liberal synagogues like our own, which as we all know are by no means token amounts. He talked about Jewish community centers around the country struggling for membership in competition with fitness centers and private clubs.

And all of this of course he put into the context of a national economy that is not where it was and may never be again, and of a generation of American Jews who will likely be less well off than their parents.

To those of us in attendance that night, simply based upon what we see in the world around us, it all made sense.

But then, he added one other danger, which he considered in the long run even more serious than the increasing cost of Jewish life. And that is what he called the decreasing level of Jewish commitment in general. Jews, he said, just don't care as much as they once did. The younger generation does not feel toward Israel the way its elders do. Giving to Jewish causes of all kinds is on the decline. Nationally, while we are lucky enough to be an exception to this for now, synagogue membership is down. It surely stems at least in part from the general and lamentable American fixation with the individual. It's all about me. But no matter where it comes from, being Jewish just does not seem to matter as much as it once did.

Congregational rabbis spend a lot of time surfing the web. We look at the web sites of other congregations. We do this so we can identify good ideas other synagogues have come up with and perhaps borrow them in some way.

I saw a synagogue web site recently whose rabbi I did not know. I clicked on his bio, which ended with the phrase, "Rabbi "X" enjoys spending quality time with his wife and children." Quality time. Ugh. Talk about a hackneyed phrase. I object to it on several levels, not the least of which being that spending time with one's family is always important and there is not a single family I know where every minute is "quality" time.

I mention this because another phrase strikes me in a similar fashion. "Community building," or phrases like "making community" or "creating community." These phrases appear often and the problem with them, in addition to sounding, a bit goeey, is that I think they contain a logical flaw.

Communities are not built. Communities are not created. The idea implies that there is some formula, some recipe; some magic incantation which if simply followed correctly, community comes to be.

That's not the way it works. Certainly, if ones wishes to have a religious community, or a school community, a civic community, or a community surrounding some shared interest, it helps if those in charge exercise their responsibilities intelligently and with bit of common sense.

But that's the easy part. The hard part is to that there are people in the first place, who care. To whom this is important... If they are not present, or they do not exist, the task ahead is a tough one.

A few years ago I visited my home town for the first time in two decades. Due to my father's death, and his unveiling, I visited twice more over the next couple of years. During those visits I had a chance to see old family friends whom I had not seen in a long, long time. It was fun to relive past glories, share stories, wallow a bit in my youth.

One of the things I asked in conversations was, why did I have the memories I did of the synagogue in which I had grown up? Why did a particular melody or a piece of liturgy set me off in a certain way?

Alas, the answers I received were stunningly unhelpful, almost awkwardly so in fact. I was told about the one synagogue in town trying to satisfy a small but frighteningly diverse Jewish community. I was told about the polarizing forces of the town vs. gown dynamics in this university city. I was told about the all too common challenges of finding enough members willing to do all the work which needed to be done.

I still had the strong memories I did. I did not know why. Was it simple starry eyed nostalgia? Nothing more?

September 11 observances were complicated this year, with the controversy over the proposed Islamic Center in lower Manhattan, and the Koran burning threat by the idiot minister in Florida. I don't know that I have actually ever called anyone an idiot before in a sermon, but if there was ever anyone who deserved it, it was him.

Although if that is the case than it may be that much of the media deserve it even more! Though he was the minister of a little 30 person church in Gainesville, Florida, simply threatening to burn a book, he nonetheless managed to get what seemed like every network, every newspaper, every internet site totally focused on him. So maybe he was not such an idiot after all....

But September 11 observances were complicated this year, and I was sorry, because the event of course must be remembered, the individuals must be remembered, and there is a heavy sense of meaning about it all.

But these observances are important to me for another reason as well, and that is because of the genuine nostalgia I feel...for September 12. The day after.

There was a universal sense of caring that day and on the days to follow, despite the tragic source of it all, an overwhelming feeling of connectedness and unity. With friends or with strangers, at home or at work, no matter where we were, there was something so amazingly tangible, so amazingly concrete...we felt comforted, we felt reassured.

When I listened to Prof. Wertheimer's words the day of his lecture, I thought about Temple B'nai Abraham of course, but I also thought about that other synagogue I remembered so well, so long ago. And as he talked about his gravest concern for the Jewish community in America, I realized what it was about my memories that were so warm.

I remembered a place where people cared. It was an institution, and a cause, that was important to them. I realize now, nobody attended as much as they should, few contributed as much as they might, the genuine heavy lifting was left to just a couple of good, blessed souls. But in my childhood's eye it seemed like everyone knew they were part of something important. I saw it in my own family but in all the others, too. Everybody seemed to know, and their behavior and attitudes seem to reflect, that the institution and the cause were something special. It felt like a community...because a lot of people clearly cared.

A lot of people work very hard to make Temple B'nai Abraham the very best it can be. I am proud of the colleagues with whom I work, so dedicated, serious and utterly committed to their calling. I am in awe of the congregational leaders who put in unbelievable amounts of time and energy which benefit so many. But each of us has a role to play.

This is a special place. Over the last dozen years this has come to be a place that moves me, a place I am happy to be. A place I feel at home. This is not just because I spend a lot of time within these walls, though I certainly do. It is because good things take place here, and good people are to be found here. People who care.

We are a community. And that shows itself in different ways. On the bimah on a Saturday morning, when successive aliyot are taken by individuals who do not know one another, they greet each other with warmth, because they are members of the same family. On summer Saturday mornings, when we make special requests to ensure that a goodly critical mass is present each week so that all who wish to say Kaddish can do so with ease and in comfort, the attendance is significant. Just a couple of days ago I called members who live nearby to ask if they would host a Shabbat observant guest to the Bar Mitzvah of the child of another member, who lives further away. The answer, of course, was, of course.

These are small happenings, vignettes really, but they speak volumes.

Not everybody gets it. While our attrition rate is wonderfully low, every year a few families leave after the youngest child has become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. "Thanks rabbi! Love you, love the shul, but we'll be on our way now, take care!"

I feel sad after one of these exchanges. I love being a congregational rabbi. But these are the moments when I feel like I have failed. My job is to help Jews understand that Judaism is important. Being Jewish is important. And being part of the community is a life long process, not something we weave in and out of as the mood strikes. Families like this are losing out on something...and by their absence, so are we.

On the other hand, a few years ago I received a letter that brought me to tears. Joyful tears. It was from someone who was considering resigning their membership because, given how little time they spent here, they could not justify the expenditure. But, in the

words of the writer, “We realized that this is not about us. It is about being part of the community.”

If we try to justify our membership by “return on investment,” forget it. Being part of the community doesn’t work that way. But the letter writer gets it. I wish he spent more time within these walls. I wish everybody spent more time within these walls! It is my job to wish that and it is my job to make being here as positive and meaningful as possible. But the most fundamental characteristic of all to be part of the community is that someone cares. And the person who wrote that letter cares.

American Jews have challenges ahead. No question about that. Prof. Wertheimer is correct.

And this congregation, with so rich a past and present, we have new aspirations toward which to aim. We already are but we need even more to be a place where all feel at home – the old and the young, the intermarried and the inmarried, special needs families, the straight and the gay, those who are affluent and those of limited means, those from diverse Jewish backgrounds, those who have been in Essex County for ever and those who have just arrived.

And while there are many ways to achieve those aspirations, and the lay leadership and the professional leadership of the congregation address them with vigor and energy and commitment, there is one essential component to the effort that this be the community that we all want it to be, a component that is more important, more critical and more essential than any other. (And yet again I use this word because it is the word!) We have to care.

It all flows from that. We don’t build a community; if we care, we are a community.

This is the lesson I learned from what I remember from almost a half century ago. When people gather together for a common purpose, and that common purpose is important to them, and their actions and their attitudes and their words demonstrate that importance, good things happen. Hearts are touched. Souls are gladdened. Wonderful memories are created...and trust me...those can last a long, long time.

Ten days ago we spoke of the land of Israel. We recalled how ever since God’s fateful conversation with Abraham the land had been part and parcel of who we are.

As well, ever since Abraham, we have been a people. A people. A Jew does not live in isolation. A Jew is not an abstract idea. A Jew is not a suit of clothes one puts on when one feels like it.

A Jew is part of the Jewish people, a Jew is kindred to other Jews, a Jew is connected to other Jews and, together, we help one another along the path we have already been following for thousands of years.

This year, I ask a simple favor of you: care. Express it however you wish. Come a little more often. Be little more generous. Ask, how can I help? Be a member of the congregation you would like to be a member of.

A funny thing has happened to me over these last dozen years. The old melodies still bring tears to my years. But there are new ones that do as well. And what I have discovered is it really has little to do with the melodies themselves...and everything to do with where the melodies are heard.

May the year ahead be a year of blessing and peace. May the year ahead be a year of good health and prosperity. But right now, right here, in this place, may it especially be a year of caring. May we care well, may we care lovingly, and by so doing, may future generations bless us. Amen.