

Vulnerability in Community: Rosh Hashanah 2017

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My previous congregation's building was a former New York Public library. A square block of concrete, the building's defining features were the nearly 12 foot windowpanes that encircled it. They were an excellent opportunity for synagogue advertising. One of the members used to take flyers of our events and have them blown up to affix them to the windows and announce what was happening at West End Synagogue.

Until September 11, 2001, however, I was pretty skeptical that anyone ever looked at those windows. But on September 12th, we hung several posters in those windows inviting our neighbors to a prayer vigil. I don't remember the exact text of the posters, beyond the invitation to be together, but that night, in our modest sanctuary that had about 175 seats, there was magically room for 350 people – they were sitting on the floor, in the aisles, standing on the steps up into the sanctuary, at the back and on the sides, several rows deep.

The silence was broken only by songs, prayers, and tears. I didn't recognize many in the congregation, but it was clear that the first 48 hours after the attacks, people needed a place to come together. All of us raw, shocked, and vulnerable. Yet that night I understood something profound: when we widen the markers of Judaism and Jewish life, we increase the potential number of people who feel part of the community.

Last night I began a dialogue about vulnerability—that feeling and experience of uncertainty, but also the potential for creativity and growth. This morning I want to reflect on the communal response to vulnerability as well as our responsibility when the community itself becomes vulnerable. After 20 years in the rabbinate, I have seen countless examples of how the synagogue community is responsive to uncertainty and instability. Our tradition accepts and responds to our sense of vulnerability, and provides, should we choose to accept it, a context in which stability can be regained, where hope can be embraced, and joy can be experienced once again.¹

Community and ritual and identity can create, in the words of Elizabeth Gilbert in the popular book, *Eat, Pray, Love*, “Safe resting places for our most complicated feelings of joy or trauma, so that we don't have to haul those feelings around with us forever, weighing us down.”

I think I have given this sermon every year in some way, since I became a rabbi. Because I truly believe that when we choose to be in community, we can find **resilience** in the face of difficulty; we can act with **integrity**, when we stand up as a community; in the face of hate or oppression we can feel **hope** in the face of loss.

This morning I want to look at those resources as we examine communal life, and the challenges placed before us in the dizzying spin of the 21st century. I believe that everyone here

¹ Rabbi Richard Hirsh, sermon, date unknown

accepts in some way, the idea that in community, we show up in times of celebration and grief. Dancing and weeping together—sometimes both at the same time.

The images in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston point to the incredible ability that people have to help, to share resources, and simply to CARE, knows no bounds. The flood waters that filled the sanctuaries of Conservative congregation Beth Yeshurun, Reform Congregation Emanuel, and United Orthodox Synagogues, didn't prevent those communities from coming together to support their members, the larger neighborhoods, and their beloved city.

We may disagree on how to fix the vulnerabilities of the world (more on that on Kol Nidre), but I don't think we disagree that a religious spiritual community ought to awaken a sense of connectedness and responsibility, even while it can also nurture the soul.

Religion/spirituality can help us not by changing the facts, but by teaching us new ways of looking at those facts. Religion doesn't prevent bad things from happening to us and the world, but in its finest moments it helps people cope with and make meaning out of those ills. Humanity has always sought answers to the bigger questions of meaning—who am I? What am I called to be? What is my responsibility to others?

But “It makes an immense difference whether we see ourselves as isolated individuals at war with the rest of the world, or as links in a network of human beings working for each other's survival as well as our own, and depending on other people to help us find what we cannot get for ourselves.”²

Here's an example. In May of 1991, in the hours between the end of Friday night services, and the beginning of Shabbat morning services, at Congregation Bnai Jeshurun in NYC, a large section of the ornate Moorish style ceiling, collapsed over the bima in the sanctuary. Miraculously, no one was in the building at the time.

The Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew was two short blocks away, and the pastors offered its sanctuary to the synagogue. But the community members were moribund. The rabbi, Marshall Meyer z"l, the teacher of my teachers noticed the depressive quality of their singing on the following Friday night, and said, “why are you sad? We should be celebrating that no one was hurt!” So for the last 26 years, halfway through Lecha Dodi, the melody shifts and the congregation gets up and dances around the sanctuary.

Hafachta mispedi l'machol li—You have turned my mourning into dancing, says the psalmist—clothe me in joy, that I may forever give thanks. Where there was vulnerability, celebration took its place.

² Harold Kushner, *Who Needs God?*

Resilience can mean the capacity to recover from difficulties, to engage in activities that were once believed to be no longer possible because of vulnerability. To share in that resilience with others, can make for a beautiful, connected existence.

On February 1 of this year, in the aftermath of the announcement of the travel ban from primarily Muslim countries, more than 800 people gathered together at Congregation Beth El to proclaim with courage and conviction that we Jews were once refugees and immigrants, too, and we would not stand idly by the vulnerability of others.

Many congregations and Jewish institutions came together as a community and with wholehearted **integrity** affirmed with conviction that the vulnerability of others must propel us to demand a purposeful and connected existence for everyone. We shared our **hope** that America would remain a place to gather the huddled masses, yearning to breathe free.

Where there was vulnerability, solidarity took its place.

There are so many more examples: Greene Family Camp in Houston opened its doors 8 am to 5 pm every day for any family to bring their children while the adults dealt with the myriad of details after the disaster. Communities cook meals for a member undergoing chemotherapy; our own members make *shiva* calls to people they don't even know; our synagogue has reduced or waived dues when someone has lost their job or otherwise has fallen on hard times.

Only a few generations ago when the waves of Jewish immigrants made their way across our shores, the need for community and the experience of vulnerability may have looked different, but neither have diminished in the ways that matter. And yet, Jewish engagement efforts must offer access to this very old conversation that remains provocative and enlivening.

“The necessary partner of authenticity is creativity. Imagination. Torah teaches that the greatest expression of human freedom is the ability to deny inevitability, to defy expectations, and believe that with creativity and imagination we can create a new reality for ourselves.”³

So just as people seek and need community when we feel vulnerable, so, too, do communities seek and need people, when the community is vulnerable.

To use a contemporary metaphor: We are like our smart devices of choice—whether phone, ipad, computer or car. We work best when *fully charged*. Jewish communal life is one of the elements that serves to recharge us when we are depleted, and steadies us when we feel vulnerable.

³ Rabbi Sharon Brous, *Synagogues Reimagined*, in *Jewish Megatrends: Charting the Course of the American Jewish Future*, by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz.

We depend on our phones, computers, cars to be “ready for us” when we need them, just as many of us depend on Jewish community to be ready for us when we are in need of it, and our vulnerability often brings us to the door.

There is a common assumption that synagogues will always “be charged” and ready for us when we need or want to use them. But the landscape of the American Jewish community has changed, especially outside of orthodoxy. Synagogues are closing or merging, restructuring dues obligations, selling buildings, and reimagining their missions to address the shifting sands of Jewish communal life.

Many congregations, including ours, spend many hours thinking about creative ways to engage YOU—inspire YOU—recharge YOU. Can the synagogue be **resilient** when faced with depleted resources, burned out volunteers, or shrinking membership? Can it revitalize with **integrity** and **hope**, the field of Jewish engagement, committed to tradition and innovation, attracting unaffiliated or disengaged Jews to a rich and meaningful Jewish communal life?

When Neo-Nazis and white supremacists descended upon Charlottesville, VA, the Jewish community in town quickly came together to support one another. The Jewish community of Charlottesville is centered around its synagogue, Congregation Beth Israel.

In a recent article in *Times of Israel*, Reconstructionist Rabbi Nathan Weiner reflected that CBI’s capacity to stand strong in the face of hate comes from its members knowing that their community matters. In a “*Dayenu*” styled reminder, Weiner wrote: “No synagogue members = no funding = no synagogue = no gathering place = no rabbi = no holiday celebrations = no embrace of non-Jewish community = no sanctuary to protect the vulnerable = no stable organized community to be strong in the face of assimilation, apathy, and depleted resources.”⁴

In other words, no charging station for the Jewish people.

In this era of vulnerability, it feels important not only to ask what *you can do for Jewish community*, although clearly, we want and need to know that! But equally important is the question, *what can Jewish community offer you?* How can we recharge ourselves in such a way, as to simultaneously recharge the greater whole?

Jewish communal life has the potential to transform; being connected to community can change lives, make meaning, and invest people in the world around them.

Resilience
Integrity
Hope

⁴ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/a-lesson-after-charlottesville-join-a-synagogue/>

These are the tools that have been with our people for generations. As we anticipate the New Year unfolding, let us remember that communities need at their heart a narrative—a story that isn't about guilt, fear, or settling for something mediocre. The story of our involvement with Jewish community should help us articulate what it means to be alive in the world, what it means to be a human being, and how to make sense of the vulnerability that is all around us in this room and so far beyond.

The story of the Jewish people is one that can remind us to dream of something that's bigger than us. A story told not only to relay historical events, but to convey critical ideas, to instill values, to offer a sense of purpose in a chaotic world with **resilience, integrity and hope**.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah –

May the coming year recharge us and enable us to recharge Jewish communal life together.