

Last night we sang with joy, we were happy, and that seems fitting as we marked a milestone of the earth's 5777<sup>th</sup> birthday and the celebration of our Temple's 70<sup>th</sup> year. In our happiness we also began our esesret yemei teshuvah our ten days of reflection and introspection

As is customary with milestones, with this season, I have been reflecting. Reflecting on life well lived and the life of our synagogue. Yesterday I officiated at a funeral for a woman who was blessed with 97 years of strong life. Who knew life wasn't always easy, but taught her family to hold their heads up, toughen up, and move forward. And almost 30 days ago, I officiated at a funeral for a very sweet boy just a few days shy of his fifth birthday. He, he lived life well. He embraced the lifestyle of being happy, of adding sparkle to each moment of life, sharing joy with smiles and giggles with each person he connected with.

And last week, I was given the honor to officiate a service for an incredible woman by the name of Nina Quint. Nina was a Temple Beth Hillel member for over **50** years. She also lived 101 years of a life, and a life well lived they were. No she wasn't famous, you probably didn't know her. But the secret to her incredible life was that she found her place of paradise, her way to weather life's storms with coming home, embracing family, relationship with the other and never letting go of her deep sense of ethics and values.

She was honest all her days, intellectually curious, and in touch with all things political and worldly. Nina didn't shy away from things when they got hard or bury her head in the sand. In her early days, she lived in Chicago in shtetl style life, with family on the first floor of the building, her on the second floor, and more relatives on the third floor. Family took care of each other and were your best friends. She would marry the love of her life have two children, and then at 34 God played a cruel trick on her and her husband died. A heavy blow; yet, she persevered. Life would need to be different. Adapting to a new world, she picked herself up, moved her family to LA, went to work and eventually fell in love again. The new love would stretch her boundaries, as she needed to create a blended family. A bright woman who was informed early in life that woman don't go to college, changed that mindset and continued to work hard, side by side with her husband in their pharmacy, long hard hours, but always coming home to her family, and eventually to her 9 grandchildren and 20 great grandchildren.

As modernity raced around her, she didn't fight it. Rather she leaned into it, accepting that families look different than in her day. Even though she was raised family lived close, looked the same, shared Eastern European Jewish backgrounds, she would adapt and come to appreciate that family meant interfaith, inter-racial, variety of ethnicities, and blended through and through. This was the modern family and she embraced it. She found joy in her family so much so, that Sunday dinner was a must. Not to be missed, and so living independently at 100 years old she would take an uber to her son's home, and here each person would grab hands and share a moment of gratitude. Nina didn't need a big occasion to appreciate life. She just needed the occasion of being alive to find joy and happiness in the day to day. There is much to say about Nina and her 101 years. How she adapted from no phone, to shared party line, to rotary, to cellular, and of course even learning to uber.

A lifetime, a special time. And Judaism teaches that a person who reaches the age of 70 is as if they have lived a full lifetime. There is also much to say about our Temple at 70, for you see. 70 is a good number in Judaism. We are taught that 70 is a lifetime, that the people of Israel were chosen specially from amongst 70 nations, that God had 70 different names, there were 70 souls who went down into Egypt, 70 holy days in a year with 52 Shabbatot and 18 festivals, 70 elders in our Sanhedrin, 70 names for Jerusalem, 70 pillars in the Temple and much much more.

If 70 is a lifetime, than its natural to wonder is this the end? Is our synagogue's lifespan over? Or like Nina whose life felt it should end at the age of 34, shall we be like her and simply prepare for the next phase of life? Oh, most certainly. We are preparing for another lifespan.

But I do want to address the underlying narrative in society, in America, that faith based communities are dying. Churches and synagogues have no place in modernity. They are closing their doors, are a thing of the past. Let's explore this notion for a moment.

Did you know that the synagogues as an institution has been dying since they were first founded in America. In 1872 The New York Herald shared an editorial declaring that, "The rising generation demand a form of religion which their hearts can appreciate and hold fast to..... the young Israelites do not manifest that love for the synagogue which their fathers and forefathers showed."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, a rejection of synagogues in 1870s. And again in 1927, Rabbi Israel Goldfarb wrote, "Of all the problems that beset the American Rabbi of today none is more complex and more difficult to solve than that of how to bring the child closer to the Synagogue, how to arouse his interest in things Jewish and how to secure his permanent attachment to the ideals of faith and our people."<sup>2</sup> I am wondering if these words sound familiar to our ears today. And then there is the generation that our founders boldly chose to establish TBH in. It was during this generation that articles were being written declaring, "Many of our people have had little contact with synagogue life, having thought this was something for their elders. Now as parents they wish to facilitate a return to Judaism for their children. Not for themselves." Hence the rise of Sunday school enrollment, and then the declaration that, "the fruit of this might well be a Judaism that ends rather than begins with Bar Mitzvah."<sup>3</sup>

With all of this, the institution of the synagogue learned to be one of the most adaptive organizational structures. I repeat the synagogue is one of the most adaptive organizational structures across time. Remember Nina, she was told that girls don't go to college and work, she did. She was told that you don't blend families, she did. She was told that Jews don't have Asias members within their family, and she scoffed at

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<sup>1</sup> The New York Herald, Editorial July 22, 1872

<sup>2</sup> "The Child and the Synagogue" *The Problems of Jewish Ministry*, New York Board of Jewish Ministers, Israel Goldstein, ed. 1927.

<sup>3</sup> Membership Brochure, Israel community center, Levittown, NY 1948 Found in A. Gordon, *Jews in Suburbia*, 1959. Also in Herbert Gans, *The Birth of a Jewish Community*, *Commentary*, January 1951.

that. She was told that family aren't real if they spread across a nation and you shouldn't try to hold tight to it, and yet she kept Sunday night dinner no matter the circumstance.

So too have synagogues adapted, synagogues moved away from simple recitation of prayers to creation of learning environments, they became community centers, places to bake, to create plays, as well as worship, many were shuls with a pool. Synagogues met the needs of the early baby boomers when they created supplementary religious education that at first was parochial fitting the time, and are now engaging students with strategies from music, to dance, to experiential models of retreats and project based education. The synagogue evolved rapidly across time to meet the needs of Jewish America. And so has TBH moved across time during our 70 years. We have kept true to our mission, our core values, but have moved with time adapting and evolving.

Just like Nina stayed true to herself, family first, always choosing to do right, be honorable, and knowledgeable. So too has TBH stayed true to our core identity, our core mission. The three ancient primary Jewish acts are Torah, avodah, and g'milit hasadim. The words on our mosaic as you enter our building. They are holy study, communal prayer, and are acts of loving kindness or good deeds. In 1946, 13 families felt there was a need for a Reform congregation to provide a community space for prayer and togetherness, and so TBH a holy community was established at the end of the second generation and the beginning of the third generation of Jews in America. This was a very interesting time for sure. In the 1950s, the Los Angeles Jewish Community boomed from 100,000 prewar to a population of 200,000 right after, and a few short years later Los Angeles increased to 500,000 with the baby boom and the move west by families.<sup>4</sup> And by the way, the narrative of "the synagogue is dying" was already rampant. Imagine if our founders had listened.<sup>5</sup>

Rather, TBH which had started with just 13 families, saw the need gathered together and from 1955-1965 this very young congregation, raised money through donations and children selling one candy bar at a time, and built our three story school wing. At this time, Rabbi Bauman felt called to our pillar of study, and demanded each student to commit to 5 years of Religious school, with 4 years of Hebrew school, prior to bar mitzvah. Also there could be no bar mitzvah without a signed document by each student declaring they would stay through confirmation. Soon 700 families and 1200 kids flooded our halls with multiple sessions of Religious School all weekend long. And again we stayed true to this pillar of education and towards community when in unification and support of Israel post the 67' war, we extended Hebrew study with weekday classes. And again we would adapt in 1994. As a congregation we held the value that Jewish preschool education was important, that supplementary opportunities for religious education were significant, and knowing that Elementary school integrating secular and religious studies side by side was an important value, under Rabbi Kaufman's leadership, we opened a Reform Jewish Day School. We were one of 11

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<sup>4</sup> Ed Feinstein, lecture Shalom Hartman Institute

<sup>5</sup> Much of the narrative of the dying synagogue and innovations came from a lecture held at the Shalom Hartmann Institute "Can the Synagogue Be Saved?" lead by Rabbi Noa Kushner and Rabbi Eddie Feinstein, Summer 2016.

Reform Day Schools across the country. And probably we are one of the few that remain today, continuing to invest in our youth through multiple avenues.

Now, Rabbi Kaufman could have founded our school earlier in 1977, when Adat Ari El and Stephen S Wise founded their schools, but he did not. Why, he chose to hold tightly to our synagogue's value of *gemilut hasadim* – social responsibility. You see this was a bold move for this was the time when LAUSD had instituted busing for integration purposes. Rabbi Kaufman felt it important that TBH be a strong communal and moral pillar in supporting the integration plan, and did not want us to pull back and isolate ourselves. He held the value that is above our ark... "If I am only for myself what am I." This was not who we would be. So our school waited.

We continued to be true to our ancient mission of social action and responsibility, by welcoming Vietnamese boat families, adopting *refusniks* in the 70's, embracing some 75 Russian emigre families throughout the 90s, embracing homeless families as they got to their feet, and of course, being at the forefront of reaching out to Jews with disabilities. Prior to ADA compliance standards, TBH lowered our drinking fountains, made our bathrooms accessible, added a lift to our pulpit, and our famous long ramp making our sanctuary one of the rare accessible ones in Los Angeles. And as the world become more accessible to those with physical disabilities, we continued to adapt and opened our hearts wider as a congregation by providing programs for developmentally disabled from special services, to our *yachad* program in the Religious School, to full integration for almost all of our students with specialists on our staffs. And today, with our stand alone Shabbat afternoon Moses Programs for adults with developmental disabilities.

Living our value of *gemilut hasadim*, TBH has demonstrated for the rights of those who pick in our fields, those who work with our elderly. We have stood with the Women of the Wall and supported pluralistic opportunities in Israel. We have lobbied in Washington DC and in our State Capital. We have fed those in need on Thanksgiving, given out food packs to individuals on the street, distributed socks, toiletries, and love. We opened and maintain a Community Counseling Center providing support for mental wellness at a significantly reduced rate. And, TBH is a founding member of our Interfaith coalition in our Food Pantry 28 short years ago. Seeing the growing problem of homelessness, TBH member Florence Adler gathered a few friends from five other congregations, to do interfaith work and we were off. TBH housing the storage of food and First Christian the delivery vehicle for serving some now 5,000 meals a month to those in need.

As the world changed, TBH has stayed true to our mission and risen to the challenges of serving others and fighting for the rights of the weak in our society, and we will continue to do so.

Speaking of interfaith, it is here that our worship and prayer have expanded and adopted as well. From our covenant relationship in the 90s with Faithful Service Baptist Church which brought TBH into Watts to help out brothers and sisters with diapers and food and more, to our relationship with Parks Chapel AME, and most recently our relationship with Muslims for Progressive Values. We have shared pulpit exchanges,

study opportunities, service to others and much more. TBH has grown across our 70 years adopting new prayer books, even new high holy day machzorim, experimenting with outdoor services, hiking services, Tashlich at the beach, Shabbaque, Opera and Disney Shabbats, to drumming services, retreats at camp, Seder in the desert, women and brotherhood sederim, Sukkapalooza, and much much more. All with the aim of increasing joy, spiritual connectivity and drawing us closer to our heritage, God, and one another.

Yes, TBH is a synagogue that has lived up to its mission of Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut hasadim. We know who we are and we know that we must adapt across time to meet our members where they are. Rabbi Jim said to me, “TBH has tried to live its motto, inscribed above the ark, “If not now, when?” This is the operative portion of the full Hillel quote identifying the constant individual and/or communal struggle to balance individual need with communal needs (particular vs. universal) that in every difficult, challenging situation, one must choose for the self or, sacrifice the self for another. One of the chief ingredients of Jewish survival is to know this and in each instance to choose wisely.” He concluded, “TBH has often chosen wisely.” And so we must continue to choose wisely.<sup>6</sup>

So now for our next 70 that is exactly what we must do! Know our congregants, identify exactly what does the modern Jew want, and choose wisely as we live our mission.

We know from numerous studies that “Jews today ask different questions of themselves and of their community. Our grandparents would have asked: Is it good or the Jews? And some of us might inquire: is it good for our society? But many (in this millennial age) operate out of ‘sovereign self’ frame of reference will ask: Is it good for me?”<sup>7</sup>

And this means that we as a synagogue are getting asked different questions, it used to be, “When can I have a bar mitzvah?” Now it’s “Should we have a bar mitzvah?” “Should we be at a Temple?” It used to be more like “when” can I, and now they are probing .... prove to me!, “Why?” “Should we?”

So the answer is: yes individuals need synagogues. We know that Jews need one another for community, continuity, connection, and collaboration.<sup>8</sup> Jews and those who identify with us need one another. Thus, we need congregations in order to perform the primary religious acts that really cannot be performed alone. The acts that allow us to grow as Jews.<sup>9</sup> And as Rabbi Noa Kushner identifies three primary ancient Jewish acts: communal prayer, holy study, and good deeds or Torah, avodah and gemilut hasadim. She notes, “This is not a capricious categorization. Prayer (avodah) is emotional: song, candles, dance, meditation, and silence a matter of the heart. Study

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Jim Kaufman email to me September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *Ten Plus Five: The Ten Questions the Jewish community Must Ask and the Five Building Blocks Essential for the Jewish Future.* e [Jewish Philanthropy](#), Steven Windmueller

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *The Tent Peg Business, Revisited.* Lawrence Kushner and Noa Kushner, 2015.

(Torah) is intellectual reading, questioning, discussion, and rigorous logic and argument a matter of the head. And good deeds (g'milut hasadim) are public acts: helping, repairing, matching, fighting, and doing – matters of the hand. Only rare individuals are able to do all three with equal fervor and skill. And so our membership in a congregation and association with a broad spectrum of Jews will compensate for our personal deficiencies.”<sup>10</sup> We need community to live primary Jewish acts.

Bottom line, we as a synagogue can work within our mission that has held us so well these last 70 years, but the synagogue will need to refocus a bit to meet the need of the individual, to reach each person through transformative moments within the community setting. The synagogue can still be home for Jew, non-Jew, for our Modern multi identified families.

One thing that Nina did so well was finding her personal paradise in her home with her family. One thing that TBH has done so well is be a community, a home for our families focused on our paradigm of study, prayer, and social action. A home where one can find meaning, fulfillment, joy, even paradise.

A short story: There once was a man who had given up on his life. He found no joy in his work, his family, or his community. And so he prayed to God to let him leave this world. “Show me the way to Paradise!” he implored.

God asked him, “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

The man replied, “I am sure with all my heart.”

“Very well,” replied God, who showed him the way to Paradise.

As it turned out, Paradise wasn’t far away – just a few days’ journey from his village. So late one afternoon he set out on his way. He walked until nightfall and then decided to rest beneath a leafy tree. Just before he fell asleep, it occurred to him that in the morning he might become confused and forget which was the way to Paradise and which was the way back to the village. So he left his shoes by the roadside, with the tips pointing toward Paradise so that in the morning all he’d have to do was jump into his shoes and continues on his way.

But sometimes unexpected things happen. Shoes get turned around. Was it an imp? Was it an angel? Was it just a squirrel? Who knows? But somehow the man’s shoes got turned around. In the morning he rose feeling rested from his sleep, ate from the fruit of the tree, and prepared to set off on his journey. He went to the roadway, stepped into his shoes, and began walking – unaware that he was in fact returning home.

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<sup>10</sup> ibid

By noon he could see a village on the next hillside, and his heart leapt. "I've arrived in Paradise!" he thought. He ran down into the valley and up the hill, not stopping until he had arrived at the gates of the village.

"What a beautiful place in Paradise!" he thought. My village was always so crowded, so noisy. This is different, so filled with life and joy!" He sat down on a bench in the square and witnessed the life of the village. He heard the songs the children sang at school and the sounds of the adults at work. He felt the vitality, the energy, and the love that filled the village. He sat in the square all day. In the evening he heard the joyful sounds of families reunited at home and smelled the meals that were being enjoyed by each family. And he began to feel hungry.

He thought, "Since Paradise looks so much like my village, I wonder if there is a street in Paradise like my street." And just where he thought it might be, there it was! Just as he was wondering at this marvelous coincidence, a woman came to the door – a woman who bore a striking resemblance to his wife. The woman called his name and asked him to come in for dinner.

His heart leapt again. "They know me in Paradise! There is a place set for me here in Paradise!" (We know you)

"I don't know what's in Paradise," the woman responded, "but your soup is getting cold. Come inside!"

He entered the house. this house in Paradise was nothing like his house in the village. That house was always crowded, cluttered, filled with commotion. This place was cozy and homey and filled with life. He sat at the table and ate the best meal he'd ever had. He complimented the woman on her heavenly soup. Afterward he went up to his bedroom and entered the deepest, most restful sleep he'd ever known.

In the morning the woman who looked like his wife handed him his tools and sent him to work. At first the man was incredulous. Who ever heard of working in Paradise? But then it occurred to him that even in Paradise there were tasks to be done. And he found that this work was different from the work he'd done before. Not dull or tedious, it filled him with a sense of purpose. And that night he returned to the same warm and loving home, the same kind woman, and more of her wonderful soup.

Do you know that in all the years that followed, no one could convince the man that he hadn't made it to Paradise! Every one of his days from then on was filled with more wonder, more purpose, more joy, and more life than the day before.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Transcribed from Capturing the Moon: Classic and Modern Jewish Tales, by Rabbi Edward Feinstein.

We know you here, and while there is work to be done. It is holy work. It is work for our individual spiritual selves and work to establish the next 70 years, the next lifetime of TBH ensuring it for good.

Temple Beth Hillel has been our East Valley paradise for 70 years; I welcome you today on this day to check the direction of your shoes. Just as the gates are open for us these next ten days, know that the doors of TBH are open to you, to your family, to your friends every day of 5777. Paradise is right here. I encourage you to make certain your shoes are pointed in the direction of TBH, and come home.

Let us continue with what the rabbis knew was true back in the days of our Prophets and the holy Temple... prayer should be engaging and fun, lifting the spirit and bringing in the entire person...so we prayed with joy, with timbrels, flutes and drums... psalm 150 page 135.