

Every year, a few hundred of the toughest adventurers on earth attempt to climb Mt. Everest. At the top of the world's tallest mountain you are so high up you can actually see the curvature of the earth. The air is thin and the ascent is not only grueling, but dangerous. While some 3000 people have made it to Mt. Everest's summit, about 200 have died trying. The slopes are littered with corpses. It is too difficult to bring the bodies back.

On the morning of May 25, 2006 Lincoln Hall, one of Australia's best-known mountaineers, reached Mt. Everest's summit. Back at the base camp his team celebrated. On the way down, however, at 28,000 feet he got stuck. Struck by altitude sickness, he became irrational, exhausted and began to hallucinate. For nine hours the Sherpa guides stood by him, trying to talk him down the mountain. He slipped into unconsciousness. At 7:20 p.m. they poked him in the eye to see if he responded. When he did not, they declared him dead and took his backpack, extra oxygen, food and water, and left him. The temperature was 15 below zero.

Incredibly, Lincoln Hall survived the night. The next morning, Dan Mazur, an American guide and his two clients, found him. Two other climbers came by making their push for the top. They looked, and then walked on. "I don't speak English," one mumbled, and instead of helping, kept on climbing. Mazur and his clients, however, chose to stay. They had spent years dreaming of the climb and \$20,000 to reach the top of Mt. Everest, but they could not leave. They stayed ... and kept Hall alive.

Asked about how people could have walked by him, Hall reflected recently that in order to get to the top some people are willing to sacrifice everything. But, he said, those who saved him "know that the summit isn't the most important thing."¹

We live in a society and community where accomplishment is revered and success is lauded. We push our kids to do well in school in order that they can get into the finest universities so that they land the top jobs. We expect the best of ourselves and push ourselves to achieve. In such a social environment it should be no surprise, then, that there are some who focus so much on reaching the top of whatever mountain (real or metaphoric) they are climbing that moral bearing is lost along the way.

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13543799/page/5/>

When we focus too much on the ends and forget how we get there, however, something is very seriously amiss. On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the need for living an ethical life in connection to the world at large. This evening, as we begin a day dedicated to reconnecting with God and community, I would like to reflect on what it means to live in a righteous Jewish community. What is a synagogue at its best? And, fulfilling its mission, how can it strengthen our own resolve to be good?

There are all sorts of reasons we belong to a synagogue - to give our kids a Jewish education, to have a seat inside for the High Holy Days (if we get here early enough!), to feel connected to the community, out of a sense of responsibility. But reflecting on Lincoln Hall's amazing story the real reason people may belong to a synagogue is to be reminded that the summit is not the most important thing. Sure, there are synagogues where being the biggest or best is most important, and some where clergy and laity are locked in power struggles. Sometimes in *shuls* there is pressure to show preference to those who pay the most or who complain the loudest. But when a community gives in to such demands, forgetting that caring for people is what really matters, the communal sense of right and wrong has been lost. Frankly, I don't want to be involved in such a synagogue - and you should not settle for such a synagogue either. We deserve better.

What, then, ought to be a synagogue's *raison d'être* (reason for being)? First, it should help you and me answer the question "Why am I here?", second, it ought to give us a sense of purpose or direction and finally, for a synagogue to matter it must connect us to something beyond ourselves. While no community is without its flaws, our dream for ourselves should be to fulfill these three missions - meaning, purpose and connection.

Meaning

What would you say is the most important book in Jewish life? My guess is that most of you would answer that it is the Torah. Maybe, but the book more people actually open and use on a regular basis is the סדור *siddur*, the prayer book. In the next few months we will begin using a new סדור. This will be the first significant

revision of prayer for the Reform movement in a generation, and it will look different than any prayer book ever published before. Instead of having prayer after prayer, this book will have a single prayer on two facing pages. The Hebrew will be transliterated to encourage greater participation. There will be several English alternative readings and commentary on almost every page.

It may be disconcerting to get used to this new סדור, but we will offer a number of sessions offered throughout the year to help ease the transition. Do we really need a new סדור? Was there something wrong with the old one? While the previous prayer book was adequate, a growing number of people felt we could do better. The editors asked: Can we develop a סדור that might help us pray with greater intention? In our worship, as in all aspects of synagogue life, should this not always be the goal? A synagogue that matters ought to help us answer the questions of meaning in our lives: "Why I am here? Can I be content? Does my life mean something?"

Ours is an age of boundless prosperity. We possess more material goods than we know what to do with and live longer lives than any generation before ours. We have opportunities beyond the wildest dreams of our ancestors. We vacation in distant lands, taking for granted the ability to travel across the globe - journeys that were perilous little more than a century or two ago.

Yet so many of us are broken, feel their lives are aimless or are restless. One in three doctors' visits by a woman in America is for an anti-depressant, and the rate of depression in men is pushing 40 percent. More people are living alone in America than ever before are living alone. Our families are more scattered than in any time in the past, and phone calls, IMing and emails are a pale substitute for living closer. We have so much, yet have never felt so uncertain about what it all means.

It is no wonder that people turn to so many alternatives to find meaning in life - Yoga, exercise, therapy, *Kabbalah*. The search is often an attempt to find easy answers. The synagogue reminds us, however, that what may be most true about our lives is that we humans are ever searching, forever seeking. Our yearnings are real - and in this place we embrace them.

Rabbi Harold Shulweis was once in the hospital and was visited by the hospital's rabbi. Just before *Shabbes* he lit candles for him. A few minutes after he left a Buddhist monk came by. After they chatted, the monk asked, "Well, do you want me to blow out the candles?" Rabbi Shulweis explained that according to our tradition we do not blow out the candles. To which the monk replied, "That's the difference between Buddhism and Judaism. In Buddhism *nirvana* means to 'blow out.'"

We, however, do not believe in extinguishing. We don't seek to rid ourselves of what is within us, but to use that emotional energy to create something better. Instead of sublimating desire, then, we accept that it is our yearnings that make us human. The stories that serve as the foundation of our faith are of a world created good, but incomplete. Adam and Eve, and all their descendents, must work to achieve their desires. Just as pain will accompany Eve's births, so we teach here that life is a mixture of accomplishment and loss.

Some come to the synagogue hoping to run from the cares and woes of everyday life. But if that were the case, if we really wanted to create a refuge from life's pain, why speak of those who are broken in body and soul in our prayers for healing? Far from extinguishing pain, the Mourner's קדיש *Kaddish* allows for the anguished expressions of the broken heart. We Jews accept that pain and loss, uncertainty and yearning are part of what it means to be human. A *midrash* on *Kohelet* says, "no one leaves this world with half of his or her wishes fulfilled."²

With all this, however, we do believe that we can be content. Perhaps no Psalm is more familiar to us than Psalm 23: "God, you are my Shepherd, I shall not want." But the Hebrew does not really say "I shall not want." לא אחסר actually means "I will lack nothing." The Psalmist is not saying that faith will eliminate our wants. The aim, rather, is to realize that whatever things we have, they will never be enough. No matter how big our bank account, how large our home, however many children we have or how extensive our stock portfolio, it will never be enough without learning that contentment can never come from what we possess.

² Kohelet Rabbah 1:13

A synagogue that matters, then, reminds us that we are defined not by what we have, but by what we do with our lives. And that leads us to the next two key factors of a worthy community - giving people a sense of purpose and a feeling of connection.

Purpose

Many of my friends in High School were passionate Christians. Some literally cried because I was not “saved” and were afraid that I would be damned in hell because I had not come to Jesus. Though I felt Jewish, I really could not explain why I felt what I did. It is so much easier to feel Jewish living on the North Shore of Long Island, yet even here I wonder if our kids could really explain why they are Jewish. Could you? If your child or grandchild came home from college and said, “You know, I’m thinking about becoming Buddhist or Christian or Wicca”, could you give them reasons to remain a Jew? What would you tell them is the purpose of being a Jewish? And how does a synagogue help answer it?

The Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning makes clear the reason we are here. God says, “You should be holy, for I *Adonai* am holy.” Can we be like God? Is it possible? Our rabbis taught that indeed we can. They said that just as God made clothes for Adam and Eve, so we can clothe the naked. God visited the sick. When? After Abraham was circumcised. So must we, then, visit those who are ill, who are old and forgotten and those who are home bound. God comforted Isaac after his father’s death; so we should comfort those who are in mourning.³

A synagogue at its best, then, reminds us that we are here to serve not only our own needs, but to be generous with others. At times, our ego gets in the way of being so selfless. Most of you know about the letter that went out this summer to remind congregants not only of their financial obligation to our congregation, but of Judaism’s understanding that those who can give the most ought to do so. The vast majority responded more than generously, but someone told me that when some friends of hers read the letter and heard that some in our community were not paying their fair share, they were incensed. “Do you mean to tell me that some people have not been honest?” So far, the person relating the story said, she was heartened by

³ Sotah 14b

the response. But then came the shock. “Well,” one person said, “if others aren’t giving, I sure won’t be either. Next year I’m giving less!” My friend was shocked. Instead of the reminder of acting fairly and leading these people to be generous, the miserliness of others became the benchmark for their behavior.

Pirke Avot (5:13) talks about this selfishness as not only pervasive, but often normal. It says that there are four types of human character. One says, “What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours.” This is the average person. A second says, “What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine.” This is a foolish person. A third says, “What is yours is mine and what is mine is mine.” This is one who is wicked. And the one who says, “what is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours”? This is a righteous person.

All this make sense, except that there is one small addition that seems to set the whole passage on its head. “What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours ... some claim this was the sin of Sodom.” The “sin of Sodom”!? You see, in Jewish understanding the sin of Sodom is not related to sexual immorality, but to hard-heartedness. The people of Sodom thought only of themselves. Closed to strangers, they did not even reach out to their fellow citizens. They lived a philosophy of “Each person for him or herself”, of “work hard and reap whatever rewards come your way.” “What’s mine is mine” was the character of their society - focused on the individual, unconcerned with others, closed to the needs and pain of anyone else. Sodom was a place without meaning because people only cared about themselves.

The converse is no less true - a place that teaches a sense of purpose is a place where generosity and caring rule. That is the synagogue we should aim to be - a place that ennobles our vision and gives us a direction. Why are we here? The answer is quite simple. We are here to love - to comfort and clothe, to be tolerant in judgment, giving with our time. The synagogue strengthens our resolve to be so generous - and helps us see that the more we give, the more we find a life of purpose.

Connection

It is always wonderful to see so many of you here on Yom Kippur. Sometimes I just feel like saying “thank you” over and over again for the commitment you make to be

involved here - and that you make the effort to come. One of the struggles we have during the Days of Awe, to be honest, is letting you get a sense of the variety of things we do during the year here, but not making it too unfamiliar for those who don't come so often. It's a fine balance and not always easily maintained.

It reminds me of the congregant who came to the cantor after services one Yom Kippur. The person was very nice, but he was clearly unhappy. "Cantor, I know that you're trying to preserve tradition by keeping everything the same, but couldn't you spice things up once in a while?" The cantor responded, "Our services are incredibly varied! Last year alone we had a Sephardi-style service, a new-age jazz Shabbat, and an all-rap service led by our senior youth group!" The congregant said, "What are you talking about? Every time I come to *shul*, it's always the same thing: *Kol Nidrei, Kol Nidrei, Kol Nidrei!*"

Professor Steven M. Cohen, a research professor at Hebrew Union College, completed a major survey of American Jews this past year.⁴ He found out some interesting things. Among his findings is that outside of Orthodoxy, most American Jews under 40 are institutionally unaffiliated. While the affiliation rate of those with children remains high, most single and unmarried Jews do not connect with a synagogue. Yet younger Jews do embrace being Jewish. They create communities in different ways, however, seeking alternative ways to connect. Thus, they attend "synagogues without walls", listen to Mattisayhu's Chasidic reggae rap on their iPods, seek out one another on JDate, find Jon Stewart's and Borat's edgy, openly Jewish, humor cool and clamor for a place on a free Jewish Birthright trip to Israel.

What is it that these alternative expressions of Judaism have in common? First, they accept people "where they are", providing multiple means of access. Second, these are not seen as the same old "boring" ways of being Jewish. They are hip and fun - focusing less on obligation and more on joy. Third, these options offer fluid boundaries, accepting all who want to come. There is much we can learn from Cohen's findings.

First, we should expect the synagogue to be a place that is engaged in a radical sense of welcome. If you and I get a warmer greeting at Wal-Mart than in our

⁴ See <http://www.forward.com/articles/continuity-beyond-communal-walls/>

synagogue, something is wrong. Do we - each of us - make the effort to simply say “hello” to those next to us? More than this, is there a way to institutionalize caring - finding a way to help people connect with one another not only a congregational dinners or picnics, but in their homes. If we are to thrive as a synagogue, we have to address how we can get to know each other better. I am proud to be involved with a synagogue that sees an obligation to open itself to all Jews and allows all to come even when it means we are filled to overflowing during these Days of Awe. We want you who are not members to join us - for there is so much we can gain from and give to you - but even if you don't, we still hope you always feel welcome. And as much as we seek to welcome new members, so must we use every effort to have veteran members feel needed.

Second, vibrant Jewish communities should not dwell overly much on Jewish suffering (what might be called “Oy Vey Judaism”). Of course, we need to teach about anti-Semitism and be wary of anti-Israel venom on the far Left, in academia and on the extreme Right. But a Judaism that grabs people today has to be one that is joyous. Our synagogues should be alive with the sounds of music that stirs the soul, and rouses us to our feet. I am thrilled that our young teens have been coming in greater numbers to our regular Shabbat worship. But we have to find ways to tap into their presence, perhaps offering programs for them concurrent with services or while the adults have *Oneg Shabbat*.

Finally, the synagogue I want to be a part of is inclusive and diverse. We should be proud that we have one of the few congregations in the greater New York area that has shown continuous growth, with one of the largest Religious Schools in the area. But we must make special efforts to make those without children or people whose children are grown feel that this is a place that meets their needs, too. The synagogue I dream of allows singles or those divorced to feel part of the community and not like they are outsiders. The community I hope we aspire to expresses gratitude and openness to non-Jewish spouses who seek a place amongst us. The congregation I hope we are allows those who are gay or lesbian to feel they have found here a loving, accepting place. While we should never be embarrassed to say

that money is needed to allow us to reach our goals, we should be open about the fact that no one who cannot pay has ever been turned away.

Rabbi Janet Marder correctly observes that “Of course, we don't need a synagogue to find community. Each of us can put together our own network of family and friends who care for us in difficult times, celebrate the good times, share our values, engage us in meaningful talk and join with us in significant action. But only the synagogue unites in one place the ancient, powerful, life-affirming teachings of Jewish tradition, the spiritual discipline of Jewish practice, and the emotional support of Jewish community.”

The synagogue says to us as Jews that life is more than reaching the summit. It is how we make the journey. The synagogue reminds us that the things we own do not give us meaning, no more than life's struggles rob of us of being able to appreciate our blessings. The synagogue teaches us that we are here for a reason - to be, like God, messengers of love. And the synagogue connects us to a community that values us as we are. As we struggle to climb whatever summits lie ahead, may we find in this place the spiritual nourishment to seek the heights, but also know that it is the journey together that makes our lives good.