

A couple of years ago our family went camping out in California. One of the places we visited was Yosemite National Park. While there we took a tour through the Mariposa Grove, a magnificent setting of California Sequoias. Words cannot capture the awesomeness of these trees. One tree was 2700 years old, and one of its lower branches was six feet across. We could not be but humbled as we stood next to a tree trunk that is almost as wide as this *bima*. The redwoods have an amazing capacity for regeneration. Though the inside of the tree may burn out completely, as long as the layer under the trunk stays alive, nutrients can still flow. Over centuries Sequoias can repair themselves, healing scars left by forest fires. Yet as grand as these trees are - some stretching upwards hundreds of feet - their roots are incredibly shallow, reaching into the soil less than the height of an average person. How can such huge trees stand erect? The answer lays in the fact that Sequoia roots intermingle with each other. The more trees in a grove, the stronger they all are. A Sequoia by itself is more susceptible to damage, even death, because its roots are not connected with any other. Yet together, their roots entwined, they live longer than almost any other living thing.

Seeing those California redwoods, I could not help but think of them as a perfect metaphor for how we ought to relate to each other. In the Torah portion we read Yom Kippur afternoon God says, “You should be holy (וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹת, וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹת) for I am holy (קְדוֹת).” The “you” God speaks to, however, is not the singular “you”, each of us in isolation. Rather, the Hebrew is addressed to the collective, the “you” that is all of us. We are holy, therefore, only in relation to another.

On Rosh Hashanah I focused on what our name *b’nai Yisrael* implies about what we believe. I also tried to convey how that belief should manifest itself in a willingness to behave in ways that make this world better. Tonight, what does belonging to this People Israel mean for us? And how might our synagogue, at its best, reflect the call to be holy individuals united in a sacred community?

When I first started out as a rabbi in Chicago, I remember seeing a synagogue in an older Jewish neighborhood with two letters - “K.K.” - in front of its name. What I did not know then, but later found out, is that those letters stood for the Hebrew words

παυσε πκηπε - “holy congregation.” That preface to the name of any synagogue is, in fact, a fairly common practice. What it teaches is that the synagogue is, first and foremost, supposed to be a place of sanctity and community.

What defines a holy place? The tendency, I suspect, is to think that such a place is one cloistered from the world. The English term for where we worship - calling this place a “sanctuary” - fosters this idea of separateness, for this term defines a religious setting as a place of refuge, of retreat from the world.

Judaism, in contrast, defines sanctity in the context of being connected. This is not to deny the importance of the inner spiritual life, but our traditions teach that the most sacred way of living is with others.

At Rosh Hashanah I mentioned that the only architectural requirement for a *shul* is that it be built with windows. By definition a synagogue must be open to the world. It is not the only thing our faith teaches ought to be open. The dominant motif during Yom Kippur’s concluding service, called *Neilah* (which literally means “locked” or “closed”) is that we turn towards God before the gates are closed. One poem near the end of this service, however, turns this theme on itself - and alphabetically exhorts God to be open to our supplications.

Open for us the gates of acceptance,
The gates of blessing,
The gates of compassion.
Open for us the gates of duty,
And empathy,
The gates of forgiveness,
The gates of giving.

In essence, then, Yom Kippur asks us to not close ourselves off, but to be (like the place in which we pray) open to others.

When I first came here I was struck by the beauty of this building. But even before I came here I knew that this is not The Community Synagogue. Our *shul* is not the bricks and steel around us. This congregation is us. And only our openness as individuals can ensure that we will be a παυσε πκηπε. In what ways are we exhorted to be open? First, Yom Kippur asks us to have open hearts; second, to have open minds and, finally, to have open hands.

Open Heart

There were only a few dozen families in the temple I grew up in. The building was simple, the rabbis well-meaning but not very charismatic, the amenities few. The one thing about growing up in a small, *heimishe* place, however, was that every person was needed and each person was welcomed with an open heart. Even we kids knew that we mattered. Though I have lived in many places since then, I have not forgotten the wonderful feeling of being in a congregation where I felt people cared for me.

When the Temple stood in ancient Jerusalem, there was a court set aside for women, as well as men, and an area where those who were not Jewish could also come. Should we not emulate this inclusive model?

A truly open synagogue must, to begin, welcome those of every age. While it is understandable that we have programs that will appeal to different age groups, we will be a *παυσε πκηπε* only when we open our hearts to those of different generations. In the search committees I met here last year, I was moved how those of diverse ages worked together in common purpose. What I found surprising was that many of those who sat around that table did not know one another previously.

We must foster ways that will help us get to know one another better. Do you like the view out the windows here? Me, too. But imagine the view looking from the outside in if people in here opened their hearts more to those who were not at their stage of life. Younger families - I urge you to reach out to older members, to seek their wisdom and respect their long-time commitment. To those with “history” in this place - open yourself to the voices of children; encourage younger families to be as comfortable as you were in bringing their families here to worship, appreciating the fact that children will bring more energy and less decorum.

An open, inclusive congregation must also be a place where those of differing physical abilities can come with comfort. We must help our fellow Jews who can not see or hear or walk feel at home. We must open our hearts to those of different needs - to children with autism and adults with Downs Syndrome. Our building must be accessible to those in wheelchairs and older members whose hips have grown fragile.

An open and welcoming synagogue does more, however, than embrace those with differing physical abilities. One of the strengths of Reform Judaism is its openness to the diversity of those who are part of this People of Israel. A sacred community is one that embraces and eagerly reaches out to those who are divorced, singles and people who are gay or lesbian. We must do more to encourage those without a faith community to consider Judaism, and not be afraid to say to those who are not Jewish that we want you to be part of us.

Finally, this congregation can claim to be a παυσε ακηπε only if it also faces the reality that a growing number of Jews are marrying those who are not Jewish. We must, on the one hand, warmly welcome those intermarried families who are willing to throw in their lot (and the fate of their children) with our People. On the other hand, we must not shirk our responsibility to define a clearly stated policy that recognizes that our synagogue is a Jewish institution, and there are acts only Jews can perform in helping us fulfill our mission.

Open Mind

The comedian Will Rogers once said, “Even if you are on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.” He was right. Complacency is the enemy of vitality. One of the key ways of maintaining an open mind is to ever be willing to learn. For a Jewish community to claim authenticity and legitimacy to speak on behalf of Judaism learning is sine qua non. A synagogue can survive without Jews who are learned, but a παυσε ακηπε can only spring from those who are willing to continue to study.

Our Adult and Family Education program, outlined in this brochure (available from one of our ushers and being sent to all members in the mail in the next week), covers a wide range of interests. There are “hands on” sessions for those interested in basic Jewish knowledge and in-depth lectures. Classes include Jewish parenting, How to Be a Mentsch and Talmud. There will be weekday learning, sessions prior to Shabbat services, as well as Sunday morning offerings. Please take the time to look over the wide range of offerings in this catalog. Open yourself to the life-enriching pursuit of our heritage.

What does an open-minded learning environment foster? Go to any page of the Talmud and you will find the answer, for it is filled with debate and dialectic. A synagogue must be a forum for similar open-minded deliberation about key issues of the day. My vision of a sacred congregation is one where rabbis and congregants are free to speak their mind, engaged in respectful (even if sometimes heated) dialogue. We must be open to conversations about anti-Semitism and intermarriage, the nature of prayer and whether the State of Israel is a Jewish State or a State for Jews. At our best, the people who lecture here, the seminars we sponsor and the trips we encourage ought to foster wide ranging perspectives and discussion.

In one additional, critical way, I ask for you to be open minded. Our congregation is in the midst of a major effort to expand our building and establish a fund to maintain the physical plant already here. As new as I am, some have already asked me whether I think it is necessary for us to be doing this. The question, it seems to me, is not what I think, but why so many already think the answer to this is “yes.”

This congregation is on the right track, but we cannot just stay where we are, assuming the needs of the future will be the same. Our religious school is bursting at the seams, so much so that on Sunday mornings - the obvious time we ought to be having Brotherhood and Sisterhood events or adult study sessions, there is simply no room in which such programs can be held. Our Early Childhood Center - a true “jewel of the *shul*” - is restricted by the size and quality of the space it occupies.

In the congregation I served over the past decade and a half, nearly every single B’nai Mitzvah *kiddush* lunch and the vast majority of weddings were held in the synagogue. Why should we not make it easier and more enticing for us to want to have *simchas* in this place? An improved facility and greater flexibility of space can make it easier for families and their guests, allowing them to stay in one spot to celebrate. More than that, having multiple rooms will mean we can be more inclusive, allowing us to welcome more than one event at a particular time.

A critical component of the *B’Yachad* Campaign is the establishment of an endowment. I can think of no more open-minded and forward thinking act that a community can do than this, for it ensures the continuing vitality and stability of our religious home.

It would be *chutzpadik* for me, after being here only a few months, to ask you to give to *B'yachad*. But I do hope that you will keep an open mind to the idea - and allow those who have been working on this for years, fellow congregants who have concluded that this is the time to act - to speak to you about this project. Allow your roots to weave with others, and open yourself to help create something of which we can all be proud.

Open Hand

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells how he was “sitting on a beach one summer day, watching two children playing in the sand. They were hard at work, building a sand castle, with gates and towers and moats. Just when they had nearly finished their project, a wave came along and knocked it down. I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated by what had happened to all their hard work. But they surprised me. Instead, they ran up the shore, laughing and holding hands, and sat down to build another castle.

They taught me an important lesson. All the things in our lives, all the complicated structures we spend so much time and energy building, are built on sand. Only our relationships to people endure. Sooner or later the wave will come along and knock down what we have worked so hard to build up. When this happens, only the person who has somebody's hand to hold will be able to laugh.”

A sacred community of Jews cannot, it seems to me, ever be fully righteous if it does not extend a hand to other Jews. At Rosh Hashanah I spoke about why we are, as Jews, obliged to do what we can for all peoples. Our traditions urge us to feel the same affinity for other brother and sister Jews. “All Jews are responsible for one another,” our Sages teach. If we forget that, we diminish ourselves and place at risk anything we do that we hope might last.

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, our rabbis said, because of “gratuitous hatred.” Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Israel’s first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, taught that the only way to rebuild Israel is to respond with “gratuitous love.” One particularly poignant midrash quotes God as seeking the same thing from us. “All I ask of you is

that you love one another, that you honor one another, and that you respect one another.” (Tanna d’Bei Eliyahu 28)

In ancient days twelve tribes joined in one nation. We Jews have always found a way to accept diversity within unity. Why are some so threatened by the same thing in our time? What this means, in short, is that we need to reach out openly to our fellow Jews. Chabad is not a challenge to us. Nor is our sister Reform congregation down the street. Will we always be able to work together? Of course not. There will be issues about which will disagree - sometimes strongly. But if we are accorded the same respect from other Jewish groups that we intend to give to them, then there is much that we can do for the good of our People - fostering study, supporting Israel, helping fellow Jews in need and combating those who truly are our enemies.

In one more way are we asked to open our hand, and Torah’s command is explicit and direct: Ω♣σ□"η□/τ φ♥T□πfT ♥φ↔,□π “open, you should open your hand to the needy.” (Deuteronomy 15:8) This exhortation to open our hands is not understood simply as a responsibility to provide emotional support. The open hand Torah speaks of is the hand prepared to give financially.

In Judaism there is no such thing as “charity.” We speak of giving as an act of *מעשה*, which comes from the Hebrew *עשה* meaning “righteousness” or “justice.” Charity is given because it makes the giver feel good. While that is nice, our traditions are more concerned with the recipient receiving good. We give because it is the right thing to do.

An open Jewish hand, then, is one that gives. Yes, to help the world, but also to benefit the Jewish community. If you have been blessed, share that bounty. Am I asking you to give here? Why not?! But not only here. Open your hand and give to Israel - through Israel Bonds, Hadassah or the New Israel Fund. Give to the United Jewish Appeal, the most wide-ranging way of helping the larger Jewish world. Open your hand to the needs of our Reform movement - to our rabbinic and cantorial school and to our camps. A synagogue with a wall of windows should not be afraid that these places are competition to us. Far from it. In giving to others we will, in the long run, only benefit ourselves.

A woman once had a dream of a castle filled with oil lamps. Some were dim, others burned brightly. The woman asked the castle guards, "What is this place?" She was told, "Each lamp is a soul of a different person. Those ablaze with light are people full of life. The lammps that are flickering are people who are near death."

The woman searched the house for her candle, and trembled when she found it spluttering in a corner. Panicking, she reached for another lamp to take its oil and pour it into hers so it would burn brighter. But a hand stopped her. "That is not how it works," the keeper explained, "Your flame does not grow when you take from someone else. Those whose lamps burn brightest are those who give to help others burn stronger, too."

Yom Kippur reminds us that who you and I are as individuals determines not only our own fate, but that of the community of which we are a part. Α παυσε πεκηπε, then, is simply you and me writ large. When we act in sacred ways, this place will be a reflection of that. If we let pettiness, competition and ego intrude on how we act towards each other, however, this synagogue will fail to live up to its ideals. In essence, then, there is no such thing as "The Community Synagogue." This place is us. How we open our heart, our mind and our hand will determine, then, not only our own fate, but that of the sacred community to which we bind our lives.

May we ever be worthy of the responsibility.