

Rosh HaShanah 1
The Value of Community/The Value of Belonging

Meyer and Millie are on vacation in Hawaii. They have saved for years to be able to make the trip, but every day of the vacation they are shocked at just how much each excursion is costing them: fifty dollars for dinner; fifty dollars for a bus tour; another fifty dollars for a cruise around the bay. A few days into the trip, Meyer stops the car in front of a sign that reads 'Helicopter rides \$50.' He tries to sell it to Millie: It's the chance of a lifetime. But she won't hear of it: "Fifty dollars is fifty dollars!" she says. The helicopter pilot happens to overhear them bickering. "Folks," he says, "I don't usually do this, but if you ride along in the copter with me for a half hour without making a sound, I'll let you take the tour for free." That's a deal that Meyer and Millie are willing to take. The pilot takes them up over the islands, over the pineapple plantations, over the ocean, sweeping up and down the coastlines, doing daredevil stunts that he is sure will elicit a few shrieks from the back, but Meyer and Millie don't make a sound. When they are just about to land, the pilot says over his shoulder, "Well, I wouldn't have believed it, but you folks earned yourselves a free ride today." "I couldn't believe it myself," Millie says, "especially after Meyer fell out, but fifty dollars is fifty dollars!" And yes, sometimes it is Millie who falls out, so please don't ask me later.

How much would you pay for an utterly transcendent moment? What is the dollar value associated with feeling part of a sacred history? Last week, as part of an ongoing series of 'Meet and Greet' gatherings, I had a discussion with a group of our members who were hungry to hear a vision of where we are going and how we will get there. It was an open and sometimes challenging conversation, and while I hope that I represented myself and the shul well, setting out my hope for a year of learning, of relationship building, of talking together about who we are

and who we want to be, there was one question that I didn't give a full enough answer to:

“Rabbi,” one participant asked, “What do you want from us?” I asked for support for my efforts, to be there for me when I tried to build up the community. But that answer was insufficient, and I want to expand on it today. Like the story of the helicopter tourists, the question I was asked is what your role is as my partner in this sacred endeavor. And so like all good teachers, I want to answer with questions. How much are you willing to do in order to create meaning for yourself, for your family, and for hundreds of other families in East Brunswick? What is it worth to you to take part in a conversation with God and history that began thousands of years ago and remains as vital today as it was then? What is the price tag for passing on a set of beliefs and rituals thousands of years old and, in passing them on, helping to shape those beliefs and rituals in sometimes new and innovative ways for those to whom we bequeath them? What I want from you is to partner with me in both preserving our tradition and renewing it for those who are here and for the many more who could be here if we just gave them a reason to be. What I want from you is to engage in the process of teshuvah, of self reflection and personal transformation that can bring us together, heal us, and inspire others to join us. **What I want from you is to understand, and to clearly communicate to others, the value of belonging.**

I sometimes hear Jews express the idea that shuls are not for them because they don't believe in organized religion. That sentiment puzzles me. If you told me that you a lover of classical music, but that you don't believe in orchestras; that you are an aficionado of theater, but that sitting through plays is a bore; that you love art but have never understood why every painting is in the form of a square, I would have the same reaction. Judaism, religion, is, like those others, one of the fine arts. Like music, theater, painting or literature, religion's goal is

transcendence. I might even say that the other arts are secular attempts at capturing the kind of transcendent experience that religion first postulated and at which it excels. But, also like the other arts, we cannot expect to reap its reward unless we embrace its forms and norms, or at least accept the idea that Judaism has forms and norms, whose function is to concretize the values upon which Judaism is built. We can no more experience the inspiration, the joy, the intellectual stimulation, and the comfort of our tradition without organized Judaism - which is to say the rules, calendar and traditions a synagogue stands for and teaches - than we can enjoy the World Series without accepting the rules, calendar and traditions which makes baseball what it is.

For the last two thousand years, the synagogue has been at the center of Jewish life. The names by which it has been known tell the story of its functions: Beit Tefillah, a house of prayer; beit midrash, a house of study; beit kenesset, a place of assembly. The synagogue is where Jews have reached out to God with prayers of hope and of thanksgiving, where they have gathered to hear God's voice emerge from sacred texts, and where they have come together to debate, to celebrate and to mourn. The synagogue is where we share the most important moments in our lives, and it represents and advances our shared values. By way of analogy, every one in this room who owns their home pays property taxes that fund public education. Those who do not yet have children, who no longer have school-aged children in the house, and even those who send their kids to private schools and never make use of public schools all pay those taxes because we share the value and the obligation to our country to educate our citizens. The shul is the same; we support it because we are committed to providing those historical functions of a house of prayer, of study, and of assembly, whether we personally utilize one, two or three of them, or none at all.

The value of belonging is feeling responsible for keeping the synagogue standing, and to ensure Judaism's future, just as Jews have always done.

But even when performing those classical functions, the modern synagogue must do so in ways that today's Jews find compelling. We seek the same things that our ancestors did, but in our own way. Like them, we search for answers to ultimate questions: What is the purpose of my life? What do my efforts add up to? Why am I here? The search for meaning remains, but the methods by which we can seek it or deliver it through the shul are changing. In addition to sermons and classes, mainstays of Jewish education, we now also have the ability to connect to one another electronically: by e-mail, social media and through video and virtual classrooms. The modern synagogue must take advantage of these wonders to reach Jews where they are, and we will do so at EBJC. And we have to meet people where they are. If the synagogue is not yet where we will do so, we need, I need, to go wherever I can to engage them in a relationship with me and then, with their heritage. **The value of belonging is access to a modern conversation about the ancient questions.**

But let's say that ritual and serious learning is not your thing – hard for me to fathom, but possible, I grant you – and that your Judaism finds best expression through social connections. I won't take the time now to list every one of the events and programs that our Sisterhood, Men's Club, and Youth Department provide, but suffice to say that there is something for every age and every interest. And, if there is not, I will lobby for the creation of what you, as our members, want. You may not need a synagogue to find God, but it sure helps to find the Jews. Speaking personally, our family has certainly found EBJC to be a welcoming home; I know that many others will as well. **The value of belonging is in finding community.**

We know that Jews come to synagogues for life cycle events, and that we all have those events. Marriage, birth, bar and bat mitzvah and other celebrations, as well as visiting the sick and burial of the dead are made meaningful with the participation of a rabbi. While we will continue to reach out to unaffiliated Jews to feel the draw of community, there are some boundaries we will have to maintain, or put a premium on, in order to make synagogue membership a prerequisite for continuity of rabbinic relationships. **The value of belonging is in access to the life cycle events at which the rabbi officiates as a representative of the community.**

No one of us can make all these functions possible; no one of us uses all of them. The ultimate value of belonging, its highest purpose, is to create what all can access but which no individual can provide alone. What I want from you is to help me build EBJC into a place where we are meeting people's needs, so that they in return will recognize the need to support the community. Meeting needs has to come first, not last. Help me to find the Jews, to answer their questions, to teach them, to laugh them. Help me to show that Judaism is replete with the resources to find beauty and meaning in every aspect of life. Help me to re-brand EBJC as a full service synagogue whose members respect and care about each other. That's what I want from you.

Rosh Hashanah begins a season of atonement. We are to reflect on what we have done and said in the year past, undo the hurt we have caused and commit ourselves to doing better, to being better, in the year to come. That process is difficult enough without attempting to pursue it three days a year. There is an old joke about the man who constantly prays to God 'Just let me win the lottery. It is the only thing I will ever ask of you, Lord.' This goes on for weeks and

months, and finally a voice from the heavens speaks directly to him, 'Sol, meet me halfway; buy a ticket!' **The value of belonging is in participation, in extending ourselves to find ourselves.**

If you will meet me halfway and show up throughout the year, I promise to do all that I can to make it worth your while. If you are looking for meaning, for connection, for fun, meet me halfway by committing yourself to one new Jewish skill this year; the one I am particularly pushing is the skill of Torah reading. We have moved from a system of employing a paid Torah reader to one in which reading Torah is a communal responsibility. If you do not yet read Hebrew, learn to read Hebrew. If you already know how to read the language, you are but one step away from the honor of standing before God and the community and chanting sacred texts. I call on every one of you to push yourselves to learn Torah reading with me this year.

Each of us is a player in the grand story of the love affair between God and the Jews. It is my duty as rabbi and the shul's mission to make it possible to pursue that relationship through learning Torah, through social interaction, through prayer, through celebration and through support in times of grief. These are our shared values, and they are the value of belonging. I have spent the last thirty years of my life to get to this moment, to be somewhere where my learning and experience will make a difference in the lives of a great many people. I have been honored and blessed by this community to get the chance to do that, but I will not succeed unless each and every one of you helps me in that effort. As we begin this New Year together, I look forward with joy and anticipation of learning every person's name and hearing every person's story, as we begin together a journey of relationship building, of knowledge building, and of skill building.

Shanah tovah tikhateimu; may you be sealed for a good year in the book of life.