

Rabbi Asher Knight

Rosh HaShanah - 5777

Temple Beth El

Emet: Honoring the Past, Understanding the Complex Truths of Today, and Forging our Path Forward.

Years ago, at a visit to the Cairo museum, I found myself staring into the face of Ramses II. Mummified and frozen in time, his cheeks, nose, eyes, and hair were delicately preserved since his death.

Tradition tells us that Ramses enslaved and tried to destroy our people. My family – and a few other tourists - were surprised when I blurted out: “look who’s laughing now, Ramses!” Jews have survived Pharaohs and tyrants just like him, over millennia. Ramses’ civilization – and those of similar oppressors - have faded into the sands of time.

The experience of seeing Ramses’ face made me wonder about the differences between Egypt and Israel? Why did one civilization die off, while the other live on? Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains that the ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death and the afterlife, expressed by mummies and mausoleums and stone monuments. Whereas, the “Israelites, built monuments to life and became a people dedicated to bringing new generations into being and handing to them the heritage of the past.”¹

Israelites stressed family and community and conversations between generations. We gathered to celebrate and mourn. We made time for restoration and connection through prayer and learning. We affirmed the dignity of the poor, the weak, and the neglected. Judaism teaches that God is *love* and the *power* that frees, not the power that enslaves.² While the stone edifices of ancient Egypt still stand, their artifacts lay behind glass in a museum. They are relics of the past, empty and cold and devoid of life.

The Israelite journey from slavery to freedom set a new course. What our ancestors built still exists today and is very much in the present. We, each of us, *are* their descendants and heirs. We, each of us, *are* the living and breathing evidence of their sacred journey. And we come here on this Rosh HaShanah Day, inheritors of our treasured past, each one of us responsible for the promise of tomorrow.

I am honored to take my place on this *bimah*. Grateful to those that have stood here before me: For our Rabbi Emerita, our honored teacher, Rabbi Judy Schindler. And for the line of distinguished clergy going all the way back to Rabbi Philip Frankel. I am also

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Saks, “A Letter in the Scroll” pg. 30-34

² *ibid*

profoundly appreciative to work with passionate lay leaders and an outstanding team of talented, thoughtful and devoted staff - and our brilliant clergy team.

Over the last few months, I have met hundreds of congregants in both large and intimate settings. As we met, I often asked a simple question: what brought you to Temple Beth El? You told me stories about a time when the Jewish community was much smaller. You shared how your lives have unfolded - of celebrations and joy and times of loss and mourning. You told me how you chose to retire here - to be close to family -or relocated for job opportunities or the quality of life. You told me about being attracted to the synagogue because of our commitments to Justice, worship, and learning, in addition to the uniqueness of Shalom Park.

Clearly, this synagogue -and Shalom Park, and the modern world we live in, look quite different from when our ancient ancestors first forged the promise and path of Israel. We are not subjugated by the forces of despotic rulers. We have lived the American Dream: where Jewish prosperity flourished precisely because of the principles of freedom, life, liberty, and opportunity.

But, our modern and free society has different and distinct pitfalls. MIT psychologist, Sherry Turkle, explains the impact of television, the internet, and our smart-phones, saying that “we [now] live in a technological universe in which we are always communicating. She explains that we have sacrificed face-to-face conversation for mere connection. At home, families sit together, texting and reading email. At work, we text during meetings. [We shop on Amazon and check facebook] during classes and when we are on dates.”³

We are, quite literally, alone - together. At home, alone - together. In our neighborhoods, - alone - together. Working longer hours with people at work, alone - together. In the car commuting long distances, alone, together. Facing the problems of our lives, and sadly, all too often, even celebrating joys alone - together. It is a weird paradox. Superficially connected to each other through the pictures we post or the snippets of banter we tweet. We often fail to *relate*, face-to-face with family, friends, neighbors, our civic and religious institutions.

I share a story about this very real disconnect and the effect that it has on our congregation and our community. Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting with a group of Empty Nesters and Baby-boomers. They had all raised their children in this synagogue, attended Shabbat worship in this sanctuary, and are in a similar life-stage. As we began the discussion, we introduced ourselves, sharing our name around the room. I had assumed that they all knew each other. But I was wrong. Many were meeting each other for the first time.

³ See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

Their lack of relationship - the fact that they didn't know each other's names – is actually symptomatic of the much larger and different reality facing Charlotte. For much of our congregation's history, Temple Beth El reinforced relationships that existed beyond our walls. Since our founding, our congregation's members were largely, though not entirely, concentrated in neighborhoods immediately surrounding the synagogue.

But today, Temple Beth El's 3,300 souls live in over 10 zip-codes, spread-out over large geographic areas. Our community lives in Lake Norman, Ft. Mills, Ballantyne, South Park, Meyers Park, Dilworth, Uptown and in places I haven't even seen yet.

Just last week, as I taught our confirmation class, I asked the students to tell me which schools they attend. Our class of 23 students attends twelve different high schools. Even though they have grown up in the same Religious School classes - and are in the same grade - some of the students didn't know each other's names.

This isn't a critique of the congregation or past leadership or the religious school. This is about understanding the competing truths and realities of our members' lives. We are struggling with an alone-together modernity, Compounded by the fact that we live in an area with huge urban and suburban sprawl.

In Hebrew, the word for *truth* is *Emet*. *Emet* is spelled with three Hebrew letters, *Aleph, Mem, and Tav*. Aleph is the first letter of the aleph-bet. Mem is the middle letter. Tav is the last letter. Hidden in the word *Emet - truth* - is the notion that we reveal truth by exploring complexity - the beginning, middle and end. The difficulty of *Emet* is that several truths often exist at once.

What I've learned over the last three months as your Senior Rabbi, is that there is no single truth at Temple Beth El. Rather, there is complexity. Our members simultaneously want: to sustain the congregation, while making Judaism relevant in our homes, through bringing people together to share in the rhythms of Jewish time and life, to learn and laugh, to rest and rejuvenate, to act for Justice, and engaging as proud Jews in our multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious world. And that's a tall order.

And Emet - Even with these desires. Our members are simultaneously being challenged by our modern society. Where we feel enslaved to an American culture that emphasizes ambition, busyness, and superficial digital interactions. We are being pulled by powerful forces of careers and immersive technology and long commutes - and, frankly, trying to do more with less resources. We may not face Pharaohs and tyrants of yore, but we are facing a real threat nonetheless.

And as shapers of our collective future: we need to be cognizant that the *Emet - the truth* of our modern society - is affecting the very desires we have for our community, and our spiritual selves. It's affecting our Jewish journeys and our sense of belonging.

For Judaism to continue living, we must be willing to ask, what kind of living tradition will our generation build for the future? How will we confront, head on, the very real issues we are experiencing? And how will we build it in partnership and relationship with one another?

I don't have all the answers. But, here's what I do know: We will need to listen to one other. Why? Because regardless of the fundamental shifts in our society, we cannot forget that humans are, by our very nature, social creatures. From pre-historic camp-fires to our kitchen tables, it was in our homes and neighborhoods and in our synagogues, where we formed relationships that add substance and support and meaning to our lives. And in these settings, great ideas - world altering ideas - have emerged.

Later in the Spring, we plan to conduct a listening campaign. Why are we starting with listening? Because we just don't assume. The last three months have reminded me that each of us has desires and interests. Each of us is facing the dynamics of our modern society in similar and different ways. And each of us is a central element to the living faith community that we continually build, together.

When we listen to each other's stories, we realize that we aren't alone and we can imagine tackling the hardest issues head on, knowing that there are others marching with us towards the possibility of tomorrow. The *possibility* of tomorrow is ours to fulfill, ours to create the human foundations and lived Jewish experiences that will sustain the congregation, our homes, and our Jewish lives. And we will need to leverage the congregation's strengths, in order to expand and grow our current conceptions of what synagogue life in the twenty-first century can look like, both inside these walls and beyond these walls, in the broader community.

To help us prepare, our congregation's leadership is joining 14 dynamic congregations in what is called a "Community of Practice" through the Union for Reform Judaism. The Community of Practice will meet face-to-face in Chicago later this month and participate in monthly teleconferences over the next two years. We will learn from experts in the field, focusing on how modern society is affecting our lives, and re-imagining our Jewish future. Our intended result is to create a plan to better engage empty nesters and baby-boomers.

Why empty-nesters? Because we are already doing excellent work in youth, young adult, and senior programming. And we have invested heavily in these areas in recent years, in addition to hiring Rabbi Klass and Sam Swire, our new Director of Youth Engagement. Plus, it's important to know that the age of the the largest cohort of congregants is in the mid-40's through the 60's. And during the rabbinic search process we heard loudly and clearly that we need significant thinking and focus for these groups. You will receive information about how to get involved when the team is ready. Please stay tuned.

Emet - another important truth: The rabbinic transition wasn't

completed in July. This transition is just the beginning of a multi-year learning process. Significant change will not take place over night - nor should it. Transitions aren't easy.

Emet - Some people are concerned that Temple will change at once - and it may have even felt that way on July 1st.

Emet - Some people want Temple to change faster.

Emet - Some people miss the clergy that shaped and supported their lives.

Emet - Some are excited by new opportunities. And all of those feelings are understandable and respected.

I ask for your patience and your help. Help us - try and get to know us - to share your story with us -and then, to repeat your name - and to not take it personally! I ask for your Patience. Patience in this transition means knowing that we are learning to drive a big bus, as the bus is in motion, and in some cases we are trying to figure out how to change the oil and possibly a tire, while sitting in the driver's seat.

While we will likely make mistakes along the way, we are on this journey together. Together, we will do what Jews have done throughout the ages: celebrate the past - live with joy in the present, and plan for and create the promise of tomorrow.

Our ancient Israelites ancestors were audacious and spirited. And because they were - they faced the obstacle of their day and boldly marched forward. Our task is no-less audacious given the struggles of our modern world.

To succeed we will need to be weavers of a social fabric that is shaped by idea that when we are in relationship and well-connected, we can better care for the well-being of one another. And when we support the Jewish spiritual growth and learning of one another, we will live better and richer and fuller Jewish lives. This is what I believe is the essence of what it means to build a living and breathing Jewish community that draws the best from our sacred tradition, and invites all of us to become the stakeholders and leaders, who can and will face any obstacle or oppressor.

May we choose, as our ancient ancestors did, to value possibility and relationship over self-interest. And may we move towards opportunity, possibility, and abundance in the year and years ahead. *Shanah Tovah U'Metuakh* – May it be a sweet New Year.