

## FIRST MORNING OF ROSH HASHANAH 5777

Rabbi William M. Strongin

There is a continuing ballet in any community, with the dynamics in part the dance between leadership and the members at large. In a synagogue, that can refer to the Board and membership, or committees and membership, but usually means the rabbi and the members. There are unhealthy dances, but also healthy ones. I believe that we have had an overwhelmingly healthy dance these last thirty-two years of our association.

In all modern American Jewish congregations there is a larger than traditional amount of democratic procedure involved in the dance, and in Reconstructionist congregations, even more so, for one of the tenets of our movement is that the major purpose of rabbinical leadership is to facilitate the education of the membership in the various issues of Jewish evolution and thus help to empower all Jews to make informed decisions regarding their Jewish lives.

That, for example, is one reason we just concluded our survey about worship services. We shall hear more about that at a later time.

In the spirit of this dance, I would like to propose a small experiment for tomorrow's service: instead of singing *HaYom* in all of its great glory (and great length), that we simply read it in English responsively. We'll still sing it traditionally on Yom Kippur.

After the holidays, we'll debrief and see how worshippers felt about the alternative style. In my mind, even if we decide we like it, the experimental form would still be only for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. But we can talk about that too.

This particular piece of choreography in the ongoing ballet is of relatively small importance in the overall scheme of Jewish life. Here is a much larger issue: How does a congregation continue to thrive and evolve and mature if there is a large turnover in membership each year?

Compared to national statistics, our turnover has usually been slightly less than average. Until this year, anyway. And that has me worried. Not merely on the level of financial soundness, although we always operate on a tight budget and can easily get into trouble.

I am primarily worried about the state of our community, the cohesiveness of our congregational family.

That is really what we are. Like all families, we have great love for one another, and also bouts of strife. We argue and make-up. We celebrate with one another during times of *simcha*. We support one another in times of *tzuris*, whether personal pain, or tragedies of the larger community, nation or world.

Like a family, we laugh with joy over newborns and name them with blessings from everybody. We celebrate B'ney Mitzvah, welcoming young people into the more adult level of being Jews. We dance at one another's weddings, we grieve together when death arises.

In the last couple of years I officiated at the successive weddings of two brothers, both of whom I had named as infants 32 and 30 years ago, respectively. I cannot tell you how enormous my joy is to be personally involved in the lifecycle events of a baby boy growing into a Bar Mitzvah boy and then into a bridegroom.

Many, but not that many years ago, I also buried a young soldier, 20 years of age, who I had

brought to the bima for his bar Mitzvah only seven years earlier. I cannot express my anguish at that graveside funeral, barely able to chant *El Maley Rachamim*, which was then followed by the playing of a very painful "Taps."

I do not know how many babynamings we have had here during the last 3+ decades. As for B'ney Mitzvah, I figure about 300. I have no idea how many weddings, and even less idea how many funerals. I don't know how many local, national and global events of great moment we have gathered together to ponder and, in the face of them, to hold on tightly to one another in mutual support.

But in all these situations, both wonderful and horrible, there is the power of a strong community pervading the atmosphere, embracing the families celebrating or mourning, and embracing me.

And the families and the community at large always express the gratitude that there is indeed a community around for all of these occasions. That is why membership in a synagogue is not like membership in a club, or a gym, or a dance class.

It is not like any sort of membership fee supported organization. Membership in a congregation is like being part of a family. And families have expenses, and the members put their money forward in order to sustain that family.

So I must be frank and express my continuing dismay when members of our congregation, some long-time and very active members, members who have shared their and our lives together for years, make a decision to leave. Not because they have moved. Not because they prefer another congregation. Not because they are dissatisfied with something, but simply because the membership dues conflict with other financial obligations. To me this is a statement saying: "this community is not a priority for me." And honestly, that hurts.

Do I need to add that we have never, ever turned away any family who could not pay the full dues?

So here is my Rosh Hashanah plea: come back. We miss you. Put away any embarrassment you may have; that is small potatoes. The real deal is nothing more complicated than the simple fact that your family misses you and wants you back home.

And if you act now, you also receive a set of Ginzu knives.

(Sorry, I needed that little comic relief because I would rather not start tearing up on the bima.)

But on with the ballet!

Did I mention we need financial support? Well, that's one thing, but we need your sweat even more. We need more members getting more deeply involved with the inner workings of this place. A service such as we have participated in today is an example of broad participation.

I did not lead the early morning part of this service, a member of our congregation did. I sing a lot, but this magnificent choir sitting over here has beautifully enhanced the service with their singing. The Torah was read by several different people. Prayers were chanted by students, some still studying for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, some who have already celebrated that milestone last year, or the year before that. Gabbai and Baalit Kriah helped on the bima. A bunch of students gave out prayerbooks and welcomed you into this room. Members of the Board welcomed you downstairs.

Dozens of people got this place ready; do you think chairs move themselves and apples, challah and honey appear by magic? And let's not forget about the luncheon waiting for us after tashlich. Others got a children's service going downstairs, others are leading it. God knows I talk a lot, but so many of our English prayers and readings were done by you, or by folks sitting right by you. By the time these Day of Awe are over, well over 200 separate individual jobs will have been done by somebody who is a member of this congregational family.

This is the very model of what we might be like all the rest of the year as well. We are indeed blessed with dozens of people who help keep this place running, but we could use dozens more. We have great difficulty keeping a stable festival committee going. We need to try once again with a teen committee. There is always more work to be done on membership, finance, building committees. Here's an interesting point: like any family, not all of the members of our congregational family have much money, but everybody can throw in a hand to help out.

But now, more ballet!

There is a lot happening in this congregation besides religious services. We have a wonderful monthly luncheon. We have the incredible Thursday Night Live series. We have Bible Study classes, and it ain't your grandmother's Bible study! We have Havurat HaLev on some Shabbat mornings. We have a monthly Shabbat morning service and portion study that was created for the Vav Class and B'ney Mitzvah families, but is open to any member who wishes to come. We have Sukkah Potlucks, Simchat Torah celebrations featuring the ad hoc JCNP Bima Band, Hanukkah parties, Tu B'Shvat seders, B'ney Mitzvah written and performed Megillah plays, Purim carnivals and our X-rated adult Purimspiel for immature grown-ups. We have spiritually moving and gustatorily delicious Second Night Pesach seders... And yes, all of these need helpers to get them going, but they also simply need folks to come, join in and celebrate!

Do you know how many times someone has come up to me at a service or some other event and said, "I wasn't going to come, but I did and boy am I glad I did!" Let's face it, the hardest part about coming to any of these events, and yes, coming to services, is getting off the couch. So practice! Nobody has a harder time getting off a couch than me. You can do it! Just a few moments of willpower, and then: POW! A wonderful time that also adds substance to the spirit.

More ballet!

These High Holy Days represent my thirty-second wedding anniversary with our congregational family, and also the fifty second anniversary of the family itself. During those years we have witnessed quite a lot. We have seen, among Reconstructionist, Conservative, Reform and Renewalist seminaries a small minority of female rabbinical students become a slight majority. In less than one more generation there will be as many women as men in this vocation. Maybe more.

In our own congregational family we have welcomed gay as well as straight members, we welcome mixed faith families and mixed race families. We were among the very first in the nation to celebrate same sex marriages, back when they were recognized legally merely as civil unions and performed, for the most part, in only San Fransisco and New Paltz! But they were not merely civil in our congregational family, they were religious as well as far as we were concerned.

There has been a lot of change in the last half century, and we were not merely dragged along with those changes, we were in the very vanguard, and will remain so.

Our support of Israel is firm, and here's a reminder: during the last sixty or seventy years Israel has had fewer more persistent enemies than Syria. Yet when Syria began ripping itself apart and the refugees began pouring out, no religious community was faster to support those refugees than us.

We follow the Torah in its truest sense: "Feed the stranger in your midst, for you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt."

We have a right to be proud of ourselves, but we simply say, "*Dayenu*," and then go on to do more. (Which, by the way, is the point of that strange Pesach prayer.) Saying "even this is enough" when it is, in fact, not enough. A description of the truth of life, and of the Jewish way. In other words: Pause, make a Shabbat and reflect upon what already is. *Dayenu*. Then, when the sun goes down, begin again the work of repairing the world. As our sages said in the Mishnah, "The day is short and the work is long. We can never finish it, but neither can we stop doing it."

I am desperately proud of our congregational family. Let us continue onward in our excellent fashion. Maybe a step back every few steps forward, but how is that different than any other family? Maybe some of our members leave, but we yearn for their return, and welcome them back together with brand new members. We do not need to be the largest congregation we can be, but we must be the most solid, the most stable we can be.

From my personal family to my community family: May this be a year of health, joy, wisdom, prosperity and growth for all of us. Shanah Tovah.