

A Culture Of Congregational Commitment

I first got an inkling that this was no ordinary concert when our oldest daughter told us that she would *give a limb* for tickets to see Taylor Swift. Through a bit of luck and persistence, we somehow managed to get a few tickets through friends and a lucky break with a lottery. Before I knew what was happening, I had been swept up in the Taylor fever of the spring. And now, I suppose that I have to admit that I am a “Swiftie.” While it’s hard to imagine anyone here could have missed this, I’ll explain that a “Swiftie” is a devoted fan of Taylor Swift, the musician whose album sales and billboard hits top that of any modern artist. (Her recent concert tour was said to clear something like 600 billion dollars in sales.)

The concert, I must admit, was amazing. But what impressed me the most was not only Taylor Swift, but her fans. The dedication and commitment of people all across the country attending these concerts is something that I have never seen. There are tons of rituals that go along with attending these concerts. People make beaded bracelets to “trade” with their fellow Swifties, dress in certain outfits to depict each era of the “Eras” tour, spend countless hours on Spotify memorizing the set list to be prepared to sing every word together at the concert. We saw kids and adults who had in most cases already spent hundreds or even thousands of dollars waiting in line for an hour and a half to spend MORE money on merchandise, even if all that was left was three sizes too

big. The commitment and dedication of this community, and the power of participating in the rituals of this concert, were quite something to experience.

OK, so Taylor Swift is a talented musician, a dynamic performer, and seemingly a good person. And I've been to many concerts of globally adored performers and devoted lifelong fans - from Bruce Springsteen to Madonna. But this Taylor Swift experience was unique. There was a special sense of belonging, of connectedness, and of a shared destiny.

What is the key ingredient that made it so? The answer, in a word, is "commitment."

Although it may seem obvious, it's worth reminding ourselves that If we want to get something meaningful, deep, or profound out of an experience, a relationship, or a community, we have to be willing to put in the work and show up- *repeatedly*. We have to be *committed*. We have to be in it for the long haul, not just for short term gratification. That is true of our interests, that is true of our most important relationships, and it is certainly true of our Jewish family, our synagogue community.

Our biblical characters from this morning's readings are both models of this type of commitment. Abraham was certainly dedicated to living a life of faith. Why

else would he willingly take his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah to be sacrificed? (Okay, maybe he was over-committed!). Hannah, too, is a model of commitment. Her dedication and desire to have a son led her to go up to Shiloh, year after year, in prayer and devotion, to pray for a miracle. She even went so far as to promise that her son would be a *nazir*, a nazirite, who would abstain from wine or cutting his hair, placing him on a “higher level” in his service to God.

What inspires such commitment? To whom and to what are we committed to in our lives? Where have we dedicated most of our time, our resources, our love? What are the causes that we support, not just with our resources, but with the preciousness of our time?

Taking the synagogue as an example this morning, it is (of course) important to ask what this community can do for you. Our professional and lay leadership tries to ask this question every day. But it is equally critical that we ask you to consider what you can do for us, what you can do for each other, as an extended synagogue family. What does it look like to be committed to this congregation? How has your commitment evolved over the years and in what ways do you feel committed today? The new year, a time for *chesbon hanefesh*, a time for introspection, a time for *teshuvah*, a time for returning, is the right time to consider this.

I read a very interesting book over this past year by an author named Pete Davis entitled, *The Case For Commitment In An Age Of Infinite Browsing*. Davis explains that:

We are stuck in “Infinite Browsing mode” because our society has relatively recently experienced an explosion of new options. For the average American, the increase in options during the twentieth century – in the number of available opportunities, choices, novel experiences, and ways of life – is hard to overstate....A century or two ago....so much was chosen for (us) (45)

Davis explains that a culture of “open options” has taken hold in our society:

Private lives have grown and public lives have shrunk....The result, for many, is Isolation. We have everything at our fingertips except the one thing we want: other people. (224)

There was a guest essay written in the NY Times last spring and author named Brad Stulberg, entitled: “For People To Really Know Us, We Need to Show Up.” In it, Stulberg reminded his readers that if we want people to see us, to know us, and if we want to feel less lonely:

...we need to show up consistently. Over time, what starts out as obligation becomes less about something we have to do and more about something we want to do, something that we can't imagine living without. The spiritual teacher Ram Dass once wrote that “we're all just walking each other home.” But that's only true if we don't constantly cancel our walking plans.

Not canceling plans means, essentially, showing up for one another. If we commit to certain people and activities, if we feel an obligation to show up for them, then it's likely that we will, indeed, show up. And showing up repeatedly is what creates community.

Many of you are familiar with this claim. Those of you who have ever been regular participants in synagogue activities – whether Shabbat morning services, daily minyanim, adult education classes, Sisterhood, Men's club, Hazak or Youth

programming – you know what it means to create community through commitment. Indeed, earlier in the summer we had a board retreat where our leadership was talking about “why” they belong to this community and “why” they put in so much time here. One of our members said that her friends are always asking her this. What’s with all of your involvement in the Temple?, they wonder. Why do you put in so much time? Her answer to them is simple- *I gain way more than I give.*

This is something that used to be fairly obvious to us as a collective society. The more we showed up, the more we got involved, the more that we showed that we cared- *the more we received in return.* As Stulberg wrote:

Adults would go to church, synagogue or mosque every week, and see the same people over and over again. They would contribute in a way that made them feel good, too — perhaps cooking for a Sunday dinner, raising money for a local charity or rallying the congregation to support another family. Making the sorts of commitments required when volunteering, say, to host a study group or coach youth baseball or grocery shop for someone who is homebound, puts people in service to others. What is lost in freedom is gained in community and belonging.

Stulberg goes on:

Religion still works for those who feel drawn to it. Researchers have found that people who go to religious services repeatedly are healthier and live longer. In 2016, the Journal of the American Medical Association publication Internal Medicine published the results of a study¹ that surveyed some 75,000 women for 20 years and found that those who attended religious services more than once a week had a 33 percent lower mortality risk compared to those who never attended. The longevity benefits don’t owe themselves to what specific god participants were

¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27183175/>

praying to, but to the fact that they felt obligated to show up regularly in a community setting.

(You see, going to minyan is good for you!)

But over the last few decades organized religion has been in decline, and nothing has replaced it. That's not a theological concern as much as it's a socio-emotional one. Work relationships only go so far. If you aren't expected anywhere from week to week for something requiring your attendance — outside of your financial obligations — fewer people will miss you.

When you aren't missed, you become lonely. Recent polling data from Morning Consult found that 58 percent of American adults feel lonely. In other words, in a room of 500 people, 290 are lonely, with a whopping 79 percent of young adults reporting feeling lonely.

The article goes on to discuss the many ways that people might commit to a cause that is greater than themselves and in doing so can find community.

This morning, I want to remind us that we are gathered together in one such community, that can exist both within and beyond these walls. Becoming involved, committed, re-committed to your synagogue family can be meaningful on so many levels, and can benefit your social, spiritual, emotional, and perhaps even physical well-being. There is so much uncertainty in the world today. There is so much uncertainty when it comes to the future of organized religion. But one thing is certain. In order for any community to have a continued sense of purpose; in order to build a vibrant, dynamic, and relevant vision for the future, the members of this community must be committed to the project.

Part of the challenge, of course, is time. There are only so many hours in the day. How much time do we want to dedicate to our synagogue family and community each year? That is a serious question to consider. What is interesting to me is that of all the measurements that we consider when thinking about whether or not people will attend a particular synagogue event, there is no greater predictor than commitment to the particular interest or cause. If someone is committed to coming to observe the *yahrtzeit* of a family member, they will make the time to come to the synagogue. If someone is committed to Friday night services, they will make the time to attend (6:00, 7:00, 8:00- doesn't really matter). If someone is committed to the friendships and relationships that can come from playing mahjong, baking hamantaschen, building the sukkah, making latkes, laughing alongside others at comedy night, or feeling the beauty of Shabbat at the beach – they will mark the event on their calendar as soon as the date comes out. The same is true for coming to synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As Pete Davis points out in his book:

At the heart of the question of commitment is this: With so little time, how should we spend it? To infinitely browse is to cut up our time into tiny bits- all out of a fear that we will spend it wrong. To commit is to take a cosmic bet on a longer strand of time. That's what the promise of depth is: Though we can't control the length of our time, we can control its depth. And the more time we add to something, the more beautiful it becomes. The deeper we go, the more holiness we find. That's what happens when your depth makes the ordinary extraordinary. By dedicating yourself, you're making it holy. (170)

Indeed, this is the job of a sacred community of practice. To commit together.

To go deep, together. To dedicate ourselves to what is old, not for nostalgia

alone, but because we are in search of meaning, purpose, values, guidance, companionship along our faith journey. As Davis correctly points out:

...Nostalgia isn't sustainable...You can only run on the fumes of an original experience for so long before you run out of feeling and need some new spark of originality...Real roots embed us in a living commitment that connects us not only to the past, but to the present and the future, as well. Sure, we can inherit treasures from the past that we hope to conserve for the future. But stewarding them involves responding to new circumstances in new ways and bringing our own, original experience and ideas to bear on the commitment. A living commitment is like tending to a fire; nostalgia is like gathering around a fire's dying embers. It might be warm right now, but it won't be for long. (229-230)

The question for each one of us to consider this morning is how are we tending to the fire that is this community? What are we doing to nurture the flame of this community so that its light will not just be something that we remember fondly from our past, but it is something that we use to illuminate our present, and be the guiding light of our future. What can we do to recommit ourselves to our Torat El family? How might we keep showing up, or come back to showing up, in old ways and new, to this sacred community of practice? Take a moment to ask yourself- why am I here right now? What does this community mean to me? Maybe you only come once a year, maybe you come once a month, maybe you come every day. Maybe you are a teenager, maybe you are a young professional, maybe you are working full time but your kids are out of the house, maybe you have recently retired and are filled with time, talents, and skills and are looking to put them to good use. Regardless of who you are, the question is the same: What does it mean to be committed to the project that is Congregation Torat El? What have you gained from this community? Why are

you here? And how can you help ensure that this community is vibrant, dynamic, and relevant for anyone who wants to call this place their spiritual home?

As Michelle just mentioned, over these Days of Awe and in the coming months, we are going to be contacting many of you to ask you to share with us what is your “why?” Why are you here? Why do you care? We are so blessed to have so many of you that care so deeply. This year, and this morning, is an invitation to explore that feeling as we invite everyone to consider connection and commitment to your spiritual community. Rosh Hashanah is a perfect time to consider these things. Life happens. Sometimes we get side-tracked away from our previous commitments. That happens in our families, that happens in our work, that happens in our spiritual lives as well. But to quote Davis once more:

“The major factor for successful decisions is not what option decision makers choose, but whether the decision-makers **remain committed to their choice.** (113)”

Here I want to point out that it is not only your commitment to the synagogue that matters, but it is equally your commitment to one another that is critical to ensuring our future success. Rabbi David Wolpe, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, recently retired after 25 years leading one of the largest synagogue communities in America. As he reflected publicly about his career, he remarked that:

Keeping a congregation together has never been easy, and mine has become increasingly politically divided in an ever more polarizing era. Two practices have enabled us to stay together. [The first practice] I have encouraged [over the years] is learning about each other's lives before they explore each other's politics. When you share the struggles of raising children and navigating life, when you attend meetings and pack lunches together, when you are on the same softball team and sit near each other in synagogue, you don't start each conversation with how the other party's candidate is a scoundrel.

The second [practice] is listening. We, who do not know ourselves, believe we understand others. We must always be reminded that each person is a world, and that the caricatures we see of others on social media and in the news are just that — a small slice of the vastness within each human being.²

This morning I ask you to consider how we can learn about one another, listen to one another, all in the service of building and strengthening a committed community. As human beings with shared joys and struggles, as people who are all navigating the ups and downs of life together. Can we engage in the sacred act of listening to one another, as we gather in this sacred and diverse space, not afraid to "say the wrong thing" at kiddush?

The historical commitment that led to our gathering here this morning is inspiring. In the 1920's a group of individuals got together in Asbury Park and determined that a synagogue was needed in the area. In the 1950's a group of individuals determined that a synagogue was needed in the Long Branch Area and another group determined that a synagogue was needed in the Wanamassa area. As the years went on, each of our heritage communities dedicated so

² *Wolpe, As A Rabbi, I've Had A Privileged View Of The Human Condition*

much of their lives to ensuring that each community was a meaningful spiritual home to so many. Thirteen years ago, another group of forward thinking, dedicated, and committed individuals came together to form our united congregation. A spiritual community that has thrived in so many ways throughout the years. What has sustained our community that is both traditional and modern at the same time? The commitment, dedication, day in and day out, year by year, by so many of you and your families, by so many who we remember and who will forever be with us in spirit. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of what would become the modern state of Israel, once said that our task in this world was to ensure that *ha yashan chadash v' hachadash yitkadash*, the old was made new, and the new was made holy. Today, that remains our task as well.

As Jews we worry. What will be in the future? What will our synagogue, our community, look like? The truth is that I do not know. I don't have a crystal ball. But I agree with Rabbi Wolpe, who writes that while:

...religion may be on the decline in this country and in the West... if you wish to see the full panoply of a human life, moments of ecstatic joy and deepest sorrow, the summit of hopes and the connections of community, they exist concentrated in one place: *your local house of worship*.

The incredible gift, so desperately needed in today's society, the synagogue, *this* synagogue, has not disappeared, *at least not yet*. As we enter into this New Year together, I remain confident that if we are willing to remain committed to

our choice, if we re-dedicate our time, our resources, our talents, and our hearts to this place, if we do teshuvah, returning to our intention to create a spiritually wise, relevant, and nurturing community for all who wish to enter- we will not only survive, but we will thrive, for many years to come. Shanah Tovah.