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What I Learned During COVID 19 or The Future of the American Synagogue, A New Path Towards Thinking about God, Torah, and Israel

Almost exactly two and one half years ago, on Friday evening, March 13, 2020, at 6:30, I stood with my colleagues in the otherwise empty Temple Micah sanctuary to lead a short Shabbat service thru our live stream. Without even realizing it, we had entered COVID isolation.

By the following week, we were further isolated leading services via something called Zoom, from our homes. Louise and I sat each week at our Shabbat table. Our homes had really become our sanctuaries just as the Talmud wishes in its use of the phrase *Mikdash Me'at* (Megilal 29a)—home as a small temple.

We went on this way for weeks, months, over a year. Do you remember? In some ways I anticipated Friday night and Saturday morning like never before. There was a novelty to it but more than that, it was a way to connect when we so longed for connection.

At the same time, the Zoom connection could feel so tenuous. It is so easy to hit that small corner x and close off the connection, go to another website—surf the web or simply leave the computer. Leaving a Zoom room that is multiple pages is an easy and invisible act- especially if you are bored.

This pushed us\me to think ruthlessly about making our Shabbat gatherings relevant so that no one would want to leave and everyone would want to return next week.

It seemed to work. So many of you came each week. Within days, we had radically changed our Shabbat services—on Friday evenings no Amidah or Sh'ma but we sang and we listened, we lit candles, we lifted our Kiddush cups, we passed challah in our homes, we mourned, we prayed for healing, and as rabbis we sought to teach and make some sense of our world. We built and then bolstered our virtual American Jewish Table.

As we enter this new world, I find myself asking what I learned about the Jewish future from our Micah COVID gatherings.

COVID proved to me that synagogues can matter greatly.

In fact, no rich and sustaining Jewish life is possible without vibrant synagogues. This is a simple historical fact of the Jewish diaspora.

My remarks this morning are likewise born from a sobering realism about our era.

Religion, in all forms in this country----Jewish, Christian, you name it—is in decline. Check any Pew Research Center poll. Ask Mark Chavez of Harvard, who is wont to say that to deny the decline in religious life in this country is like denying global warming. You can do it—but you are simply wrong. Ask our own Alan Cooperman, the head of the division of religion research at Pew. He knows.

There may be individual bright spots—a particular community may be in a period of vitality but the overall numbers are in decline.

We first learn from our past.

Marshall Sklare was the first sociologist to study American Jewish life. Writing in the 1950s and 60s, he termed the synagogue an “ethnic church.” This describes the congregational experience of the Baby Boom generation- an era of synagogue expansion.

Jewish identity was assumed. European and immigrant Jewish memories were strong. Jewish life was instinctive if not particularly religious. In the synagogue of my youth, the words belief, theology, spirituality were seldom, if ever heard.

But by the 1970s and 80s and 90’s, the synagogue as ethnic church—that comfortable, familiar home, had become synagogue as ethnic fortress.

Intermarriage was on the rise. Jewish population studies were now focused on measuring strength of Jewish affinity

versus

fear of assimilation.

“Jewish continuity” became a counterproductive rallying cry –who needs or wants continuity that is lacking in purpose, meaning, wisdom or inspiration?

Synagogues were transformed into places for inoculation and fortification against the temptations of the outside world.

My\our teacher, mentor and friend, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, saw all this and spearheaded a movement seeking to guide the synagogue towards what he calls a “spiritual center.”

A spiritual center is not a protecting fortress against outside temptations. It is rather, an open place, in conversation with the world around it. This is what we have striven to create at Micah.

We then might ask—What makes a spiritual center—spiritual? What are its challenges and opportunities of a secular age?

Consider this story about Jurgen Habermas---one of this era’s greatest secular philosophers and his essay “The Awareness of What is Missing.”

The title of the essay captures its essence. In 1991, Habermas attended a dear friend’s funeral. His friend, a totally secular non-church going playwright, had requested that his funeral be held in a church—that is correct—a church and not a theater. There were, however, no prayers, no clergy, no liturgy—just a few reminiscences by his friends and then a post-funeral meal whose menu had been set by the deceased.

For years afterward, Habermas could not get the funeral out of his mind such that in 2008, seventeen years later, he wrote the essay articulating the idea that secular modernity has a troubling inadequacy. His non-religious secular friend, by requesting his own funeral service be held in a church had sensed this—but the setting alone was not enough—there was as Habermas writes “a sense of something missing”—a hollow quality to this secularism that had no way to recognize the depth and meaning of human life nor its end.

To state the obvious—the secular has no sense of the sacred.

There is something missing.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a leading contemporary American Christian thinker says much the same thing about this struggle when she writes:

“If I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say, ‘I am spiritual but not religious,’ then I might not be any wiser about what that means—but I would be richer...

I think I know what they mean by "religious." It is the "spiritual" part that is harder to grasp...It may be the name for a longing--for more meaning, more feeling, more connection....They know there is more ... than what meets the eye... but when they visit the places where such knowledge is supposed to be found, they often find the rituals hollow and the language antique.”

She goes on to say, “Those who belong to communities of faith have acquired a certain patience with what is sometimes called organized religion. They have learned to forgive its shortcomings... They ... are happy to use inherited maps for

some of life's journeys... Yet they too can harbor the sense that there is more to life..."

When Barbara Brown Taylor refers to inherited maps, she is referring to our very prayerbooks, life cycle rituals, and holiday customs—everything that we as Jews use to navigate our lives. We use these maps in search of “the more.”

Emile Durkheim, the great French Jewish sociologist of the earliest 20th century and by the way—descended from 12 generations of rabbis--was among the first to sense this situation that Habermas and Taylor explore. Durkheim held that a sense of the sacred was vital to the emotional health of every social order.

Durkheim wrote, “The center of any collective identity is not instrumental functionality but believed-in ideals and images that are sacred – that are...set apart, hallowed, protected, inviolable.”

Following Durkheim’s thoughts, I therefore ask myself, what are the “ideals and images” that are sacred for us in this room Jews today? What in our shared religious language defines and inspires us? What religious practices or rituals embody our beliefs and values? When and where do we experience down in our guts what we really believe? When does our Jewish practice make our hearts soar or weep?

Is Temple Micah ever this place? How can it be? How can it be even more so?

I have come to believe firmly especially during COVID that if our faith life is weak—both individually and communally, it is because our inherited metaphors are weak. They do not speak to us and it is not our fault. Raise your hand if you prefer the left side of the page—either in this book or our Shabbat prayerbook.

In his seminal work, *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger wrote that the pre-modern world lived within an implicitly religious environment that was inescapable—what Max Weber termed “enchanted.” There was no such thing as “religion” as a separate category of life. All of life was governed by rules of enchantment. For Judaism, this took the form of our rabbinic system of halachah\Jewish law.

Religion became a separate category of life—a volunteer activity—if you will, when Modernity—and with it the Enlightenment-- gave birth to what we call “religion.” The world no longer lives under an all-encompassing “sacred canopy.” Faith now requires what I term “plausibility structures.” What is a plausibility structure? Try telling your children that it is Shabbat and they have to stay home for Shabbat dinner. They open the door and for the world it is movie night, party night, football games—you name it. A synagogue is a plausibility structure—there

are other people doing Shabbat. There is a structure. It does not depend on a single parent or individual who says so.

Ask yourself this. When you are alone on a Friday evening, do you have an internal conversation with yourself as to whether you should light Shabbat candles? I do. I wonder about who it is for. Is God watching? I always light the candles but I am also aware that I am reduced to a plausibility structure of one.

Zoom Shabbat was powerful because we saw each other and our candles, challah and wine. We transformed the service over Zoom so we could co-create our Shabbat in each other's homes. With our cameras on, we entered each other's lives in a new way.

What we lack so often are enticing and seductive plausibility structures to make religion really real. They work—partially for some of us—those with the patience to use those inherited maps. They do not work for the majority.

Our metaphors—you see are weak. When you are inside a strong plausibility structure—anything is possible. Metaphors do that.

One of my favorite or strongest examples—from the totally secular realm

How many of you have heard of the Harry Potter series? This series of seven books published from the years 1997-2007 were THE MUST READ books for young adults of that era.

Consider the following scenario. It is 1998 and I call to my daughter that it is time to get in the car. No response. I call again. No response. I go down the hall to her room where I see her lying on her bed reading.

“What are you doing, don't you hear me calling.”

I see her fully absorbed in a book. I speak again in a louder voice.

After a full minute or so, she realizes I am in the doorway and she pulls her head away from the book.

“What are you reading?”

“Harry Potter”

Now I have her attention.

I ask, “Do you really think there are such things as witches and wizards and magic potions and spells?”

My daughter replies, “of course not—it is all pretend, please leave me alone, I want to go back to the book.”

Great literature creates a plausibility structure—a canopy that invites the reader in and creates a kind of reality.

This is what great art does—fiction, theater, movies. We are on the edge of our seat because we are living in a very strong metaphor.

I believe our Jewish religious faith life is weak because our inherited metaphors simply do not resonate the way they once did. They do not compellingly bring us into the Jewish story.

Does our Kabbalat Shabbat feel like an evening of romantic love with Shabbat entering as a beautiful bride? Are we swept away with passion and emotion? Are we moved to sing and dance?

On the High Holy Days do we feel in our guts that God is judge and arbiter? Do we tremble in awe?

Maybe you are lucky and you do, but for way too many, our inherited Jewish metaphors require too much cultural translation. They don't bring us in.

There is nothing more important for us who seek a vibrant religious life than to think about than metaphors.

I learned this from Eric Kandel, the Nobel Prize winning neuroscientist. Kandel writes that as a medical school graduate doing a Fellowship in psychiatry at Harvard, he points to a model of the brain and asks a bio-chemist where in the brain the ego and id are located. It is only in this conversation that he fully realizes that these terms are metaphors and have no physical place in the brain.

My point in all of this is simply to emphasize how very real metaphors are.

When I say, we need stronger metaphors—I am saying we need an entirely new poetry, metaphorical language, and art forms that speak to us in order to have a ritual life that defines and inspires.

What does it take for the entrance of the Shabbat bride to feel real? What might be our metaphor? How can we re-animate these metaphors to help us create -- the future American synagogue as a true spiritual center?

Emerging from COVID can be empowering to pursue the answers to this question.

We are, I believe in need of new ways of both understanding and embracing the very building block words of our Jewish vocabulary-God, Torah and Israel.

God!

Banish the notion of God as an old man with a beard.

Banish the notion of a God who acts in history by parting waters, or sending divine messages. These images simply do not work for most of us.

We must likewise seek to disengage from a desire to define or understand God.

Heed two pieces of wisdom that speak to a modern and approachable/believable metaphor for God:

First, the French Catholic theologian- Jean-Luc Marion puts it like this:

“A God that could be conceptually comprehended would no longer bear the title ‘God’... God remains God only on condition that [our] ignorance be established... Every thing in the world gains by being known—but God who is not of the world, gains by not being known conceptually... the Revelation of God consists first of all of cleaning the slate of this illusion...”

We cannot hold a God concept. We must rely on metaphors that bring us into a different reality.

And second, Marcia Falk—perhaps our most gifted Feminist liturgist—

“We must create new images to convey our visions, and to do so we must be patient, for images will not be called into being by sheer acts of will... the images that serve us well will emerge. We must *trust* the journey.” (“Notes on Composing New Blessings: Toward a Feminist Jewish Reconstruction of Prayer” Reconstructionist #53, 1987)

The religious person is on a search-a journey but knows not exactly what he\she is looking for. The journey is an act of faith.

As Thomas Nagel puts it, “The religious temperament...asks for something more ...without knowing what it might be...”

We are newly challenged and energized to explore for the response to that “sense of something missing.”

Torah-

The greatest wisdom that I can offer on Torah begins with an approach to our entire Hebrew Bible from Genesis through to the last book of the last section Second Chronicles—for those of you who have read to the end.

My wise and deeply learned Bible teacher in rabbinical school, David Sperling, would wryly comment. “I have read the Bible from cover to cover several times. Nowhere does it say-“Based on actual events.” The Bible is neither a history book nor a science book. It is simply and most centrally, our book.

But my understanding of what I mean by Torah incorporates much more. Torah is an attitude—an approach to life. I am reminded of the rabbinic stories—Talmudic no less—the student who hides under the rabbi’s bed all night as his master is in bed with his wife. The sage upon finding his student there in the morning is incredulous—aghast—until he hears the student proclaim “Torah Hee- Alai lilmod!” “This too is Torah and I must learn!!” This story is repeated as the student follows the sage to the privy and again exclaims—“This is Torah—and I must learn.”

The way of Torah is the considered life—the understanding that life is a serious endeavor.

And more....

Torah is the ability to see yourself in a narrative—a never ending story—as a link on a chain—a holder of a certain way of being in the world.

Torah is a posture—a way of entering the world.

Torah is “Jews don’t despair”—Torah is our Jewish mantra—“Od lo Avda tikvateinu- We have not yet lost our hope.” A Promised Land always lies before us.

Vaclev Havel’s words can guide us:

“Hope... is, a state of mind... — it's an orientation of the spirit. ...Hope is ...the certainty that something makes sense... life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and, finally, without hope.”

Torah is our guide and source of wisdom for how to be in the world.

This is what I mean by Torah.

And finally, our third pillar—who is Israel?

This is critical—but my answer is shortest.

We are in a post ethnic age of multiple identities.

I would love to see us open the doors of the synagogue to the world around us.

Our teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, has suggested that in this era of multiple identities we should understand being Jewish as someone who participates in what he terms the Jewish conversation. The degree to which you are a participant in the conversation determines the depth or primacy of this part of your identity but with this approach Rabbi Hoffman is attempting to move the conversation of who is a Jew past the simple binary of Jewish- non-Jewish. It widens our thinking about what we mean by the word “identity.”

We seek a Judaism that is an open door for anyone who wishes to drink from our well, anyone who wishes to participate in the Jewish conversation. There is even more. We learn more about ourselves when we engage in conversation with those who enter from the outside. They ask us new and different questions. The tourist pushes the native to think. We all want that. It deepens the Jewish conversation and makes it exciting.

The Zohar teaches “God, Torah, and Israel” are one.

Our metaphors for God must inspire our spirits.

Our interpretations of Torah need to expand our understanding of a considered life.

And our definition for Israel need to incorporate how we view and answer the question, who is Israel.

Let us invite all of our artists to help us create a rich new world that entices us into a vibrant canopy of faith.

Let us embrace Torah wherever we find it and may it strengthen the way we understand our journey.

And may we be inspired by Isaiah so our Micah as a house of prayer will be in conversation with the world around us and open and eager for anyone who wishes to enter our doors.

Shanah Tovah!