



Vine

FROM RABBI ZEMEL

MICAH IS ALWAYS MICAH

DEAR FRIENDS,

We are living in the epicenter of a changing world. At Temple Micah, we are seeking to confront that in every way possible.

The motto of T'ruah, the rabbinic human rights organization, is "Resisting Tyrants Since Pharaoh." It has never been more significant.

As I acknowledge our new reality, I also seek to maintain as much of the old normal as I can.

This letter represents

that impulse. Months ago, as I considered my impending retirement, I decided that I would dedicate my penultimate Vine letter to the Micah staff. I want to honor that decision. The staff has more than earned it.

Micah is, to be sure, a synagogue, a community, a place of Jewish and religious discovery. For a much smaller group of people, it is a workplace—our workplace. The names and faces have changed over the years. We have had different individuals at each and every position, save mine. In the 42 years that I have been here, assistant and associate rabbis, cantors, music directors, musicians, educators, executive directors and support staff have come and gone. Many have left a deep impression on me and I think of them frequently. In my earliest years here, I was a full-time staff of one, supported by three very part-time staffers who worked on our music, office administration and education. I was a walking meeting of the full-time staff. Four decades later, our daily staff is a bustling village of 16 full-time employees who collaborate during weekly meetings of the senior staff, worship team, rabbinic team, office administration team, maintenance team, finance team

and more. The full staff meets monthly. Other ongoing working groups gather regularly to discuss everything from b'nai mitzvah to communications. All of this activity helps keep us going. None of this tells the real story.

For me, Micah is a special place for many reasons. But as important as any is our workplace culture. It is, to use a complicated word, "authentic."

I recently led a study session on the meaning of authenticity. Charles Taylor (who else?) wrote an entire book, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, in which he seeks to define how modernity affected the very meaning of the word. In today's culture, people readily understand such expressions as, "I'm taking a break in order to discover my authentic inner self." Our grandparents would not have understood that sentiment. That's because the way we comprehend authenticity has changed, and our views of it derive from the times we live in. We have many identities because we live in many different worlds simultaneously. We have a work world, a home and family world, the world of our hometown, the world of our gym, the world of our book club or hiking club and on and on. The people in these worlds frequently don't overlap. The result is that we are perceived to be one way at work and another way in the book club. Which perception is authentic?

This leaves us uncertain about the meaning of the word "authentic." By one definition, an old coin can be said to be an authentic collector's item. A work of art might be considered an authentic masterpiece. And individuals can look for their own authenticity. It's the same word, but the meaning is now more difficult to pinpoint.

In this harder-to-understand sense, Micah is authentic because the culture of

the office is identical to the culture of the congregation at large. The "feel" of Micah is always the same. We have a culture of mutual respect, regard and kindness. We are shocked, saddened and dismayed when we learn that someone has spoken harshly to a member of the staff. We say things like, "That person doesn't 'get' Micah." What don't they "get?" Micah's authenticity.

I like to say that Micah's culture is the same behind the curtain, in the office where all the hard work is done, as it is in front of the curtain, during Shabbat services and other public events. Micah is always Micah.

Behind the curtain, we are a team. We have fun. There is a sense of camaraderie. We live the ethic, coined some years ago, that Micah is a place where we discover the best version of ourselves. Our office culture is lively, respectful, overflowing with warmth and laughter. Every morning for many years, I have looked forward to the simple act of coming into the office and seeing my colleagues, my friends.

Their dedication to Micah is deeply felt. Their regard for each other is ever present. I am honored to work with each and every one of them. I want to take this opportunity to recognize and thank them for helping to make the Micah experience that it is. They have brought me enormous joy.

So, the next time you see Sarah Brown, Jeannelle D'Isa, Mckinley Edelman, Nilson Guevara, Alison Litvin, Katherine Livingston, Philip Mayer, Santos Miguel, Sara Pettingill or Rhiannon Walsh, simply say *thank you*.

I will save the thanks and kudos for the senior staff — Rabbis Beraha, Crawley and Slakman; Education Director Sharon Tash; and Executive Director Beth Werlin — for another time!

Shalom,
Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel



“Every person shall sit under his grapevine or fig tree with no one to make him afraid.”
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IT'S HARD TO SAY GOODBYE

BY RIELLE MILLER GABRIEL

Since Rabbi Zemel announced his retirement last January, many members of our community have been working together to make this last year a special one for Rabbi Zemel and our whole Temple Micah community.

We started the year with a panel, “The Future of the American Synagogue,” in September 2024. Rabbi Beraha moderated a



fascinating discussion: should the synagogue be the center of ‘Jewish life’ or ‘Jewish spiritual / faith life’? Whose voices are we not ready to hear? Will synagogues go separate ways over beliefs about Israel? How do we build language to help people express their ‘Jewish fitness’? And how do synagogues’ business

models need to change to engage and respect the ‘Jew in the pew’? The event honored Rabbi Zemel’s career of pushing boundaries, re-imagining the synagogue, and engaging in deep questions within Temple Micah and with great Jewish minds around the country.

This January, Rabbi Slakman hosted a panel on “Israel in the Year 2048.” The three panelists shared their thoughts on how the current situation in the region will impact the future of Israel and the Jewish people. There were hopeful proclamations about peace between Jews and Palestinians. There were also pragmatic statements about the continuity of the status quo. However, each of the esteemed panelists spoke to the interconnectivity of Jews and Palestinians, highlighting Rabbi Zemel’s long-standing commitment to shared society in Israel.

February saw Rabbi Zemel himself take center stage during “Grandpa Goldman” weekend. Throughout Shabbat Yitro, Rabbi Zemel shared the wisdom of his grandfather, Rabbi Solomon Goldman. Congregants and guests learned about Rabbi Goldman’s biblical theology, his voluminous correspondence (including exchanges with Albert Einstein!), and how Rabbi Goldman’s writings about antisemitism still ring true. The Celebration Committee, represented at this event by Martha Adler and Valerie Strauss, surprised Rabbi Zemel with a gift from the congregation. Rabbi Zemel will spend two

weeks at the Hebrew Union College’s archive in Cincinnati, with access to a research assistant, to continue his exploration of his grandfather’s prodigious works. After the studies, the Celebration Committee volunteers hosted a pizza party and brownie bake-off. A huge *thank you!* to Shelley Fidler, Jane Kerschner, and Harriet Weiner for leading the amazing team of Stuart Brown, Jeannelle D’Isa, Miriam Grogan, Harriette Kinberg, Arlene Lutenecker, Barbara Levine, Marc Levy, Jean Nordhaus, Helaine Palmer, and Ken Schwartz.

March has featured a number of celebratory events. Machon students and families are enjoying age-accessible events with Rabbi Zemel, from pre-K through R2B (grades 8-12). We will also host Rabbi Zemel’s teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, for our Scholar-in-Residence Shabbat, March 21 through March 22. Rabbi Hoffman will speak on “Temple Micah as a Laboratory: How to Put the World Together” at our Kabbalat Shabbat service. On Saturday morning, Rabbi Hoffman will present “God, Prayer, and Other Things that Matter” before joining us for kiddush. That afternoon, “Questions Jews Ask, Or Should: A Conversation among Rabbi Zemel, Rabbi Hoffman, and Our Former Tisch Fellows” will take place before a community havdalah.

Our third celebratory panel, “The Future of American Jews and Israel” [link!] will occur on April 27. Rabbi Crawley will host three insightful rabbis as they share their thoughts on this timely topic. On Sunday, May 4, the Temple Micah community will gather for a festive program with music, toasts, and speakers celebrating all that Rabbi and Louise Zemel have given to our community.

In addition to these events, all members and former members are encouraged to contribute to Rabbi Zemel’s Memory Book (<https://www.templemicah.org/2024/12/a-memory-book-for-rabbi-zemel>), edited by Emily Tamkin and Rob Sugar, by Monday, March 31. We want this book to share the wide array of experiences that this community has had with Rabbi Zemel over the past several decades, so share those specific memories! We are also offering a second volume of Rabbi Zemel’s writings, *A Time to Reflect*. Book orders can be placed from your ShulCloud account.

Thank you to all the volunteers who have made, and continue to make, this year meaningful. It is an honor and joy to mark this milestone year with Rabbi Zemel.

Hineni Connects Community

By HARRIET TRITELL

WOULDN'T YOU LIKE to know more about some of the older and younger members of our community? At Hineni, we do!

On December 10, 2024, Machon Micah 5th graders participated in an intergenerational program with Hineni volunteers to discuss immigration and compare stories of their families' histories and their own current Jewish story. Alan Kraut, a longtime Micah member and a professor at American University, began the program with a slideshow and a talk about the history of Ellis Island and the immigration stories of the many Jewish families who passed through its gates. Then, in small groups, the students and Hineni volunteers began conversations, recounting tales of family history, growing up Jewish, favorite holidays, favorite foods and

Jewish experiences.

Both students and Hineni volunteers enjoyed the opportunity to get to know one another a bit better and explore their common heritage. Pizza and cookies for all topped off the very interactive afternoon!

As one of the participants said, "The children at our table were full of enthusiasm, and what touched me the most was their respect and kindness for each other. I congratulate the program on picking what seems to me to be a perfect age to stimulate curiosity about their backgrounds, family history, and family stories."

In addition to programs like these, Hineni volunteers answer the call all year long: bringing meals to community members, making visits and phone calls, baking and delivering challah, and so much more. We recently met



Member Alan Kraut speaks about the American Jewish immigrant experience.

with Machon Micah parents to better integrate Hineni's activities with the needs of the religious school. And to honor and celebrate all the wonderful Hineni volunteers, Hineni hosted a volunteer appreciation gathering in

October of 2024. We shared stories of our Hineni experiences and discussed ways to make Hineni even more meaningful to our ever-expanding congregation.

We are grateful to all our volunteers for their open hearts and willingness to give to others in our community who need a little extra. And we look forward to everyone joining in our efforts to connect our community.

Upcoming Hineni projects include establishing neighborhood cohorts in order to get to know our Micah neighbors better. If you would like to get involved with this project, please let us know. We need you! If you are interested in receiving emails from Hineni, joining our volunteer corps, or learning more about what we do, please connect with us at hineni@templemicah.org. ♦



Nancy Piness, center, and Barbara Diskin, right, share stories with Machon Micah students.

THE PRODUCERS

By **BETSY BRODER**

NO, NOT ZERO MOSTEL AND GENE WILDER scheming a Broadway flop, but those who labor behind the scenes at Temple Micah and make things happen. During this year of celebrating Rabbi Zemel, Louise and the entire Zemel family, the producers of our marquee events have delivered hit after hit, and will continue to roll out engaging, imaginative and joyful blockbuster events to honor and celebrate our beloved Rabbi Zemel and his GOAT cast.

When the credits roll, look for these magic makers. Lead producer and chair of the Celebration Committee, Martha Adler, with co-producers Susannah Nadler and Valerie Strauss are the creative team par excellence. Susannah, the mother of two Machon students, has made certain that Micah members of every age will feel involved and have the opportunity to celebrate Rabbi Zemel through storytelling, ice cream parties and other joyful, age-appropriate gatherings. Valerie, formerly a *Washington Post* journalist, is the creative force behind the panels exploring our lives as American Jews, including our relationship with Israel. Working closely with Rabbi Zemel, she recruited the extraordinary discussants, helped frame the programs, and managed every detail in these deeply engaging and provocative events, with assistance from David Adler and Debra Berke. [Log in to your ShulCloud account for these upcoming features.](#)

No production would be complete without a red-carpet celebration, and for that we have Martha Adler in the director's chair. She has overseen earlier Micah celebrations – who can forget the DC Fire Department on hand when we burned our mortgage? Maybe it doesn't have a black-tie dress code, but the May 4th gala will be an occasion for us to dress up and make a toast to our retiring leader. Working with our multitalented and indefatigable Beth Werlin, the team of Sarah Brown, Mark and Sam Freedman, and Aurie Hall has



worked every angle to make sure our May the 4th will surpass the buzz of *Star Wars* with music, tributes, humor and plenty of delicious food.

And the award goes to . . .

Our gift committee, chaired by former Board President and longtime member Mary Beth Schiffman, is keeping things under wraps, but it is understood that her group – with Jodi Enda, Aurie, Ed Wendel, Larry Cooley, and Rich Harwood – has come up with gifts that will capture the spirit, legacy

and forward-looking wisdom of Rabbi Zemel.

We are a roll-up-your-sleeves congregation where our reward is often simply our own sense of joy in supporting our community. But we want these volunteers who are giving so much to Temple Micah in this momentous year to know how deeply we appreciate all that they do to strengthen our bonds and, as Rabbi Zemel might say, thicken our connections. Let's have a big round of applause for our exceptional crew. ♦

WE WEEP TOGETHER

BY RABBI STEPHANIE CRAWLEY

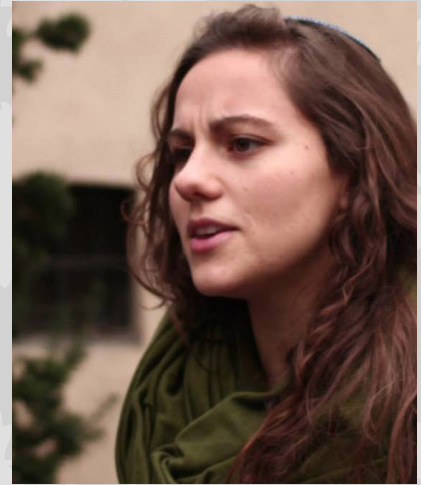
We weep together - you and me and the heavens
Some days - the rain drops are so light they are like air
a mist that dances and sits atop our hair and clothes
This is sadness I can bear

Most days these days - the drops are bigger
a small splash on my cheek on my hand as I put on a raincoat of distraction
This is a sadness I can bear

And some days - the drops are thick, wet, and heavy
they hurt.
I can't open my eyes through their deluge
This is sadness I cannot bear.

The skies can not hold them in.
And neither can I - their weight rips through me
This is sadness I cannot bear, at least, not alone.

We weep together - you and me and the heavens
And there is gratitude in that - weeping together.
It isn't much - but it is our sanctuary in the storm
Built from what bursts out when we can no longer hold the injustices and pains
and stolen miracles from us
When we can not protect and can not prevent and can not make the peace stay
But it is also built from our love from our compassion and from our hope
our hope - and our small peace, together.



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IN HONOR OF

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Louis E. Schotz and Phyllis Schotz Salzberg, by Stanley and Ellen Brand
Celia Shapiro, by Bob Dorfman
Perle and Kenneth Suna, by Lila Suna
My grandparents, Esther Hadburg Weiss and Joe Weiss, by Emily Bramowitz
Harry Wellins, by Beverly and Harlan Sherwat

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Emily and John Sylak-Glassman
Emily Tamkin and Neil Bhatiya
Christie Thomas and Jeffrey Grossman
Randy Tritell and Harriet Tritell
Peter and Yelena Van Praagh
Harriet and Louis Weiner
Meryl and George Weiner
Cecelia and Mark Weinheimer
Steven and Elise Weinstein
Gloria Weissberg
Bobbie and Ed Wendel
Beth Werlin
Linda Wernick-Cassell
Sonia White
Allison and Alex Wohl
Scott and Lizzie Worden
Beverly Yett
Sharon Zamore
Rabbi Daniel and Louise Zemel
Shira Zemel and Adam Goldstein



Chag Pesach Sameach



YOU CAN BE PART OF ENSURING OUR LEGACY FOR DECADES TO COME!

We ask you to join us in preserving and expanding all that we value at Temple Micah through a planned gift from your estate. There are several ways to give: by will, a percentage of your retirement fund, or even a paid-up life insurance policy. To learn more, reach out to Noel Salinger and Jim Hamos at plannedgiving@templemicah.org. They will contact you and explain how your generosity will truly make a difference.

MAZAL TOV

TED BORNSTEIN AND LESLEY WEISS, on the birth of their grandchild, Alexander Aryeh Bornstein Kona

GARY AND RITA CARLETON, on the birth of their grandchild, Ishan Henry Bagwe

RACHEL AND ZACH COHEN, on the birth of their child, Eli James Cohen

JACQUELINE SIMON AND DOUG MEYER, on the birth of their grandchild, Evelyn Jodi Simon Klapes

ISAAC, CAROLINE, AND LEO SONETT-ASSOR, on the birth of their child and sibling, Micah Gordon Sonett-Assor

RONIT ZEMEL, ETHAN PORTER, AND AVI PORTER, AND RABBI DANIEL AND LOUISE ZEMEL, on the birth of their child, sibling, and grandchild, Saul Zemel Porter

CONDOLENCES

THE TEMPLE MICAH COMMUNITY extends its deepest condolences to:

PAUL CARVER, on the death of his wife, Elise Bean

SUSAN KESELENKO COLL, on the death of her mother, Marion Joan Keselenko

HANNAH GOULD, on the death of her cousin, Annette Levitt

PHIL KATZ, on the death of his mother, Josephine Katz

RITA KIRSHSTEIN, on the death of her husband, Bliss Cartwright

PHIL LEVINE, on the death of his cousin, Neil Levine

ARLENE LUTENEGGER, on the death of her husband, Dan Lutenegger

ELLEN SOMMER, on the death of her mother, Marcia Kurzberg

BEVERLY YETT, on the death of her husband, Dan Yett

May their memories be for a blessing.

ALWAYS THINKING ABOUT THE JEWISH FUTURE

BY SHARON TASH, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Things have changed for Jewish education in 2025 yet they remain recognizable. Once upon a time, students came multiple times a week to religious school (yes, even schools affiliated with the Reform movement). Classes were dull and teachers drilled Hebrew so that students could learn to recite liturgy. Most of the kids I knew did not like going to “Hebrew School” at all, and I do not know if many of them chose to affiliate with a synagogue or raise Jewish families as adults. I once observed a student refusing to go to her classroom because “*it is so boring*” and the retort from her parent was “*if I had to do it, so do you*”. Clearly that’s not good enough and certainly not compelling enough to make the case for Machon Micah(!) Temple Micah introduced the idea of Machon Micah in 2009. The Machon aims to provide Jewish learning experiences for both kids and adults and it combines experiential education with conventional learning settings. Taken together, we hope that Temple Micah families feel prepared to live Jewishly in a meaningful way and that students have a positive, enriching experience in classes and E-vrit tutoring sessions.

In 1838, Rebecca Gratz instituted the first Jewish Sunday school in America. The curriculum of Bible, prayers in English, holidays, Jewish home rituals and values devised by Gratz is familiar to us even today. Gratz prioritized inculcating a strong sense of tzedakah and community rather than the Talmudic instruction that was found in European Jewish institutions. Her goal was in part to inoculate Jewish children against the 19th century missionary tide in America. Rebecca Gratz was also extremely pragmatic: she realized that instructional time was short, and that teaching subjects that would bolster what we think of today as *modern Jewish identity* was key to raising confident and thoughtful Jewish students.

That the model that we currently reference for Jewish religious education is

not so different from the one created by Rebecca Gratz is perhaps surprising, but it’s also very Jewish. Gratz created a roadmap for the most broadly accessed form of Jewish education in America. Drawing from the Christian concept of Sunday school, she envisioned a way for Jewish families to teach their children who they were while they participated as fully as possible in American life.

What makes a supplementary educational program successful today? Finding the balance between modeling Jewish living, learning the “basics” about Jewish life and tradition (Torah narratives, holiday observances, Shabbat, Israeli culture and history, and mitzvot) and understanding our Jewish past are key building blocks for a curriculum. Jewish culture and tradition are so very rich that it is necessary to carefully decide and “edit in” content to the instructional time that we have with our students. At Machon Micah we endeavor to find gateways to our stories, traditions and culture so that families will engage with them. This year our youngest students have begun learning the Hebrew letters using the *Hebrew Through Movement* curriculum. Thanks to Assistant Director of Education Alison Litvin, all of our E-vrit students have access to wonderful digital games that enhance their Hebrew decoding and mastery of liturgy. I am thrilled to note that our teen offerings have tripled in numbers, and with soon-to-be Director of Education Mckinley Edelman’s hard work and enthusiasm we are able to provide topical and exciting opportunities for our Micah teens.

In some forty years of working at synagogue educational settings I have seen instructional time shrink while extracurricular demands on our students have grown. This challenges us to continue to find ways to bring a lived Jewish experience to them, so that students *will* engage and also love their time at Machon Micah.

At the end of June I will step away



from the helm of Machon Micah. Capping my career here at Temple Micah has been an enormous privilege and a joy. Working at a congregation is not a “normal” job because the rhythms of congregational life include simchas, loss and everything in between. We become acquainted in ways that most office jobs would never afford, and I do not take that lightly. I value the many wonderful Micah people whom I have come to know, and I will miss seeing you regularly! Prior to my arrival at Temple Micah I met Rabbi Zemel several times through my friend and colleague, Shira Zemel. I was excited for the challenge to work with the entire Micah leadership team in a place that holds Jewish intellectual life and culture in the highest esteem, and in this I have been rewarded many times over. I love that Temple Micah is always thinking about the Jewish future. Our education program could not have expanded without the many talents of our post-Covid Machon Education team of Mckinley Edelman and Alison Litvin. I am so grateful to be able to work alongside them and with all our Temple Micah staff.

As we begin this spring to transition our Machon Micah leadership, I know that the new team will begin their tenure from a position of strength and stability. I am excited to see what the future holds for Machon Micah students and for the greater Micah community, and I am so very glad that Temple Micah has played such an important role in my Jewish education adventure. I look forward to coming back often to share in the next iteration of Temple Micah. Until then, *l'hitra'ot*.

SHOWING UP: THE SACRED ACT OF BEING TOGETHER

BY RABBI JOSH BERAHA

They say a sermon shouldn't introduce something entirely new, and that a preacher's role is not to surprise, but to remind or inspire. That's the meaning of the phrase "preaching to the choir," because, presumably, the choir already knows the message. But the truth is, the choir still needs to remember why they sing—and how.

And so, what I write here are not groundbreaking insights but a return to what grounds us.

The rabbis taught, "*Al tifrosh min ha'tzibur*—do not separate yourself from the community." (Pirkei Avot 2:4) And long before the rabbis, the writers of Genesis knew too, "*Lo tov heyot ha'adam levado*—it is not good for people to be alone." (Genesis 2:18)

If there's one message for these fragile and frightening times, it's this: we need each other. And not just community for the sake of community, but a chorus that lifts us up. A gathering of voices that holds the melody when we falter, that reminds us our song is part of something larger.

Isolation causes us to lose our way. We forget we belong to a greater composition. We forget that the questions we ask have been asked before, that our anxieties are not entirely new, and that others have searched for the same notes before us.

And yet, the structures of modern life push us toward isolation. The spaces that once anchored communal life—libraries, town halls, sanctuaries, committees that met in person—are disappearing, replaced by private screens and remote interactions. Everything now is about convenience, allowing us to shop, work, and even worship without stepping outside. We know this, but we go along with it. Because it's easier. Because it's safer. Because after a long day, showing up anywhere, physically, can feel like too much.

Sherry Turkle, professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

warns that "we expect more from technology and less from each other." Virtual spaces give us the sensation of community but lack the substance of real human presence. In the digital world, we are never truly vulnerable. We curate our words on email, filter our faces on Zoom, exit a conversation with the click of a button. But true connection demands something more—presence.

These days, the news is a deluge of distressing headlines. It's easy to feel drowned out, our own voices lost in the noise, uncertain if singing even mat-

“History moves forward because of the choices of real people who refuse to give in to isolation or indifference.”

ters. But the synagogue, and by extension Jewish tradition, tells a different story. It tells us that even in our darkest moments, we are not alone. History moves forward because of the choices of real people who refuse to give in to isolation or indifference.

I love Martin Buber's rendering of God's name as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, "*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*," often translated as "I am that I am." Buber instead translates it as, "I shall be present as I shall be present," shifting the focus from *being* to *presence*, from God to humans. For Buber, the realization of the Divine is not an abstract theological proposition but *a lived experience*, and one defined by showing up.

Similarly, the Talmud (Sotah 40a) teaches through Rabbi Yitchak that in the time of the Temple, when the priests blessed the people, they turned to face



the congregation, *their backs toward God*. The message is clear: holiness is not found in retreating but in turning toward one another. The Divine is not a remote presence but is made real in the connections we build with one another.

This is why Buber later points out, "In the Torah, no distinction is made between the 'social' and the 'religious'; the religious element marks the direction, the social determines the course." Faith, in other words, is not only about personal contemplation but unfolds in our interactions with others.

The alternative, as Buber saw it, is a life of angst, which he defined simply as "not to belong"

Practically speaking, there are obstacles—a good book, a cozy couch. Parking is limited, and not all of us drive after dark. The melodies might be unfamiliar, or the Temple's message may not fully align with our beliefs. All of this can be true.

But being together, even in imperfection or disagreement, is better than going it alone. If the world needs less of anything right now, it's isolation. And if we need more of anything, it's each other.

I hope I'm preaching to the choir. But even choirs need practice and to remember why they sing. So if you've forgotten the tune, come join us. Someone will help you find your voice again.

"God," writes Buber, "does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but simply *to be realized through us*." (Emphasis added.)

This is our task—and why we sing: to bring the *moreness* of the world to life by being with one another.