

**Sorry, We're Open;
Warmth and Depth and Breadth
Yom Kippur Morning 5784
September 25, 2023**

Words of wisdom, from a wrinkled shirt on a stranger passing by:
“Nostalgia,” the shirt astutely proclaims... “Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be.”

Last month, on Cape Cod, we returned to a place with nostalgic appeal for us. It is a weather-worn, old-time breakfast spot in Chatham called Larry’s Px, where fish tales and flapjacks and coffee are spread around in the morning, and the sign on the door reads: “Sorry, We’re Open.” And there, on the wall, are the following words of wisdom: “Order Whatever You Want. Eat Whatever You Get.”

I have my own fish tale at the moment. Talia and I did go on the water while on the Cape. She caught no less than 14 fish – all of a kind no one wanted. And I... I continued a frustrating personal tradition. One year I caught a 30-inch-long striped bass. The minimum that summer was 31. The next year I caught one 33 inches long! But the keeper size that season was 34. This summer I caught a 15.5-inch black bass. The limit, of course, was 16.

We had a great time. And for dinner that night? We had chicken. And a few choice words about rules and regulations.

But rules... expectations, norms, standards...do have a role to play in our lives still.

Long ago and far away... The tale is told of a prospective proselyte, interested in Jewish life, who approaches the two greatest sages of the time. גִּירְנִי עַל מְנַת שְׁתַּלְמְדֵנִי כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלָה כְּשֶׁאֲנִי עוֹמֵד עַל רֶגֶל אַחַת “I will convert to Judaism,” the man announces, “if you can teach me the entire Torah, while I stand on one foot!”

Is this a prank? Is he setting up some ancient equivalent of a TikTok video to show his friends, who will have a hearty laugh at the expense of these ridiculous rabbis? What’s going on here?

One of the rabbis doesn’t dignify the stunt with a response. The Talmud tells us דָּחְפוּ בְּאֵמַת הַבְּנֵן שְׁבִידוֹ. Shammai chases the man away with a stick. Or, literally, the “builder’s cubit” that was in his hand.

Many of you know what comes next. The man goes to Hillel with the same offensive offer. Instead of chasing him away, however, Hillel responds with the Jewish version of the Golden Rule:

דַּעֲלֵךְ סְנִי לְחֻבְרָה לָּא תַעֲבִיד — זֶה הֵיא כָּל הַתּוֹרָה כּוֹלָה וְאֵינְךָ פִּירוּשָׁה הוּא

What is hateful to you, do not do to another.
That is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary!”

Then he adds words which are often left out: זֵיל גְּמֹור “Go, study!” Go forth, go out, and learn more.

But the summary, and the attempt to meet the man where he was, on his own terms... that was enough. The man becomes part of our people.

So Hillel is the hero here. That is the usual view. Look at his kindness, his way of responding, his openness! The result supports this: Hillel's approach... well, if what we want is to bring people in, his approach works!

Most of the time, I agree. Catch more flies, and all that. But there is one small part of me that wants to say... let's not move on too fast.

In stories, details are not accidental. Do you know about "Chekhov's gun?" It is a narrative principle that every element in a tale must be necessary. Anything irrelevant should be removed. So, if a gun appears in a play early on, even in the background, it has to be used at some point later in the plot. With this awareness, I don't want to ignore what was in Shammai's hand.

What did he use to chase the man away? It was an *amat habinyan*. A builder's cubit. Not just a stick - a *measuring* stick. A testing tool. A symbol... of standards.

I want Hillel's kindness. But don't forget...Shammai's expectations are important as well. Open arms. And guidance, direction and challenge. Harmony and growth. How we feel, and what we should do. Who we are, and who we should be. Is, and ought.

I have said before, and I affirm again now: I want to build a Jewish life, a communal life, I want to be part of a synagogue which stands for three things. I want us to be a place of warmth, and depth, and breadth.

Warmth. Acceptance of who we are, and how we come.

Maybe it has always been this way. Or maybe it is more so today. But the plain fact of contemporary Jewish life is this: if we don't begin with warmth, if we are not open in tone and inclusive in our approach, nothing else we do matters.

Adam Sandler's newest movie "dropped" on Netflix a few weeks ago. His wife and daughters are cast with him in *You Are So Not Invited to My Bat Mitzvah*. I found it filled with stereotypes but still funny. I loved the almost too-cool Rabbi Rebecca. What struck me in the middle of the movie, though, were the family names of two characters: Chang Cohen, and Roderiguez Schwartz. Not an accident, of course. And not unusual, either.

We come here, alone or in groups, in many shapes, and from many backgrounds. Perhaps this poses some challenges. When you come from different cultural backgrounds, and you plan a menu for a party, do you want there to be just enough so your guests don't starve, to take the edge off the drinks? Or do you want them to feel... like they never have to eat again?

But mostly this is a great blessing. We are of all races or mixed race, we are in same-sex marriages and traditional ones, we have Jews by choice and Jews by chance and interfaith families and some who are just curious about who we are and what we do. We welcome Jewish families in all the forms in which they come today.

Believers and skeptics mix and mingle. We Jews are quirky, and we are very different from one another. Steinberg goes to synagogue to speak with God. Bergstein goes to synagogue to speak with Steinberg. Either way, here, in this place, both are welcome.

This *has to be* the first step. We can't overstate how important this is.

Once, far away and long ago – not here, of course, it could not have happened here... a new family came to a service. I was caught up with a sudden crisis and could not get to them at the Oneg. I reached them the next week. They told me they would never come back.

Because there they were, after services... and no one spoke to them. No one greeted them. No one welcomed them. No one interacted with them at all.

Look, it is a hard world out there. What we want, above all, is a place to fit in, to feel connected, to be ourselves. And really....to twist the theme song of Cheers a bit, [as I shared at my Installation...](#) it should be a Bar Mitzvah, not a bar, where everybody knows your name. And we're always glad you came.

This is not just a one-way street. To create, maintain, sustain, build and even expand a holy community, this is not just about how you feel when you come here, but what you do to welcome others. It is not just how we are welcomed, but how welcoming we are. This is a charge which falls not just on me, on our staff, on our leadership. This is a value, this is a vision that has to permeate every part of who we are, and what we do.

This is a rooted community. Atlantic City roots run deep. People still speak about high school. There is a sense of stability, and preservation. Our connections often transcend generations.

But remember... Or try to imagine... what it is like to be new! Not everyone is from here. Not everyone's partner has those same experiences. And our children... Time passes. Places change. And none of our children recall or respond to the nostalgic pull of a neighborhood that once was but is no more.

Remember: cliques kill community.

What I am asking is for each one of us to view ourselves as an ambassador. Be active, proactive, and welcoming. Be open. Reach out. Greet newcomers, *bring* newcomers, act as if people are coming to your home, and make everyone around you feel welcome! **Be Hillel!**

A Christian friend of mine put the matter well, for her own tradition, when she said: "Love everyone. No exceptions."

We are not just a collection of like-minded believers and similar-practicing associates. We are a people.

And as part of the Jewish people, you belong. Period. It comes before what you think, and it is greater than what you do. It is acceptance and inclusion... beyond behavior and belief.

Without warmth, without a sense of being accepted, without this being a place of comfort, we may never take the next step.

But acceptance... acceptance does not have to mean *agreement* about everything. And comfort... comfort is only part of why we are here. We are also here to grow. Who we are, yes. But also, who we can and should be.

Depth.

I have heard people refer to our movement as “Judaism Lite.” I cringe at the phrase. It is true that Reform Judaism was founded to ease our way in the modern world while retaining our identity and remaining Jewish. We support the impulse to be engaged with all the opportunities and activities around us.

There are many real demands on our time. As I once observed, “the god of soccer is a vengeful god.” But even with all our activities, balanced against other commitments, Jewish life *can't always come last*, if we have any hope at all of honoring our roots, experiencing excellence, and infusing our lives with meaning and purpose.

Reform Judaism was never meant to be “less than,” something “watered down” or a pale reflection of some more traditional “real thing.” It is about *understanding change, embracing challenge, making choices about our own Jewish lives*. Learning about tradition, rules and regulations, customs and practices. Striving towards standards, grappling with expectations. And then

sifting and sorting: what are we called still to retain? How are we compelled to reframe?

Being a place of depth means we are not afraid to take where we are... and take it to the next level. **Be Shammai!** Measure, and learn; be thoughtful about what you do.

This is a place... where you can do that, too. Just in the coming months, just for this Fall we offer different choices and chances for Jewish growth. On Wednesday evenings in October, we offer Taste of Judaism, a three-week nationally tested “taste” meant for anyone, from those who are curious or have questions, or those who have doubts about or disagreements with organized religion. On Wednesdays in November and December we dive more deeply into Foundations for a Thoughtful Judaism, still somewhat introductory, but using some of the teaching tools of the Shalom Hartman Institute of Jerusalem.

On Thursday afternoons, beginning in October, we present Great Books I, in which we go Beyond the Bible, an exploration of some of the most important works of Jewish tradition in between the Hebrew Scriptures and the modern world: the Talmud, Midrash, the Law Code of Maimonides, the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, and more.

Almost every Saturday morning we come together for an exploration of the Torah portion of the week, meeting in the Cohen Library or on Zoom, sometimes covering a chapter, sometimes a single verse in our time together. And now, over the coming months... I am very pleased to announce that we will

be serving as a test site, part of a pilot program for the Reform movement's new Torah commentary.

Whether with us, in person or online, with others or on your own, this year I hope each one of us...wherever we may be, will do something more. Will take our Jewish learning to a new level. "Now, study."

And breadth. That the values we teach and preach in these halls, within these walls, walk with us into the world. זיל גמור Go forth, go out!

Last January we were able to bring to this community something I had witnessed in St Thomas – a way of involving local high schools in our observance of the MLK holiday. We asked schools to select one senior who best represented the "spirit" of Dr. King, and then, in our service before the holiday, we heard from the students, their essays about the issues they thought Dr. King's ideals called us to address today. We then presented each selected student with our First Annual Beth Israel Spirit of Martin Luther King scholarship award.

These scholarships were made possible through our own Brickman/Gross Special Purpose Fund. And those of you who were here at this service witnessed the spontaneous offer to match these gifts, made by the Atlantic City Chapter of the NAACP. That partnership now continues.

Outreach is aimed at an outcome. What we teach, what we preach in this place is connected to the world around us. We are a part of the larger community, not apart from it.

Our tradition travels with us. It can be a source of comfort, warmth... and insight, depth. It is there in our professional lives, anytime we come to a crossroads between ethics and expediency. It is there in a family crisis almost all of us will face, struggling with hard choices in a hospital as loved ones come together to say goodbye. It is there as we watch rights and health care choices we took for granted for fifty years be challenged and change – often in ways which are a direct violation of our own Jewish teachings. It is there, on the bridge to Ocean City and the lawns of our neighbors, as we argue over wind and water and values and our view. It is there as we stand up for those who are vulnerable, who have less of a voice – because we know what it is like to be outside and other, because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The Reform movement chose, for Yom Kippur, a Torah reading different from the one in more traditional settings. *Atem nitzavim kulchem...* we stand, today, all of us, all of us, men and women and children, sages and street-workers, natives and newcomers, all of us, together... And: *lo vashamayim hi*. This Torah, this learning is attainable, achievable, available. And: *u'vacharta bachayim*, this is meant for life, for our lives.

Acceptance. And Challenge. And Change.

**Unapologetically, we're open. Warmth. Without a doubt – or even
with some - we stand for something. Depth. And: what we do matters.
Breadth.**

We come together today. What we can build here is not just a path to the past but a foundation for the future. Not just nostalgia, but aspiration. Stirred by memory yet spurred to action. An honored heritage. And a sacred task, in our hands. In all of our hands.

L'shana Tovah.