

Sacred Gifts
Rosh Hashanah Morning 2009
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When I was a little girl, I could not have imagined that it was possible for me to be a rabbi. I had no model for it. My rabbi was a man. My cantor was a man. Our Director of Education was a man. And our temple presidents were most certainly *always* men.

The women in my Reform congregation ran the giftshop and prepared the *onegs*. I had never seen an adult woman hold a Torah, let alone read from one, or make the announcements during the service. Even the girls in my B'nai Mitzvah class would not have thought about putting on a *tallis* or a *kippah* or expected to be back on the bimah for any reason other than Confirmation or maybe their wedding.

Then for my Bat Mitzvah I was given the gift of a book. But it was more than a book, it opened up worlds that I had not imagined. Because in that book I saw a photo of a young female rabbi in a *tallis* and a *kippah*, holding a Torah in front of an ark – and my world changed in an instant. Suddenly I could see myself as a Jewish adult in a way that spoke to me on a core level. I saw myself in that image in the book, and for the first time, I really saw myself as part of a sacred community.

It was the first time I could see myself as being fully part of the Jewish community as an adult. I could now see there could be a place for my love of learning, my love of Torah, and of social justice within a synagogue setting.

I think of that story now, and, I look at our *bimah*, and I worry. I look around and I wonder, can *my* sons see themselves on this *bimah*? Where will they see their place in *this* synagogue?

We as a congregation need to begin a conversation not only about gender but also about the different ways we model what it means to be an adult in our congregation. We need to look at ourselves and ask, are we as a congregation doing all we can to create a welcoming environment for ALL of our members? Are we providing a variety of models or images of Judaism so that everyone in our congregation can see themselves, their own stories, their own voices, as being part of what happens here?

We need to make sure that the boys and the girls, the women and the men, in our congregation know that their place can be in the kitchen and on the *bimah*, on the Temple Board or as a teacher, or simply that they are valued as an important part of our congregation.

Last night I spoke about creating sacred space – a holy gathering place where each of us can come together and find a safe haven, a sanctuary. This morning I want to talk about sacred gifts. What does each of us, every man and every woman, bring to this sacred space, what are our gifts to this temple? How do we bring ourselves to this sacred space and make our own unique talents and perspectives a holy offering to B'nai Israel?

And by gifts, I don't mean monetary contributions – while those are always welcome and needed. And the board would be upset with me if I didn't remind you to please remember to fill out, and turn in, your High Holiday pledge cards.

No, what I mean something else. I'm talking about each of us as individuals – what is our own personal gift that we bring to this *k'hillat kodesh* – to this sacred congregation? The Torah speaks of two different types of contributions to the *Mishkan*, or the Tabernacle – each one can be seen as a metaphor for us to understand the different ways that we can contribute to our congregation.

In the building of the Mishkan, God said to Moses: “Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart is so moved... And let them make Me a sanctuary so that I may dwell amongst them.” (Ex. 25:2 and 25:8)

The Hebrew text is explicit in saying who it is that should bring gifts, it says “*kol ish*” - *every person*. The rabbis teach us that all members of the community, men and women are to bring voluntary gifts¹. Each person is to decide for themselves what offering, what gifts, they want to bring to the creation of the *Mishkan*, to the creation of the Tabernacle.

S'forno, the medieval commentator, said that it was important to note that God specifically included the phrase “whose heart so moves him” in order to distinguish between that which is freely given, and *tzedakah*, which are obligatory contributions.

A few chapters later in Exodus we are given an example of what is considered to be an obligatory gift. We are told that when the census is taken, each person who is counted must pay a half-shekel tax to the Sanctuary. The Torah further states: “Everyone who is entered in the records, from the age of twenty years up, shall give the Eternal One an offering: the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than a half a shekel” when giving to the census. (Ex. 30:11-15)

These are two very different models of giving, but both are needed, because each one serves a different purpose.

The voluntary gifts enable us to express ourselves as individuals, different and distinct, recognizing that each person has something special to offer, and there needs to be space for us to make offerings from our own hearts and not only gifts that are commanded from a decree on high.

And while the voluntary gifts enable us to infuse this shared space with a spirit of Holiness by bringing a bit of ourselves to it, the obligatory census tax is also important because it supports the Mishkan itself and it recognizes the important reality that when we do a head count of who is in the community, all of us, rich or poor, should be counted the same way, symbolizing that we are all of equal value and equal importance in our community, and to our community.

So let's get back to the idea of the voluntary gifts. The Torah describes them as objects that bring beauty to the Tabernacle, precious objects of gold and silver, fine fabrics and exotic materials. And the purpose of bringing these gifts are so that we can make a space where the Holy One feels welcome, and can dwell in our midst.

But today I believe that what is most precious to us are not things, but time, not objects, but ourselves. When we bring ourselves, our own personal talents, our own wisdom and perspective, our own sense of caring, and even just our physical selves to this sacred space, we are bringing the most precious gift of all.

¹ Nachmanides

The torah teaches us that Moses was instructed to speak to all of the Israelites saying to them, saying to us,:

You shall be holy, because I your Eternal God am holy!

To be “holy” to be “kodesh” also means to be set aside, consecrated for a specific purpose. Each of us, male *and* female, are made in God’s image, each of us is special and unique, created with our own talents and abilities in this world. Each of us, male *and* female, are needed to create a sacred community. Our gifts may be different, but they are all essential. Because WE are the gifts that God desires.

We become *kodesh* when we are present and involved and engaged in the work of our community, we become *kodesh* when we set aside our time and our skills for the purpose of creating a sacred community.

What makes this space sacred is not the ark or the Torahs, or the mezuzahs on the doors. What makes this space glow on a day like today is the presence of each of you. You are the sacred offerings. Friends and family, long time members and new ones, guests and visitors, as well as those who are seeking a spiritual home and still finding their way, when we bring ourselves as an offering *then* we are inviting the Holy One to dwell amongst us. The Sacred dwells in our midst when we see the very space between us, around us, and within us, the space that we occupy with ourselves and within our relationships as holy, as special, as *kodesh*.

When we provide different images of the sacred, male and female, young and old, we create an environment that values different images of holiness.

So as we immerse ourselves in the High Holiday season, let us each begin to ask, what gift can I bring to the temple? What do I have to offer that is mine to give?

I want to ask each of you to make a voluntary contribution of time to B’nai Israel over the course of the next year. I want to ask each person to consider committing to eighteen hours of service, in any way that your heart so moves you. And if you already come more than 18 hours a year, commit to 36 hours.

And just in case you’re looking for ideas, I have a few...

We need help in creating a mentoring program for young men and boys in our congregation, a Big Brotherhood program if you will, where the men in our congregation can teach our sons and young men what it means to be a *Mensch*..

We need your help in creating offerings that ensure that the men in our congregation feel heard and seen, and their needs are met as well. These opportunities might be academic or spiritual, they might involve social action, or simply be a weekly basketball game – anything is possible, but we need your ideas and your help in creating them.

We need our parents and educators to be involved in our youth and adult education programs, we need you to help us as we move forward in defining what it means for B’nai Israel to be a community of learners.

And if you like to get your hands dirty, help us build and maintain an Organic Garden here at B'nai Israel, or get involved in maintaining our buildings and grounds. Or if you're looking to start out on a smaller scale, help us build the *sukkah* on the Friday after Yom Kippur.

We are always looking for volunteers to read Torah or give a d'var torah on Shabbat. And if you love music, join the choir or help us start a klezmer band, or talk with Julie Steinberg about how we can bring more music to our Shabbat and holiday celebrations.

Many of you have special skills in your professional and personal lives, skills in such fields as education, computers, technology, carpentry, art, finance and advertising, to name just a few, we invite you to volunteer in these capacities at the temple, or offer some of these services pro bono to members of the congregation who might need some extra assistance these days.

Or if your special talent is being able to walk up to a stranger and make them feel welcome, we'd love for you to sign up to be a shamus on Shabbat.

Three years ago I spoke about the importance of brownies at the onegs. I misspoke, because it's not just brownies that are important, cookies, cakes, pies, or a nice fruit platter is always needed to bring a little extra warmth to a Shabbat Service, helping us to build and strengthen relationships after Shabbat services are over. My husband also suggested that I let you know that cheesecakes are always good too.

If you like to bake, feel free to make a few batches of something that can be frozen and pulled out for an *oneg*. Or honor a special birthday, anniversary, *yertzeit*, or milestone in your life by sponsoring a Shabbat *oneg*.

If you're not already doing so, consider participating in a Brotherhood, BISO or Women of B'nai Israel activity or try something new and take on a leadership role for an event or committee.

Another important opportunity where someone can get involved is with Hineini, our Caring Committee. Try committing to sending one note a month to a person who is on the healing list, or visit a fellow member who is home bound on the holidays. Or send a condolence note to someone after they have lost a loved one.

Whatever form your involvement might take on is up to you. I only ask that you find something that is meaningful to you, and then do it, and then do it again and again. Or use this as an opportunity to try something you haven't done before.

All I ask is this, look inside yourself and discover what your special gift can be.

On your seats you should have a sign up card. As you give these hours of service, please fill out the card and turn them into the office so we can both keep track of who is bringing gifts, and in what areas. Fill out a new card each time you do something. We'll keep a box in the office and the Sanctuary Foyer where you can drop your cards off each time you come to temple, or if you prefer, pop them in the mail.

We'll keep track of all the hours, and give you periodic email updates about how many hours we've done as a congregation, and what opportunities are coming up. Every person who completes either 18 or 36 hours of service between this Rosh HaShanah and next will be recognized next year during the High Holidays.

When I was a young girl I had to look towards a picture in a book to see what it could mean to me to be an adult Jew. I needed to see what someone else had to give in order for me to begin to see that I also had something to offer.

Each of us has the opportunity through our own actions to model for others what it means to be *kodesh* – sacred and special in our own right. Each of us through our own deeds can make sacred offerings to our congregation and to each other.

God has given us the important task of creating holy space and sacred relationships. The responsibility of creating sacred space and holy relationships lay in our hands, not in someone else's. The work is ours, and the invitation is ours to make, not Gods, not the rabbi alone, but all of us have something to bring to the table, to bring to the altar.

And when we do this, when we bring ourselves to this place, then we have created sacred space where holiness can dwell.

And who knows, maybe the gift that you give will be what someone else needed so that they can discover the sacred within themselves.

May this year be a year filled with the blessings of joy, of health and of peace, for each of us, for our community, and for all the world. Shana tova.