

## **Renewing the Works of Creation**

Rosh Hashanah Morning - September 19, 2009  
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California  
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One of the real joys of our congregation is our preschool, Gan Sameach. Most mornings when I arrive at Temple, I make it a point to walk by Gan Sameach's playground to say hello to the children. When they see me, some of the kids come to the fence, jump and down, and call out: "Hi Rabbi!" Of course I greet them with a big smile and say "Hi" right back; though I don't jump quite as high or shout quite as loud as they do.

I freely admit that it's an energy boost for me to see their bright faces. I love witnessing their enthusiasm and excitement. How joyful it is for these little children to make a new discovery each day. How thrilled they are to learn how to count to twenty; to hear the sound of the shofar; to listen attentively to a story; and to celebrate Shabbat each week.

Anyone who encounters a young child knows exactly what I am talking about. Whenever we interact with youngsters – whether at Gan Sameach or at home; whether at our neighborhood park or when we visit grandchildren – we are reminded of the delights of the young. We see through their eyes how the world is a thrilling place of discovery. In our playful times with children, we are reminded what it means to fill our day with delight and enthusiasm.

Too often we adults forget about this youthful vitality as we return to our daily responsibilities. We get caught up in our web of chores to do. We focus on issues that require our attention. We are adults after all, with families to care for and tasks to accomplish. Because we are so busy being adults, we lose sight of our youthful perspective.

But guess what? Judaism says we're not supposed to act as big boys and big girls all the time. In fact, Judaism says, we're to be child-like in how we view the world each and every day. Especially on this sacred day of Rosh Hashanah, we are encouraged to live with the youthful enthusiasm of children.

This may well surprise you. After all, today is a High Holy Day, a time of hyper responsibility about our obligations to God, and our commitment to ethical behavior. The High Holy Days are full of purpose and seriousness;

prayer and penitence; fear and awe. This very day of Rosh Hashanah is entitled Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgment. We confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. We emphasize the most adult parts of our personality – judging our behaviors, reflecting on our past, taking responsibility for our misdeeds, and asking others to forgive us as well. On this Day of Judgment, we envision God opening the Book of Life and writing our fate for the coming year. It does not get much heavier than when we speak about this day as determining who shall live and who shall die; who by fire and who by earthquake.

Yet there is a countervailing voice in our tradition that says in essence, “Hey Jews, it’s not so bad,” because Rosh Hashanah is not just about judgments and decrees; it’s also about vitality and youthfulness. There is another name for Rosh Hashanah besides Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment. Rosh Hashanah is also called Yom HaRat Ha’Olam; which means, on this day, the world was created.

Yom HaDin demands that we behave like adults. Yet, paradoxically, Yom Harat Ha’Olam, doesn’t want us to be so heavy. In fact, this Day of Creation emphasizes just the opposite. It really invites us to act like children. On this day we are to relish the simple pleasures of life. Ever see a preschooler bite into a fresh apple? So too, when we dip our apples into honey on Rosh Hashanah, we are to do so with pleasure.

Ever see a youngster play with a close friend? So too we are to enjoy the company of friends on this sacred day.

Ever see a young child discover something amazing – a creepy crawly in the backyard or the blossoming of a seed? So too, on this day, we are meant to see the world with fresh eyes; to discover something new about the world. On this Rosh Hashanah day, we are to begin a fresh start and rediscover in ourselves the capacity for wonder and creativity.

Much earlier in this morning’s service, we recited a prayer that reminds us about creation. This prayer is called Yotzer. We praise God with these words: *Uvtuvo M’hadeish B’chol Yom Tamid Ma’asei B’reishit. For in Your goodness you renew each day the works of creation.*

This prayer speaks of God’s action in the present tense. God renews the works of creation each and every day. It doesn’t say, *Uvtuvo Hadash Ma’asei B’reishit*, You created the world long ago, thanks very much. Our Yotzer prayer doesn’t thank God for creating the world in seven days and then God wiping off the dirt and saying, “All right, I’m done and I’m out of here.”

No, *Uvtuvo M’hadeish B’chol Yom Tamid Ma’asei B’reishit*

signifies that God is continuing the works of creation. Furthermore, we humans are called upon to be God's partner in this creative process.

To be God's partner in the unfolding process of creation means first and foremost that we cultivate in ourselves our creative spark of the divine. We are to maintain our child-like capability of seeing the world with awe and wonder. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expressed this idea beautifully when he wrote:

*Awe is an intuition for the ..dignity of all things and their preciousness to God. . Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine; to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.” God in Search of Man, page 75.*

We are called upon to be God's partner by nurturing our child-like spirit, cultivating our capacity for joy and wonder. Undoubtedly, there are many different ways individuals express creativity. Some of us express ourselves in art and others do so by sailing. Some create by writing and others by singing. Some find joy in cooking and others create masterpieces by composing music.

There are many different ways each person can express his or her spirit. In the moments ahead, I want to focus now on how we nurture our creative spirit in our communal life as a congregation.

At Temple Beth Torah, we have many strengths – the shared memories of the past 40 years that unite long time members of the congregation. Social bonds of friendship tie us together as a community. We are a congregation that relishes moments of celebration like births, B'nei Mitzvah, and weddings. We share as well our sorrow when a loved one passes away. We are a synagogue that knows how to have a great time – on Simchat Torah, on Purim, and at Pesach Seders; as well as on many other occasions throughout the year.

These are real strengths at Temple Beth Torah – there is a solid, consistent, and mature base to our congregation. Yet, the very strength of our synagogue can paradoxically be a weakness. For, at times at Temple Beth Torah, we are too adult in our orientation, too grown-up in our judgments. Sometimes, when something new happens in our congregation, there is resistance. There is comment and criticism. The cry goes up – “it's always been this way” and it is strongly implied that's how it should be.

I believe it is vital that we resist our resistance to change.

As a congregation we need to reenergize ourselves. We need to recapture some of our youth. We need to try new things and be willing to explore unfamiliar possibilities. Routine and even organized religion sometimes can be the enemy of the spirit. In the coming year, there are three core areas we can revitalize.

The first key area is worship. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer states in tractate Brachot, “One who makes his prayer routine – his prayer is not acceptable.” At Temple Beth Torah we have a solid base for worship. We have a beautiful new prayer book, Mishkan T’filah. Our Shabbat services are a lovely time for our congregation to come together for worship. But too often we get stuck in a routine – we move through the words of the prayer book without much reflection or feeling. So our communal task is to find increased opportunities in the coming year to make our prayers alive, to fill them with kavannah, with intent and meaning.

Sometimes that means we must be willing to experiment and try something that has not been done before. In the past year, we began offering something different on Shabbat morning, an alternative service. For those who seek an experience like a “regular” Shabbat service, you will be disappointed. However, for those who seek a more expansive time for prayer, this may be the right service for you. This alternative Shabbat service allows time just to be; to sit in quiet meditation, to sing a niggun, a wordless melody that allows one’s soul to open up in prayer. For those seeking a personal connection to Torah, this service allows for the opportunity to stand on the bimah and not feel separated by those up here and those of you down there. For those who want a new way to share yourself with God, this service may be just right for you. Next month, on October 17, we will hold our first alternative Shabbat morning service.

We will continue in the coming year to find new ways to connect to God. Perhaps we will add in such new elements as yoga and story telling. Some of these services will be held at Temple. Maybe we will find other places to gather together. Here in the Bay area we have great opportunities to embrace nature whether at a local park, or on a hiking trail, or by the water. We have so many ways we can recite with wonder: , *Uvtuvo M’hadeish B’chol Yom Tamid Ma’asei B’reishit. In Your goodness you renew each day the works of creation.*

In this New Year of 5770, there is a second way to renew in ourselves our youthful spirit at Temple Beth Torah and that is through learning. Study is one of the primary expressions of the Jewish spirit. I truly believe that we encounter God not only in the sanctuary, but in the classroom as well.

As you know, Temple Beth Torah has long offered opportunities for adults to learn. It is limiting though when we think that adult learning is synonymous with what's been done in the past, that is, adult learning means Midrasha on Tuesday nights. That model does not exist anymore.

Adult learning takes place here at Temple all the time, on many different days. It happens on Sunday mornings in my Torah study class. It occurs on the same morning when Michelle Eisenbruck teaches adults Hebrew. Adult learning occurs whenever Shalom Aleynu on Monday morning or Women of Temple Beth Torah or Brotherhood invite a speaker to enlighten us. Yes, adult learning regularly takes place on Tuesday night with my Introduction to Judaism course and during an upcoming class by Rabbi Fishman on Judaism and Sexuality. Adult learning happened as well on a Saturday night, such as last May, when Women of Temple Beth Torah presented an interesting film about Jewish professors from Germany and their impact on African American colleges in the South. Jack Weinstein led a wonderfully stimulating discussion that night about the movie. Adult learning happens during our spring lecture series and it will take place in just ten days when we will hold a study session on Yom Kippur afternoon.

My point is – there are many opportunities for adults to learn at Temple Beth Torah – and not just on Tuesday night during what used to be called Midrasha. That was the routine in days gone by. So my challenge to all of you is this – in this new year, how many of you will take advantage of these great opportunities to expand your knowledge, to discover anew the depth of our tradition, or to see reflected in the pages of our texts your spiritual quest for meaning and substance? How many, besides the so-called regulars, will engage in learning and through your studies renew and re-energize your soul?

There is one other key element I believe we need to address in the coming year. We have spoken about increasing kavannah in our communal worship. We have addressed the opportunity for every adult in our community to engage in learning. The third key element is to talk, honestly, about a segment of our community that is conspicuously absent from our midst.

If you were to conduct a demographic survey of Temple Beth Torah, you would find that out of our membership of about 200 families, the percentage of our membership with children of school age – meaning preschool, elementary, middle, and high school – represents only one third of our membership. As for the number of member families in which one

adult member is under the age of 40, we have about ten families, representing about 5 per cent of our membership.

People between the ages of 18 and their late 30's are clearly missing in our membership. We all know the typical reasons why. Our kids graduate high school, most go off to college, a time of experimentation and exploration, and then, we don't expect younger adults to join a synagogue until after they get married, have children, and are ready to enroll their children in Religious School.

Well, I have news for you: that so-called reality is changing. Many younger adult Jews are not going to be joining our synagogue and that's no reflection on the wonderful quality of religious education we offer here at Temple. The absence of adults in their 20's and 30's at Temple Beth Torah is reflective of a larger trend being played out across the country.

Many younger Jewish adults do not see the need to join a synagogue. And no amount of parental berating is going to change the minds of younger Jews who do not see the need to be part of organized religion. Just because these younger Jews are not members of a synagogue does not mean they have disconnected from Judaism altogether. These days, many young Jews are finding their own ways to express their Jewish identity. There are plenty of young Jewish adults who find their niche somewhere other than the synagogue. Some do it on-line, participating in social networks that link people across the world in similar minded pursuits. Some young adults find meaning in alternative minyanim that meet in people's homes rather than in synagogues. Some young adults find purpose in Social Action, working to enact change on issues of justice. Some young adults just want to have fun, hang out with friends and meet new people. Some like going to hip new places like the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco. Once a month, on Thursday nights they go to a hipster event entitled "Oy Vey" and toss back Manischewitz shooters.

I have got to tell you, there's a part of me that questions the value of Manischewitz shooters as a meaningful expression of Judaism – but bottom line – we at Temple Beth Torah have to lighten up if we're going to attract young adults into our midst. I don't mean throwing back shots during the Oneg, but we do need to find new and creative ways to engage younger adults.

This means first and foremost to be willing to experiment, to being open to changing how we do things. Nothing is more of a turn off for a younger person than to have someone older scold them for trying something new.

We must find ways to reach out to the young in ways they understand. I do not mean pandering to younger adults and trying to act like them, but I do mean communicating as they communicate – through mobile phones and online.

At Temple we certainly have a presence on the Internet. Our website is far more relevant and interactive than many congregations I have seen. We need to do more in the year to come however. We can post many more photos and videos on our website. We can add as well videos created by our members and staff as well. We can promote more active social networking such as a TBT Facebook group, as well as creating a Temple Beth Torah Twitter account.

We can do more to be relevant in the eyes of younger adults. For some period of time, this congregation has avoided addressing issues of public concern. I understand that there is a danger in taking a stand on matters of public policy, fearing that such issues are divisive for the congregation. However, we cannot remain silent in the face of injustice. Our prophetic tradition demands that we thoughtfully and passionately engage the world in which we live. We can do more, as a congregation, to address issues of social justice. Promoting the right of same-sex couples to marry here in California is one issue that we can and we should affirm as a congregation. It is the right thing to do. In addition I believe that in doing so, we have a better opportunity of engaging younger adults who see themselves as progressive on issues of social concern.

In the coming year, we need to broaden our outreach to younger adults in a variety of different ways. We have a lot of really smart people in our congregation with technical know-how. We need to pull together and utilize our creativity and skills in order to reach out to young Jewish adults to bring them into our community. The leadership of this congregation, the committee chairs and the board, need your help in thinking about how to broaden our outreach to younger adult Jews.

In doing so, we should keep in mind that attracting younger members is not only a matter of good programming and offering appropriate dues categories for young adults. It is not just about utilizing the latest technology, which is very important, but also about drawing young members into something that engages them, that speaks their language, and being a congregation that interests and excites them.

Members of Temple Beth Torah can take great pride in what has been accomplished in the past, but this day of Rosh Hashanah is also a time to renew our vision of what we can be in the future. Rosh Hashanah

is the perfect time to celebrate anew the beauty of creation. So let us find within ourselves that inner child that relishes each day. Let us discover anew the power of prayer and learning. Let us reach out to include others who are not part of our community. On this sacred day, Yom Harat Ha'olam, let us be God's partners, renewing creation, practicing kindness, and building a sacred community together.

Ken yehi ratzon