

LOWERING THRESHOLDS

Every rabbi has the same struggle each year: “High Holy Days, biggest crowds of the year, lots of important topics demanding attention, what should I speak about?” Writing the sermons is generally easier than picking the subjects. But this year there is really only one place to start: isn’t this beautiful— this year, we have a new worship space.

I have lots to say about that, but lest I forget in my excitement, I want to say thank you to the committee – Randy Carter and Elliott Cohan and your small but wonderful group of workers; to the architects Peter Gisolfi and Sandy Mintzes and their staff, and to the contractor Jonathan Litt and his crew; and to our staff and in particular Larry Murray and Jaime Valencia for all they did all summer long.

The original sanctuary, built in 1959, was a big change from the original building on Valley Street with its central bima and women’s gallery. The 1959 sanctuary was a product of its time, and it did very well what it was intended to do. It had a high *bima* from which the service could be presented frontally. There was an intentional distancing which was designed to inspire awe and reverence.

This newly renovated space is also of its era. It has a low *bima* so that the service can be more participatory; stairs all around so that it invites intimacy; seats that curve and embrace the *bima* so we can see one another and interact during the service. What we did here this summer was not just a change in décor; it reflects a change in the way American Jews are worshipping.

But let me tell you what has not changed. Over the course of more than fifty years this room has seen several generations’ worth of *simchas* and sorrows. It is filled with memories - more than 50 years of them - and these memories have not gone away. They were not carted out when the ceiling tiles were removed, nor covered over when the sheet rock went up. They are still here, filling this room and connecting the generations. They are in your hearts and minds -and photos and videos- as well. But they are also still right here in this room. There are symbols of that continuity – the eternal light, the tree of life menorah with its shofar-shaped branches, the names which will soon be back on the memorial plaques, the Torah mantles,

which will be back after *Simchat Torah* – and of course the Torah scrolls themselves. All of these link past and present. And now we have an opportunity to create new memories –not in place of, but in addition to, linked to the ones already here. Appropriately for Rosh Hashanah, today we begin a new chapter in the same book, a new chapter in the book of the life of this holy congregation.

Over the course of my nearly 20 years here, we have often spoken about renewing and refurbishing. I have long envisioned what a renewed worship space might look like, and more importantly, what type of spiritual life it might help us to create. It is Judy Cohen and her family who have enabled us to turn that vision into reality.

When Judy and I first spoke about ways we might remember and honor Alan’s life and values here at TBA, she listened carefully and thoughtfully to my hopes of what a sanctuary renovation would allow us to do, and in particular to the accessibility it could finally provide. And just a few weeks later at an *oneg* Shabbat, she told me that she thought this would be a wonderful way to honor Alan’s memory and that she and Maddie and Wendy would like to make it happen. It is a remarkable act of generosity – generosity of both dollars and also of spirit. And amazingly, not too much more than a year later, here we are. Judy, I am personally grateful and we are all honored and blessed that you have chosen to make Temple Beth Abraham a place where we will see Alan's values lived out every day. For all of your family here (then mention all of the people who have come from the family) – I hope that you will see this room and this congregation as an embodiment of things he held dear, and as a tangible reminder that we live on in the things we touch and the values we transmit.

If I were to define what this renovation was all about in a single phrase, it would be “lowering thresholds.” As I said to the sixth and seventh graders on Wednesday: the wood is warm, the new fabrics and colors are lovely, the brightness and the windows are inspiring, but that’s not why we did this. Well, it’s not the main reason we did it. We did this to lower thresholds, to make this room more accessible, both physically and spiritually.

The most obvious physical barrier was the height of the *bima*. A wheelchair-accessible *bima* was not on anyone’s radar in the 1950’s. One of my favorite protest posters from the 70’s showed a man in a wheelchair at

the bottom of a steep flight of steps leading up to a synagogue. The caption from Psalms read, “Open for me the gates of righteousness!” And now we finally have. We have a graceful ramp so that anyone can come to the *bima*, and be honored with an *aliyah* to the Torah. And more than that: the Torah table itself easily changes height so that anyone in a wheelchair can see the Torah as it is read – or read it themselves.

And there were other physical barriers to full participation. Some people – more than we know – have trouble hearing. If you can’t hear what’s going on, it’s difficult to participate in services. So beneath the carpet we have installed a T-loop so that anyone with a hearing aid or cochlear implant that has a T-switch – 95% of all new hearing aids - can flip that switch and have the audio broadcast directly to their ear, rather than hearing it along with all of the ambient background noise. As far as I can tell, we are the first synagogue in Westchester to have it – and when we renovate the Social Hall and the Conservative chapel, we will put it there as well. Open for me the gates of righteousness!

And then there are those whose advanced age or physical weakness makes it impossible to even get to the building. For them we’ve installed the ability to stream our services live on-line. These folks may not be able to be here physically, but they can enter our sanctuary and take part in the service nonetheless. Open for me the gates of righteousness!

We have gone a long way to opening the gates, to fulfilling the command to make God’s house a house of prayer for all people. I am sure that going forward we will discover new needs, and I am equally sure that we will find new ways to help.

But physical accessibility was only one of the components of this renovation. The other is spiritual accessibility. Having gotten in through the gates of righteousness, what are we hoping to accomplish?

Standing on the old *bima*, two feet higher than this one, and largely hidden behind a huge podium, I found myself constantly fighting a sense of separation from the congregation. We came off the *bima* during services so much in part because being up there felt so far away, and it was difficult to connect. And the straight rows meant that none of you could connect either. The lower *bima* and the angled seats mean that we are all – clergy and congregants – physically part of one prayer community, which makes it so

much easier to create a powerful worship experience. Lowering spiritual thresholds – in this case by literally lowering the *bima*.

And this new space is already inspiring us to imagine other ways to lower thresholds. For many years we have heard, largely from parents of young children, but also from some of our seniors, that a service at 8:00 on Friday evening is just impossible. It's past everyone's bed time. The kids need to go to sleep, and the adults can't get motivated to put their shoes back on after a long work week. So as I described in the bulletin, beginning next month we're trying an experiment. We know that there are some who still like the late service, but we think there is an audience out there for an early service. So, for a few months at least, we're going to do both. We'll hold a 5:45 service that will run about an hour, and also have our regular 8:00 service. The services will be very similar, and Cantor Goldberg and I will alternate who leads which service. We'll do this through March, and then reevaluate. I hope you'll participate. We're lowering thresholds and opening the gates of righteousness – come on in.

But now I want to talk about a completely different kind of threshold. We have a welcoming, accessible worship space and we are trying new things. But in the end, a sanctuary is just a room and a Temple is just a building. What makes them holy is what happens here, what human beings do within these walls. We need you to want to be here, and for you to want to be here we need to help you feel connected and valued.

Synagogue membership and participation was once a given in Jewish life, but not so much any longer. Around the country that is changing. Rather than seeing membership in a synagogue as a long-term relationship, more and more people are coming to see it as a market transaction. We feel and behave less like members and more like consumers.

There's not anything inherently wrong with being a consumer. We buy things we need all the time. But there is a fundamental difference between an interaction that is relational and one that is transactional, between being a family member and being a customer. Prof. Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist at MIT, puts it this way:

“We live simultaneously in two different worlds— one where social norms prevail, and the other where market norms make the rules. The social norms

include the friendly requests that people make of one another. Could you help me move this couch? Could you help me change this tire? Social norms are wrapped up in our social nature and our need for community. They are usually warm and fuzzy. Instant paybacks are not required: you may help move your neighbor's couch, but this doesn't mean he has to come right over and move yours ...”

This is the realm in which families work, and in which we have always expected the synagogue to function. It's why people volunteer their time; that's what families do.

Ariely continues: “The second world, the one governed by market norms, is very different. There's nothing warm and fuzzy about it. The exchanges are sharp-edged: wages, prices, rents, interest, and costs-and-benefits. ...Market relationships are not necessarily evil or mean— but they do imply compare-able benefits and prompt payments. When you are in the domain of market norms, you get what you pay for— that's just the way it is.

“When we keep social norms and market norms on their separate paths, life hums along pretty well.... When social and market norms collide, trouble sets in....Introducing market norms into social exchanges...violates the social norms and hurts the relationships. Once this type of mistake has been committed, recovering a social relationship is difficult.”

Ariely goes on to explain that in recent years businesses have made the mistake of mixing social norms and market norms by trying to appear warm and fuzzy, while at the same time remaining bottom-line oriented, usually with bad results. For example, he says, banks have been talking about relationship banking. But what happens when a customer's check bounces? If the relationship is based on market norms, as they used to be, the bank charges a fee, and the customer [pays it and] shakes it off. Business is business ... In a social relationship, however, a hefty late fee— rather than a friendly call from the manager or an automatic fee waiver— is not only a relationship-killer; it's a stab in the back. Consumers take personal offense. They'll leave the bank angry and spend hours complaining to their friends about this awful bank. After all, this was a relationship framed as a social exchange. [And it only takes] one violation of the social exchange to move that consumer back to the market exchange. It can happen that quickly.”

When I read that, a light bulb went off. Suddenly, I understood in a very different way why some people get so angry at what I would consider a small mistake: a typo in letter, a missed phone call. And why the synagogue bill causes such *agita*. It's not just the amount – it's that it's framed as a bill. And bills move us from the social, relationship realm to the market, fee-for-service realm.

Synagogues have the same problem as the banks that Ariely mentions, except that we are not trying to be warm and fuzzy just as a marketing ploy. We really mean it when we speak of ourselves as one big family. We hate thinking of our interactions as business transactions. We constantly try to frame our interactions in terms of relationships. And yet, just like big companies and unlike a pure social relationship, we do have a bottom line. We do have bills to pay. And the moment that we remind you of that, by say, sending a bill, we move you out of the social and back into the market mentality, fee for service.

TBA – like all synagogues - gets in trouble because we are forced to mix the two realms. We have to keep the lights on. But none of us really wants to think of the things TBA provides - the b'nei mitzvah or the funeral or Kol Nidre - as a transaction. I officiate at great-grandma's funeral because you are part of the TBA family. Once we start speaking of money, it starts feeling more like a business and less like a family.

In an article this summer called, *Can't Buy Me Judaism*, Seth Chalmer suggests that we Jews need to make a conscious effort to go back to imagining our participation in and support for a congregation in terms of a family. When you think of family, you don't usually think immediately of finances – that's the world of business. But, Chalmer says, “if the past few years of the economy have taught us anything, it is that families also face financial issues. And when mom and dad sit down at night to face a pile of bills, it is certainly not fun and there may be arguments– but it doesn't change the idea that they are [a family], a team working to solve a problem.” Even though it's about money, it's still relational, not transactional. This is where we need to get to in the Jewish community in general, and synagogues in particular. As Chalmer puts it, “Jewish communal contributions should be more like a married couple pooling their salaries for

groceries, and less like a crowd of strangers each ordering their own lunches.”

The most upsetting phone call we received this summer was from a member with kids in the school, who called to say they were leaving the Temple. “Was it something we’ve done wrong?” “No, everyone has been lovely.” “Is it something we’re not doing, not offering?” “No, it’s everything we expected and wanted. The truth is that it’s just too expensive.” “Well, that’s not an issue at all. We never turn anyone away because of money – lowering the financial threshold for anyone who needs it is something we’ve always done. It’s confidential, and though we know it can be uncomfortable to ask, we try to make the process as dignified and painless as possible. We get these phone calls quite a bit, and we’re always able to work it out.”

This is where the call got upsetting. The member said, “I’m sorry, I wasn’t clear. It’s not that we can’t pay it. It’s just that the amount you are asking is not worth it to me. I can purchase what I want elsewhere for less. We could belong to the Temple – we just choose not to.”

When I heard this, I was speechless. This was not a matter of ability – it was a matter of “bang for the buck.” That’s not relational – that’s the market talking. “We can purchase the same services elsewhere for less.”

I’ve been thinking about that call for weeks. And it’s certainly true. You can get almost all of the things, the services, the transactions we offer here elsewhere, and maybe for less on a per item basis. And while I might argue that we do most of them better than others, ultimately that argument will not matter, because for many people, the other choices are close enough.

There are places and individuals from whom you can purchase an education and a bar mitzvah. But if you do that what you won’t get is the greater relationship to the community, and the sense of being an integral and important link in the ongoing chain of Jewish history. If you do that, you are not embracing Jewish values – you are purchasing moments of Judaism.

And I’m told that there are less expensive congregations out there as well, that do offer a sense of relationship. But what you won’t get there is a community and a clergy that shares and lives your values: pluralism, egalitarianism, openness to other faiths.

The truth is that it costs a lot to be a Jew in America. Especially if you see yourself not as a consumer of services, but as a member of the Jewish people. I don't yet have a solution to this problem. The Board of Trustees has begun to wrestle with it, and is hoping to create a completely different way to ask for financial support, one that will feel more relational, one that will lower the threshold of belonging while still ensuring that there will be a synagogue for future generations. There are lots of places other than synagogues where Jews can purchase the moments of Judaism they want – education, life-cycle events. But I can't help wondering – and worrying – about the quality of those events. Not the events themselves, which may be lovely, but the relationship, or lack of relationship behind them. If the market place mentality is really where we are headed as a Jewish community, I fear for the future of Jewish values. Judaism won't disappear. We'll continue to have the shell, the rituals where everyone yells *mazal tov* or cries, or both.

But what happens after the event, after the transaction? How will that event impact our lives if it is a moment we consume, and not part of a complete web of relationships? Will it impact our lives, or will it end up being a lovely photo-op? Will the next generation feel less and less like Jews and more and more like Americans who simply shop for Jewish moments?

I have no easy answer. But I can tell you that for going on five thousand years, being a Jew has meant being a member of the tribe, a member of the family, not a consumer of Jewish moments. If Judaism as we know it is going to continue, we need to get back to that feeling. Here at TBA, we need to keep lowering the thresholds, and making it easier for you to feel and stay connected. But I am asking each of you, this year, to think about how you think about being part of the Jewish community. If you think of this synagogue mostly as a business, and if you evaluate what happens here through the market lens, as bang-for-the-buck – I am asking you to rethink that attitude. We should be more like a family pooling resources, and less like a crowd of strangers each ordering their own lunch.

We have a magnificent new worship space; we are doing new and exciting things; we are working together to build the future of the Jewish

people. This year, I ask you: cross the threshold. Come in not as a consumer but as a member; come in not to buy but to belong.