

Shabbat shalom and shana tova. For many years I've enjoyed the family reunion feeling of the High Holy Days here at Beth Shalom. Before and after services we greet one another with hugs, kisses and handshakes after the delights of a summer break. These relationships that bind us together and to Temple Beth Shalom are the essence of who we are. Judaism is fundamentally about community and forming relationships with others within the community, with God (however we may understand God), and with the community around us. We don't atone alone on these High Holy Days - we do it together. We don't celebrate lifecycle celebrations during the year alone - we celebrate together. And we don't mourn alone - we do that together too.

Last year when I spoke to you at this time I shared a few of the priority goals that our Board of Trustees had set forth for the year. One of those goals was to consider how we might engage more of our members in relationships that we each find personally meaningful.

During the fall we conducted an analysis of what percentage of the households of our community appeared to have an active relationship with TBS. Admittedly, our methodology was a bit crude, but we looked to see how many of our adult congregants participated in some temple activity (e.g., attended services, played softball, participated in Sisterhood, Brotherhood or Garden Club events, attended torah study) on a regular or semi-regular basis. The analysis produced an estimate that 58% of our households have one or more adults with such involvement. When I have shared this information with others, they have been impressed that the percentage is so high. I, too, believe that it is pretty impressive, but I think it can and should be higher. Now I recognize that some of our members live here only part of the year, and some are seniors who have difficulty getting to TBS, and finally some of us simply don't want a more active relationship. Still, I think we can do better.

The reason is because Temple Beth Shalom is an astounding congregation. OK, I'll admit our so very well-intentioned and devoted lay leaders, clergy, educators, other professional staff sometimes make mistakes. For those mistakes during the past year, I ask for your forgiveness.

But stepping back, when I look at this community, all I can say is "wow."

1. We are welcoming and caring. We do our best to seek out the individual or family who appears to know no one. When a member of our community is in need, we are there for that individual or family.
2. We are pioneers in innovation and practitioners in search of excellence in early childhood, elementary and teen learning. Many other congregations come to TBS to learn what we are doing.
3. At a time when many congregations nationally are struggling with declining membership and failing finances, our membership is strong and growing - people want to be a part of TBS. In addition, we are on solid fiscal footing.

4. We have clergy, educators and professional staff that any congregation in America would feel blessed to have, and some covet.

So I've told you why I think we should have a higher percentage of adult congregants with an active relationship with TBS. Now let me let tell you how we want to make it happen.

Between January and June a special task force of temple members and professional staff met to explore how we can facilitate making everyone in the TBS community feel welcomed, known and in a relationship that brings meaning to his or her life. Our group read portions of a new book identified by Rabbi Todd titled "Relational Judaism" and we conducted a field trip to a huge church community's Sunday service to learn from their practices. We brainstormed and developed a long array of creative and exciting ideas. For this coming year our Board has decided we will keep this topic as a priority goal and begin to put the ideas into place, sometimes on a pilot basis so that we can learn what works best. Some changes will be visible. For example, we are going to test the idea of creating permanent name tags for Shabbat services to make it easier to remember the name of that person who we know we have met before but their name just alludes us (does this ever happen to any of you?). We will also be instituting a type of a buddy program for new members of our community. Someone from our Member Relations Committee, which is ably led by Wendy Gutterson, will reach out to new members a few times during their first year to help them become connected, and to answer questions they have. Other changes may be less visible but equally important.

Above all else, however, we will expand a practice that I hope will come to define our culture. For a long time many of us serving in leadership roles at TBS believed that if we offered interesting programming – compelling speakers, moving worship services, fun dinners, social action projects, etc. more people would call TBS "home", a word that so many used to describe our community during our Mikdash parlor meetings last fall. We don't think this anymore. Being a congregational community is not solely about offering excellent programs for people to attend. Why? Because meaningful relationships aren't built on programming alone. While we will continue with, and strengthen, our program offerings, we realize that relationships – solid Jewish relationships -- are built on outreach, caring and trust.

For this reason I am not going to urge those of you who might be feeling your relationship with TBS is a little distant to read about our programs and come check out all that is happening at the intersection of Highland and Webster. I'm definitely not going to try to make anyone feel guilty about anything – our liturgy today provides enough space for atoning.

The practice we want to expand upon, is by which so many people have entered into meaningful relationships at TBS for decades. The path has been simple – someone extended a personal invitation. That's how I became engaged at TBS when Julie and I joined in 2001.

Someone called me on the phone and asked if I would help plan a celebration to welcome our newly hired rabbi. A young guy named Jay Perlman who grew up in Malden was returning to the Boston area to be our rabbi. Who extended that invitation to me? Ina Glasberg. Ina is a wonder; she has been extending that type of invitation here at TBS for over 50 years.

Learning from Ina's example and that of many others, over the next year and beyond, we are going to extend more personal invitations. A lot of male and female Ina Glasbergs of different ages will participate in extending a hand. Now, please understand, this doesn't mean that you'll all receive a call. Still, in many ways, we will be trying to invite more people into congregational life. If you don't want to wait to be asked, please call or email me.

Temple Beth Shalom is not an institution. It is not "the temple." Temple Beth Shalom is a community. It is [names of specific people in the sanctuary]. *We* are the community; *we* are TBS. Like many of you I love this community. I want to see it continue to grow from strength to strength with each and every of us engaged in that process.

I want to close by wishing you and your families a New Year filled with sweetness, good health and joy, and by asking that you seriously consider supporting our annual Shofar Appeal. Your contributions are not only appreciated, but they also truly enable us to build the Jewish community to which we all want to belong.

Shana tova.