

EREV Rosh Hashanah 5785 - 150 Years and Counting
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When I was growing up, my father who ALWAYS won at Trivial Pursuit liked to do the crossword puzzle in the newspaper. He *still* possesses the talent of retaining an immense collection of factoids in his head. But at that time, to complete the New York Times Crossword Puzzle, in ink no less, was seen as an indication of some highfalutin knowledge and carried prestige. If you are a long-time puzzler, you probably know what I mean.

These days, I enjoy the NYTimes crossword puzzle too, but I fill it in on my iPad and not all the clues are from the past. New York Times Columnist Melissa Kirsch explains: “As the technology used to make crosswords has improved and a more diverse group of puzzle makers and solvers have emerged, doing a crossword today is less a quiet test of mid-20th century minutiae and more [of] a spirited conversation with modern culture. Now Times puzzles regularly include modern slang, internet speak, references to memes and films that weren’t shot on celluloid.”

For some, this makes crossword puzzles more exciting and relevant. But for others it can feel uncomfortable and even foreign. Everdeen Mason, the editorial director of NYTimes Games observes: “There’s a sense of loss, maybe, when something that you thought was for you, turns out to be for other people [too].”¹

It’s so human to want to see yourself reflected in the things that you love, and to push back against changes that make things less comfortable- less sure footed. When I read about people’s varied reactions to the evolution of crossword puzzles, I couldn’t help but think how similar they are to how we think about our Temple.

Some of you have grown up here, and your parents, your grandparents, even your great grandparents did too. The physical space from the ark doors and elegant arches to the stained-glass windows and of course the dome, represent Temple in your mind's eye. And certain melodies and prayers, they bring you back in time. They remind you of your childhood, they remind you of people you love who are no longer with us. They remind you of the past and thinking about the past feels really good sometimes. So, when you come to Temple and you see that the prayer book, the choir’s location, even the furniture has changed, or maybe you don’t recognize all the melodies like you once did, You might feel wistful for the days when everything was familiar.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/13/briefing/the-gen-z-crossword-era.html>

But not all of us who call Temple our home, grew up here. Over the last 150 years our congregation has grown exponentially in size and in cultural diversity. Our members come from all over the United States and the world. We are straight and we are queer, we are black, brown, white and many combinations thereof. And we ALL want our life experiences to feel relevant and valuable in our Jewish space. We all want to feel comfortable in OUR sanctuary when we come inside.

Finding a way to balance the old with the new, to retain tradition while embracing what the future might hold; to be familiar and comforting yet also exciting and inspiring; to be stable but not static. These are the timeless challenges of Jewish communal life.

There is a fascinating conversation in the midrash², where several sages have a debate about which verse in the Torah is the most important, leaving it to their leader, Rabbi Yehuda Ha Nasi, to make the final decision. Ben Zoma insisted on the Shema: “Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.”³ The Shema is the watchword of our faith, and a declaration of monotheism. Ben Nanas chose, “Love your fellow as yourself,”⁴ considered by the great Rabbi Akiva to be the general principle of the entire Torah. Ben Azai proposed the verse “When God created humankind, it was made in the likeness of God.”⁵ The notion that humankind is created in God’s image is the foundation of human dignity and spiritual growth.

Each of these verses seems to be a worthy candidate. Yet none of them were chosen. Instead, Rabbi Yehuda gave the prize to Simon Ben Pazi who chose a command regarding the daily sacrifices in the Temple: “one lamb you shall offer up in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer up in the afternoon.”⁶

Why would Rabbi Yehuda pick this bit of Torah, that focuses on what was even at that time a seemingly mundane procedure of Temple business? For him, the answer was clear. Without the commitment to invest ourselves in the pursuit of faith, ethical behavior and human dignity, and without the determination to consistently live our Jewish lives through action, we, the Jewish people, would no longer be here today.

I think this is an important truth to consider, as we reflect on the ways the landscape of Jewish life has changed-and how new challenges remind us of old crisis’s, how important it is to remain

² Torat Kohanim (Chapter 4, Midrash 12)

³ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁴ Leviticus 19:18

⁵ Genesis 5:1

⁶ Numbers 28:4

committed to each other, here, in Israel and around the world. All the things that have made our Temple so strong over these past 150 years.

Of course we are proud of the many ways our members have helped build the city of San Antonio! From developing the River Walk, to refurbishing the Majestic Theatre and bringing the Spurs to town. We are inspired by Rabbi Jacobson's historic work to desegregate the city, and the way Rabbi Stahl built strong relations between the Jewish and Catholic communities. How we continue to stand up for LGBTQ rights and racial justice and women's right to choose. How our sanctuary has been a gathering space for the Jewish community and for greater San Antonio to support and comfort each other after Charlottesville, after Pittsburgh, after October 7 and as we will do next week to memorialize that horrible day and mourn the deaths and destruction that have occurred in its aftermath.

These are all extraordinary, but they are not the only things that make Temple special. Rather like the priests who attended to the daily sacrifices with careful attention, it's all of you...our members and our staff who make life happen here- day to day. Showing up with a quiet consistency, keeping us all going - the very heartbeat of our Temple.

It's the congregants who bake and set up for our pre-Shabbat oneg. The volunteers who greet us every Friday night, and those who buzz people in on Sunday mornings. It's the folks who organize social action forums, turn up to help at the Foodbank, cook Shabbos meals for our community here and prepare casseroles to deliver to members who are in need.

It's the custodians like Mike and Sonny, Alan and Priscilla, Daniel, Janie, Adrien and Ramiro who set up, and take down tables, chairs and microphones so that we can gather together. And our administrative staff: Dollie and Sarah and Ariel who create our calendar, answer our phones, answer your questions and point you in the right direction. It's the way that Eric, Ellen, Aliyah, Ross and April are always thinking, planning and working to bring Jewish community at Temple to life!

Every two-year-old who comes with their parents or grandparents to Sunday Funday. Every 13-year-old who stands on this bimah as a b'nai mitzvah. Every teenager who volunteers their time as a madrich or madricha on Sunday mornings. You are all needed...Everybody is essential.

And when you commit to consistently being a part of Temple life-Whatever that may mean for you, the sense of connection strengthens you as well. How do I know? Because you told me so!

Hannah Margolis still remembers what it felt like to hold a Torah for the first time. Mel and Marlene Eichelbaum treasure the years they spent teaching 2nd grade religious school, working with our bright and energetic children. Sherrie Alyn remembers becoming an adult bat mitzvah in 2002 and how glad she is that she overcame her stage fright to stand with the eight other b'nai mitzvah that Shabbat. And Linda Kaufman recalls how welcomed and appreciated she felt when Rabbi Stahl invited her to create theatrical productions with other members of our congregation.

Maybe Temple has touched your life in one of these ways. Or perhaps another way entirely. But sitting here this evening, at the beginning of yet another Jewish New Year, we can all appreciate those who sat here before us - who kept Temple going, feeling connected in their own way, and how they made space for us to reimagine Temple once again. Shouldn't we commit to making sure there will be others who sit here, long after we are gone?

In the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, Isaac Luria articulated an understanding of how God created the universe through a process he called *tzimtzum*, or a sort of stepping back to allow for there to be an "other" or a something 'else' besides God. By subduing the omnipotent, all-embracing Divine presence in the Universe, God allowed space for other beings.⁷ Seen in this way, our world is a gift of sacred space given to us by God. A space created by the simple motion of stepping back, the humble act of honoring the separate reality of an Other.⁸

Though none of us is God, we all actualize this concept of *tzimtzum* in our lives. When we engage in respectful debate, listen carefully and graciously concede a point. When we share responsibility with colleagues and peers, and when we give them the chance to creatively express themselves and grow.

When I arrived in San Antonio for the first time, I immediately felt something here that made me want to be part of this community. Ten years later, that feeling has only grown stronger. I am grateful for our congregation's rich history. I am humbled by the dedication of our leaders and volunteers, and I am inspired when I think about what we are capable of creating together.

I see us investing in deeper community connection-as we find ways to bring together people with similar interests or in similar life phases: whether it's hiking in Hardberger park, cooking for the Senior Lunch Chavurah, singing in the choir, attending consecration orientation, or sitting at the Shabbos morning Torah Table.

⁷ Etz Chaim 1:1:2

⁸ Rabbi Gershon Winkler with Lakme Batya Elinor, *The Place Where You are Standing Is Holy: A Jewish Theology on Human Relationships*. p.1

I see us expanding our Jewish knowledge and literacy. Not only to better understand our traditions, but to experience Jewish music and art, literature, theater, and film in new and exciting ways and to grapple with the challenging issues of our modern reality together. With Cantor Ettinger's arrival, I know we will experience a renaissance in the creative arts here at Temple. I cannot wait to see what we do together.

I see us continuing to find ways to stand up for those who are vulnerable, taking care of people with loving kindness, making our space a welcoming and safe one for all who want to join us. Rabbi Yergin's investment in our "Choosing Judaism" students, Her support of our social action activities and her passion for ethical justice enable us to continually reflect on who we are and who we want to be.

And I see us working hard to intentionally, thoughtfully, and graciously honor our past by investing in our congregation's future, making sure to create space that encourages those who come after us to give of themselves, as we give of ourselves, so that Temple Beth-El continues to evolve and grow.

Recently, my father started doing the crossword, and other NYTimes puzzles on his tablet. Afterall, it's backlit, and the print is much larger. I am sure he is wistful for those days when he would steal a few moments to sit with the paper, pen in hand, feeling those fleeting moments of delight that came when the answer to a clue popped into his head. But I think he is also able to appreciate that references to new movies and new celebrities and new sayings are now part of the crossword lexicon. Afterall, while adapting to what is new is rarely easy, the benefit from learning new things, meeting new people, seeing the world from someone else's perspective...it's what keeps us connected to the world as it continues to change.

For 150 years, Jewish people have come together as part of Temple Beth-El to celebrate the new year just as we do tonight. With beautiful music, and heartfelt prayers they prayed as we pray, *Avinu Malkeinu, chadesh aleinu shanah tovah*- Our father, our King, may this new year be a good one for us all.

On one hand it's difficult to imagine exactly what their lives were like. I wonder what challenges they were facing. What their dreams were for the future. And how their connection to Temple impacted their lives. On the other hand, it seems likely their hopes were not all that different from ours. They, like us, were looking for Jewish connection and community. They, like us, prayed for a time when there would be less antisemitism, more opportunity, and more inclusivity for us all.

And they understood, like we do, that commitment and consistency create the kind of stability required to take risks, to embrace change, and to look to the future with optimism, enthusiasm, and joy.

So may we, in this 150th year of Temple Beth-El look forward with expectation of all that is surely yet to come.

Shana Tovah