

Erev Rosh Hashana 5779
Why Reform Matters
Mara S. Nathan

Its Sunday night.

If you are like me, then usually you are at home in some comfy clothes, straightening up.... getting ready for the week ahead. But tonight, is Erev Rosh Hashanah. So instead, you are here all dressed up, surrounded by family, friends, visitors and even strangers getting ready for the year that is to come.

There is a special energy that fills the sanctuary at this time of year. A palpable mix of obligation, nostalgia, and spiritual yearning. We make space in our secular lives for this annual religious rite. We remember those who used to sit with us each High Holy Day Season but are here no more. And we allow ourselves to recognize that there is something more to our lives than the daily routines that fill our days....We are all united in our search for meaning.

Why ultimately do we gather each year in this sanctuary, as other Jews around the world are doing the same? Because, in some way, we feel the pull of God's command- from the book of Numbers 29:1

א וּבַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ מִקְרָא-קֳדָשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל-מִלְאכָת עֲבֹדָה
 לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ יוֹם תְּרוּעָה יִהְיֶה לָכֶם

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be a sacred assembly, a cessation from work, a day of commemoration proclaimed by the sound of the Shofar.

Maybe as Reform Jews we don't think of ourselves as commanded. Torah contains the stories of our people and its ethical teachings guide our lives, but we aren't here because we HAVE to be...Because God said so....or are we?

How DO we define our obligation to our faith traditions? And where does it all fit amidst our hectic 21st century lives? Rest assured, we Jews have been asking this question for generations, most especially the founders of Reform Judaism back in the late 18th Century. Let me give you some historic context.

After the French Revolution in 1789 and the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte soon after, the ideal of citizenship FOR ALL, for the first time in history, became an earnest aspiration of the intellectual elite. And though they were no great friends to the Jews, the great philosophers of the day; men like Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu, understood that a French Constitution stating that no one should be disturbed for his religious beliefs must include the Jews if were to have any integrity at all.

We might assume that the Jewish community would react to emancipation with joy and gratitude, yet this was not the case for everyone. As Jews were slowly granted citizenship throughout Europe Two general responses emerged.

The first- fear. And not of anti-Semitic backlash. Rather, the religious establishment was terrified that Jews would renounce their religious affiliation to reap the benefits of education, culture and career that came with full participation in the general society. They clung tighter than ever to their traditional Jewish ways.

Others, however, wanted to find a way for people to be modern AND Jewish. They thought that if they could use modern culture to make Judaism more beautiful and meaningful, Jews wouldn't need to leave their faith behind in order to take advantage of all that Western Culture had to offer. They called their experiments in bringing Judaism up-to-date "Reform" because they were reforming ghetto Judaism to fit a free, modern society.¹

¹ Borowitz, Eugene & Patz, Naomi. *Explaining Reform Judaism*, Behrman House, West Orange, NJ, 1985. p. 6

Each round of changes from how they dressed and the way the music sounded To editing and sometimes even changing the text of the prayers they said were met with both outrage and delight. The traditional establishment- which would later evolve into Orthodoxy- felt that modernization was a slippery slope towards assimilation and the eventual annihilation of Judaism.

But the early Reformers and their enthusiastic followers felt differently. Recognizing that Judaism had been evolving from the moment God told Avram, “*Lech Lecha*- Go forth”. They took their cues from the most famous Jewish innovators in history ...the Talmudic sages themselves.

Pirkei Avot- The Ethics of our Fathers chapter 1 codifies a tradition of progression we know well.

**At Mt. Sinai, Moses received the Torah
and handed it over to Joshua who handed it over to the elders
who handed it over to the prophets
who in turn handed it over to the men of the great assembly.
The latter said three things: Be deliberate in judgment,
raise up many disciples and make a fence around the Torah.²**

When we study this passage, we generally understand it to mean that by handing Torah over, we are ‘keeping Jewish tradition alive’. We are physically giving the Torah to the next generation- with all the commandments written therein. But, we are also metaphorically imparting our customs, beliefs, identity and pride to them as well.

By doing this publicly- say at a bat or bar mitzvah - we are trying to encourage others to do the same, protecting this most precious inheritance so that it can be handed down to the next generation too.

² Pirkei Avot 1:1

But what is that inheritance? Are the customs, beliefs and identity we are imparting something that has remained literally unchanged since Mt. Sinai? Obviously not. So, who gets to decide what stays the same And what gets adapted over time?

In his book *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life*. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman unpacks this question for us.³ He explains that the Jewish word for tradition “*masoret*” comes from a root (*masar*) meaning ‘to hand over,’ as in tangible property. A physical Torah is tangible property. But are words and ideas the same thing?

Unless we are talking about a piece of jewelry, furniture or some other precious item, we know that everything handed down to us from a favorite recipe to family lore changes over time, even if it is initially in imperceptible ways.

Hoffman uses the evolution of the synagogue as a concrete example. Originally synagogue- from the Greek *synagoga* - meant just “a gathering”, and not a religious one at that. Over time synagogues have been called and used as a *bet Knesset* (house of gathering), a *bet midrash* (a house of study) and/or a *bet t’fillah* (a house of prayer.)⁴

And even when synagogues became synonymous with sacred Jewish structures How they looked on the outside and how they were arranged on the inside varied greatly as well.

From this perspective, the tradition of handing down Torah from generation to generation was never intended to be a static tradition. Even by the time our ‘Torah passing’ Talmudic passage was composed, the system of Temple sacrifices was gone and there were competing schools of Jewish thought. (Think Hillel and Shammai). The tradition was fluid. (And celebrated as such.)

³ Hoffman, Lawrence A., *Rethinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life*, Jewish Life Publishing, Woodstock, 2006, pp.25-27.

⁴ Hoffman, pp 26-27

So, it would follow that in each generation, what it means to live Torah was always meant to evolve over time. While at the same time it was the core values that were meant to remain the same. (Hence the admonition in the Talmud to 'make a fence around the Torah.')

The early reformers gravitated to this idea of fluidity. They felt that in order for Judaism to not merely survive modernity but to continue to flourish and grow, they would need to speed up that evolution process. And while they were considered radical for moving forward so fast, what they were actually doing was refashioning that preverbal fence around the Torah to be one that could, from their perspective, more successfully weather the wear and tear of time.

After all, there are many kinds of fences. Some are tall and imposing. They say you are either in or you are out. Others are easy to see over and some you are able to see through to the other side. These fences still demarcate space but at the same time are porous. They allow people to peer in and are both protective and inviting at the same time.

As 21st Century Jews we have inherited this job of fence making. And as Reform Jews we not only get to decide what our fences will look like. We also must decide what it is we want to protect within. To do that, we need to be able to articulate which Jewish customs and beliefs are important to us and why. So that the generations that follow us will not only learn the craft of fence making but will be excited to fill their fenced in sacred space with a strong sense of Jewish identity and pride.

But how do we equip ourselves for this task? Our decision to be here tonight makes a difference. But it's probably not enough. To protect a system of customs, belief and identity that is thousands of years old requires a more active and inspired commitment. And that is what Temple is for.

This past spring our congregation ratified a new mission statement after almost a year of Board discussions and wordsmithing with the expert help of Temple

member Jesse Edelman. The result is a succinct, yet expressive aspiration for our congregation.

The mission of Temple Beth-El, the historic heart of Reform Judaism in San Antonio, is to provide a sacred framework that inspires people to cultivate their Jewish lives.

Why a new mission statement? Just like the *masoret*- the traditions of Judaism have evolved over time, The way we at Temple Beth-El see ourselves and what we want our community to be must be fluid as well.

As a congregation that is almost 150 years old we have lots of our own traditions. But we also have an obligation to those who come after us to make sure that the customs and beliefs we hand down to future generations are strong and enduring, while also as flexible and resilient as those that were given to us.

Truly a Jewish text, our mission statement contains many layers of meaning. It is only three phrases yet each one enables us to create beautiful fences around the customs and beliefs that reflect our core Jewish values and flexible enough to help us respond thoughtfully to what the future holds.

It is meant to help you fashion your own traditions and develop a Jewish identity you are proud to pass down to the next generations that are to come.

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For many people, Temple Beth-El is synonymous with history. Not only has Temple played a significant role in the life of San Antonio since it was founded in 1874 but our members who have been essential in the economic and cultural development of the city have generously applied those talents and passions to the life of our congregation as well.

Have you ever been in the President's Room? If not, I highly recommend it. In that small meeting room are the images of almost 150 years' worth of Jewish leadership and commitment to community. Its inspiring!

We've been blessed with sixty-one men and women who have each given of their time and talent to keep this congregation moving forward. Not to mention the hundreds of others who supported them on boards, committees and task forces along the way. Their pictures give us a glimpse of history in the making. **Morris Stern** led the move from Travis Park to our Belknap location in the 1920s. **Bobbie Stern** oversaw the decision to maintain a Jewish presence downtown even as much of the Jewish community migrated Northward in the 1990s. **Michael Swanson** invited Great Hearts to use our space to assure the financial well-being of our congregation for generations to come.

Your families have also made an impact on the continued history of Temple Beth-El. Whether you serve in leadership or serve meals to home bound seniors. Greet others on Shabbat, sing in our choir, provide hospitality at oneg, or act as a docent giving tours of Temple you help maintain the historic legacy of service to the greater San Antonio community that keeps the heart of Beth-El beating strongly.

We are by nature self-critical beings. I know that I spend a lot of energy focusing on what we could do better. We compare ourselves to other congregations- pointing out what is missing. But the reality is that our Temple calendar is bursting with Shabbat and holiday celebrations, educational and cultural opportunities and social gatherings. Brotherhood, Sisterhood, Social Action, Chavurot the hope is that there is a space and a place for everyone.

And even though there is always room to evolve and grow, unless we are here- building our lives upon the sacred framework that the institutions of Jewish community provide- we won't know what is truly missing.

For sure, the Jewish calendar organizes my life. I am after all a rabbi. But I am also a wife, a mom a daughter, a sister...a friend. My three kids go to three different schools and are involved in too many activities—just like all the kids you know. So, I can personally attest that living an active Jewish life is not always easy or convenient.

The Jewish home Larry and I envisioned when we were planning our family is not anywhere near our reality. And the older our children become, the harder it gets. We are constantly making compromises along the way.

But regular Jewish observance and a connection to our congregation add meaning and purpose to our lives. It reminds us that we are obligated to something bigger than ourselves. We have a home base where values, traditions and experiences are shared. And we have options and opportunities to create a meaningful life for our children and for ourselves.

In the end each of us has to make our own choice to stand in the chain of tradition and pass Torah down. And even though there are no promises as to what your children or your children's children will decide to do with that inheritance, we do know that for thousands of years in different places and varied circumstances Jews have found ways to make modern meaning of our tradition's ancient truths. And they have built all sorts of interesting fences along the way. Taking an active role in constructing their Jewish lives, And modeling a tradition that gives future generations the tools, the knowledge and the inspiration to refashion those fences in their own way as well.

At Mt. Sinai, God gave the people of Israel the gift of Torah. God passed Torah down to Moses, who gave it to Joshua. Joshua gave it to the elders, who handed it to the prophets. The prophets gave Torah to the men of the great assembly who gave Torah to the rabbis.

The **rabbis** spent their lives stepping inside those sacred texts, finding modern meaning in the ancient teachings of our people So that they were relevant in their own day as well.

This is just what we must do. In each generation we get to decide how to pass those teachings on. Temple is here as an historic anchor, providing a sacred framework, giving us the tools and the materials to build beautiful, creative and inspiring fences within which to keep our Jewish connections alive.

Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to open your tool box and begin again. I invite you over the days of Awe to reflect on what your family's fence looks like and how your Temple community can help you maintain the Jewish life you are protecting for the sake of those who come after us as well. In this way, Torah will continue to be passed down m'dor l'dor...from generation to generation...always evolving, always relevant and always strong.....AMEN