

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Several years ago, when I was visiting my parents' synagogue for the High Holidays, I was walking through the hallways of the synagogue on my way to or from the restroom. Those of us over 50 years old, understand the need to find a restroom in the middle of High Holiday services. But to those in their teens and twenties, looking for the restroom during services can be more of a way to escape what's going on in the sanctuary and find social connections. As I snuck out of the room just prior to the rabbi's sermon, the usher at the door said to me, "Hurry back, or you'll miss the worst part!" The hallways that Rosh Hashanah were filled with people my age pretending their bladders were full.

I bumped into an old friend from High School whom I hadn't seen in a long time. She gave me a big smile and hug, glad to see me, and said, "Boy! I'm seeing everyone today! They should have these more often!"

I said, "What a great idea! How about...weekly?"

She thought for a moment. "Naah. That would be a bit much."

I also remember shortly after I first moved to Houston, there was a campaign called "Reclaiming Shabbat," in which all local synagogues had special programs the first Shabbat of the month to encourage greater participation. I joked at the time (this was long before I was a rabbi), that, "The Houston Jewish community has decided that a Shabbat every week is too ambitious, so we're going to shoot for once a month."

Ever since I began this rabbinic journey – believe it or not, I'm beginning my 17th year at Temple Beth Torah – I've been trying to find a delicate balance. In the days when Judaism was not my number one priority, I remember that I never liked feeling judged about my observance, practice or philosophy. So, I try to be 100% accepting of each person's individual, personal decisions about their involvement in Jewish life. At the same time, I wonder what kind of encouragement would receive a positive response; if I don't try to encourage increased involvement, is that saying I don't care? Rabbi Marshall Meyer, of blessed memory, was known to say, "Those who are uncomfortable should be made to feel comfortable. But those who are **too** comfortable, should be made to feel a little uncomfortable."

This is why I love the Chai Mitzvah program (see pg. 6) that we are beginning at TBT in October. **You** find the ways you want to engage in Judaism, as much or as little as you want. **ONE** thing to learn, **ONE** ritual to try and **ONE** activity to enhance the community. Of course, Judaism is also about being together, so once a month (a very reachable goal), a group learning session to engage with a subject and with each other.

A mitzvah is a commandment, a sacred obligation. For some, mitzvot like going to *shul* on High Holidays or getting together with family are opportunities to embrace. For others, it is the kind of obligation to dread. A chore. Putting in time. Dressing in uncomfortable clothes, trying to remember people's names, smiling at people who bother us, making up for lost time at work or school...can't wait till it's over.

Of course, not everyone finds synagogue worship or performing *mitzvot* a chore. But it is true for many. During the High Holidays, synagogues are filled with a mixture of people who are embracing their Judaism and those who are annoyed with it...and many with mixed feelings. Our lives have become so busy, we have so many things on our calendar, sometimes it can seem difficult to "squeeze in" being Jewish.

I'd like to suggest, however, that we are Jews wherever we go and whatever we do. When we are honest in our business dealings, when we treat others the way we want to be treated, when we avoid gossip and when we honor elders, we are performing *mitzvot*, sacred obligations. Also true when give *tzedakah*, mindfully respect our bodies by eating well and exercising, ask forgiveness from those whom we have wronged and forgive those who may have wronged us.

As Jews, it is our obligation to fulfill commandments. We don't **have** to **like** it. But when we embrace these obligations, then Judaism is an exciting opportunity rather than a chore. When we can find the sacred in the ordinary, and connect our every-day tasks to values we've learned from leading a Jewish life, then we're not just Jewish a couple of days a year, or even once a week...we're Jewish people who do Jewish things. For Judaism to survive, it has to feel worth it; it's a time not just to **be** Jewish, but to **embrace Judaism**. When we do it with joy, we become shining examples for all.

For a sweet New Year...this year's Book of Life is sure to be one exciting read!
Shana Tova!

Dan Gordon

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