

## *The Season of Gratitude*

Sometimes, after the High Holidays, I feel a little sense of letdown. The anticipation and working toward the “Big Days,” including the nervousness: Will I deliver the right message? Will my words hit home? Will people be inspired by the prayers, the music and the camaraderie? The sanctuary and social hall are full for a few days. I get to see people whom I haven't seen in a while and catch up with their lives. I meet new people, coming to the temple for the first time, perhaps reconnecting with Judaism after a long break. And then, back to the same old, same old...

I don't feel that kind of letdown this year. There's nothing “same old” about Temple Beth Torah these days. There is so much going on, it is hard not to be excited. Our Religious School is at an all-time high enrollment, with an enthusiastic, experienced and dedicated faculty. Our teenage teachers and tutors bring a beautiful sense of continuity, showing the younger children that learning and devotion to the synagogue do not end with bar and bat mitzvah. Outside educators are also enhancing our learning for children, teens and adults. The Jewish Federation has provided Israel education for older students, Institute of Southern Jewish Life brings community engagement and TORCH (Torah Outreach Resource Center of Houston) gives a weekly class to adults interested in a variety of Jewish topics. We also have music education, emphasizing the joyful spirit of Judaism and Chai Mitzvah, the adult engagement program to enhance connections with our learning, practice and community involvement. Shabbat dinners provide a sense of community, and our SALT (Social Action Leadership Team) group brings community to service. We're delighted that the temple's still-new social hall has been able to host bar mitzvah luncheons, allowing us to go straight from a service to the celebration.

At the risk of sounding like a commercial, this is the perfect season to bring us into Thanksgiving. Anyone looking for ways to connect should be able to find them. At the same time, are we finding you? At the end of Yom Kippur, those who were still at services stood together in candlelight, singing the *Havdalah* service that “separates the holy from the ordinary.” I suggest that the holiness doesn't end when the candle is extinguished, but lingers on into the rest of the year. What we may think of as “ordinary” can become extra-ordinary...when we notice.

Shortly after Sukkoth this year, my friend, colleague and teacher, Rabbi Judy Abrams passed away suddenly. Rabbi Judy liked to emphasize the importance of *brachot* (blessings). There are blessings for everything, and one of her favorites was the blessing for learning. She said that you could say this blessing -- thanking G-d for making us holy with the commandment to engage in sacred study -- any time during the day, and it would count retroactively for anything you had learned earlier in day. Saying a *bracha* for performing a *mitzvah* (sacred obligation) gave the *mitzvah* more weight, helping us get more “mitzvah points.” “It's like telling G-d your frequent flyer number,” she would say, hinting that reciting *brachot* gives us a spiritual focus that makes the *mitzvah* more meaningful.

At her memorial service, Rabbi Judy's daughters said their mother would see the sun rise in the morning and say, “G-d gets a 10 today!”...regardless of how nice the sunrise was. The sun came up, didn't it? Gratitude includes challenges. Rabbi Judy Abrams lived with a great amount of illness and pain; yet she still expressed her gratitude every day. When we lose a loved one, we say “*Baruch Dayan Ha-Emet*” – Blessed be the Judge of Truth. The Mourner's Kaddish is about praising G-d even when we are missing our loved ones, because of our gratitude that they were a part of our lives. When one day seems filled with difficulties, we are challenged to appreciate the all of what life offers: the good and the bad, the easy and the difficult, the comfortable and the uncomfortable and the hard lessons we're meant to learn.

Rabbi Abrams' daughters admitted they were not feeling grateful that their mother had died. They did, however, express deep gratitude that she had lived to be their mother, their rabbi and their friend. Ruth and Hannah Abrams offered a blessing to those gathered at the memorial:

*“If you take the time to be habitually grateful even when you don't feel it, you'll realize there is good and bad in everything; and no matter how good or how bad it may be, there is always a **truth** to be blessed in everything.”*

October to November takes us from the Jewish holiday *Sukkoth*, the festival of the harvest, to the American holiday Thanksgiving, a celebration of the bounty. This year, I pray for the strength to embrace joy and challenges with equal enthusiasm and gratitude, knowing that all these blessings help me grow.

L'shalom,  
*Rabbi Dan Gordon*

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