

Pitching the Big Tent

For the past year, Temple Beth Torah has participated in a number of training opportunities from coalition of the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and Jewish Outreach Institute called "Big Tent Judaism." The concept of the Big Tent comes from the tent that our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah shared. We are taught that the home tent of this patriarchal/matriarchal couple was always open so that Abraham and Sarah would see travelers and welcome them in for hospitality. Today, the *chuppah* (wedding canopy) is expected to be open on all four sides so that a wedding ceremony is shared with loved ones who fulfill the *mitzvah* (sacred obligation) to bless and rejoice with the bride and groom. The goals of Big Tent Judaism include "connecting individuals and households who are not currently engaged with the organized Jewish community to local institutions that will be welcoming toward them through inclusive and meaningful programs."

Several members of the leadership of TBT, as well as Temple Administrator, Stacey Blumin and I, have been learning new ways to reach out to those who might have had limited connections to the Jewish community in general and to Temple Beth Torah specifically. TBT already has a reputation for being welcoming and inclusive; but only from those who have experienced the temple. We've always believed that there are more Jewish people northeast of Houston who haven't taken advantage of the opportunity. Big Tent has encouraged us to look for ways to introduce the temple to interested people without waiting for them to come to us. Our experimenting started with public storytelling for Hanukkah and Passover in local libraries. These programs helped teach children and their parents about the Jewish holidays, and were attended by a blend of Jewish and non-Jewish participants. Our periodic Shabbat dinners have also attracted people to be able to experience Friday night *Erev Shabbat* in a different way. Community programs are good public relations for our relationships with the non-Jewish community, while still maintaining the goal of helping Jewish people find a spiritual community.

None of the programs has had the impact of the recent public menorah lighting in Kingwood's Town Center. The program was planned quickly, as Dan Kullman, Stacey Blumin and I, together with the TBT Board, said, "Let's go for it." A financial gift from Paul and Sandra Bomze in memory of Robert Lipstet (Sandra's brother) helped make it happen. We were hoping, with the late notice that perhaps 50 people would show up. There were easily four times that many. Many were people who were not Jewish, but just curious about Hanukkah; this was fine, as the Talmud teaches us that Hanukkah is a festival that is meant to be shared, and the lights should be seen by all. The evening, which included very festive music from Israeli musician "Motzi," was most successful for reaching other groups. Of course, we had plenty of TBT's "regulars," but we also had several Jewish people who said, "I've been meaning to check out the temple for a long time..." or "I didn't know there was a temple around here!" For some, the accessibility of being able to enjoy being Jewish in a park, without any expectations other than celebration, was appealing. Whether or not it inspires someone toward greater participation in the synagogue, it was a memorable Hanukkah experience to help stay connected to community. For me, it was another example emphasizing that different aspects of Jewish life touch people in different ways.

I am reminded the popular Sufi tale (also found in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions) of six blind men encountering an elephant. When they touched the elephant, each had a different impression. One thought the elephant was like rope; another like a palm leaf; another like a flat wall; another like a tree trunk; another like a sword; still another like a thick garden hose. Because each focused on only one aspect of the elephant, he thought the whole elephant was represented by the tail, or the ear, or the torso, or the leg, or the tusk, or the trunk. Every aspect of the elephant was of primary importance to one of the men. But it took all of the parts to make a whole animal.

Judaism is like that. Each of us can embrace whichever aspects of Judaism that mean the most to us. When we all come together, we make one community.

The tent is open...come on in and find *all* the wonderful aspects that are available.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

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