

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Report Card, 5776

June is a time when students receive their report cards, hopefully feeling good about their accomplishments while also seeing where they need to focus additional efforts. I thought I would take this timely opportunity to look at the major “subject areas” of our synagogue to see what our GPA (not Grade Point Average, but Growth Potential _____) would be. Rather than traditional letter grades (you know, I’m not the most traditional rabbi in the world!), I’ve decided to highlight key areas, looking to build on our strengths and find ways to get better. Pirke Avot states (and we sing this on Shabbat): “*The world stands on three things: **Torah (learning), Avodah (sacred service and worship) and G’milut Hasadim (deeds of kindness).***” This teaching relates to our mission statement, which is a very appropriate foundation for both Judaism and an annual review. The subject areas to evaluate come from our Mission Statement: **Temple Beth Torah** is a congregation that embraces the philosophy and values of Judaism in the following ways:

- Spiritually, by celebrating the richness and traditions of Torah, prayer, holidays and life cycle events;
- Educationally, by encouraging learning, increasing Jewish knowledge and enriching understanding for children, teenagers and adults;
- Compassionately, by caring for our members and others in the Jewish community in times of need while also fostering positive relationships with our non-Jewish neighbors. Temple Beth Torah embraces the spirit of inclusion for Jewish individuals and families who represent a variety of backgrounds and family compositions.

Subject One: Spiritual (*Avodah*)

Temple Beth Torah’s spiritual year began by introducing a new flavor with musical worship during High Holy Day services. Cantor Vadim Tunitsky, with his enthusiastic embrace of worship and his soulful violin helped worshippers connect to both the joy of prayer and the gentle contemplation of self. Shabbat services almost always had participation from a wide range, including a variety of ages and religious knowledge and experience. A Leaner’s Service in the fall brought many closer to understanding some of the underlying meanings behind prayer and tradition. Some found new ways to connect spiritually, including a new, monthly Shabbat morning meditation group. The year culminated with the beauty of about 50 gathering on the beach for a *havdallah* service that brought us together with community and nature, hopefully bringing the spirit of Shabbat to enhance our everyday lives.

Areas for improvement: Finding ways to touch a wider variety of Jewish worshippers, recognizing the broad spectrum of worship options within Judaism as well as the diversity of interests, experience and preferences within our community.

Subject Two: Education (*Torah*)

Learning is one of the most important pillars of Judaism and an area in which we place much of our focus at Temple Beth Torah. For our children, the curriculum from Institute of Southern Jewish Life helps our volunteer teachers provide a full basket of learning, from the youngest children to teenagers. The little ones have received a great introduction to the joy of learning, while older students develop sophisticated knowledge and personal philosophical thinking. The addition of a Hebrew Coordinator, a first for TBT, has helped our students focus on a most difficult subject, learning in new and creative ways. Though many adults suspend their formal Jewish learning after bar or bat mitzvah age, record numbers have been coming to TBT for adult learning on a regular basis. In addition to the monthly Shabbat morning meditation exploration, our partnership with Torah Outreach Resource Center of Houston (TORCH) brings a different level of weekly learning adults with both limited and extensive Jewish experiences. “Lunch and Learn with Rabbi Dan” gives adult learners a relaxed, free-flowing discussion based on their own interests. This year for *Shavuot*, we are including the tradition of late night study. Annually, our trademark “Jewish Night of Why” continues to bring the community together, expanding our collective knowledge, ideas and interactions while enjoying fine food and friendships.

Areas for improvement: Expanding adult learning into cultural areas of Jewish life, including the arts and international connections.

Subject Three: Compassion: (*G'milut Hasadim*)

As you walk into the front doors of the temple, you immediately see one example. We encourage all our visitors to bring with them non-perishable food items to donate to the local food pantry at Humble Area Assistance Ministries (HAAM). Some members volunteer at HAAM, and a growing number have become involved in monthly delivery of Meals on Wheels to needy community members. Our Care Committee tries to stay on top of bringing cheer to those who experience illness or loss as well as the “*Mazel Tov*” for happier occasions. As rabbi, I also volunteer as a prison chaplain, bringing learning and hope to those who are trying to find light in the darkness. The temple’s Social Action Leadership Team (SALT) finds ways to engage in ongoing projects, including a partnership with a local shelter for families in need through Family Time. Beyond the projects to benefit community, we try to live up to our image as a warm, welcoming, intimate congregation, to make everyone feel welcome and included.

Areas of improvement: Building involvement in the ongoing projects to expand to more of our members and find more ways to bring these values to into our experiential learning for young people.

Extra Credit Bonus Points: Community Outreach

Those who are not Jewish or who are exploring Judaism find Temple Beth Torah to be welcoming and inclusive. Student groups visit the temple to learn about Judaism and Jewish worship, and come away enthused about their learning. Individuals explore classes or a Shabbat service, enhancing knowledge within the general community. As rabbi, I get involved in several interfaith activities, speaking at local churches, participate in monthly Presbyterian/Jewish dialogues and, as National Rabbinic Advisor to March of Remembrance, partner with Christian churches to bring about awareness of the Holocaust.

We are commanded in Leviticus to “Welcome the stranger as one of your own, as you were strangers in the land of Egypt. We’re delighted to hear how many “strangers” feel right at home at TBT!

Areas of improvement: Temple Beth Torah was once called “the best kept secret” of congregations. We’re no longer a secret! But there are still some in Houston who say, “Are there really Jews out there?” and some in the area who say, “I didn’t know we had a synagogue out here.”

TBT has made a major impact in the lives of individuals and our community. We can be very proud of our “report card.” Just as our high school graduates move on to higher learning, TBT is ready to take even more steps to enhance our community spiritually, educationally and compassionately.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon