

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Keeping Our Holiday Spirits High

Several years ago, I was in Pittsburgh during the High Holidays, visiting my parents and attending services at a large, Conservative synagogue. During the long services, the hallways were crowded with people taking rest room breaks that often extended into socializing. As I was walking back into the sanctuary, I ran into a friend I had not seen since high school. She greeted me with a big smile, enjoying the fact that she was able to reunite with old friends. “Wow, I’m seeing *everyone* today!” she said, almost surprised. “They ought to have these more often!” I’m not sure she realized what she was suggesting, and I smiled back and said, “You mean, like, weekly?” She paused for a moment, and said, “Naah. That would be a bit much.”

It is difficult to capture and maintain the High Holiday spirit. The combination of beautiful music, powerful liturgy and the timing of the spiritual awakening at the beginning of the year are hard to beat. There is another component that makes Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur special at Temple Beth Torah. There is a real buzz in the air as people reunite with old friends and establish new relationships. I saw a number of people making new friends, at an Oneg, Rosh Hashana lunch, the Yom Kippur break-fast and even during services. I got a lovely note from someone new to TBT who said, “I came in as a stranger and soon felt as if I had found a home.” I know that not everyone has the same experience, but the atmosphere of welcoming that some expressed is exactly what we’re hoping for. Religious services aren’t meant for people to sit and “put in time.” They’re meant to be meaningful, uplifting and inspirational. They’re meant to motivate us to include the teachings of the Torah and the sentiments of the prayers into our daily lives.

When I see a full room of people enjoying High Holiday services, I’ll admit that I’m secretly hoping the room will remain as full for our regular Shabbat services. I know that is an unrealistic expectation. Certain days on our calendar *are* more important than others, and the size of the crowd at temple mirrors them. There are also holidays that traditional Judaism has deemed important that don’t always make it to the radar screen of the mainstream American Jew. So, I’ll expect more modest crowds on Friday nights, realizing the “High Holidays” got their name for a reason.

There is a difference between a hope and an expectation. If we *expect* something to happen, and it doesn’t, we’re disappointed. But if we’re merely *hoping*, we could be in for a pleasant surprise.

Throughout the Torah, and particularly in the Yom Kippur afternoon Torah reading, we learn about the importance of treating strangers kindly. There are times when each of us feels like a stranger, wondering if we’re really where we’re supposed to be. When people come to temple, whether regulars or new, we never know what frame of mind brought them there. If we can treat everyone like the kind of stranger the Torah teaches about – embracing, welcoming and making them feel wanted – then we will have created the kind of spiritual home lots of people will enjoy returning to.

In the words of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach: “Return again; return again; return to the place of your soul. Return to who you are; return to what you are; return to where you are born and reborn again.”

I look forward to seeing you soon; however often you return!

B’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon