

ROSH HASHANAH – 5766

Allow me to begin with a word of thanks. Since last year when we celebrated these High Holy Days much has happened in my life. Going on sabbatical for six months, studying and teaching, experiencing Judaism from a different perspective, - all contributed to an enriching, refreshing and challenging year. I have all of you to thank, profoundly, for giving me this opportunity and this gift. Todah Rabbah L'culam- I am truly grateful.

Since I returned in June I've been eager to share the many unforgettable experiences that filled our time in the London – like...learning a new language (sort of), appreciating the beauty of a grey sky – every day, developing a taste for the *lovely tea* one needs to warm up from those cold grey skies, and memorizing the British mantra...”stay left, stay left, stay left.”

On a more serious note, my experiences in the British Jewish world have made an enormous impact on me. Some of them were positive, some have left me troubled. On the positive side, I was impressed by the ability of so many congregants to lead services. From the liturgy to the music, most services have lay leaders (even when the rabbi is present! I loved that.) It was inspiring to share worship with so many knowledgeable and capable liberal Jews.

At the same time I was distressed to find that most Progressive British congregations are struggling. They are under-staffed, meagerly funded, and have little resources for the breadth of programming that we experience. I had heard this from my British friends, including Rabbis Michael Shire and Marcia Plumb, (whom I hope you all loved – as I do.) I have to admit though, that I really didn't “*get it*” until I was there and experienced a different level of congregational energy. Don't misunderstand me, the Progressive Judaism of England is made up of devoted members and of committed, dynamic and bright rabbis but it is not simply American Progressive Judaism on a smaller scale. Although the second largest Progressive Jewish community in the world, British Reform, Liberal and Masorti congregations comprise a less dynamic community.

This brings me to what was the most powerful experience of my sabbatical. It happened on May 19th not in London but here, in Falls Church. We had returned home on May 18th and of course, the next day, the first place I went, even before the Starbucks

and the Giant, was – here. It was a great morning – the sun was shining, it was warm and dry, it felt wonderful to be back on the “right” side of the road, I couldn’t wait to see everyone. I came in to the Temple through the front door; I stood in this magnificent building, my ears were filled with the joyful voices of our pre-schoolers, 5 or 6 posters advertising upcoming events hung in the hall, the sanctuary, my spiritual home for the last 16 years, appeared warm, calm and inviting. And I started to cry. I hadn’t expected this. I was happy to be home, overjoyed even, but these were not tears of joy. Why had this feeling of sadness overwhelmed me?

No one was in the foyer, so for a brief moment I sat down on the grey couch there. And then I understood. In that moment when I walked through our doors, I realized something I had never before fully grasped. I realized that **WE ARE PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM** - Us – the members of Temple Rodef Shalom AND the members of all of the Reform congregations in America. For all of the visits I have made to all of our communities around the world I had never seen our community for what it truly is: **THE MOST SIGNIFICANT, THE MOST POWERFUL, THE MOST DYNAMIC AND INFLUENTIAL LIBERAL JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE WORLD.**

Only in America is the Jewish news dominated by the events of the Reform and Conservative community not the Orthodox. Only in America can the Reform movement demand the attention of politicians, influencing law and policy on a national level. Just two weeks ago when the King of Jordan came to Washington to meet with a group of Rabbis it was the Reform and Conservative rabbis to whom he looked for support in his efforts to make changes in the Middle East.

There is no country that has what we have here – growing, thriving, respected, powerful congregations contributing to the greater Jewish and non-Jewish world. I thought the UK had this on a smaller scale, it does not. I know Israel will some day have this, because its progressive community is growing and is dynamic, but it is still very small, its growth is slow and it still struggles for even the slightest recognition by the greater Israeli society. We must support them that they may someday join us in this place of strength and responsibility. But right now we are alone.

We are like that biker in the tour de France who pushed himself for hours and at one moment looked up and realized that he was totally alone at the front of race. No one

was there to draft off of; no one was there to neither challenge nor encourage him. He was probably full of pride and joy and relief knowing he was so far ahead of everyone else. We are not in a race, but part of the long steady journey of Judaism and we find ourselves alone too. Unlike the biker, this is not a happy moment. At least it is not for me. Being alone here makes me feel scared, worried and most of all overwhelmed by a sense of profound responsibility.

I felt like this only one other time in my life. After our first child was born, my mother came to stay, Kevin's mother came to stay, Kevin took time off, it was wonderful – and then one morning the mother's had left and Kevin went to work and I was alone in the house with the baby. I remember thinking ... oh my God; I'm alone with this baby. It's all on me. I remember it was an overwhelming morning. I think I cried that day too.

Although I am not planning to make everyone here cry, my goal today is to ensure that all of us clearly see our place in the vast mural of world Jewry; AND that all of us understand the heavy responsibility that comes with our prominent position on that mural.

I'm a visual learner, so let me show you this more clearly. Let's imagine that this room contains all of the Jews in America. If this were the case, the Orthodox would be just this small section to my right, (10 %) the secular world would be there, (25%) and all the rest of us would be Progressive Jews. (Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist) Now lets consider looking at the same percentages in a European country – France for example. There all the numbers would be reversed. 10% Progressive, 25%+ unaffiliated, 60%+ Orthodox. Finally, if we were to take all of the Progressive Jews in America and put them in a room with all of the Orthodox in the entire world (not only might there be a little tension) but there would also be twice as many Progressive Jews as Traditional Jews. Do you see what I see? Without Progressive Jews in America, Judaism is one very small community. Second, our position of strength is only here in America. But, at the end of the day, we do have the numbers to make the difference. Numbers do equal power; but numbers also equal responsibility.

Although I have always known these facts, for some reason, I have not allowed them to influence and shape my own character as a Reform Jew. It was only when I became a part of a smaller, less influential community, (British Reform) that I saw us for

who and what we truly are. I suspect many of you are like me. You too probably know the facts, but you may not feel, as I did not feel, the weight of those facts on your lives. Why is it that many of us have not yet seen, nor embraced our role? I suspect that there are a number of reasons – different ones for each of us. Some of us come from other movements and are conflicted about leaving those movements. Others struggle with one or two aspects of Reform Judaism preventing them from coming on board fully. But I also know of one reason that frequently emerges and always blocks our ability to see our genuine status. Let me describe it to you by sharing an encounter I had just a few years ago.

I walked into the JCC and saw someone I knew well sitting with the Lubavitch rabbi. Now I have a pretty good relationship with the Chabad rabbi, (I've even been to his house for dinner) and this person was a friend so I went over and said hello. To my surprise the rabbi informed me of the generosity of my friend towards the new Lubavitch synagogue that was being built. Now I have no objection to the place of Chabad in our community, but I had thought my friend was affiliated with a Reform congregation. When I called him to find out more he said something I have heard dozens of times, something that truly knots up my stomach, something that we should never, ever say. His words were: "Well, you know Amy; I give to them because they are 'real Jews.' Aren't they the ones keeping the real tradition alive? I know I couldn't live that way, and I feel guilty about that, so I make a big donation every year to one of their projects."

Over the years I have learned that many, many Reform, Conservative and unaffiliated Jews feel this way – inauthentic, inferior even illegitimate. As far as I can see, little could be more destructive to our Movement and its future than thinking such as this. Maybe some of you know someone who feels this way. Maybe you feel this way. If you do, please remember that we stopped making 'guilt offerings' when the Temple was destroyed and the people sitting next to you in this very room are indeed real Jews.

When I heard that response from my friend, after I recovered from my shock, I asked: "Do you really see yourself as a second class Jew? Do you really see the Reform Movement as some stepchild of Judaism?"

His answer: But they look so much more Jewish.

My response: Didn't you ever learn – don't judge a book by its cover?

His question: Then what do WE have that makes US authentic Jews?

My response: How much time do you have?

Well he's not a member of this congregation and he's not here tonight, but the answer to his question is critical to our ability to step into our role as the largest, most prominent, most religiously conscientious, socially conscious and morally relevant tradition in the world today.

My friend does not know what makes our Judaism authentic. Let me respond. The first and most important thing to know about Reform Judaism is that it is the true Judaism of our ancestors. It is the seamless continuation of the Judaism that the rabbis of old created in order to keep their religion not only alive, but healthy and thriving.

The foundations of the Judaism that we know today were established after the destruction of the Temple and those foundations have always been progressive and changing. The texts written over the last 2,000 years serve as a window into the past. Open it and you will see educated individuals and communities interpreting and adapting a tradition in order to keep it relevant. The Talmud is not a text about fixing Jewish law, but rather a text that shows how Judaism is open and receptive to the needs of each generation, always knowing how to grapple with the varying circumstances of Jewish life. Today's Orthodox community deeply values our texts but their approach is to focus on the detail of the laws. The dynamic interplay between our God, our world and our tradition is most alive here, in this movement and in us.

As members of a Reform Congregation, each of us is required to engage in this very dialogue with the tradition. We have the autonomy to make our own choices but ideally we make those choices only after extensive study and experience. We, Reform Jews, do not act on blind faith. We, Reform Jews, do not define our Jewish observance by the things we don't do. Ours is not Judaism "lite." Rather, like the Rabbis of old, we craft our tradition around religious and spiritual integrity, always integrating our modern world with our respected and much loved tradition.

As confident as I am in the Progressive approach to Judaism, I am even more proud of how that approach has lead us to leave a moral mark on our world. Our authenticity is strengthened by our fulfillment of the visions of the prophets. They insist that the pursuit of social justice is as significant as our obligation to rejoice on this New

Year and to fast next week on Yom Kippur. We are the movement which has led the way in ensuring egalitarianism, pluralism and inclusivity not only within our tradition, but within our world. We have repeatedly challenged the status quo, for women, for African Americans, for the elderly, the gay and lesbian community, for the poor – for all of those groups of people who have been pushed to the fringes of our society. On Yom Kippur all Jews around the world will read Isaiah’s call to reach out to the hungry and the down trodden in the Haftarah. But it will be mostly us, Reform Jews, who will bring this message out into the world, into the ears of the politicians, that we and they might correct the injustices that persist in our society. As my colleague and friend Rabbi Dan Zemel recently said: “to be a Reform Jew is to be morally scrupulous, ethically demanding, passionate for justice and a voice for those with none.”

Personally, I swell with pride when I look over the vast accomplishments of our movement. Perhaps I will send this sermon to my friend so that he may see and feel what it is like to be part of an authentic movement of Judaism. Perhaps now he will be able to visualize himself in that prominent place on that vast mural of world Jewry. Maybe he will step out from the shadow of the man standing in front of him – that man with the big black hat so that he can see himself in his rightful place – standing next to you and me, beaming with pride.

Unfortunately, I think my friend will have trouble with this picture. Even if I convince him that Reform Judaism is an authentic, legitimate and thoughtful expression of our tradition, he may not be able to step into this new role. Why? Well, at the end of the day I believe he is a Reform Jew out of convenience. He is essentially a Reform Jew by default. He did not actively seek out a progressive approach to Judaism. He was not looking for a Judaism where religious integrity was critical or inclusivity essential. He joined his Temple because it was the closest to his house and had the least number of hours of required religious school. I know that many different reasons have brought each of us to Rodef Shalom as well – some of us are here for the Temple’s location, some for our dynamic commitment to social action, some of us are here for the contemporary music and liturgy, and even a few, I’ve heard, come for the cookies at the oneg.

Whatever the reason, all of us are here by choice. Today I am asking you to embrace the kind of Jew you have chosen to be. Today I am asking you to consciously

support the Movement of which you have chosen to be a part. Being a Reform Jew by default just won't do. Today, we must leave our neutrality and our passivity about the Reform movement and become passionate – passionate Reform Jews, passionate Jews.

We must do this because, in my opinion, **the entire world needs Reform Judaism**. The Jewish world needs US because it needs an ideology that is relevant, flexible and dynamic – without that we will lose those who see no way to bring their tradition into the world in which they live. The non-Jewish world needs us because WE bring a message of social justice to a world torn apart by injustice. OUR tradition calls us to be the voice for those who cannot be heard. OUR tradition compels us to join the voices of those progressively religious people who stand up to the fundamentalists and extremists who seem to become louder and louder each day.

The entire world needs Reform Judaism. And, as the largest, most prominent community of Reform Jews in the world, it sits squarely on our shoulders to nurture and grow our movement to ensure its successful future.

Imagine for a moment that vast mural of world Jewry 50 years from now. Let me tell you what I hope to see. The children of this congregation, now adults, will dominate the scene. Of course they will be joined by many many more Jews. Drawn by the appeal of a relevant religious and ethical tradition - our numbers will grow. Further, the Reform crowd will be much more diverse – now Americans are surrounded by their teammates. Brits, French, Russians, Israelis and us all push forward up the mountain together; all support one another on our shared Jewish Journey.

But I see more in this picture. That Reform Jew on the far edge of our group is standing next to an Orthodox Jew. Are they talking or are they arguing? I don't know, but I see a Progressive Jew who is capable of being in dialogue with his traditional cousin. He does not have to shy away, feeling that he cannot hold up his end of the conversation. He does not feel inferior for a lack of beard or black hat. This Reform Jew knows the tradition well and knows that the choices he has made about his practices come from a thoughtful and careful Jewish process.

I also see something new in this picture. Beyond the edges of our group are other groups, more colorful, more diverse, they look healthy, they look happy. Could the world be a better place 50 years from now? Could we have helped others welcome the stranger

and care for the poor and the downtrodden? Could we have helped to bring peace – God’s most precious gift?

I truly hope that this image, which shows us flourishing in the future, will come to life. In 1898 Theodore Herzl had a vision of national homeland for Jews. He said: Im tirtzu ain zo agadah. If you really want it, if you will it, it will not be a dream. The vibrant growth and significant impact of Reform Judaism cannot be a mere dream. We have the power to ensure that it will be a reality and we must act now to make it so.

The world needs Reform Judaism. Reform Judaism needs to grow to meet this challenge. To grow, Reform Judaism needs active, involved Jews with integrity. We can be those Jews.

If only I could take a real picture of this metaphoric mural of world Jewry. I’d have it printed out onto a large canvas and hang it in a prominent spot in my home. Each day, I would walk by and be reminded of my place in that vast scene of world Jewry - a place of pride and responsibility. Each day I would see myself standing in that picture and I would be challenged to become a more committed, more active Reform Jew. Are you in this picture? Won’t you come and stand there next to me?

Amen

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