

Jews are known to pray in unlikely places: not just in synagogues or community centers, and not just in minyans or groups; but sometimes on the sports field, in the office, or even alone in bed at night. Some Jews pray on the subway or the airplane. While there are certain traditions governing the structure of a synagogue sanctuary, where one is allowed to pray, at any given moment, is almost completely up to us. But according to the Talmud, there is one interesting requirement regarding where one chooses to engage in the sacred act of prayer: In Tractate Brachot, we are told that one should always pray in a room with windows.

What does this text come to teach us? We can see from the beautiful windows in our places of worship, our architects and building design committees understood it well. These windows allow us to feel connected to the earth around us, the sky, and the beauty of creation. As Jewish philosophers from Spinoza to Heschel have told us, this is an important way to seek closeness with God. But this verse of Talmud means more than that. One instructive fact is that although most references to prayer in

Judaism emphasize the communal, this command is phrased in the singular, aimed not only at us as a group, but at each person, as he or she prays. In addition to the windows that allow us all to see the world outside, it calls on us, as we sit here praying side by side, not to allow ourselves to be isolated from one another, to ensure that the spaces between each of us are transparent and not opaque. At this moment, you could be sitting next to someone whose child is in the same class at the same school as yours, or who is in a similar line of work as you are. You could be seated near a fellow congregant, whose child just became engaged or someone who just moved to the area and is looking for a congregation – and you don't know it. We don't need the Talmud to tell us that this is not the way it should be.

We know it should be different, and we can guess at some of what gets in the way. There are plenty of opportunities to speak to each other. But we might be shy or embarrassed. Maybe the person next to you is the president of the congregation, and, Oh My goodness, I asked them their name! Now I feel horrible! We

are afraid even to introduce ourselves, let alone really get to know each other. God only knows the myriad reasons we don't speak to each other, having nothing to do with how much each of us wants to know the others with whom we share this community.

The goal of increasing the culture of community, welcome and connection at TRS is one of our biggest priorities this year. We are in the process of creating a task force on our culture of welcome at the congregation, whose mission is to identify both minor and major changes that could be made to everything from our programming, to signs around our building, to the layout or content of the bulletin, setups for events, and what initiatives we can undertake that will enhance relationships between members. We even dream about the possibility of opening a café, where people can meet for a drink or sit down when they have a free moment to visit or read a magazine. Why should we go to Starbucks or Greenberrys, when we could sit here with our fellow congregants at Beans from the Bema, or Holy Grounds, or Micha Mocha?

This last idea, the dream of opening a TRS Café, begins to break open the concept, the question, of what Temple Rodef Shalom is. Is this community the sum of the programs we offer: religious school, adult education classes, Shabbat services, community service events, lectures, concerts and celebrations, where finding yourself at the temple is a function of whether there was a program that day that drew you to show up? Or does the community, and the interaction, mutual support and common purpose of the people in it, lie at the center, and what we do grows out of that? This, I believe, is the true definition of community. And this is why as we pray, and learn, and celebrate, we must work to create windows into each other's lives. The ties that bind us together must be more than the programs we attend or where we pray. We have to work to know each other and develop deeper relationships. We can start by doing one of the most Jewish of activities; we can start by sharing with each other our personal stories, the narratives that make us who we are.

It's not common for us to share our personal stories with others. When I was a teenager, I lived in a neighborhood with few other Jewish families, and my friends were not Jewish. We were close, but I was always aware of feeling different. The subject of religious or historical background seldom came up. One day, I remember sitting with my friends in front of the TV, watching a Mel Brooks movie. There is a scene in the movie in which Brooks sings a parody song about the Spanish Inquisition. It's at the same time a very funny, and very disturbing scene. Stereotypical Jews, in their black hats and *peot*, dance in unison, strapped to tables or guillotine blocks as they wait for torture or execution. I sat there thinking about my maternal grandparents who fled Nazi Germany in 1938, two of my great grandparents who died at Auschwitz, and all the stories from my grandmother, whom I call Omi, about her struggle to make a new life in this country. While my friends laughed together, I was afraid I would cry, because I could feel that my friends had no idea of the relevance this scene had for me. The distance between me and my buddies felt wider than ever. I got up

and rode my bike home in the middle of the movie, and my friends had no idea what happened.

What if I could have told them my family's story and how it affected me? I could have heard their stories as well. To this day, I don't know the particular family immigration stories of my childhood friends, but each of them has one, and though it may not include racial or religious persecution, it may include other hardships, such as living in poverty or being soldiers at war. Our relationships would have deepened, and I might then have been able to watch this Mel Brooks scene with them, feeling them as allies instead of strangers.

Think of how our relationships, in this community, could change if more of us were able to share our stories with each other – not only our family backgrounds, but the stories of our own lives, past and present. What if we could also talk with each other about the places in our lives in which we need allies, and where we could benefit from and be uplifted by change. A community with windows knows the people who make it up. It also shares a sense

of what its common needs, goals, and interests are. We do share the need for Jewish learning, and to observe the holidays and our life cycle events in a Jewish context, and those are holy purposes. But a sacred community can go much further than this. As we sit here, there may be someone in one of the seats near you who just lost their job, or is afraid of losing it... and, again, you have no idea. We often speak about the problems that lie outside of our community and the people who need our help. What about the struggles, concerns and desires of our own congregation? There are members of Temple Rodef Shalom who are struggling financially in these current economic times. There are others who were already having difficulties making ends meet before the recession began. Beyond those who are struggling acutely to meet their basic needs, there are even more who are under financial stress or anxiety, challenged by the need to care for their aging parents; worried about rising expenses, as their children attend college or they approach retirement. Others in our community are grappling with divorce or dealing with illness or disability, mental

or physical, or with feelings of depression, loneliness or isolation. There are high school students among us confronting all sorts of pressures, and families helping them to cope.

Some of these challenges are spoken about from the bema. But we don't often talk about them amongst ourselves. What if we could go beyond our family narratives and share with each other some of the most important aspects of our lives: our struggles, the concerns we think about when we can't sleep at night, or the pressures that confront us every day. Think of how we could understand ourselves and each other better.

Perhaps the idea seems strange, or artificial. We don't like to burden each other, and in our culture of individualism, we tend to keep our deepest struggles private. Sometimes we don't know how to tell each other our own personal stories or struggles, or even see that as an option. We certainly don't ask those kinds of questions. Well, if it's in the right way, in a safe and respectful atmosphere, maybe we should.



A friend recently shared with me how surprising it was when the doctor in her new medical group asked her about her social life. Yes, it's an unorthodox question for your doctor to ask, but she raved to me about this practice group, and it began to make sense. While I'm not exactly an expert in the practice of medicine, I do watch the TV show *House*, so I know a little something. I've seen the doctors sneak into their patients' homes to find the moldy food in the refrigerator or the evidence of some strange habit, leading them to the brilliant diagnosis. I know that the fuller picture you have of a person's life, the more help you can be to them. This doctors' office goes even further to become a community – when you're notified that your care will be delivered by a doctor other than your own for a period of time, your doctor will tell you the reason: her father has died, or she is working on research. It's not a need to know basis. They share information both ways, on the theory that it will lead to happier relationships and, ultimately, better care.

If our doctors have figured out that their relationships with us should include what's going on under the surface, how much more so our partners in this sacred community, where we seek to understand each other and be there for each other? Even more, think of the possibilities that might emerge if we began to ask each other these deeper questions, and we discovered that some of the concerns we thought were private and personal were actually the same as those faced by other members of the community. We all have had the experience of sharing something we thought was unique about us and our lives, and finding out that it's not. It *is* cathartic, and it's also more than that. It's part of the way people get together to solve problems: we can accomplish more together than alone. We might find, as we identify these common concerns, that there are ways in which we could work on them as a community. Maybe they would have to do with the experience of Jewish students in Northern Virginia schools, or perhaps coming together to save a park we all care about, like Evans Farm, which was closed down several years ago, a very sad event for many of

our members. Whatever we might choose to work on together, this would be the essence of community: common goals and common purpose.

This congregation is our home, and we should talk about some of the same things here as we talk about around the kitchen table. Within the right context and in an atmosphere of trust, we should be able to bring our own stories, and our struggles, to our partners in this community. To help us do this, we have begun a congregational dialog at Rodef Shalom. With the help of the Reform Movement and training from organizers from VOICE, Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement, we are speaking with each other, one to one. This fall, we will also begin to talk in small groups in people's homes. The goal of this dialog is to build community from the inside out; to share with each other our stories and what is on our minds, find out what some of the goals and concerns are that lie at the center of our community, and then, eventually, what meaningful actions might grow out of this discussion. Reform synagogues around the

country have used this process to begin work on anything from changing the culture of excess at their B'nai Mitzvah parties – and thus addressing the values they impart to their children – to working to improve the care of their elders at local nursing homes. There is also the opportunity for us to become involved in work with other religious congregations in Northern Virginia, on issues that we share with them. Before we do that, though, we must engage in our own internal conversation. I invite you to be a part of that, and to keep your eyes and ears open for these opportunities.

I believe that dialog, and the act of sharing our stories and our struggles in other ways, can have a transformative effect on our congregation. I wasn't here years ago, when TRS was a small place, meeting in people's homes, building this sanctuary and working to make the temple succeed. But I can picture it. I see fifteen people crowded into a dusty room with unpainted walls and no table, joking, slapping each other's shoulders, and commiserating about the latest failed construction contract or the

design for the ark on the bema. Their smiles come from knowing that they are in something together. I see a congregational meeting where all 100 members show up and debate their plans. I see those same 100 people sitting practically on top of one another in the sanctuary, watching with tears, kvelling, as the congregation's first Bar Mitzvah goes up to the bema. I see them squeezing into hospital rooms to visit each other, packing into the sukkah in the parking lot to eat together and wave the lulav, and showing up at a member's home for a *shiva minyan*.

Years later, their work has succeeded, probably beyond any expectations – we can ask them; they're sitting among us today. And we're still working together. Their effort has led to this enormous beautiful building, thousands of people, and a lot of fulfillment. With size and success can tend to come distance, but that closeness still exists for groups within the congregation who come together regularly, whether it's Torah study or Renaissance. At the same time, we could use a mission to engage in together

that goes beyond Jewish learning and social gatherings, and there are areas in our lives and in the life of this community that cry out for that same drive, that unity of purpose. We need to talk to each other to find out how our congregation could be addressing the challenges of its own community. There is a lot of strength among us, a lot of talent, knowledge and intelligence. Think of what we could accomplish together that we might not be able to do alone.

We don't know exactly where this work will lead us. What we know is that talking to each other is a good thing. Let's deepen the conversations that happen between members of this community, so that we can be connected beyond finding ourselves sitting together in this sanctuary. Let's strive to be a community that knows itself, whose members share with each other the things that go on in their lives, easy and difficult, momentary and lasting, the things that make us proud and those that make us vulnerable. Let's be open to finding out what unites us. Let's strive to be a community with windows.