

Rosh Hashanah am 1, 2016/57777 Rabbi Amy Small

Why Are We Here? New Beginnings for an Old Community

It was just a bit over a year ago that I came to Burlington for the first time to explore the possibility of becoming Ohavi Zedek's senior rabbi. I went home to New Jersey with many positive reactions, and I was happy to have become acquainted with this great congregation.

One question was reverberating in my head -- many of you had asked me in a few different ways: "*Why do you want to come here?*"

"*What makes you think you would like it here?*"

"*Do you know how cold it gets and how long is the winter?*" and...

"*Do you know enough about our community to feel like this is where you want to be?*"

I was happy to have felt a very positive and comfortable answer. I wanted to be here because I shared the values of social justice activism, the diversity and inclusivity of the Ohavi Zedek community, the down-to-earth and interesting people I met here, the long and treasured history of the congregation, its abiding respect for tradition, along with open-minded creativity and a desire for innovation. All of this made me happy to be here - then, and now.

Short as it has been, these nine months since I began my tenure here have been an intensive course in getting to know you -- as we get to know each other. Yes, it was a bit more intense than we had both expected, but that only accelerated the rate for our mutual partnership.

So now it's my turn to ask the question: **Why are YOU here?**

This is a serious question. Of course, today is the New Year, and Rosh Hashanah is when Jews gather in synagogue. It's what we do. Something pull us like an invisible thread to want to be here among our people. Some of us carry memories from our childhood -- melodies, sights, stirring sounds of the Shofar, and the freshness and joy of celebrating a New Year. Others have come to this experience as adults, having become part of a Jewish family or choosing a Jewish identity on our own. Some just feel the need to be in a community of Jews in prayer and celebration.

But none of these reasons fully explain why all of this matters enough to bring us together for these services, given that we all have choices. It takes effort to follow prayers in Hebrew while many of us can't read or understand the words, so I am not surprised when I hear complaints -- sometimes delivered with humor, sometimes not. I hear about the length of services, the repetitious prayers, and difficulty feeling engaged with the prayer as a personal experience. This is not to dismiss the feelings of many of you who feel fulfilled and are content with the traditional prayers.

Still I must ask: **Why are You Here?**

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I want to reassure you that I am not critical of complaints about services. Your feedback is very important and I understand it's not universally working. Because of this, it is even more delightful that you are here -- and for this I am very grateful. After all, we have a lot to talk about together!

I am well aware that many Jews are opting out. We are living in a time of rapid cultural change. Church and synagogue participation and affiliation rates are declining almost everywhere, while tastes and interests in religious life are shifting dramatically. Our culture supports independence and personal preference. We prefer to make our own choices. We know that everyone here could be observing this holiday elsewhere. In fact, some of our members have told me they wouldn't be here. Some are visiting family, while others prefer to find holiness with a mountain hike or a trek to the Lake.

Priorities and choices are shifting and changing Jewish interests and engagement. Surely, many of the choices that Jewish individuals, couples and families are making in today's world might have been only whispered in a hush in a prior generation when social conformity was the norm.

I grew up in an age of great Jewish pride when American culture was celebrating ethnic differences. The Jewish world, post-Holocaust and in Israel's early years was buoyed by Israel's achievements. Israel's struggle to survive gripped our hearts. Even now, I am still moved by the poem "I Was With Abraham" which we recited weekly in the synagogue of my youth. I'll share a few selections from it:

I WAS WITH ABRAHAM

*I stood with Abraham in his lonely vigil
And read the destiny of my people in the stars.*

*I stood with Jacob
When he wrestled through the night
With the angel of despair
And won a blessing at the break of dawn.....
I heard Solomon in the Temple
On the day he dedicated it as a House of Prayer for all peoples,
And I learned from him
Of a God Whose compassion extends to all,
Even to the stranger who comes from a far-off country.
I was with the prophets and heard them lash out against injustice.
I warmed at their compassion for the weak.
From them I learned what a raging fire within one's soul
An unfilled mandate from God can be....
I was with them in the Six Day War.
I stood by them when their precious hard-earned state was in danger.
I trembled when they did, and I rejoiced when they rejoiced.
I was at the Wall. I was in the Sinai. I was on the Golan Heights.
Shall I leave them now?
Can I part company with this immortal band whom I love?
They have become too dear and precious to me.*

*They are bone of my bone,
Flesh of my flesh,
Soul of my soul.
They are my people.
Their quest is mine.
They will live within me,
And I will live with them, forever.*

A generation ago, we were entertained with “The Joys of Yiddish” and our Jewish “in-speak.” Our sense of collective Jewish identity meant being different, and the Jewish a sense of mutual responsibility, from the rabbinic mantra, “All Jews are Responsible for Each Other,” moved many of us.

That era of expectations and uniformity has receded as the “we” has given way to “me.” Boundaries have broken down, and many Jews are now trying to figure out, “What meaning and value does Jewish community provide me in my life?” Today, many Jews proudly hold hyphenated identities: Jewish and female, Jewish and gay or lesbian, Jewish and intermarried, Jewish and Buddhist, Jewish and athletic, etc.

I’ve been an observer of these trends for many years. Now, in the nine months since I arrived here, I am learning about the unique ways the Burlington community is diverse, independent, fiercely committed to social justice activism and fluidity of identities, lifestyles, religious practices and --flannel. ☺

I had the privilege to meet many members of our congregation in 17 “meet and greet” gatherings last spring, thanks to your generous hospitality and the tremendous organizing help from Ducky Donath and Judy Danzig. While I didn’t *yet* get to know each of you -- as I hope I will during this year -- these conversations offered a broad and increasingly deep view of our community.

Your responses to the questions we discussed are being collated and charted into a form that will help us to review and consider how to update our ***Tikvah 2020*** Vision.

In the meantime, I will share some observations, hopes and dreams.

Some themes that emerged through our meetings and our 9 months together are:

1. **Social justice** is core to our values and our Jewish communal priorities.
2. Within the Ohavi Zedek community there are distinctly **different age groups** with varying needs and interests. We have many older members who need caring attention, while younger members need play groups and programs for young families.
3. **Geography matters** -- when I sat in living rooms in Richmond, in Williston, in Shelburne, in South Burlington, and in Essex, I not only had a chance to drive the distances you drive, but to hear how it made such a difference that we were meeting in your neighborhoods. I heard the call for more and more of these types

of gatherings. Some programs need be locally organized for our members to be able to be actively engaged.

4. Related, I learned how much **home-based communal gatherings** are important. Many people crave intimate, warm, informal, gatherings as connections to Jewish community. Shabbat Services in shul may not be as appealing for some people as intimate local Jewish experiences are for them.
5. **Meaning matters.** Folks want to know how Jewish community or Jewish practice can guide them, as individuals, to find meaning in life and answers to their life's questions, at all stages of their lives.
6. **Caring: G'mach/Gemilut Chasadim**-Acts of Loving-Kindness is very important. It is essential that our community cares for each other, especially for those most vulnerable.
7. **Open mindedness and acceptance** of different views and choices is an important value to all of us.
8. **Tradition** is also very important to many in our community, while for others it feels inaccessible.
9. **Worship** needs to be **accessible** and infused with joy and meaning.
10. This is a big one: **Different worship styles must be offered** for OZ to remain a relevant choice for our diverse community.

It is heartwarming to know how much people care about Ohavi Zedek and are moved by its history and importance in our Burlington and Vermont communities.

When I was preparing to begin my tenure I met with a small transition committee who had polled the Hebrew school committee and the board to be able to share the congregation's needs with me. The multi-page laundry list they gave me was very thorough and thoughtful. When I read it I couldn't suppress a chuckle, saying it read like *meshiach*(messiah)-yearning. Sorry guys, I said, I'll work really hard and get a lot done, but I am not the Messiah. ☺ They understood -- then we got to work to whittle it down to categories and priorities.

For better or for worse, the unexpected organizational transitions and challenges that consumed much of this year took over more of that focus than we had imagined. But I have not lost sight of the goals and the essential need to help our community engage in meaningful Jewish community and religious life.

One fundamental take-away from this year is this: Balancing the needs of a diverse community is Solomonic -- we need to be wise and thoughtful in the directions we chart and the choices we make as a community. I look back to another tumultuous time of change in Jewish history when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and exiled our people in the year 70. The rabbis who guided the Jewish people through that tremendous transition ultimately created rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism we inherited. Its text is the Talmud -- which was based on the foundation of the Hebrew Bible, but greatly expanded and changed what it meant to be a Jewish community. We wouldn't be here if it were not for their resilience, courage, creativity, wisdom and devotion. Their transition took several generations -- many dozens of years. Along the way, many views were recorded as minority opinions, even when they didn't prevail. Rabbinic Judaism ultimately set a

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course for synagogue and home-based Judaism with Jewish practice guiding Jewish belief. That is to say, DO Jewish, that's what matters. Hopefully, belief will develop as part of our experience. But actions are more important than beliefs.

The rabbis led a very diverse community and they refined the boundaries of that diversity through a thoughtful process. *Our* process of transition and innovation must be similarly thoughtful. Just as rabbinic Judaism came to hold to basic principles with priorities and limits, the limits our Jewish practice will continue to be refined. *Valuing diversity cannot mean being all things to all people.*

That brings us to the question: **what do we stand for?** From my first visit here I heard from many members how important it is to them that we are a Conservative congregation. Since then I have also heard from others that they have questions about the efficacy of our affiliation with United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, while others have been more strident, wishing that we would cease to be affiliated, perhaps making other choices.

In these conversations I have come to believe that our Conservative affiliation is good and important for us on many levels. In the coming years we can continue to explore this together, and your input will always be important. For now, from this vantage point, I will say this: The Conservative movement stands for "Tradition and Change." *That is what we here at Ohavi Zedek value.* I can also tell you that in my conversations with many close Conservative colleagues it is clear to me that the Conservative movement is itself going through a time of major transition and change, and it is increasingly concerned with the issues and challenges that we experience here. I hope that we will remain in the progressive wing of the movement and I imagine us leading the USCJ in this time of change.

In that regard, we will continue to innovate liturgically, with alternative services and rituals of different styles and forms. For example, I was very moved recently by the participation of nearly a dozen women in a women's *mikveh* at the lake for spiritual preparation for the New Year. The beautiful energy and intimate sharing of the women, who braved 50 degree temperatures while jumping into the water last Sunday without a complaint, was nothing short of transformative. We will seek many more opportunities to create sacred moments together.

We are planning a learner's service on Shabbat morning, November 5. It's for everyone - kids and adults and will feature a pared-down Hebrew service complemented with guitar music and singing of traditional and contemporary songs and guided learning about the meaning of the prayers. Our Hebrew School kids will lead some of the prayers and I will lead us in biblio-drama for our Torah learning. There are so many ways we can find spiritual nourishment with open minds, creativity and respect for core traditions.

Our enhancements for prayer and ritual experiences will come with **music**. It's time to re-infuse our synagogue with singing and to add instrumental music where it is appropriate! Our new OZ music community will bring new life and beauty to traditional melodies and will introduce an eclectic collection of contemporary Jewish music into

every nook and cranny of what we do. We'll be patient while they learn and prepare in cooperation with our Religious Committee's guidelines. Soon it will be an exciting new chapter for us.

We need to prioritize a focus on helping non-Jewish family members, as well as Jews who are not synagogue "mavens" -- experts, to feel included. It is not enough to say that we are welcoming. We need to make our rituals and prayers accessible with more instructions and guides and transliterated versions of Hebrew prayers. That is one of the several reasons why I have proposed the *Lev Shalem Siddur* (prayerbook) for us -- and I hope you will do whatever you can to come to one of our learning sessions about the siddur to learn why the Religious Committee is proposing this with me, along with our ideas for how to we hope to fund the project if it is approved.

We need to create more social events to help people share relationships in our community. Too many Hebrew School parents don't know each other, and empty-nesters and seniors don't interact either. We will need all of your input and your help to create a more engaged and socially connected community. In addition, I planted the seeds for a new social group we are calling, clumsily, Young Professionals. Grace, our new executive director, is taking the seeds and helping the group to begin to blossom and grow. She dubbed this group, "Yo-Pros." Under Grace's able and enthusiastic guidance, we look forward being THE place in Burlington where young Jewish adults enjoy community together.

The essential question with which I began today is: "Why are You Here?" We all need community, spiritual nourishment, meaning, purpose, *gemilut chasadim*/acts of loving kindness, and a home for living according to our values and animating our best selves. We are here because deep inside we are called to be present to our souls; where our souls are nourished.

Now is the time for turning, the meaning of *teshuvah* -- to the promises of a New Year. May we see with our hearts, as captured in this poem by Marcia Falk:

The Gift (Marcia Falk)

Sitting before a window, with no desire
but to see with the heart, clearly:

you watch the shadows come
and go,

you let yourself be forgiven.

Clouds cross the sky, mending
the roughened edges here and there,

partway through your life.

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With our souls nourished here, the question is less **WHY** we are here, and more about **HOW**. This question belongs to all of us. Our synagogue is the place where we will be fulfilled by caring and loving friendships and warm community, while exploring our questions about what matters in life and how Judaism offers abundant paths for finding meaning in the everyday of life. In this coming year, a New Year, a fresh start, may we be increasingly united in our search for how we will make this dream a reality for *all* of us. Let's dream big, and then proceed with patience, wisdom, courage, creativity, and love.

May this year be a year of good health, joy, friendship and love --a fulfilling and sweet year. *Leshanah Tovah Tikateivu* -- may you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for good.