

Yom Kippur Morning 5778
The Blessings of Belonging
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I am feeling a little nervous this morning. Exactly a week from today I will be attending my 25th high school reunion. I have actually never attended a high school or college reunion. Aside from my three closest friends, the last time I saw anyone from Belmont high school was in 1992.

Who among us doesn't look back on our teenage years with a sense of angst and doubt? There was stress over grades, but mostly I recall worrying about who to sit with at lunch, navigating the ever changing world of friendships, and a deep lingering question: where do I fit in? For those of you who are in high school now, perhaps it brings you comfort to learn that your rabbi, and many other adults in this room, struggled as well, and made it through. With the impending reunion, did I mention exactly one week away, some of these feelings are rising again to the surface.

Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? These questions confront all of us, each day and throughout our lives. Today, even with sophisticated and faster tools of communication, more and more people experience isolation, disconnection, and loneliness. Loneliness is not to be confused with solitude. Solitude is coffee and a newspaper, a walk on the beach, or some might say sitting on the couch and watching the Patriots. I treasure my solitude and don't especially think of myself as a joiner. However, more and more people are seeking connection in a disconnected world.

It is why our Shabbat service was overflowing on Friday night after the election this year. It is why we had over 100 temple members enjoy and savor our congregational retreat last April. It is why we are here today. On this Yom Kippur, we crave community. On this fast day, so many of us hunger for meaningful connections. I believe that this year especially we are in need of powerfully supportive communities to hold us up. Belonging brings meaning and wholeness to our lives.

We heard the message this morning: you belong here. Not just at Beth David, but in the covenantal community of the Jewish people that extends from Sinai until this very day. We stood at the foot of the mountain and heard the words chanted in Torah, "You stand today, all of you, *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem* – before the Eternal your God..." (Deuteronomy 29:9) We all stood at Sinai, and we all stand here together today.

But a lot has also changed. Standing together and being part of a community is no longer a given. Our society is plagued by divisiveness and individualism. Family dinners are down. Mitch Prinstein reflects in his book, *Popular - The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World*, "Fame is in. Power, influence, and prestige are hot. Character, kindness, and community? Not so much." And most of us have heard the latest Pew Research Center studies on declining religious affiliation.

Clearly, there are many ways to find connection and community: yoga, the gym, books club, social media. Yet, Rabbi David Wolpe observes that, “To be healthy, a soul has to care about other things and other souls beside itself and its source.” (*Why Be Jewish?*) I believe that the synagogue does just that.

I am often asked, “Why should I belong?” And beyond merely joining, what compels people to form lasting connections and stay? This morning, I would like to offer three blessing of belonging. Three blessings of being part of Jewish community, and belonging to Temple Beth David in particular.

For the blessing of meeting. For 2,000 years the synagogue has been a meeting place; a place to meet other people and a place to meet God. Dr. Ron Wolfson, in *Relational Judaism*, teaches that Judaism in its very essence is a relational religion, born of a covenant between God and the people of Israel, sustained for millennia by a system of behaving, belonging, and believing that grows and evolves through time and space. Judaism is more than a religion. It is a people, a community of communities, a culture, a language, a history, a land, a civilization, a technology, a path to shape a life of meaning and purpose, belonging and blessing.”

In other words, we find holiness in interpersonal connections. God is in the in between. In the long-lasting *chavurot* that were established by Rabbi Zoob, in the Beth David Shabbat morning *chevra*, the group of friends who pray together and share their lives each week, and in the new faces that we meet during the beginning of each Shabbat service when we invite you to turn to someone near you and wish them Shabbat Shalom.

I love that here at Temple Beth David we value nametags. They are not always easy to manage. Volunteers *shlep* the boxes out every Shabbat, and routinely sort and order. Past President Dan Weller makes sure that new members have new nametags.

Author Scott Ginsberg decided to conduct an experiment. He wore a nametag 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for 3,495 consecutive days. In his book, *Hello, My Name is Scott...*” he highlights some lessons learned:

- Never underestimate the power of approachability.
- Create encounters that otherwise would not have existed.
- Give people permission to talk to you.
- Everyone has a story. And everyone wants to tell that story. So ask them.
- It’s really hard to beat up a stranger if you know his name.
- Nametags will not get you dates. If you’re a jerk, not even a nametag will make you approachable.
- Nametags are NOT about you. They’re about everyone in the world except you.
- Don’t boycott them. Wear your nametag for other people. Always.

When asked, “What’s with the nametag? Why do you do it?” He said, “The nametag represents friendliness in a world full of strangers, creating opportunities for connection

in a world where people desire to be seen and known, but so often feel invisible and misunderstood.” (Rabbi Jennifer Clayman, Sermon at Congregation Beth Am)

I thank you for wearing your name tags, for greeting each other with grace and kindness, for embracing strangers, and for living up to your reputation of being a congregation that is warm and welcoming, as our President, Paul Greenberg, referenced in his Rosh Hashanah message. It sometimes takes a leap of faith or a step outside of our comfort zone. This year try meeting one new person and tell them you are glad that they are here. And if you feel on the margins, bring your questions or doubts with you. Our synagogue is a refuge in a shaky world. We find blessing in meeting others who share common values, spiritual struggles, hopes and dreams.

For the blessing of gifts. To belong to a synagogue is to learn how to be effective givers and willing recipients. It is the give and take, the offering and receiving that strengthens and inspires us. One of my favorite authors, Marilynne Robinson, writes, “It is very much in the gift of the community to enrich individual lives, and it is in the gift of any individual to enlarge and enrich community.” (*When I Was a Child I Read Books*) Judaism emphasizes this generosity of spirit and mutual responsibility. This is the essence of *minyán*, a community of pray-ers and comforters.

It is the opposite of a selfie. This is the blessing of being there for one another when we need it most. After I gave birth to our twins, my congregation in California brought us meals for a month. I don’t remember much from that time. I was recovering from a c-section. The smaller of our boys had to stay in the hospital a little longer. Micah went back to work at his congregation. But I remember the nourishment and acts of kindness that carried us through those sleepless nights and days of endless feedings and changings.

When I returned to the temple, I said that we needed to give a meal to all new parents. Members of the temple brought meals, and not just to new parents, but also to families in mourning, and those struggling with illness. The blessing of gifts is ultimately about empathy. Sometimes we need to receive, other times we need to give. In giving and receiving we are never alone in the highs and lows of life.

It is inspiring to witness our human offerings here at Beth David. I am inspired by Cynthia Atkins and Anne Heller who lovingly care for our temple gardens and grounds. I am inspired by Jeff Greenwald who organizes our interfaith walk for hunger right here at our temple, and by Lynn Kaminski who collects our food donations each week from the bins at temple and brings them to Family Table. That is a lot of peanut butter jars and canned salmon to carry! These acts feed people who are hungry every day. I am inspired by so many other countless individuals who give of their time and their resources to hold our community up. I hope you are as well. Give of yourself. Lend your hands. You will receive much in return.

Peter Block, in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, writes, “Belonging means that you relate to your community as an owner; it belongs to you, so it is yours to create. You see yourself not as a consumer – a passive recipient of services – but as an investor,

an author and builder; a partner in shaping what happens inside. Instead of asking, “What can they do for me? Those who belong to a community ask, “What can we create together?”

We are the authors, the builders and creators of our holy community. Belonging to Temple Beth David makes us better people, because we are inspired by each other’s gifts, and because we can inspire others to keep giving and receiving.

For the blessing of generations. A synagogue is as strong as its past, present and future. Your rabbis love hearing kids’ voices in our sanctuary. Those voices are our future.

The Talmud urges us to prepare kids to manage without us. We should raise them to work, to enter into marriage or a stable loving relationship, and to live a life of good deeds. And we should give them survival skills. As the Talmud puts it, we should teach our kids how to swim. (Kiddushin 29a) Or as Rabbi Janet Marder comments, we should teach them to “navigate their way through life’s turbulence without going under.” (Sermon Erev Yom Kippur 5776)

Research shows that spirituality plays a role in helping kids thrive. Psychologist Lisa Millers shows how young people of all income levels who grew up in a warm, close family and were regularly involved in a spiritual community fared better. She wrote in *The Spiritual Child*, “They had a strong transcendent relationship with a higher power... which gave them a sense of peace, calm, guidance and love. They saw their lives as purposeful; they sought to use their gifts in service to something beyond themselves.”

How do we cultivate this powerful and protective sense of spirituality in our kids? How do we help them connect, figure out who they are and where they belong?

We can start by showing them what it means to be part of a spiritual community. We show them when we ourselves show up week after week. We show them when they see the generations gather together. We show them when they see adults lighting the Shabbat candles, praying for the sick, celebrating the birth of a baby, saying *Kaddish*. We show them when families share Jewish moments together, like when we begin all together on Sunday mornings in this sanctuary with songs and blessings. We show them when they see adults studying while they are in religious school. Three members of our congregation, Connie Rizoli, Mark Albion and Roseli Weiss, show them when they volunteer their time each week in the afternoons to help our students learn Hebrew. We show them when we wrap the Torah scroll around them on Simchat Torah, and when we retell our story of freedom at the Passover *seder*. We show them when we pass the Torah to them as they become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, children of the commandments.

Think about it. At the moment when young people on the verge puberty are not likely to want to stand in front of a crowd, Jewish tradition says, you are going to ascend the *bima* and lead us because you have something valuable to say and we want to listen. At the moment when they are starting to figure out their place in the world, we tell them you can make a difference. At the moment when they are hearing voices of doubt, we tell them

you matter. We want to learn from you, and celebrate you, and welcome you into our community. You stand in the chain of tradition. Bar and Bat Mitzah can be a netting of community, catching them when they need it most. We owe it to them as a congregation to be present and welcome them. Hopefully it is the beginning of many significant spiritual moments that they will one day pass on to the next generation.

In the synagogue, we pass on the joys and sorrows of our people, memories and stories, melodies and pictures, holiday customs and treasured recipes, the taste of gefilte fish (it's an acquired taste) and the sweetness of *oneg* cookies. The blessing of generations gives us the assurance that we, too, will be remembered. We pass on our legacy.

So why belong? Because, belonging, true belonging, touches our souls. For the blessing of meeting, the blessing of gifts, and the blessing of generations. These are only a few of the many blessings of belonging.

Here at Temple Beth David, I pray that we will continue to build an open, inclusive, ever evolving, warm and welcoming Jewish community for all who seek it. A place that nurtures our individual growth, where we share our stories, pass on our traditions, help heal the world, and bless one another.

Atem Nitzavim Hayom – You stand together this day. I am blessed to belong here.