

## **The Community We Need – Yom Kippur 5779/2018**

### **Rabbi Micah Citrin**

Sometimes, friends will ask me, “Isn’t it really hard to do a funeral?” It is, and at the same time it is often inspiring as I get to learn the lessons of a person’s life. I had such an experience at the beginning of the summer. As many of you know, one of our long-time members, Milton Safren died in June. I was blessed to get to know Milton a little bit during the past few years. But what I learned about Milton in his illness and his death taught me not only about him, but also about the DNA of this community. Milton had been part of Temple Beth David since the 1970’s. He was a regular at the Shabbat morning lay-led minyan that takes place every Saturday in the library. Milton would always greet you with a kind word. Milton also had his own opinions, especially when it came to politics. One might affectionately say that on the political spectrum he was just to the left of Attila the Hun. His views did not really jive with most members of our Reform congregation, and on occasion he would get into an argument with a fellow member, or even the rabbi about one of his opinions. I even witnessed a tense exchange between Milton and a more liberal congregant at an event this past year.

When Milton became ill, and went to the hospital in May, I was astounded at the way Rabbi Karen and I learned about it. It was a Wednesday afternoon when the Temple is bustling with Hebrew students. Rabbi Karen and I were running between classrooms, engaging parents and helping teachers and students. The same temple member, who just a few months earlier had exchanged words with Milton over politics, called the temple several times during this most hectic time of the week. She kept getting the voicemail. Not wanting to leave a message, this member drove from her home to the temple to inform us that Milton had been hospitalized. I had never seen anything like it, and it made a deep impression on me about the essence of community here at Temple Beth David.

Over the next few weeks, as Milton was in hospice, countless congregants, especially the Brotherhood, came and sat by Milton’s side. They allowed his son Stephen, who had dutifully flown up from Florida, to take a moment for himself. They were present.

When Milton died, his townhouse was too small to host shiva. Founding members of the congregation, who had been part of Milton and his late wife Selma’s chavurah, opened their home. The shiva was packed wall to wall not only with long time members of the congregation, but with people who grew up with Stephen in the temple and had moved to other parts of the Boston area. And their children came, too, serving as a source of support for Milton’s grandsons. It was important to so many people to be present. I remarked to the host about the outpouring at the minyan. She said, that is how it simply was at Temple Beth David, we showed up for each other.

As I walked out of the shiva minyan that night, I could not stop thinking about community. What community is, what it means, what it takes to build community, and why it matters. I thought in particular about this community. This congregation has

existed for 59 years. It has gone through periods of flourishing and growth, and also challenging times when its fabric frayed. Among us we have members who have been with the congregation for five decades and some who have been here for five days. I wonder what will be the next chapter of community here at Temple Beth David. The community we want and the community we need is shaped by each of us throughout the year.

There are few things that I can think of as more essential, a need more immediate in our own day than community. One could cite statistics on anxiety rates in individuals today, or that we live in a world that is increasingly disjointed. Our attention spans have become fragmented. The need for institutions is being questioned by society and synagogue affiliation has declined. Rather than working to change the institution to meet evolving needs, too often people abandon the institution. We have long known that joining anything is no longer a given, except maybe a gym. And virtual communities cannot take the place of interpersonal connections and interactions. Real community on a meaningful and personal level is the remedy to living in a confusing and chaotic world.

The elixir of community in challenging times is nothing new to Judaism. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was a great Hasidic rabbi living in Warsaw at the outbreak of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. Through his time in the ghetto and eventually until his death in a concentration camp in 1943, Rabbi Shapira taught Torah that remains relevant today. In one of his significant works, *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work*, Shapira writes, "The troubled man cannot quite articulate what he is feeling inside-this tickling, this pressing of his soul! So he pours himself a drink, he eats, or he does some other mundane task. He does not succeed in quelling the spasms of the soul...(p.38)" Shapira identifies "conscious community" as an association of people seeking holiness and oneness. This is the essence of Jewish community, when we get it right.

We feel this essence so profoundly today. That is why we are all here. That is why we have to open the doors of the sanctuary, and extend chairs into the Rosen Hall. That is why we have to hold two morning services, as we seek holiness and oneness.

Our Torah portion this morning captures this sense of striving for conscious community. *Atem Nitzavim*, Moses declares to the people, from officers of the community to woodchoppers, children and adults, everyone is present. *Lo L'vadchem*. Not you alone enter this covenant with God and one another, but also generations to come. Moses is speaking about us. The Torah imagines this very moment. But *Lo L'vadchem* can also mean, you are not alone. When we build true community, we overcome loneliness and isolation. And finally, Moses encourages the people that living the covenant is attainable. That it is not in the heavens or the work of prophets, sages, and rabbis. Creating community is the work of the people, for it is *karov eilecha la'asoto*, close to you, and within your ability to achieve. In making community, we draw near and create warmth, support, and intimacy.

But this day will end. What of our gathering? What of our community? Rabbi Shapira, in his wisdom speaks to this, too. He teaches, “when you feel as though your heart could break on Yom Kippur, indeed your heart and mind are wide open. But the rest of the year, when day to day anxieties overtake you, you lose touch with the immediacy of the power of your heart and mind (p.13).” It is not enough to be in community a day or two a year. We would never try to shape our family by just popping in on our daughter’s birthday, or bringing a bouquet of flowers to a spouse on an anniversary and then say, “see you next year.” Like family, conscious community takes practice and commitment. It was the community Milton Safren built here over a lifetime of being present.

If we create the community we need, what does that community look like? This summer, I posed that question to a variety of congregants. What is Temple Beth David community at its best? What does it look like and how do we know that the need is being met? I spoke with founders who said that when the congregation started community meant painting the building themselves when it needed paint and sewing curtains when windows needed to be covered. When kids became bar and bat mitzvah everyone came because, as they said, “they were our kids.” To them community was their teen aged daughter remarking, “Temple’s great! All of my aunts and uncles are here.” That’s in the DNA of this congregation, but those traits go dormant if they are not renewed. This coming year we have 15 bnai mitzvah. It goes without saying, but you are all invited! They are your kids. They’re our kids. In this broken world, they desperately need a conscious community where they can come of age; where they know that they matter. And when you are part of that experience, or the naming of a child whose parents are new to the community, you will feel affirmed in being part of something lasting, that stretches back through millennia and will continue in generations to come. That’s what it means to build the community we need.

I spoke with a couple whose youngest son recently went off to college and whose eldest daughter was recently married, and, thank God, the middle one is gainfully employed. What more could they want, you might ask? They want community, too. Like many other brotherhood members, the husband sat with Milton Safren and was present as he lay dying. This man said that he does not need gimmick programs or incentives to be in synagogue. He is looking for authentic moments to touch life, like being present for someone in need, or engaging in Jewish learning that responds to the big questions. His wife said that after a long week of work, finding peace and reflection in synagogue on Shabbat brings grounding. And together, they have made a community of justice by helping to lead our Sunday Sandwich Hevre, an intergenerational effort to make bag lunches for people who are hungry. They remind us that the nest does not really lie empty when we make meaningful connections, and seek community in synagogue. They are making the community we need.

And over the past couple of years, our congregation has seen significant growth in *Shorashim*, our Religious School. Families with young children are seeking community in an increasingly frenetic life. I spoke with a father whose family recently joined the temple. I asked him what they are looking for from the synagogue. He said

that they want to have an anchor in tradition for their kids. Anchors help us to orient ourselves and keep us from drifting away. A synagogue religious school is part of that anchor, but it is not enough.

Rabbi Karen and I envision Shabbat as the place that anchors all of us. In our vision of conscious community, Shabbat is the place where 4 year olds and 84 year olds find each other. It is the place where adults with kids in the home, or kids out of the home, or no kids at all build their own spiritual reserves. You will hear us say it over and over again. Families who make Shabbat synagogue attendance a practice, like soccer, or dance, or gymnastics, have kids who feel connected, comfortable in Hebrew school, and at home in Jewish community. Creating Shabbat together with our presence is creating the community we need.

I want to leave you with a favorite story about the essence of community:

There was once a small *shtetl*, a little village about a day's ride from Warsaw, the capital of Poland. The *shtetl* had one rabbi, and the rabbi had one son who would soon be married to a lovely young woman in the *shtetl*. All the townspeople overflowed with excitement for this *simcha*. Since such an event would only happen once in the life of the *shtetl*, the mayor decided that it would be fitting to issue a proclamation to the entire village. The mayor declared that a gigantic barrel be brought to the center of town. The barrel would be so big that a person would have to climb a ladder to get to the very top. Then the mayor said, in honor of the wedding of the rabbi's son, let every person in the *shtetl* contribute a pail of his best wine to the barrel. This way, on the wedding night the bride, groom and entire village would have the most memorable and the sweetest celebration. For the two weeks leading up to the wedding, a continuous stream of people climbed up the ladder to pour their wine into the barrel. Finally, the night of the wedding arrived. After the wedding blessings, smashing the glass and a shout of *mazal tov*, the celebration was ready to begin. The mayor climbed the ladder to the top of the large barrel to tap it and make a toast, "*Mazal tov* to our rabbi, *mazal tov* to the wonderful couple, and *mazal tov* to all of us." Amid these shouts of joy the mayor opened the spigot and out flowed copious amounts of... water. There was confusion, then silence, and finally shame, as each villager looked down at his feet or fidgeted with her hands, and understood what had happened. Over two weeks as residents of the *shtetl* marched up the ladder, each one said to himself, do I really need to part with my wine, each one said to herself, no one will ever know if I add a little water instead. Who would be able to detect it in a barrel of wine so big? Each person thought that another would provide the wine. What was supposed to be the happiest day in the *shtetl* turned out to be the saddest day of all.

In the days, weeks, and years ahead. Rabbi Karen and I hope to engage with you in shaping the community we need. Temple Beth David is our barrel. It is open. All it needs is your finest wine, all it needs is you.