

REKINDLING COMMUNITY –

Remarks on the Occasion of my Installation at Temple Sinai

Parashat Vayeshev November 30, 2018 22 Kislev 5779

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First, I want to thank the Search Committee and the members of Temple Sinai for this great honor of becoming your first new rabbi in more than a “double-chai” of years. I know I might not have been the profile everyone had put in their “Tender for Rabbi’s” search, but that first weekend, I felt that spark of connection and it seemed like one of those rare *bashert* moments in life – when fate and free will come together. I am deeply grateful.

And I want to thank the staff of Temple Sinai, Judy, Michael and Mark, who have been working so hard to support me, and it’s been a busy few months.

And I want to thank David Collins and the Board, and especially the Installation Committee who have worked so hard for this.

And I want to thank – need to thank – my husband Tim Owings, who has been unnervingly supportive and nice these past few months. We have been very close friends since Ms. Coulette’s Health Science class in 9th Grade, and it is such a gift to be with someone who knows me so well, and whom I know so well.

Recently, with the events in Pittsburgh and around the country, we in the Jewish community have been reminded – again – of the reality of anti-Semitism, and of the reality of our daily need to live in some functional level of denial about it. Living in Burlington, mostly, it is easy to do, which is one of the reasons we live here. But these outbreaks of anti-Semitism sound an ancient alarm, a shofar that lives in our DNA, that brings us back to community, to remind ourselves that there is a community to come back to.

I know that for me, it was anti-Semitism that led me away from the marching band and to the synagogue on Friday nights. That the synagogue had the most handsome young rabbi didn’t hurt at all. Hi Bill.

But ultimately, it isn’t healthy to be Jewish only when someone calls us a Jew. Or worse.

While I love Alice Walker's profound observation that "Resistance is the Secret of Joy," – and that as a sign over my desk when I was a dean at Middlebury - and I have found it to be often true, I know Judaism can't be embraced solely as a stand against prejudice, the Holocaust, or assimilation. "Cultural Judaism" and "Ancestral Guilt Judaism" are not enough for the next generation to join synagogues. If we want there to be synagogues and Jews in America in 200 years, we need to revitalize, and rekindle our Judaism. We need to cause a new light to shine upon Zion.

Judaism only works if it makes our busy lives better, and I believe Judaism and Jewish tradition, if lived intelligently, is a technology for making our lives richer and more joyous, more connected – Our tradition is an epic life hack, if we engage it actively.

We live in a time where we work far too much, are too programmed, can't keep up. Judaism pushes back, by calling us to holidays and Shabbat, the most sacred cathedrals in time, that if we let them, if we lean into them and trust our ancestors just a bit, if we risk reshaping our lives just a bit, our tradition will help us find a better balance between the rest and work, sacred and profane.

We live in a time of screens and virtual connections. One thing I noticed the other day while playing Mah-jongg with the Sisterhood was that nobody was on their phones. People were talking like people to one another. That is not an ancient tradition, but a recent one, and will make our own to pass down.

We live in a time when we can be so disconnected from the world around us that it too easy for the miracles all around us to fade in gray. Heschel teaches us that Indifferences to the sublime is the root of all sin. Jewish tradition is bursting with mindfulness by commanding us to say 100 blessings a day, for things from the mundane to the sublime. Just imagine how different the world would seem if you actually tried to do that!

We live in a time where feelings seem to mean more than facts, a time of Wikipedia quick but dubious answers, of "expertise by Tweet," and while all of us long for simple answers, Judaism teaches us the smallest issues are bewilderingly complex. The entire Talmud is a testament to the futility of easy answers and "truthiness.'

And We live in a time where individualism, “doing our thing,” our way, you-be-you, conveniently, drive-through, or better-yet, Amazon-Prime Second Day Delivery. Other spiritual paths have packaged themselves as good therapy for individuals doing their own thing in their own way at home in their immaculately organized homes that don’t look lived in.

We all know Jews have left the synagogue for the Vipasana retreat, the UU Fellowship, the Zen chanting, or the guru. Or just for secular individualism. But Judaism stands in creative tension with such individualism. Judaism can only flourish in community; it can only be experienced, understood and enjoyed in the company of other Jews. It is a religion of community, a spirituality of connection and it can’t be followed in a cave, or in a monastery, or in a retreat. But it revels in mah-jongg and singing and praying together, cooking together. Learning Torah together. This is why it is so important that we maintain Jewish institutions like having a synagogue in your community, one that reflects your values.

If we work together, if you let yourself step into the circle, together we can create a progressive active spiritual justice-loving Jewish community here in Vermont - but like the hokey pokey, you have to put your whole self in.

And perhaps that is what is most difficult for humans. Putting our whole self in. Committing to a path. It has certainly been very difficult for me at times. Like many of you, I have spent years of my life with my left foot in, or my right hand in, but my whole self had one eye on the door.

All of us struggle. . All of us wrestle with questions of identity and faith, connection and independence. All of us sometimes feel we don’t belong. All of us have had our hearts broken. But as the Chassidim teach us, “nothing is as full as a broken heart.” We are broken, yet beautiful as we are. It is in recognizing our shared struggles and doubts that deeper connection and sacred community becomes possible

I believe that Judaism offers us an exquisite, joyful path to a spiritually full life, and it is my mission in life to share that joy and spirit with others. To share Judaism’s insights and spiritual tools, while also letting our own unique way of being Jewish as a community evolve and change.

Too often, we let our Jewish imagination get stuck at “Fiddler on the Roof,” and when we don’t feel like doing the bottle dance and shouting “tradition” we give up.

But it is the very image of a Fiddler on the Roof that I want to explore tonight, that Chagall-like figure playing violin up on the roof – With Topol’s voice –

“A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask, why do we stay up there if it’s so dangerous? Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Tradition!”

Now, as I Reform Jew, someone who is very proud of being Reform “on purpose”, I don’t think Tradition alone is what keeps us balanced. I think one side of the roof might be tradition, but the other side is modernity, science, skepticism and critical thinking.

We progressive Jews are Fiddlers on the Roof of modern Jewish life. As Jews, we straddle entire worlds.

We stand with our feet in the past and in the future. We remember and mourn what we’ve endured, but we celebrate the world, life, and the amazing flourishing today of Jewish culture, writing, language, and self-determination. We refuse to choose on in the name of simplicity. We are complex.

We stand on both faith and skepticism, knowing cynicism leads to great suffering, and so does faith when it is divorced from reason. But we also know that reason, science without poetry, without faith in something greater can lead to unimaginable cruelty and destruction. When our reason robs us of our sense of the miraculous, we lose what is most profound about our humanity.

As Jews, we are required to stand fully in the world around us, knowing we are all one family of one God, children of Adam and Eve, but we also are commanded to stand at the same time in the cozier Jewish world, one in which we are the children of Abraham and Sarah; we are family. We are tribe.

WE are the children of Joseph also. In this week’s Torah Portion, Joseph is the quintessential “Fiddler on the Roof. He straddles two worlds, the world of Canaan

and the world of Egypt, the world of the nomadic shepherd and the geek who could read, write and do accounting. He straddles great heights and depths, and like so many of us, he straddles the fault-lines in his own family.

Joseph looks directly at us across thousands of years and we look back and see a relative.

In two days, we will begin to celebrate Hanukkah. Over 2,000 years ago, the Maccabees also straddled two worlds, the Greek and the Jewish. It was their “reform” to Jewish law, that one could fight a defensive battle on Shabbat, that allowed them to prevail. They rekindled the lights in the Temple, but they also rekindled the people’s belief in their own agency, in the possibility of autonomy and self-rule.

And we must also remember that they also rekindled a sort of self-righteous extremism, an us-verses-them world view that we see rising all around us today – and also within us and among us.

The fiddler on the roof knows balance and music, but not certainty or ease.

Chassidism speaks of sparks of holiness, of beauty that are embedded in the profane world all around us, sparks that are leftover from creation.

But I believe it is we who make those sparks, and standing as we do connected to the poles of modern existence. If we are creative, those poles of holy and profane, of ancient and modern, of being a believer and a skeptic can become a sort of spiritual battery.

I believe we, modern progressive Jews are the spark, the jumper cables of a new sort of vibrant meaningful Jewish life, rich in tradition but rich in innovation, creativity, and joy. And connection.

Tonight, as we approach Hanukkah, we celebrate our own rekindling of this community, the rekindling of our belief in our future, our commitment to one another, and our pride in what we are and what we can still become.

In many ways, I see myself as “ba’al teshuvah” some one who has come back home to Judaism. My prayer is that as your rabbi, I can show you the deep pleasure that journey has brought me, and that I can help keep that flame burning, help remind you of how much joy and meaning come from being part

of a living sacred community, a Jewish community that makes our tradition live and breathe. We burn with passion and compassion in this world that needs our wisdom of study, community, connection and humility more than it ever has. That is what we rekindle tonight. That is our work together, for Light is Sewn for the righteous, and joy for those with pure hearts.”

Ken Yehi Ratzon.