

# From Our President Robert Weintraub

## “A BAS Balancing Act”

Recently, Rabbi Bronstein and I were approached by a consultant to the UJA, who is preparing for a conference entitled, “Riding the Third Rail: Leaning In To Controversy.” The goal of the conference is “to help congregations find ways to address issues that are so controversial and charged that they can threaten the unity of congregations and undermine leadership.” The consultant came to us because of our reputation. She wanted to learn about Bet Am Shalom’s “process” and “experience” in dealing with controversy.

I explained that what we enact is an inherently Reconstructionist process – ingrained, a long time ago, in the culture and *modus operandi* of our community – and, over the years, continually reinforced. I depicted how we consider Jewish and communal traditions related to issues at hand, along with current data and congregants’ varying perspectives on them. And I described how we try to make sure decisions are made through democratic means.

In the end, the consultant concluded what many of us know – that the way this process is embedded in Bet Am Shalom’s character sets us apart from most other congregations.

I did not, however, discuss the other side of the coin, engraved with a picture of congregants pulling out their hair. Periodically such congregants have expressed to me their exasperation over how much time and energy is consumed when our inclusive and democratic process is used to address issues that aren’t nearly “so controversial and charged.” Why do we seem to “over-process” or “overthink” daily issues? Why, on what appear to be obvious matters, do they get discussed with the rabbi, the education director, the executive director, the executive committee, the board?

Serving as president has given me the opportunity to regularly experience both sides of the coin, and arrive at a conclusion that I believe further sets BAS apart. We act as we do because our Jewish and communal traditions demand that we strive to find the right balance between the interests of our congregation and the interests of its individual members.

It is part of Bet Am Shalom’s culture for people to set the interests of the community *above* their own. When someone has an idea, a concern, an observation, a suggestion, it is most often for the benefit of our congregation at large. Still, as our deep-seated process takes hold, further consideration is given to how the resulting action might affect each of our members. It still surprises me when apparently obvious decisions turn into lengthy discussions about how so and so might feel about the results. Coming from over 40 years in a business environment – as well as in other organizations and communities – I sometimes twitch at the extent of this slow, deliberate, cumbersome piece of our process. Too cumbersome? Sometimes. But I think most of us would rather we err in that direction.

Admittedly, in trying to get the coin to stand on its edge, we’re not always as true to the process and culture I described as we would like. Yet, it is our intention, our aspiration, and a part of the work in which we are engaged. In a recent article in [The Atlantic](#), Yoni Appelbaum, the Senior Editor for politics, wrote: “Americans have never agreed when to prioritize the needs of individuals and when their collective project should come first. If this tension wasn’t itself unifying, it nonetheless helped stake out the terrain over which productive national debate could be waged.” Closer to our Jewish home, Mordecai Kaplan, more than 80 years ago, emphasized that: “It is just as essential for the community to accept responsibility for the welfare of the individual, as for the individual to be responsible, to the extent of his ability, for the welfare of the community.”

I hope you agree that we have traveled over this terrain productively, seeking to harmonize the welfare of Bet Am Shalom with that of each of its members. And I look forward to our collectively perpetuating the unifying quest for this elusive place of balance.