

Shabbat Shalom.

I would like to begin by sharing my story of how I came to Bet Am Shalom.

About a year and a half after we came up from the city, in 1995—I had the second bun in the oven and we began looking for a synagogue up here.

I had been told about a reform congregation to check out—not too far from where we are now. We knew what we did and didn't want, and I told the poor woman who answered the phone that day—"we are *very* liberal. We are looking for an open, inclusive community. But we are very serious about being Jewish. And I don't want a place where you have to worry about what you are wearing for the holidays."

I don't know about you, but for me, growing up in the early 60s, the high holy days were like Fall Fashion Week in Far Rockaway. I hung on my mom's arm as the preparation for the Days of Awe took place at the beauty salon, in between the Waldbaums and the kosher bakery. The ritual included a stealth hair teasing that would take mom from Erev Rosh Hashanah through the end of Yom Kippur. The motto was: "the higher the hair, the closer to God."

I continued to tell the woman on the phone at that Reform Congregation, "not only do we want a liberal, inclusive and serious environment where I don't have to wear high heels, we want a place where we can become involved in the community, where we can participate...and be a part of something."

"You belong at Bet Am Shalom," the woman said to me. Wow – it was like the Macy's / Gimbel's moment from *Miracle on 34th Street*. She was sending me to the shul down the street?

David and I met with Rabbi Bronstein and joined. I remember David saying to the Rabbi, "we're not people who jump right into the middle of things. We're sort of the type to put our toes in first, and very slowly wade in."

That's who we are. Our first Rosh Hashanah, we wheeled our then-3 month old and 3 year old, with all the baby and toddler paraphernalia over to the tent in the double stroller—a clumsy, awkward 90s affair that we'd gotten on sale, was poorly made and had terrible suspension. We were way over there – [my left—mid-way] in the corner– negotiating the rough terrain—and astounded by the enormity of crowd.

I knew Les and Benjie – as fellow day care parents. And I knew 2 people from my pre-natal exercise class who were members at Bet Am Shalom. That was it. There were a thousand other people – a sea of them – and I thought, how will we ever make our way in?

I'd like everyone to take a second at this moment – and look around at the other people here tonight. If you're in front, - just look all the way in the back. And you guys in the back – you're already looking all the way in the front. *[people look around the tent]*

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This is what I want everyone to reflect on—how is it that each of us makes our way in? How do we reach out and help each other navigate that path from the periphery to the core of what we have here at Bet Am Shalom?

A couple of weeks ago, the Board of Trustees and School Board met for the first time this year and discussed an article called “How to Succeed at Congregational Life,” and we considered, in small groups, what made people most comfortable, connected, welcomed, and part of this community.

A few things emerged. Everyone is very, very friendly and introduces themselves. But – it's difficult to “break in.” Some of us are still “navigating our way in.”

For a number of people—“breaking in” came during the Rabbi's Mitzvah class—when they sat together – panim el panim--with the other clueless parents and their 12 year olds and made that important, life-changing journey as a team. I was there—and I'll never forget that experience. That's a long time to wait for the people who join when their kids are babies.

For some, it was when they came through the two-year Adult B'nai Mitzvah class—learning together as adults, opening up to each other about what it means to be Jewish, wrestling with the Torah, and learning to live authentically Jewish lives. I was there too.

For many on the board, it was not about which program, talk, or class they attended, but more about the first time they volunteered for something—whether the craft show, work on a committee, helping their kids' class event. I started volunteering when my older child was in Kitah Dalet, and soon, I was approached from many directions to participate in numerous volunteer activities. There was one stretch, this was when I was program chair, where I was here in the Bet Am Shalom building for 13 evenings in a row. At some point, obviously, I went from “wading in” to “in, way over my head.” It was insane [Dinner was “Shut up. Mommy's volunteering. Order in a pizza.”]

Yes, David and I and the kids got what we asked for—a synagogue community where we could participate.

Recently, there has been a lot of discussion about how American Jews identify and express their Judaism. In early 2013, the Pew Research Center conducted a study of Jewish Americans as we are today. While respondents overwhelmingly said they are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging—in terms of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture—there is not as much of

an identity of being Jews by religion. And the younger the age bracket, the less Jews affiliate with religion.

For today's Jews, *as per the study*, "What does being Jewish mean?"

- For 73% it is remembering the Holocaust
- 69% said it's about leading an ethical life
- 56%, working for justice/equality
- 43%, caring about Israel
- And right behind caring for Israel—for 42% it is having a sense of humor. Whew. It's great to be Jewish.

Also in 2013, SYNERGY, an organization of the UJA Federation of New York that brings synagogues together, conducted research on NY metro area congregations and produced a report on "Connected Congregations: From Dues and Membership to Sustaining Communities of Purpose." The focus is primarily on how to increase **engagement**—a very frequently used term—and SYNERGY has leveraged much of the terminology from Dr. Ron Wolfson, who has coined the term "Relational Judaism."

Wolfson, a professor at American Jewish University in Los Angeles, published what I would call a catalyzing book entitled *Relational Judaism – Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*.

Wolfson draws the distinction between "transactional Judaism" – where you pay a fee and receive a service or series of services in exchange—and "relational Judaism," where you become committed by virtue of strengthening relationships. It is Relational Judaism, as laid out by Wolfson, which sustains the Jewish communal experience, and it is what we strive for here at Bet Am Shalom.

It is not the proliferation of programs that draws people in and keeps them affiliated and engaged, but the relationships they form. The task then, is to create the environment where those relationships grow.

It's not only about stepping through those doors and saying "What's here for me?" but more about "What I am here for?" What am I here to do?" how can I participate, how can I give, in a meaningful way to help create this community?"

I personally feel that we have a lot of this here at Bet Am Shalom.

Bet Am Shalom's trajectory is not consistent with the trends of other synagogues in terms of membership decline, dis-affection or financial straits.

- We have people joining when their kids are babies or toddlers instead of waiting until the last possible moment when they have to put their kid in the Hebrew school in order to become a bar or bat mitzvah.

- We have many adults who waded in – after their kids become b’nai mitzvot.
- We have people who have joined as older adults or empty nesters. Our membership numbers have remained steady or are possibly, modestly increasing—knock wood.

BAS is in a solid financial position. If you cannot pay in full, we work with you to contribute what you can afford, and we consider you full members of the community. No one knows – aside from the one or two people who work it out with you—who is paying an abated amount, or who has contributed a little extra or a lot extra. And as you all know—people give incredibly of their time—those contributions are essential to making BAS work. What we have here is working. To be sure, we have room to improve, opportunities to serve the changing needs of members, but we are a congregation that has continued to thrive.

It’s been shown that when people leave a synagogue, despite what they tell you, “it’s not about the money—it’s about the relationships.” People leave because they are lonely. Let me say that again, a little differently—it is about the relationships—not the money—and it is against this backdrop that I continue our tradition of making our Kol Nidre appeal.

Some of you are now thinking “worst fundraising speech ever.”

The Kol Nidre appeal is about asking for monetary donations. Asking for you to give—as much as you are comfortable giving, as much as you can. We look to each and every one of you to help us sustain this wonderful community we’ve built.

We are transparent about the money that comes in and where it goes. Your annual membership dues help to sustain the buildings, the staff, the guests, the clergy, members in need, programs, and our community. And Kol Nidre contributions are included as an important component of our annual budget—we target 11%. That is the reality of this sacred business.

You may be wondering, why tonight on the holiest night of the year are we making this appeal? As someone at a recent SYNERGY meeting said: **“Engagement’s competition is downtime.”** Think about what that means. After facebooking, tweeting, gaming, texting, commuting, working—and caring for our parents, our kids, our dogs, cats, and our fish. Waiting for 3 hours for cronuts or 4 hours at the apple store for the iPhone 6, and then instagramming it all, so we don’t miss a thing—who has time to be engaged in Judaism? Who has time to attend to sacred purpose? While I wouldn’t label tonight strictly speaking, as “downtime,” it is a time where we are all engaged in the present moment.

That’s why we’re here. Our cell phones are off—hopefully. 😊 Maybe in a few years, you’ll be asked to text your donations to 55400 if it’s \$360 or 554001 if it’s \$500 – but not today. Today, we are asking you to consider what you can give to sustain Bet Am Shalom. To fold down a number on your card that represents what you can give, and we will come around and collect any that you are ready to hand back to us in a few moments.

I want to share a quick “progress report” on where my “wading in” has brought me.

Tonight, I carried in a Torah that survived the Holocaust.

If you’ve never held a Torah, or read from the Torah or gotten up close, give yourself that experience. To carry the Torah, as I did tonight, to touch the parchment, to read the words, one by one—words, which—one by one—were hand-copied and painstakingly, precisely drawn on parchment, in the same manner as has been done by generations and generations, to look at the rivulets of white space that run through the text—of the many experiences I’ve had here, reading from the Torah for you, our community, that was what “got” me... all the way in, linking our past, our present and our future as a Jewish people.

A quote on the Union for Reform Judaism website resonated for me this new year. It said:

“The Days of Awe are about more than confessing our sins. They are an opportunity to envision our lives and our communities if we each become a little more caring with each passing year.”

So, I ask that you give—not because you feel guilty that you haven’t done enough, but because you have a shred of hope—a vision for this caring community.

Give, to sustain our congregation through change.

Give, in ways that your fellow congregants may not have the means to provide, but knowing that we are here to provide for you in your times of need.

Give, with faith that our lives and our actions, today and every day, will continue to make our world a better place.

I wish you all a healthy and a joyous year. Gemar Hatimah Tovah

Members of the Executive Committee will now walk through the aisles to collect your pledge cards.