

From the Rabbi

Kislev 5782/ November 2021

### “The Refresh Button”

Thirty or so years ago, our congregants reconstituted Bet Am Shalom’s organizational committee structure around the principle of communal mitzvot, or sacred obligations. We formed *chevras*, “societies,” around a variety of mitzvot that could best be performed by the collective rather than disparate individuals. For example, Tradition tells us to visit the sick. Our response was to create the *bikkur cholim chevra*, or the society for caring for the needs of the ill within our community.

Tradition calls on us to provide a meal of consolation for mourners returning from the cemetery. We created a *s’udat hav’ra’ah chevra*, a committee that literally prepares and delivers those meals to the *shiva* home prior to the family’s arrival.

Tradition commands us concerning *hal’vayat ha-meit*, the accompanying of the dead to burial, and the subsequent observance of *shiva* for the rest of the that week. We created a *shiva chevra* that helps the family set up their home, provides prayer books and *shiva* chairs, and supplies prayer leaders and a minyan each evening during the period of mourning.

Tradition commands us to learn and teach Torah as a life-long enterprise. Our school board re-configured itself as a society dedicated to *talmud torah*, so as to ensure that we could provide a basic Jewish education for our children. Our program *chevra* creates, among other things, never-ending Jewish learning opportunities for adults. And our library *chevra* that safeguards a treasure-trove of *talmud torah* resources for endless study and research.

Tradition provides a prayer for us to recite as a congregation every Shabbat on behalf of those who are ill and their caregivers. The prayer asks for the obvious, *r'fu'at haguf*, or healing of the body, but also *r'fu'at hanefesh*, or healing of the spirit. In light of this, our *r'fu'at hanefesh chevra* gives congregants a place to go when mental illness surfaces in their lives. They pair congregants with other congregants who may be able to provide mentorship based on their own life experiences. They offer a conduit through the rabbi for congregants to locate appropriate medical or psychological counseling. They look out for the “soul” in distress.

Tradition calls on us to feed the hungry, lift up the fallen, advocate for the neglected, and hearken to the cry of the downtrodden. Our social action/*tikkun olam chevra* tends to local needs through a variety of hands-on projects, and it

creates avenues for both education and advocacy on the pressing social issues of our time.

Tradition requires us to pray regularly as a community, and to examine the deeper meaning of the prayers we offer. Our ritual *chevra* works to achieve the best possible prayer experience for our congregants, whether on Shabbat, weekdays, holy days, or special occasions. It constantly seeks ways to reinforce what works, and to re-construct when new approaches are called for.

And there are more: The Board of Trustees, Finance Committee, Executive committee, Legal Advisory Committee, and other bodies that carry out the mitzvah of *bedek habayit*, or maintenance of our communal home. The Gardening *chevra* and the Green *chevra* that make our grounds beautiful and hold us responsible for living in concert with our environment. The *Mishloach Manot chevra* that bakes five thousand hamantaschen on the way to raising money and Purim spirit for the congregation. And let's not forget the *Purimspielers* whose very existence constitutes a *mitzvah*.

All in all, we operate the synagogue by committee, as would a secular organization, but our committees are rooted in a rich ancient tradition. The driving force behind each committee's work is Tradition itself – the *mitzvot* that

have motivated the Jewish people for millenia. In that light, our so-called committees are not secular by any standard. They are the epitome of sacredness.

Now for some good news. Recently, new volunteers have stepped in to positions of leadership in these many *chevras*. They stand on the shoulders of congregants who have done this sacred work for years, sometimes decades, and who have asked to be accompanied or succeeded by the next generation.

In that sense, Bet Am Shalom has “hit the refresh button.” Not the “re-set” button, heaven forbid, for that would mean we had reached a dead end as a community and needed start from scratch. Rather, we have found new energy to refresh the strength of those who served their time and more.

Now for even better news: Many of the people we see doing the work of these *chevras* are our younger members. They have children in our school who can look up to their parents as models of living Judaism. They bring vast professional expertise to the table. They have the verve that comes with youth, as well as the dedication that comes from people who have little time between childrearing and their jobs, but who realize that if they wait until their children are grown and they themselves retire, they will have missed the opportunity to contribute to building the very communal context that benefits them so richly.

On a cautionary note, may I suggest that more of our younger members need to step up, and more of our veteran members need to encourage them to do so. We need to put out a welcoming hand, as was done for us by those who mentored us in the art of synagogue leadership.

Many speak about the “sustainability” of Jewish congregations in terms of filling the roster with young families. Young families on the roster is a start, but in and of itself it does not create Jewish sustainability. That only comes with stepping up; with convincing younger families to do the work of the *chevras* that make synagogue life meaningful and viable. It comes when a congregation can hit the refresh button every few years, because its ranks are full of people of every age who want to go above and beyond to fulfill the mission of the Jewish people: intellectually, spiritually, and actively. Or in the language of the aforementioned Tradition, *torah, avodah, g’milut chasadim* – sacred learning, sacred introspection, and sacred acts of loving kindness.

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