

Strengthening Community<sup>1</sup>  
 Rabbi Rachel Joseph  
 Congregation Beth Israel  
 Rosh Hashanah Morning 5781

Friday, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Our first Shabbat totally at home, newlyweds, who decided to make challah for the first time. My wife, Sara, and I (both working parents) were suddenly home on a Friday afternoon with time to bake. Even the shabbat before, I was leading services to an empty sanctuary – back when we thought this was only going to last a few weeks. First we had to source the bread flour and yeast from friends (because everything was sold out in the stores) and then Sara began following the recipe from a cookbook photo our friend texted. As she would tell you: I quickly became critical of her technique ;-). And then the challah didn't rise. I sent pictures to friends who are bakers asking for help. They gave us ideas. It still didn't rise. We turned on the oven to warm the kitchen. It still didn't rise. But then we braided the strands anyway and a Shabbat miracle: we had two beautiful loaves for our family. I have continued to bake challah every Friday since.

On that Shabbat, a ritual was born: a ritual that connects me to the Temple that once stood in Jerusalem, to generations of Jews throughout the centuries. Baking challah has become a connection to myself, my family, my community, and the Jewish People.

Like individual strands of challah, we are braided together, we are connected to one another through time and space.

The name challah is derived from the Hebrew word used for “portion” in the biblical commandment to separate from their dough a portion and give it to the *kohanim* (priests) every Sabbath. After the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and we no longer offered sacrifices or had priests, these rituals moved to our homes: it is still a tradition for Jewish bakers to tear a tiny lump of risen dough and to burn it while reciting a blessing<sup>2</sup>.

And why are we still baking Challah today, even after the destruction of the temple? Because Judaism is not bound to a single time and single place. While the fillings have evolved, the baking has not.

At a time when we gather digitally, when we create sacred spaces in our homes because our sanctuary doors remain closed, we look to our past to inform and ensure our future. And it is hard work.

This is not the first time Jewish community has reinvented itself.

There is a rabbinic story<sup>3</sup> that when Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yehoshua left Jerusalem and saw the Holy Temple destroyed, Rabbi Yehoshua said: Woe to us, for the place where all of

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Sara Spettel, Josh Kashinsky, Rabbis Sam Joseph, Michael Cahana, and Aimee Gerace for their guidance and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> “What is Challah” – My Jewish Learning website <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/challah/>

<sup>3</sup> Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Chapter 4:5 [https://www.sefaria.org/Avot\\_D'Rabbi\\_Natan.4.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Avot_D'Rabbi_Natan.4.5?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

Israel's sins are forgiven is destroyed! And Rabbi Yohanan replied: My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of kindness. Here, Rabbi Yochanan reframes our core Jewish practice from sacrifices in the Temple to acts of kindness. From public ritual to private action. In the midst of a major tragedy – the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – when Judaism could have ceased to exist, it survived and thrived!

So, what about today when our temple is not destroyed but our beautiful sanctuary and ability to gather is extremely limited, maybe for a while? Why are we still members of Congregation Beth Israel when anyone with an internet connection can join us online?

I wasn't comfortable going to my gym – even though it is open – so cancelled my membership and bought a treadmill for my basement.

And when we are talking about Jewish communal life, it is easy to slip into the model of "Membership" as it relates to the synagogue community - like it would be at the gym. In this case, you pay your dues to the synagogue, I get a salary, and you get a powerful and inspiring Rosh Hashanah sermon (jazz hands).

I'm not saying you don't deserve a good sermon, but making it about a transaction isn't very satisfying. You may wonder, "This is what I get for my membership?"

I think all of us want more than that. And as responsible as a synagogue is to create a community of which we want to be a part, each of us has a responsibility to make it that kind of community. To be co-creators of that type of community. The synagogue isn't a product created by the clergy - it is a community we are all responsible for.

Even though we Jews are over three thousand years old, Our Judaism is a radical faith. Torah and the Jewish people exist for one purpose and one purpose only: To provide a framework for all of us to understand that we are not alone and, in the process, to affirm that our lives have meaning, purpose and value. These days, when the world feels dark and distant, when we feel powerless and out of control, when our state is literally burning, we must be partners together in creating a community that matters. Our purpose is to deepen relationships with each other and Judaism. That's it. That's the reason we exist.

Ecclesiastes teaches "Two are better than one... . [And] a three-fold cord is not easily broken."<sup>4</sup> The message is clear: we are stronger together. "The text teaches about a three-fold cord; it says nothing about three individual strands. The strands only gain their durability through being bound together. And their durability is determined by the strength of their bonds. And so it is with challah. A strand of dough on its own does not a challah make. But through the weaving of multiple strands together, a challah comes into existence. Through the weaving of people together, a community comes into existence."<sup>5</sup>

Even before the pandemic changed our world and forced us to physically close our synagogue doors, there were countless articles questioning whether the synagogue as an

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<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:12

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Avi Fine, Weaving our Communal Challah Together, Rosh Hashanah 5780

institution would survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Even before, I spent a lot of time thinking about what Jewish community and Jewish life would look like as younger, digital natives, come of age; when we transition from the generation of Jews who built our physical institutions to the generation of Jews who live their life online.

With the current crisis, we have been catapulted into the future-- change that would have taken at least ten years is happening now and the way we engage is radically different. We never could have imagined not gathering in our sacred spaces for lifecycle events, religious school, or the High Holidays. I used to joke about selling the temple buildings and instead meeting in coffee shops and parks around the city. I regret that joke now, as we are witnessing the effects of the loss of gathering.

Data from a recent study by the American Enterprise Institute<sup>7</sup> shows that during COVID-19 just being a member of a religious institution has a significant positive impact on our mental health, even though we're not physically gathering. There are real and meaningful differences when you're a member of a religious organization.

So, yes, there are thousands of apps focusing on your spiritual health, today some people like to meditate or do yoga, take long walks, which bring them to a place of spiritual connection - me too - but our own individual pursuit in and of itself is not enough. **We cannot be Jewish alone.** Yes, we want community that IS personally meaningful but we also want the power of community to reach beyond ourselves. To help us to readjust our lives so that we can focus on what is powerful - not passing; what is sacred - not superficial; what is essential - not ephemeral: community and connection.

We are here because WE are here. Our synagogue is not defined by its architecture, as beautiful as our sanctuary is. Our synagogue is not about sanctuary or office space, social halls or classrooms. I could be standing in the sanctuary right now, in my robe, delivering this sermon, by myself, but I chose to be on Zoom, in my home, where we have built community over these last several months. Because our synagogue is defined by its real contents. Congregation Beth Israel is about each of us. **WE are Congregation Beth Israel.**

We are a place where our core Jewish values of *tzedek, chesed, hachnasat orchim*; acts of justice, loving kindness, and caring for the stranger, are embodied. We could be sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves, yet our synagogue moves us to actually take care of one another.

As Rabbi Cahana spoke about last night<sup>8</sup>, our young people are leading the way in their ability to frame what is happening in the world right now. I have the privilege of working with our *b'nei mitzvah* students on their *d'verei torah*, their speeches, and I too am so impressed. One of our recent celebrants, Coco Pike, taught us something so powerful about community that I wanted to share some of what she said:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-membership-is-stopping-jews-from-paying-synagogue-dues-1.5387705>; <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/can-the-synagogue-survive/>

<sup>7</sup> "Despite Shuttered Shuls, Members Say They Feel Less Lonely" Samuel Abrams, August 17, 2020 <https://forward.com/opinion/452742/despite-shuttered-shuls-members-say-they-feel-less-lonely/>

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana "A More Perfect Union: Hopefully Lessons from the Pandemic," September 18, 2020

When this pandemic began, I was really worried. What would happen to my Bat Mitzvah? This was scary, because without a community, life is a lot harder. You don't have people to pick you up when you're down, to teach you new skills, and how to cope with difficult things like a pandemic. But COVID-19 definitely taught me something, I learned that my community is strong and can overcome challenges. If you don't believe me, then let me show you some proof. Despite the fact that we can't get on planes to travel, and can't see each other in person. All of you are still here, listening to my speech, and giving me the strength I need to accomplish this milestone. Despite being miles apart, my community is still with me on this day.<sup>9</sup>

She is right. Even though the way we are meeting with our community is different, the values are still the same. Our community still brings fulfillment and joy.

Traditionally during the time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, known as *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the 10 days of repentance, we are supposed to spend time in reflection, doing the work of *teshuvah*, turning, looking inward and outward. This year, I'm going to ask you to do two things. One, I'm asking you to think about what being Jewish means if you don't have a physical building. You cannot be Jewish alone, so what are you going to do?

The second is a little more concrete. Over the next 10 days, I want you to write down the names of 12 congregants you would normally wish a *shana tova* to during this service. And if you can't think of 12 people, I want you to contact me. [Go ahead, pause the video, write down the names.] I want you to send them a text or call them on the phone. You can blame me and say Rabbi Joseph made me do it ;). I want you to wish them a happy new year, I want you to see how they are doing during this difficult time.

And, then, I want you to think of 3 people who you want to meet and learn something about them. Why? So each of us is connected to multiple people. So there is no one small group of people holding all of the strands of our community. So when one person falls, there are seven or eight there to help lift them up. We all feel it when something tugs at the fabric, and so the entire community becomes responsible for helping to support and celebrate each other.

3 and 12 are not random numbers. They are the number of strands and humps in our challah. This is a convenient way to remember this building block of community -- and a reminder that our tradition mandates that we be there for one another and care for one another. For each of us, finding our 3-12 won't happen overnight. And it won't happen without your help. But let us commit to beginning this vision together in the new year.

The way to strengthen community, the way to weave the strands of challah together, is to invest your time and effort into our community. Like homemade challah, a community is best when braided by the hands of its members.

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<sup>9</sup> Coco Pike, Bat Mitzvah speech, September 5, 2020.

That is my vision for CBI. That each of us is valued, that each of us is an essential part of this community, and that each of us recognizes the *kedusha*, the sanctity, of one another, to being partners in creating a sacred community that matters. Now, I turn to you. Be my partner, be our partner.

Join me, join all of us, in mixing the dough. In watching it rise. And in braiding our community together.

In this new year, now, more than ever, how will you braid our community to make it sweeter and stronger?