

Gathering our First Fruits

Shanah tovah, my friends. Tonight we mark the start of a new year, not just for the entire Jewish world, but we also mark the start of a new year together as Temple B'nai Torah. Three years ago we joined our legacy congregations in an act of hope, of determination, and of dedication to the ideals of Jewish continuity. A little over two years ago, Cantor Sher and I were blessed to become part of the family, and in a way, Temple B'nai Torah truly began its journey. In reflecting on our time together so far, a Jewish parable was brought to mind.

One time a Jewish peasant boy came to the big town to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. He didn't know how to pray. He could not even read the letter *Alef*. He only saw that everyone was traveling to the synagogues to participate in the holy prayers. He thought, "If everybody is going to town I must go too!"

He arrived at the town synagogue with his father and watched the congregants crying and singing together swaying to and fro. He turned to his father and asked, "Father, what is this all about?"

His father turned to him and said, "The Holy One sits enthroned in the heavens and we pray all year long to God. We pray especially during these two days of Rosh Hashanah when the whole world is being judged, and each person is being judged, for the rest of the year."

The son responded, "Father, what am I to do since I do not know how to pray?"

His father quickly said to him condescendingly, "All you have to do is be quiet and listen to the other Jews praying. That is enough for you."

"But Father, if I don't know what these people are saying how is that going to affect God's decision? How is being silent going to help me?"

His father became unnerved and blurted out, "Listen, you should be quiet so no one will know you're an ignorant peasant!"

The son stood still for a couple of minutes as his father and the rest of the congregation continued praying and then - the young boy stood up and spoke loudly.

"I am going to pray to God in the way I know best. I will whistle to God as I whistle to my flock of sheep."

He began whistling the sweet calling as most shepherds know. His father was enraged. The boy continued whistling with all his might not caring what other people thought.

Now, it happened to be, that this particular Rosh Hashanah, all the heavenly gates were shut and suddenly because of this pure whistling of the heart, all the gates burst open. The prayers of Israel were finally heard.¹

We have completed three years together as Temple B'nai Torah, and we joyously enter our fourth. Throughout this process of merging our lives, our traditions, our histories, and our customs, there have been many times that we felt like that little peasant boy – perhaps we said to ourselves: I don't know exactly how to do this, people might be telling me that I'm doing it all wrong, but I'm going to keep chugging ahead with all of my heart and soul. I believe in this, I believe in connection with God and the Jewish people, and I'm going to keep moving forward despite any challenges that come my way.

In Jewish tradition, reaching the three year point holds much significance. In fact, three parallels come to mind, each with its own meaningful lesson for us.

The first example that relates to the development of Temple B'nai Torah is found in the Torah text itself. We learn in Leviticus chapter 19 that, when we plant a new fruit tree, we may not harvest its fruit until after the third year. The text reads:

23 And when you shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then you shall count the fruit there as forbidden; for three years it shall be forbidden to you; it shall not be eaten.

24 And in the fourth year all the fruit grown shall be holy, for giving praise unto God.

¹ http://www.hasidicstories.com/Stories/Later_Rebbes/rosh.html

25 But in the fifth year you may eat of the fruit, that it may grow and increase. I am the Eternal your God.

The second example I wanted to share with us concerns the practice of reading the Torah on something called a “Triennial Cycle.” In this practice, it is recognized that it can be challenging to read and understand the entire Torah portion each and every week, and thus each portion is divided into three. For one year, the first third of each portion is studied. During the second year, the middle third of the portion is studied, and, likewise, during the third year, the third third is studied. Thus, over a period of three years, the entire Torah is read, interpreted, and discussed much more in depth than we may be able to accomplish in only one year.

The third example that relates to us here at TBT is the tradition of *Upsherin*. *Upsherin* finds its basis in the laws of the first fruits, and it concerns the first haircut of a young Jewish boy. In the Bible, human life is sometimes compared to the growth of trees. Just as we just read in Leviticus 19:23, one is not permitted to eat the fruit that grows on a tree for the first three years. Some Jews apply this principle to cutting a child's hair. Thus little boys and even some girls are not given their first haircut until the age of three. To continue the analogy, it is hoped that the child, like a tree that grows tall and eventually produces fruit, will grow in knowledge and good deeds, and someday have a family of his or her own. Chasidic Rabbis have made this comparison, and in some communities a boy before his first haircut is referred to as *orlah*, as we would refer to a tree in its early years.²

As Temple B'nai Torah has grown over the last three years, each of these three Jewish analogies has profound implications. We have planted many metaphorical trees that we hope will begin to bear fruit in the coming years. We must be patient, and not rush to pick all of the fruit that is already growing, and we must be sure to offer thanks and gratitude to God for sustaining our community through this transitional time. Yet, we also can begin to taste the sweet fruit that has begun to grow, and enjoy the rewards of our labors thus far. Many have been our “farmers,”

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upsherin>

and many have worked hard to ensure that we have a variety of orchards from which we can harvest.

Like a Triennial Reading of the Torah, we have taken one part of this process at a time, trying to understand, parse, and interpret each new phase of our growth. It has taken a full three years to get more comfortable with our new name, our new community members, and working together to create a new whole. This has given us a sense of competency and literacy, and yet, just like with the Torah, there is always more to learn and we need to work together to understand the many layers and levels of the community.

The analogy that is most exciting to me is that of the young child. Like a toddler might do, we have been learning the new language and behaviors of becoming Temple B'nai Torah. It hasn't always been easy, but we are ready for our first coming of age rituals. We are ready to learn new ideas, try new traditions, and become a part of a new generation.

Together, we are going to help Temple B'nai Torah become a leader within the Reform movement, and to be a full-fledged member of the 21st century. Already, there is incredible buzz about us in the surrounding areas, and people are hearing that "this is the place to be." Maybe you've heard some of these sentiments, or you've helped to spread the word about this exciting congregation. We have gained a reputation for being down-to-earth, warm, and welcoming to all. We invite all kinds of families to be a part of *our* family – singles and couples, gay and straight, younger and older, Jewish and interfaith, single-parent families, same-sex relationships, observant and not-as-observant. We hope that you find a place here that fits you and is *just right*.

We have a growing presence online and on various forms of social media. Most notably, we have a successful Facebook group, an active Twitter profile, and a soon-to-be-launched brand new website. If you are not yet a part of Facebook, or you haven't yet joined our temple group, it is becoming a wonderful way to communicate about upcoming programs to our membership, while also allowing our congregants a forum in which interact with one another. In addition, a number of staff and lay leaders have been discussing ideas on how to live-stream our worship services, songs, or sermons online, and what kinds of podcasts we might offer. My biweekly column on the Jewish Week's website has helped to raise Temple B'nai Torah's profile online, and is bringing us even more attention.

As we watch a child grow, we dream of what we'd like that child to become as she or he grows up. All of us – every single one of us in this room, is raising the child known as Temple B'nai Torah. We have dreams, fears, aspirations, concerns, and hopes for where we'd like this community to go. I pray that you will join us as we “dream big,” as we work towards making this a destination for all New York Jews who want to experience moving, spiritual, and warm worship. Or who want their children to learn in a nurturing, safe, and fun environment. And who want their own social, spiritual, and educational needs to be met in a variety of ways. And who want to be on the forefront of what modern, progressive Judaism has to offer for Jews of all ages.

I am excited to be a part of this growth, and I know that we are all on this very special journey together. There will be times when we feel like that peasant boy, surrounded by words and actions we don't yet understand. Yet, there will also be times that others will turn to us, as those who learned how to merge successfully, who learned to build something new with love and care, and who rededicated themselves to the future of the Jewish community.

May we enter this New Year, 5772, with hope, optimism, and love for this very special community.

May we find new ways to enrich ourselves, our families, and our congregation with the beauty of meaningful Jewish tradition.

May we be blessed with light, love, good health, good friends, and much peace as we embark on this next phase of our journeys together.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon, May this be God's will.

Amen.