

What is truly essential in your Jewish life? What is it that you need to be and to feel Jewish? What is the core of Judaism as you understand it and as you need it in your life? What does it mean for you to be a part of the Jewish Community and of the TBS Family?

These are questions we ask ourselves more often than we realize. They may not be worded exactly like this, but we ask ourselves these questions every Friday night when we consider what time it is as we pull in the driveway and consider how or even if we are going to celebrate Shabbat. We ask ourselves these questions when we consider when to send our children to religious school and why we are sending them. We ask ourselves these questions each year as ponder our temple membership when our dues statements arrive in the mail.

Look around you. Notice how many people are here this morning! Look at the familiar faces and take notice of new ones. Feel the energy in this sacred space of all of us here this morning. When we join in more of our blessings this morning, especially congregational readings and singing, close your eyes and listen to the voices of all of us together, praying together, being together as one people. It is awesome and inspirational.

You had a choice this morning. You could have said, ‘it’s Thursday, I still have so much to do at work before the weekend, I think I’ll just skip Rosh Hashanah this year so I can get it all done.’ But you didn’t. You put aside the every day tasks and you’re here! You are a part of this family and this moment.

But still, we ask, why? Why do you commit yourself to a congregation, this congregational family? What is in it for you?

Belonging to a congregation is not so automatic as it once was. Only a few generations ago, it was unthinkable for Jews to not belong to a congregation. However, today, here in Orange County alone, there are 100,000 Jews and 70,000 of them are not members of any synagogue. Imagine that number multiplied throughout the country! Only three out of ten Jews are members of a congregation! This number was unheard of years ago, yet today, this is the reality.

Two generations ago, the only place someone could be a part of making Jewish connections was through the synagogue. But today, people can log on to the internet and be a part of a virtual community. Yes, we stream our services here at TBS for those who are not able to physically leave their home so they can feel a connection to our community. But there are actually some internet congregations where the rabbi and cantor lead a service in front of a camera and invite participants to “chat” using their keyboards during the d’var Torah. But it is only your voice you hear. There is no touch of another sitting next to you as you sing a closing song. Yet, for those in rural areas or who are secluded because of health or lack of community, it works.

Today, we can also open the local Jewish publications and see advertisements for life cycle services by community rabbis. They are happy to train your child for Bar or Bat Mitzvah, bring a Torah to a ballroom in a local hotel and hold a private service for you and your family. Yes, a cheaper way to provide the learning a child may need to read some words of Torah and maybe it’s just enough Judaism without a longer term

commitment. But it's missing the opportunity for the child and the family to share in this momentous moment in their lives with their Jewish community. After all, becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah is the opportunity for a child to stand up and say, I am now a young adult in this community and I count!

With all of the changes in our world, with all of the ways we connect via internet, with our schedules and schedules of our family, it seems less and less of a need to belong to one more community and have one more commitment.

Yet, Donniel Hartman states that “Judaism is viewed as a malleable system, almost infinitely adjustable to the commitments, desires and needs of contemporary Jewish life.” However, there is a fear that if obligations are set before us as to what it means to be a part of a community, we might lose a sense of tolerance and inclusiveness and hence push those outside of the community.

This brings to mind the concept of *ikkarim*, the basic core of our Jewish obligations. *Ikkarim* are important in establishing the obligations to our Jewish self and our community, for without them, the Jewish community cannot stand on it's own. And, we as Liberal Jews are all Jews by Choice, whether born Jewish or have become Jewish later in life, “we all choose a path, a way of life, identity, culture, and peoplehood as the primary prism through which one lives one's life, sets one's priorities, makes one's choices, and educates one's children.” (Donniel Hartman)

And for all of us, that path leads us to this place today, and for that I...we are grateful.

For our Rosh Hashanah would seem empty without each and every one of you.

So what do we get for being a part of the TBS Congregational Family?

Let’s start with our congregational brit. Did you know we have a congregational brit? Some of our newer members might as it was included in your membership packets and we use it during our New Member Shabbat each year. But the rest of our congregational family may not remember that we have this. So let’s try this – you have it there in your bulletins you received this morning. I’d like to invite us to do this as a responsive reading – this side of the congregation, you’ll read the Members’ Covenant to the Congregation with me; this side, you’ll read the TBS Family’s Covenant to the Members with Cantor Reinwald. (READ)

Being a part of our congregational family encompasses each of these areas and is reciprocal between each of you and the entire congregation and staff. Providing and participating in **educational** opportunities not just for our children but all of us. Providing and participating in Shabbat and Holiday **worship**. Providing and participating in **life cycle** celebrations and comforting one another in times of need and **bereavement**. Providing and participating in **tikkun olam**, social action and social justice, for not only our congregation but our community and world. And finally, providing and participating in **social** opportunities, making new friends and continuing to connect with old.

No one can “Do Jewish” for another. Yet, no one can “Be Jewish” without the other. Hence, why each of these areas, Education, Worship, Life Cycle, Tikkun Olam and absolutely, Social connections are so critical to our congregational family’s existence.

Around the synagogue, in your mailbox and on the TBS website are copies of this (HOLD UP TBS PROGRAMS PUBLICATION). Right here is a menu of opportunities for everyone and all ages. From educational classes for youth and adults to fitness classes,

such as Zumba – an energetic workout with awesome music and fun moves that anyone can do – not to mention a fun word to say, “ZUMBA!” Learning and socializing takes place not only in the classroom, but also on the trail with our Shabbat hikes. There are book groups, field trips and movies to watch. While we might feel that learning opportunities are only for our children, we too should take advantage of these opportunities for ourselves. I cannot tell you how energized and inspired I was to have taken the opportunity for myself to participate in an intensive learning experience this summer, for two weeks, twelve hours a day. While this might seem a bit much for most, it reminded me that I too must make the time for my own educational growth and be a role model for my children in that studying does not end when you graduate. OK, and they both loved the fact that Ima had homework!

We have plenty of one session classes to choose from and classes that with very little time commitment. But that one, two or three hours may just inspire you to reach for a new understanding or new knowledge about something you never considered learning or experiencing before. Please, explore this book. It’s full of so many incredible opportunities.

Our congregational family is committed to being here to care for one another during life celebrations and moments of bereavement or need for consolation. By being a member of TBS, you have invested in Clergy Insurance! By being a member of the TBS family, your clergy insurance provides you with a rabbi or cantor for baby namings, brit milot (ok, we just do the blessings, but we can help you find the actual mohel!), b’nei

mitzvah for children and adults, weddings, conversions, anniversary blessings, birthday blessings, hospital visits, funerals and counseling, just to name a few. Cantor Reinwald and I are here for our congregation 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. Our phone numbers are available for life cycle emergencies day and night, and some of you have called in the middle of the night when you needed us. And we’ve been in the hospital room with you or in your home in the late hours of the night or early hours of the morning. This isn’t an inconvenience for us, this is what we do. It’s a privilege for us to be a part of some of these most intense moments in your lives. And when we say, ‘really, just call us if you need us,’ we mean it.

How often do we reach out to the synagogue when we are in an accident, have received some difficult medical news for a loved one or ourselves, or struggle with an ethical dilemma regarding our career or work life? How often do we turn to our Jewish community to share a moment of life celebration? A new job, a new relationship, the fulfillment of a personal goal? When do we share life’s little moments with our Jewish family? These are reasons that the congregation exists, so we can be here to support and celebrate with throughout all of life’s moments.

Being a part of Jewish community and the TBS family also means building lasting friendships. There are many of you who have been part of social groups, or chavurot since you were first married. Some of these chavurot have shared in the birth of their own children and now celebrate in their weddings and birth of their grandchildren.

Many of you have participated or will participate in our Reservations Only events. While these are fundraiser opportunities, they are also opportunities to meet

and get to know more people in our congregation. These social events have introduced so many of you to new friends who you might not have ever connected with outside of the congregation. I recently heard someone liken the congregation to a country club. TBS is their country club, it's the place to belong to get together with friends, enjoy good meals, and be a part of a group of like-minded individuals.

It is our hope to create social events for all ages and demographics. We have travel opportunities such as our Tour of Jewish LA, which of course will involve eating! And there is the congregational trip to Israel this coming January 25-February 5. This trip is designed for adults to not only experience Israel and the beautiful places and historical sites, but to also connect with the Israeli people. I spent the summer exploring the country and meeting some amazing individuals who I look forward to introducing you to and building the connections between the people of Israel and our congregational family. And an added bonus! You get 12 uninterrupted days with me, your rabbi! Complete access for 12 days!

And while we have so many opportunities for connection on some levels, I still believe that we can continue to stretch boundaries of our community. That we can and should create deeper connections to our Temple Beth Sholom family through each of us reconnecting ourselves to one another and the link of past generations, to today and forward to tomorrow.

While sharing in what we currently have, I want to introduce to you what we are going to create starting today. Allow me to introduce you to the TBS Congregational Connections program. Last year, through the vision of Monica Engel and the

commitment of so many volunteers, we established our Mitzvah Meals program. And one year later, Mitzvah Meals has successfully fed thousands of individuals thanks to so many of you here in this sanctuary. Each and every Sunday, many of you have joined with our Mitzvah Meal leaders, sorted, cooked and delivered hot meals to those in need throughout Santa Ana and Orange County. And I could not be prouder of the work that we are doing for our community. May this work continue until the day comes that no man, woman or child goes to bed hungry. Then we will have fulfilled our mission.

And now, while it is so important to remember that Temple Beth Sholom is a cornerstone in the community, it is time to bring this cornerstone back into our own lives.

How often has someone said to me, Cantor Reinwald or another staff member that they were touched by a card they received from the Keshet LaBayit, the TBS Caring Community, which has been headed by Carol Kanofsky, Carol Weiss and Renee Siembieda for these past seven years. Over that time, some of you have helped with our caring community by sending these cards, providing meals or driving those in need to doctors or physical therapy appointments. But the group has been small and we realize that the need is greater and can be expanded.

Today, I share with you the beginning of our TBS Congregational Connections program. The vision is to help all of us connect to TBS, the Jewish community, and especially our Jewish selves, at all points in our lives. While the most obvious times include times when a loved one dies and there is a need to help lead or organize *shiva minyanim* in the home; or someone is in the hospital or long term care and longs for

visits and help to and from the doctors; there is still so many more ways for us to connect with one another. And creating these Congregational Connections will help foster our connections to peoplehood and our Jewish life.

A member of our TBS family recently said to me, “after my accident, I made sure to take care of my body and my car, but I didn’t think about taking care of my soul.” When this person was ready, *birkat hagomel*, the blessing that is said in the community when someone comes through a life threatening or very difficult time, was shared and these moments of bringing in Jewish connections added to their healing.

We all have the opportunity to be a part of these connections. Each of us are a part of the link and each of us, without any special training, has the ability to reach out to another, welcome a new family to the congregation, check in on a family with a new addition, invite a single individual or couple with no other family around to Shabbat or a holiday meal, and support the foundation of our congregations existence. Each of us has the opportunity to not only be Jewish but to do Jewish.

This summer, our membership Vice President, Susan Sherman, TBS Program and Membership Director, Juliet Friedman, have been working to divide the congregation into twelve Congregational Connection teams, each with their own coordinator. In the weeks to come, each family will hear from your Congregational Connection Coordinator and he or she will share with you information about how to create deeper links to our congregational family and fulfilling the needs and celebrating life’s moments together. Each of the Connection teams will be responsible for one month during the year. During your Connection team’s month, your coordinator may receive a call from me, Cantor

Reinwald or anyone on the TBS staff, sharing that there is a need in the congregational family and we could use the support of your connection team. Some of you may not have time for visits, but be willing to make a phone call to just say hello to a homebound TBS member. Others might be freer during the week to drive someone to a doctor’s appointment or just stop by a home for a visit and to deliver a meal already prepared by our Mitzvah Meal mavens. You yourself may see a need that your Connection’s team can fulfill. Maybe a young couple with a new baby could really use a date-night to reconnect and they don’t have family around who can babysit. Your team might have someone, be it grandparent type or family with young children of their own and all the needed baby accoutrements, and would love to volunteer to babysit just so the couple can have some much needed time together.

The possibilities are endless for the connections that we can create with one another. There is so much to share in each other’s lives that creating these connections will not only care for those in need but also build connections amongst the entire community. And is not this the reason why we are here?

No one comes to the synagogue to be alone and no one should feel alone when you are here. Therefore, allow us to revisit the questions I asked you when I began – What is truly essential in your Jewish life? What is it that you need to be and to feel Jewish? What is the core of Judaism as you understand it and as you need it in your life? What does it mean for you to be a part of the Jewish Community and of the TBS Family?

Can you fulfill Jewish obligations alone? Can you pray alone? Can you eat alone?
Of course, yet, what brings us back to this place each year is the sense of being a part of

the larger community, being a part of the Jewish family. What sustains our Jewish selves and our Jewish core begins with each other. And so, allow us to sustain it together. Allow us to build stronger connections through our monthly links and into the ever changing moments of our lives. Allow us to celebrate together and to be and do Jewish together.

Today, we join together during these High Holy Days, during this Rosh Hashanah, this new year, to contemplate what it is we hope to achieve in our Jewish lives. May our blessings be expanded to the connections we can create together and the vision we can make real and may we each be blessed in the Congregation we call family.