

Temple Beth Sholom...A Center for Connections

Have you noticed how many news reports have focused on geneology and using DNA research to trace back our Jewish roots? A recent study sampled the DNA of 1400 males, Jews and non-Jews, from around the world in search of common date markers, and what they discovered was breathtaking. The overwhelming majority of Jewish populations throughout the world—whether Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Indian, Asian, or Black African Jews share a common Middle Eastern ancestry on the male line, that goes back to ancient Israel 4,000 years ago. According to the Bible, that is when Abraham founded the Israelite line. Now DNA research cannot tell us whether Abraham, Moses, or Aaron actually existed, but it does show that Jews are bound by ancestry, land, and faith stretching back more than three millennia. DNA exploration is one way to piece together our people's story.

Why are we so fascinated by studies like these? As a people we seek a window into our Jewish origins because it provides us with cultural cohesiveness. We thrive on connections.

A few years back, a fellow scientist e-mailed me and asked me if I was related to Jacob and Esther Benaksas from Tangiers, Morocco? He had googled Benaksas, my maiden name, and found me through my work web site. I replied, of course, anyone with the last name Benaksas has to be related! I found out that I had a physicist cousin in Paris that I didn't know about.

Now with the Internet and ease of travel, we are all having experiences like these... where the degrees of separation seem smaller and smaller and the connections more intimate.

Connections....a link, a bond, a union, an affiliation, an alliance, an association, a relationship, a circle of friends, a group of persons connected as by religious ties. We, as human beings, seek those connections that give meaning to our lives, that provide relief when we are distressed, and that share joy when we want to celebrate and have fun.

Have you ever had a conversation with adults who are second or third generation Beth Sholomans? It is just so much fun to hear. They generally went to high school or youth group together, belonged to a young singles group here in Orange County, or even dated each other. Each went their separate ways during the college years, but have now returned to raise their

kids here at this Temple. Many of my best friends live in an area we affectionately refer to as the Tustin Shtetl. I can't say that I have had the benefit of those connections personally, but I believe my children will, since they stay in constant contact with their Jewish friends.

How many of you are first generation Beth Sholomans? Please raise your hand. How about second generation? Third generation? How about fourth generation?

Temple Beth Sholom too is a Center for Connections.

Now, hold that thought for a moment as I shift gears.

This past spring, I attended a conference conducted by the Union for Reform Judaism in Atlanta. 100 incoming Temple presidents from Reform temples large, medium (like ourselves) and small came together to study and hopefully learn how to be Temple presidents.

Can you imagine what that was like? Each meal, which was of course was laden with rich southern cuisine, was like sitting at a family seder combined with a Board meeting. Loud, with lots of energy and passion! We formed an immediate connection based on the sacred work we had each committed to do for the next two years. We had ample opportunity to compare notes. We could all commiserate with the common temple issues, mainly revolving around finances, and we could share our enthusiasm about programs our Temples had each pioneered. It was a fertile ground for idea exchange and I have since brought some of those thoughts back to our Board.

At the end of the four days, I really came away energized and also with an overwhelming feeling of being pretty darn blessed. Why you may ask? Because, I could honestly say, of course without any bias, I was a member of one of the greatest Temples in North America. Where else could I work with such an incredible Board of Directors, such amazing Professional, Support, and Teaching staffs, and such fabulous congregants?

The Reform movement prides itself with progressive thinking and I am here to tell you that Temple Beth Sholom is a shining star in the movement. We are well known because our professional staff has always been part of the movement's leadership, as well as our innovative programming.

As I said on Rosh Hashanah, we are a congregation that is not complacent. We are not satisfied with the status quo. We are continually pressing the envelope of synagogue innovation. We listen to the desires of our congregants, and we try hard to make it happen.

This does not come without consistent, strategic planning, master planning, if you will. A master plan requires an inventory of the population and the patterns existing in the area, economic and demographic predictions of what the future is likely to bring, a thorough understanding of the infrastructure that these future changes will require, and considerable imagination in determining what uses should be encouraged and what uses discouraged and where.

The Temple Beth Shalom Master Plan has been developed over the past 7 years. It is a living, breathing document that has been revised and amended to include input from over 150 of our congregants. There are goals outlined for membership, culture, worship, education, social action, community gathering, governance, and facility dictated by cultural and demographic predictions of what the future is likely to bring.

The vision of the Temple Beth Shalom Master Plan is to be a center where our TBS community can grow Jewishly through engaging worship, innovative education, dynamic programming, and effecting tikkun olam, and can connect with one another through Jewish as well as secular activities.

The rationale for this vision...

The Jewish community in Orange County is served by 27 congregations of different denominations. The vast majority of them have experienced stagnant, if not declining, membership for the past five or more years. Additionally, 70% of the Jews in Orange County remain unaffiliated.

Master Plan's findings and conclusion is that there is a movement toward increased "cultural-social" Judaism. TBS needs to be the place where the Jewish community wants to congregate because it is vibrant, active, relevant, stimulating, spiritual and filled with opportunities to connect.

For TBS to thrive in the years ahead, the Temple needs to be a place that meets the needs of today's Jewish community and anticipates the diverse needs of the Jewish community of tomorrow. Our membership will continue to include young families, but it will continue to age as well. It is a Jewish

population with a constant and rapidly expanding interfaith component. It is anticipated that interfaith couples could make up the majority of families within the next five to 10 years. TBS will provide for the diverse needs of our ever-changing Jewish population by fostering a culture of inclusiveness and connections.

Congregants being with congregants. Jews being with Jews.

Before the TBS Master Plan was even codified by the Board of Directors, those participants in the master planning process began to enthusiastically implement some of the goals for programming. For example, a desire of congregants was to provide parallel programming so that adults and children could enjoy programs that met the needs of each demographic individually, yet simultaneously. Our religious school offers adult education during Sunday mornings while the kids are in school. The added benefit is that parents are modeling lifelong learning to their children. You should see this place on Sunday mornings. Every inch of space is used on this campus, including sukkah plaza, the kiddush area, and the sanctuary. We pack them in because Sisterhood and Brotherhood have also brought in great speakers during this prime time.

Another goal is to better address the needs of specific demographic groups. On Rosh Hashanah I mentioned our plans for young professionals and marrieds, as well as seniors. In March 2008, we began what we call our Special Needs Network. Assisted by Jewish Family Service, we have provided support for both the family and the members with special needs, by addressing concerns with acceptance, offering resources and speakers, and by providing assistance with inclusion in ALL synagogue programs, with a focus on religious school, Bnai Mitzvah preparation, Camp Sholom, and holiday celebrations. An added synergy is that our youth are serving as special needs companions during religious school and camp. This group of 17 families and growing, meets monthly for activities like the Family Seder, picnics, and Heart of Sailing program.

We plan to start an adult special needs group this year, as well as expand to form additional support groups in the coming years.

With the goal of providing social-cultural connections, our gala fundraiser last year incorporated something new and wildly successful, that we plan to expand upon this year. Our Reservations Only offers fun social events to congregants, generously sponsored by other congregants in their homes or

special venues. During this past summer some of the events have been Smooth Jazz in the Zuckerman Garden; Serves (as in tennis) and Hors D'oeuvres; Margaritas, Mudslides, and Mayhem; Kick up your Country Heels, and Mahj Madness-6 hours of Mah Jongg. Sounds like fun doesn't it? Plan to be at our next gala event in April. As I have said before, we love to have fun and be together and what better way to help our Temple than to do just that!

Additionally, our hope is to offer programming that our congregants seek in the secular community and offer it right here on our campus. Wouldn't it be great to take your yoga class with fellow congregants and Jews in the community? Wouldn't it be great to send your kid or be an adult in an all Jewish basketball league at your temple? Wouldn't it be great if you could grab that cup of coffee here at TBS instead of heading over to Starbucks on 17th? This is the direction that we hope to be moving towards in our future.

How does this all happen? One step at a time. From our master plan we have already begun to fulfill the many needs of our diverse community. Each year we make inroads in providing creative programs and expanding services.

Now, I can't say that we are not limited by our facility, and we have spoken about the bricks and mortar that are part of this plan. The fact is that the facility is one significant tool to achieve the full vision of the Master Plan.

We continue to push forward on that front as well. This past year we engaged Herman, Colliver and Locus, an amazing architectural firm out of San Francisco that specializes in religious spaces. A dedicated committee of 20 congregants spent about a year and a half, examining the most efficient use of our 5 acre parcel while translating the precepts of our Master Plan to paper. With space planning and positioning of all the essential elements on our property, what resulted is an innovative and comprehensive concept that reflects the overall vision of the Master Plan. With various options, from complete campus construction to phasing the project, the conceptual plan is designed to be a tool for fundraising, leaving detailed design elements and refinement for a later stage of development.

Late last year we began looking into a financial feasibility study and the fiscal requirements to make this project a reality.and then the recession hit. This shocking veracity definitely pushed out our timeline, leaving it with a hazy, indefinable target date. Appropriately, we focused our efforts to take care of

the immediate needs of our congregants. We implemented and continue to implement our own Temple Beth Sholom triage making sure that we keep our family whole and intact.

Ultimately, what does this mean to our Master Plan? Do we scrap our vision and dreams? I say, and your Board of Directors say, we can not.

Even, or maybe especially, in tough times, it is important that we continue to plan with an eye towards the future. We do not have a crystal ball to tell us when the time is right for building, but we will definitely be poised at the ready...

And we continue to innovate and create those new programs, defined by our congregants and powered by our volunteers and professional staff, truly fulfilling the vision of the Master Plan.

I sincerely invite you to be part of our TBS future. Share an idea, participate in a TBS group, volunteer on a project. Get involved. Be an active member of our community. A fellow congregant said to me just a few days ago, don't forget to remind people that whatever effort we put forth on behalf of our Temple, we will receive the benefit back at least ten-fold. He is just so right!

I leave you with a parting thought... So much of American Jewish life has been, and still is, reflected in the synagogue. We must respond to changes in the climate of our times. I'd like to believe that together, we are reinventing the role of the synagogue to respond to future changes, and that Temple Beth Sholom will be the model for others to come.

Why? Because we are all in search of connections: connections to our origins and connections that provide cultural cohesiveness, connections that provide comfort and shared commonalities.

Temple Beth Sholom is our communal home, not just an institution FOR Jews, but one that MAKES Jews... a place where we are building the future of the Jewish people.

And with all of our support, as her guardians, Temple Beth Sholom will be the sacred home for future generations, God willing.

Chatimah Tovah, May you be inscribed in the Book of Life for a good New Year ahead.