



**Erev Rosh Hashana 5770**  
**Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

### **Our Congregational Family is a *Ner Tamid***

The markets have rallied over the past few months, home sales are increasing, and seven of the ten indicators of the Conference Board Leading Economic Index are pointing upward. Newsweek proclaimed the recession was over - yet were quick to point out that despite this statement, unemployment also continues to grow.

Last year at this time we stood here baffled by the rapid downturn in our personal savings and the loss of our seemingly 'safe' employment. Last year, many postponed retirement plans because pensions were severely depleted. Last year, I called out to our congregational family to help create connections between those who have lost their jobs and those who knew of possible openings. And please know, I am still trying to make those connections for those who are out of work - so please keep the job referrals coming.

Last year, we were stumbling, asking ourselves - "How are we going to stay on our feet?" Unfortunately some are still asking this and many other questions as we join here today.

While our economy is slowly recovering - and who knows how long this recovery will take - each of us have taken thoughtful and deliberate consideration of that which really matters - our family, our health, and our general mental & spiritual well being.

Each of us have examined our personal finances and made cuts to our budgets. Within our congregation, we have made serious cuts to our expenses and created a very lean budget for this coming year. Yet, while we have made these cuts, we have not sacrificed our true mission of being a Jewish center of life, learning and connections. And we continue to be committed to being the congregational home you have come to love and be a part of. While we may be pulling back on some of the bells and whistles, I would suggest that we are doing what so many of us are doing in our own lives - we are going back to basics.

What does this mean? It means that we want to capture that which brought us here in the first place.

As the Israelites were approaching the land of Israel shortly after being freed from slavery, they called for 12 spies, one from each tribe, to enter the land and report back what they found. The spies departed and went deep into the land to seek out the bounty God promised. These men were sent in to spy on the people whom they would have to overcome in reclaiming the land God promised Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of their descendants. When the spies returned, they brought with them grapes so large that it took two men to carry a bunch. They returned with stories of the fertile earth that will be perfect for planting and raising their herds. But ten of the 12 also returned with stories of giants and men too strong to defeat. These ten spies warned the Israelites that there was no way they would be able to successfully enter the land and conquer its inhabitants - that this was a one-way road to destruction.

Joshua and Caleb, the two optimistic operatives, tried to persuade the people that if only they have faith in God who delivered them from Egypt, God will also deliver them into this land of plenty. Caleb cried out, *ah-lo na-a-leh v'rashnu o'tah kee ya-chol nu-chal lah*, "Let us by all means go up, and we shall gain possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it."

But these were people who only knew slavery and their relationship with God was too new, too fresh, and with too many questions. How could they possibly have faith to succeed in this seemingly impossible quest? There were too many obstacles in the way and they were feeling defeated right at the onset.

According to the text: "The men who had gone up with him said, "We cannot attack that people, for they are stronger than we." Thus they spread lies among the Israelites about the land they had scouted, saying, "The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers. All the people that we saw in it are men of great size ..... we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them."

Notice that they not only referred to themselves as grasshoppers, meaning that they viewed themselves as small and insignificant, but that they also said that they felt that others perceived them in such a way as well.

There are times when a look from others, or even just the situation that we find ourselves in, will make us feel more insignificant, more inconsequential than we may otherwise be. It is important that we use our faith to remind ourselves that given the right perspective, any negative can be seen as a strength.

As is usual in these stories, a Rabbi was having a dispute with a King who did not like having the Jews as his subjects. Said the king, "You Jews brag about your world-mission and are proud of the fact that you are God's Chosen People - yet throughout history, everyone tramples you underfoot! Aren't you deceiving yourselves?"

The Rabbi replied, "When our Patriarch Jacob fled from his brother Esau, God appeared to him in a dream and said: 'Your children will be as numerous as the dust of the earth.' What, may I ask, is more important to our race than the earth under our feet? Yet it too is eternally trampled underfoot..."

In Judaism, there is an idea, *Yerideh l'tsorech aliyah* - we go down only to ascend. Psalms teaches "from the depths I cry to You," we cry for God to help us ascend out of the depths. We want to be lifted up, we want to be renewed. We want our flame to be rekindled.

The challenges of this past year should help us find the power to move toward change and we are already creating this in our lives. The despair and pain of this past year is a call for us to channel something new in our lives. While each of us have overcome loss this year, be it the loss of a family member or friend; the loss of a job; an illness; or worrying about those around us; Caleb and Joshua remind us that we should not despair, that we should have hope. That we should be a *ner tamid*, an eternal light in our lives, in the lives of our families and the lives of our congregational family.

You might have noticed when you entered today that our *ner tamid* looks different than it did last year. It is not the same orange flickering bulb, rather it is a brighter light reaching upward. And it is not powered by electricity coming from a grid, it is powered by the sun. As I like to consider it, our *ner tamid* is powered by that which God created.

This past year, we joined with congregations through Southern California for the solar *ner tamid* project. This year we blessed the sun, a blessing that one recites once every 28 years. And in marking this occasion, with the generosity of our weekly Torah study students and our religious school *tzedakah* fund, we installed a solar panel on the roof of our sanctuary to power our *ner tamid*.

While we would like to think that this will have a fiscal impact on our congregation, the reality is that the *ner tamid* only takes a small amount of energy. Yet our solar *ner tamid* provides us an even greater resource - the inspiration that God's presence is truly with us in this sanctuary for it is the sun which God created that lights our *ner tamid*. And as long as the sun exists (and we have at least one out of eight days of sunlight) then our *ner tamid* will also shine.

But our *ner tamid* serves another purpose. It is a beacon - it is the light from the shore that calls to us, reminding us that while the sea may present waves that come crashing down on us, attempting to pull us under - there is a light, there is God and there is our community guiding us through the storm so that we might weather it together and sail on to future celebrations.

But let's be real for a moment - how can we really be affected by the light of the *ner tamid*? it is only one small light? I agree with you - however, I would suggest that the candelabras rising over your heads in the main sanctuary hold lights that are no bigger than our *ner tamid*. So how do they work to provide enough light to read by? By working in concert and lending their strength together towards a common goal. This is the meaning of community - by definition, a community cannot be made up of one person. It is the concentrated efforts of all of us that can provide assistance to those of us who are struggling, for whatever reason.

So let's take a little quiz - don't worry there is no right or wrong answer here, but it is interesting for us to consider.

How many of you are here because: (go ahead, raise your hands)

- You saw an ad about TBS and decided to try us out?
- Your family has been here forever and this is the family temple?
- Your friends told you that you should check out TBS because they love it here?
- You were looking for a way to educate your children, so you started off in our preschool and are now hooked?
- You were looking for a religious school and decided that the TBS religious school has what you are looking for?
- You Googled Orange County temples and TBS showed up near the top of the search? In other words, you found us on the web?

We enter these doors for a number of reasons. And as I mentioned before, there is no right or wrong answer as to why we are here. But what we do find, is that during difficult times in our lives and our world, we know that we can always turn to our congregational family for support. We know that our congregational family is here to lift us up from the depths. Yet, do we always have the confidence to meet the challenges head on?

You have walked through the doors today, for whatever reason you mentioned earlier. You have come to this place to be with your family, both of relation and of community. We have come to this place to know that we are not alone and that there is so much here for us as long as we are here to create it together.

Which door do you walk into when you enter Temple Beth Sholom? For some, it is the door to worship; for others it is the door to education; and for others, it is the door to being together with friends who share a common interest or bond. And for many, it is more than one door.

We are building these doors together. We are creating this congregations mission as one family. We exist because we walk through the door.

This year, I invite you, walk through the door, any door. And if the door you are looking for does not exist, then please, call me and let's find the key together. This is a partnership in which together we lift ourselves up and explore what our Jewish community is for us.

We have been tested this year and we have been called from the depths of this moment in our history. We have entered these doors tonight that connect us to our community and to one another. And each of us has within us a ner tamid, an eternal light that beacons each of us to love one another, each of us to care for one another, each of us to be a light for one another and for ourselves. How will you shine as a ner tamid in our congregational family? How will you continue to inspire? And how will each of us, like the sun, satisfy the need for ourselves and our community to find, explore and enter the door to a new year and new opportunities?

We are one family, we are an eternal light for ourselves and one another and we have the ability to make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of our family, our friends, our community and our world - but only if we walk through a door and explore what is on the other side. May this new light shine for each of us in this new year and may the doors be opened wide.

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