

Erev Rosh Hashana 5769
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

We Are All One *Mishpacha* – Family

I'm addicted to Facebook.

Whew! I feel much better admitting that.

I have over 250 “friends” in my network and I feel connected to them when I get to see updates as to what they are doing at that moment. I even like to “Twitter” my activities occasionally, but I'm not as proficient at it as I know others are. But still, it's one of those ways of staying in touch with friends and family. It's a way to connect – I like to connect!

Tonight, I'm hoping to connect with all of you, for we are all one family, one mishpacha – and no, put the phones away, I will not be connecting via text during the sermon. However, I would like to suggest that, whether as Facebook Friends or sharing common gastronomic traditions, we all have a lot in common as one family. And tonight, no matter where we are from, no matter our life goals, we always manage to return to this place, every year at this time to reestablish our root connections, our family ties. Looking around at our family here tonight, we recognize that each family member has many needs, hopes and dreams. And together, as we recognize our family, we hope to understand one another even more, so that we can truly love one another as we try to love ourselves.

Our TBS family is made up of so many faces. There are those who have been a part of this family for the past 65 years either as founding members or the second generation. Our TBS family is made up of native Californians, those of us who moved to California later in life, and even those who were not born in the United States. Our family members speak English, Hebrew, Spanish, French, Russian, Yiddish and a host of other languages. We are Caucasian, African-American and Asian. And tonight, we recognize that we are also isolated, have special needs and of various religious traditions.

Tonight, on this Rosh Hashanah we recognize that under it all, we are one family.

Being a part of a large family can feel a little intimidating. Think about walking into a large party where you only know one or two people yet the room is crowded and the chatter almost deafening. Consider the feeling of being alone even in the midst of so many other people. For that moment, one can feel very alone even amongst the crowd.

Work as we might, not everyone feels connected to the family because they miss their own family or are alone in this world. In our midst there are those who live here yet their loved ones or friends live in another state or city. In our midst are those who are new to our community and are just trying to establish a foothold in order to navigate the larger scene. They are the college student who comes to Orange County for school seeking a spiritual home away from their home synagogue. They are single adults, single parents, and new moms for whom getting out of the house after caring all day for a new baby is a greater chore than one could even imagine. They

are the homebound who have no access to public transportation to release them from the confines of the home. They are the seniors whose families do all they can to provide them with compassionate care in a facility that meets their medical needs yet unknowingly omit their spiritual needs. We are family to those who are isolated and alone and therefore, responsible for reaching out and caring for them whether they sit with us tonight or wait for our call.

It is easy to get lost in a big family, and therefore, it is our ethical responsibility to ensure that no one is alone and isolated.

We've talked about our Caring Community, Keshet LaBayit, and how we strive to reach out to those in need. But it is not by this committee alone that our work can be done. Rather, it is the responsibility of each of us to identify and then take action in reaching out to those who are isolated. While it is essential for us as clergy and staff to be aware of who these individuals are, it is also crucial that we act as one family and take on the responsibility of caring for all.

For the past few years we have worn our Temple Beth Shalom nametags in an effort to identify who we are. And let me tell you, it's a blessing on so many levels! First, that we are able to learn one another's names and second that we are able to establish deeper connections. And for those who come to visit our congregation, they too are given name tags from which we are able to identify a newer family and recognize that they could use an extra voice of welcome and introduction.

Our tradition speaks of the mitzvah of *ushpizin*. We are aware of this mitzvah in relation to welcoming guests into our sukkah but this mitzvah also teaches us to welcome guests at all times. Therefore, we should continue to welcome our guests, never allow someone to sit alone and bless each individual with goodness and compassion.

In this tradition of *ushpizin*, may we also choose to call the new mom and remind her that she is not isolated and alone. Offer to visit with her at home or even help her and the new baby and possibly younger children out of the house for a few hours of respite and socializing.

And in this tradition of *ushpizin*, may we reach out to those who are homebound by providing them with rides to programs or services. For those who are not able to leave their home, may we learn from a very dynamic group of our weekly Torah Study students who make a point to visit such places as Bubbe and Zaydes for Shabbat and other festivals. Temple Beth Shalom does not only happen within these walls, rather, each of us is Temple Beth Shalom and can bring that to anyone, anywhere.

May it be our desire to never allow any family member feel alone or isolated but rather cared for and loved.

There are those in our congregation who are here, yet they remain invisible in the fulfillment of their needs. Each individual is unique in his or her own way, yet our tradition teaches us that each person is created, *Btzelem Elohim*, in God's image. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 teaches that "A human being mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the Holy One, Blessed be God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human, and each one of us is unique."

Each of us is a bearer of the Divine image although we come in an infinite variety of sizes, shapes, abilities, and disabilities. Therefore, each of us must be treated with kavod, with respect.

According to the National Organization on Disability, 54,000,000 of us have a significant disability. The logo for accessibility depicts an individual in a wheelchair, yet only a small proportion of people with disabilities 1,400,000 use wheelchairs or scooters. About 26,000,000 of us have hearing impairments and the rest of us have special needs that may not be readily apparent. This prompts a cautionary note as we think about "people with disabilities." Many of us will fall into that category at some point in our lives.[\[1\]](#)

Many of us have or know children with special needs such as, aspergers, autism, down syndrome, those who are ADD and ADHD. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 4.4 million children have been diagnosed with ADHD.[\[2\]](#) When we speak of disabilities and making our congregation accessible to all, it is not only a consideration of how we get in to the temple, physically, but also how accessible the temple and Judaism is for all.

Each individual has special talents, gifts, and needs. And each family member deserves to have accessibility to temple and Jewish life. This year, in partnership with the Union for Reform Judaism and Jewish Family Services, we are examining how we can be more active in ensuring that TBS is accessible to all.

This past spring, TBS kicked off a Special Needs Network for parents of children with special needs. Together, the network shares resources such as medical contacts, journal articles, workshops and even recipes for children and adults with special nutritional needs. This summer, the Special Needs Network met at a Shabbat evening service and shared dinner and social time allowing parents and children to visit hence creating their own chavurah.

Our religious school program, youth and camp programs all provide accessibility for children with special needs in partnership with parents. While we are still learning how best to meet the needs of all our youth, TBS is committed to ensuring that each child and adult has the opportunity to be brought to Torah and creating a meaningful Jewish life at home and in the synagogue family. If you or if you know someone has special needs, please be in touch with me as we are still building our programs. It is all of our responsibility to ensure that our family needs are met for all and that all are brought to Torah and share in the blessing: *Blessed are You, O God, who creates a variety of Creations.*

Finally, there is one more important dynamic to our family that I want to acknowledge tonight.

We are all aware that our congregation includes many families who both partners are not Jewish. Before 1970, statistics showed a 13% intermarriage rate. By 1979, that number jumped to 47% and has held here. In 1979, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, of blessed memory, the then President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, recognized the need to address this demographic by establishing the commission on Reform Jewish Outreach. Rabbi Schindler understood that even in biblical times, Jews met and fell in love with non-Jews. Moses met and fell in love with Tziporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. We read about the *gerai toshav*, the resident alien,

who was the support to help make Jewish existence possible. Since the beginning of the Outreach Commission almost three decades ago, the Reform movement has welcomed more interfaith families than all other movements combined.[\[3\]](#)

Nationally, nearly half of children in Reform religious schools have one parent who is not born Jewish. In a recent study presented at this past year's Reform movement national biennial, Leonard Saxe and Fern Chertok presented trends found throughout the country. In interfaith marriages where couples are not affiliated with a Jewish organization, only 12% of children are raised Jewish as compared to 47% who do affiliate. Saxe and Chertok proposed that if we want our children to participate actively in Jewish life then we must model that life for them.

We see, even in our own community, that once a couple decide to raise their children Jewish starting with a naming or brit milah, then the rest seems to follow. But continuity is created when our children and grandchildren see their parents and community integrated into the language of Jewish life and living along with our love of it and joy of it.

Many non-Jewish partners have taken active roles in all aspects of temple life; from worship, to study to participating in community service projects.

“These parents who commit to raise Jewish children have given us the priceless gift of their presence, and through their children, of another generation of Jews.”[\[4\]](#) These partners and parents must be thanked by us. You are one of the heroes of our community, taking on the responsibility of raising a Jewish family. To you, we say thank you. Thank you for blessing our children and community. Thank you for partnering with us in bringing our children to Torah. Thank you for helping ensure the continuity of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Janet Marder wrote the following blessing and tonight, I offer this blessing to you, the parents who are the heroes in our midst:

You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool and bring the refreshments to Shabbaton. You help explain to your kids why it's important to get up on Sunday morning and to learn to be a Jew. You take classes and read Jewish books to deepen your own understanding, so you can help to make a Jewish home. You learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish; you learn to put on a Seder; you learn to put up a Sukkah. You join your spouse at the Shabbat table – maybe you even set that Shabbat table and make it beautiful.

You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing at first. You hum along to those Hebrew songs, and some of you even learn to read that difficult language. You stand on the bima and pass the Torah to your children on the day of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and tell them how proud you are and how much you love them, and how glad you are to see them grow into young Jewish men and women.

We know that some of you have paid a significant price for the generous decision you made to raise Jewish children. You have made a painful sacrifice, giving up the joy of sharing your own spiritual beliefs and passing your own religious traditions down to your kids. I hope your

children and your spouse tell you often how wonderful you are, and that their love and gratitude, and our love and gratitude, will be some compensation, and will bring you joy.^[5]

We are all one family, one community seeking to build and maintain our Jewish home. We are one family, committed to each individual – those who are able to be here tonight, those who are isolated from family, those with special needs, and those who give their commitment to the continuity of the Jewish people. We are one family and together our community is that much stronger, together we are on a journey to the future. We are all one family and no one is ever left behind or forgotten. May we be blessed by one another and may we continue to strengthen our familial bonds tonight, tomorrow, this year and into the next 65 years.

Amen v' Amen

^[1] “Acknowledging the Invisible” by Sara Rubinow Simon. Shma. <http://www.shma.com/dec99/invisible.htm>

^[2] <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25820744/>

^[3] Inside Intermarriage: A Christian Partner’s Perspective on Raising a Jewish Family. Jim Keen. URJ Press, New York, NY; 2006. xiv.

^[4] Ibid. xiv.

^[5] Rabbi Janet Marder, Beth Am, California.