

Erev Rosh Hashana 5768
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibor - Not turning our back on TBS

Take a look around you. Do you know who you are sitting with? For most of you, the answer is yes. Do you know who is sitting in front of you? How about behind you? Go ahead, look around...make sure to smile. Now, look about 10 to 15 rows in front of and behind you. Do you recognize all those people? More than likely, not. At a weekly Shabbat service, you might recognize all the faces and, thanks to the wonderful name tags we now have, are more likely to remember the names. However, tonight, it's overwhelming! There are more people here tonight and over the next ten days then we see at Shabbat services all year.

We read in Leviticus that, "In the seventh month, on the first of the month, there shall be a Sabbath for you, a remembrance with shofar blasts, a holy convocation." (Leviticus 16:24) We are commanded to gather together on Rosh Hashanah in order to observe this holy day, and we take this commandment very seriously.

From the time we were children, we were taught Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were important enough to take time off of school and we were expected to join our parents in synagogue. For some of us, we were not fortunate to have a children's service program that was tailored just for us such as our Camp Shanah Tova program directed by Rabbi Jocee Hudson along with our new Youth/Camp and Program Director, April Akiva.

I remember sitting in services all day amongst the sea of people during the holiest days of the year. And at the time when my synagogue was next to a vacant lot, I remember passing the time watching the gophers peak their heads in and out of their holes right outside our sanctuary plate glass windows.

Why do we come as adults? Because we came as kids? Or do we feel a sense of duty and purpose? Or because of good old fashioned Jewish guilt – you know, the voice of your bubbe or zaide saying, "what! You're not going to services?" Or, dare I say it, because you **ENJOY** services? Whatever it is, let me just let you know...I'm very glad to see each and every one of you here tonight, because what would the Holy Days be without our family.

We don't want to pretend that the High Holy Days are just another service. There's a lot of pressure on the clergy and staff of the synagogue. Elias and his entire maintenance staff spend a great deal of time preparing the building – from fresh coats of paint to polishing the chandeliers and making sure our facility is in great shape. The front office staff has spent the past two months putting together letters and packets of information for the congregation and guests along with answering the many phone calls and emailed questions. And all the staff has worked tirelessly preparing programs, learning opportunities and services for the congregation to ensure we meet the needs and desires of each of you. Yes, it's a lot of pressure on the synagogue staff, clergy and volunteers to get their best foot forward. And we could not do all of this without the numbers of volunteers who helped dream, build and promote the High Holy Day programs and services.

However, I would argue that the pressure is also on each of **YOU** within the congregation to put your best foot forward. This is the opportunity for each of you to step forward, be counted and held accountable to God, yourselves, and the community. Each individual is challenged to examine his or her life over this past year, to ask if each goal was accomplished and to critique choices made. The pressure of the High Holy Days is on each of us to examine how we are a part of this community.

Over the next ten days we are going to explore who we are as a congregation and how we relate to our community, to God, Israel and World Jewry and even our past. But before we do that, we need to start with our own TBS Congregational Community. Let's explore how just as a congregation, we can make up our Kehilah Kodosha – our holy community.

In the first century BCE, Rabbi Hillel set forth a one line dicta that has characterized Jewish communities for the past 2000 years. “*Al tifrosh min hatzibur* – Do not separate yourself from the community.” And to be even more inclusive – do not separate yourself from the community **physically, intellectually or emotionally.**

It is easy to feel physically disconnected from a community. We no longer live in the shtetls or small villages where everything was within walking distance including extended family, the market, schools and businesses. We are spread out over the miles here in Orange County, from the north of Yorba Linda and Anaheim Hills to Irvine and Mission Viejo in the south, our congregation spans this expanse and we are invited to meet in one central location. And then when we add the Jewish Community Center, Federation and Bureau of Jewish Education who are located in South County, we feel even more physically isolated.

It takes effort to get into our cars at the end of a long week and come in the direction of TBS to celebrate Shabbat. Someone once said to me, ‘I wish Shabbat was at the beginning of the week when I had more energy.’ I suggested that we should consider Shabbat to be the beginning of the week -- what a great way to start the week with a day of rest in order to gather our energy so we can tackle the tasks before us. And wouldn't it be great to start our week with a day off right up front!

While our lives have us living, working and playing in so many locales, we cannot let ourselves be separated from our Jewish community physically. We have to work harder and make it a priority to both come to the community and bring the community to us.

Federation, the BJE, and Jewish Family Services recognize that there is a large contingent of the Jewish community who are not being served by the South County Campus. That is why Temple Beth Sholom is recognized as a central meeting place for numerous programs. Temple Beth Sholom remains the home of the only Introduction to Judaism class for the Reform Movement in Orange County. TBS has also become another site for Jewish Family Services who conduct bereavement, newly divorced or separated support groups and will soon utilize our facility to partner with the Union for Reform Judaism to offer programs and services for families with special needs children and grandchildren. This requires extra effort for our staff to offer our facility in this way, but we realize the benefit: We do not allow the Jewish community to

separate from us who are in Central and Northern Orange County, and by remaining physically close with our TBS community, we can remain close with those other organizations as well.

Do not separate yourself from the community **intellectually**. Temple Beth Sholom is a community of learners – We start as infants with our Torah Tots program, continuing with our dynamic and inspiring preschool, moving along as students in our religious school program and then through High School and finally on to our adult learning opportunities, there is something for everyone!

We cannot separate ourselves intellectually from our community as the Talmud teaches:

"Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were once reclining in the upper story of Nithza's house in Lydda, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered saying: Practice is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered saying: Study is greater, for it **leads** to practice. " (Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Kiddushin 40b).

Each Shabbat morning, we have at least 30 individuals participate in Torah Study. This year, nine adults stood on this bima as adult B'nei Mitzvah. Each Sunday every space in these buildings is filled with not only children learning, but adults as well. Rabbi Jocee Hudson continues to build an outstanding educational program that is accessible to all –traditional instruction, brown bag lunch and learn, and opportunities for Young Professionals around Orange County through the Nefesh Minyan beginning the end of this month. The Nefesh Minyan is a joint program with Orange County Congregations to offer a Shabbat experience and minyan for those 21-39 who are just beginning to create their own personal connections to the Jewish community.

Where do you find yourself in the educational and intellectual realm? There is always something new to learn and it is each of our responsibilities to take advantage of these opportunities provided or if you do not see an opportunity that calls out to you, then by all means, suggest something.

Finally, once we have engaged in study, it then falls to us to use our actions to not separate ourselves from our community **emotionally**.

We are not so base as to turn our heads when someone is suffering and say, 'at least it is not me' or 'there is nothing I can do for this person.' We are connected emotionally as a caring community and as one congregation.

This has been a difficult year for our congregation and our families. Many of you have lost loved ones. This past winter was especially gray as we attended countless funerals and memorials. Many of us were moved to tears as we said goodbye to two young parents whose lives were cut too short. Lori Weinberg and Larry Altneu are dearly missed and their spirits reside in the souls of their children. And then, just a couple of weeks ago we gathered to seek solace and grant comfort for Diana, Lindsay and David Glazer after the tragic loss of Michael and Sydney. Each of these Memorial services were filled and tears were shed as we said goodbye and promised to

care for the living. No, we cannot separate ourselves emotionally. Not once did our congregation ever say, 'there is nothing I can do.' You reached out, you touched and together we wept.

And we also shared our joyous emotions with the birth of new children, weddings of young couples and celebrations of B'nei Mitzvah for our youth and adults alike.

We had our first Synaplex Shabbat this past May, where we danced and played games and enjoyed ourselves together as a community. Synaplex is an opportunity for us to create various Shabbat experiences that discover ways we can celebrate Shabbat in our diverse community. And we will continue this venture in new Shabbat celebrations starting with our Sukkot Synaplex on September 29. We are a congregation who also knows how to laugh and love. We cannot disconnect our emotions from our community and our selves.

Kesher LaBayit – Temple Beth Sholom's Caring Community, continues to keep our families connected during both simchas and times of sorrow. Yet each of us can be inspired by our morning blessings during which we remember to care for the world, to care for those who are in need of healing, to celebrate with bride and groom and to care for the bereaved. Each week we receive our on-line news with simchas, sorrows and a list of those in need of healing. We don't do this simply for the 'bragging' rights of the grandparents, or for some morbid sense of awareness, but because we are all part of this community, and what affects one of us, good or bad, can affect the congregation as a whole.

So what can we do? Each of us have directories or can obtain one from the temple office. Throughout the year, try sending out congratulatory or sympathy cards to fellow TBS family members. Don't be afraid to call a couple who were just blessed with a new child and offer to bring over a meal. Don't be afraid to reach out, even if you do not know someone personally. Do not be afraid to pick up the phone or pen and let your fellow TBS family member know you are thinking of them.

In a popular song adapted by Jewish artist, Dan Nichols, we sing:

Do you know who I am: Do I know who you are:
See we one another clearly, Do we know who we are?

We know who we are by name, if only by glancing at each other's name badges, but now is the time to get to know one another on a deeper level. You know who I am and I know who you are by name, face, blessings, and sharing our lives together. Now is the time for us as a congregational family to say, "*Al tifrosh min hatzibur*" we will not disconnect ourselves from our community after these Ten Days, after these High Holy Days. To know who we are and who we are to become together, we must remain connected, to our temple community, our surrounding community, to God and Israel.

I look forward to seeing each of you during these Yamim Noraim, these Holy days, and hearing how you have made a connection to our congregational community. I look forward to partnering together as we, the entire Temple Beth Sholom family dream together, build together, and become inspired together in our Jewish lives. We are partners in creating and sustaining our

Jewish homes, community and lives. It is an awesome responsibility and I cannot express to each of you more how humble and grateful I am to be your rabbi - how honored I am to work alongside of Cantor Mark Thompson, Rabbi Jocee Hudson, Susie Amster, April Akiva, Lindy Lane-Epstein, the entire TBS Board of Directors, and each of you as we begin our new year together.

May each of us during this next year start to see one another clearly and may we together, learn who we are.