

Rosh Hashanah 5764
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How we measure our lives

Five years ago I stood on this pulpit for my first High Holy Days with Temple Beth Sholom. I was right out of rabbinical school and ready for a great new career with many possibilities. And with all the excitement and new responsibilities I soon realized that this was no longer a student pulpit! As a student rabbi there was the forgiving expectation that we were students and the congregation was a part of our educational experience.

But, here I stood, young and right out of school and with the official title "Rabbi." And despite a recent article in the Orange County Jewish Journal, I was not a "Jr. Rabbi" but a full-fledged teacher in Israel.

The joke in school was that newly ordained young men had the advantage over the women. Although we were the same age, the men could grow a beard to look older. We women, we didn't want to grow a beard. Besides what woman actually wants to look older?

I'm sure when some of you met me for the first time you might have thought, "who is this kid? I have problems older than she is, what can she do for our congregation?" Hopefully, over these past five years I've been able to gain your confidence as well as show that a person's abilities are not based on years, but on merit, competency and overall commitment to goals and aspirations.

OK, so Rabbi Donnell still complains that before I came here, he was called the young rabbi. I keep trying to convince him that if he wants to still be the young rabbi, he can, we just want to see him at some of the Camp Sholom beach days.

You know I love what I do. I love that I am able to spend the summer in shorts and a camp shirt with Camp Sholom. It was great when a colleague called and spoke to Ruth in the main office. The conversation went a little like this:

"Hello, is Rabbi Cohen available?"

"No, I'm sorry, she's at the beach today."

"Oh, is it her day off?"

"No, she's working."

Later that night my colleague called me at home and said, "what kind of job do you have?" And I told her, "the best!"

And during the rest of the year I spend time with kids of all ages, from the preschool to our amazing youth groups. I strive to let everyone know that my door is always open and they are always welcome to come in and talk about anything and everything that could possibly be on their mind. And if they don't have time to pop their heads in, I have plenty of "hello" nose and handprints all over my office window in the rotunda to show me that they care.

And as I get older and worry that I'm not in good enough shape to go up that rock climbing wall with the BSTY youth group, or how exhausted I feel when I get home from the NFTY convention with 1500 youth after singing all night, I can take strength from Rabbi Allen Smith, who only two years ago retired from his position as director of the UAHC Youth Division and leader of NFTY, the National Federation of Temple Youth after spending 31 years with them, well into his seventies.

So although I might ask myself, 'how long can I possibly be in this young rabbi role ' I realize that I have many more decades ahead of me. Even if I might just need a head start up that rock wall.

But I am not just the TBS youth rabbi, I get the best of both worlds right now- spending time with our youth but also sharing in the lives of all our congregants. I love sharing in the simcha of a wedding, or a birth and celebrating with b'nei mitzvah, or being in a class filled with adult learners eager to explore our Jewish heritage. I am honored when a family calls me in times of need for an illness or death in the family. And I know that I am privileged to sit in my office with someone who needs a shoulder to cry on or needs advice on a difficult dilemma.

So, as Rabbi Donnell likes to say, let's acknowledge the rhinoceros in the living room. That rhino is Rabbi Donnell leaving TBS and the question many have asked is, 'so Rabbi Cohen, why aren't you applying to be the next senior rabbi of Temple Beth Shalom?'

First, Matt, Dahvi and (point to belly) look forward to many many years to come here at TBS. This is our congregation. This is the family which has always opened their arms to all of us, been a few hundred other parents, grandparents and siblings to Dahvi and I know will be to this next baby. This is home.

Sure, I have every confidence that if I chose to apply for the senior rabbi position I could find success and fulfillment the love and support of this entire congregation. But at the same time, I recognize that there would be many sacrifices that I would have to make.

In previous generations of rabbis, the thought was, one would start in a congregation as an assistant and after three to five years, one would move on to a solo congregation and eventually the senior of a large pulpit. But this past decade has seen a shift in my generation of rabbis. No longer are rabbis including men, striving to be the senior of a large congregation. Sure, there are those, who dream of becoming the senior some day, but some have another goal to create balance in a rabbinic career and family life. Does that make this generation of rabbis any less committed to Am Yisrael, the people of Israel or less ambitious to succeed in the rabbinate? No, I believe it makes us even more committed.

Some of you might remember an interview in the Orange County Register my first year. I told the reporter, 'As a rabbi, I am in the business of promoting Jewish families and in order to do so, I have to start with my own.' It's true. I cannot promote the important values of a strong family if I, myself do not live by what I teach. I cannot say to someone that they need to make sure they carve out time for themselves and their family and that life does not revolve all around work and career if I am not practicing this lesson as well. I've even gone so far as to actually put dinner into my daily calendar just to prevent myself from working straight through every night without spending at least part of an evening with my family and then returning for a meeting.

As you know, a rabbi's life is more than a fulltime job. But I take pride in knowing that if a congregant is in need he or she can and should feel no hesitancy in calling me any time day or night. My family and I know when we started down this career path that days off might be interrupted with a funeral or hospital call. And Dahvi asks in the most sincere and gentle way as I put on my work clothes on a Thursday, 'Ima, is someone sick or sad? Are you going to go help them?' And then she gives me a kiss and a hug and is there waiting at the top of the stairs when I get home. But she knows what I do is a mitzvah and what we as a family do in supporting a congregation is a mitzvah as well. Being a rabbi is not a one-person job, it's a family career.

But still, although I, along with other rabbis from this generation, may not strive to be the seniors of larger congregations, we know that what we do and what we give is beyond measure. I take pride in my life here at Temple Beth Shalom and I hope I will be able to do it for many years to come.

At the same time, we now have to ask how we as a congregation will deal with formidable changes including searching for a new rabbi and welcoming him or her to our Temple family? We can't and should not expect to replace Rabbi Donnell with another Rabbi Donnell. After all, each rabbi will bring his or her own qualities and vision to our congregation. That being said, we still need to work together to decide what qualities we hope the next rabbi will bring.

As a congregation, we have matured. We have dreams and goals that we strive to fulfill. Therefore, we need to make sure exactly what vision we want to drive Temple Beth Sholom. This is a time to think not only about who the next rabbi will be, but also to examine, what we want to be as a congregation over the next year, five years, and generations to come.

Our Master Plan Committee has been examining the history and potential future of Temple Beth Sholom for the past year. But this is not a task that belongs to committee alone, it is up to all of us to become visionaries.

We need to ask ourselves, where we see ourselves and our congregation in the

Orange County Jewish community and also within the Reform movement?

What is it that we expect of our congregation and what should our congregation expect of us as members? We need to strive toward higher Jewish learning with more involvement in activities and Jewish life.

We need to expect that in times of crisis we can reach out to one another for comfort and assistance.

We need to continue to create innovative programs for all ages. And the congregation needs to expect its members to participate fully in each of these programs.

These High Holy Days are our sacred times for setting measures of our lives, communally and personally.

The words from a recent Broadway show describe the difficulty in measuring our lives: "In 525,600 minutes, how do you measure a year in the life? In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee, in inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife?" What experiences anchor the passage of time and remind us where we have been and how far we have traveled?

Do we measure our lives based on our age. We've seen that one's success does not always depend on one's age. Or do we measure our lives by taking stock of the status we've attained?

However, we can't just count the plaques on our walls or where we are on the corporate ladder. How about the bumper sticker, "The one who dies with the most toys wins!" Actually, they just die.

Our tradition also gives us guidelines to measure our lives and directs us as to where we should be in stages of life.

At five years old we should start to study Torah, at ten, study Mishnah, at thirteen become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, at fifteen study Talmud, at eighteen, get married, pursue your career by twenty, by thirty you should have a full understanding about what it is you do in this world, have complete understanding of all of life's intricacies by forty, and be able to counsel others at fifty, by sixty we should be mature, by seventy we're old and stale, we're given some extra strength at eighty, only to be bent over at ninety, and well, by one-hundred, the Mishnah reads, "one is as one that is dead, having passed and ceased from the world." And the rabbis said all this before the age of comprehensive health care. We should market Judaism as a secret to long life living if we could guarantee always getting to one hundred!

Unfortunately, our lives are not so simple and obviously the rabbis didn't have music lessons, Hebrew school or PTA meetings to contend with.

But even in our modern times, we set expectations for various ages - at five, go to kindergarten and learn to read and write, obtain the privilege of driving by 16, graduate from High School and gain the right to vote at 18, be responsible to drink age at 21, start a career in our mid-twenties, get married, have kids, all at varying ages in our youth. (Hopefully not too much in our youth) But as my parents are fond of saying as I recount to them spending a day huffing and puffing after Dahvi, "That's why you have children when you're young". But the point is, there are cultural and societal pressures to attain certain goals at pre-determined times.

I think we can agree that there is no definitive way to measure the quality of our lives. However, we can ask ourselves, are we fulfilling our own personal goals? Not the goals that someone else has set for us, but where we believe we want or need to be. We need to weigh the balances of our lives based on our own scales - those of our own goals and expectations. We need to make sure we are living our lives as ourselves.

There once was a great rabbi, Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol. Rabbi Zusya spent much of his life studying text and serving small congregations throughout many provinces. His life was filled with congregational expectations as well as fulfilling the expectations of his students. One day a young man saw Rabbi Zusya sitting on the steps leading up to the synagogue. His head was in his hands and he was obviously upset about something. The young man approached Rabbi Zusya and asked him, "Rabbi Zusya, why are you so distraught?"

Rabbi Zusya responded, "because, I am concerned about the day that I will have to go before the great throne of judgment."

"Rabbi Zusya, you have nothing to worry about. You have been a great scholar and rabbi to so many people. You strive to meet all the needs of so many people. You might even be compared to such a scholar as Moses!"

"Yes, that is what worries me. For when I go before the throne of judgment, they will NOT ask me, 'why were you not more like Moses our teacher? Instead, they will ask me: 'Why were you not more like Zusya?'"

When the time comes, will we be able to say, I was myself? Will we be able to measure our lives based on who we were and not what someone expected us to be?

Over these past months I too have had to measure my life on my own scale. I needed to examine where I am today at my age and where I hope to be in another 10-15 years. I've had to reevaluate my goals for my professional life and my personal life to make sure that everything balanced the way I want them to balance. I've had to make sure that all my personalities of Rabbi, wife, mother, friend, and family member get their fair share of time. How much the more so that we as a congregation have to reevaluate our goals and future expectations to keep everything in check so that we can say, we are Temple Beth Sholom.

May each of us strive to be ourselves, not what someone else expects us to be. During these High Holy Days and in the future, may we measure and weigh our lives on our own scales and be confident knowing that the time when we go before the throne of judgment we can say in confidence, 'I was myself and I lived my life the way I wanted to live my life.'

Amen