

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5776 - Year in Review

For most of my adult life, I thought to myself -- if I could choose a religion in which to die, it would be as a black Baptist. Even though I have only experienced that culture from the outside, I have always looked at black Baptist funerals with quite a bit of inter-religious envy. The music, the spirit, the celebration of life that forces us to rail against the despair of loss – all are quite different from the somber and tear-filled Jewish traditions. But then there are moments where we begin to look at our own traditions differently, and think, huh, maybe the rabbis were actually onto something.

As I look back at this past year, one of the most beautiful moments for me as a rabbi was also one of the saddest, the loss of our patriarch, Gordon. Gordon was one of my most important teachers. Beyond the constant care he showed for Mel, me, and congregation, he was a man who balanced gentleness and honesty. Toward the end of his life, I could tell he was quite angry – with God who had decided that it was time, with a world that could not change that reality, with his fading body that betrayed his desires. As I sat with him on a few of his final days -- I was feeling tired and worn out from High Holidays, from work, from the

mundane – and I was looking to check out. Gordon in many ways shook me out of the rut I was in. He said to me, “Rabbi, I just love living. I just love watching the world. I love my life so much.” And in that moment, aside from feeling a deep love for Gordon, I also really felt in this moment – *this* is one of the holiest moments of my life – I really do believe that God is speaking to me through this encounter. That moment was deeply personal and transcendent, but also profoundly universal. Our encounter with death is one that knows no boundaries of race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. Death, like birth, makes us human.

But how we relate to death is deeply rooted in culture, faith, time, and place. And our response was deeply Jewish. The final confession in a person’s final moments to free them from the pain of former sins, the psalms chanted by loved ones as we accompany the body, the outpouring of support at the funeral, and then, of course, shiva. It was a very Waterville shiva, and it reaffirmed for me and Mel why we love working in this community so much. Beth Israel may not be as large as it was in the 1960s, but it is far more diverse. Which, of course, makes it a lot more fun. Dozens upon dozens of people from throughout Waterville, Jewish and non-Jewish, came with the meals that brought them comfort. In addition to the kugels and lasagnes, we had food from South America, Asia, and middle America.

Regardless of the time of minyan, there we stood together, praying, consoling, living thoroughly Jewishly. Colby students came by to visit the Wolmans, drop off food, and make minyan. They rose to the task of being Jewish adults. During one of our darkest moments, we shone the most brightly. It affirmed for me at least -- yes, this is why we're here, this is why Judaism is so brilliant, this is why we will sacrifice, and celebrate, and learn, to make this faith community work.

There were also many other points of light for this community this past year. The Jewish community of Waterville received four significant gifts from the Alford Foundation: 1) A grant to finish the endowment of new Jewish Studies position that will ensure Colby Hillel will always have a rabbinic advisor 2) A gift to Beth Israel Congregation to cover personnel expenses 3) A matching grant to replace the windows in our sanctuary in order to save money on heating costs for our synagogue, and finally, a matching grant to launch the Center for Small Town Jewish Life.

The Center for Small Town Jewish life will be launched this year in late November. It will enrich Jewish life throughout the state of Maine through the Maine Conference for Jewish Life, the mid-Maine Jewish Funtensive, the

Colby-Bowdoin-Bates Shabbaton, and the Waterville Jewish Leadership Initiative, among other future projects. The Center will work to ensure that Jews in small towns and colleges across Maine and America will be able to access the best of Jewish life, despite our small numbers. What Jews in small communities lack in financial resources and large populations, we more than make up for in warmth, commitment, and authenticity. We want to make sure that every Jewish soul is nurtured and sustained, and we will work to bring our small communities together, whenever possible and appropriate, in order to provide the most robust sense of community and the best quality of programming possible. Mel, Rabbi Erica Asch, Rabbi Sruli and Lisa, Rabbi David Freidenreich, and I are working to make this vision a reality, and use the resources of our communities and Colby College to actualize our potential as Jewish communities in Maine. I encourage everyone to come to our annual congregational meeting in October so that I can present our vision statement and three-year plan to the community, solicit feedback, and recruit support for this important initiative.

Beyond the financial gifts we have received, we also finished out a stellar year of programming. When I came in as rabbi four years ago, we had no one in the community that could read Torah. Now at Beth Israel, we have Abby, Adam,

Chloe, Tiffany, and soon, Josiah and Sawyer. We've trained several kids and congregants in Hebrew reading, Torah trope, and haftarah trope. We also have many Colby students who have risen to the challenge of reading Torah each year at the High Holidays. This is the first High Holiday season where I am not doing the majority of chanting, and it is an incredible thrill. We made three new Jews this year through conversion who have become incredible congregants and leaders.

Home hospitality Shabbat was a hit for the third year with fabulous attendance and beautiful relationships forged another year. We welcomed an Israeli artist in residence, Shirel Horovitz, who taught us about Judaism from new angles, and brought her artistic and educational gifts to teens in downtown Waterville. Tu BeShvat and Purim were the biggest ever last year, with great contributions from Colby students and Beth Israel leadership working together. Shavuot was a bit smaller this year, but the quality of learning and the warmth of the community were really moving -- it was also important because Shirel, who grew up in a religious family in Israel, said that it was the best Shavuot she had ever celebrated.

Even when we are small, we are real, we are loving, we give of our hearts, and it makes the combined Jewish community of Waterville amazing. Last but not least, we welcomed many new faces into our synagogue with our first big fundraiser.

One of the best chefs in Portland came to cook for Beth Israel, and our friends and

family came from around the area to support our community, help us reach our goals, and celebrate with us. This is why being Jewish in small town, and Waterville in particular, is really so fantastic.

Of course, we need to grow and develop further. Beth Israel has not grown in terms of the number of members willing to step in serious leadership roles. Our synagogue cannot reach its potential until we have more lay leaders willing to step up and contribute to make sure our events a success, our children are educated, our parties are joyful, and that we don't burn out the same group of people who give time and time again. During this time of *teshuva*, we need more people to step up and help the board, and your synagogue staff. If you've ever thought to yourself, I wish Beth Israel could have or do _____, let us know what it is, and do it! Host an event at your home. Help beautify our building. Help us plan one of our big parties. My biggest fear and concern as the leader of this community is that we will lose the leadership we have now if no one is willing to step up in meaningful ways. Don't wait -- make 5776 the year you contribute to your Jewish community, and your personal Jewish journey-- through giving to a community that appreciates and grows from every contribution. This is the time.

As we draw the year 5775 to a close, let us celebrate a great year, and recognize our room for growth. Our building is becoming more beautiful and efficient, our youth are gaining all the skills of basic Jewish literacy and the responsibilities of Jewish adulthood, there are more and more events at our shul filled with genuine joy. Even as we focus on opportunities for growth, let us stand at this moment and recognize our many gifts and strengths, bringing to life the words of our morning liturgy, “Mah Tovv Ohalecha Ya’akov, miskinotecha Yisrael!” How great are your tents oh Jacob, how goodly are your dwelling places. Shanah Tovah u’mitukah! A good a sweet new year to all!