

A Pigeon Must Love Her Home

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5774

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The Rabbi of my early childhood had an unpopular habit which marked his High Holy Day sermons. He would chide the congregation. Noting that we had come in large numbers those two days, he would rebuke us for not attending the Temple weekly throughout the year.

During my rabbinical training, I was privileged to witness the opposite approach to the same reality. I took a year off from my formal studies to serve as rabbinic intern at Touro Synagogue in New Orleans with Rabbi David Goldstein, who plans to be here for my installation next month. Rabbi Goldstein's study was adjacent to the Sanctuary bimah. He and the pulpit party would enter the bimah from his office. Gathered with leaders of the congregation on Rosh Hashanah Eve, I watched as Rabbi Goldstein cracked open the door and peered into the Sanctuary, a few minutes before the service was to begin. "They've come home," he exclaimed, with a sense of joy and wonder.

Tonight, we have come home to Temple B'nai Israel. I experience Rabbi Goldstein's gratitude and awe, as I contemplate the numbers in which we have come to welcome the New Year and to affirm our Jewish connection here in Central Arkansas. I am grateful to be your rabbi, and I look forward to coming home with you to this congregation for many years ahead.

Gates of Repentance poetically describes "a summons older than the hills." Indeed, many here are responding to perceived obligation or a connection to times gone by.

Others are here because Judaism at Congregation B'nai Israel has become the source of our own spiritual comfort and deepest meaning.

Still others, and the groups surely overlap, are here because we have found and created community here. We are here with "our people," not only in the traditional sense of our Jewish people, but also in the Arkansas usage of the phrase: "My people are there."

Some of us study the life of the synagogue – this Temple, yes, but also a broader focus on the future of the synagogue as an institution. We know that young adults – the "millennials," they are called – will come where they find meaning and community, not out of that time-worn sense of obligation. The next generation will be here in large numbers, not only on the High Holy Days but also on Shabbat, if they find themselves at home here.

Of course, "they," that next generation, are not so different from the rest of us. None of us will come willingly or respond happily to a synagogue we find meaningless, or where we do not experience community. We live in an open society, with freedom of religion and from religion. We can make whatever communities we wish, or none. No law, Jewish or otherwise, truly compels us to attend tonight or ever. Little Rock is not Minsk or Pinsk, and it is certainly not Anatevka. All of us will return happily to this sacred place, year over year, week after week, only if we find a home here.

Modern Israeli author Meir Shalev has written a fanciful if powerful novel, about two generations of a single family, set both in modern Israel and at the time of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. The entire book, *A Pigeon and a Boy*, may be understood as a meditation on the meaning of home.

Several characters in the 1948 sections of the book are homing pigeon handlers. The reference is historical: Homing pigeons actually were used by the Israelis during that war, particularly for communication with Jerusalem under siege.

The reader is repeatedly reminded: “The pigeon must love her home.” After all, the pigeon has to want to fly back there, or the mission will not be completed. Therefore, Miriam, a chief pigeon handler, hangs placards to remind her co-workers of the “characteristics of a good pigeon handler.”

Tonight, at this eve of our first New Year together, I would like to suggest that we are, all of us, are “pigeon handlers,” who must assure that our “pigeon cove,” Congregation B’nai Israel, is a home to which our pigeons – our congregation, all of us – will be eager to fly home once again, year after year, yes, but also on Shabbat and in between, for worship, for learning and for community.

Rule #1: “A pigeon handler is kind-hearted and cares for every pigeon.”

Ours is an historic congregation. For many, Temple B’nai Israel has been your spiritual home for a lifetime. Though I am new to this congregation, you and I have much in common: I grew up in a Houston synagogue with all four grandparents, and my family had belonged there since the late 1800s. Last year, I observed Yom Kippur there for the first time since 1990, and I still knew many, many people; the place still felt like home. I also observed, to my joy, the presence of hundreds and hundreds of people I did not recognize. There is a tendency of the long-time members there, and at other historic synagogues, to say, “I don’t know anybody there anymore.” I grew up knowing my grandparents’ friends and my friends’ grandparents. None of them are living, and I don’t know the new people.

Let us all be like good pigeon handlers. Those of us who walk in here new, whether as Jews or as potential Jews, must enter ready to join the family, eager to be welcomed, to become vital members of a new sacred community, to do our part, and to care for the sacred traditions of those who have been here for generations. And those who are descendants of Temple founders, who have every right to enter this sacred edifice proud of what you and your forbears have built, must continue building, not only “once in a generation,” but every time we open the door. No, I’m not foreshadowing a new capital campaign. Instead, we build Congregation B’nai Israel week by week, person by person, as we assure that all who find their way into our Temple love their new or even temporary synagogue home.

Let each of us, like pigeon-handlers, be kind-hearted, caring for every person among us.

Rule #2: “The pigeon handler is considerate of others.”

Handling pigeons is messy business, if you know what I mean. In *A Pigeon and a Boy*, the pigeon cove at the center of the action is housed in a working Kibbutz. Occasionally, the neighbors are bothered by the noise and the stench. The pigeon handlers must take extra care to assure that not only the pigeons, but also the people, are safe and comfortable.

At Congregation B’nai Israel we face challenges characteristic of communities with one Reform Temple, particularly when that congregation is historic. These issues primarily revolve around worship services, and they are demonstrated in sharp relief on the High Holy Days. Tonight, we pray with the inspiration of organ and our magnificent professional choir. Tomorrow, we will be moved by the contemporary artistry of our own Temple musicians. These different styles are reflected on Shabbat, as well. Our challenge, and I really view it as an opportunity, is to assure that every single member will experience our Temple worship as our very own, every single Shabbat and at each Holy Day service, whatever the individual’s worship style preference.

But consideration of others goes beyond how we pray as a community to how we treat one another as human beings. Each person who enters these precincts must come with confidence that she or he will be treated with respect and dignity. Every voice must be heard. And when pain is experienced here – and we must acknowledge: Hurt has happened here, as it will even in the finest homes – we must hear the cry and respond to it; and we must never blame the victim.

Let each of us, like the finest pigeon-handler, be considerate of one another.

Rule #3: “The pigeon handler is sensitive in observing and discerning the character and condition of each and every pigeon.”

Ours is a diverse congregation. I have already hinted at some of that, but other aspects of our diversity are also important. Some were born into the Covenant while others received the Torah as adults, and non-Jews also worship among us as members of Jewish families. Our demographics skew older, it's true; but our Religious School is larger this year than last, a trend we pray may continue. Only a minority of Temple households are like mine: two parents of opposite sex with children at home. We are blessed with empty nesters, single adults of every age and orientation, same-sex couples, single parents, and older adults, married, single, and widowed. In the last week, I delivered apples and honey to our congregants who had lost loved ones in the past year, and I witnessed the extent of a reality few may fully understand: Ours is an economically diverse congregation. Very.

Moreover, because our sister congregation, Agudath Achim, is both small and Traditional with a capital “T,” many people choose B’nai Israel despite not really seeing themselves as Reform. We also are blessed with members whose families have been stalwart Reform Jews for generations. We include members whose attendance is regular, more than weekly, and others who very much value their membership though they cross the Temple’s threshold only a few times a year. While many members embrace the social justice platform of Reform Judaism, others are more conservative. And our community includes more than a few who are not members, but who see themselves as connected to B’nai Israel, through faith and family.

Perhaps most importantly, God has bestowed manifold talents upon our members, whose volunteer efforts on behalf of Temple B’nai Israel span the gamut, as well as potential volunteers whose gifts have yet to be tapped.

Not long ago, I took a “strengths skills inventory.” I learned something about myself: My gift is the ability, and the inclination, to see each person differently, as an individual, not to expect the same of every person, but to build a team, each bringing the unique gifts that he or she has to offer. Oh, by the way, that skills inventory also identified weaknesses, but tonight isn't Yom Kippur.

We could be tempted to bemoan our diversity, to view it as a problem. Let us instead embrace our diversity, and understand it to be our strength. Let Congregation B’nai Israel be a big tent, a place where all are valued, where all can find a place to express their passions and offer their gifts, and where everybody will find something – a program, a class, a service – to call their own.

Not only homing pigeons must love their home. We must love our synagogue home. In *A Pigeon and a Boy*, our protagonist, who struggles with the concept of home throughout his life, finally comes to resolution. Rabbi David Lyon describes the book's conclusion best: “Two different generations . . . come to serve the other in ways that were ultimately remarkable even if they were unforeseeable.” The same can happen here: People with very diverse needs, different opinions, and a variety of backgrounds do and can increasingly create a true home, together.

As we examine our souls on this Rosh Hashanah Eve, let us also examine our collective synagogue soul: What have we done, and what can we do, to love this spiritual home even more, and to make this sacred place ever more of a home to which we, folks like us, and people very different from us, are all eager to flock?

Then, may we, B'nai Israel, and indeed all B'nai Israel, the Children of Israel everywhere, find blessing in 5774 and beyond.

Amen.