

Every Single Sheep

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776

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Pam Schuler works full time as a synagogue youth director. She is also a stand-up comedian. Oh, and Pam Schuler has Tourette's syndrome.

Pam jokes that, when she takes her dog for a walk, nobody complains when the dog starts barking. When she starts barking, well, that's another matter. As an adolescent, her Tourette's seemed so disruptive to a Religious School teacher that she was asked to leave. Pam experienced that moment as being kicked out of her synagogue, even thrown out of Judaism. Pam bemoans: "It was easier to get all the Jews . . . to accept 613 commandments than it was to get some of the Jews in one room to accept me.

Pam Schuler's Jewish experience turned around when she went to work at Indiana's Goldman Union Camp Institute, very much like our own Jacobs Camp. The camp took a huge risk, engaging her as a staff member. Pam's Tourette's – like only a minority of cases, actually – caused her to blurt out curse words. Every now and then, she would scream the "f-word," to which the rest of the staff would respond, in unison, "is a bad word." Pam loved it. Her Tourette's was no longer a disability to be accommodated but a difference leveraged to benefit the entire community.

Here at Congregation B'nai Israel, our community includes men, women, and children with every kind of difference imaginable. Will we focus on what we can't do because some folks are different, or, as Pam urges, will we celebrate what we get to do because we were not molded with a cookie cutter?

Moses is our example. The teaching comes from a *midrash* which I learned from Rabbi David Ellenson. Our sages ask why God chooses Moses, of all people, to lead the Children of Israel. God sees Moses shepherding his father-in-law's flock. One of the sheep strays, and Moses follows him a long distance, to an oasis. Rather than cursing in anger, Moses exclaims, "If only I had known you were thirsty! You must be exhausted from running." He then carries the sheep on his shoulders, returning her to the flock. God is overwhelmed by Moses's caring for every single sheep, and therefore chooses Moses to lead God's own flock, the Children of Israel.

As we assemble for our community's largest gathering of the year, to welcome the New Year together, let us ask ourselves: How would we respond, if the next Pam Schuler were in our Sanctuary tonight, intermittently barking like a dog? Would we gently encourage her to leave these sacred precincts, or would we find a way to make music from her discordant sound?

When we meet somebody who comes to our Temple from a non-Jewish background, from another neighborhood, or from a rural town where we imagine that Jews do not live, do we ask ourselves what she could possibly want with us; or are we thrilled by what she might add to our congregation?

Consider the lifelong Jew who married a Christian decades ago, whose children haven't been raised Jewish. Do we pity or scold him, or do we consider how the family may enrich our community?

More than a few of our Religious School student have Autism, dyslexia, or any of a host of special needs. Do we obsess over the costs of inclusion? Or do we imagine how embracing their unique gifts improves our congregation?

Consider the African American man, passing by on foot, who sees our synagogue, piquing his interest after having read about Judaism for years. Do we notice his sweat-stained clothing, if not his race, worrying about what some may think? Or do we welcome the possibility that he could bring new life to our relatively small community?

Let us be mindful of the lifelong member who feels out of place, a political conservative in what feels like a sea of liberals. Sadly, most Americans don't worship with people whose politics are very different from their own. How can we make ideological diversity a positive attribute of our congregation, without compromising anybody's principles?

Most of us probably imagine this synagogue to be like Disneyland for the gay men, lesbians, and transgender Jews. Goodness knows, we're much better than most houses of worship in this regard, but do our LGBT worshipers feel merely tolerated? How do we communicate that having gay, lesbian and transgender members strengthens our congregation as a whole?

And what of those who are straight, born Jewish and married to a born Jew, upper middle class liberals with 2.5 children and a dog? How do we celebrate those who fit that so-called normative profile, now a minority?

Let us never forget those who do not come through our doors: She doesn't see our Temple as the place for her interfaith family. His parents concluded that his special needs are too much for our Religious School. Being single, she feels too alone.

Being a comedian, Pam Schuler has experience with improv. She teaches that, like the improvisational actor, we should respond to situations with two words, "yes, and." Her absurd example: If one actor says, "We're on the moon and I need shoes," the other doesn't protest, "No we're not!" A more helpful response: "Good thing there's a moon shoe store nearby," and take it from there.

We need to build, and to create, and to imagine, moon shoe stores of every kind, right here at Congregation B'nai Israel. Have no fear; we can do it. These "moon shoe stores" won't be our first.

LGBT members may be prominently in our midst. However, some still wondered if they were more than tolerated; so we made sure that our membership application doesn't assume that two adults in a membership would be male and female. We inaugurated a Pride Shabbat, to celebrate the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity in our midst.

However imperfectly, we have welcomed kids with Autism Spectrum diagnoses, and other disabilities big and small, into our Religious School. We have room for improvement. Still, if one Bar Mitzvah boy can proclaim on the *bimah* that he feels at home with his Autism at our Temple, and another will speak about standing up to his stutter, we know that we have said "yes, and," at least to some of our young people who tell us about their differences.

Our Temple Directory is an opportunity. When I notice that a married person – or somebody living in a long-term, committed relationship – is listed in our Directory as single, I make a call. Do they prefer to be listed singly? Or did they imagine that their partner didn't belong, because she isn't Jewish, because they're a same-sex couple, and/or not legally married? Listing in the Directory may be a small thing; but in my experience, the impact is real: When we say that people belong, they understand that they truly are part of our community.

Still, our work is not complete.

Last winter, when Ellyn Polsky and I took our Confirmation class to Washington, D.C., I spoke about our young people being in the presence of hundreds of Jewish teens, particularly important to our class, to whom I referred as “the six known Jewish tenth graders in Central Arkansas.” Gently and privately, but forthrightly, our Board member Beth Levi corrected me. I might not know the other tenth graders who may be Jewish, or who have a Jewish parent and a connection to Judaism, but they are out there. I was ignoring some of the sheep. Our entire congregation was.

I cringe, each time I remind myself of the young people whose parents have decided that their disability is too profound for our Religious School. Jewish education at Congregation B’nai Israel is, or ought to be, somewhat like public education, made available by the entire Jewish community for every child of our congregation. We do charge tuition; however, with help from the Jewish Federation, we offer generous scholarship assistance to assure that money isn’t the reason any child doesn’t attend Religious School. Still, unlike public schools, which are legally obligated to meet every special need, we don’t serve those whose differences are most profound, some would say disruptive, like the young Pam Schuler. No, we haven’t thrown them out of our school. Still, I wonder, do they feel that they have no place in Judaism, as Pam once did?

Pam reminds us that Judaism has always been creative. When the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, our rabbis didn’t throw up their hands, declaring an end to worship of the one God, since they could no longer offer sacrifices the way they always had. Instead, they adapted and changed, meeting the needs of a new age with intention.

Let us heed Pam Schuler’s counsel. We must stop seeing people who are different from us as “them.” We are all “us.” Congregation B’nai Israel, inside these walls and beyond them, is one, a magnificent mixture, with each and every person having something to offer. Differences enhance and beautify our community, just as each distinct color in our Holy Ark’s tapestry adds to its magnificence.

Tomorrow morning, we shall pray from a new prayer book, one whose editors strove to assure that everyone who holds it can be included. You don’t read Hebrew? The transliteration is right there on the page. Your family is non-

traditional? The phrase, “have mercy on us and on our children” has been changed to read, “and our families.”

That prayer book is called *Mishkan HaNefesh*, the Tabernacle of the Soul. The Tabernacle of old was a place where every Jew could find shelter and comfort. All Jews were welcome in the *Mishkan*, not just the ones who married Jews, and not just those who could understand every word. The *Mishkan* was even open to Jews who bark like a dog from time to time. We are now the custodians of our Tabernacle, Congregation B’nai Israel. Like Moses before us, you and I, together, must run after every single sheep – carrying them on our shoulders for a while, if necessary – to make a place for each one in our shared Jewish home.

Amen.