

As Long as We Believe
 Part II
 A Sermon for Kol Nidre
 By Rabbi Susan Grossman
 Beth Shalom Congregation
 Columbia, MD

Shanah Tovah

Last week, on First Day Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about dreams, not the kind of dreams we awaken from after a night's sleep, but the kind of dreams that can fill our hearts and change our lives. I spoke about our personal dreams – for love and significance -- and our national dreams – for peace, security and being a light unto the nations. I spoke about how, if our dreams are worthy, if they were placed in our hearts by God, then, even if a dream may seem impossible, it is not. As long as we believe, God can make a way even when it looks like there is no way, if not this year, then next.

That is the lesson of the incredible history of the Jewish people, our People and the reestablishment of the State of Israel after almost 2000 years. As long as we believe, God can make a way, even when it looks like there is no way, if not this year, then next.

What is true of our personal and national dreams is also true of our communal dreams, our dreams for our congregation, for Beth Shalom, for what we can do here together. We have worthy dreams, dreams placed in our hearts by God, dreams that can help us deepen our relationships, with God, with our families, and with each other; dreams that can inspire us to do what we can to help our neighbors and repair our world; dreams that can help *us* become who we know we can and want to be.

Let me tell you a story: It is about a man who lived a long time ago. His name is Zerubavel, the last descendant of the House of David. He had a dream, a worthy dream, placed in his heart by God: to rebuild God's House, the Temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonians decades earlier.

He never despaired of his dream during all the long years he lived in Babylonia in exile. Then Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia and allowed the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild their Temple. Zerubavel was on the next boat. Once there, he immediately laid the Temple's foundation.

Then the problems began. The neighbors, the Samaritans, were not happy the Jews were rebuilding the Temple. They dragged Zerubavel to court and got an injunction to stop construction. Zerubavel's followers became disheartened. For ten years, the project languished. Zerubavel did not know how his dream would ever reach fruition. But God can find a way even when it seems there is no way.ⁱ

God sent Zerubavel a message through the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might, not by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts... Zerubavel's hands have founded this house and Zerubavel's hands will finish it."ⁱⁱ

Zechariah told Zerubavel to take the *even rosha*, the cornerstone, the final piece needed to complete the Temple, and place it where he and the people could see it and greet it with shouts of "*Cheyn, cheyn la!*"

My colleague, Rabbi Mark Kunis writes, “Why was it important that ...[Zerubavel] keep the cornerstone in front of him...? Because every time he got tired, when he was down, when he thought it was impossible, he’d go over and look at that cornerstone. That was God saying to him, “I will complete it. I’ve got a plan. Just don’t give up’... Zerubavel was to speak positively when he saw that cornerstone saying, ‘*Cheyn cheyn la.*’ *Cheyn* means, ‘grace or favor.’ *Cheyn, cheyn la* then means, ‘Bless it God with Your favor. Let it happen!’ ...[this helped Zerubavel] envision it completed and create the spiritual possibility of it happening...”

As we know, the Temple *was* completed and stood for hundreds of years. As long as we believe, God can make a way, even when it looks like there is no way, if not this year, then next.

We are like Zerubavel and his followers. We have a great dream placed in our hearts by God. Thankfully we already have the edifice, this building within which we sit. The question is how do we transform this House of God into a House God can dwell within, a holy sanctuary in which our worthy dreams come true?

I believe the answer is found not in bricks and mortar but in our willingness to live our Jewish values in everything we do here, in how we treat each other, reach out to others, teach our children, and even how we make decisions. Jewish values guided our ancestors and continue to guide us. *They* are the building blocks to realize our dreams.

Let me share with you how just ten Jewish values could change our lives and the life of our congregation.

First and foremost, *Hesed*, Kindness. Kindness is not a feeling in Judaism. It is an action. We are to *do* kindness by helping others. Acts of *Hesed*, kindness, are so important that *Hesed* is one of God’s attributes. Just as God takes care of us, we are to take care of, go out of our way for, others. We are to give a ride to the senior who can’t otherwise get to services. We are to come to minyan so that a mourner can say kaddish. We are to cook a meal for someone who just got out of the hospital. When there is a need, we are to help. We do God by doing good.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the words of an anonymous poet:

I sought my God and my God I could not find.
I sought my soul and my soul eluded me.
I sought my brother to serve him in his need,
And I found all three - my God, my soul, and thee.

We find God, ourselves, and each other in the concrete acts of *Hesed*, kindness, we do for others, those we know and, especially, those we may yet not know.

Number two: *Hakhnasat Orchim*, Hospitality, welcoming and including guests. According to tradition, Father Abraham’s tent had doors on all four sides so he could see travelers coming from all directions and run out to welcome them in. Just as Abraham was welcoming, we are to be welcoming, introducing ourselves to people we don’t know, or don’t know well, inviting them to sit with us, talk with us, join us for a Sabbath meal or next week’s services or event.

Hakhnasat Orchim, Hospitality, can be transformational, for us and for others. Many people today are looking for something that makes sense and provides meaning. Judaism does just that. Without watering down who we are and what we believe as a Conservative congregation, we can grow by inviting others to share our journey. We can invite every Jew we

meet, whether at the gym, the PTA meeting or the supermarket, to be part of what Beth Shalom has to offer for *their* sake, so *they* don't miss out on being here.

Number three: *Emunah*, Faithfulness, to God, Torah and Jewish tradition. Faithfulness means putting God at the center of our experience.

We all have different experiences of God – Loving Parent, Powerful Creator, distant First Cause, the potential for good in people, the Force. We don't even need to believe in God to put God at the center of our experience, because we have God's values, through Torah and Jewish tradition, to guide us. But to have true *Emunah*, faithfulness, we need enough *courage* to trust that all things work out for the best when we make choices consistent with God's values, Jewish values. Even when there does not seem to be a way, God will make a way.

Number four: *Tzedek*, Justice, going beyond the letter of the law to do what is right. Maybe you remember the Hebrew National ad: "We answer to a Higher Authority." All of us do. As Jews we have a holy task: to be a light unto the nations. Our Torah teaches, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "justice, justice shall you pursue."^{iv} We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and remember the stranger. Each of us has a role to play in *Tikkun Olam*, in protecting and repairing the world, locally, nationally and internationally, in creating a world of *Tzedek*, Justice not just for Jews but for all people, and all God's Creation, and even the earth, itself.

Number five: *Tzedakah*, Generosity, giving of ourselves to help others. My father always had very little but he is one of the most generous people I know. His mantra is, "If I can help, why not?" I am sure his generosity not only helped many people but contributed to the amazingly happy person he has always been. Giving *is* receiving. That goes for financial donations as well as the sweat equity of volunteering to help. Maybe that is why our sages taught that *Tzedakah*, generosity, along with prayer and repentance, averts the severity of God's decree. We are enriched when we live a life of *Tzedakah*, Generosity.

Number six: *Klal Yisrael*, Jewish Unity. Our sages taught *kol yisrael aravim zeh be zeh*, "All Israel is bond up with each other." What happens to a Jew anywhere affects Jews everywhere. Whether our own local needy or our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world, they count on our help, as Jews have counted on each other down through the millennium. We cannot let them down. Despite our differences and diversity, we are one people, *Klal Yisrael*.

Number seven: *Achrayut*, Responsibility, the willingness to step up when something needs to be done. When Moses saw an Egyptian overseer beating an Israelite, he looked this way and that before intervening. Our sages explained that Moses looked around and seeing there was no one else to help, he stepped up to help. If not for that decision, we probably would not be here this evening, because Moses would never have had to escape to the desert where he heard God's call there.

Achrayut, Responsibility. We are each responsible, to God, to each other. We cannot merely stand by. Though we are a very communal religion, individuals make up the community and determine its nature. Our community, Beth Shalom, depends upon each of us.

Number eight: *Derekh Eretz*, also known as *mentschlekeit*, Civility, Respect. There is a lot to being a *mentsch*. It means living all the values I already discussed and several more, like

refraining from speaking behind people's backs or passing on negative comments about anyone. Our ancient sage Hillel taught it best, "Do not do unto others what you would not want them to do to you." *Derekh Eretz*, Respect, also means positive actions, like going out of our way to be considerate of everyone, even someone we don't like, and judging everyone favorably, just as we hope God will judge us.

Number nine: *Simhah*, Joy. Our Holy Scriptures command us to celebrate our holy days in joy, worship God with joy, and find joy in our family. The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, taught, "Those who serve in joy do their Creator's will."

If we are doing God by doing good, what's not to feel joyful about? We can embrace the *Simhah*, the Joy of Judaism, in everything we do: in our Religious School and youth programs, community and adult activities, and certainly in our services. Not everything can be fun, but joy can infuse most of what we do even when we are working hard, as long as what we are doing is meaningful.

Last but not least, *Limud*, Learning. We are the People of the Book. Throughout the ages, our strength came from our knowledge of our Holy Scripture and rabbinic texts. As our Sages taught, *Talmud Torah k'neged kulam*. "The study of Torah is equivalent to all over *mitzvoth*, all other commandments," because it leads to all others. Learning Hebrew, growing in our Jewish knowledge and observance, reaching into Jewish texts to speak to God and hear God, and our ancestors, speak to us, opens the door to all the other values I mentioned above. *Limud*, Learning, links us to our past, guides us in our present, and prepares us for our future.

These are my top ten Jewish values that I believe can transform our lives here at Beth Shalom. When you come right down to it, all these values really add up to one big overriding value, the essence of all Jewish values: Love. Yes, Love.

Judaism doesn't get credit for being a religion of love, but we were the first religion to preach love. We are to love the Lord our God, love Israel and the Jewish People, and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Imagine what kind of congregation we can be if we live just these ten values, which is really one value, Love, in everything we do. Imagine how transformational living in that kind of community can be for our families, for ourselves. What a force for good we can be in our community. How good we all can feel being part of that. How good God will feel watching us doing God by doing good in this way.

Jews have believed in these values, lived these values since the founding of our faith by Father Abraham. When we do God by doing good, by loving God, Israel and our neighbors, we can find a tremendous sense of connection that will fill us with joy, even when we are tired, and a sense of purpose, even when we are unsure of our way.

Is this too much to dream for Beth Shalom? That we can be that kind of transformational, joy filled, value lived, holy congregation?

When I came here 16 years ago, the future of Beth Shalom seemed limited only by the limits of what we could dream together. That is still true. We have survived one of the worst economic downturns in world history which derailed our plans for an extensive building

expansion. We have survived division. We may have to revise some plans and adapt others but we can begin again. God says we can begin again. We can become the kind of congregation we dream of. I can't do it alone, but we can do it together.

How we prioritize these values, how we go about planning the concrete steps necessary to realize our dreams, will be a subject of discussion in the coming year with the help of our Board and Long Range Planning Committee. And I can promise you this: As long as we believe, God can find a way even when it looks like there is no way, if not this year, then next.

Like Zerubavel, we, too, have an *even rosha*, a cornerstone to inspire us. You can go see it after services. On the wall of our classroom wing are the words: "Learn our values. Live our values. Love our values."^v That is our *even rosha*, our cornerstone. If we ever get tired, if we ever wonder if our dreams are impossible to achieve, we can look at these words on the wall, say "*chen, chen, la*," "God bless our worthy dreams with Your favor," and we can find, therein, the strength to continue.

As Jews, our job description, given us by God, is to dream worthy dreams. We can learn our values, live our values, and love our values, and thus come to transform our lives and the life of our congregation. As long as we believe, God can make a way even when it looks like there is no way, if not this year, then next.

"*Chen, chen, la*," May God bless our worthy dreams with favor. And let us say, Amen.
Shanah Tovah

ⁱ My appreciation to Rabbi Mark Kunis for the quote, "God can find a way even when there is no way," as cited in my Rosh Hashanah Sermon "As Long as We Believe, Part I" and for highlighting the story of Zerubavel.

ⁱⁱ Zechariah 4: 6,8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Bandy, *Moving off the Map*.

^{iv} Deut. 16:20.

^v With appreciation to Alan Spiegel, Randy Gartner, and Rabbi Dan Plotkin for coming up with the message: "Learn our Values. Live our Values. Love our Values."