

Paying Forward Our Legacyⁱ
A Sermon for Yom Kippur Yizkor 2020
By Rabbi Susan Grossman
Beth Shalom Congregation
Columbia, Maryland
www.beth-shalom.net

Shanah Tovah

Do you know the phrase, “pay it forward?” It’s when someone does something nice for us and we pay forward our appreciation by doing something nice for someone else.

I was thinking about the generational implications of paying it forward the other day as my eye fell upon a fragment of Roman marble on my mantle. My father, of blessed memory, gave it to me as we walked along the surf in Caesarea on our first Beth Shalom Mission to Israel. He had been looking for something else.

Like most first-generation Americans, my father abandoned his Orthodox upbringing when he left home. But he retained a deep faith in God and an enthusiasm for the few traditions he kept, like leading the Seder. As he aged, he began to seek something more. Maybe it was my becoming a Rabbi. Maybe it was just getting closer to meeting his Maker.

He discovered a small synagogue in Manhattan with good cookies, no dress code and nice people. He began to attend services, volunteered for the food pantry, led the food pantry, and eventually became synagogue president.

“The Little Synagogue,” as it is called, shares space with a church. Each week before services, volunteers set out their prayer books and ritual items, returning them to their closet afterwards. My father felt the lack of being in the presence of distinctly Jewish objects. So, he decided to build a Torah Ark and a Rabbi’s podium.

That is why we were walking along the beach. He was looking for mosaic and Roman sea glass fragments to beautify and lend a bit of Holy Land sanctity to his Ark and podium. By the time we crossed the beach, my father had his collection of fragments. (Our tour guide assured me he could legally take them home.)

My father spent months on his project. I once asked him why was he working so hard for his synagogue. He explained, he wanted to ensure it would be there for others, as it had been for him. He was paying forward his debt for the legacy others had provided. Indeed, you can still find “The Little Synagogue” meeting in Manhattan.

Paying it forward is the story of our People. Collectively, we are the recipients of a rich legacy of wisdom, history, and tradition each generation received and then paid forward to the next generation in an unbroken chain of continuity. Some of us also received a rich legacy of tradition from our parents and grandparents, who we honor when we pay forward our appreciation for what they bequeathed us. Each of us at Beth Shalom are also the beneficiaries of a legacy bequeathed us by our founders and all the clergy, staff and especially volunteers who helped establish and sustain this synagogue, our Jewish home.

Fifty years ago, Howard County had no synagogues. The small Jewish community gathered together for holidays. In 1969, Kol Nidre services included a recording by the psychedelic rock band, The Electric Prunes. That is when Larry and Shirley Greenwald, on line today, and others, now mostly in the mezzanine section we reserve for guests from the next world, decided it was time to pay it forward by establishing a Conservative synagogue in Howard County, a synagogue to conserve and respect our traditions, even as we adapted them to modern times. Beth Shalom was born of their efforts in July, 1970, 50 years ago.

For almost 25 of those years, almost half our history, we were a lot like my father’s “Little Synagogue.” Volunteers set out and returned chairs, prayerbooks and our Torah Ark to a closet each week in interfaith centers and meeting rooms. Like my father, members yearned that they and their children be surrounded by the symbols of our faith and our People. They dedicated their time and generosity to pay it forward, eventually building this building from which Cantor and I are leading you.

So many volunteers continue to pay it forward, building on the legacy they received by generously giving of their time and resources to sustain Beth Shalom. In response to COVID, we are developing the tech infrastructure, on line services, virtual gatherings, and outdoor programming that prove Beth Shalom is more than a building. Though I am confident we will again be able to laugh, sing, eat, and

physically sit together in our building and sanctuary, Beth Shalom has always been much more than a building.

It seems only yesterday when my husband David, son Yoni, and I first visited. We fell in love with the good hearted and caring people we met, congregants sincerely interested in fair play and going out of one's way to help others. We fell in love with the willingness to grow Jewishly and celebrate the joy, and fun, of Judaism. We fell in love with the fact that children can be seen and heard here and that people are valued by how they act not by what they wear. We fell in love with the potential to reach goals still unachieved and unimagined.

At that time, we had no formal adult education program. Now our programs are replicated around the country. We did not have a library. Now we have three: our reference, adult and children's libraries. Though Sisterhood was already vibrant, we had no functioning Men's Club. Now we do. We had little social action or interfaith programs. Now we are nationally recognized, award winning leaders in meaningful interfaith engagement and appreciated across Howard County for our good works. We had no structured way to support congregants in need. Now we have a Hesed (Kindness) Committee. We had just started our own Religious School and had no Hebrew High. Today, over a thousand graduates have become proficient enough in their Sabbath prayers to feel part of our People in synagogues around the world. I know because students call me years later to tell me. Speak of paying forward our legacy to the future!

All these qualities and achievements, and so many more I don't have time to mention, were shaped by individuals who sought to ensure Beth Shalom would be there for others as it has been for them.

We are as strong as we make ourselves. This is one of the things I learned from my father. Being part of a synagogue is not a transactional relationship dependent upon what the synagogue has done for us lately. It is a debt, as the beneficiaries of the legacy others built and sustained for us. It is a covenant, a sacred promise of mutual support, the same covenant Jews have shared across the generations and still share, with each other and with generations yet to be: to pass forward the legacy of Jewish commitment within a local, personal, relational synagogue community.

How will each of us pay this legacy forward? What talents, energy, and resources are each of us ready to share, what new skills are we willing to learn, what new relationships are we open to as we begin our next 50 years? Who will we

invite along on our journey of personal and communal discovery? Our family? Neighbors? Friends?

This covenant includes each and all of us. Beth Shalom is here today for us because others ensured it would be. We and our children are the beneficiaries of their efforts, their kindness, and their generosity. Their legacy is a debt we cannot repay them, only pay forward. Whether Beth Shalom educated our children, supported us through a loss, helped us celebrate a Baby naming or Bar/Bat Mitzvah or make friends, or provided a place to learn, grow, and pray, it is our responsibility to pass forward this legacy that was here for us so it will be here for others.

Beth Shalom is not just a building. We are Beth Shalom. Some of us believe in God. Others in the Jewish People. Others in the importance of sustaining a Conservative synagogue in Howard County and doing good in our community. We gather for different reasons: for worship (*Tefillah*), fellowship (*Hevruta*), learning (*Limud*), deeds of kindness and justice (*Gemilut Hasadim* and *Tikkun Olam*), outreach (*Keruv*), and service to God and the Jewish People (*Avodah*). This is our legacy. And like generations before us, we can pay forward this legacy to the next generation with our own time and resources, as my father did.

My father passed more than four years ago. The marble fragment he gave me reminds me how important it is to pay forward the legacy he bequeathed me, of applying my talents and resources in service to God, the Jewish People and our most significant institution, the synagogue, which for me means Beth Shalom.

We will shortly recite Yizkor, one way we pay back a little of the good our benefactors -- our parents and other family members -- did for us. But it is in paying forward what they did for us that really keeps their memories alive.

No one who knew my father would call him religious or observant. Yet, at some point he realized paying forward the legacy he received from his parents and grandparents included applying his efforts and resources to supporting the Jewish People and its central institution, the synagogue.

Our founders established Beth Shalom not just for themselves but for those who would come after them, for us. They understood the need for a Conservative synagogue in Howard County, that our unique ability to balance tradition and change is the best investment we can make in the continuity of the Jewishness of our own families as well as of the Jewish People. They worked hard to sustain Beth Shalom in its early years. To build and expand this building and our

programming. We are the recipients of their hard work, their legacy. How will we pay forward that legacy they bequeathed us so those who gather here 50 years from now will continue to want to pay it forward to the next generation and the next?

The answer is up to each of us.

Shanah Tovah

ⁱ © Copyright. Susan Grossman. 2020.