

There's a tradition in Judaism that during the Ten Days of Awe one does a Heshbon Nefesh, a spiritual accounting. A people are encouraged to take stock of themselves, honestly assess their strengths and weaknesses, consider what should be changed during the coming year, and make a plan for carrying out those changes. This is valid not only for individuals, but for families, communities, and nations as well.

Tonight I want to do a Heshbon Nefesh for our community, for Temple Shalom. This, of course, is a rabbi's Heshbon Nefesh, and in fact this particular rabbi's Heshbon Nefesh.

Looking back at the past year, I see a lot of strengths: We are growing in numbers—not growing fast, but growing. Now, numbers in and of themselves do not necessarily imply improvement. But consider the situation of small congregations in the South. Many are fading away. In some places one finds a gathering of a handful committed, diehard elders, but no one under seventy. In other places, congregations have disappeared altogether. Here in Arkansas, there were numerous congregations that now exist only in memory: Temple Israel in Blytheville, B'rith Shalom in Osceola, Ahavah Achim in Wynne, Tifereth Israel in Forrest City, Temple Beth El—a very old congregation dating to 1867 in Helena, an unnamed congregation in Dermott, Bene Israel in Dermott, Temple Beth El Emeth in Camden. So surviving and growing in this environment is an accomplishment in itself, and of course a precondition for all other accomplishments. Our growth is due in part to demographic factors but also to our own dedication to making Temple Shalom an attractive center of Jewish life. Here, then, we have one strength. You can help make us even stronger in this regard. If you meet a new Jewish person in town, welcome him or her with open arms, get that person's contact information and pass it on to our President or membership committee

Another step forward: We have moved in the past year to having services every Friday night during the school year, every other week in the summer. I can recall, not so long ago, when we had only monthly services, then twice-monthly, and now every month. Most of these services are lay-led, thanks to a devoted corps of lay leaders. This is a big step forward, a turning point whose importance should not be underestimated. A congregation with weekly services has a presence and a reality that

is lacking in congregations that meet less often. If you are drawn to pray on a Friday evening, you *know* that the Temple will be there for you, with doors open and lights lit and challah and wine on the table. You don't have to wonder, "Hmmm, is there a service tonight? Where's my newsletter?" You just know and go. Here, too, you can help. Volunteer to lead a service. If leading a whole service seems intimidating, find a partner and divide it up. If you need help, I'm ready to help. Last year I conducted a workshop for lay leaders. I hope to do one again this year during one of my visits. It's not hard to lead a Friday night service. The service isn't long and, as standup comics say, you'll have an "easy room," a roomful of people who want you to do well. Aside from the satisfaction of doing the mitzvah, there's another benefit of leading a service: you'll find that the prayers become more meaningful and moving to you even when you're not leading. And in a different way, it changes your whole perspective as a Jew. I led my first service on Memorial Day, 1966: it was my Bar Mitzvah. From then on I was not just a participant, I was a Jewish prayer leader. If you want to volunteer, you can talk to Darla Newman. If you are thinking of volunteering but have questions, I'll be glad to talk to you.

Our religious school is strong. We have a committed corps of teachers and a dynamic director. Our children are now helping to lead Friday Night services. We are using the Institute of Southern Jewish Life curriculum, a curriculum well-suited for small congregations like ours. Here, too, you can help. Melissa Woods, the Religious School director, will be delighted if you come up to her after services and say, "What can I do to help the Religious School?"

Our beautiful building is a great asset. It's no longer brand-new, but that in itself has some benefits. People become familiar with it. Once a building has been in place for a few years, it develops a presence in the community. Five years ago, someone might ask a random Fayetteville resident, "Is there a Jewish Temple in Fayetteville," and it was not uncommon to get an answer like, "Gee, I don't think so. I don't think I've ever seen one." When our Temple building was new, the answer might be, "Hmmm... I remember seeing a building going up on Sang Avenue. I'm not sure what it was—maybe that's the Temple. Or maybe it's a Mosque, or just a big luxury house." Now, people can say, "Yeah, I've seen it—it's that stone building on Sang with a Star of David in front." What can *you* do here? Well, the building's built, so you can't build it, but you can help keep it clean and work with one of the committees that help maintain and improve the building and grounds.

Yet another strength is our Board. We have a board of people who work well and efficiently together. Some of you might have heard “Rafi’s Points of Non-Parliamentary Procedure Specifically for the Orderly conduct of Jewish Meetings,” written by one of my teachers, Rabbi Richard Hirsh. In case you haven’t here’s a bit:

1. POINT OF PERSONAL OUTRAGE. At any time during a meeting when a participant becomes extremely upset, he or she shall have the right to interrupt any other speaker, will not be required to wait for recognition from the Chair, and has the obligation to speak at a volume considerably higher than required for normal conversation.

2. POINT OF IRRELEVANT INJERJECTION: Irrespective of the motion on the floor, the participant shall have the right to monopolize the meeting for not more than five minutes as he or she discourses on a point the relevance of which escapes all other participants.

3. POINT OF PERSONAL ATTACK: In response to a point raised by another speaker, the participant shall have the right to reply by launching a personal attack against the speaker. At no time shall the substance of the point itself be addressed.

10. POINT OF GRUDGE: Entitles the participant to raise an issue debated and decided by the organization not less than five years earlier, for which the participant has not yet forgiven those involved.

There are six more, but I think you get the idea. I have to say, these rules of procedure most definitely are *not* being followed by our Board. For whatever reason, board meetings are conducted with respect and efficiency. Having seen both kinds of meetings, I know how valuable a situation that is.

Another strength of our community is the likely new program in Jewish Studies at the University of Arkansas. I don’t want to count chickens before they’ve hatched, but it is very likely that within two years, U of A students will be able to minor in Jewish Studies. Community members, too, will be able to take advantage of these resources. We have already run programs jointly sponsored by the Temple and by a Jewish Studies grant at the university. Is it too much to hope that several years down the road we may have a Jewish Studies major, which would attract Jewishly interested students—including some interested non-Jews—to our area and perhaps to our congregation.

Then we have maybe our biggest strength—our members. We have a varied and talented group of people. Almost anything you could want done, you can find someone in the congregation who can do it, or, if not that, someone who knows how it's done and who can do it well. We have many people of great generosity, both with money and time. We have singles, parents and empty-nesters. Many congregations would look on us with envy.

So these are some of our strengths. I could name more, such as your great patience, but if I tried to name them all, even such patient people would begin to look at their watches.

Now, some challenges.

One challenge is our very diversity. Diversity is great, but it can be uncomfortable. It's easy enough in the abstract to talk about diversity, but when we encounter diversity in real life, it's not always so easy. Our mission statement says in part, "to welcome diverse practices of Judaism," a statement approved after extensive dialogue and deliberation, so I think we are committed.

But still, some say, "We're a Reform temple, so we should be doing things in the Reform way. That's true enough, but it doesn't necessarily mean what you might think. Until a few decades ago, there *was* a definite Reform way of doing things, and you could find it recognizably from one temple to another. But starting in the 1960's a new trend began to emerge. Reform rabbis found that they agreed on less and less. The solution was the principle of autonomy, the current ideology of the movement. A good Reform Jew, on this view, must study and learn about all the traditions of Judaism so as to make an informed choice among them. Some might choose one direction, some another, but this itself is an intrinsic part of reform. The movement now embraces diversity, and that is the Reform way.

But there's another point, a deeper one. Some say that there are six kinds of synagogues:

Orthodox

Conservative

Reform

Reconstructionist

Renewal

Humanist

and then there's the seventh kind—the kind of synagogue that's the only synagogue in town. We rabbis talk about this as a real category. When you're the only synagogue in town, you may be affiliated with this movement or that, but you have an obligation to the Jewish people to serve a broader constituency. So even though we are a Reform temple, committed to the principles of reform, one of those principles is to have concern and take care of k'lal Yisra'el, the totality of the Jewish people. Now, obviously, there are some whose needs we are simply unable to meet, but those needs we can meet, it is a mitzvah for us to meet them. Perhaps in 50 years Fayetteville will have enough Jews to support ten synagogues, from ultra-Orthodox through the whole spectrum to Humanist, but for now, we're all in this together.

I have spoken with Father Lowell Grisham about this issue a number of times. One point he made impressed me. If you try to do everything in a middle-of-the-road way, you may minimize objections, but there will be for many people no excitement. So we need diverse programming to bring out the excitement in those who feel a connection with this or that kind of event. And we want, and need, excited Temple members.

I have to say, my impression is that we are doing a lot better at this than in the past. In the past year we have had a musical service, a meditative service, and a dancing service, each of which spoke to the heart of some people. I think in the past, if I had proposed a service of dances, I would have heard some objection, but none was heard this time.

I want to talk about one particular element of our diversity, which is the number of converts who are members of Temple Shalom. Here I have heard some words of objection. I have to admit, it is a strange new world. In my Conservative synagogue growing up, if there were any converts, I didn't know about them. Now we see many. I can understand the discomfort. Becoming a convert means becoming a part of the Jewish family, and a convert's situation is like that of someone who marries into a family with strong traditions and ways of doing things. At first the new person may not fit in. He or she doesn't know the unwritten rules, the ways of doing

things, the traditions, the stories and son on. After a long time, hopefully, the new person becomes more and more an integral part of the family. I know it's not appropriate to single out individual converts, but I might mention one who is no longer with us, Carol Rappaport, of blessed memory. By the end of her life she had been Jewish for about sixty years. If I hadn't known about her conversion, I never would have suspected. So if you encounter converts, especially new converts, whose ways seem strange, give them some time.

The truth is, we need our converts. This is the 21st century. 31% of millennials report that they have no religion. 13% of them were raised with no religion. Of people raised with a religion—not just millennials-- 28% now belong to a different religion. How many people raised as Jews now profess a different religion or no religion? If their place is not made up by converts, what will become of Judaism. The Reform movement is indeed growing, but it's not because Reform Jews are producing a lot of children who grow up to be Reform Jews. If we counted only such people, the movement would be shrinking. The growth consists of people who come in from other Jewish movements, non-practicing Jews who begin to practice, and converts. This is a trend not likely to change. In an era when individualism prevails, it prevails in religion as well as other areas of life. Jews who find another religion more meaningful will convert to another religion. Non-Jews who find Judaism meaningful will convert to Judaism. This is the world we live in, and we have little choice.

Indeed, we should be grateful to many of our converts, who have taken active roles in the Temple, serving on the Board, on committees, and as volunteers in many parts of Temple life.

Another area of challenge is Jewish learning. Many of us went to a religious school that met from two to five hours a week. Many of us went there for only five years. Do the calculation: that means a total of 360 to 900 hours. The average first-grader in public school spends a total of 1,260 classroom hours in first grade. So if you did the typical 5 years of religious school, you got fewer classroom hours than a first-grader. If you went on Sundays only, you got fewer classroom hours than a child would get in the first semester of first grade. And in any case, these hours were spent when we were no more than 13 years old. How much can one learn about Judaism that way? The Reform movement calls on us to make informed choices in Jewish living, but how many of us are informed enough to make the choice? So increased

adult Jewish learning is one of our needs. Joel Lurie Grishaver, a leading Jewish educator suggests bribery: He says that we should tell our children, “We’ll pay for your college education, provided you promise to take at least one course in Jewish Studies; if not, you can pay for it yourself.” All the more should we make sure that we ourselves have adult-level Jewish education. I could give a whole sermon on that subject alone, but let me make a couple of suggestions: Get a copy of *Jewish Literacy*, by Joseph Telushkin, or *These Are the Words*, by Arthur Green, and read until you become familiar. They’re interesting books to read, the kind of book that you don’t have to read all at once, but if you persist you will learn a lot. Even I learned a lot from them.

Another challenge comes with growth. Sociologists who study congregations—Christian, Jewish, and other—have noticed that a transition comes at about 50 member units, which is the size we are. Smaller congregations are family-like: everyone knows each other and most arrangements are informal. At 50 there’s a tipping point. People no longer know each other, there begin to be subgroups with different interests, and more formal structure is required. If a congregation is not careful, its unity can be threatened at this point. All the more so with our diversity. So we need to see how to keep ourselves together. One thing is to stretch ourselves. For a long time I found Classical Reform worship uninspiring. But then I opened myself to the beauty and grandeur of much of the music of Classical Reform. We sing a few Classical Reform numbers here at Temple Shalom. “All the World Shall Come to Serve Thee” “May the Words of My Mouth,” and others. I learned that I can be inspired by this manifestation of Judaism. It’s not my main path in Jewish life, but it’s one of the side-paths that can be explored from time to time and make life more interesting. So I encourage you to stretch yourself and participate in something that you might not have thought of doing.

I hope we will also see more social events. When religious ideology is not at stake, we have a lot more in common. With the fact of diversity, we must pay more attention to such events, where we can all feel at home and part of the Temple Shalom family. You don’t need a rabbi to plan such things. In fact, lay leaders are probably better than rabbis. One example: Some synagogues now have a Shabbat Café, a program where you can enjoy refreshments, often with some kind of shabbesdik entertainment. The possibilities are endless.

Another challenge is fundraising. I won't say too much here, but we need to pay off our debt and we need to have enough left over to fund our programs.

One last thing, and here I may be treading on thin ice. I want to challenge you to be open to more Jewish ritual. Note that I'm not telling you to engage in more rituals, but to be open. The Reform movement on the whole is moving in that direction. It's not that you have to move with the Movement, but there are fewer and fewer places with the former anti-ritualism of Reform prevails. Old time Reformers, still speaking German, said that one must preserve the kern while discarding the schale—preserve the kernel while discarding the husk of ritual. Some dissenters tried to point out that the husk is there to protect the kernel—the pod is there to protect the pea. But for a long time the husk was in fact discarded. The new reform ideology, as I have mentioned, calls on us to make an informed decision. But how can you make a decision about whether to do something, if you've never done it? Reading and studying aren't enough. It's a bit like kids who know they don't like broccoli without ever having tried it. Of course, many of you *have* tried these things when you were young, and didn't like them. I once tried to persuade someone to come to a service, and at the end of a long conversation, the person finally said, "When I was young, my parents forced me to go to services and I hated it, so I decided that when I was grown up, I'd go as little as possible." Many of us had similar unpleasant childhood experiences. But now we're grown up. With an adult's perception, we might feel differently. It's just like the broccoli: If your parents forced you to eat it when you were 10 years old, you might decide that when you're grown up, you'll never eat it again. And, in fact, you don't have to. But if you do try it, you may find that you like it. I might suggest an experiment: set aside some time—maybe just an hour—for Shabbat. Turn off the computer, silence the cell phone, put aside your projects—even projects you enjoy—and take time to rest. Read an inspiring book if you like, talk to friends and family, sing, pray if you're a praying person, eat, and in general do things that allow you to be present in the hour. Try it a few times to give it a fair chance. If you don't like it—well, then that's what you learn from the experiment. But there's a good chance you will like it.

There may be a few more, but these are all I want to mention to you tonight. These challenges, let me make clear, are not flaws or weaknesses in the temple: they are areas where we have opportunities to grow. May God bless us with the strength and courage to experience a year of growth, so when next Yom Kippur arrives, and



we do our spiritual accounting, we will find that the credits outweigh the debits, and we as a congregation may go from strength to strength. May we join hands with God to write ourselves for a productive year in the Book of Life.

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