



**Rosh Hashanah I Sermon – 5777
Inclusion**

By Rabbi Pivo

A few weeks ago Hazzan and I began our new roles as teachers in the religious school. We are now making connections to our students much earlier in their education, and more deeply, than before. We have a new family in the school who came to us because they were searching for an inclusive synagogue home. I have gotten to know the new student in our school and, on a recent Sunday morning after dismissal, I stopped at the light on the corner of 83 and Gilmer on my way home. Sitting there, I heard a voice from the car next to me: ‘Rabbi, Rabbi!’ The new student was excitedly waving to me, and we had a brief stop-light chat. As the light turned green and I pulled away, I smiled to myself in the realization that this new family, and the new student in our school, felt included. It didn’t take much, just a reassurance that their identity as Jews was the only requirement for entry into our community, and willingness to welcome them. That’s an easy bar for us to clear, but it makes me wonder if we do it well enough for everyone.

This past Shabbat we read parshat Nitzavim. It begins with the words *atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai*, ‘You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer...’ As the Israelites stand at the edge of the Promised Land, on the verge of redeeming themselves from forty years of wandering and redeeming the promise made to Abraham 400 years earlier, Moses looks out at the people and sees all of them, men, women and children, non-Israelites, people of every conceivable rank and position, occupation, gender and age. As they prepare to re-affirm the covenant with God and enter the land, everyone is accounted for and everyone counts. It is a vision of radical inclusion.

Like our ancestors, we stand at the precipice of our own future. On these holidays we seek to renew ourselves in the year to come, to redeem ourselves from the mistakes we have made and the unhealthy habits we have allowed ourselves to fall into. The *yamim nora'im*, the Days of Awe, are at their core an opportunity for us to transform ourselves into the people we want to be, the community we wish to be. Like those who stood before God so many centuries ago, we too acknowledge that the synagogue, where we learn to live out our covenant, should be open to and to include every possible kind of person in our community, just as Moses did.

But is it? For those who are already on the inside, there are manifold opportunities at Beth Judea for learning, praying and socializing. Consider, thought, how many Jewish families in our area belong to no shul. We have to engage in *heshbon nefesh*, self-reflection, to ask what we can do to help them take advantage of all we offer, of the friendships and the deeper connection to Jewish thought, history and practice that a synagogue, especially this synagogue,

can offer. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that there are areas where we can lower barriers, real or perceived, to encourage and enable them to feel included. There is both a moral imperative to do so, in order to strengthen the Jewish community and ensure a healthy future for our families, and a matter of our synagogue's very survival. Until all Jewish families feel that they too stand with us before God, we have not fulfilled our responsibility to them or to ourselves. Our *teshuvah* this year must include the goal of inclusion, of being the kind of place where Jews who are not yet here can imagine themselves at home here, regardless of what has caused them hesitation in the past.

What kinds of change would demonstrate our commitment to inclusion, and what must remain our core values? I envision us welcoming in all those who yearn for an authentic Jewish experience, for learning, praying and celebrating in ways that are consistent with Jewish law and custom. Including more people, and more kinds of people who are devoted to those values reinforces our community's commitment to those values. This past year, our Board of Directors, with the congregation's approval, amended our constitution to redefine membership at Beth Judea as any household with at least one individual of the Jewish faith. That one simple change acknowledges the reality of diverse family structures, and makes it possible for us to include many more Jewish households. This year the Board has reformulated our dues structure, specifically with unaffiliated families in mind. Knowing that families often struggle to balance all of their commitments, we have lowered the financial threshold for young families, with or without children. You too can benefit from a dues reduction for referring new families.

Radical inclusion means thinking about the specifics of the individuals and families who are not here and meeting them where they are. If we want our core values and practices to survive and thrive for one, two or more generations hence, we need to make connections to Jews who are potential members of our community. Who are they? What do they need? The answer is that they may not be the same sort of households, or the same kind of Jews, that have filled synagogue rosters in the past. But they are our children, our siblings and our friends. They yearn for connection to something greater than themselves, and they deserve to find it here.

In order to be truly inclusive, our programming and services must account for those who struggle with disabilities. If we were to enumerate the many varieties of disabilities that prevent Jews from being able to fully participate in Jewish life, to enliven it with their presence, to expand our definition of what it means to include, we would be quite surprised. Consider your own family: does someone in your home or extended family have difficulty with their vision, hearing, walking? Do they have access to transportation? Can they read Hebrew? Yes, that is a specifically Jewish disability, one which I am proud to say we address with continuous adult education and, thanks to our friend Sandy Victor, now provide transliteration booklets for all Shabbat and weekday services. In order to include all those with disabilities, I need four to six people to help drive the effort. We must make our words of inclusion real by enabling those who want to be part of a community but need help to overcome disability. Contact me during the week to add your name to that effort.

Radical inclusivity also means welcoming those who are members of non-traditional families. For example, if gay and lesbian Jews in our area seek community with other Jews, we should be actively welcoming them and integrating them into communal Jewish life. In fact, we

need to energetically welcome new friends to our shared home, including any household in which there is at least one Jew. In the same way that Moses looked out over the landscape and included those who were deeply connected to our community yet not yet part of it, our efforts must also include those who don't feel a part because of who they have chosen to marry. It is in their interest, and in ours, to show them that we want them here, so that their families can benefit from the learning, the celebration and the traditions that tie us one to another. If your children, your siblings, your friends are not a member of a shul, they should be, and that shul should be Beth Judea. Anyone you know who struggles to connect to the Jewish community because they don't feel included: Reach out to me and let me help them. Give me their names and I will call them and invite them for a private meeting and a tour, so that I can learn how we can serve them and they can become part of us.

I can't tell you how many times visitors to Beth Judea or those who are considering membership have said to me how welcoming our synagogue is. One of our many strengths is the warmth and attention with which we try to greet every new face. But that warmth is not felt by those who never enter our doors. If we want to connect all Jews in our area into communal life, to inspire them to new levels of learning, to engage the tradition, to act as the next link in the eternal chain stretching back to that moment when Moses looked out over the people, then we have to be as radically inclusive as he was. At a time of so much talk about building walls, the synagogue must be a model for building bridges, for opening doors, and for breaking down barriers. When I look out at all of you, I also see the gaps, the places not taken by those who do not yet feel included. Help me to help them come to our home, to make it their home, so we can include every one of them as we cross the river of our own redemption this year.

Shanah tovah u'metukah/g'mar hatimah tovah.