



THE  
UNITED  
SYNAGOGUE OF  
CONSERVATIVE  
JUDAISM

# Synagogue Resource Center

Document: PRE.07.C

We all have prepared for this evening for well over a month now. During the month of Elul we spent time reviewing our lives this past year, taking a moral inventory and asking forgiveness of those we have wronged. We celebrated Rosh Hashanah, during which we expressed awe at our smallness before God and hope that God's mercy will allow for forgiveness and a chance for us to live our lives more fully and well. And all this preparation brings us to what for many of us is, without doubt, the high point of the High Holy Days, Yom Kippur. Now we are going to fast in order to purify our bodies as we pray at services in the hopes of purifying our souls. In particular, we have just convened before a court as we heard the haunting chant of Kol Nidre, the prayer for which this service is forever known. Kol Nidre, words which are derived from the ancient Aramaic, meaning "major fundraiser."

I know that this speech is an uncomfortable and harsh intrusion into the intended spirit of the Holy Days. As this is the only congregation I've ever really known, I don't know the traditions of other congregations. I know that the Holy Days have historically been times for the selling of seats, aliyot and perhaps other particulars of the synagogue service in order to raise money for congregational operations. So perhaps our deliberate intrusion into the liturgy, necessary as perhaps it is, at least stands out as an exception in our otherwise thankfully egalitarian congregation, where we don't dispense honors based upon contributions.

So I thank you all in advance for bearing with me as I fulfill the duty imposed upon me as congregational president. I will take advantage of that opportunity to ask for your support in a few minutes. However, I want to spend a little time describing my personal odyssey and why I love congregational life.

I was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York in a time and place where being Jewish came very easily. I lived in a neighborhood built just for my parents' generation; post World War II families creating their lives together. Kosher butchers were plentiful and synagogues, YM/YWHAs and other markers of a typical Jewish neighborhood sprung up all around us. Life was lived on the front porches of row houses, my parents talking to my friends' parents across low railings. Or actually yelling across them, because I remember that yelling was the normal tone of voice for most conversations when I was a child. I felt as though I could hear my mom's call, like a blast from the shofar, from a half-mile away against the wind when she really needed to have me come home. (Tekiah) "Ronnie," (Teruah) "dinner's almost ready, come on home."

I didn't know it then, but it was a very comfortable existence because we all took the ground upon which we lived, our neighborhood and our Jewish upbringing, for granted. Schools were closed on High Holy Days. My parents weren't observant and I never attended High Holy Day services, though I was required to dress up like my friends who were forced to attend. They never discussed the secret rituals that took place at Temple, but I got the sense it didn't much matter because they never talked about it and we all changed our clothes and resumed our games of stickball and handball as soon as we were allowed.

I moved away at the age of sixteen to attend college and I never really went back. I graduated college and medical school, did my residency and fellowship, fell in love and married, created a family and was very happy in my life, settling here in Santa Rosa. I never missed my childhood home, nor did I think much about my life in Brooklyn.

And I never intended to explore or raise my children to experience Judaism.

The full blame for my initial return to Judaism belongs to my wife. Not Jewish herself, she insisted that our children know about Judaism and experience being in a Jewish community. I imagine myself watching a 49ers game as Ellen told me she wanted to enroll Ryan at the Jewish Nursery School. I figured she must know what she's doing. After all, she researched nursery schools, and probably picked the best one in the community. I probably said "yes" without much thought.

I will return to my story shortly.

Joel ben Izzy is a local storyteller, and a favorite of ours when our boys were younger. You may have heard this story before, but I want to tell it anyway, though very briefly. He tells of a king who had four daughters. He decided to go away for a long period of time and, as a going away present, gave each of his daughters a grain of rice. Each of the daughters pondered this gift in her own way and, many years later, the king returned and asked each of his daughters to see the gift that he gave her. The first daughter proudly produced a pendant into which she had inserted the grain of rice to show how much she had valued it. She gave quite a show as she detailed the exquisite finery of the pendant she had commissioned. "Oh", said the king.

The second daughter said, "Wait a moment", and went up to a closet to retrieve the grain of rice. She told her father how she wanted to ensure no one would steal this precious gift, so she kept it hidden away from anyone's sight. Now she could tell him of her good deed. "Oh", said the king.

The third daughter disgustedly said that this was just a grain of plain old white rice. "How foolish to have treated it as anything but what it was. So I immediately ate it at the first dinner after you left. So here's another one instead." "Oh", said the king.

The fourth daughter told the king that she didn't have the grain of rice at all. Angrily, he asked her what she did with it. She said, "I gave it a great deal of thought and didn't know quite what to do." And then she brought her father to a large window looking out over the palace grounds, and there he saw the largest, most beautiful field of rice he had ever encountered. "I decided to plant it, nurture it and cultivate it so that our people could benefit from your gift until your return." And she received the king's blessing to rule over his kingdom.

Ellen didn't realize it that day, or perhaps she did and didn't tell me, but she planted a grain of rice that day while I was away, so to speak. She cultivated a Jewish upbringing for our children, not only by enrolling each of our sons in Nursery School, but then participating in the life of the school. She learned simple prayers and songs, presenting them on Fridays so all the children could have a taste of Shabbat. When I went, only to support the children of course, I got caught up in the joy that was being shared in the room. We started celebrating Shabbat, at least in the evening, at home.

In the years that have followed, many of you, probably unaware of it, have planted and cultivated seeds which have enriched my life and transformed my heart, to paraphrase our congregational mission statement. I will give just a very few examples of how you have helped to do so.

Item: A family here in attendance took it upon themselves to invite us to Passover seder. For them, no doubt, they considered this a mitzvah because they take the living of the commandments to heart. They barely knew us at that time, but we joined their family, three generations strong, around the table and heard the story told and ate a sumptuous meal. My family had always ended Passover with the four questions being asked, never answered. Grateful, Ellen helped create a Passover Seder adapted to families with young children that is still sometimes used by us at the table and has been used here. We invite guests who are new to the community or to such an experience every year, if possible.

Item: One of our sons suffered from strabismus, crossed eyes likely inherited and which risks blindness in one eye from disuse if not surgically corrected. As parents, we knew we had to force our son to have this surgery, but were terrified to discuss it with him. In the preschool he had a teacher with an eye condition who spoke to him regularly about her and his conditions, so that one day he came home and told us he was ready to have this operation. To this day, our son has an inner courage and strength no doubt drawn in part from this woman.

Item: The congregation created a havurah program and we joined so that our children can meet other children their age. One of the members was always involved in congregational work. As chair of the Religious School committee she casually asked me if I was interested. I had never done any such work before and didn't want to volunteer. But I both liked and admired her and so went to a meeting. I became a committee member and took on special projects such as facilitating the creation of the Tikva Shofar services. One thing led to another, and here I stand before you now as your president.

Her I'll never forgive!

Item: Ryan was training for his becoming a bar mitzvah and I wanted to help him in his training. A congregant took me under his wing, helped me to learn the trope, or musical notation, for the haftarah and Torah, which I had never learned or had long since forgotten in my own religious school training. I rediscovered that I love to sing and have since regularly chanted haftarah and have learned to love our Shabbat morning services, at which I get a lot of opportunities to sing my heart out.

I'm sure it is my voice that keeps some of you from coming to Shabbat morning services regularly. However, you'll have to endure me again tomorrow morning when I chant haftarah.

I have no doubt that my life is richer, that my rice field, so to speak, flourishes because of the seeds planted and cultivated by so many of you sitting here today. I love congregational life because at its best it provides that fertile soil and other conditions necessary for us to give the best of ourselves and create opportunities, just by being fully ourselves, to enrich our lives and transform our hearts.

We have numerous ports of entry into the life of this congregation, from nursery school through Friendship Circle, from the library to our gift shop, from prayer services to Social Action, from havurot to meditation. I hope that each of you can give the best of yourself to our village and give yourself the opportunities to be enriched and transformed in ways you may never have imagined.

I now want to evoke another image appropriate to this evening in particular. Later during the evening service we will recite the *ki hineh khakhomer* prayer. This is the only time during the liturgical year that we recite this prayer. If you wish to see it, you may turn to pages 394-5 so you may know to what prayer I'm referring. We call up very beautiful analogies for our relationship with our Creator, who fashions us. We are compared to clay in the hand of a potter, iron in the hand of a blacksmith and so on.

I want to confess to you, however, that I have a little bit of trouble with the images invoked. The various materials generally are unformed and given full shape only after formed by God. As a psychiatrist I know we are born with enduring temperamental features, not blank slates as often thought. I know that this is a quibble because you can argue back that God fashions these individual, innate temperaments as well.

In any case, I want to provide what for me works as an ideal material for who we are and our relationship with God. I would look to see us as jewels, already formed to some degree, but perfected by polishing and other fashioning. Jewels are precious and each of us is precious, no matter how much polishing we may need. I like this image because it gives beauty to the mitzvah to "love your neighbor as yourself", because if I can envision each of us as a precious jewel, I will do my utmost to treat you with care, attention and value.

At its best, congregational life compels people of varying ages, interests, and beliefs to commune together to help heal the world, so to speak, by our joint actions. To borrow from the Rabbi, who helped me with this, even the frictions that develop are for the sake of heaven, in that we change the shape of our evolving congregation and influence each other because of our mutual caring and concern.

I also like another feature of this particular analogy. The prayer states that we ask God to recall the covenant on Mount Sinai and show mercy. I like to see the English word "jewel" as comprised of two syllables. "Jew" is each of us, and "El" is the Hebrew root for God. We, as jewels, are truly sparks of the Divine, God in us. And, if you will, the word then invokes the inseparable union between God and us through our covenant, which guides each of our precious lives. At its best, congregational life is God's vehicle for helping us to polish and fashion each of our lives while striving for perfection individually and as a community.

If you get a chance, read the list of values that are displayed on the windows outside this room tonight. You have wisely voted these into our congregational by-laws. We already live these values and we can always do better. Making them a constant, conscious part of our lives will help us to fulfill the covenant, sustain our Jewish heritage and help heal the world, our world. By doing so, we will become ever more precious, individually and together.

I mentioned earlier that I never went back to Brooklyn after I left at age sixteen. That's not exactly true. Last year I visited my old neighborhood with my family during our trip to New York on vacation. The neighborhood that I knew was gone. Yes, the homes were still there as well as the incredibly stinky multi-billion dollar sewage treatment plant nearby. However, it is peopled by many different ethnic groups including Koreans, Russians, and Chinese who I'm sure interact with each other, but who make this a place very different from my childhood. Though reflecting the glory of America at its best, welcoming all people and giving them freedom and opportunity, it also was sad to see the loss of that coherent community which helped nurture me.

My parents and many of their age mates have "made aliyah" to Florida, the Promised Land. "Next year in Miami", as we all say at the end of the seder each Passover.

We live here in a heterogeneous community as a Jewish minority. The synagogue campus is not at the center of our neighborhood. Therefore, our price for maintaining the covenant and this community is vigilance. The most obvious threats come from those violent acts initiated by cowardly, disturbed loners or small groups of people who have only hatred as companions. The more subtle threat, though, comes from complacency and lack of appreciation for the value of communal life. Like my neighborhood in Brooklyn, time and lack of attention here can cause our community to dissolve or become a place that doesn't provide nourishment to our souls.

We constantly risk becoming jewels scattered among the sands, ignored, rather than fashioned together as a beautiful crown, each jewel essential for its design.

So now I get to make the necessary pitch. We have incurred extraordinary expenses already this fiscal year to provide temporary and necessary security for our children, ourselves and our facility in the wake of the recent assaults and continuing threats, magnified by the inflated value given to the fact of the secular millennium's approach. We need to continue our efforts to improve security in measured, reasonable ways. But this addresses the need for vigilance against only external threats.

We additionally need to strengthen our programs and have sufficient resources to achieve the goal of replenishing our operating reserves and implementing the priority items we essentially agreed upon at the last Membership Meeting. Doing so through all our efforts will help maintain and strengthen our community so we don't scatter.

I am personally grateful to those of you who already have pledged amounts over and above your annual membership contribution in order to help achieve these goals and preserve our community. Your vigilance and dedication give me hope for the future.

Each year we actually budget a goal for this Kol Nidre, this annual major fundraiser. As you inspect your envelope for the silent appeal you will note the actual amount we raised last year, which is the budgeted amount for this year. However, I asked that we also enclose the amount I hope we can achieve this year to meet our obligations and strengthen our community.

Please note that volunteers are circulating amongst you in order to collect your pledges. I will now be silent and let you make your decision in silence.

May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good life this next year. Thank you.

PRES RON WELCH  
CALIFORNIA