

A Synagogue is NOT a Grocery Store
Yom Kippur 5771
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Over the past few years, I've asked many of you,
"Why did you join Temple Isaiah?"
There's a core set of responses that won't surprise you:
"For the Preschool."
"For the Religious School"
"Community"
"It was the closest one to my home."

All good reasons.
All true reasons.

No one has ever said:
"You know,
I wanted to practice a different way of living
that would help bring about a world filled with justice and peace."

Now, I imagine,
since I've mentioned it aloud,
some of you would say,
"Yes. Also that."

But, I've noticed,
we tend **not** to articulate **that**
as the reason why we joined.

And yet, we **DO** want to practice a different way of living...
I know this
because you tell me all the time.
And because our sanctuary would be empty
if people were doing just fine...

We're in search of a different way to live,
and we have a sense,
maybe only a vague, distant, far-away sense,
that we might learn it from our Temple.

We might taste it on Shabbat..
We might feel it on Big Sunday.
Opening day of Religious School...
Preschool graduation...

¹ Thank you to Rabbis Stephanie Kolin, Greg Litcofsky, Esther Lederman, and Scott Perlo for their masterful Torah and editing.

Moments where we
sense something different in the air...
sense that there IS a different way to live –

But in the meantime, we've settled:

We've settled for barely keeping our heads above water
with our pace of life.

We've settled for superficial interactions and conversations
with friends and loved ones.

We've settled for accepting a world as it is
instead of how it could be.

And, as a result,
we use Isaiah as a true sanctuary,
a place to seek **refuge** from the **assault** of the everyday world...
so that we are able to get back out there
with hopes of **surviving** another day/week/year.

On one level, this is okay.
That's why we are creating
our Center for Wellness and Gratitude.
Because the **impact** of the world on each one of us
can be destructive.

We join a community like Temple Isaiah
so that we can learn to live
through the inevitable moments
of pain, loss and uncertainty.

But, what if...
and here's the BIG IDEA:

What if Isaiah were a place
where we didn't just go
to deal with the impact of the world on us...

but also...

where we learned
how our words and actions
could have an impact on the world?

What would it look like if Isaiah
were a place for learning the words
and the actions
and the skills
that would help us to create the world we most desire?

So we stop drowning in a sea of overextension --

So we stop running away
from complicated conversations --

So we start feeling
strong and powerful as we articulate what's possible...
and we begin to see it happen

This is a Big Idea.
But it's not a New Idea.
Some of you joined Temple Isaiah years ago
for just this reason.

Some of you were there when Temple Isaiah
took a powerful, public position:
On the Vietnam War.
On school busing.

Synagogues were once at the forefront of social change in Los Angeles.
We learned and lived a **transformational** Judaism.

Today,
more often than not,
we've settled for a **transactional** Judaism.

Here's what I mean:

Lots of things we do at Temple
LOOK like we're selling something –
like a product.

You pay us money and we provide a service:

- Pre-school.
- A bar-mitzvah.
- High Holy Days.

Transactional Judaism.

Except, we're not here to sell products.

And you haven't come here
to be consumers.
We're here for something more.
You can sense it.

It's time to reclaim our legacy.

[PAUSE]

So, this is a sermon about Isaiah
as a place to learn and to live
transformational Judaism.

It's a sermon about people, just like you,
trying to figure why they joined...
and why they stay.

And in homage to Ira Glass²,
this is a sermon in 3 acts.

Act 1: A synagogue is NOT a grocery store.

Congregants are pre-ordering boxes of fruits and vegetables
in hopes of creating healthier, more sustainable lives,
and by extension a healthier, more sustainable world.

Act 2: Inch by Inch, Row by Row (*sing*)

Parents, teachers, principals and community members
are planting seeds of collaboration and trust
that will ensure a different future
for public education in Los Angeles.

Act 3: Attention shoppers, there's a Rabbi in aisle 5.

Well....you'll just have to wait for that one.

[PAUSE]

Act 1: A synagogue is NOT a grocery store.

Last year, we set up an 8 foot table in the temple lobby
on a Tuesday afternoon.

Fruits and vegetables were laid out, end to end.
Strawberries, lemons, oranges and watermelon.
Bouquets of rainbow chard.
Heirloom tomatoes.

² This American Life, NPR

It was a bountiful harvest,
picked that day from McGrath Family Farm
and delivered to the Temple
as part of our Farm to Table program called CSA:
Community Supported Agriculture.

Children wandered over
and we tore off leaves of spinach, lettuce, kale and chard –
go on, taste!

They held up bunches of freshly picked carrots,
their willowy, green leaves still attached –
shaking them at their parents –
Come and see!
Carrots have tops!!

We explained that we partner with Farmer Phil McGrath.
Each week, he sends our CSA members
a box of seasonal, fresh produce from his farm in Oxnard.

Here's the catch, we said:

We eat what's in season.
Whatever he grows, he puts in the box.
We don't get to choose.

We agree to pay for our food a season at a time –
before we know what we will be buying.
We share in the farm's risks and in its bounty.³

We're practicing a different type of relationship
with our food
and with our farmer.

We explained as much of this as we could
in between tastings...

"What a wonderful program for the temple to offer,"
said one congregant
as she sorted through the produce.
*"I'll take one bunch of carrots for tonight – how much?"*⁴

[PAUSE]

³ Mary MacVean's words from CSA article in Isaian, September 2010

⁴ Honestly, this happens every time we do guerilla marketing with our veggies. ☺

Okay...

A synagogue is NOT a grocery store...
we know this.

So why are we marketing vegetables?

We're doing it
because we're trying to teach
a set of values and behaviors
that show us acting differently –
eating differently.

We learn that we can't always get what we want.
We accept certain limitations.

We learn more about our natural environment:
What's the impact of **factory** farming
on our eco-system?
On the animals?
On the farm workers?

We learn about our city environment:
Which neighborhoods have access to fresh fruits and vegetables?
Is that fair?
Is that just?

And we begin to connect the food we eat,
IN PRIVATE,
(in our homes and at Temple)
to larger, PUBLIC issues of food justice
in Los Angeles, in California, in the United States.
Issues of access, equity, nutrition, and climate change.

[PAUSE]

Synagogues are NOT here to answer the question:
how will I pick up a bunch of carrots for dinner?

Synagogues ARE here to answer the questions:

- Why does the world look this way?
- What is my role and responsibility?
- What will be our reaction?

And it's more than food.

Think about Friday night Shabbat services.

We invite people to turn to their neighbors,
To introduce themselves,
and to say “Shabbat Shalom.”

Why do we do this?
I’ll tell you,
it’s not a time-filler
while your clergy think about the next thing to say...

It’s a practice
meant to create connections
that last beyond the sanctuary.

It’s a ritual reminder
that the people who share this space with you MATTER.

Imagine if we practiced that kind of relational behavior
in carpool line or Coffee Bean.

Think about the model seders

that we run in Preschool and Religious School.
We teach our children to say aloud,
“Let all who are hungry, come and eat.”
We invite them to dramatically retell
our exodus from slavery to freedom.

Why...
Because we’re giving them a lens
through which they might see a world moving towards justice.
A lens through which they see their hands
reaching out to help others.

Think about Jewish Education.

Within the walls of Temple Isaiah,
each person,
regardless of his/her background,
has the opportunity to weigh in on the tradition.
We learn to tolerate,
if not celebrate,
competing opinions,
complexity and paradox.

Why do we do this?
Why do we encourage students

AFTER their bar/bat mitzvah
to continue studying with us
through Confirmation...
and **AFTER** Confirmation...
to continue studying with us
through Adulthood?!

We do it
because we want to teach ourselves the skills
to go out into a contradictory,
inconsistent world
and to listen for creative solutions --
to honor our instincts --
and to move with power and purpose
towards a world filled with justice,
compassion, and peace.

**We are practicing in here,
Who we want to be out there.**

That's transformational Judaism.

Act 2: Inch by Inch, Row by Row (*sing*)

Last month a group of 25
congregants, educators,
and community members
gathered at Temple Isaiah.

This is part of our ongoing effort
to strengthen public education
for ALL children in Los Angeles.

25 adults gathered
in the wake of the LA Times
releasing reports
on teacher performance,
ongoing budgets cuts,
anxiety about a new school year soon to begin...
and the challenge was offered:

What story do you want to tell?
We can listen to the media
and our neighbors who say:
"All hope is lost!"

Or,
we can tell a different story.
A story about moving from darkness to light,
from oppression to redemption.
A story that says
we ARE moving towards the Promised Land.

Sound familiar?
It's our story.
And it's NOT meant to be saved for Passover.
It's a narrative that changed lives...
and can continue to change lives...
If we use it.
If we speak it.
If we believe it.

And sitting in that room,
were 25 adults
from different parts of Los Angeles,
with different jobs and life stories,
who nodded their heads and said,
“Amen! We DO want to tell a different story.”

Why is Isaiah working on public education?
We're not a PTA.
We're not a booster club.
So why are we working on strengthening our local schools?

We're doing it
because we have an important vision to contribute –
A vision and a language
that comes out of our faith tradition.
And it shouldn't be reserved for the model seder.

We are not “playing” Judaism
when we come to Temple.

We are learning it and living it.
We are impacting the world with it.

So, say it with me now...

- *We are practicing in here (We are practicing in here)*
- *Who we want to be out there (Who we want to be out there)*

Amen.

That's transformational Judaism.

[PAUSE]

The Kabbalists, Jewish mystics,
believed that words and actions
could transform the world.

Lurianic Kabbalah taught that humans
could undo the damage
done in the world
through *tikkun olam*
[Literally, repairing the world]

Now, today, Tikkun Olam
seems to be a synonym for social justice,
but back then, it was everything:
It was Shabbat.
It was Torah study.
It was daily prayer.
It was how you did business.
It was how you acted in the world.

Every time a person performed a *mitzvah* (a commandment),
she raised one of the holy sparks
and restored it to the upper world.
Conversely,
every time she sinned,
a divine spark plummeted down.

The day would come,
taught the Kabbalists,
that if we all do our part
and live with the right intention,
the Divine Light will be restored to the upper world.

Our ancestors
believed in our ability
to act in the world –
to make an impact.

It was not *just* a blessing over wine –
it was elevating a divine spark.

It was not *just* visiting someone who was sick –
it was elevating a divine spark.

There's **nothing** in our tradition
that's "JUST" a ritual
or "JUST" a story...

Through our holidays and celebrations –
Through our rites of passage –
Through our sacred language –
And indeed, through our acts of justice –
We transform the world.

That's transformational Judaism.

[PAUSE]

Act 3: Attention shoppers, there's a Rabbi in aisle 5

I love shopping at Trader Joe's.
And often,
while I'm debating between trail mixes,
I hear a voice call out "Rabbi!"

It happens at Bed, Bath and Beyond.
Restaurants in Culver City.
For many of you,
I'm a rabbi both **in** and **out** of the temple.
There is no "on" and "off" switch.

And truthfully,
I try NOT to live separate lives.
I hope that what I teach at Temple
is what I practice when I leave the building...
but I'm not always sure.

I have my moments where I wonder:
Am I living what I'm learning?

What about you?

When you're at Trader Joe's
or the park or the gym
or at school or at work...
are you seeing the world
through the lens
that you learned at Temple Isaiah?
Are you speaking the words?
Using the skills?

Are you living what you're learning?
If not, why not?

[PAUSE]

Why not?!?
Because it's hard!
I know!

I'm asking
because **THIS** is the time of year
when we are challenged
to think about the changes
we want to make...
And to commit to them...

At this time of year,
our tradition offers us some extra help...
to do the hard work
of transformation.

At this time of year,
we are learning a particular language
we are practicing a special set of behaviors
directing us
towards a new vision of our lives
and of our world...

that's called teshuvah.

Teshuva, from the word la-shuv,
Literally means, "to turn."

Like a teacher
who points us in the direction
of the next book we need to read...
synagogue life,
and our practices therein,
this day
and ALL of its liturgy and ritual –
Points us in the right direction.
Shows us a path.
Which is ours to walk.

We are being invited to turn...
To return.

[PAUSE]

Synagogues were once at the forefront of social change in Los Angeles.
We learned and lived a **transformational** Judaism.

It's time to reclaim our legacy.

Now, I know, this idea feels big.
It feels risky.
I'm a little nervous myself. ☺

There's a lot of uncertainty
as to what it would look like...

- How would it work?
- Who would show up?
- What if we start to turn...would others turn with us?

The answer...
is YES.
Absolutely.

10 people in this community
helped me realize this last spring.
That Isaiah
could be something more for us
than it already is...
That we could take our words and our actions
and make a significant impact on Los Angeles.

This past February,
late in the month,
10 of our leaders sat in the sanctuary,
at the end of a rehearsal –
not for a bat mitzvah,
But for a major action
addressing our community's concerns
about public education.

We'd been working for months to develop the plan.
We had committed to filling the sanctuary
with community members -
with politicians -
with representatives from various schools
from across Los Angeles.

And we sat there
looking at each other
somewhat anxiously...

- Would they show up?
- Would it make a difference?

We were terrified.
I remember saying,
“I know we’re scared, but we can do this.”
And 10 of our leaders nodded and agreed:

- We can’t turn back.
- We can do this.
- We have to do this.

One week later,
on March 7,
the results were in:
500 people filled our sanctuary.
Standing room only.

500 citizens of Los Angeles.
Jews and non-Jews.
Parents and teachers.
Students and politicians.
Members of the community
500 people showed up and committed to working together
to strengthen our local schools and neighborhoods.

500 people showed up
because **10** of you decided
that Temple Isaiah was more than just a refuge.
More than just a school.
More than just a place to have a bar-mitzvah.

10 of you turned out 500.
What if there were 20, 30, 50...100 of us who said,
“I want Isaiah to be a place
where I learn
how my words and actions
can impact and transform the world...”

Can you imagine the impact we would have?!
The light we would restore?!

[PAUSE]

Why did you join Temple Isaiah?
More importantly,
why do you stay?

Because there's a great Religious School,
or because you want your children
to learn the skills
to live life with courage and conviction?

Because there's a CSA, Farm-to-Table program,
or because you want your dinner table
to reflect your values?

Because there's a lively Saturday morning Torah study (open to all),
or because your purpose in this world
is made clearer
through THIS type of conversation?

Because you like to run into your Rabbi at Trader Joe's,
or because
more and more
you recognize **YOURSELF** in aisle 5...
and it's the person
you most want to become in this world?

It's time to turn.
To profoundly turn –
to point ourselves in the right direction
for the year ahead.

Let this place turn you.

Let this day turn you.

If you decide to make that turn,
I can promise that when you do,
you won't be standing alone.

Shanah Tovah.