

Completing the Circle

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I hope you're looking forward to our upcoming Yom Kippur Dance. What, you haven't heard of it? Luckily, we have ten days to update our announcements.

The Mishnah tells us that the two most joyous days of the year were the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur. On those occasions, the daughters of Jerusalem would go out into the fields, wear beautiful white dresses, and dance. Their dance was designed as an invitation to marriage.¹

There are several reasons given for the significance of the 15th of Av, which in modern Israel has morphed into a sort of Jewish Valentine's Day. However, it doesn't seem immediately obvious why Yom Kippur would be a time of joy. The key to the puzzle is that this dancing takes place on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. That is, it occurs as the day of fasting is ending, as our souls are cleansed and we prepare to face the new year with new strength. It's a time of beginning again, a time appropriate for marriage proposals.

In its commentary on this custom, the Talmud tells us some more about the dancing. Its focus is on the 15th of Av, but there's no reason that the explanation shouldn't apply to Yom Kippur as well. The Talmud teaches that beautiful women would give one reason for why they would make good wives, women with impressive families would give another, and even so-called ugly women had their own pitch to make.²

We can take issue with several parts of this story, including the description of anyone as "ugly." But once we account for our different sensibilities, the Talmud is making a point that we can consider: in this ideal Jewish community, everyone could dance.

Unfortunately, I don't think that's what most of today's American Jewish communities resemble. Our dance would look more like an old fashioned social. The in crowd would be cutting the rug. But on the outside, the chairs would be filled with those who weren't asked to dance and those who didn't know how to ask, all the people who couldn't get on the floor. And further outside would be those who weren't invited into the room at all, who could only hear the music and the laughter through the open windows. If you were dancing, you probably wouldn't notice either group.

Recently, on Facebook, a rabbi asked other rabbis to name those people who weren't on our dance floor, those members of the American Jewish community who get overlooked,

¹ M. Ta'anit 4:8.

² BT Ta'anit 30b.

who get ignored, who get shunted aside. Answer after answer came back. I stopped counting when the list of groups reached twenty.

I won't mention each one, but to all of them, I say, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. Welcome to the dance floor of Temple Etz Chaim. Welcome to this Jewish community.

To the members of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning community, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. This past June, our Temple held its first Pride Shabbat. I was surprised by the response. People came up to me afterward and thanked the Temple for this service. And in doing so, they reminded me that it takes more than good intentions to make people feel that they are seen. It takes actions. It takes letting them know it. And it takes learning. This November, supported in part by a grant from Combined Jewish Philanthropies, we'll be conducting a program jointly with Temple Beth Torah of Holliston on transgender and Judaism. The more we learn, the more we can truly bring people onto the dance floor.

To those who adopted Judaism later in life and to the non-Jewish partners of Jews, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. Forty years ago, in 1979, the Reform Movement launched the first outreach campaign by any stream of Judaism. It sought to bring those who chose Judaism and those non-Jews who chose to throw their lot in with the Jewish people onto the dance floor. And yet, even after four decades, the Jewish member of an interfaith couple looking at our congregation will almost invariably ask me whether their non-Jewish partner is going to be looked down on. There must be others out there who are uncomfortable even asking me, those who think a synagogue will be a place where they can't feel at home. We need to get our message across that we are a home for everyone, but equally we need to keep checking ourselves to see how to make our congregation more welcoming.

To Jews of color or others whose skin isn't white, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. Far too often, people have assumed that you converted. Maybe you did, but maybe you were born Jewish. No one can know based on your skin color. But they have been certain that when Jews are born, they don't look like you. And that has made you hesitant to join the dance.

But others have understood. Amy Kuo Hammerman is "the American-born daughter of a Taiwanese father and a Japanese mother [who] each immigrated to the U.S. as young adults." Amy and her brother were the children of their marriage. She explored different religions as a teenager. She fell in love with a Jewish boy, and they too married and had children. She joined the Jewish people and chose to be active in Reform Congregation Shaare Emeth in St. Louis. Amy writes this:

"One of the many reasons why I felt at home in this synagogue is that I have never ... been made to feel like I am a token. Having built a rapport with the clergy and lay leaders at the synagogue, earlier this year I was honored to be elected to the board of trustees. I have never been made to feel like I am there to fulfill some kind of politically-correct diversity quota. Sure, I sometimes register a fleeting look of surprise at my face at services or meetings, by people who don't know me. However, I have never been

asked if I am Jewish, or how I became Jewish, or about my husband or my family's religious status. My existence as a Jewish person has not once been questioned by any member of the clergy, lay leadership, or staff. This is not to say that my race and ethnicity are ignored – they are just taken as part of who I am. The clincher here is that my mixed-race Jewish children have been treated with the same respect and care.”³

To those who are single, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. Outside of the Jewish singles scene in big cities like Boston, we tend to think in terms of “families.” Maybe that word can refer to families of one, but most people don't use it that way. Our language and our practices need to make clear that you can be on the dance floor, even if you're dancing by yourself.

To those who think that they can't afford to belong to a synagogue, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. We say that lack of resources is no reason not to join our Temple, and we mean it. But under our current rules, those of limited means still need to tell someone that they need dues relief. Of course, our Temple has to have financial support to serve this community, and we want to encourage those who can do so to help us keep our presence here vibrant. But when we say everyone should be able to get on the dance floor, we have to mean it.

It's hard to seek dues relief. It can make you feel that you somehow don't fit the standard, that you don't belong in the dance. We have an image of what a suburban Jew looks like. That image doesn't include not being able to pay for the basics in life, and being part of a synagogue needs to be a basic part of life for Jews and those who are connected to them.

I attended a program at Jewish Family Services of Metrowest. It reported on several families who were facing serious financial hardship, even to the point of losing their homes. Often, the problems weren't of their making. For whatever reason, though, they felt cut off from a Jewish community where people just don't lose their houses. With support from CJP, Jewish Family Services has helped those people.

My friends, we have people who face economic insecurity right here in our community. We can refer them to JFS. But we also can show by our actions as well as by our words that we are open to their being part of our Temple. We can go away from dues with their presumption that payment of a minimum amount is a requirement to enter the dance hall. Other congregations have done this. It is time that we do too.

To those who are political conservatives, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. These last few years have been difficult ones for our country. Judaism calls us to act in the world. I attempt to ground my calls for action in Jewish texts, in Jewish understandings of what those calls actually are. I will continue to speak out, because I cannot imagine doing otherwise as a Jew and as a rabbi.

³ Amy Kuo Hammerman, “Welcoming Synagogue Diversity,” *My Jewish Learning*, Sept. 23, 2019, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/jewish-and/welcoming-synagogue-diversity/?fbclid=IwAR03wIwt2rpALv9Vci9hGtyYO6FDUs1NuvsYODpfICU-Wj-yJUOTTh158Dg>.

And yet, as these High Holy Days are upon us, I'm reminded of a change that was made in the wording of the Yom Kippur *Vidui*, the confession of sins, between our last High Holy Day *machzor*, or prayer book, and our current one. In the last one, *Gates of Repentance*, we said, *EYN anachnu azei fanim uk'shei oref lomar ... tzadikim anachnu v'lo chatanu*, "We are NOT so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say ... we are perfect and have not sinned."⁴ The current book, *Mishkan Hanefesh*, strips away that fig leaf, that "we are NOT so arrogant and stiff-necked." It admits our failings. *Anachnu azei fanim uk'shei oref lomar ... tzadikim anachnu v'lo chatanu*, "We ARE so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say ... we are perfect and have not sinned."⁵ The new *machzor* recognizes that being sure we're always right is itself a great sin.

So, I will confess. I have been sure many times that my cause was right. Even in hindsight, I've usually been confident that I was right – but not always. And that "not always" needs to be part of my thinking. There are people who disagree with my understanding of what Judaism compels us to do. And they deserve a place on the dance floor. Even for those who agree with the positions I take and would urge me to go even further, I'd say that our community has to be open to differing opinions. There is room for all political persuasions on that floor.

Perhaps most significantly, to those with disabilities or atypical abilities, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome. This past winter, I went on a trip to Israel with other Reform rabbis. Among the people we met on that trip was Nati Gruberg. In 1999, he was a twenty-nine-year-old high-tech worker. He liked sports – on TV. One day, as he was riding his motorcycle, he was seriously injured in an accident. He lost the use of his legs. During his rehabilitation, he was introduced to Etgarim. Founded by disabled veterans of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Etgarim focuses on something called "adventure-based therapy." It takes people with disabilities outside, gives them challenges that involve an element of risk, and helps them grow by meeting those challenges.⁶ Indeed, the word "etgarim" means "challenges."

Nati took up hand cycling. According to his wife, it made him feel like a whole person. But not only that – he got to be very good at it. He became the Israeli champion. He started to prepare for the Special Olympics in Beijing in 2008. He trained nine times a week in all sorts of weather, focusing on the chance for Olympic glory. The day before the race, something went wrong, and the police allowed a vehicle on the course. Nati was hit again. His dreams were gone.

Until they weren't. Nati didn't win an Olympic medal, but in 2012 he did participate in the London Special Olympics and came in seventh.⁷ At forty, he looks forward to cycling for the first time in the New York City marathon.

⁴ Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Gates of Repentance: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis Press, 1984), p. 324.

⁵ Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Mishkan Hanefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe: Yom Kippur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis Press, 2015), p. 296.

⁶ See <http://etgarim.org.il/what-is-odt-adventure-therapy/>.

⁷ For Nati Gruberg's story, see <http://etgarim.org.il/nati-gruberg/>.

Explaining why he kept at it, Nati had a basic question: “Am I going to be the victim of my life or the hero of my story?” Our synagogue needs to find new ways to bring in all those who want to be the heroes of their stories. It needs to get Nati Gruberg’s hand cycle on the dance floor.

This past year, Temple Etz Chaim was chosen to be an affiliate of the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project, which operates under the auspices of CJP. The Ruderman Project provides resources for improving inclusion in synagogues throughout the Greater Boston area. We will be using those resources to open more doors to people with disabilities.

We have already begun to do so, literally. We replaced the front door latch and some others in the building with more accessible ones, ones which can be pushed up and down rather than turned. Thanks to Jim Buja and the Building Committee, we now have ramps that allow wheelchair users to enter and move around our Temple building fairly easily.

Thanks also to the Building Committee, we have microphones in the sanctuary at 900 Washington Street. When I got here, I was told that we didn’t need microphones because our space wasn’t very large. But as Ruderman and others have taught, people with mild hearing loss need amplification; just speaking louder rarely helps.

We have done some things, but we need to do more. We need to make ourselves welcome to those with more profound hearing loss or to those who’ve never been able to hear at all. We need to make ourselves more open to those with vision limitations. We need to make ourselves a better space for those with mental illness or developmental disabilities.

People here have been wonderful with our son, David, who has autism. But there are those who’ve been afraid to join us, those who can’t yet know the kindness our community has. Similarly, our community doesn’t yet know what it can accomplish. We have to do an inventory of where we are, to find out where we can go, and to move toward that goal.

Several congregants have agreed to serve on a task force to look into disability inclusion and to work with the Ruderman Project to help our Temple achieve this. We will be meeting soon after the Holidays to get started. This task force is part of an initiative that Temple President Richard Shulman has called “Let There Be No Stumbling Block.” The title is based on the line in *Mishkan T’filah*, our *siddur*, which urges us not to let the threshold of our synagogue be that stumbling block.⁸

⁸ Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Mishkan T’filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis Press, 2007), p. 124.

As I said, there are other groups besides those whom I've named. Again, *b'ruchim haba'im*, welcome to you all. We need to find you, and we need to bring you into the dance.

At the end of the passage where the Yom Kippur and 15th of Av dances were mentioned, the Talmud tells another story. Ulla of the town of Bira'a quoted Rabbi Elazar: In the future, in the end of days, there will be a dance of the righteous, and God will be sitting in the very middle of the dancers. Each of the dancers will be in that circle around God. That is the time that we must hasten to bring. For only when all of us, all those who hadn't made it onto the dance floor and all of those who had, when all of us can be standing at every point in that circle, only then can God truly be among us.

Kein y'hi ratzon, be this God's will.