

## **A New Vision Of Community**

For Rosh Hashanah Morning

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Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon

Temple Sinai

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After five years of planning and construction – stretching all the way back to 1999 – our dream has finally reached fruition. Our team of enormously dedicated lay leaders has created an exceptionally beautiful synagogue – a structure that cultivates our spirituality, delights us aesthetically, and promotes a culture of learning. Our new sanctuary is bright with natural light. The new classrooms for the religious school, Hebrew school, and high school are colorful, cheery, and state of the art. The Todd mansion is homier than ever. At long last, our facility is welcoming and fully accessible for the disabled.

But as significant as our new facility is to us, Temple Sinai is much more than bricks and mortar. Temple Sinai is more than a building. We are a community. A warm, friendly, and caring community, to be sure, in which new members quickly feel they belong to a special synagogue. But we cannot afford to get complacent. Our accomplishments in community-building remain works in progress.

This is a time of renewed enthusiasm and energy at our Temple Sinai. As we excitedly anticipate our return on October 1, we are presented with a unique opportunity to revitalize the depth and breadth of community feeling in our congregation.

Judaism esteems community. Can you sit shiva without a community? Can you conduct a Pesach seder alone? The very thought is preposterous. We can be Jews only within community. 9/11 brought home to us the pricelessness of community in the most powerful way. This temple called every member to find out if you and your family were okay. We held a special service soon after 9/11. We expected a hundred people. More than 400 people showed up, not wanting to be alone, seeking comfort within the community to which they belonged.

But building community in our synagogue or in our towns is much harder than it used to be. Just think of the neighborhood where you grew up. It was easy to build community when just about everybody thought the same way, valued the same things, and shared the same background.

Building community in today's highly diverse, multicultural, pluralistic, and mobile society is far more complicated. Like most reform congregations today, Temple Sinai is a big tent, composed of people with vastly dissimilar backgrounds and beliefs, interests and lifestyles. Our congregation is increasingly diverse in matters of faith and observance, with widely varying spiritual, educational, and cultural needs.

The challenge facing our Temple Sinai – as well as American society in general -- is how to achieve consensus within diversity, to reach unity without uniformity. From Dr. Stephen Steinberg, the executive director of *Penn's National Commission On Society, Culture, and Community*, we learn that community 21<sup>st</sup> century style arises through shared situation and shared purpose. Dr. Steinberg observes, "So, at the heart of the community is not a common response to a common situation, rooted in common values or identities, but differing responses, rooted in different backgrounds and experiences, by individuals bound to each other by the necessity of accomplishing the community's work."

What brings us together as a community, in a deeper and more profound way than ever before, is our mutual quest to find answers for the unsafe and dangerous world we live in, a world with terrorism, nuclear weapons proliferation, and a disorienting pace of change.

What brings us together is that we have much work to do together. We face challenges that will require the best thinking and collaboration of all our members. We need to teach our children why be Jewish. We need to define Temple Sinai's mission, to identify the core values that this community stands for and what it stands against. Beginning this fall, we will invite you to sit down with some of your fellow congregants at a "community conversation" to use our collective imaginations to generate a vision for the future of Temple Sinai.

Now let me share with you a new vision of community for Temple Sinai. We Jews know something about how to forge strong communities. We have been doing it for centuries. And the secret of our proven success has been the community's commitment to fulfill three primary actions: worship, study, and deeds of lovingkindness. These are the three pillars on which Jewish community rises or falls:

Because no Jewish community can develop its shared values and set of core principles unless it engages in the act of Jewish learning. Because no community can connect with God or reach its highest moral potential unless it engages in the act of prayer. Because no Jewish community can fulfill its mission to be a light unto the nations unless it engages in acts of lovingkindness and deeds of social justice.

So let me paint a portrait for you of my dream Jewish community. In my vision of a dream community, the sanctuary is full for services not because we suddenly find religion. We show up because worship builds community. And we are committed to community.

My dream community is also distinguished by its culture of Jewish learning. Adults, of every age and stage of life, are studying torah and Jewish theology, philosophy, and history. Not because we suddenly find religion. We show up because study builds community. And we are committed to community.

In my vision of a dream community, the social action committee does not need to run projects for the congregation. Everyone engages in projects of community service and social justice. Not because we suddenly find religion. We show up because working together to build a better world builds community. And we are committed to community.

Now picture yourself belonging to the dream community I have described. It's a community where all our Jewish dreams come true. Hear the laughter of our children and grandchildren in the classrooms. Hear the excited voices of our teens becoming proud and learned Jews. Feel the arms that hold your hand in your time of need and dance with you in times of joy. See yourself and others searching our sacred texts, plumbing their depths, for the vision and the values we need to live a life of meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. See yourself joining with others to bring more justice into our troubled world. Imagine a community making a profound difference in the world every day. Imagine a community making a difference in your life every day.

Wouldn't we all want to belong to a community like this? A community where people care about each other, feel responsible for each other, and live out our Jewish story together. As Rabbi Janet Marder observes about such a dream community, "you want to be there. You want to take it home with you. You want to take into yourself some of its power and peace. You want to be inside a place where the ordinary is lifted up and exalted."

How do we make our dream community come true? How do we build the kind of dream community that all of us want and no one would ever want to leave? Kol yisrael areveim ze la zeh. "all Israel is responsible, one for the other. " in a real community, every single member counts. In a real community, every single member can be counted upon! Just like a family, community can be as demanding as it is rewarding and nurturing. It can be no other way. There are no quick short-cuts to genuine community.

Each and every one of us in this sanctuary this morning has a unique contribution to make to this community – some talent that you and only you can bring to this enterprise. Our community is enriched by your active involvement. Our community is impoverished by your absence.

A congregant came to one of my colleagues. She expressed her disappointment about some things in the congregation. Then she said, "so here is what I'm going to do to help make things better." now that is someone who understands community.

And another person who truly understood community was our beloved temple leader Doree Cooper, may her memory be a blessing. She said: "Stuart and I have spent some 27 years as members of this congregation; helping, working, creating, building, learning, and always trying to strengthen and mold our temple's future and the future of our own family. We have seen our lives and the lives of our children take shape – enriched by the

teachings of Judaism. Those many years were filled with love and dedication and devotion. Temple was always at the center of our being and still is. Hopefully, Temple Sinai will go on forever; its teachers and leaders creating the foundations for other families and helping to inspire the future generations. ...we love our Jewish lives. We love our lives in Temple Sinai.”

I've learned from my study of cosmology that

A polar tension is embedded in the universe. A tug of war is going on between the attractive, gravitational pull of matter and the repulsive anti-gravitational pull of dark energy. We live in a polarized universe, a polarized world, and a polarized nation. There are so many forces working to pull people apart, to pull us apart from each other. Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Hillel said al tifrosh min hatzibur. “do not separate yourself from the community.” the temptation to disengage from community is just as powerful today as it was in antiquity, if not more so.

As we renew this New Year, let us renew the spirit of community at Temple Sinai. Let us not succumb to the forces of polarization here. Together let us lift up the three pillars of Jewish community: prayer, study, and acts of lovingkindness.

Cognizant of a resurgent anti-Semitism around the world, can we not give a little more of ourselves to insure that our synagogue stays vital and strong? Here at Temple Sinai, we can find shared purpose in life and the community feeling for which we yearn. Supported by our heritage and each other, we shall know that we are never alone.

Community doesn't just happen all by itself. Community can happen if we choose to commit ourselves to making it happen. There was a famous poster that came out of Berkeley in the '60's. It read: “prayer doesn't work. Meditation doesn't work. Psychiatry doesn't work. None of it works.” but at the bottom of the poster it read: “you work.” there is a limit to what the new bricks and mortar of this facility can do for us. But there is no limit to what we can accomplish together.

This is our congregation. This is our community. Temple Sinai will become what we shall make of it.

Let us lift up the three pillars of Jewish community. “let us take into ourselves some of its power and its peace.” a magnificent future is in our hands.