

Good morning and Shana tova. I feel it important, at the start of our relationship together, to share with you exactly what it was that drew me to Temple B'nai Abraham.

And if I'm being honest, I was quite drawn from the moment I saw that B'nai Abraham was searching for a new rabbi, so much so that it felt like a moonshot.

To be part of a congregation with such an illustrious and inspiring history— with its own *m'sorah*, an inherited, transmitted tradition rooted in Judaism and local and national communities— it would be to very seriously feel the support of generations past and the clarion call to further their sacred work.

To be part of a congregation that joined Dr. Joachim Prinz in his influential civil rights efforts, particularly in such tumultuous times as these when we need all the strength we can muster and the guidance we can find, is to be empowered and inspired in working towards *tikkun olam* and bringing wholeness to this broken world.

To be part of a congregation that chooses religious independence is to finally feel at home. I find religious boxes to be confining and limiting. Coming from one of the more traditional Reform congregations in Canada, a nation where religion is often more traditional than south of its border, I still found myself to be more traditional than my home Reform community and yet more progressive than the local Conservative shuls. For so long have I been seeking a place that practices Judaism on its own terms, deeply engaging tradition while negotiating with the realities and needs of today's world. For so long have I been seeking a community who rather than self-defining according to

the parameters of a national body, is audacious enough to make its own communal decisions, grounded in tradition and yet soaring in all possible directions.

To be part of a congregation in a region with such a critical mass of Jews is to be blessed with opportunity and capability to do truly remarkable work, in education, arts, ritual, culture, Israel, and *tikkun olam*. In Livingston, in Essex County, and in Greater MetroWest, we have the capacity to set the standard for dynamic Jewish living and lead our people into the decades ahead. And we will.

It is for these reasons that I felt drawn to this community, and at just a few months in, these reasons still hold true. Since arriving though, I've learned about something else that to me is far more essential to what and who Temple B'nai Abraham really is.

What I've learned about B'nai Abraham is that this community— that you—are all friendly, kind and passionate people looking to connect. At my on-site interview, the warmth and exuberance were palpable along with a refreshing openness and candor. Community members jumped right into sharing with me their passions, joys, concerns, and desires. On my first official day, I walked in to find the Temple B'nai Abraham staff doing everything they could to make sure my office was ready for me, complete with a potted plant and welcoming balloons, which my children promptly appropriated. Since then, I encountered collaborative and excited colleagues in the incredible and indomitable staff team here. I've felt supported in all areas of my work by Rabbi Kulwin.

I've received a beautiful welcome, with orchids, from Irene Friedman. I've been welcomed in friendship by the Prinz family. And, I've been blessed by a flood of outreach from B'nai Abraham community members looking to establish a relationship through phone calls, office visits, meals, and parties. I'm sure that by now there must be at least a couple hundred relationships established, and I'm very much looking forward to the months ahead as we continue in getting to know each other. What I've learned these past few months is that B'nai Abraham's true blessing is its community. And I believe that you all see that too. When people tell me what they love about this synagogue, the first thing they say, before its incredible history, before its beautiful services, before anything else, is that this is their extended family. People are here because they're passionate about the community members of present and the generations past. People are here because they feel that they're part of something larger, that they're cared for, and that they matter. They're here because they feel like they're part of the Temple B'nai Abraham family. Miriam, Nava, Judah, and I, we feel it too.

Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time for new beginnings. We reflect on what has been before and we look forward with hope. We mark *briyat ha'olam*— the ultimate point of hope, when God, from nothing, brought forth light and the universe. More simply, we celebrate the world's birthday. [pause] Rosh Hashanah however is also about recognizing that every moment, for each one of us, *can* be a new beginning, a new point in Creation, and a new chance at life. And to reach this new beginning, there's something that we must recognize.

In today's Torah reading, it's not the story of Creation that gets read, it's the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, of Isaac and Ishmael.

Though there is much in this story to discuss, what's important, for our purposes today, is what happens *after* Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the desert wilderness around Beer Sheva with nothing more than some bread and a skin of water. In heart-wrenching language the Torah tells us that “when the water was gone from the skin, [Hagar] left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.”

But then, the Torah tells us, God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar and said, “*Ma L'cha?* What is troubling you? Fear not, as God will look after you and your boy, and I will even make a great nation from him.” And suddenly, a well flowing with life-giving water appears before her eyes.

It is not only our protagonist, Abraham, and his line, for whom God cares and for whom God acts. Before saving Isaac in the next chapter, God intercedes on Ishmael's behalf— on behalf of a non-Jewish man, who will be the progenitor of another religion. In having God miraculously intervene for two half-brothers who the Torah knows will represent two very separate peoples, the Torah is essentially telling us that God cares

for, and looks after, all human beings.

This is the significance that we are meant to recognize every Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah is Judaism's way of telling us that each one of us matters. We go from the macro of the creation of the entire world to the micro of God looking after two specific and different human beings. Our liturgy on this sacred day reflects this important principle. Over and over again, we hear of our divine parent and ruler who watches over us as a shepherd tends his flock, and we are held to account for how we have and have not acted this past year. Not because we're Jews, not because we've been dedicated to God's work in this world for generations, but simply because we are God's children, and God cares for us individually. This day is about each one of us—our very existence, the privilege of being alive, and how every life in this universe is sacred.

If we indeed recognize, in everyone we meet, that sacred quality—when we recognize another person's humanity, when we truly connect with them, according to the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber—in that specific moment, God comes into the world. In his seminal work *I and Thou*, Buber speaks of two kinds of relationships: the I-It (spelled I-hyphen-It), and the I-Thou (also with that hyphen in between the I and Thou).

I-It is impersonal, where we make use of another person to achieve a goal. When we ask a spouse if they've seen our keys, or an usher to tell us where there are three open

seats together, it's I-It. I-Thou, however, is a very different experience. It is a deep, and intimate connection, the kind where we may not even realize how close we have come to another person until after that encounter has ended. It is when we ask that usher, who we haven't seen in several weeks, how they're doing, and actually care to hear the answer. It's when we engage in conversation, or study in partnership, or simply sit beside each other relishing the company of community. For Buber, when we have that I-Thou encounter, God comes into the world. God is, in the relationship, the hyphen—the real and deep connection with another. And this means that the more we recognize each other as human beings who each matter in their own right, the more God comes into the world.

In what I've experienced here at Temple B'nai Abraham, it is apparent to me that God is very much present in this sacred family. In our services, our social functions, our B'nai Mitzvah, our funerals and shivas, even our officer and board meetings— when we are truly present with each other, God is here.

I want to challenge each one of us in this room today, to not only maintain this sense of divine connection, but to improve upon it. I challenge us to continue to work to bring everyone into this extended family, and to double down in these efforts. This means that when we come to Temple, we look out for others, and introduce and reintroduce ourselves, we find common ground, and we share a piece of who we are. It means that when we haven't seen a person in awhile, we call to check in on them. It means that we work to anticipate the needs of those around us, and that we show up when we'll be

needed to offer comfort and care. It means that when someone hurts or offends us, we open ourselves up to t'shuvah and forgiveness. It means being vulnerable, and honest with each other. And this is really hard to achieve, as we're often tired, seeking comfort for ourselves, and just looking for the familiarity of friends with whom we are close. But, if we're going to continue to be that community worth coming to, a community overflowing in holiness and abundant in connection, we must always persist in reaching out and making those I-Thou moments happen.

And while we're doing it here, let us take it a step further. If every human being, regardless of whether they're part of our tribe or community is a person who matters to God, then he or she should matter to us too. Our human and Jewish obligations are upon us whether we're here or outside this hallowed space. What happens in here is meant to push us to action everywhere else. That is why, after all, a sanctuary is required to have windows— so that we will never forget the world in which we find ourselves and to which we are deeply tied. If we are obliged to truly experience the humanity of all those in our Temple community, all the more so must we work to notice and connect with everyone else we might encounter, be they colleagues at work, parents and kids at school, people who live a few doors down with whom we've not yet actually spoken, or the people with whom our relationship is almost always transactional—store clerks, gas station attendants, or even telemarketers, for example. Each of these human beings matter to God, and so, too, must they matter to us.

And, here's the beauty of all this. If we embrace relating to and connecting with as many people as possible, the rest of what makes this community special will thrive and stand firm. In connecting deeply with everyone coming through our doors, our community will continue to succeed into the years ahead. In connecting deeply with those in the Jewish community beyond our doors, the sense of *yachdut*—of togetherness—will resonate and reverberate and keep MetroWest as a desirable Jewish destination. In connecting deeply with human beings beyond our community, we will feel compelled, from our *kishkes*, to help others in need.

With the strength of all these meaningful relationships, we will have the capacity to do whatever it is that will need doing in our obligations as community members, as Jews, and as human beings. And with all these meaningful relationships, we will truly embrace what it means to be part of Temple B'nai Abraham.

These past three months my family and I have experienced the gift of your friendship and trust, and for this, we are so very grateful. I have experienced first- and second-hand this gift that so many of you share, that gift—this essence, these relationships—that makes Temple B'nai Abraham an extended family.

This Rosh Hashanah, let us all reflect on these gifts, and how we've benefited from them. Let us think about what we need to do to ensure that our extended B'nai Abraham family remains strong, and can stretch its reach outwards to all in need. What is it that we need to do to build, nourish, and grow these sacred relationships? Each one of us matters, each one of us is needed to continue the work of those who came before us,

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and each one of us has the potential to make an enormous impact for each other, for this community, and for this world.

May we always remember how blessed we are. May we always be cognizant of those in need of that by which we are blessed. May we always know that individually and together, we have a capacity limited only by our imaginations to be there for all in need, and may we always recognize that each one of us can be that difference for the other.

Shana tova u'm'tukah, a good and sweet new year to each one of us, and to all of us.