

High Holy Days 5768

“What If?”

Rabbi David Englander

Boker tov, good morning and Shanah tovah. These are my ninth high holy days here at B'nai Torah. Every other year – each odd year on the English calendar, and each even one on the Hebrew calendar I have the opportunity to share a Rosh Hashanah morning with you and I always look forward to the opportunity. I hope the feeling is mutual.

A friend, teacher, and colleague tells the story of what he does when he is called on to consult with synagogues that are worried about their inability to attract new members. He calls the group together and says he has an announcement – there is a new synagogue opening around the block, and they are going to be good at everything that your synagogue is not good at. The assignment is simple – “discuss”. Synagogue leadership quickly develops a list of what could be done better, and only after they have that list can they figure out what is feasible, especially in light of the perceived offerings of their new, albeit made up, competition.

Of course it would be much better if every house of worship, every Jewish organization, knew how to be the very best version of itself and then put the best possible practices into place to achieve that reality. One of the things that makes this an incredibly difficult thing to do, especially for synagogues, is that our clientele – members of the tribe, if you will – have extremely diverse needs and even expectations. If this next paragraph from a recent book by rings true to you, you are by no means alone, and I have something to say to you this morning:

Dr. Ron Wolfson, in his new book *The Spirituality of Welcoming*, describes a ‘limited liability synagogue’ like this: “There is a tacit understanding between the institution and the members. For the members, it goes something like this: ‘We pay you a fee [dues] for services rendered. We expect a religious school for our children, a rabbi on call when we need her or him, and seats for the High Holy Days. Other than that, we expect you to offer programs that may or may not attract our attendance, because, after all, we are very, very busy people and synagogue is not exactly our top priority. We like the fact that you are there when we need you, but don’t expect or exact too much more of a commitment from us.’”

And he goes on to describe the so-called ‘new synagogue’, probably the one that will be conceived of and built down the street in our hypothetical challenge, and if this is the model of synagogue you are looking to be a part of then I have something to say to you as well: Again, Ron Wolfson, on behalf of the excellent Synagogue 3000 initiative to re-imagine synagogues and synagogue-life: “The new synagogue we envision is a spiritual center for all those who set foot inside it. It is a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community, where relationships are paramount, where worship is engaging, where everyone is learning, where repair of the world is a moral imperative, where healing is offered, where personal and institutional transformation are embraced.”

And this is what I have to say to you, whether you are in the so-called limited liability camp or the so-called new synagogue camp, and that is: welcome. Or welcome back. I'm so glad you are here. We – and by we I mean anyone within the professional or lay leadership structure of our synagogue – would be crazy to imply a criticism of anyone who is with us three days a year and who call on us in the trying or happy times in your lives. We would be equally crazy not to express gratitude to you and to those who utilize our building, staff, programs, and people of our congregation – and who contribute in so many ways – to our physical, spiritual, and communal growth. As the prophet Isaiah declares – shalom, shalom, la-rachok v'lakarov – peace and greetings to those near and far, to those who feel at home and to those who feel they are observing today from a great distance, a distance that is not measured by what row you are sitting in.

I view my spiritual home as a place that has achieved great things and which can strive to accomplish so much more. The day we stop asking “what if” as a community is the day we stop growing. This morning I wanted to pose the same question about three different but really important entities – the synagogue, the state of Israel, and you. There are times when ‘what if’ is a very damaging question. When we look back on things that have already happened and ask ‘what if’ I had done or not done something that seems, in retrospect, to have led to an undesired outcome, we do little else than kick ourselves, bruise ourselves, sometimes entering into a never-ending loop of second guessing, all the while changing nothing and learning nothing. My ‘what if’ question is different – I’m asking the question while there is time to do something, while there is time to avoid an outcome that no one would want to experience. So let’s begin with our wonderful B’nai Torah.

What if B’nai Torah wasn’t here? What would be different or missing? I have to share a story about a meeting of the top management team of the synagogue, discussing rising property insurance rates, an issue with which most of you are quite familiar. Rates are skyrocketing and opinions were being sought as to what strategy to employ to face this new budgetary reality. Around the table of these dedicated, selfless volunteers the discussion went. Many interesting ideas were offered. But do you know what? Not one person suggested that we cancel insurance for damage to the property. I thought this was grand. We could have saved oodles of money, piles of it really, and taken our chances – and if the building got knocked down in a storm, we could just walk away. And if it didn’t – budgets would be a bit less tight.

But no one offered that suggestion – the continued presence of B’nai Torah, come what may out of the nether regions of the tropics or the coast of Africa or wherever it is that hurricanes come from – was deemed absolutely vital. Everyone around that table, and they are your elected representatives, and they work diligently on behalf of all of us and deserve to be lauded and applauded for all of their efforts, they all felt that it would not be a good thing if B’nai Torah was not here. I agree with them. You clearly agree as well, and I’m glad you do. But for a moment, because it is a good exercise and because we have to use these moments to appreciate deeply what we have even as we commit to fulfilling our responsibility, each in our own way, to strengthening and thinking of the future and how it will be even brighter than the present, reflect for a moment – what if

you were coming south on Military Trail, hung a right onto SW 18th street, went through the light at Howard's Market, and on your right you saw...nothing. If you feel a twinge of emptiness, regret at what might have been, sadness about something that once was but now is no more, that's what I would feel as well. As long as we think that our lives, community, relationships with each other and with God are better because of our shared mission here, and as long as we are willing to communicate to others that we are at home here just about as much as we are at home in our own houses, we will be fine.

But we rarely settle for fine in other parts of our lives which is why we have to continue to ask ourselves what we haven't yet done as well as that imaginary synagogue opening around the corner. We have to do all we can to continue our work to build a synagogue that will focus on the needs of a Jewish community that is more diverse than at any time in Jewish history. We have to be an attractive place for those who are looking to make a three day a year reservation, we have to do a better job of vying for the attention of those who are willing to do more, and we have to extend ourselves to help maintain the energy and interest of those volunteers who already are doing more. We have to continually find ways to lower the barriers that prevent younger people from considering membership, just as we have to increase the number of entry points for them into our Jewish community. Boca Raton will never be a young community but there will always be young people here. No significant, present-day Jewish community has yet figured out how to attract more than a veritable trickle of its youngest adult Jewish members. We can be part of the effort to reverse that trend if we are willing to ask and then answer the right "what if" questions.

What I asked you about B'nai Torah I would like to now ask you about Israel, and this is a more disturbing scenario. It was imagined recently by a book on my summer reading list, Michael Chabon's excellent *The Yiddish Policeman's Union*. It's a very good detective story, but unlike your run-of-the-mill not written by a Pulitzer Prize winning author detective-story this one has a unique setting. Chabon invented the mythical Sitka District. The town of Sitka is real, you can find it on your handy map of Alaska. He imagined what the world would be like if Israel's War of Independence in 1948 had failed, the Jews had been routed instead of victorious, and an ambivalent United States government had been pushed by a few powerful people to create a temporary asylum for this persecuted people. Finding the least hospitable, most-out-of-the-way place for its implementation, Congress settled on dreary Sitka. But the lease on Sitka would be only 60 years in duration, so the book, set in the present day, contains an approaching expiration date and the angst that accompanies this pending reality pervades the novel.

It sounds far-fetched, but probably isn't to those who remember – or who have heard first-hand from those who remember – the far-from-predictable outcome of Israel's first stern military test in 1948, let alone those who recall well a world without a sovereign Jewish state. I was only 10 years old when Israel went into Lebanon the first time to secure its northern border, and, ahem, two when Israel was attacked in 1973. I have no living memory of a war that threatened Israel's existence. Sadaam's scuds didn't do that, and at the moment only Iran's worrisome rhetoric and even more worrisome activity in the nuclear realm come close to forcing me to grapple with the fearful possibility of a

world without Israel. My generation – and any that has grown up with Israel as a blessed reality – hasn't spent much time mulling over this heartbreaking proposition.

But many have, and the sentiment gained a foothold in the mainstream media in an op-ed piece in the Washington post last July by regular contributor Richard Cohen. It is a credit to those who are passionate about the place of Israel on the world stage that this foothold didn't become a firestorm. I quote from the piece: (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/17/AR2006071701154.html>)

“The greatest mistake Israel could make at the moment is to forget that Israel itself is a mistake. It is an honest mistake, a well-intentioned mistake, a mistake for which no one is culpable, but the idea of creating a nation of European Jews in an area of Arab Muslims (and some Christians) has produced a century of warfare and terrorism.” And if you think well, that was last July, and it didn't catch on, then be sure not to buy the new book whose authors thank goodness are having a difficult time finding mainstream audiences to speak to. The book is called “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” and (as a reputable reviewer reports) it describes Israel as a virtual rogue state, empowered by American wealth and might, that blocks peace at every turn, threatens its cowering neighbors with impunity, crushes the national aspirations of the Palestinians and, whenever the opportunity arises, bites the hand that feeds it. In sum, it argues: “Now that the cold war is over, Israel has become a strategic liability for the United States.”

You, of all people, don't need a “be pro-Israel” sermon on the holidays. We do need a reminder that one theme of these days of reflection is to gain, maintain, or improve our perspective, and another what if question can help us do that. What if, as so many in the world think and some are willing to say, what if Israel was not here? There is only one remotely positive thing that I can think of that would come out of this extremely far-fetched and thankfully unlikely scenario. And that would be the unity amongst all but the Jews living on the outermost fringes of our people who would be dreaming about, or better, working toward, Israel as a reality. Imagine how passionate support for a state of Israel in its ancient borders could be, what we would give to make it happen, how we would pray for it to come about in our lifetime. Oh how we would rally, organize, donate, even relocate to help make it real. Let's let some of that imagined passion fuel our real world commitments to our beloved state of Israel in the coming year.

The last what if question is the one that stares back at us starkly on days set aside for reflection on the past and future. And that what if is a question each of us is called on to ask ourselves as we pass before God, as the un'taneh tokef prayer phrases it, 'kiv'nei maron' – like sheep before their shepherd. And that is: What if we were faced with the very reality we are here to pray will not come about, one that we wish on no one, one against which we would protect ourselves and those we love at any cost if given the opportunity. What if a loved one were suddenly not here? What would be left behind, what would be remembered, what regrets would linger?

I want to reflect, for a moment and with some trepidation, on a few of the surprising after-effects of a most significant and wrenching disappearance – the loss of a special

person in the prime of her life. This loss was a real one, and the fact that it took place in my family makes this a personal reflection. There is a fine line between sharing such a reflection and crossing the guarded line between what is private and what should be shared in this public realm, but I feel that I have to talk about what is most on my mind if I hope that you will share with me what is most on yours, no matter how tough things get. And so, these three answers to the question of ‘what if someone special to you wasn’t here’ are based on the waking nightmare of the still very recent loss of my wife’s sister, a loss that many of you were touched by in some way, a loss for which your outpouring of sympathy and support is something that my family will never forget.

The first: there is a common sermon theme especially around this time of year that calls on us to reunite with those from whom we have become distanced. Children who have gone their separate ways, parents who allowed an unwelcome decision to spiral into disengagement, and, perhaps most commonly, a brother or sister we have written off, or by whom we have been written off. I wonder if these well-intentioned messages work – I have my doubts. Maybe if someone is ready to hear such a sermon then hearing it in a sacred forum could prompt them to act. But when tragic loss occurs, and you witness its aftermath, and you are confronted with images of those experiencing the searing pain of the loss of a sister, a daughter, a niece – that brings to mind your own brother, sister, son, daughter, cousin, whatever – and people pick up the phone.

I don’t know if many relationships were mended by those who chose to reach out. But the ball was put back into the estranged ones court – it is better to be the one who has reached out – even again and again - than the one who has turned away from the sincere overture. The same is true for each of us and God – let God decide to forgive us after we plead our case sincerely, after we dig deep down and commit to doing a bit better. Let’s put the ball in God’s court, and we can enter our year with full confidence that we have done what is in our power to set things straight. Even in sadness my wife’s family will be forever grateful that they were as close as they could have been with each other, and their sadness is not about regret for what was, but instead for what might yet have been. They have no unnecessary regret for words left unsaid or relationships left unnourished. And that is a blessing they and I wish for all of you.

The second unexpected part of the aftermath of this awful loss is simple to state and difficult to fully describe. And that is the affirming and tangibly real effect of knowing that people are thinking about you, that people are praying for you. I’ve exited many hospital rooms by telling the patient I’m visiting that many people are thinking about you and praying for you. I say it now with a great deal more sincerity.

The last unexpected answer to the question of this particular “what if” question is something, like author Robert Fulghum might have said, is an idea we learn in Kindergarten but can’t truly own until its message is hammered home in a painful moment of clarity. Erase the word “fair” from your vocabulary – I did. For something to be fair it has to be within describable boundaries, like a fair ball in a game of baseball. It has to be somewhat intelligible, like a fair point made in a debate. It has to be at a level of intensity that stops short of overloading our spiritual and emotional circuitry. It may

seem counterintuitive, but finally accepting a lack of fairness in life and in death has been liberating. I hold everything important to me in my life as a temporary, and thus very precious, gift. If we own something important and it is taken away there is pain and there is anger because what we lost was ours, no one else had a right to claim it as theirs. But if we are given a beautiful gift and we treasure it and enjoy it and it is taken away, make no mistake – there is great pain, but it is great pain mixed with gratitude for having been entrusted with a temporary, valuable jewel. I can't expect any blessing to be a permanent part of my journey through the world but I can tap deep wells of gratitude for what is today fleetingly, blessedly, mine.

This year, this moment, we can say thank God even though we have experienced illness and loss, depleted energy, curtailed optimism, dulled capacities, disappointments, even failure. We can say thank God in whatever language we wish, using whatever words we can articulate in our mouths and hearts, because we have experienced the love of family, the giggle of a baby, the look of wonder on a child's face, an optimistic check-up, an unusually great day, a professional success, a new or different perspective on an important person, place or idea. We can say thank God We can say thank God because there is Israel, there is our B'nai Torah, and right at this moment there is you. The question of 'what if' is transformed into the question of 'how can?' How can we best live in response to and in appreciation of what is, and in anticipation of what might yet be? How we answer that question defines us. May we answer the call with our voices, with our actions, and with compassion, hope, courage, and faith.

Shanah tovah.