

**“...And the Youth Shall See Visions”**

*Rosh Hashanah ~ 5784*

*Childhood was for fantasies, for nursery rhymes and toys.  
The world was much too busy to understand small girls and boys.  
As I grew up, I came to learn that life was not a game,  
That heroes were just people that we called another name.*

Last year I stood on this bimah and talked to you about our kids. I talked about how hard the pandemic years were on them, about my work with our youth group, Sinaites, and how that work has inspired and continues to inspire me. Ultimately, I delivered those young folks a message of comfort and congratulations. Scars of the frustration of pandemic years spent indoors will live with many of our young people forever, but, thank God, scars and all, they made it to the other side and could be with their people again. I thought it was important that they hear that we were proud of them, and that I could, to whatever degree, inspire them and their families to dive back in head-first. “In a sense,” I said, “our bringing up conscientious, caring, Torah-driven young people is the greatest act of repairing the brokenness of the world that we can do as a Jewish community.”

I meant those words then, and they ring even more true now. That sermon was impactful. Families came to me and told me that they were considering allowing their kids’ participation in our religious school to lapse but after hearing my words opted instead to re-enroll. The knowledge that this happened for even one family makes that sermon an absolute victory. Moreover, we had a wonderful, decidedly non-virtual year in our Sinaites youth group, confirmed several more Sinai teens, celebrated countless b’nei

mitzvah, and brought many of those same young people around our community to volunteer their time to repair the world on various occasions.

5783, though, was an **emerging** year. It was a year for us to come back. To test the truth that we are better as a community when we come together in person. It is my strong suspicion that we came out of the experience of this past year hungry for more, and Temple Sinai is preparing for that reality. If 5783 was an **emerging** year, 5784 has the potential to be a **thriving** year. AND, for all that promise, it will only be that kind of year for our community if we actively make the right choices about how we spend our time in community. 10,000 square feet of new space both indoors and outside won't do us much good if those spaces aren't being filled with members of our community hungry to reconnect with each other and deepen their own authentic connection to Judaism. What I won't do, however, is recap my Yom Kippur sermon from last year and just tell you all to come to Temple again as sort of a blanket statement. This year, again, I'm talking about, and to, our kids.

*Now I'm grown, the years have passed, I've come to understand:  
There are choices to be made and my life's at my command.  
I cannot have a future 'til I embrace my past.  
I promise to pursue the challenge, time is going fast.*

Raise your hand if you grew up in any way affiliated with a Jewish Youth Group of some stripe or another. What about any faith-connected youth group or affinity group among your peers as a young person—Jewish or otherwise? Keep them up and add your own if you had a relationship with some kind of Jewish summer camp. Keep them up and add your own if you visited or perhaps frequented a Jewish Student Union or Hillel

at your University. Finally, let's add to this chorus any and all hands of those who continued their Jewish education after their b'nei mitzvah, perhaps toward Confirmation or some similar program. Look around the room at the sheer number of hands. This is not an accident! We know from studies and from our own experiences that when adults invest in our identities as young people, we grow up to lead more connected lives. The Jewish community of today is vibrant, engaged and diverse in large part due to the investment of the grown-ups that brought us up.

I am living proof of this. As a kid my parents got me involved, either through my Temple, JCC or Summer camp, in three different Jewish Youth Groups—USY, BBYO and NFTY. All of these experiences, in addition to the shaping and strengthening of my Jewish identity, gifted me with lifelong friendships and indelible memories. I even credit my marriage to them. These experiences in middle and high school followed me into college and beyond. I share these things with you not to brag about my undeniably Jewishly-privileged youth, but to illustrate the remarkable impact of the Jewish community's loci of informal education. While the variety of my experiences might be rare, the impact of each of them has been repeated in so many of us over and over again. And all we need do to prove it is look around one more time at all those hands that went up. (Put them up again really quick!)

The experience of our young people in Jewish life should matter to us all, even those of us who do not have children or whose children have long since grown up. This is, undeniably, a transitional era of American Judaism. Look across the room at the young

faces present, and it is my sincere hope that you will be looking at the faces of the people that make 21st Century Jewish life go! Not just future clergy, which will be represented as the tiniest sliver on the pie chart, but future lay leaders and community members! The folks you see when you come to Temple, or a program at your JCC.

But this hope is just that: **hope**. L'dor vador, the passing of Jewish life from generation to generation, doesn't just happen automatically. We have to invest in the future.

*Today's the day I take my stand, the future's mine to hold.  
Commitments that I make today are dreams from days of old.  
I have to make the way for generations' come and go.  
I have to teach them what I've learned so they will come to know.*

Just this past May, a recent Temple Sinai confirmation student, Rebecca Waldman, published a powerful piece for her school newspaper entitled: "Learning to Follow Judaism Out of Love, Not Fear." In it, she wrote about her learning in Confirmation class that opened the door to new possibilities of belief and of an embracing faithfulness within Judaism. She concluded the piece, saying: "I won't pretend that my faith in God is perfect. I still worry about those 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and every so often, I still think that I have chosen to believe in the wrong profile of God. But now, my faith is no longer based on guilt. Rather, it's based on a genuine belief in a higher power. This year I will again attend Rosh Hashanah services, but this time purely out of love, not fear. I am happy to say that I am Jewish, not because I have to be, but because I want to be." Post-b-mitzvah Jewish experiences, not only formal educational experiences like Confirmation but also youth groups, camps and college campuses, have

this kind of remarkable power. They transform Judaism in the minds of our youth from [ something into which they are being forced ] to [ something into which they want to invest their spiritual capital. ]

If you were raised Jewish and are an engaged Jewish adult, it's likely because when you were a kid someone, likely many someones, taught you the power and meaning of your identity. You, the adults in the room, have the power to open those same doors for our kids. If you have children, I urge you to enroll them in these types of Jewish formal and informal experiences after b'nei mitzvah.

Even if you don't have kids, or kids this age, you can help us make the most of this moment for the sake of American Judaism's next generation! This is a truly exciting time. NFTY was hit hard by the pandemic, but is surging back and NFTY-MAR (or Mid-Atlantic Region), our region made up of teens from DC, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina, has an incredible programming year ahead of it, including the first DC-based regional Kallah in years this coming April! I'll be making college visits to Sinai-Alumni-heavy campuses in the Springtime! An incredible year of learning in Noar and Confirmation awaits us! But if we're going to seize this moment for the betterment of our kids' lives, and ultimately for all our benefit, then we need your help.

You can help us in a couple of key ways:

1. Over the years we have depleted our youth scholarship funds, we are looking for support to restore those funds because we know the positive impact these experiences

have on our kids. Talk to me after the holidays about how your generosity can help more Temple Sinai teens attend summer camp and youth group gatherings.

2. In the Spring, I will be facilitating an elective in our Noar Middle School program during which our students will learn from members of their Temple community about possible pathways in life. We'll put together panels of professionals that will show our 7th and 8th graders how their Jewish identities and values show up in their work. Reach out to me or Cantor Robbins if you might be interested!
3. There is a QR code you can scan on your way out today that will bring you to three different links.
  - A. The first is a link to a spreadsheet where you can sign up to get connected about Sinaites goings-on. Leave us your contact info, and we'll make sure you get informed about all upcoming programs and events!
  - B. The second is a link to the Sinaites Cabinet application form. This is a chance for teens to plug into their youth group and help direct it toward a bright future without taking on the full responsibility of being on the youth group board. Applications are open and rolling—sign up!
  - C. That NFTY convention in April will require many of our Temple families to volunteer as host homes for the weekend. If you might want to be a host family, this link will bring you to a quick form to declare your interest. PLEASE consider doing so—you don't need to have a teen of your own to do this!

In the end, it was Jewish tradition, given voice through the brilliant lyrics of Debbie Friedman, who got it right decades ago, when she wrote:

***And the old shall dream dreams  
And the youth shall see visions  
And our hope shall rise up to the sky  
We must live for today  
We must build for tomorrow  
Give us time, give us strength, give us life***

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