

RH 2008/5769      You Can Always Get What You Want      Rabbi Peter S. Levi

Ah, here we are again. Why do we come back? What do we expect from our High Holy Day observance? Do we really want something? Something from our Judaism? Something from God? It reminds me of that old Jewish joke about the poor old Jew walking in the forest who feels close enough to God to ask:

“God, what is a million years to you?”

God replies: “My son, a million years to you is like a second to me.”

The man asks: “God, what is a million dollars to you?”

God replies: “My son, a million dollars to you is like a penny to me.”

The man asks: “So God, can I have a million dollars?”

God replies: “In a second.”

What do we really want? We may think it is money, things, material comfort...just enough stuff so I don't have to worry....just enough so I can fit in with everyone else. And God tells us: no, that is not it. You think you want a thing, something tangible, something you can wrap your hands around. But that is not what it is all about. Because, God says, if I grant you your wish, you be gone. “I got my million bucks. Thanks God. See ya...I got my BMW. Thanks. See ya.” So God says: “I'm not going to grant it, instead you get to hang out with Me *for the next million years*...so get comfortable and let's talk.”

Yeah, parents can be like that too...instead of giving us what we want they want to talk to us, tells us their opinions. And we as parents do the same to our children. All we want is to be close with them and that means talking. Really talking.

On Yom Kippur I will take up what God wants from us. Today I would like to address the essence of what we want from God. You know the answer. You have heard it dozens of times. We want to lead lives that matter; we want to be loved.

No one on their death bed ever said “I wish I had spent more time at work.” What? So we can earn more money, buy more stuff, impress more people with our accomplishments?! The sad reality is that many regret they did not spend more time with their families and friends, reading stories and tucking kids in bed, having long leisurely meals together, playing catch or cards, getting out together on the courts or fields, or just having unstructured time at home. What we really want in life is to spend time with the community of people who know us and who we know.

What we want is not to be lonely, turned out, alone, cold, frightened...exiled from home, from each other, from God. We want to be home, at home with each other, at home with God.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Mordechai Gafni taught about his longing to be home. He lives in Northern Israel, writes books and articles, studies, and travels around

the Jewish world teaching. On one of his road trips, he found himself in Denver in a hotel room with a long bed, a television, and a lot of towels, and, of course, a Gideon Bible. His suitcase with all his clothes and books missed the connecting flight so there he was...in a hotel thousands of miles from home, and without his loved ones or books. He felt lost and empty. So he reached in the drawer next to the bed and pulled out the only book in the room, the Gideon Bible. In the front he was surprised to see a detailed index of how to use the bible. If depressed, read Psalm 19. If drunk, read Psalm 38. If you are feeling lonely, read Psalm 23. He was feeling lonely so read it. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.....Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil for You are with me...” He read it slowly and carefully and when done, he still felt lonely. As he was closing the book, he noticed a note scrawled on the bottom of the page: “If you are still lonely, call Lola.” After recovering from laughter, he realized that after years of studying, teaching, and thinking....it all fell into place. What we really want and need in life is to be connected.

And that is the only mission of a synagogue community. Yes, I continue to tell you the synagogue is a place for *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *Gemilut Chasidim*, a place for learning, worship, holy day celebration, and deeds of loving-kindness. But in truth, can you learn, pray and do social service on your own. In fact, earlier this month the Union for Reform Judaism came out with the most comprehensive study ever done on why people join, stay and leave their synagogues.<sup>1</sup> The most surprising result was that the #1 response to why people leave their synagogues was that they didn’t need a community to be Jewish. So what do we need a synagogue community for?

Let me address that by first telling you why I love Nordstrom department store. They got everything you need there for kids and adults including the latest fashions and the comfortable standbys—pants, shirts, shorts, suits, socks, underwear, watches, wallets, umbrellas, and the best shoe department around, and even a café. Very convenient. The people who work there are very helpful, courteous, and nicely dressed. The music is wonderful. The food is quite good. And you can return anything. I love Nordstrom. You might even say I am of the community of Nordstrom shoppers.

Funny how that term “community” is thrown around a lot these days, especially about the “financial community”, but we also have community associations, the South Orange County community, the Jewish Community....I am part of communities where I don’t even know most of the people and they certainly don’t know me. We call Temple Beth El a community, but what does that really mean.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://urj.org/\\_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item\\_id=21842&destination=ShowItem](http://urj.org/_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item_id=21842&destination=ShowItem)

For many folks, the synagogue is a place where we pay fees for services rendered. Rabbi Larry Hoffman calls this a “limited-liability” community.<sup>2</sup> For our dues we expect in return: meaningful prayer services, religious school for our kids, seats for High Holy Days, maybe class or lecture for the adults, a rabbi on call in case I need one in the event of a birth, Bar or Bat Mitzvah, wedding, or God forbid, illness or death, also I expect offered attractive programs we may or may not come to because, after all, we are very very busy people.

Is that what you are thinking...a list of programs and services there for you, waiting and ready for when you need them? If that is the case, we are no different than Nordstrom department store. At Nordstrom, each person in one their own consumerist mission to acquire what they need for their journey. While I love buying shoes there, I am not particularly interested in guy sitting next to me buying shoes. How is day has been, his family concerns are not relevant to me. I am there to get *me* a great pair of shoes...and if they aren't so great, I can return them and get *my* money back.

The bottom line is a community is not a list of programs and services, but a place where relationships are primary. It is easy to make activities for every age group. It is a challenge to be a home of spiritual significance in the lives of community members. Isn't that what we all want: to know we make a difference, to have a place where we are known and know others.

And I don't mean with your clergy. Heaven help us if more than the small percentage of you actually want to engage the professional staff on a more intensive basis...because frankly we don't have time. Our community has over 2000 individuals associated with it. With only two rabbis, we would have to meet with more than 5 people every conceivable working day just to meet with each person once a year. And if you expected us to do all our other work, it would take at least 3 years to meet with everyone once. And getting together once every 3 years does not make for a very meaningful relationship.

Nordstrom is a place where you only need to know the salespeople and you get your great pair of shoes and you are gone. It is not a community. Temple Beth El is a community...but only if you invest the time and effort to get to know *each other*. Our job is to help make that happen for you.

Now, the regulars find their way to a more committed relationship with synagogue, but most do not. Dr. Ron Wolfson observes that “the failure to engage the adults in a serious relationship with the congregation is the most serious indictment of the synagogue of the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup> Why do so many people

---

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction to *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community* by Dr. Ron Wolfson. This book is insightful and helped form many of the ideas of this sermon.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 144

move through the synagogue for a period of time and then move on...because we have failed to establish a connection between individual congregants and the congregation that is so valuable and so meaningful that they couldn't ever imagine not being a part of their community.

Our challenge is never to reduce the community to a list of programs and services like a department store because there you don't care about the lives of the other shoppers, and once you get your shoes, you're gone. *Thanks for the bar mitzvah, see ya.*

If our synagogue is going to embrace deeper that we are a community *not of programs but of relationships*, then we need to open the doors wide and put out the welcome mat and have warm smiling people there on the inside to embrace you. We need to encourage our community members who are occasionally involved into a deep relationship with each other, with the community, with Judaism, and with God. And being connected, we will lead deeper, richer lives. Just like what God taught the old man: it is not about getting what you want but about entering into relationship.

A synagogue is a community where we offer comfort, meaning and purpose because *this ain't no Nordstrom*—this is a place where people care about you and you care about them. A *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community is a place where relationships are sacred and lasting.

We are good people. But we can be better. We don't need more, but we can be more. We are a great community, but we can be holier one.

Suggestions:

1. Get to know each other: invite each other over to your home for Shabbat, a meal, or just to get spend time together.
2. Hey, if you don't have lunch plans after services this morning, grab someone and go out to lunch now.
3. Come out this afternoon at 4 for tashlikh and be part of a party celebrating the birthday of the world...I promise cake and a meaningful communal experience.
4. Lastly...make a an effort to make this your community and begin by just wishing each other a *shanah tovah*. To help you on this journey, the ushers have baskets filled with cards. On each card is the name and phone number of a Beth El community member. Please take one on the way out, and just call them to wish *shanah tovah*, a good and sweet new year.

And may your year be filled with goodness, sweetness, and community where relationships are sacred and lasting.