

Vision for East End Temple
Yom Kippur 5770
East End Temple
Rabbi David Adelson

A few weeks ago, in the social hall after services, I introduced myself to a middle-aged woman I didn't recognize. Turns out, she was visiting from another city. She told me the name of her home synagogue. I told her I had heard many good things about it, and that it sounded like a wonderful place. Oh yes, she said, that place has changed my life.

When we consider what we want from Jewish community, from a synagogue, from East End Temple, that woman's assessment pretty much sums it up. We need to be a community that changes people's lives.

The first verses of this morning's Torah portion capture the call to become such a community. "You stand this day, all of you, before your Eternal God, the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every one in Israel, men, women and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops the wood to the one who draws the water." At EET, we are a wonderfully diverse community: young, middle-aged and older, married and single, with children and without children, a mixture of all professions and economic circumstances, interfaith couples and families, gay and straight, many Jews by choice and a mix of ethnic backgrounds. And what we have in common is that we are all here to "stand before your eternal God." What that means is that each of us is here because we are in search of something bigger than just ourselves. We define what we seek in different ways, whether as a search for local community, or for a broader sense of peoplehood, a search for values and structure in our lives, or for spiritual connection. I believe each of us, like our visitor a few weeks ago, on some level seeks the kind of experience that can change our lives.

I spoke on Rosh Hashana about how we might see the events in our lives not as reward or punishment, but rather as an opportunity to feel connected to deeper meaning, maybe even, to God. Today, I'd like to talk about how we can create a community that helps us experience that type of deeper connection. I am speaking about a vision for what synagogue community can be. I am talking about a vision for the future of East End Temple.

And for those of us here today who are not members of the Temple, well, its not too late to become one. Regardless, I hope that the search for meaningful community in our lives is a topic that will resonate with all of us.

Let's start by talking about what we need synagogues for in the first place. Before modern times, belonging to a synagogue was not a matter of individual choice, not part of an individual search for meaning. Today, we have many parts to ourselves: family life, friends, work, cultural experiences. Synagogue, with its ritual and eternal values, can be the place that helps us see and integrate the meaning in all those disparate parts of our lives. And in New York City, we spend a lot of time rushing past each other: on the

subway, at work and school, even at home. Temple can be the place where we stop to see how we are connected to each other, and in fact, connected to all people.

Now let's talk specifically about what we need East End Temple for. This is my tenth year serving here as rabbi. Maybe you find that as shocking as I do. This moment has prompted me to reflect on where we have come as a Temple community, and where we are going. In what ways are we truly a place that changes people's lives and how do we need to continue to grow to be that place?

Recently, four of the leading scholars on American Jewish life collaborated on a study of transformation in American synagogues. Their soon-to-be-published book is entitled "Sacred Strategies: Transforming Functional Synagogues into Visionary Congregations." In their assessment, so-called "functional synagogues" take care of the basics: they house regular services, religious schools, life cycle events. "Visionary congregations" do all of those things, but do much more, and in a very different way. Their activities are integrated, they are reflective and constantly changing in how they operate, they are innovative, and participatory. They have a mission to be a sacred community.

Where is East End Temple on the spectrum from functional to visionary? I'd put us right about in the middle. There are several areas in which we are well more than simply functional. Our services, led by the model we've developed with Synaplex, are growing more innovative, dramatic and engaging. Our education for kids is growing more family- and community-centered, often happening not in a classroom but in real-life activity. Our leadership grows ever more diverse and open to change.

But there are areas in which we have a long way to go. We need to move entirely beyond traditional religious school to a fully integrated system where children and all adults in the community learn together in an even more experiential, more relevant and engaging way. We need to get better at how we reach out to support one another when we are ill or otherwise struggling. We need to grow in our pursuit of social justice through community organizing, just to name a few.

And the single factor that will enable us to achieve all this change, and much more, is to grow more connected to one another as individuals. We need to know each other better, and be willing to care about one another. This goal is both a means to other ends, and an end in itself. For example, when we learn together in a meaningful, relevant way, we will come to know one another better. And when we know one another better, we can better decide how and what we want to learn in an even more relevant way. And the same thing works for prayer services, for supporting each other in illness and grief, for pursuing social justice, and every other area of community life.

The shift from functional to visionary reflects part of what we've learned from our community organizing. That is, we need to move from a fee-for-service model to a more relational model of congregation. In a fee-for-service model, people pay dues to a synagogue, and maybe make some donations, because they feel they are getting something for their money. When they are no longer getting what they were originally in

it for, they leave. In a relational model, we are a part of community because we care about the other people in it. We know what is going on in their lives, and they ours. We are all invested in the type of community we have, and we all demand relevance and high quality. And this shift includes not only how we program for learning, prayer, and social justice activity. It will revolutionize how we pay for what we do too. I can imagine a day when we no longer need blanket appeals for funding, like last night's Kol Nidre appeal, which we rely on today. Maybe we could even do away with dues entirely. That would come because each of us will know how our own lives have been changed here, and we will want to make sure that others, whom we have come to care about, can have the same experience. Then we all will naturally give to support what we love about being here. We'll all give to our capacity, and we will have more than enough to pay for what we need.

We are today on the verge of becoming a relational, visionary community. We are prepared in a way we have not been before, at least not in my ten years here. Our truly stellar new professional staff members, Cantor Shira Ginsburg and Director of Congregational Learning Sara Blumstein, have joined our beloved administrator Sharon Shemesh and, you know, the rabbi. Our lay leadership is ready, from the wise and tireless Karen Feuer, to several rising new leaders, to many long-term leaders all committed to working for change. But however skillful staff and lay leaders are, it will be our whole community that makes change happen. Our members will need to talk together, discover common interest and need, demand new programs be created, and help make them happen. We should be able to leap to a new scale of growth, both in the quality of how we operate, and in number of members. We are ready. All that is left is the work.

What will this vision of sacred community at EET look like? We'll be more integrated. Kids, their parents, and adults with no children, will learn together. They will study the eternal values of our people, and then act on those values together by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and fighting to maintain middle-class housing in New York City. It will mean praying together with uplifting, joyful music, and knowing what the people around us are praying about, because we know what is going on in their lives. It will mean remembering the time when others in our community supported us when we were ill, and then going to their house for a shiva, because we now have the opportunity to return what they provided us. Over sacred text, sacred singing, and yes, sacred bagels and coffee, we will share our stories about what matters most to us. We will be connected not by happenstance or proximity, but rather, by our common search for meaning and community. Then we will work together to make that community real. We will honestly say that Temple is the place in our lives where we are challenged, where we are comforted, where we act on what we believe, and where we grow.

We are going to start right now. We did so well studying together on Rosh HaShanah, I am going to ask us to continue getting to know one another right here. I'd like to ask each of us to find one person, just one, near us, who we don't know very well. I'll ask that each person take just two minutes each to share either something important to you about your Jewish identity (or participation in Jewish community, if you are not Jewish),

or something you hope to get out of your participation at East End Temple. I'll tell you when to switch. Then we'll come back together.

When will we achieve this visionary community, this relational community, this place that changes people's lives? A lot sooner than my next ten years at EET, I hope. On the high holidays, when we are all held to account, let us hold ourselves accountable. We have, for the first time in a very long time, the real chance to transform our community. Let us seize it. As we read today, "No, it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it."

Ken y'hi ratzon, may it be God's will.