

The Mishpacha Masterpiece – A Synagogue
Rabbi Zoë Klein – Yom Kippur 5767

An artist once taught me the difference
Between a good painting
And a masterpiece.
 On a napkin, using the waitress' pen,
 He drew the outline of a man,
 And said, "This represents a good painting."
Then, on another corner of the napkin,
He drew the same outline of a man,
 Except this time,
The line was broken.
He said, "This one represents a masterpiece.
The difference between the two,
Is that this one breathes."

The simple sketch,
Whose destiny was to be
Crumpled in a busboy's sloshing bin,
Stayed with me.
It changed how I looked at art,
But more importantly
It transformed how I looked at people,
The way the lines of our lives breathe,
How our boundaries blend and blur
In relationships,
How the difference between good living
And masterful living lay somehow
In the way we choose to
Draw our lines.

There was a church in northern California
Which recently wanted to expand its building,
People in the neighborhood were furious,
One by one they came before the court
And testified, "Sometimes on a Sunday,
When I'm enjoying a quiet afternoon by the pool,
I'm disturbed by the sound of people singing."
"Sometimes, when I'm taking a walk
Around the neighborhood
I lose my train of thought
Because of the sound of children playing..."
And then one said in the spirit of Johnny Cochran,
"If you can't scale down, you must leave town."

The basic argument
Was that the church was disrupting
Their tranquil village,
Disrupting their community...
When in fact, what each neighbor was describing
Was exactly the opposite of community.

Even within the walls of our Temple Isaiah
We see the same kind of thick line-drawing,
We have the privatization of the bar mitzvah ceremony,
All the worshippers are invited guests,
Not temple regulars...

We see this kind of line drawing as well
With the schools...
This is my seventh year as the Associate Rabbi of Temple Isaiah,
It is also my seventh year as a Temple Isaiah preschool parent.
From the minute I started serving this congregation,
I was also getting letters addressed to the parents of
Kinneret or Rachmiel Klien.
Peggy called me a week after school started this year
To say, "We need your emergency forms
By this Friday or Kinneret can't come back to school."
I understand the life of a preschool family,
The morning rush...
Talk about broken lines that breathe,
Most mornings I barely feel there is enough there
To hold myself together. Definitely don't feel like a masterpiece.

It is not a new conversation.
In fact, it is one of the most prominent conversations
In any rabbinic conference,
Not at all unique to Temple Isaiah.

Rabbi Herring, a conservative rabbi in New York wrote: "Synagogues and Jewish schools have often been viewed as distinct realms, one dealing primarily with adults and the other with children; one dealing with instruction and the other with practice. While this is really a false dichotomy, the integration and inter-relation of the synagogue and the school is a significant concern."

Our religious school Principal Ellen Goldberg
And our Preschool Director Tamar Andrews
Have taken extraordinary steps
And have been remarkable partners
In making our community whole,
With family education programs,

Coffees clutches at people's homes,
Shabbat dinners with savory cholent.

I have heard rabbis say that the dichotomy
Between temples and their schools
Stems out of the an ancient debate
Over which is more important,
Study or practice.

In the Talmud,
Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says,
“He whose study exceeds his deeds
Is like a tree whose roots are few
But whose branches are many.
If the winds of the world come,
They will uproot the tree from its place.
However, he whose deeds exceed his study
is like a tree whose branches are few
but whose roots are many.
Even if all the winds of the world come
and blow upon it,
they cannot move it from its place.” *Pirkei Avot 3: 22*

If our synagogue is a tree,
Then we must explore
The health of our roots and branches...
How our members embrace
Ongoing learning
As well as meaningful practice
Of Jewish values.
And the core that holds us together...

But the heart of the dichotomy
Between schools and synagogues
Is not really a debate about study and practice.
It is about American individualism and Jewish community.

Rabbis around the country
Are always lamenting
How often they hear from preschool families,
“Why do I have to be part of a Temple;
all I want is to send my children to the school.”

It's a question that never had to be confronted
A few generations ago.
As American consumers,
We've lost the awareness of what community is,

And why it's important,
Why it is valuable to be able
To walk freely into the sanctuary with a child
In the middle of the day,
And hold her up at the podium,
And say, "This is where you are going to stand one day
To have your bat mitzvah..."
Then tickle her and let her
Rush through the pews in socks with peals of giggles.

Why it's valuable for children
To interact with many adults whom they can emulate...
Why it's valuable especially for children to see their parents
Engaged in prayer and study and *tzedakka*,
And not only in the month leading up to bar mitzvah,
But as an organic part of Jewish family.

Why do we have to belong to a synagogue...

It's no longer enough
To point out that synagogues
Are the communities
That most deeply touch people
over an entire lifespan,
during the most critical and profound times.
That through interactions that people have
during these profound moments,
synagogues create relationships
which are the foundation for
individual and communal Jewish growth.

It's no longer enough to point out
That synagogues are the grassroots organization
of the Jewish world.¹
...That they've endured for over two thousand years
Is no longer enough
For a generation who is impressed
More by innovation than longevity.

That it's the place where personal stories are shared
And become part of the story of a people,
That synagogues instigate, create, defend
And protect...
Or that it is the one place
That will preserve the Jewishness
of the American Jew...

doesn't seem to satisfy the question anymore,
for many Jews as well as for rabbis...
fifty percent of ordained rabbis today
seek non-pulpit positions.ⁱⁱ

David Kaufman
Wrote that the ideal of churches and synagogues
Is to be a mediating institution between
The individual and the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

He asks,
“What is religion,
If not the consummate mediator
Between the individual and the world,
Between the immanent self
And the transcendent beyond?”

But I'm not convinced today
That people are consumed with interest
In the transcendent beyond...(I am!)

We live in an age of individualism...
An age of “technological leaps,
global commerce,
travel, genetics, neuroscience,
hunger for increased personal entertainment...”
Nothing is destiny anymore...
One writer wrote,
“In the past,
There was one thing you could depend on.
If you were born a man, you died a man.
If you were born a woman, you died a woman.
Now, you can switch!”
Everything is up for grabs,
Even biology...

Jonathan Sachs wrote,
“It used to be you had a job for life,
a marriage for life, a place for life.
Not everyone had them,
but they were not rare.
Today these things are harder to find...”

Autonomy and individual choice
Are the hallmarks of modern society,
The things that once gave us continuity

Are now constantly in flux.
Choice and not *loyalty*
Is a highest ideal.

It can be seen as a loss,
Leading to feelings of depression or isolation
 And it can also be seen as a gain,
 Leading to tremendous creativity and innovation.

Even the way we understand religion...
“In an earlier period, not that long ago,
religion was viewed as a timeless truth...”

Today in contrast:
belief systems not divinely revealed
but created by human beings
who lived in a certain time in a certain place.”
There are no absolutes.
Religion is often market-driven,
We rarely talk of just Judaism anymore,
But of finding one’s own Judaism,
Finding your Judaism.

Today we can create therapeutic relationship
Which substitute for friendships...

I meet monthly
With a group called the
Rabbi – Social Worker Round Table,
And we discuss different methods of counseling,
And it is so interesting to see the difference
Between a therapist and a rabbi...
There is an element of control
In the fifty minutes with a therapist,
there are very clear lines...
there are lines with a rabbi too,
except the lines are somewhat dashed,
because we are kayaking
and trapezing, hiking and traveling,
marrying, burying, celebrating,
learning, eating and worshipping with the same people
who share their beautiful
and often tragic stories in our studies,
along with their entire families.
A therapist is generally separate from
The community of his or her client,

A rabbi is not.

The modern belief in the sovereign self
Over the commanding community also
Has changed the way we give
And how we think about work and money.

Money is so difficult to talk about –
Often with premarital counseling,
The question of a joint checking account
Is the most difficult subject to confront...

That and the color of the bridesmaid's dresses,
And inlaws,
And not putting the toothpaste cap back on,
And who does the laundry,
How loudly the other chews,
Who controls the remote,
Too many or too little blankets,
And ex-fiancees...they're difficult to confront...
The broken lawnmower that someone promised to fix,
And roof tiles...

In the book, *Living High and Letting Die*,
the philosopher Peter Unger
presents a series of imaginary examples
to challenge us
about whether it is wrong
to live well without giving substantial amounts
to help people who are hungry,
malnourished or dying from easily treatable illnesses.

In one example he describes a man
Who invests most of his savings
In a valuable old car,
Which he is not able to insure.

One day he parks the car near the end
Of a railway siding
and goes for a walk up the track.
As he does so,
he sees a runaway train,
with no one aboard,
running down the railway track.
Looking farther down the track,
he sees the small figure of a child
very likely to be killed by the runaway train.

He can't stop the train
and the child is too far away to warn of the danger,
but he can throw a switch
that will divert the train down the siding
where his car is parked.
Then nobody will be killed —but the train will destroy his car.
Thinking of his joy in owning the car
and the financial security it represents,
the man decides not to throw the switch.
The child is killed.

Our immediate reaction
Is that the decision to save the car
And not the child is, of course, wrong,
Sinful...

Philosopher Peter Singer commented
On this hypothetical situation saying:

We, too, have opportunities to save the lives of children. [This man] did not have to look into the eyes of the child he was sacrificing for his own material comfort. The child was a complete stranger to him and too far away to relate to in an intimate, personal way. He did not mislead the child or initiate the chain of events imperiling him. In all these respects, [this man]'s situation resembles that of people able but unwilling to donate to overseas aid...(to desperate children we don't know...)^{iv}

When this man first grasped the dilemma that faced him as he stood by that railway switch, he must have thought how extraordinarily unlucky he was to be placed in a situation in which he must choose between the life of an innocent child and the sacrifice of most of his savings. But he was not unlucky at all. We are all in that situation.

From the perspective of the commanding community,
Work is one of the ways by which the Jew
Participates in the re-creation of the world,
As a partner with God.

From the perspective of the sovereign self,
Work is a means to create independence, comfort and status.^v

This December we will be exploring
Many of these questions in discussions
And with nationally known speakers
In the What is a Good Life? conclave
Put together by our adult education committee.

Why belong to a synagogue?
What do *we* get out of it?

In participating in a synagogue community,
We receive for ourselves,
And give our children three things,
 Community,
 Identity,
 And Faith.

None of these things become seamlessly woven
Into the fabric of a life
When given only in ceremony at age thirteen,
Instead of weaving them into the
Everyday ordinary experience of a person
From the start.

The traditional three names for a Synagogue in Hebrew
Are *Beit Tefillah*, a House of Worship,
Beit Midrash, a House of Study,
And *Beit Knesset*, a House of Gathering.

As a *Beit Tefillah*, a House of Worship,
The synagogue draws us inward,
To self-reflection, balance and wholeness.
 As a *Beit Midrash*, a House of study,
 The synagogue connects us upward,
 Through sacred text and thoughtful conversation
 We become connected with that transcendent beyond...
As a *Beit Knesset*, a House of Gathering,
The synagogue connects us to each other,
In community.

The one thing that all those names
Have in common is the preface *Beit...*
Bayit...House...

Rabbi Avi Weiss said that his congregants
Refer to their synagogue
As “The *Bayit*.”
Whenever someone comes in they say
“Welcome to our home.”
The Temple is a home and
The congregation is a *mishpacha*.

Rabbi Weiss wrote about this model,
“I would like to suggest the role of the rabbi as *abba* or as *ima*, as a father or as a
mother...the role of the parent, one who leads with unconditional love, as a parent who
loves no matter what.”

There was a recent study
Which looked at twenty congregations
And discovered that there are really three kinds.
The first is the *inherited congregation*,
Which adapts little
And seeks to stay the same.
The second is the *generation specific congregation*
which is designed to appeal to the needs of a particular generation,
typically younger.
Schools are *generation specific communities*.

Thirdly, there is the most difficult
But ultimately most rewarding model,
Which is called the *blended congregation...*
Which negotiates between
Tradition and change.
Not surprisingly,
A blended congregation is most likely
To experience tension and conflict
In trying to break through old lines,
but, if welcomed positively,
it is often that very tension and conflict
which makes the community
Most charismatic, gutsy and exciting.^{vi}

How do we become a
Successful blended community,
One *mishpacha*
Where we gather around one table,
Where there is no separate children's table,
Where the elders have a place
And a voice that is heard and revered?

It requires a lot of paradoxical thinking...

Thinking back and thinking ahead.
Being both reflective and proactive.
Enabling leaders to follow and followers to lead,
practicing collaborative leadership.
Seeing both the forest and the trees,
The roots and the branches,
creating community among diverse individuals.
Honoring the past while anticipating the future,
balancing tradition and change,
creating a community of shared Jewish meaning,
while honoring the uniqueness

and independence of individuals,
articulating common values
while enabling personal spiritual quests,
embracing diversity
and being one,
being one house, one *Bayit*,
with many portals, many doors.
One tree with roots that extend widely
And branches that are bountiful and well fed.^{vii}

A clever person once said,
“The world is divided into two kinds of people:
Those who divide the world into two kinds of people,
And those who do not.”
In synagogue,
We need to break up the thick lines,
And be able as a community to breathe.^{viii}

I spoke with a couple of preschool classes recently,
Spoke with the children about Yom Kippur,
And I asked them what is it they want
to change about themselves this year...
They thought about this for a long moment,
And then one girl said, “I want to be able
To get across the monkey bars.
 Right now I can only do one bar.
 I want to do all of them.”
Immediately twenty other hands went up,
And one by one,
Each student agreed that this was a great
Resolution for them as well this year.

For the rabbi, the congregation is a living organism.
Like some doctors,
Rabbis experience more death and dying than war veterans,
Because it spans our entire careers.
And people often ask, “How do you handle it.”
I always say that it is a unique privilege
To be able to see a community as a whole,
For me the baby naming in the afternoon
Is a loving commentary on the funeral in the morning.
No one there knows how connected are these two lives...

Wanting to finish the monkey bars is really the desire
To get from one place to the other without falling down.
To use one's own hands,

To muster one's own courage to fulfill a dream.
It is a universal, ageless desire.

It is not different than the stroke victim,
Painstakingly relearning how to walk.
Our stories are valuable to share
Because they are really part of one intertwining,
Breathing story,
Leaves of one living family tree.^{ix}

One of the stories this past year
Which intrigued and haunted me the most
Was the story of a van crash in Indiana,
In which one college student, Whitney Cerak
Was pronounced dead.
She was buried in a funeral that drew thousands.
Another student in the same accident,
Laura VanRyn lay in a coma for months.
Her parents visited her every day,
Sang to her and spoke with her.
Her boyfriend would sit and hold her hand
For hours.
Months later,
As Laura began to emerge from the coma,
It became clear
That it was not Laura,
That Laura lay buried in the grave bearing Whitney's name.
And the girl was actually Whitney.
How could parents, her boyfriend,
Mistake the identity of this young woman for so long?
They had cared for her lovingly, hourly,
All through her recovery.

For me, the bittersweet story challenges
The ideas of identity, I wondered how in Whitney's future
All of the love and care from a family not her own
Who treated her as a daughter,
Would effect her sense of self and community...
What if we took care of each other,
As if there were no lines between us,
As if we were one *mishpacha*,
Without deception, but with eyes wide open.

God sketches us on napkins with broken lines.^x

We have taken many steps

to be a self-renewing blended congregation...
Our new ambassador program
Empowers congregants to reach out to new members
With an embracing welcome.^{xi}

Our year of the Torah
Is an extraordinary way
For us to unite our branches and roots in a single trunk,
A strong core.^{xii}

Etz haiym hi... it is a tree of life...
Torah is connection,
To those that are here,
Those that are yet to be,
Those that live on with us.

This year we increase the sanctity of our community,
By drawing closer to Torah,
By making our synagogue a house of study,
Along with participating in writing a new Torah,
And learning to complete the monkey bars,
I want to set another goal for each of us
For the growth and depth of our community...
It is a very simple goal
And you have a whole year to fulfill it.
Make a new friend in the congregation this year,
Make a new friend.

It's not that hard.
Come to our Temple's Spring Retreat in Malibu this spring,
And you'll meet this goal tenfold.
Or start studying Torah in one of our classes.
It isn't that hard to do,
Or just approach someone...
Here are some good conversation starters you can use...
"Why did you become a member of Temple Isaiah?
Tell me your favorite story about Rabbi Gan?
Tell me what distinguished your Judaism from anyone else's?
What is it that you would like yet to learn?
What is it that you would like yet to teach?
How did you like the rabbi's sermon?
Do you think she talks too fast?
Do you think the signer is really signing everything she is saying?"

Imagine if everyone here made a new friend.
2,000 connections.

And if you want a bonus,
If you want to really challenge yourself,
make a new friend outside of your demographic,
outside your generation.

If you are a professor, spend Shabbat talking with an engineer.
If you are a preschool parent share a bagel in the lobby with
A founding member.

The rewards are great...
“The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote
that in capitalist society we constantly think of
Extrinsic goods, things that money can buy.
For a community to work,
we need to accord full value to intrinsic goods,
things inside ourselves that are valuable.”

Our virtues, our stories.

God breathed into us to give us life...
Blurred the lines
Between us and heaven.

Imagine instead of sitting here in the Century Plaza ballroom,
You are sitting on the floor
On a colorful mat
In a preschool classroom at the temple.
It's been a satisfying day.
You made it a little further in the monkey bars,
And you've just had snack.
The rabbi comes and sits on the floor,
Holding a shofar.
She is reading from one of her favorite children's books...
It is a book called
“The Fall of Freddie the Leaf” by Leo Buscaglia.
It is a story of life and death,
About a leaf, named Freddie, on a great tree,
He is frightened of falling off the tree...
And on the last page,
The rabbi reads:

Then Freddie was alone. The only leaf left on his branch.

The first snow fell the following morning. It was soft, white, and gentle; but it was bitter cold. There was hardly any sun that day, and the day was very short. Freddie found

himself losing his color, becoming brittle. It was constantly cold, and the snow weighed heavily upon him.

At dawn, the wind came that took Freddie from his branch. It didn't hurt at all. He felt himself float quietly, gently, and softly downward.

As he fell, he saw the whole tree for the first time. How strong and firm it was! He was sure that it would live for a long time, and he knew that he had been a part of its life, and it made him proud.

Freddie landed on a clump of snow. It somehow felt soft, and even warm. In this new position he was more comfortable than he had ever been. He closed his eyes and fell asleep. He did not know that spring would follow winter, and that the snow would melt into water. He did not know that what appeared to be his useless dried self would join with the water and serve to make the tree stronger. Most of all he did not know that there, asleep in the tree and the ground were already plans for new leaves in the spring.

Etz hayim hi,
It is a tree of life
To those who hold it fast,
In a moment
We will walk through the congregation
With our Torah scrolls,
One of these very Torah scrolls will be given
At the end of this year
To be replanted
In a congregation in need,
And next year there will be a new Torah
Whose letters were inscribed
By all of us here,
We reach out and kiss the Torah
And for a precious moment
Our lines fall away,
Bits of you in me
Bits of me in you,
Breath of God in both,
As we become part of a living,
Thriving,
Loving,
Evolving,
Breathing,
And breath-taking masterpiece.

ⁱ Re-Envisioning the Synagogue

ⁱⁱ Re-Envisioning the Synagogue

iii Larry McNeil wrote the goal of churches and synagogues should be to become “mediating institutions capable of connecting at the deepest level with their members, assisting them in making sense of the world, and equipping them with the power, strategies and skills to intercede and negotiate with all other institutions that affect their lives.”

iv Suppose that there were more owners of priceless vintage cars —Carol, Dave, Emma, Fred and so on, down to Ziggy— all in exactly the same situation, with their own siding and their own switch, all sacrificing the child in order to preserve their own cherished car. Would that make it all right for him to do the same?

v From the perspective of the commanding community
There are ancient teaching that challenge our
Modern understanding of property and ownership...
In the Torah every fifty years, on the Jubilee year,
All land was required to be returned
To the family of the original owner,
It could only be leased 50 years at a time,
Ensuring that no generations of a family
Should be destitute for all time.

From the perspective of the sovereign self
Property sets us apart from others,
Fences are high and a nice community
Is one that doesn't have to worry about
Church bells, children or train whistles
Disturbing a pleasant afternoon.

vi Re-Envisioning the Synagogue

vii Based on Re-Envisioning the Synagogue

viii The shift in focus of synagogues
Is also reflected in the way the Reform movement
Has changed...

In 1885 the Pittsburg Platform of the Reform rabbinate stated:

Today we accept as binding only its *moral* laws,
and maintain only such ceremonies as
elevate and sanctify our lives,
but reject all such as are not adapted
to the views and habits of modern civilization.
We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws
As regulate diet,
priestly purity,
and dress
originated in ages
and under the influence of ideas
entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state.
They fail to impress the modern Jew
with a spirit of priestly holiness.

Autonomy and personal choice were of supreme importance.

In 2001 the Reform rabbinate met in Pittsburg again

And renewed their platform, saying:

We are committed to the ongoing study
of the whole array of mitzvot
and to the fulfillment of those that address us
as individuals and as a community.
Some of these mitzvot, sacred obligations,
have long been observed by Reform Jews,
others both ancient and modern
demand renewed attention
as the result of the unique context of our own times.

In the beginning there was an emphasis
On autonomy,
And now there is a re-education about sacred community,
Sacred obligation.

^{ix} Take a lump of clay,
Wet it, pat it,
Make a statue of you
And a statue of me
Then shatter them, clatter them,
Add some water,
And break them and mold them
Into statue of you and a statue of me.
Then, in mine, there are bits of you
And in you there are bits of me.
Nothing ever shall keep us apart.
Kuan Tao-Shen

^x All of our blessings say,
Baruch Atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melech HaOlam,
Asher kiddishanu B'Mitzvotav...
“Blessed are you who has sanctified **us**
With the commandments
And commanded **us...**”
A Hasidic master pointed out that
It is in the plural, “commanded **us...**”
Therefore, he concludes,
One who is commanded
Is part of a community.

One verse of Talmud reads:
“Greater is the one who is commanded and performs
then the one who is not commanded and performs.” *BT Kiddushin 31a*
why? Because he is part of a community.

^{xi} In the book *Re-Envisioning the Synagogue* it is written:
“To think about the future of the synagogue is to think about the future of American Jewish life, about American Jewish culture, about American Jewish families and about American Jews. It is to ask the toughest questions, about boundaries between us and them and us and us. It is to ask about how to envision a future and a past and above all, how to shape ourselves as men and women, as a culture, and as a people. It is not only to ask who we are, but who we should be, and how to think about that question in the

institutions that will not only define us, but through which we will transmit what is most important to future generations.”

Judith Plaskow wrote in *Standing Again at Sinai*, “The individual is not an isolated unit who attains humanity through independence from others... Rather, to be a person is to find oneself from the beginning in community.”

^{xii} Maimonides said:

A house of study is superior to a synagogue.

The great wise ones –

even if they had many synagogues in their towns,

would only pray in a place where people

were occupied with Torah study.

There one would pray with the community.

Maimonides continued to add:

It is permissible to make a synagogue

into a house of study,

but not to make a synagogue

from a house of study

because the sanctity of a house of study is greater

than that of a synagogue.

Increasing the sanctity is permitted – not decreasing it.