

Rosh Hashanah AM
Sinai Temple, Springfield, MA
October 3, 2016

To See the Obvious

Some things change, but something don't. I thought this one would change when I came here, but it hasn't. It turns out to be the same as it's always been.

For many years now, I've been losing my car in a parking lot somewhere at least once a day. I drive in, I park, I go into a store, and then I come out, only to realize that I haven't the slightest idea where I've left my car.

It's embarrassing. People see me walking down row after row, frantically punching the lock button on my clicker that sets off the beep. But until I get close to my car, there is no beep. And, when it happens that someone who sees me is the same person who saw me doing the same thing I did the day before, it isn't rocket science to know from their smirk what they are thinking: "Here comes the car loser.....again!"

Of course my car might be in the same vicinity it was the previous day, and the day before, and the day before that. But for some reason I never remember that when I come out of the store carrying a heavy bundle.

To see the obvious: that's what this morning's Torah portion is about. Hagar and Yishma'el her son, after being thrown out of the house by Abraham to appease his wife, Sarah, wander through the wilderness until the food and water run out. Then, simply, after she puts Yishma'el some bowshot away from where she's going to be (She can't bear to watch what her son will suffer), she, bemoaning her fate, sits down to die!

But then an angel appears. "What ails you, Hagar?" the angel says. "Just open your eyes. Your salvation, a well of water, is right next to you!" In other words, "Open your eyes and see the obvious!"

I think that lesson is what led the Rabbis to choose this *parashah* for the (so-called) 1st day of Rosh Hashanah (and what we read today is the real Torah portion for this morning, not the Akedah). It's the mandate to us to look for - and see! - the obvious.

Think about this for a moment. Why would God tell a reticent Abraham to listen to Sarah, to cast Hagar out? Would it not be to bring us to the point of the story, namely to be able to tell Hagar to behold - and for her very survival to act upon - what is there all along?

But that's a lesson not only to Hagar. It's a lesson to us as well. It's why we read this *parashah* on Rosh Hashanah, the time of spiritual stock-taking. If we're willing to look, if we open our eyes, we can see where we have fallen short, have missed the mark. And then we can act on it.

But I want to go further. I want to apply the lesson to the entire issue of organized modern Judaism. Because in this - and it's obvious if we open our eyes - our very survival is endangered. But first a prelude.

When I was growing up on Chicago's South Side, my Dad, *alav hashalom*, made a point of taking me to see the educational and cultural sites abounding in Chicago. Some of those trips we shared remain with me to this day.

In particular, I will tell you about one of them. It was to see a vast sculpture done by a famous Chicago sculptor named Laredo Taft.

The sculpture is called "The March of Time." In it, Taft created a 120 foot long mammoth parade of humanity showing over 100 different figures symbolizing life's journey from birth to death. This "march of the doomed" takes place in front of an imposing, 26 foot tall statue of Father Time.

The work is based upon a line from a poem by an English poet and essayist, Austin Dobson, "Time goes, you say? Ah, no, time stays; we go!"

"The March of Time" was Taft's life-masterpiece. It took him fifteen years to finish. He wanted it to have an eternal look, so he designed it in a classical "beaux-art" style. Unfortunately, by the time he finished, the beaux-art style was already unfashionable. It was replaced by abstract modernism. Resentful at the way styles had passed him by, Taft became a leading spokesperson for conservative sculpture and lectured against the evils of modernism.

For all that his work was about, Taft himself had learned absolutely nothing about the inevitability of time.

But not only that, Taft also had tried to construct his sculpture using materials that would last a long time. After consulting with engineers, he decided on steel-reinforced, hollow-cast concrete. Unfortunately, that was not suited to Chicago's winters. The concrete expanded and contracted, causing cracks in the surface. Details eroded and crumbled away forever.

And years later, I subsequently learned, by the 1980s, the interior was crumbling due to moisture buildup, and the surface had become pitted and drab, assaulted by time, elements and pollution. Not only that, the neighborhood where "The March of Time" sits deteriorated even more than the sculpture. The sculpture became overgrown with weeds.

And that all proved: no matter how big or permanent we try to make something, we cannot outwit time.¹

And that is the lesson I want to address in the next few moments. It is one based upon an "obvious" that lies right in front of us. But it is also one that, just as with Hagar and despite the critical implications for our very survival, we are not seeing. The issue? Simply stated, the forms of Judaism we are promulgating, except for what is happening within Orthodoxy today, simply are not working. If they were, we would not see synagogue after synagogue closing down, shuttering doors at a rate faster than, even a few years ago, any of us could ever have imagined.

To see the obvious... From the beginning of my rabbinate some twenty-one days after ordination until this very day, my life, in one way or another, has been connected

¹ From <http://illustrationart.blogspot.com/2008/11/lorado-tafts-fountain-of-time.html>

with the synagogue. It ranged on one side from the unconventional, as my synagogues located inside of an Army chapel, either at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, or in the Frankfurt Central Chapel in Germany. And it ranged too all the way to the other side, to the totally conventional synagogue, as my synagogue, the Tree of Life, in Columbia, South Carolina. And it also spanned everything in between.

Now if I were to be really honest with myself, despite what I might put down in a resume, sometimes my rabbinate was super-successful. Other times, not so. Not that I speak of whether a contract got renewed or not, since contract renewals often have nothing to do with rabbi's effectiveness. Rather, I speak of whether my synagogue at any given time was a major and important force in the lives of the people in the *k'hal*, in the synagogue community, or whether it wasn't.

So which rabbinate were successful, and which were not? Well, the successful ones were where I succeeded in leading the synagogue – and remember, some of my rabbinate played out in some very much out-of-the-way places (as a little town called Sharon on the Pennsylvania-Ohio border; or a city in the middle of the south, or in Hong Kong, or even in Albuquerque which lies far away from the mainstream of Jewish life) – ...to return: the successful ones were where I succeeded in helping the synagogue become a reflection of the members at the particular time I was there, not some preconceived pattern of what I or someone else thought a synagogue ought to be. Conversely – and this true Monday-morning-quarterbacking looking through a lens of 20/20 hindsight – my rabbinate was less than successful when I tried to follow the crowd, tried to convince the synagogue to become what the national organizations or the mega-congregations said a synagogue ought to look like. So here it is: when it was about the particular people of the particular congregation, the synagogue was vital, exciting, alive. When it was about an out-of-the-book model that some thought a synagogue ought to be, the synagogue typically was dull, unattractive, unattracting, and irrelevant.

I am going to suggest that most non-Orthodox synagogues are like that today. The proof: look at the declining numbers. And look too at the fact that some 80% (!) of the American Jewish community stands unaffiliated.

Some of it is about economics, certainly. Synagogues often, in the face of declining memberships, keep raising the dues higher and higher. They have to just to pay the bills. And eventually they reach that thousands of dollars point where membership for most simply is unaffordable.

But I don't think economics are the main point. Most synagogues, as ours, do not turn people away because of an ability to pay.

Rather and more, synagogues often do not fulfill any real needs of the people out there. People will join, maybe, to insure that their kids celebrate bar/bat mitzvah (whatever that does for a child!), but during the time they are there they often don't set foot in the place other than on the High Holy Days. And the day after the last child's bar/bat mitzvah celebration? Gone!

My take, and it's a sad one: in the main, while Orthodox shuls are about their members, non-orthodox synagogues simply are not.

But of the ones that are successful – and by successful I mean that their pews are filled Shabbat after Shabbat and, more, their buildings are aflutter with people coming and going to during-the-week programs – while they are non-orthodox, what makes them successful is that they are, more than non-orthodox, unorthodox. Their programs are not about what every other non-orthodox synagogue is about. They are about the people themselves: their needs, their concerns, and their wants.

I'd like to suggest something: if we want to attract people and be self-sustaining, it cannot be "business as usual." It needs to be "business different." And, especially, "business relevant." And what does that mean?

It's interesting: the number of Jews who could be synagogue members in America *hasn't changed*. We still have the same number of Jews around as we had ten years ago. Why aren't they joining synagogues?

Now while we used to say that 70% of all Jews belonged to a synagogue at some point in their lives, we also said at the same time that only 30% of the Jewish community belonged to a synagogue at that moment. I always thought that the 30% percentage was abysmal. Well now, as I said a few moments ago, some say that only 20% of all Jews belong to synagogues. It's gotten worse.

So what's wrong? Let's listen to some of what I heard last year.

Back in Salem, I created an institution called Institute for Jewish Living. Its purpose is to serve as an outreach into the vast community of the unaffiliated. In connection with that, I make it a point to speak to people, all the while trying *really* to listen to them. I want to know what they are feeling deep down. But I don't only speak to the unaffiliated. I speak to the affiliated as well. And of particular concern to me are those who are members of synagogues with declining membership.

So here's the conversation that was repeated a number of times last year. It started with my question: "Do you think you are you getting your money's worth?"

"Well," the typical response went, "We have a good school for our kids."

"Yeah," I rejoined, "But your kids are beyond that point. So what about you? Is there anything in the congregation personally for you?"

"Well," this was the usually answer, "I've never been a service attender. But there are services every week."

"Okay," so what is there that you participate in, what that justifies, for you, that kind of expenditure? Classes? Continuing activities? A community of friends to hang out with?"

"Hmm...well, I guess not."

Of course you guess not, I think to myself. There isn't anything there for you, an intelligent, seeking Jew looking for something that will enhance or spiritually enrich your life. I know because if I personally, with the Jewish knowledge that I have spent a lifetime

trying to gain, were looking for such a synagogue, could I find just one with classes, even one class, in which I myself could grow???

(And don't say that I'm the exception. I'm not! While I might be a rabbi, I'm also a seeking Jew!)

The problem: I think our congregations, in the passing of time, have in the main passed into irrelevancy. We're trying to keep our synagogues in the same model they were in fifty and seventy five years ago.

It doesn't work. Our world isn't the world of fifty and seventy five years ago. We aren't the people we would have been fifty and seventy-five years ago.

Simply stated, synagogues, haven't kept up. Worse, in the main we aren't even trying to!

My point: beyond high-children-density areas where synagogues can still function as bar/bat mitzvah mills, we can't survive doing our shuls in the way we have in the past!

(And by the way, even the bar/bat mitzvah mill model isn't going to work much longer. There are a plethora of rabbis out there who will officiate at "private bar/bat mitzvah celebrations." It doesn't take four years of Hebrew School to get a child to the point where s/he can stand before a congregation and celebrate becoming bar/bat mitzvah. Start to finish, with a child not knowing an alef from a beit, that child can be brought to the point where s/he can read a parashah from the Torah in a year! I know. I've done it.)

The obvious: if the institution of the non-Orthodox synagogue is to survive, we need to re-formulate the institution of the synagogue.

What will that new synagogue look like? I don't yet fully know. But I do know this: every synagogue - we! -- will have to formulate itself - ourself! -- for the particular group of people we are and whom we are looking to attract into our membership. One size doesn't fit all. What a successful synagogue here will look like will be different, maybe totally different, from what a successful synagogue will look like somewhere else. Jews here aren't the same as Jews somewhere else, not even as Jews are on the other side of the Valley.

Look, I know that many congregations out there are declining, but I know there are a few others that are thriving and growing. It is possible for us not to have empty seats in our sanctuary, to have lively Shabbat experiences alive and teeming with turned-on attendees. Even more important, instead of the silence of tombs in our precincts throughout the week, our halls can be filled with adults as well as young people and be abuzz with programs and life.

Exactly a year ago, on Rosh Hashanah, I experienced something I had heard about but never experienced before. It was the occasion, the first such since 1963 (!), when I was not on the *bimah* during the High Holy Days. I said to Janet, "Let's do something neither of us has ever done before. Let's find a synagogue somewhere, buy a ticket, and spend

Rosh Hashanah where absolutely no one knows either of us. In other words, let's be Jews in the pews."

We did. We went to New York and purchased tickets for Rosh Hashanah online to the congregation that I had heard was the "in" synagogue. It's called Romemu. In fact, it doesn't have a building but holds its services in a church, for Rosh Hashanah, depending upon the service, in two churches.

Now I have to admit that it really felt strange hitting the "order" button when I placed the online order for our tickets. Since rabbinical school, I've always been on the *bimah* looking out at a sea of faces on the high holy days. What would it feel like being down below looking up?

I found out. We weren't down below, not for a minute. We were, instead, always a part of, really a part of, everything that was going on throughout the sanctuary. From the moment we arrived at the place of the service where people were out on the sidewalk to greet us, to the foyer where still more people were there to greet us and wish us a *gut yontiff*, to the seats we found and in which people passing down the aisle stopped to say *l'shanah tovah*, the whole time we felt like we were home. Here's one: the service the first day lasted 5 ¼ hours! And at the end we didn't want it to end!

Was it the service itself? I don't think so. I think it was the outreach and the fact that the messages of the service were totally about what we were about.

(By the way, we went back to Romemu on a Friday night later in the year...same feeling!).

I get the Romemu bulletins by the way. Were I to live in New York, I'd quickly become a member. It's programs are about what I, not as a rabbi but as a Jew as many of you, am about.

So what do Romemu and the handful of other synagogues like it have in common? My take is that they have two things going for them. A community of warm outreach and embrace is their by-word, and people feel their hospitality the minute they walk through their portals. Second, and more important, their programs a) are totally about the very people they serve and b) are completely relevant to their members' lives and needs.

As a rabbi now forty-nine years into the rabbinate, I'm not yet ready to say *kaddish* over the institution of the synagogue, and especially, not now or ever, of Sinai Temple. But at the same time and during the time I will be with you, I'll continue to preach this message: we have to look at ourselves, deeply and seriously, and then find the paths, some old but some totally new, to our very salvation.

So I say this, my prayer on this day of Rosh Hashanah, as the voice of the angel who spoke to Hagar still echoes in our ears: may we too open our eyes to see the well of water now right beside us, and may we look at ourselves and find the keys that will enable us to keep the doors to our synagogue, as a vibrant and flourishing synagogues, unlocked. No, not unlocked, but open wide to all who pass by. For then our synagogue will continue to be our life and our salvation, and, for length of days, be here for the generation that will follow us. And to that, let us together say...amen