

D'var Torah

SINAI TEMPLE, SPRINGFIELD
SHABBAT EVENING, 18 NOVEMBER 2016

Brought Back from an Irish Bat Mitzvah Celebration: an Important Message for Sinai's Future.

The *Sabba* was *k'velling*. For those of you who don't know the words, *Sabba* is Grandpa in Hebrew. That's what my grandchildren call me. And as for *k'velling*, it's a Yiddish term I learned from my mother, *aleha hashalom*. It means, bursting with pride.

So where and why was the *Sabba k'velling*? It was in Ireland, several weeks ago, where Mitzi, my second oldest grandchild, celebrated becoming Bat Mitzvah. And in addition to the fact that Mitzi was wonderful, she was, to make the *k'velling* even greater, *my* granddaughter.

But there is more, much more.

As a rabbi, I have a particular affinity to Ireland. I served there for seven weeks several years ago as rabbi/scholar-in-residence at our liberal synagogue, the Dublin Jewish Progressive Congregation. I still have close friends there. And while people here often still question whether there is Jewish life in Dublin, there very much is.

But this bat mitzvah celebration wasn't in Dublin. It took place two hours away in a little town called Killaloe, right next to another little town, Ballina, in County Tipperary, which is not far from the town of Ballahinge where my daughter, Yonit, her husband, Vlad, and their three children, Talya, Mitzi, and Ilani, live. So why would they be living in such a place. Well, it's near the city of Limerick, where my daughter occupies a teaching position at the Irish World Academy of the University of Limerick.

Now if you are wondering if there is a synagogue there, there isn't. The bat mitzvah celebration wasn't held in a synagogue. It was held in a place called Quay Arts, an arts center that provided wonderful space for the service. And the rabbi who officiated, Rabbi Monique Mayer, a graduate of Leo Baeck (our Reform seminary in London) who taught Mitzi for months by Skype, came over by ferry and car from where she lives and serves a congregation in Bristol, England. (in addition to running a *cheder* in Wales), and she and her husband carried with them the Torah!

And about there not being a synagogue there, there was a synagogue in Cork, several hours away. It closed a short time ago, though a *chavurah* functions there. But Limerick? The Jewish community left there after the Limerick pogrom in 1904, and it never returned. And now, including my family, only a handful of Jews live in the area. But that doesn't mean that, led by my daughter and her husband, there isn't Jewish life there. There is. And that to me is source of intense pride.

But more about the Bat Mitzvah celebration. Do you need a shul? But what *is* a shul? I think, more than a building, it's a place where a minyan of Jews gathers to daven, or study, or, in some other way, to do Jewish. And that's what Quay Arts, or at least for several hours, fully became. And there were probably close to two minyanim of Jews there that morning among the forty or so people who were present for and participated in the service. Many, most (?), were non-Jews. But is the large number of non-Jews who were present at the service so different from the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrations we have here at Sinai?. For me, that little place, during that service, was as much a synagogue as any I've ever been in during a service!

Now I want to digress for a moment. I once asked my Grandfather, *alav hashalom*, an Orthodox Jew who practiced Orthodoxy literally until the day that he died, this typical Reform question. "If you live too far from a shul, is it better you don't go instead of driving there on Shabbos?"

He didn't have much patience for my question. He simply responded, "You don't live in such a place! If you can't walk to shul, you don't live there!"

That wasn't completely true. And of course, one doesn't need a shul to pray in on Shabbat. One can, when one is Orthodox for instance and finds himself or herself far away from a synagogue, stay where s/he is and pray the morning service, just as on weekdays, even when there is a synagogue or two or three very close, most people *daven* at home before they go off to work.

And the fact is that there are, as there have always been, observant people who don't live close to synagogues.

So what does it take for Jewish life to exist in that place. Or for that matter, for Jewish life to exist anywhere?

First, the question of the place... Admittedly, it can be easier to practice Judaism in a large center of Jewish life. When we are back in Salem, there are at last seven synagogues we can attend any Shabbat. There are places to shop Jewish around the corner from where we live, and, just as here, there is a JCC to belong to and attend along with numerous other places where Jewish culture abounds. And if the immediate neighborhood doesn't do it, Brookline, a major bastion of Jewish life and culture, is only a short distance away. As is Boston.

And the same is true right here, where, at this very minute, three synagogues and a JCC and two day schools and more are standing.

Such doesn't exist in places as Limerick, Ireland. In fact, one of the things that my daughter asked me to bring over was two boxes of Chanukkah candles!

On the other hand, that doesn't mean that my daughter and her husband don't, for instance, put up a sukkah in their back yard on Sukkot or keep Shabbat in some way, or keep the other holidays as well. They do. And occasionally all of the few Jews in the area there do get together to observe something or other that is Jewish.

But what it takes to for all of that to happen there, or anywhere, is, first and foremost, a sense of commitment to keeping Jewish life alive, even if it's happening far away from the mainstreams of Jewish life. It is not the number of Jews that live somewhere that keeps Judaism alive in that place. It's the people among them who work at it, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, non-denominational or otherwise. While the numbers might suggest otherwise, it is not the more than 300,000 Jews in Greater Boston, for instance, who keep Jewish life going there. It's the 20% or so of them who work there at doing Jewish. And the same is true here: it's not what I think is a significantly large number of Jews living in the Pioneer Valley who will make Judaism flourish here. Rather, it's those of us who, by affiliation and practice – such as we are doing right here in our Sinai community – who are doing it.

So what does that, and the lesson of a really significant Bat Mitzvah celebration somewhere in a small town in Ireland, *really* mean, especially as it relates here to Sinai Temple?

We all know, from the correspondence we have received from our president, Bruce Leshine, along with the bulletin articles and the knowledge that we have, that a committee is functioning here whose purpose it is to try to suggest, based upon the needs and feelings of our holy Sinai community, the future clergy-model of our congregation. Our demographics have changed here, and our numbers within Sinai Temple, along with so many other congregations in so many places, have diminished.

But however that goes, what I realized as I was participating in an exciting event in the life of my own family off in Ireland, is that ultimately, what it will take for us to survive and flourish as an institution is for us, as the *individuals* who make up Sinai and who will in the future join with us, to commit ourselves to doing as individuals what we, as a congregation, say Sinai is committed to. The fact is that while Sinai Temple as an institution and a legal entity has an existence of its own, the reality is that what Sinai Temple consists of is us, as individuals. It's really simple. If we commit ourselves in our own lives to keeping an active Judaism alive – and, since we are Reform Jews what exactly that means will vary from each of us to the rest of us – then Sinai Temple, as a synagogue and an exemplar of Reform Jewish life, will continue, not just into the 2020's but long after. If we don't, it won't.

But that's negative. And as I learned years ago in seminary, we don't end *divrei to-rah* in the negative. And so, here is what I believe: after all is said and done, we *will* make such a commitment, just as we always have. But the prophet Zechariah said it better, and that really is the basis of my own faith. And it's what I saw the day my granddaughter celebrated becoming bat mitzvah a few weeks ago in a little town in Ireland: "It's not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Holy-One." Spirit? That's commitment. May we, each of us, commit ourselves to maintaining Judaism within our lives here, and with that, may we together make Sinai Temple continue to flourish, that it, and we, go forward...*far* into the future.