

## Looking Ahead at the Shaar Shalom

Shabbat shalom,

It has been a pleasure serving the Shaar Shalom community for the past 3 years. It has been an incredible time for our family, a time filled by sacred moments shared with incredible people, and Halifax has been the city our progeny have most come to know as home. In moving on to new adventures, our family is leaving behind many gifts we have been granted—from perhaps the most abstract in the blessings of Canadian culture to the most tangible in the relationships we have forged with people who have moved us to no end through their generosity and love.

When I was in high school, I was a regular participant in USY—United Synagogue Youth—the youth branch of the Conservative Movement. At the end of each school year, there was a leadership transition as each new USY board—composed of teenagers—was voted in to represent the chapters, the regions, and the international

organization itself. I have not staffed a USY event since 2011, so I am not sure if anyone is still marking these board transitions in the same way, but these board transitions were always marked by some teachings on leadership and values from within the Jewish tradition.

Today is not the mark of the end of the current board of the Shaar at all, but we are closing in on the end of the contracts Rabbi Weiss and I have signed, and, with this, there comes on the one hand a huge leadership transition, and, on the other hand, not a very big leadership transition at all. Like many communities of our size, the Shaar Shalom deeply relies on the passion and good will of its volunteers. I

understand that in the history of the Shaar, there have been many rabbis, and, even when rabbis come and go, the community has always stayed. I want to take this time not so much to reflect on how the past three years have been for my family, but I want to present the community with a few ideas about leadership and values that come from the Jewish tradition. After all, all of you sitting here today are the leadership of the Shaar Shalom. By coming to shul and being present—

whether it is by coming to services, by sitting on the board, by serving on a committee, by volunteering in some other capacity—voting with your feet makes you a leader in our egalitarian community.

I want to limit my teachings today to only 3 takeaways from what Jewish values teach about true leadership:

**1)      Whatever you do, do it together.**

There are only two places in the Torah where anything is described as *lo tov*: not good. The first *lo tov* is when God says *lo tov heyot ha'adam levaddo* (“it is not good for humanity to be alone” [in Genesis 2:18])—and in that moment, God sees *Adam*, the first human being, and makes for *Adam* a partner named *Chavvah*, whom, in English, we call ‘Eve.’ The fact that the first person’s name Adam is like the Hebrew word for “ground”—*Adamah*—means that humanity was initially a very low, lowly, lonely, debased existence. In fact, humanity was just basically a mud-pile, a waste of moving debris—that is, humanity was a useless, no-good *lo tov* existence until *Chavvah* came along. *Chavvah* is not merely a word related to *Chayyim*, “life,” but “*Chavvah*” actually

means “to enliven,” “to give life.” Before partnership, there was no life in humanity. But partnership brought meaning to our human existence.

And for all that we sing in the prayer *Yigdal: lo kam beyisra’el kemosheh od navi*—“there was never a prophet who arose in Israel like Mosheh”—and for all that we praise Mosheh for what wonderful accomplishments we can credit to Moses, the truth is that Moishele had a father-in-law who said, “Get real. This boychik doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Yitro, Mosheh’s father-in-law noticed that Mosheh was trying to do everything himself and getting burnt out. After all, we’re talking about a guy who smashes the ten commandments, tells God that he wants to be erased from the Torah, asks God to kill him in this morning’s parashah, and acts violently towards a rock with whom he’s supposed to engage in some sort of dialogue. Yitro’s theory is that what Mosheh is doing—taking on everything on his own—is *lo tov*—“no good.” Yitro tells Mosheh that, if he wants to survive this job, he has to set up some judicial committees to do some of what previously fell under Mosheh’s portfolio.

These words therefore won't shock you when I tell you that anyone being the only person capable of doing something in a community is *lo tov*. But there is a *tov*—good—solution to it. We must teach others to do tasks that keep falling on the same person. We must be on the lookout for individuals whose burden is too much to carry, and we must ask how we can help. No library committee, Chevra Kaddisha, Ritual committee, Hebrew School committee, kitchen committee, Tikkun Olam Committee, house committee, or any other kind of committee should ever just be one person. I sometimes remind myself of a recurring joke from the television show *The Flight of the Conchords* about a band that had only one fan. A running gag throughout the series was that their manager kept adding the word “base” after “fan” because sending a newsletter to the entire “fanbase” always sounded better than sending a newsletter to the entire “fan.” Even when we live in a small Jewish community, *lo tov heyot ha'adam levaddo*—it is not good for any of us to be alone. It is imperative that we not merely add the word “committee” ever to a single person's duties, but that the

word “committee” means that, together, we have built a sub-community of commitment.

**Whatever you do, do it together.**

**2) Ask questions every day with love.**

Each of us carries pain, and each of us carries wisdom learned from hard lessons.

After all of the time that each of us has committed to getting to where we are each day or where we are this very day—it is tempting to say, “I have the answers.” It is tempting to say to others, “I can solve your problem.” But there is a beautiful teaching from the sage Hillel, **which**

**you can find near the beginning of chapter 2 of Pirkey Avot (2:5).** About

1900 years ago, this thoughtful Jew spewed out in a single breath 5 different ‘don’t’s that are all pretty similar. His first ‘don’t’ was *Al tifrosh min hatzibbur*—“do not separate yourself from the community.”

There are times many of us have been tempted to say, “But, Hillel, I want to go away from these people who around me; they are doing something God-awful.” Believe it or not, Hillel said, *Al tifrosh min*

*hatzibbor*—"do not separate yourself from the community"—because *we all get this inclination*. Each of us is prone to saying, "I gotta get outta here." And the truth is, Hillel says, we have got to stay—no matter how sad or anxious or angry we get when we enter a place we care about where we have been suddenly hurt.

Hillel next said: "Do not be sure of yourself until the day of your death." Although it is good to work with the knowledge that we have, it is worth doubting ourselves—just a little bit—every once in a while, for we are part of an evolving tradition. The cultural norms we learn in one place will not necessarily be the culture of a new place. The values of yesterday might not be the values of tomorrow. The Judaism of Abraham was different from the Judaism of Moses, which was different from the Judaism of the Jews who watched our Temple get destroyed, and that was a Judaism that was different from the Judaism of the Jews who witnessed David Ben Gurion's leadership, and that is different from the Jew who sits here at the Shaar Shalom in Halifax in 2019.

Suffice it to say, the first Jews who 200 years ago first sat in "family

pews” with no segregation of the sexes asked different questions than the Jews who celebrated the first same-sex Jewish marriage not so many decades ago, and the questions these Jews will ask will be different from the questions asked by Jews who, in June 2019, wonder who will be sitting in these seats at the Shaar Shalom 10 years from now or 20 years from now. To keep seats filled, the spirit in the room will inevitably change from time to time, and with an evolving spirit, we will see new faces, and we will ask new questions. If we fail to ask these questions with love, we will fail to fill these seats. But, if we do ask these questions with love, we will bring our hearts along for a journey of change—a journey of affirmation, one whereby we will not truly judge others negatively but only suspect the best of them. Although we might not understand everything that happens around us at all times, it is never too early or too late to ask with love the questions that will deepen our relationships and guarantee our future.

And, as I said—many of the lessons that we have learned are lessons that we have learned from painful times. Because of this, many of us fear learning. But there is no better time to learn than now. So...

**Ask questions every day with love.**

**3) Keep making this synagogue holy.**

When God gives Shabbat in the Torah, God is described as making it a holy day. When God commands the Jews to observe Shabbat in the Torah, we are commanded to make it a holy day. Shabbat is simply a 25-ish-hour-span of time that happens every week, and it will always be there, but it will never be holy unless we take the time out of our schedules to make it holy.

So too are the sacred spaces in our lives.

A synagogue is a place where we have to live in a holy way and make things holy. The fact that we have Torah scrolls here does not mean that this is a place we will automatically treat with religious piety. In fact, we Jews don't even believe that the Torah is holy enough to be interpreted literally. That is why we believe that the way that we talk

about the Torah is holier than the Torah itself. That is, holier than the Torah itself is the way we interpret the Torah.

A synagogue is a place for us to dress in a special way—with a kippah, with a tallit, with all of our prayer garb—and a place for us to speak in cleaner language and of purer ideas, and a place for us to treat people more kindly than we might normally think to treat people.

*Kedushah*—holiness—in Judaism is about ‘difference,’ and, when we choose a righteous differentiation, we create *kedushah*, holiness.

Pirkey Avot [at 1:2] says that the world rests on three things: Torah, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness. We can choose to make this a place of Torah or a place where Torah study is deemed not worthwhile or accessible; we can make this a place where prayer is a core value of what we do, or we can declare our relationships divorced from prayer; we can say that Judaism is about being kind, or we can say that we have certain concerns that are just more important and somehow holier than kindness. And, by the way, it may be compelling to say “No” when faced with a religious dilemma; after all, if *kedushah*

is about making things distinct and separate, perhaps there need to be more boundaries as we build sacredness. But, given that the middle of the Torah in Leviticus, in the parashah of *Kedoshim* (meaning “holy people”) gives as its central law: *ve’ahavta lere’akha kamokha* (“You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself”)—I bet that we can’t think of too many things holier than kindness and bringing other hearts closer to our own hearts. When we choose *torah*, when we choose prayer, and when we choose kindness, we can make holiness happen.

**Keep making this synagogue holy.**

I cannot thank the community enough for the support that you have given us in my family’s time here, and I want to leave with three Jewish lessons on leadership:

1. Whatever you do, do it together.
2. Ask questions every day with love.
3. Keep making this synagogue holy.

If we cannot follow these three rules, we could endanger the future of our community. However I happen to know enough about this

community to know that we have what it takes to be together, to ask questions daily and lovingly, and to make this continually a sacred place and to ensure a promising future for Jewish Halifax.

Shabbat shalom.