

“Community”
Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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Temple Beth El
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As we moved into 5782, many of us thought that the words of our opening prayer, *hinei mah tov u'mah na'im, shevet achim gam yahcad*, how good and how pleasant it is to sit together, to be together, would herald the beginning of a return to gathering in person. Looking at the masked faces and the boxes on the Zoom screen, we know that is not the case. Our community this year will look different than it has in years past. That presents both a challenge and an opportunity for us as a community. This morning, I'd like to talk about what it means to be a community. What got me thinking about this, believe it or not, was the aptly named explanatory comma.

Yes, the explanatory comma. Ironically perhaps, the explanatory comma needs an explanation. You may not remember the term from grade school grammar lessons because it was coined recently by the people behind Code Switch, an NPR podcast about race and culture. That last sentence contained an explanatory comma. Basically, the explanatory comma is used where someone explains what might be obvious to some, but is not apparent to everyone. It is a way to make what is being said more accessible. So, for the many of you who had no idea what Code Switch was, you now have some context. But we don't explain everything. For example, I assumed that you all knew what a podcast was and what NPR was (I didn't even spell out National Public Radio!). According to Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Maraji, the hosts of Code Switch (see I did it again), what we explain has a lot to do with who we think our audience is. Demby and Maraji are particularly cued into this topic because their audience is browner and younger than the typical NPR audience and they want to talk to that demographic. When you explain things that a large portion of your audience knows, you might be sending the message that the content is too elementary for them. They use the example of Celia Cruz, the Cuban queen of Latin music. If you grew up with her music, and then you hear who she is explained in a story, you assume the story isn't for you. I mean, if it is reaching people, like myself, who don't even know who she is, then how could you possibly get any new information from the reporting?¹ So what we explain, and how much we explain it, has a lot to do with who we are talking to and what kind of community we are trying to create.

This works in the Jewish community as well. How much we explain information says a lot about who we think is in our Jewish community and who we think belongs. This isn't only an internal discussion. How we explain who we are to others is also an important part of this conversation. The last year has upended many of our assumptions about community—who is a part of our community, what we need from our community, why we should gather at all—we'll take some time this morning to delve into these larger issues.

First, who is a part of our community? The short answer is, everyone. But it is a little more complex than it seems. Being a part of our community is about more than just being

¹ “Hold Up! Time For An Explanatory Comma,” *Code Switch*. December 14, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/14/504482252/-hold-up-time-for-an-explanatory-comma>. Read the entire transcript at <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/782331005>.

Jewish or showing up to services or events. It is about knowing you belong. And that brings us, oddly enough, to page numbers.

I have a habit of announcing page numbers frequently. I first was made aware that this habit was a bit unusual a few years ago when Madeline Cooper was with us as our rabbinic fellow. She actually asked about why I called out so many page numbers, even when it is technically incorrect. For example during the Amidah, the standing prayer (the explanatory comma strikes again!), you are supposed to go right through without interruptions. But right after we chant *magen Avraham v'ezrat Sarah*, you'll hear me announce the page number before we jump into *atah gibor*. Madeline told me that at Hebrew Union College they are encouraged to call out page numbers only when they make large jumps so as to not interrupt the flow of the service. Now if I was leading a service only for HUC students, I would rarely call out the page numbers because I assume they know how to go through a service. But here, I don't make that assumption. I know that many Temple members are new to Judaism or come to services only occasionally, or aren't even Jewish, so I want to be sure that they are able to follow along. While my alma mater prioritizes the flow of the service, I prioritize everyone being able to be part of the service. In a small way, the frequent announcement of page numbers is a way to be welcoming.

It's not just me, and it's not just these ways that we embrace being welcoming. Every time we show someone where to find a prayer book as they walk in, or help someone find their place at Torah study, or define a term, we are helping the Temple become a more inclusive community. We are, so to speak, using an explanatory comma.

The expansive use of the explanatory comma ensures that the broadest possible group of people feel welcome here. I know that those who grew up classical Reform will never get used to the amount of Hebrew we do in the service (it is a lot). And, those who grew up Conservative might still raise an eyebrow when songs like "When I had a Hammer" creep into our services. Those who did not grow up Jewish will face an occasional question about their Jewish practice as kids. We're never going to get there entirely. But when we do not take the knowledge of others for granted, when we lean into the explanatory comma, we create a community where more people feel welcome.

Thus far I've conveniently left out the darker side of the explanatory comma. Cue the scary music... The downside is the danger that those who are 'in the know' feel talked down to or like this isn't for them. In the podcasting world, that might mean fewer listeners, but in Judaism it has more dire consequences if we create a community where we are constantly going over the basics. Those consequences are not just the potential lack of members.

The problem with overusing the explanatory comma is that it can lead to what Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, a professor at Hebrew Union College and founder of the Synagogue 2000 project, calls "pediatric Judaism." (Notice the explanatory comma in that last sentence?) Hoffman has written about how synagogues work, and he has identified a trend of Jewish institutions catering to children rather than adults. Many synagogues contain robust children's programming (often without much Jewish substance), but fail to adequately provide exciting and stimulating offerings for adults. As a result, many families leave synagogues after their

children become b'nai mitzvah.² Now, we have some of that problem here, but I think Hoffman is pointing to a larger issue. Too often, synagogues don't offer anything of substance to keep adults engaged, either before or after their kids go through the b'nai mitzvah process. That's not to even mention those people who don't have kids at all.

Rabbi Dr. David Aaron shared this critique with me while I studied with him in rabbinical school, many years after he served this community. Dr. Aaron asserted that we should challenge people in their learning and their practice. And he practiced what he preached! Some of you may recall that he even went to the extreme of giving you homework to complete before Torah study! Rabbi Susan continued that tradition of offering thought provoking and challenging study.

Being open and welcoming does not imply that we constantly focus on the basics. In fact, as a first-time learner, it can be more exciting to delve into more difficult topics. Our use of the explanatory comma does not mean that we never learn. Look at the challenging text we already studied at the beginning of the service! I challenge you to come to Torah study or our second day Rosh Hashanah services tomorrow and find out for yourself.

Judaism, as we know is all about questioning. We like to debate and discuss among ourselves, and probably have some *savlanut*, some patience, for explaining within these four walls. However, many of us are probably very tired of explaining, yet again, what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are and that, yes, they are more important than Hanukkah. Often, the non-Jewish community needs not just a comma, but an extended explanatory paragraph that comedian Hari Kondabolu calls "Hold Up, Wait a Minute." [You have to say it that way!]

Here are some things that many of us probably have heard over the years:

- Why do the dates of your holidays keep changing?
- I didn't know women could be rabbis!
- But you don't *look* Jewish!
- I heard that the Last Supper was a Passover seder!
- But I thought Hanukkah was the only Jewish holiday!

How many of you have heard such comments, or some like them? How many of you find it annoying? We relate. Many of us have been dealing with having to explain missing work or school for this very day (which was September 19th last year and will be on September 26th next year) most of our lives. I don't want to take away from the frustration many of us might feel, but in the best tradition of Judaism, I want to offer a *d'var acher*, another way to look at this.

I'm going to make the radical suggestion that we should be able to explain the basics of Judaism to people who aren't Jewish and that these questions actually present an opportunity for us. First, part of embracing our own Judaism is being able to explain it to others. Maybe not all the details, but certainly we should be able to talk about why the calendar moves around or explain the basics of Passover. Before there was a rabbi, all of you in the congregation were responsible for teaching the broader community about Judaism. Temple members purposefully brought non-Jews into this space so they could demystify the Jewish experience. Explaining why you are missing school for the holidays is actually a skill we practice in Hebrew school. Being able to answer these questions allows us to grow in our Jewish knowledge.

² Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, *ReThinking Synagogues: A New Vocabulary for Congregational Life*, (Woodstock, Vermont, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006), pg. 57-9.

Not only that, this is an opportunity to introduce people to a more expansive type of Judaism. Most people experience Judaism on television with ultra-Orthodox characters. Now although I did love “Shtisel” as much as the next person, I think the world should know about our brand of Judaism—a more liberal, modern Judaism that honors tradition but is open to the contemporary world. Jews, they look just like us! Who knew? Every time I get the comment, “I didn’t know women could be rabbis,” I grit my teeth a little bit. After all, it’s been almost half a century! But, then I remember that this is an opportunity to not only share with this person, but with others they might meet, so I reply, “Yes, for 50 years now! The first ordination was in 1973!” If they picture me or Rabbi Susan as a rabbi and this congregation as Jewish, then that positive outweighs the negative of yet another “Hold Up Wait a Minute” encounter.

We are part of a community that uses the explanatory comma in the best way, to bring people in and to challenge ourselves to learn more. At a time of uncertainty and upheaval in our lives, this community provides many of us with an anchor. That anchor is more important than ever. At the very beginning of 2020, Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, (explanatory comma!!) published his book Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World. He highlighted an epidemic of loneliness and isolation in our society and how weak social connections can negatively impact our health. We are social creatures. In addition to making us healthier, being connected to others increases our empathy and gives us a stake in more than our own interests.³ In a world where it can be hard to create social connections and friendships, Temple Beth El provides a place to experience community. Murthy says that in addition to our inner circle of close friends and confidants, we need a middle circle of what he calls “occasional companions.” These are groups that gather together around shared interests and tell stories, laugh and sing with one another.⁴ Sound familiar? I asked several people why they come to TBE and why they are so active. Here is what they said:

One person said, “Walking into Temple feels like I’m Norm showing up at Cheers, and it feels good to be part of something bigger than myself that is happy to accept what I can give and stretches me to give in ways I haven’t before.”

Someone said, “I love the people and the community...There’s always something, usually multiple somethings, that I enjoy so much about each individual who I see regularly -- I genuinely like everyone. How often can you say that about a group of people?”

Another shared, “I crawl in to Shabbat Services to leave behind my often trying week, to switch gears and take a breath. I love being in community with people I know and care about as we move through the service with pieces I’ve carried from the past and new tidbits, as well. The ritual grounds me.”

Finally, someone shared, “It started out that the Temple really needed help if it was going to survive, and if not me, then who - was going to take a leadership role? Along the way I have made enduring friendships and seen constant growth. It is satisfying to see the good work that we have accomplished together.”

³ Dr. Vivek Murthy, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. (New York, NY, Harper Wave, 2020), pp. 12-13, 34, 109, 146.

⁴ Dr. Vivek Murthy, pp 221-226.

When we show up we get the opportunity to connect to individuals and a community that matter to us. As someone else said, "I've found it difficult to 'break into' communities and organizations in Maine, but I felt welcomed and connected the first time I attended TBE." It is also a chance to take a breath, leave behind our worries, and center ourselves with ritual or study. Finally, it is a way to make a difference. Without all of you, we wouldn't have a community so showing up means a lot.

We've done a fabulous job the last year and half keeping in touch and connected without being in our building. We've continued to be a community where you can ask questions and share opinions, and where we value the explanatory comma. The next year will call on even more from us. Your presence, in person and on Zoom, helps us to be the kind of community we want to be, one where we are there for one another. And not only does the community gain when you are here, you, too, benefit.

I want to close with the story of a nobleman who lived in a small mountain village in Europe many centuries ago. As he aged, he grew quite concerned about his legacy. What would remain after he died? What could he leave behind? He thought that he should give something grand to his Jewish community. After a great deal of contemplation, he decided to build a synagogue. The plans were a secret. The construction took longer than planned (that might sound familiar) and excitement built.

When the project was finished, the townspeople marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. Stained glass, a beautiful bimah, wooden rafters, an ark so carefully constructed, a silver menorah, and sparkling eternal light. It was perfect.

After a few minutes the townspeople noticed something. A young girl said, "Seems like you are missing something."

The nobleman responded, "Torah, ark, seats, bimah, prayer books, eternal light. It is all here." A brave woman raised her voice and asked, "But where are the lamps? How will we be able to see when we are inside?"

The nobleman pointed to brackets, which were placed all along the walls throughout the synagogue. He then gave each family a lamp as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. But, each time you are not here," he said, "a part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God's house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light."

We need all of you to continue to share your light with our community. As we move into this new year, in this beautiful new building, may we continue to bring the light of our presence and the light of our spirit into our sacred space. May our individual lights help to sustain us and strengthen our community in the year to come.