

“Gathering Holy Sparks”

A few months ago, I was walking with my family down the famous Orchard Street in the Lower East Side of New York. At the turn of the 20th century, this street was teeming with Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Though now the Lower East Side is being redeveloped as a trendy neighborhood with upscale restaurants and shops, then it was the epicenter of immigrant life, a throw back to the shtetls of Poland and Russia.

I described to my kids how the shops once spilled out onto the street with every kind of ware, from pots and pans, to barrels of fresh pickles arrayed beneath awnings painted with Yiddish signs. The hustle and bustle of immigrant life was palpable in those days, the street overflowing with activity even as the tenement apartments were stuffed with humanity.

But now it was Saturday evening, and this once vibrant neighborhood was quiet and empty. We were literally walking down the center of the street. And just then, as the sun was setting before us, a shadowy man scurried out of an old building. “Are you Jewish,” he asked a startled Micah? “Yes,” Micah answered tentatively. “Can you help? Inside, there is a gentleman who has Kaddish to say, and we need a 10th Jew for the minyan.” Naturally, all eyes turned to me, and I sent everyone ahead, while I went in.

Appreciatively, I was taken down to the basement, where the minyan was assembled and waiting – actually waiting for me, the 10th Jew. The rabbi had no idea who I was, and it didn’t matter at all, except that I was there. I was handed a prayerbook and we davened Mincha, the afternoon service. Graciously, I was given the honor of taking the Torah from the ark which, in this case, was not an ark at all, but an old wood burning stove, on top of which the Torah rested, wrapped in a tallit.

As I prayed in that makeshift shul, I looked around and imagined all of the prayers that must have risen up plaintively from that very basement. Prayers for healing of little children stricken with primitive disease; prayers for manna from heaven, a little something to buy bread for a hungry family. I thought of all the minyans that gathered for Shabbat afternoon prayers, and how now, after the ebb and flow of Jewish immigration had receded, it came down to just me.

I was the 10th Jew for the minyan. The person who showed up on this once vibrant Jewish street to make prayer possible, so that a mourner could say his obligatory kaddish.

Wow! What a responsibility that I didn’t even know I had.

As I emerged from the basement, my thoughts were racing. My kids took one look at me and said, “you’re going to use this in a sermon, aren’t you?”

Yup ☺

What can I say? A light went on. I’m the anonymous 10th Jew. In a sense, I thought, we all are that 10th Jew. Our very presence matters. Without us, something is missing from the Jewish people.

And I often see how much part of *your* consciousness this notion is. Each time I meet with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah family, I get the distinct impression that you, both parents and children, are pulled to temple by an engrained responsibility to uphold your part in the Jewish people.

When I speak with Jewish grandparents, it is clear to me that you feel a tremendous weight of tradition on your shoulders, and a calling to be that warm Jewish presence in the life of your grandchildren.

I have come to recognize how each of us instinctively knows that we are the 10th Jew, the one without whom the minyan cannot be held, a synagogue cannot exist, Torah will not be learned, Judaism will not be passed on to our children and grandchildren.

Some time ago, I read a story that speaks to this innate consciousness we all share. It’s the story of a nobleman who lived many centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe. He decided that as an act of tzedakah, he would build a synagogue for the Jewish community there. When the building was finished, all the people came to see it. They marveled at its great beauty and detail.

But then they noticed something strange. There were no lamps in it anywhere. They began to talk among themselves and ask, how could this be? How could such an important detail be overlooked? Finally, they questioned the nobleman about it. With a flourish of his hand, he pointed to the walls and told them to look more closely. They looked and saw that, instead of lamps, there were brackets on all the walls.

And then, he gave to each family, a lamp. He said to them, “Bring your lamp with you when you come to synagogue, and place it in your bracket on the wall. And know that when you’re not here, that part of the synagogue will be unlit. This is to remind you that when you fail to come, some part of God’s house will be dark!”

This story conveys not only the responsibility we carry, but also the great challenge we face today. For not just synagogues and churches, but actually all kinds of civic clubs and organizations are growing dark. In America, our social fabric is fraying and unraveling. Studies are telling us that more and more Americans are disconnected from civic engagement and religious involvement.

In a seminal book called, “Bowling Alone,” Harvard professor, Robert Putnam, documented a tremendous membership decline in everything from gardening clubs to bowling leagues. Over the last 25 years, he says there has been a 58% drop in attendance at club meetings. Family dinners in America have dropped by 43%. And having friends over has dropped by 38%.

Putnam describes this loss as, “declining social capital” – a disintegration of the civic bonds that are vital to a healthy personal life, and to maintaining a cooperative society.

In fact, in another kind of sermon, I might argue that this is behind much of the rift and rancor that we see in politics today. Because of declining social capital, our shared vision of American society is fading.

But these same trends also hit closer to home. The Jewish community is not immune. In their equally seminal book, “The Jewish Within,” Professors Arnie Eisen and Steven Cohen document a new Jewish attitude which they describe as, “the Sovereign Self.”

They write that, “More and more, the meaning of Judaism in America transpires within the self. At the same time, relative to their parents’ generation, today’s American Jews in their thirties, forties, and early fifties are finding less meaning in mass organizations, political activity, philanthropic endeavor, and attachment to the state of Israel.”

In short, American Jews also are “bowling alone.”

What to do about all of this is the great conversation of our day. How do we reverse the trend, and revive that sense of duty that Tom Brokaw once described in his tribute to the WWII generation, which he called the “Greatest Generation” – a generation defined by personal sacrifice and commitment to the greater good of society?

How do we as Jews reignite the sparks of our commitment to a shared destiny? In short, what can we, the members of Temple Solel, do to be counted as that 10th Jew?

Well, as they say, the writing is on the wall – in this case, literally, right here, on the wall behind me. As you know, our Bima depicts the Kabbalistic vision of the big bang of creation, the moral of which is, that it’s up to us to gather up the scattered sparks of creation’s first light and repair the world’s brokenness. It’s a metaphor of course, but a powerful one. Because it teaches that we each have a unique role to play, particular sparks of light that only we can reclaim. Like that lamp the nobleman handed to each member of his newly built synagogue, part of the world will remain unredeemed until we do our part.

At Temple Solel, we adopted this metaphor as our logo, and inscribed it on everything from our building's architecture to our letterhead – "Gathering Holy Sparks to Repair the World." As a congregation, we believe that each of us has a lamp to hold, holy sparks to gather, a minyan that depends on our being present.

And, as your rabbi, I want you to know that I believe in you. I believe this is the kind of place that builds social capital, that stands against the discouraging trends of an America that is increasingly bowling alone, and a Jewish community that is coming undone because of the sovereign self.

What I think distinguishes Temple Solel is that so many of you care and are willing to declare for yourselves, for your children, for your grandchildren a duty to the Jewish people and its future.

And that is why I am taking this occasion to launch a new initiative that I hope will energize you and enrich our community. Appropriately, we are calling it, "Gathering Sparks." Like the Kabbalists, who gathered sparks by performing acts of Torah, we as a congregation are going to make our own pledge to the Jewish people.

As you entered this morning, you received two things. A booklet and a wristband. Our staff has been working for six months to create this booklet for you. It contains every opportunity for gathering sparks at Temple Solel.

This booklet is an amazing catalogue of all that takes place here – from our Early Childhood Center, to our Empty Nesters and Seniors. There are sparks of learning, of social action and Israel action, of family activities, of holiday celebrations, of music, Jewish yoga, Hineynu caring and Facebook conversation.

Every member of your household has a place in this booklet and can gather a spark for your family by participating in an activity. Your children can gather sparks. Your parents can gather sparks. Even your grandparents can gather sparks.

At the back of the booklet, you'll find a menu to fill out – simple choices of activities you think you might want to attend during the year. You'll also find a registration card, which we ask you to bring back to services on Yom Kippur, and place in one of our "Gathering Sparks" baskets. We will then use your card to email personal updates on the activities you've check off.

Our thinking is that we all have great intentions, but then life gets in the way. So, your part of the synagogue remains dark and the holy sparks go unredeemed. We want to help you be proactive now, and not only pray to live differently, but to

take the first steps in organizing your commitments into something manageable and doable that you can fit into your busy year ahead.

Choose the number of classes, programs, activities that you think you could realistically space out over the course of a year, and we will stay in touch to support you in making your best effort. Of course, this is a guilt free commitment and we understand that life is a moving target. The idea is to increase our focus, and support each other in being better Jews, the Jews we would ideally like to be.

As a congregation, maybe we can stand up and defy the disappointing trends in America. Maybe we at Temple Solel can build some social capital, strengthen the Jewish people, and repair this world in our little corner.

This leads to the second thing we gave you – a rubber wristband that we hope you will wear with pride. It says, “Gathering Sparks,” and can serve as a reminder that, to quote my two role models, Elwood and Jake of the Blues Brothers, “we’re on a mission from God!”

Every time someone asks us about our wristband, or we glance at it on our wrist, we can be reminded that we are the 10th Jew, and we have a sacred duty to our ancestors before us and to our children after us.

For the end of the year, we have planned a celebration of all the sparks you’ve gathered. We want to recognize everyone who gathered sparks at a special event in your honor. We want to see how much Torah we can teach and learn, how much joy we can bring to others, how much healing we can bring to the world, and how much stronger and better we can make ourselves as Jews and human beings.

I know that we can transform this community. We can make ourselves and Temple Solel L’Or Goyim, a lamp unto the nations. We can gather sparks, we can renew our Jewish identities, we can raise up this community and, together, we can bring a great light to the dark corners of the world.

In the preface to his book, Gates of the Forest, Elie Wiesel tells of a similar challenge that was once faced several centuries ago, by the generations of the great Bal Shem Tov:

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: “Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know

how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer,” and again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Lieb of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: “I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.” It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is ask You to redeem us, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

Many among us are here because we long for connection with a distant past, because we have a feeling deep within that we are Jews, and that we somehow must implant that same feeling within our children and grandchildren.

But time and place have removed us from tradition, from regular practice, from knowledge of our sacred texts. We do not any longer know the place in the forest, nor how to light the fire, or even the prayer. But, we do remember the story and it lives in our hearts.

For now, this is sufficient. Because we are here, together at this moment, vowing to change in the New Year – refusing to be swept up in the tide of civic withdrawal and bowling alone Judaism. Instead, we can recommit to walking into this building with our lamp in hand – because we are, everyone of us, the 10th Jew, without whom, our corner of the Jewish people remains dark.

Joining together as the community of Temple Solel, I know we can “gather holy sparks to repair this world!”