

## **Raising Up Holy Sparks -- Rosh Hashanah 5765 (2004)**

The fabric on the pews is aged and stained. The carpet is threadbare in places. Little children's feet have left their marks on things, as have their fingers, bathed in Oneg Shabbat chocolate. And though these walls need painting, they hold whispered secrets and countless sacred memories.

Parents tightly clasping hands and whispering, "I love you," at their child's bar or bat mitzvah. The voices of mourners, reciting Kaddish for their husbands and wives, their parents and children. A sleeping infant, swaddled in mother's arms, as the Shabbat morning community joyfully enters her into the covenant of Israel at her naming. A young couple exchanging wedding vows beneath our chuppah.

If only our walls could talk, they would share all this and more.

These are our last High Holy Days in this sanctuary. Soon, it will be time to march our Torahs down the street, where the carpets will be new, the paint will be fresh, and everything will be ready for us – to begin again.

What an incredible journey it has been to this point. For those of us who have been around awhile, we can't help but be nostalgic. My daughter was named here on this bima, just as my two boys each became bar mitzvah here. For them, as for many of your children, this is the only temple they've ever known.

I guess we deserve to be a little nostalgic! And, on this occasion, I can't help but reflect on the remarkable achievement of our founders, who came to a place that was mainly flower fields, and had the foresight to realize that a community would soon grow up here. Some 30 families met in a home and agreed – a temple would have to be built. So, they built one and we, the inheritors of their forward vision, eventually came and joined them. Thirty families have become 770 families, who in turn are building our next building, and we are indebted to them all, for the legacy they have given us.

How does one even begin to describe what Temple Solel has become? We are not just an institution; we are an assembly of souls – searching for meaning, for Jewish identity, for connection with other Jews. We are interfaith families, breaking new ground in synagogue life. We are single parent families and blended families. We are seniors and singles, military and civilian, gays and lesbians, Jews by birth and Jews by choice. We are Jews born in America, Canada, Israel, Iran, Mexico, South Africa, South America, Russia, England, & Turkey – all joining our fate and our faith to the Jewish people thru Temple Solel.

From where I get to sit everyday, it is a remarkable dance. I see those who are exploring Judaism for the first time, tentatively make their way to the gift shop, to buy their first set of Shabbat candlesticks. Nearly every week, I see proud b'nai mitzvah children, standing at the mirror, modeling a new tallit. I see one generation touching the next, as our seniors sit on the library floor and read stories to our preschoolers. I see our students become teachers. I see friends reaching out to friends again and again – at graveside, at shiva minyans, at events joyous and sad.

There is a flame that burns here. It burns in the hearts of an unbelievably dedicated staff. It burns in the hearts of a lay leadership who have given so many hours that we could never afford their professional services if we actually had to pay for them. It burns in the hearts of all of you, who come in and out – dropping off food for JFS, building our sukkah, hosting our shelter, running our Purim carnival, building houses in Mexico, donating funds for our programs, and so much more.

And that's just what I see. Then, there is all that I can't yet see – our future, that new building down the road that will enable us to really reach our potential. As we cast our gaze down El Camino Real, what can we imagine? What do you think our future will hold?

As challenging as the past has been, building a new congregation from scratch, I actually think the future could be even more daunting.

As we look forward to our move, I would like to describe to you the design concept that will carry throughout our new building. The theme is Creation – creation as it was seen through the eyes of the mystical Kabbalah.

The mystics, much like our modern scientists, imaged that our universe began with a Big Bang. God poured pure light, or the seed of energy, into cosmic vessels within space. But the light was so pure and intense, that the vessels could not contain it.

So the vessels exploded – and their fragments scattered throughout the universe, with sparks of the light of creation, clinging to the pieces. Our job, said the Kabbalists, is Tikkun Olam – to recover those holy sparks of light, and to repair the shattered vessels of creation, which we do every time we perform a mitzvah – an act of goodness, an act of holiness, an act of justice or compassion.

The essential teaching of Kabbalah comes down to this: Raise up holy sparks; repair the world. And this is what you will see when you enter our new building. The theme will begin to unfold inside our sanctuary. Our newly designed stained glass, ark, and bima wall, will all reflect the moment of creation – the shattering of vessels, the bursting forth of light. From there, it will carry outward to the mezuzot on all our doorways, and also on our signage, all the way down to the entrance at the street. It will even be carried on our new letterhead.

Our logo will say: “Raise up holy sparks; repair the world.” When I think about our future, the challenges that await us at Temple Solel, I can think of no better expression of our task. Upon our shoulders is an awesome responsibility. To nurture light within souls, to tend to shattered vessels, to repair humankind and piece this fractured planet together.

How do I envision doing this in our new building? In my experience there is only one way to do it – and that is, one person at a time, one encounter at a time. As I’ve often said before, what we are building is a living Jewish laboratory – the safe place to which you can come, crank up our Bunsen burners, and even from time to time, blow up your experiment! Come to Temple Solel to eat or sleep in a sukkah, to chant torah at services, to experiment with kashrut in our kitchen. Our clergy and staff are not performers – we are facilitators to help you, to empower you in new and old Jewish expression.

For many years, I have had two goals for Temple Solel. And honestly, these are sometimes hard to reconcile with each other. The first is, to make sure we are always a welcoming, non-judgmental congregation. Everyone should feel comfortable here, and appropriately included. At the same time, there is that second goal, which is for Temple Solel not to be for beginners only; not to be a synagogue from which, at a certain point, you need to graduate in order to continue your Jewish growth.

We are passionately committed to nurturing light within the souls of all who pass through our doors. And we are up against some very tough odds. The first ever Jewish demographic study of San Diego was released this year, and it tells us exactly what we’re up against – one of the lowest affiliation rates of any community in the country. Only 29% of all Jews living in San Diego, even belong to a synagogue!

At the same time, what we see is that many Americans are adrift and looking for exactly what we have. This year, some of you probably heard about a new phenomenon called the “Faux Mitzvah.” A Faux Mitzvah is basically a coming of age party, without the service. It’s in great demand now among non-Jewish parents and teens, who are searching for a way to mark the milestone of adolescence. The Faux Mitzvah tells me that people are hungering for something that secular society doesn’t offer them – a way to attach meaning to life’s passages, to nurture the light within souls.

So here's the irony – those who can't have a Bar Mitzvah want it. While 71% of those in San Diego who *can* have it, don't want it. That's our challenge. To help more Jews find the holy sparks.

The truth is, we Jews never been big on outreach. In fact, my Christian colleagues often ask me why we don't proselytize a little. Rabbi Alexander Shindler, *alav ha-shalom*, the former president of our Union for Reform Judaism, encouraged us to reconsider that position. I think we definitely need to do a better job of bringing people into our congregation.

Our new building finally gives us room to spread out. More importantly, it gives us room to welcome many more newcomers into our midst. Souls are touched one person at a time. I would ask you to seriously think about what you can do to bring one soul into Jewish life, or to be that welcoming presence when you do see someone new come through our doors. It really only takes one smile, one friendly greeting to make a person feel that he or she belongs.

As I know you know, there are so many psychological barriers to walking into a new synagogue. And as it is, we ourselves don't know a lot of people here, because so many of our members have only joined in recent years. But, as we form ourselves into a more established congregation, we need to be the ones to break down those psychological barriers and make someone new feel accepted.

Our San Diego Jewish community and Temple Solel will only be built by nurturing light within Jewish souls – one soul at a time.

I wonder, what will we be thinking about on the day of our Torah march? As we hold a great procession down El Camino Real, I know we will be carrying our Torah's with pride.

I hope we will also be thinking about the shattered vessels. About those whose lives are broken by illness, or death, or need. Tikkun Olam, repairing the vessels, starts and ends with us.

I read that, in Japan, there is a new profession. *Benriya* are hired to take on many of the tasks that people are afraid to do for themselves. For a fee, *benriya* can be hired to break up with a girlfriend on your behalf, to confront a neighbor who's a nuisance, or even to sleep in bed next to a widow, who's afraid to be alone at night. I don't know that much about Japanese culture, but reading about this tells me that many Japanese are missing one thing in their lives – connection.

In fact, now, I often wonder about our own culture. As much as new technology connects us, it can also have the reverse effect of making us more isolated. I think of my own kids who won't even pick up the phone or visit other kids in the neighborhood, because they talk on-line. When we ask them to get the homework from a friend, they have a great excuse – they can't, because no-one is online! I would also add, that the virtual office has created much the same syndrome for many adults. At home, we can work 24/7 on the computer, phone, & fax, all in our p.j.'s, without ever having had any real human contact.

When we walk through the entry archway of our new building, we will emerge into a circular courtyard. We designed it this way on purpose. We want you to come in and be enveloped. Sit on a bench by the fountain. Grab a book from the library or a cup of coffee from our coffee house. Meet others and relax. No *benriya*, no intermediaries, no virtual world – a circle of meeting and human connection.

We need each other. Others with whom to share our burdens, to talk with about the things that matter in life. To support each other in reaching personal Jewish goals and raising Jewish children. To help those in our midst who are facing serious crises.

And there are many – more than you might imagine. Young mothers undergoing treatment for breast cancer, older women losing their husbands of 50 years to Alzheimer's, unemployment that has lasted for one and two years, in a downsized economy. This is what people are facing right now, here in this sanctuary.

Thank God for our Hineynu, Chavurat Chesed, and Keshet committees at Temple Solel. Our clergy and staff can't do it alone. Tikkun Olam, repairing shattered vessels begins with us.

As you make your vows for the New Year, consider how you could make a difference here. A difference for others and a difference for yourself. There is so much to be done. Driving an isolated senior to services, preparing a meal for a bereaved family, sitting and reading to someone who can't. *Kol Yisrael Arevim zeh l'zeh* – all of Israel is responsible for one another. If we don't help, who will?

Finally, there is a broader community that needs our support. As you know, there is a severe housing crisis in San Diego. Not only is housing expensive, but it's also unbelievably scarce. As a result, more and more middle to low income families are facing hardship. That fine line between making ends meet, and falling into a black hole, is getting thinner and thinner.

Good, working people in our community, with just one bad turn of events, can become homeless. Professionals with advanced degrees, young families with children. But for a twist of fate, there go you or I.

Around the corner from us, and just up the street, you will find migrant workers huddled together, waiting to get picked up for any kind of work. They'll hop into the back of any truck that promises a few dollars at the end of a day. Lord knows what they have to do to survive. I see them in the 7-11 or in the market. They usually walk quietly, almost invisibly thru our midst. Many sleep in open fields, with no sanitation. When it rains, they and their children just get wet. Their plight cannot be ignored, and so we try to bring them food. But there is even more we could be doing if more of us would help.

As a Reform congregation, our mandate to bring about social justice, extends beyond just our members. To repair humankind and piece this fractured planet together means, that we care about the migrant in the field, as much as we do about ourselves. "You know the heart of the stranger," says the Torah, "for you yourselves were strangers in the Land of Egypt."

In our new building, there are seven gates, corresponding exactly to the number of gates into the old city of Jerusalem. These gates will serve as a perpetual reminder of our vital relationship with Israel.

We need Israel. Every time we visit, we are immeasurably enriched by the vibrant Jewish life we encounter. We experience not only our ancient past, as we walk over stones that are thousands of years old – the very stones over which our priests and prophets and rabbis walked. But we also encounter the greatest Jewish civilization of our age – the place where Hertzl's dream of a Jewish homeland is being lived everyday.

At the same time, Israel desperately needs us. As the court of world opinion condemns Israel's right to build a defensive barrier, we need to stand up for Israel. We cannot be naïve and think otherwise: the growing clamor of anti-zionism is nothing more than a veiled form of anti-semitism. And taking away Israel's right of self-defense, is only a pretext for taking away the Jew's right to exist.

Israel has made plenty of tactical mistakes. I am the first to point them out in loving rebuke. But, let's not fool ourselves. With the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the world, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are only going to escalate. *Im lo achshav ematai* – if not now, when? When will we stand up for Israel's security? When will we promote travel to Israel? When will we go out of our way to buy Israeli products?

*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof* – Justice, justice shall you pursue, proclaimed our Torah. To repair humankind and piece this fractured planet together means that we must hear the Torah's prophetic voice. It speaks to us through innocent children living in our fields; through homeless men, women, and children walking among us; through Israeli families torn apart by a suicide bomber.

As I think about our beautiful new home, I sadly envision a future in which the gap between the haves and the have nots is widening, rather than shrinking. With our inspiring new surroundings, it will be tempting to lock ourselves within our gates, and not look outside. But, as from the gates of Jerusalem, it is my deepest hope that from *our* gates, "Torah and the word of God go forth."

So, here we are, greeting the Jewish New Year 5765. Our last High Holy Days together in this building. We cherish the legacy that has been gifted to us. And we are poised to carry it forward, as we declare that the future of Temple Solel rests on our shoulders.

*We will be the ones to nurture the light within souls – to instill Jewish values, practice, and knowledge in all who enter our gates.*

*We will be the ones to tend to shattered vessels – to share our compassion and healing, and our own sacred life journey with others in our temple.*

*And, we will be the ones to repair humankind, and piece this fractured planet together.*

*As a community moving to our new home, we will, "Raise up holy sparks and repair the world."*

As I consider our future and all we have yet to accomplish, I am inspired by a place I once learned about. At the end of a long, winding path, there is a glorious Daffodil Garden. Five acres of countryside are planted with blazing daffodils. It is as if buckets of richly hued paint had been poured over the hills and sloping valleys.

And it all belongs to one woman who lives on the property. On her porch, is a sign. It reads: "*Answers to the Questions I know You Are Asking.*"

- 1) *50,000 bulbs;*
- 2) *One at a time, by one woman;*
- 3) *Began in 1958.*

I would say to you that, it is amazing what one person can do over time, let alone what a whole community like Temple Solel could do. Our ancestors planted for us. Now it is our turn – so let us go out together, to our new garden, and begin to plant again.