

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
Rabbi Stephanie M. Alexander

AN INTEGRATED, INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

Good yontif - and thank you. Thank you for the open hearts and spirits with which you entered our worship space this morning. Thank you for your beautiful voices - yes, *your* beautiful voices - which have filled this space with heartfelt prayer and joyous celebration. Thank you for prioritizing, as has the leadership of our congregation, the importance of being together as ONE community on these holiest days of the year. Thank you, especially, for enabling the many generations of our congregation to come together in one space. For, if the great sage Hillel once asked, "If not now, when?", I would ask, "If not here, where?"

Consider the following bit of news: In China, it has been deemed an official and punishable crime for adult children to neglect their elderly parents. It seems, with millions of Chinese workers now living thousands of miles away from their home towns, what had been a cherished tradition of filial piety has unfortunately eroded as of late. So, under a new law that took effect at the beginning of July, those who fail to visit or call their parents can be fined. The law doesn't spell out how many visits are required or how frequently phone calls should be made; it will be up to disgruntled parents to lodge a complaint. But it doesn't bode well that vendors on China's largest e-commerce website have already begun a service to send strangers to visit with one's parents - to chat, celebrate birthdays, even dance and sing.¹ So much for bringing the generations together.

It's an outlandish example, but it does touch upon a reality we know to be true and increasingly prevalent in our society: Generations are drifting further and further apart. There's less face-to-face interaction between those of different ages, they're sharing fewer and fewer experiences with one another, and there's no doubt we are seeing and feeling the consequences.

A recent Pew study reported that today's teenagers send and receive an average of 88 texts a day. Socializing at every hour on phones and a whole slew of other devices, "they're living under the constant influence of their friends." As Joel Stein wrote in this summer's much discussed *Time* cover story about the "Me Me Me Generation": "Never before in history have people been able to grow up and reach age 23 so dominated by [their] peers. To develop intellectually you've got to relate to older people, older things: 17-year-olds never grow up if they're just hanging around other 17-year-olds."

At the other end of the spectrum, older generations have become isolated, as well. There's no single cause to point to, rather it is often the result of a combination of factors: an injury or illness, job loss or retirement, the absence of reliable transportation, the needs of a partner or spouse with Alzheimer's or other illness that requires constant care, and more. But the result is that as many as 17% of Americans 50 and older are currently living in isolation, and the number

¹ *The Week*, July 19, 2013

appears to be growing.² Whereas younger generations are increasingly defining life's meaning in the exclusive company of their peers, too many older individuals are struggling with how they can *bring* meaning to their lives, isolated from others.

Generations are drifting apart, but we need each other, we need to come together. Fortunately, the gap doesn't have to be inevitable.

One of my favorite observations in the *Time* article was that, while we often act like it, believe it or not, older and younger generations are not actually different species. Consider one of the factors most often said to cause a generational divide: Technology. Constantly updating Facebook, posting photos on Instagram, tweeting a moment's deep or (more likely) fleeting thought - these aren't new trends so much as they are the continuation of old trends with new technology.

"Posting vacation photos on Facebook," Stein writes, "is actually less obnoxious than 1960s couples trapping friends in their houses to watch their terrible vacation slideshows. Can you imagine if Boomers had had YouTube - how many home videos we would have had to suffer through? Or how many Instagrams of people playing in the mud we would have been subjected to during Woodstock? In many ways it seems we blame Millennials for the technology that happens to exist right now. Yes, they check their phones during class, but think about how long you can stand in line without looking at your phone. Now imagine being used to that technology your whole life *and* having to sit through algebra."³

No, different generations are not different species; we just need to reach out to and be with one another. And it seems to me that one of the most natural places to do so, one of the most important places where we ought to be able to bridge some of that gap, is in the synagogue.

A healthy synagogue, like ours - a growing, dynamic, vibrant synagogue - has older members and younger members; it has multigenerational families and individual households who find their way to the synagogue on their own, separated from their families of origin by geography or religious observance. With so many people of different ages and backgrounds coming together, synagogues seem to hold tremendous and inherent possibility for intergenerational connection. But we have to work at it to realize it - so how?

One place I think we can draw inspiration is from a concept my colleague, Rabbi Elaine Zecher, has carried over from the medical world to the world of synagogues: "Integrative medicine."

The concept arose in the medical community from the consistent and widespread use of medical approaches - like acupuncture, herbal remedies, massage, and meditation - not commonly practiced in established medical institutions like hospitals and doctors' offices. Their practice was widespread but they were deemed alternative or complementary as they were not part of the mainstream. Slowly, the medical establishment began to explore how best to incorporate them into mainstream medical settings. Over the course of two decades, what was once thought of as

² Study conducted by AARP (at www.aarp.org)

³ Edited.

"alternative medicine" turned from having an exclusively complementary role in the practice of medicine to being more commonly integrated and part of routine treatment protocols. Side by side with traditional medical treatments like prescription drugs, surgery, and other modern methods, the juxtaposition of these treatments created the potential for a synergistic relationship aimed at preventing, treating, and managing diseases. Each treatment could and had stood on its own, but combined they could have a more powerful influence on the total health and well-being of an individual. Applied in coordinated fashion, the multiple modalities of integrative medicine could lead to a stronger result.⁴

What we need is an integrated community - and that's precisely what a synagogue can provide. But, in order to do so, we have to follow the direction of the medical world: What has thus far played a complementary role needs to become substantially more integrated into the whole. Consider our worship at KKBE - a prime example. Senior Shabbat, Tot Shabbat and youth-led services are among the special offerings that currently complement our "regular" Shabbat evening and morning worship. How do we know they're complementary, outside the mainstream? They each receive their own targeted publicity and invitations; they each have their own attendees who, for a variety of reasons - difficulty in getting to synagogue, the attention span of their children, the hour of the day - may only come to that particular service. They also each seem to prompt another cohort to stay away - whether because of a dislike for the organ, the noise of energetic children, or the perception that they (or anyone) can outgrow the poetry of Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss. Of each of our "complementary" worship services, there are those who simply say, "that's not for me".

But what do we risk when we serve one of our generational populations by offering exclusively parallel and complementary experiences? We communicate - whether intentionally or not - that the worship experience in which they feel most comfortable is not part of the mainstream. So is it any wonder that older congregants can leave a Senior Shabbat service still feeling isolated and unconnected? Or that so many young adults who have attended youth services on the holidays throughout their most formative years are seeking out independent minyanim as opposed to making their spiritual homes in synagogues?

When I retire, years from now, I would like it said at my retirement celebration that I figured out how to create a true "family service" - a meaningful experience for every member of our congregational family in one worship service. I picture it somewhat like these jigsaw puzzles I recently discovered called "family puzzles", which have big and medium sized pieces for little hands, and smaller pieces for grown-up hands; yet all of the pieces and sections somehow fit together and everyone gets to work together side-by-side. I think if we're willing to compromise, such intergenerational worship is possible, and if we cooperate with one another I believe the result can be truly amazing. But the fact of the matter is that there is no magic formula, and it may take a whole career to figure one out.

In the meantime, I think we know at least one of the keys to this kind of powerful intergenerational worship, and we can implement it right away. But it's not in the hands of a

⁴ Adapted from "Preparing for the New *Machzor* and the High Holy Days: An Integrated Approach", Elaine Zecher, *CCAR Journal*, Summer 2013.

rabbi or any service leader to accomplish. It won't come about through any particular piece of music or prayerbook or physical setting; and it's not about whether there's organ or guitar, a sermon or a story. Meaningful intergenerational worship happens when we can each recognize spirituality in the experience of another - and that, in turn, takes *us* to a spiritual place.

It happens when we see our youth groupers and campers dance and spin with the music and realize they feel comfortable in their community and their Judaism brings them true joy. It happens when we see a broad smile on the face of an older congregant as she chants the Haftarah blessings, and realize she is remembering when her father sat her down to learn these words as a child - insisting that any *daughter* of his, just like any son, should feel at home in her tradition. It happens when we see a congregant's face suddenly wet with tears and realize that, taking care of children and parents, she always has to be so strong - yet, moved by a particular prayer or just comfortable enough in this sacred space, she was able to release her own emotions for a bit and draw upon the strength of her community instead.

You see, a service, a prayer, a piece of music doesn't necessarily have to be something you might ordinarily describe as being *for you* in order for it to be meaningful or inspirational - sometimes even profoundly so.

And this is the kind of integrated community we can more consistently be. We need everyone together - not only with *a* place (too often separate and distinct) at the temple, but with everyone together in *one* place, in *the* place, more often throughout the year. One of God's most evocative names is *HaMakom*, "The Place" - for when we do all come together in common spirit and purpose, God most assuredly dwells among us, as well.

Our prayer book reminds us that three generations prayed, each through their own experience, each through their own vision and in their own way.⁵

Abraham, with the fervor of justice, pleaded for the cause of cities.
Sarah, in the pain of waiting, dared to hope for new life.

Isaac, meditating alone in the field, lifted his eyes to find love.
Rebecca asked for the ability to discern God's call.

Jacob climbed the rungs of night into heaven, seeking destiny.
Leah dreamed of love; and Rachel sought harmony.

What they, as we, sought - above and through all else - was God's Presence. May our coming together - many generations as one community - ever bring us strength, inspiration and the feeling of the divine in our midst. Amen.

⁵ Based on *Mishkan Tefila*, p. 245.