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Our Place in History

One hundred years ago these *Yamim Noraim*, Franz Rosenzweig, the pioneer Jewish existentialist and one of the great thinkers of the last century, almost converted to Christianity.

Born in 1886, Rosenzweig grew up in an intellectually engaged, culturally assimilated German Jewish home.¹ Although his parents were proud Jews, nothing about their lives suggested to young Franz that Judaism mattered much. And among the rest of Rosenzweig's circle of intellectual elite, religion appeared similarly irrelevant.

But away at university Rosenzweig encountered students for whom faith did matter, deeply—devout Christians who found in their Christianity moral direction, solace and joy. Rosenzweig admired their devotion, and so he decided to join them.

When he informed his parents—well, you can imagine their horror. “What can we do to make Judaism easier for you?” they must have asked. And Rosenzweig, being Rosenzweig, would have explained to them that they just didn't get it: He wanted a faith not simply of convenience but one that demanded something of him, that proclaimed its own relevance, and that required he act and live consciously according to its precepts.

Before converting, Rosenzweig decided to experience the *Yamim Noraim* one final time as a Jew—to give the faith of his fathers one last look. His parents, now suddenly devout, refused to allow the apostate to accompany them. So 100 years ago these Holy Days, Franz Rosenzweig found a little shul in Berlin he would enter to say goodbye to Jewish life. But instead, something else happened. Rosenzweig never described precisely what, so we can only conjecture based on his life and contributions that followed. This much is clear: In that little shul, Rosenzweig discovered a Judaism he had not believed existed. There he found a Jewish community for whom faith mattered...profoundly. 100 years ago this week...

Dear friends, I am aware of history tonight/this morning and of our place in it. I am aware that the selection of a new senior rabbi represents a decision of great consequence in the life of a congregation. And although I keep telling myself that this is just another High Holy Day sermon and that I should not be too nervous, I am aware that this is *not* just another High Holy Day sermon...and I am nervous.

But I'm also overjoyed, excited, and filled with anticipation and hope for what I pray will be our many wonderful years together. And I'm deeply honored, to have come to this great congregation, so rich in history and in promise, guided through the years by such extraordinary leadership, lay and professional. Although I will continue to thank them privately, we all need to acknowledge with gratitude the remarkable clergy,

¹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

staff, teachers and lay leaders who are the foundations of this temple. I will, however, thank publicly one individual: Rabbi Dr. David Posner, whom I proudly and humbly succeed. David, as I said at the Annual Meeting last spring, what makes this congregation so special to so many of its members, what makes it feel like home to them, is you and the love people have for you because of the love they know you feel for them. The rabbi's most precious role in congregational life is that of pastor and friend, and that is what you are for them and what you will always be. To learn from you continues to be my great joy.

I am aware of history tonight/this morning and of our place in it. And I am aware that you certainly have many questions about this youngish man who stands before you as your new senior rabbi. What, you probably would like to know, is his vision for our congregation?

Let me begin to answer by saying that the vision which guides us forward will be one we fashion together. This is your temple. I cherish the opportunity to partner with you—your devoted officers and trustees, creative and passionate committee chairs, and committee members ever-willing to roll up their sleeves and get things done. Only in such a partnership is sacred work accomplished and sacred community built.

Still, I know that to be a rabbi is to be more than just a fellow builder; it is also to be an architect, to articulate a vision. And here is where the story of Franz Rosenzweig intrigues me and excites me. What saved Rosenzweig for the Jewish people was a chance encounter with a community of Jews for whom Judaism was powerfully relevant.² When does Judaism become powerfully relevant? When it offers true and purposeful community: community that supports us through the challenges of our lives, community that engages us with the challenges of our time. This should be our vision for Temple Emanu-El.

T'kiah: Building Community

A wonderful *aggadah* teaches that when King Solomon built the Temple, he installed two gates—one on the right and one on the left—so that as people entered from opposite ends of the Temple court and circled through it, they would meet face to face, talk and learn about the goings-on in each other's lives...building true community. On top of his Temple, the King erected a platform for sounding the *shofar*. Its first note, *t'kiah*, called that community together.

The temple is where we Jews build true community, where all are welcomed and embraced. Like a *sukkah*, a congregation should be constructed of many different branches woven together: the young and the old, the married and the unmarried, single parents, grandparents, gays and heterosexuals, non-Jewish spouses, individuals with disabilities—all who wish to participate in Jewish life regardless of age, race, gender identity or expression, or financial means. The broader the *sukkah's* base, and the more tightly its branches are woven, the stronger it stands. So, too, the synagogue: The greater the variety of people welcomed within it and the closer they feel to one another, the stronger the temple stands.

² Rabbi Harold Kushner, "Franz Rosenzweig Comes Home," *Faith and Family*, p. 111.

I want for Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York to be the place where religiously liberal Jews of all stripes feel welcome and at home. And that, in answer to the big question, is why I am choosing to wear a *kippah* and a *tallit*. If our temple is to feel welcoming to many seeking a synagogue today, we need to signal our openness to ritual practices now normative among the broader swath of the Reform Jewish community. While at first they may make us a little uncomfortable for their newness, they won't diminish the essential nature of the worship we love, unique in its elegance, beauty and transcendence.

As you come to know me, you will learn that while ritual is important to me, it is not an area where I draw any lines in the sand. The *tallit* is a beautiful garment: The feeling of the shawl around the shoulders is likened to God's protective embrace; the fringes that hang from it remind us to uphold the *mitzvot*. The *kippah*...a custom, not a commandment...instills humility before the Almighty, reminding us of God above. I derive meaning from them; I enjoy them; but I also can pray comfortably without them. And whether you wear them or not is your decision. The Reform Movement, of which this temple was the third congregation in the country and the first in New York City, was founded on the principles of religious autonomy and informed choice. Those ideals can be lived out only in an air of openness to diversity of practices and views.

This is what I believe. And I'll always tell you what I believe. I hope you'll do the same. We are partners in the creation of this sacred community, so the honest exchange of ideas is critical. Martin Buber, Rosenzweig's close friend, taught that when we thus open ourselves to one another, the *Shechinah*, "God's presence," abides among us.

Therefore over the next 12 to 15 months, I will be inviting every member of Temple Emanu-El to meet with me in groups of 20 or so at a time. I need to hear about your passions and concerns. I have already spoken with more than 200 members, and the conversations have been wonderfully enriching for me. I have learned about people's generations-long affiliations with Temple Emanu-El, or their escape from the Nazis, or their finding Judaism through the love of a husband or wife or the excitement of their children. I have met Peace Corps volunteers and members who 50 years ago marched in Washington with Dr. King. And I'd like to meet each of you to learn what motivates your affiliation and what would enrich it. As I said at the outset, this is your temple...your home, and any vision we implement for its future will be one we fashion together.

Sh'varim: The Challenges of Our Lives

T'kiah summons us to build our spiritual community. But if our spiritual community is to be relevant, our faith must have purpose. One must be to help us negotiate life's uneven terrain.

To the rejoicing, the synagogue must say: Come sanctify your happiness.
To the sorrowing: We are here to help. To the lonely it must offer friendship.
To the wandering spirit, the synagogue must say: Come home.

The *shofar*'s second note, *sh'varim*, is the broken note: the cry of disappointment, of regret, of loss felt most poignantly at this season. A woman writes: "The Jewish holidays are a time for families to be together, sharing joy and happiness. This is not so in my family. I am divorced; my two children will be away. I suffer in silence because I don't want them to feel guilty. A holiday that used to be filled with happiness is now sad. Am I alone in experiencing these feelings?" She is not.

So many are hurting. While our congregation celebrates countless joys, there exists enough suffering here to break the heart: the husbands and wives, siblings and friends who have grown apart; the parents unable to communicate with their children; the grieving and the sick; the isolated and the lonely; the child suffering silently the bullying of others; the teenager standing alone outside a circle of friends. Here those who are broken or struggling must know they can come for healing and strength. As a congregation, we need to create new ways of learning about our members' needs and of letting them know that Emanu-El is a home that can help.

The 19th century Chasid Menachem Mendel of Rymanov taught, "Human beings are God's language." Our name Emanu-El means "God is with us." Here the suffering must feel God's presence in our outstretched hands.

T'ruah: The Challenges of Our Time

Studies have shown that young Jews—but not just young Jews, all Jews—are more likely to join and remain tied to organizations that demonstrate their relevance. Judaism becomes powerfully relevant when it inspires us to face with faith the challenges of our lives...and when it impels us to stand with conviction against injustice in the world around us.

Here we will teach children and adults—people of all measures of Jewish literacy—a Judaism committed to wrestling thoughtfully and fearlessly with the critical issues of our time. For Torah has something to say about the role of government in lifting up those slipping through society's cracks; Talmud speaks directly to the distribution and cost of health care; Mishnah to the use of capital punishment. As our member and mayor told the world, Jewish tradition has something to say about a society's responsibility to protect its citizens, its children, from senseless violence. To the tragedies of our world, Judaism is terribly relevant!

While *t'kiah* calls us to build our community, and *sh'varim* to make our community a place of healing and comfort, the *shofar*'s third note, *t'ruah*, demands we turn our attention to the wider world. Maimonides heard in *t'ruah*'s staccato alarm: "Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers, out of your slumber!"

There is a story of a young boy awakened early one morning by the chimes of a grandfather clock. He went downstairs to the living room where the clock seemed to him to be chiming out of control. "One, two, three, four," he counted. When it reached "17, 18, 19, 20," the worried child ran upstairs to his parents. "Quick, wake up!" he cried. "It's later than it's ever been!"

T'ruah warns us it's later than it's ever been for the more than 46 million poor in this country. It's later than it's ever been for the more than 30,000 Americans who will die from gun violence this year alone. To human suffering wherever it exists, at home or abroad, our community, our country, our human family must respond—and not rhetorically but purposefully and responsibly.

And here I would add a word about the heightening tension in the Middle East. It's later than it's ever been for the more than one million child refugees and the more than 100,000 dead as a result of Syria's civil war, the more than 1,400 murdered with poison gas, so many of them children. As the violence there continues, our concern deepens: for Syria's innocent victims and for Israel's security. The balance of considerations there is so complex: Should the United States decide to strike, Syria and Iran have threatened to retaliate against Israel; should we not intervene, many fear Iran, sensing a weakening of American resolve, will advance with impunity its nuclear ambitions. Neither scenario is a good one for Israel. While I will address the vital importance of our support for Israel on Yom Kippur, I encourage you to remain after services tomorrow morning/this morning to hear Ambassador Ido Aharoni, Israel's Consul General in New York. Israel and its people must be very much in our prayers this Rosh Hashanah.

T'ruah commissions us to tend to the welfare of our own people...and of all people. Under the leadership of our *Tikkun Olam* Committee, we do so with greater energy and devotion than any synagogue I know. And you always have, whether it was the Women's Auxiliary aiding the war effort or past-president Louis Marshall fighting for Civil Rights and civil liberties, world Jewry and the environment. Whether generations ago or today, it always has been our calling to view the struggles of the human community here and around the world through a Jewish lens, to wrestle with our own roles in addressing them, and then to respond wherever possible with our hands, but always with our voices—because we believe as Rosenzweig did: It is up to us to redeem God's creation.

T'kiah! Let us build a home in which we all have a place.

Sh'varim! Let our home be a place of comfort, the place to which we return for all that matters in our lives.

T'ruah! From our home let us move forward to rebuild our world.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa taught that the left horn of the ram God gave Abraham to sacrifice instead of Isaac God later blew at Sinai; the right horn, greater than the left, God will blow in the time to come, when this world that is broken and those lives that are broken will be healed and whole; when all those shattered notes will join together in a triumphant *t'kiah gedolah*, as it is written, “And it shall come to pass on that day, a great *shofar* will be sounded.”

Kehilah Kedoshah: A Community of Meaning

I return to the story of Franz Rosenzweig where we began. In a sense, the drama that unfolded in that little shul in Berlin plays out in every synagogue at this season—Jews coming together to find community and to find meaning. And that is what the temple

must offer: community and meaning. After all there may be another Franz Rosenzweig sitting among us whose connection to our faith depends on the passion with which the rabbi preaches it and the congregation embraces it.³

As I have said to many of those with whom I've met these past two months, as I long as I have wanted to be a rabbi, I have wanted to be a congregational rabbi, to serve a temple family. I cherish the opportunity to labor with you in loving partnership as we build a community of meaning for all the times and seasons of our lives, as we worship with joy, as we nurture the next generation, and as we sound the *shofar* summoning us to speak out and stand up for what we know to be right. But more than anything else, I cherish the opportunity to be your pastor and your friend: to celebrate your joys, to comfort you in sorrow; to offer counsel when I can, always to listen; to support you in your striving to create lives of Jewish meaning. This is what it means to me to be your rabbi: to know you, to challenge you, to love you.

This is an exciting time for us, the beginning of a covenantal partnership. It is, as one of you recently described it, much like a marriage. So may we be patient with one another, honest, gentle and loving. And may we be guided by a vision that we fashion together. May our *chuppah*, this synagogue...our home, be like a *sukkah*—infused with a sense of God's presence, open to the needs of the world around us, and woven tightly with the branches of sacred community, beneath which we celebrate, find strength, learn and grow...together.

Amen.

³ Rabbi Harold Kushner, "Franz Rosenzweig Comes Home," *Faith and Family*, p. 112-113.