

## WILL I GIVE WATER OR WILL I GIVE WINE?

My favorite Jewish story, of all time, was one that I told during my Confirmation service, some 20 years ago. It's been around a long time. You may even recall hearing it last year. But it's still as applicable as ever. It goes like this:

“There was once a King who was visiting a particular town. In preparation for the King's visit the townspeople decided to fill a giant barrel with wine and present it to the King upon his arrival. But how were they going to get so much wine to fill the giant barrel? They were not a rich town, and the people within it had enough to support themselves, but not much else. So they needed to come up with a plan. They came up with a brilliant idea; each family in the town would bring one flask filled with their best wine and pour it into the giant barrel. This way the barrel would fill with the sweetest, most delicious wine the King had ever tasted. And if everyone was able to give, they would have a beautiful present that wouldn't cost anyone too much. The townspeople grew more and more excited over the idea. They placed a giant barrel in the center of the town with a ladder reaching to the top and every day people lined up to pour their flask of wine into the barrel.

The day finally arrived and the King visited the town. The people were so excited to present the King with their wonderful gift that they had spent weeks preparing. The King was shown to the barrel and was given a big, beautiful goblet to sample the delicious wine. They filled his goblet high and waited in anticipation as he took his first sip. As he drew the cup away from his lips, the towns people were shocked by the look on the King's face. He looked very confused and somewhat unhappy. The head of the

town stepped forward and inquired, “King, we have spent weeks pouring in our best wine. How does it taste?” And the King responded, “That wasn’t wine at all. What I drank was just plain water!”

As it turns out, each family had thought to themselves, “Why should I be the one to pour in a flask of my best wine? I will pour in water, instead. I am sure no one will notice if there is just one flask of water among all that wonderful wine that is already there.” And because everyone in the town thought that way, no one ended up pouring in any wine. Everyone was relying on someone else to give their best. And the result was that no one gave anything at all.

Last night, at our Erev Rosh Hashanah services, I asked you to turn to someone near to you, and share the WHY behind your decision to be part of Temple Chaverim. What we learned is that EVERYONE has a reason for joining in a particular community. Everyone’s reasons may be different, but they exist - otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.

Communities can be defined in a broad range of terms. There are the communities that you are born into, like a family or a particular geographic location, such as a city or village. There are communities that you are required to be part of, like going to elementary school or being incarcerated (hopefully those don’t feel like one and the same). There are communities that you chose to be part of like a sports team, a book club, or YES, even a synagogue community. No one requires you to be in those places. In fact, each one of us woke up this morning and made the decision not to go to work or school or out with others, and instead to be here - to be present now. Hineini - here we are! We are a community made up of people who choose to put aside other amounts of time, money, and energy in order to be here, all together.

We are a group of volunteers, lay leaders, members, and people who are seeking out one thing in common - to find a Jewish community that serves our needs and that we want to be part of.

When you are voluntarily part of a community, it's natural to feel a deeper connection to being part of that community. As humans, we are inherently selfish - we like to make sure we have our basic necessities met like food, safety, and shelter. Once those needs are met, we are free to spend the rest of our time, energy, and money to endeavors that bring us joy, satisfaction, and some form of wholeness. And so we choose activities that bring us some sense of increased and heightened joy. Let's face it - if we didn't like being here, we wouldn't be here.

If you were not at last night's service, it's probably been a while since you asked yourself WHY you are part of this community. But I find that it's helpful to check in with yourself, periodically, as to WHY we do what we do in life. Even if it's a small or seemingly unimportant reason, it still matters and still guides the way you spend your time in that place and space and with those people. Moreover, at the turn of a New Year, I think it's vital that we ask not only WHY we are here, but WHAT we are doing to make the community, any community that we're part of, a better, brighter, more invigorating place to be, for all. Our Judaism teaches us that community is sacred, and so we must always see ourselves as part of the holy work that helps make our experience significant.

I want to start by being clear - I'm not suggesting that we are the townspeople who all poured water in the barrel instead of contributing our best wine. If that were the case, our community couldn't and wouldn't exist. But, like every community that exists, we have people all along the spectrum who are contributing various amounts. It's not uncommon, no matter what the size or location of the community, to have the people who ALWAYS get tapped for projects, the people who might rally behind one or two causes, and the people who come when it best

suits them or their needs. And being in any one of these categories is NOT inherently bad. Not at all. Communities are made up of all different types of people. We come to different communities for different reasons and often our engagement in that community is a reflection of why we are there. You cannot have a community made up entirely of leaders and you also cannot have a community entirely made up of followers. No matter where you lie on the spectrum, that is okay. What I'd like to suggest is that we begin to challenge the way in which we engage with this community, no matter where we are. Engaging in a community means investing in where it matters most, to you.

I believe there are three main ways that we engage within any given community. We contribute our time, our energy, and our money. At any point in time, we are ideally contributing some variation of all three. It is unrealistic to believe that we could be contributing 100% of our time, our energy, or our money to any one endeavor. Otherwise, you'd have nothing to give anywhere else in life. Rather, I'd like us to take stock of where we are on each of these spectrums, and ask ourselves - could we be doing more? Should we be doing more? Do we want to be doing more? At this time of year, when we're taking an individual assessment of where we are in our spiritual lives, we can also begin to think about how we interact with our community and what changes we'd like to see being made.

Contributing more time to our synagogue doesn't mean that you have to jump to be a committee chair or on the board of trustees - though if you're interested, I'm happy to connect you to the right people! Rather, it just means showing up more than you did before. If you're someone who comes to services about once every month or two, maybe try coming for even one or two more Shabbatot in that timeframe. We have many, MANY areas in our community where you can choose to spend your time if Shabbat is not your thing: you could join Michael Wright

at the Ronald McDonald house serving brunch to families that have loved ones in the hospital. You could join Lise Mayer as part of the volunteer corps, who is beginning a Caring Corps network for those who need some support. You could join Donna Bloom at Meditation and simply relax and unwind. There's a lot that happens simply by showing up to a community. You might find you have increased connections to others, more awareness of what's happening and what's being offered, as well as more exposure to Jewish learning and living. As we know, "Showing up is often half the battle<sup>1</sup>." And time is an individual experience. You can choose how much and how often you'd like to give it, and where you want to contribute it most based on what you need. Unlike energy, it doesn't require you to do much other than to be present, to absorb what is around you, and to appreciate what is being offered to you.

Giving of your energy is different than giving your time. Time involves showing up and being part of what is provided for you. Giving your energy means that you are an active part of creating the community around you. It might be easiest to think of this category as akin to leadership. If there's something that needs to be done, you can be the one to help make that happen. We know, from the laws of thermodynamics, that energy is never created or destroyed. But it can be transferred or changed from one form to another. The same is true of leadership, especially in a synagogue. Our leadership and the people who are creating opportunities for others, are always changing, and that's a good thing. We should always be getting new ideas, new people and newly transferred energy to help create a meaningful community that is reflective of everyone's needs. You don't necessarily have to be a leader, as prescribed by the committees of our synagogue, either. You simply need to see a void and want to be part of what we do. Do you want to start a social group for parents of young children? Start it! Do you have

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen

a desire to connect all the people you know and are close with here in our community? Make it happen! Is there something you're not getting Jewishly? Speak up! The best kind of change and progress happens when it comes from the people who begin to see a need and then start to give their energy to be part of the solution. That's true in our community and in life. As we begin to think, this Rosh Hashanah, about how we want to be spending our year ahead and what matters most to us, all I ask is that you consider the following, when it comes to where you spend your energy, "Are your needs truly being met? And if not, how can you help make this community feel more like a place you want to be?"

People can be funny around talking about money. It can feel very personal and incredibly private and some people don't like to air that in front of others. But I'd like to suggest that we should absolutely be talking about money, at least in a communal sense. And instead of calling it money, I'd like to think about the Jewish notion of contributions. Because Judaism is actually replete with examples of the importance of money, contributions, and giving towards communities that you believe in. The townspeople with the barrel of wine didn't each have much to contribute, but theoretically they could take a portion of what they had and contribute it to the greater good - they just chose not to. And when talking about giving, it's important to remember that giving is a sacred and holy act part of our Jewish tradition. We are commanded to tithe - to give a portion of what we earn, in order to help our society function properly. We also know that even the poorest among us is required to give some portion to charity, even if they themselves are receiving charity. Why? Because our world is built on helping others, and seeing that our society has what it needs, regardless of your station in life. The High Holidays can feel like a particularly strange time to talk about money, but I believe it to be an important time to be taking stock of all that you've done this year and all that you plan to do next year. What and

how did I earn, honestly? Where did I give and where did I hold back? What could have been helped, had I only been able to give, even just a little more? Our society functions through our economic system and our Jewish world is no different - that's why our sages and our Rabbis were so explicit about the need to give. And while you do not need to fill the entire barrel by yourself, it is an important time for you to think about the people and institutions in your life and ask yourself the following - Will I give water or will I give wine?

I have always been fascinated by how people come together. If you have ever read Priya Parker's book, "The Art of Gathering" you have learned that there is almost nothing more powerful than the intention behind how a community or grouping of people meet with one another. When done correctly, it can be the most meaningful connective experience you ever have. There is so much potential in how and why we gather, if we do it right. I spend a lot of time thinking about why people join in, and how they gather together, especially in a religious context. One of my favorite anecdotes about religious engagement comes out of California. Pastor Rick Warren arrived to a small community in Orange County, CA in 1980. He noticed a few small churches and many unengaged people and he decided he wanted to learn more about them. So, he went door-to-door and sat in people's homes and listened to them about their lives, what they liked to do, and how they spent their time. He didn't ask them about their religion, if they were affiliated or involved, or what they wanted to see out of a church. Instead, he listened to them. He talked to them. He asked questions and probed into what they wanted from life. And then, he built his church. He built his church to reflect many of the trends that he heard - wanting a central place to meet others, a place to join in activities with like-minded folks. Something that felt fun, warm, exciting, and worth their time. And because he built it, they did

come. Today, the Saddleback church of Orange County California boasts over 20,000 members, engaged in every aspect of religious and church life<sup>2</sup>.

More recently, this past summer, headlines in England captured the story of the Norwich Cathedral and how it tried to increase engagement. Although it was built in the 11th century and is one of the largest churches in Europe, they began trying something completely new and different. The church constructed a large carnival ride to be housed inside the cathedral itself, drawing in 20,000 visitors and 10,000 riders. The Bishop of Lynn, the Right Reverend Jonathan Meyrick said, “God is a tourist attraction” and gave his sermon from halfway up the 50 foot slide that was in the shape of a lighthouse. He then slid down as he finished his delivery. The dean of Norwich Cathedral explained that this was not a gimmick - it was a way to bring people into the Church who might not have otherwise come. Or seen it as a space for them. It was a true act of changing people’s minds about what the well-established Church had to offer<sup>3</sup>.

We, at Temple Chaverim, are going to test some of these assumptions. No, I’m not going to be suspended from mid-air as a trapeze artist. Unless that’s what people want from their Judaism! No - we are not looking for the next big gimmick. When we only focus on marketing and drawing people in, we’re just looking for new words and not really new ideas. Instead, we are going to find out what it is that you really want, what it is that our neighbors want, and how we can best and most successfully fulfill the needs of this community. This fall, and throughout the year, we’re going to begin a LISTENING CAMPAIGN to hear what people love to do and where they like to spend their time, energy and money. We are going to do this with members of our synagogue, and non-members, and also with members who are simply part of the Plainview

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<sup>2</sup> <https://saddleback.com>

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Erica “What are we talking about When We Talk about Engagement?” eJewishPhilanthropy, August 28, 2019



community. We are NOT going to ask people what it is they want from a synagogue. Instead, we are going to ask where people spend their time, energy and even money. What matters most and is of value to them? What is meaningful to them about their Judaism? How do they see Judaism in their lives?

And, we cannot do this alone. We need your help. Whether this is your first time visiting us, or you've been here for 25 years, we need your input, your guidance, and your REAL and HONEST opinions. We need you to be present. We will also need people who can be part of the listening, those who are trained to begin asking the questions and probing more to hear the answers. We need people to gather friends who aren't in these pews, today, who never come here to find out what matters most to them and where they spend their time and energy in life. We need people's ideas, people's thoughts, people's reactions, people's dreams. We are a community and in order to make us as fulfilling as possible to everyone, we all need to contribute to these efforts. Each one of you has wine to bring to this barrel.

Being a part of a community, no matter where you sit on the spectrum of involvement is about being present and showing up. In the Torah portion most famously associated with Rosh Hashana, that we will read tomorrow, we hear words of being present and ready to get to work. When God tests Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac, we hear the famous words, "Hineini! Hineini!" I am here. The word is said twice because there is so much meaning in that moment for being present. In this double phrase exists all of Abraham's fears and doubts and all of his faith and promise. It is a powerful word - to utter the phrase "Hineini" Here I am. "Hineini" I am present and ready to do what needs to be done. "Hineini" I am imperfect but I am whole and I am here.

This Rosh Hashanah - that is all I ask of you. Instead of pouring water, or half a jug of water, commit to pouring your wine to fill our community with the sweetness of what you have to offer. Our community needs you and every gift that you have. And, at this time of year, it's important to ask yourself - what should I be doing more of, in this next year? It's a time to challenge your thinking and have an honest conversation with yourself about where you want to spend your time, your energy and your money. It's the time to say, like Abraham, "Hineini" - here I am, present and excited to dig in to the work that will make this a more fulfilling experience for me, for my family and for our whole community. After all, as my friend Dan Nichols sings, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got and you'll be who've you've always been, you'll go where you've always gone." Let us not be complacent. Let us strive to do more, to see more, to know more and to experience new horizons, together. At the conclusion of our service, you'll be able to pick up wrist keychains that say the word "Hineini" to be a sweet and gentle reminder of the importance of your presence in our community and your willingness to be part of something great.

When I think about the story of the barrel, the conclusion I always come to is that every community's success is defined by the way in which we engage with it. You get out of it what you put in to it. And this work of creating is sacred. Rabbi Akiva tells us: "God made grain and asked humans to complete the process of creation by baking it into bread. Thus, humans are destined to be partners with God in Creation. God created an incomplete and imperfect world so that humans would be challenged to perfect it<sup>4</sup>." We have a beautiful community here and we are always going to strive to make it more, we are always going to challenge ourselves to make it

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<sup>4</sup> "Inner Peace: Achieving self-esteem through prayer" Roll, Yisrael. 1999

relevant for all, and we are always going to work together to continue creating it to be the best possible community it can be. Hineni - I am here. I am ready to do the work.

As we begin our New Year together, looking at all that has been and all that will be, let us each strive to find a deeper sense of purpose in all that we do. May we begin each endeavor with whole-hearted commitment to achieving the very best that we can. May we show up for those when it matters most and be fully present in each and every moment. May we see ourselves as partners with others and with God in the work of creating and Creation. And may we always leave our water at home, and bring the sweetness of our wine in every aspect of our lives. L'shana Tovah u'metukah - wishing all of us a sweet, happy and healthy new year.