

The Mishnah in Sanhedrin (4:5) teaches: “A human being mints many coins from the same mold, and they are all identical. But the Holy One, Blessed be God, strikes us all from the mold of the first human, and each one of us is unique.” Each one of us is special, made in Gds image. And each one of us is human, this means we are by definition flawed, works in progress. Let us open our hearts to the humanity and the Godliness of each person in this room.

Our society suffers increasingly from loneliness, anxiety, and a sense of vulnerability. There are record numbers of people in our country being treated for anxiety, depression, addiction, and other illnesses. Tragically, more are not treated, due to perceived stigma, or finances, or difficulty navigating a complicated health system.

There are also people in our midst and in our families who at times suffer with situational illness. Often these emotions occur at normal life cycle times: a birth, new empty nester, certainly a death of a loved one, infertility, loss of a job, or just a feeling of life is either over-whelming or not enough. Life rattles us sometimes and we can feel a sense of being spiritually disconnected.

Often when families struggle with physical and mental illness of loved ones they can feel less connected to our community.

As our health care providers struggle to address medical needs, our faith community can have a significant role in promoting spiritual wellness for all, not only for those who are ill.

Even for those in our community who consider themselves physically and mentally well, there are times when you may feel a sense of dis-ease with the world.

I like to think of it as each person travels through this world with his or her own suitcase of tsuris. How we carry that suitcase can be a function of our spiritual wellbeing; a function of how strong our families, networks, and community are---when your suitcase of tsuris is heavy, it is good to have the community help you carry it.

There are also those who may feel they are somehow on the outskirts of any Jewish community because they somehow do not fit into what used to be traditional conceptions of what Jewish adulthood looks like. Ask yourself what it might be like to look for spiritual community at a shul when you are single, either by choice or by circumstance. People say you make your best friends when your children are in preschool. With no kids in preschool, who is reaching out to you?

How do you fit into our Jewish community when you ARE partnered, but do not have children, again, either by choice or circumstance?

How about if your partner is not Jewish? How do we make this for your family?

How can we make it more accessible for more people to find a spiritual home here and to grow and care for their souls?

Whatever your own history, circumstances and story may be, whatever individual challenges you deal with, shul should be the place where you can find that which will help you to be *shalem* – help you to feel a sense wholeness, or at least of Grace.

At the High holydays we are asked to take stock of our life. Some think about this in terms of how their health, wealth, relationships with family, friends, and co-workers fared from last High Holy Days to this one. Some years we just do not always have happy answers to these questions; that of course, is the nature of the human condition.

The Rolling Stones had wisdom when they sang, you can't always get what you want. None of us live this life unscathed. So maybe it is more germane

for us to ponder: how is the state of your soul? How connected do you feel to God, to each other, and to a sense of sacred Jewish community? How can we promote spiritual wellness for all?

Sometimes I do believe that it is truly through God's grace that we are able to come through difficult times. [Anne Lamott, noted novelist describes grace as "that deeper breath, or pause, or briefly cleaner glasses that gives us a bit of freedom and relief". \(Grace Eventually, 232\)](#)

Sometimes that Grace is felt in the medicine of a doctor, or the calls of friends, and the God given grace that allows people to believe that they can overcome an emotionally challenging time.

Spiritual well being means that you pay attention to the needs of your soul in a regular way, that you are able to listen and to perceive, as the prophet calls it, "the still small voice" in each one of us that calls us to be exceptional, that calls us to feel close to God, that calls us to feel a sense of connectedness with community, to past and to future, to God and to what is sacred.

When we tend to the garden of our soul, even when we suffer from an illness or a dis – ease about the world – our spirit can feel the power of God's love and grace. For those who do not yet sense a presence of God, one can say that spiritual wellbeing is when our souls can feel a sense of joyful calm or purpose in life.

Last week we read the prayer of Hannah. It is authentic, raw, and filled with deep emotions. Authentic, raw, emotive. The name Hannah means grace. From this we learn that grace comes when we act in the world with deep and raw authenticity.

I want to introduce you to a few stories of people who have great spiritual well being, even Grace, WHILE struggling with great challenges-they are my teachers. Let's learn from a few of them:

- I have a colleague and friend named Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski. He is a very accomplished man, a rabbi, has a PhD, a wife and children. He is a deeply sensitive soul; in addition to an academic job, he is the

rabbi of a shul. He also sometimes struggles with bi-polar disease. A few years ago the disease became public when it was not controlled. He impersonated a police officer, was arrested, and spent time in a hospital. A large portion of the Jewish community shunned him. The Jewish and secular press were terrible to him. But not his shul. The following is an excerpt from a news story about him: The Jewish week wrote: "His synagogue, however, has taken a very different approach: it is standing by its rabbi, who is now home from the hospital.

"The shul leadership said "It is our first priority at this moment should be to do everything in our power to help Rabbi Alfredo recover from his illness and to welcome him back as our spiritual leader at the appropriate time,"

In a d'var Torah delivered at Shabbat services and shared with The Jewish Week, one congregant alluded to the rabbi in discussing the tablets smashed by Moses, which were preserved alongside the new ones.

"We DO NOT discard broken tablets or anything that is not whole, not perfect. "And, we do not discard people who have erred in some way or who are ill," the congregant said. "We are a sacred congregation. We are a family; and when one of us falls, we rush to help him up, to stand by him and to support him with compassion and love."

The response of this congregation was spiritual. It helped him to get well. But it has done more. I speak about this rabbi at his urging, using his name, in our hope that all of us can begin to internalize that our shuls must be places for EVERYONE. For every Jew, at whatever stage of physical or mental wellness we are at, for each one of us to be our authentic selves here. This rabbi teaches us to be open so that we can lose the stigma of mental illness in our community. 40 years ago most people whispered the "c" word when they referred to cancer. Great campaigns of education mean that now those who suffer from cancer can do so with out stigma. Rabbi Borodowski, and I, and I am certain most of you- can work that same cultural change for those who deal with mental illness. Let us start that here. Mental illness is illness, not a character flaw, and those who struggle with any illness, and their family and friends, need their shul to be a safe and supportive place.

Another story:

- Last year a group of about 6 or 7 folks worked with a professional from Jewish Alcoholics Chemically Dependant and their significant others to plan a lunch and learn for last fall. We were to have two Jewish speakers who were in recovery. The morning of the lunch and learn arrived and only one speaker showed up. So two of the planners of the event decided on the spot to go public with their own stories. Each one told a different story of their adult child that struggles with recovery, how this affects their family, and how even though the parents are involved at shul most people did not know that their families were struggling. For the 80 of us who were present our world changed. The shul became an intimate space where we could support the real life challenges of our synagogue family. Addiction was no longer someone else's issue, it was and is ours.

We understood what grace is when we saw and heard two of our members speak about their authentic lives. We saw spiritual wellbeing in action when two families, maybe just on that day, were able to speak the truth of their lives in the shul, surrounded by love. I hope they felt less alone; I pray that they have continued to feel support from all who heard their moving stories. I hope we will find new ways to support our families.

- Many of you may remember about a decade ago when Rabbi Brad Artson was our scholar in Residence. The following is from a blog post that his son wrote a few years back: "My name is Jacob Artson and I am a person just like you. I am part of a wonderful Jewish family, I go to our local public high school, I play sports, I love to travel, I enjoy hanging out with my friends, and I care about making this world a better place. The only difference between you and me is that I have lots of labels attached to me like nonverbal, severely autistic and developmentally disabled. Every person alive is encumbered by challenges and blessed with gifts. I used to think that my ratio of challenges to gifts was higher than most, but now I realize that my challenges are just more obvious.

That is grace. That is Jacob living a spiritually healthy life. And that is Jacob teaching us that that we each have challenges and gifts. His may be easier to spot, but we all have them.

3 stories of how to live in a spiritually authentic way. Not one of them deal with lives that are perfect. Wait, No one's life is perfect, each one of us has struggles. Even Moses had a severe speech impediment; he certainly led a spiritual life, connected to God and community, he just needed the help of an interpreter.

At the end of the Torah Moses is about to leave Joshua to lead the people as they continue their physical and spiritual journey to the Promised Land. As part of Moses parting words he gathers his flock together and says "*Atem Nitzavim* - You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord Your God- your tribal heads, your elders, your officials, all the men of Israel, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from wood chopper to water drawer – to enter into the Covenant. I make this covenant not with you alone, but with you who are standing here, and with those who are not with us here this day.

A first classical rabbinic understanding of this text teaches that the phrase "All of you" means not only the leaders, but each and every individual must be present to build a relationship with God personally and not through the agency of another.

You know that phrase that people often say, "it's not personal." Well, not true in Judaism, our relationship with God and with the community is personal. We each count. When your spiritual gifts are not part of the fabric of this community we all miss out.

The rabbis then comment on the phrase: "Those who are not with us this day". The standard interpretation of this verse is that it refers to the descendants of those present. You and me. This is a simple answer, and though not in-correct, it is not enough.

Two other interpretations of this verse challenge those of us who are here today, to think, to struggle, and to build a more expansive community.

The next interpretation by rabbis of “all those who are here today, and those who are not with us today” refers to those who are physically or mentally handicapped”. What barriers are present for them to participate fully? Thankfully one less physical barrier exists in our congregation this year as our Capital Campaign was able to provide us with an elevator for this historic building.

There is one more commentary on the verse “those who are not with us here today” The rabbis say it refers to “those who reject the Covenant but are still claimed by it and are included in it”.

Astounding. The Torah is teaching us that in the Jewish community every single Jew matters, even if they are not here. Maybe especially if they are not here, we have a responsibility to listen to them, hear their spiritual struggles, and provide places for them.

Our Beth Sholom community is healthy. We have many who participate in many programs. We have strong prayer options, much learning, and we do much social action. And for those who participate it is wonderful.

But we also need some honesty. Record numbers of people in America are not here in shul. And they are not in churches. This spring The Pew Foundation for Research in Religion published these statistics: “The number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing rapidly.” At the same time other studies report that “belief in God, importance of religion and prayer, overall spiritual inclination is rising rapidly in Jews who are under 35 and among empty nesters”.

That is an opportunity. Jews want to live spiritual lives- just maybe differently than before. If we are to become a more 21st century shul, **and if we are to engage more Jews, then we need to both preserve what we have and at the same time innovate for a population that does not yet exist here.**

The theory of disruptive innovation was invented by Clayton Christensen, of Harvard Business School, in his book “The Innovator’s Dilemma” he

describe innovations that create new markets by discovering new categories of customers. In our case, it is time to discover new categories of Jews whose spiritual needs are not yet met here, and new ways to serve your spiritual needs, along with preserving what we already do.

The Hillel at the University of Pennsylvania is an amazing example of Disruptive Innovation under the leadership of Rabbi Mike Uram. That Hillel has a well deserved reputation of being strong and vibrant. Still Rabbi Uram realized that they were only reaching a small percentage of Jews on campus. He knew Hillel worked for those who attended, so he left it alone to thrive. On a parallel track he formed the Jewish Renaissance Project at Penn. He got people who were not involved in Hillel to become part of The Renaissance Project by creating a new way of engaging hundreds of students on their own terms. Same values of engaging young Jewish adults, just a different method.

Thousands more students at Penn are now involved in Jewish life. These people would not have walked into a regular Hillel Program, 50 percent had not done anything Jewish since bar mitzva. Hillel was never going to be for them. But Jewish Renaissance Project sponsored by Hillel is for them. Same values, different, novel delivery.

Rabbi Glanzberg Krainin and I want to let you know about a project for Beth Sholom and the community that uses this same theory to grow our spiritual community.

We love our traditional religious life here, but we must remember what the Torah says: Every Jew is needed in this community. There are many paths to holiness. And each one in this room is unique and valued. But so are the Jews who are at home or at work today. So we need a bit of disruptive innovation. If you love the services or learning or volunteering that occurs at Beth Sholom our programs will continue, and hopefully grow.

At the same time you will begin to see signs and programs that say sponsored by The Center For Spiritual Well Being. That is your shul also. Guided by extensive research, lay committees, a private donor by way of

our Capital Campaign, and a deep sense of hope for the future, we are thrilled to open a center here to provide a way into Jewish life that honors diverse spiritual needs-and works to keep us all spiritually well. The center, like Beth Sholom, will be based on: Service, meaning, spiritual, well-being And finally, our programs will be radically inclusive.

Dedicated to **service**. We start from the premise that each individual is created in the image of God and has a unique gift that he or she can contribute. By contributing, one helps one's own spiritual well being.

This center will focus on avenues to engage in *g'milut hasadim* acts of loving kindness. We have seen repeatedly that those who are in need, and those who are in a position to give, help to heal each other through regular engagement in these sacred Jewish actions and practices. We believe that doing meaningful volunteer work and giving to others helps to create a spiritually healthy life and community.

The center will seek ways to help each of us to create **meaning**. In addition to our meaningful traditional services we will seek ways to include people in diverse forms of Jewish prayer and study.

Finally, a 21st Century synagogue has to be radically inclusive. Too often, synagogues have made those Jews who find themselves outside of the so called "normative" Jewish family structure feel like they have no place in our Jewish community. Whether it is around issues of sexual orientation, the status of being single or divorced, suffering from a mental illness, or suffering from addiction, too many of our families experience themselves as being outside of the "norm" and therefore excluded from full participation in religious and communal life. A goal of our center will be to act on the value of including all of God's children by creating avenues for under-served, marginalized, or hidden populations to find a place within the synagogue community that speaks to their spiritual well being.

Lofty goals, and it will take us time, and it will take your involvement and your blessings. But it is worth the work to say that we love Judaism and Jews enough to build a 21st century Beth Sholom.

Modest starts: Last week I led an alternative spiritual experience with meditation, chanting and music. Over 125 people attended. There were many requests to continue. We are learning what works. Tomorrow during the break you are welcome to join Rabbi Glanzberg-Krainin for soulful study on repentance in the Sisterhood. And new this year, you can join me in the Price Chapel for quiet meditation and soulful singing. Next week we partner with Jefferson University Center and offer their Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction classes at the shul, with a significant discount for our members. In October classes in Mindful Yoga begin with our own Julie Coopersmith. In November our Shul Buddies and Social Action Committee along with the center will present a lunch and learn on how to care for the mental and spiritual wellbeing of Care Givers. In the spring look for a program on Mental Health that deals with how we handle everyday life issues. Since June a Nar-anon support group meets here every week for families of those living with addiction and in recovery. We are the only shul in the area with this kind of support group. Hopefully this is just a start.

This is the mandate of the Jewish People. To be inclusive. To not have a place for only the cool kids; an inside crowd, but to be a place for all of God's kids to grow spiritually. That's us. Beth Sholom is for all: from woodchopper to water barer. Those who are here, and those who are not yet standing with us. Hopefully the Center for Spiritual Wellbeing will be another entry way for people to join our sacred community. Those on every part of the spectrum of health. Those who seek holiness and those who seek friendship. We are thrilled to build the Center for Spiritual Wellbeing with you, with an Open heart, Open soul. Open shul. Open to all. That is our prayer for the New Year.