

A New Feeling

PETER NATHAN,
PH.D.



was in the other room interviewing. The boys were having fun with me, a little at my expense. Off the cuff remarks shaped the conversation into one of verbal sparring. The girls seemed more in tune with

their own individual identities. It was one of the girls who asked, “Do you have pictures of your family?”

My Blackberry sprang to life. Several teenagers pressed around me together with their younger siblings, intent on viewing what my device could reveal. Our older son, younger son, appreciative remarks for their good looks, and then a confident 24-year-old American girl, at ease with her femininity.

“She’s pretty — your daughter?” Next, an older gray-haired lady. “My mother” Next, a photo of my ginger-haired niece, whose hair color caused commotion. And then silence. The children stepped back, unsure.

A boy asked, “Who is that?” “My brother” I answered. “Yes, but why does he have that on his head?” The youth made a circle around the top of his head. I gave a moment’s pause to ponder my answer, and the consequence of the only answer I could give.

“Because he is Jewish.”

A girl put her finger to her lips and made a shushing sound. They all took another step back. Another question.

“If he is your brother, are you Jewish too?”

“Yes. Is that a problem?”

Another shush. The atmosphere changed. Another question: “If you’re Jewish and Debbie is your wife, is Debbie Jewish?”

Again the shush. And then I had the realization that here in this stark marble floored apartment, these curious, eager teenagers who learn English from the American wife of the local butcher, were having their first meaningful encounter with a Jew. No military fatigues, no shouts of disdain from a religious settler. The silence dissipated, their curiosity returned, and they were all eager to see more photos.

Two months later, the young woman who made the shushing sounds completed her three-week intense Artsbridge training program in Boston. At the final showcase gala, I asked her a question.

“What went through your mind that day in the apartment in Tulkarem?”

She remembered it well. The unsettling silence, with the group stepping back. The shushing. Then she said very simply, “First we knew you, trusted you, then we discovered you were Jewish. It was a new feeling.”

Peter Nathan is president of Chabad of the North Shore, a founding board member of Artsbridge (making a difference through art), and an organizing committee member of J Street North Shore. He lives in Swampscott.

Scrapping Synagogue Dues: A Case Study

DAN JUDSON

The synagogue dues structure has recently become the source of a lot of conversation — on web forums, at Federation events and at synagogue conventions, people are questioning the long-term sustainability of the membership dues structure.

As a result of the recession and longer-term demographic trends, many synagogues are facing fewer members, as well as members who are hoping to pay less. In 2008, one large conservative synagogue in suburban Boston, Temple Israel of Sharon, was facing a significant problem of declining revenue from dues.

“Each year we were raising dues to make our budget numbers, and we reached a point where we were actually losing money when we raised dues. We were on the wrong side of the demand curve,” said Rob Carver, a lay leader at Temple Israel and a professor of statistics.

“We had reached a price point where families decided they would rather not belong to the synagogue at all, than pay higher dues. Of course families could come to us for an abatement, but everyone finds the abatement process onerous, so some families just leave. And raising dues again, particularly at the height of the recession,

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just seemed to sow ill will amongst the congregation,” he said.

The congregation began a search to replace their dues structure. At first they investigated “fair share” dues, whereby synagogues peg the amount of dues to the adjusted gross income of the family — usually synagogues ask between 1% and 1.5%. But members did not feel comfortable with this approach.

So the synagogue was in a bind — it wanted to change the dues structure, but folks were not willing to utilize a fair share system. So Temple Israel did something somewhat radical: they scrapped the dues system altogether. They went to an entirely voluntary system where families simply told the synagogue how much they were going to pay that year.

“Of course some folks were very worried that this was not going to work. How could a voluntary system work, particularly at the height of the recession? People will simply pledge a low number and we will not raise our revenue. So we developed what we call a sustaining amount. This is the amount that

each family would need to pay in order for us to meet our budget. At the membership renewal time, we send a letter saying this is the sustaining amount we need — if you can do this great, if you can go above this, even better — but you tell us how much you are going to pay, and that’s what you will pay,” Carve said.

The synagogue adopted the revised system three years ago in 2008, and the first two years saw revenues decline, but at a lower rate (4%) than they had declined the previous year under the old system. This past year, the downward trend has reversed itself and revenue was up 2% from the previous year. The fact that the synagogue made this change at the height of the recession and the still lingering bad economy makes the upward revenue shift all the more remarkable.

More significantly, perhaps, was the membership change. This year, the synagogue saw a net increase of over 20 new families into the congregation, reversing a long trend of downward numbers.

The synagogue’s financial team noted, “The new commitment structure has completely transformed the conversation about why members choose to affiliate with the Temple.

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The drive was routine as we passed through the security barrier heading north out of Jerusalem. We travelled an age-old route past villages of modest houses that blended into hillsides filled with terraced rows of olive trees that have clearly adapted to the harsh conditions and provide a valuable source of income to those who tend them. On the next hilltop some 1,500 feet above sea level sat a cluster of housing, sentinel like, in stark contrast to what we have seen for the past 20 miles. Where were the olive trees that had now become so familiar?

Amir pointed. “That is an Israeli settlement. We cannot go there.” That picture repeated itself again and again.

Our destination was Tulkarem, situated nine miles east of Netanya. Tulkarem has been commercially and strategically significant for centuries. Settled by the Canaanites in 3000 BCE, history has made its mark there: Romans, Muslims, Ottomans, the British and most recently the Israelis. Tulkarem is economically challenged now, and as we traveled north from Jerusalem, the economic disparity unfolded right before our eyes.

“If you wake up tomorrow morning and peace is declared across the region, what would that look like?”

We drove through the town center, made a couple of quick turns and found ourselves in a narrow street lined with four-story apartment buildings. A group of excited teenagers and their younger siblings were clamoring on a balcony. We certainly stood out, and they quickly welcomed us into a cluster of stark, bare rooms. Here they learned English each day after school, taught by a caring American lady who was married to the local butcher. The teens were hopeful of being selected for the Artsbridge Leadership Development Program held each year in Boston for Israeli and Palestinian youth. A dozen interviews and a dozen crayon drawings were made, photographs were taken and questions were asked.

“If you wake up tomorrow morning and peace is declared across the region, what would that look like?” Not a single one of those bright-eyed, teenagers with their whole lives ahead of them, could imagine this.

What happened next was one of those “had to be there” moments. My wife, Debbie,

RABBI DAVID WOLPE



From historian David McCullough: “Once upon a time in the dead of winter in the Dakota Territory, Theodore Roosevelt took off in a makeshift boat down the Little Missouri River in pursuit of a couple of thieves who had stolen his prized rowboat. After several days on the river, he caught up and got the draw on them with his trusty Winchester, at which point they surrendered. Then Roosevelt set off in a borrowed

Time to Read

wagon to haul the thieves cross-country to justice.

They headed across the snow-covered wastes of the Badlands to the railhead at Dickinson, and Roosevelt walked the whole way, the entire 40 miles. It was an astonishing feat, what might be called a defining moment in Roosevelt’s eventful life. But what makes it especially memorable is that during that time,

he managed to read all of ‘Anna Karenina.’ I often think of that when I hear people say they haven’t time to read.”

A man once approached Rabbi Yisroel Salanter and said, “I have 15 minutes a day to study. Shall I study Torah or mussar?” “Mussar” answered Salanter. “Why?” asked the man. “Because then you will realize you have more than 15 minutes a day to study.”

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Rebirthing of the Tree of Life

ARTHUR WASKOW



This is a dark and wintry time in our society. It is also the dark and wintry time in the northern hemisphere of Mother Earth. Yet it is exactly at this time every year, the Jewish mystics reminded us, that trees not only renew their life, but call on us to renew our lives — our energy and our commitment to their rebirth.

The festival most Jews call Tu B’Shvat (15th day of the Jewish “month” of Shvat) begins Tuesday evening, February 7.

There is a seder, a sacred meal, for Tu B’Shvat — just as there is for Passover. The Tu B’Shvat seder is focused on four kinds of nuts and fruit, and four different colors of wine. Each of these “fours” is connected with the four worlds of Jewish mysticism; the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire; and the four seasons of the year.

Below are some suggestions on how to make this seder into a joyful gathering that also acts to protect and heal our Earth.

1. Make the seder itself a direct nonviolent action to protect the earth. In Florida, a congregation gathered to protest and prevent destruction of the Everglades. In Northern California, the

“Redwood Rabbis” and others gathered to protest the logging of tall and ancient redwoods for the sake of corporate profit, and illegally walked onto corporate land to plant redwood seedlings where the land had been ripped apart. Look in your own locale for a place where trees and the earth are being wounded.

2. Prepare for Tu B’Shvat by seeing two films. One is “Gaslands,” a factual report on fracking and the anti-fracking movement. The other is “Avatar” (now out on DVD). It is a deeply moving, modern version of struggle between a spiritual community that treats trees and all life forms as sacred, versus a military-corporate force that is willing to destroy people, trees and all life for the sake of wealth and power.

3. Celebrate the seder as an act of emotional and spiritual connection. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Wiccans and those of secular ethical communities can join in the celebration and action. Perhaps have a discussion about “Avatar.” Did the story remind you of the biblical Exodus, when Pharaoh’s arrogance brought locusts, frogs and hailstorms to rise up and shatter Pharaoh’s power?

Rabbi Arthur Waskow is the spiritual leader of The Shalom Center in Philadelphia, Pa.