

When I was a young rabbi starting out in my first pulpit, we had a congregant, a man in his early fifties, who belonged to one of the congregation's founding families and was very devoted to the synagogue. He and his wife attended services every Friday night. Although he didn't officially have the title of House Chairman, he had a key to the synagogue, assumed the responsibility for opening up and for locking the building before and after services, was frequently on the premises to make sure that everything was in good order, and arranged for all necessary repair and maintenance work to be done. One day Sam approached me with a complaint. The previous Friday evening I had changed the tune we used for *Mi kamocho*. At the time, I probably knew about three or four different melodies for *Mi kamocho*, and I thought that a little variation might not be a bad thing. But Sam would not hear of it. He let me know that he had been singing *Mi kamocho* the same way for forty years and wasn't wanting to change.

If changing the way that one small section of the worship service is sung was uncomfortable for and met resistance from this long-time congregant, one can certainly understand the level of emotion aroused by the issue that has dominated our Jewish communal agenda in Springfield for the past year and that will entail far more significant changes for all of us— the consolidation of Temple Israel and Temple B'rith Sholom into a single congregation. People are uncomfortable with change. They like what they are familiar with and want things to stay the same as they imagine them to have always been.

The future of the Springfield Jewish community has been a concern for at least the last fifteen years. Our dwindling numbers, the aging of our most active community members, our young people moving away from Springfield after college, shrinking enrollment in our Religious School, and the fear that we will reach a point at which our financial resources will not be adequate to maintaining our religious institutions as they are currently structured have been among the factors that have led concerned community members to consider consolidation. Some of us, myself included, while acknowledging these concerns, would prefer to stress a more positive motivation – that a single congregation would be more vibrant, robust and stronger than either of the existing synagogues could hope to be as separate entities.

A previous round of negotiations aimed at consolidation was undertaken nine years ago, led to a series of regularly scheduled meetings of a committee comprised of members of both congregations, and ultimately floundered after less than a year and a half of deliberations. The

current Joint Committee was charged by the Boards of both synagogues a year and a half ago with the task of issuing reports on the finances, the membership, and the demographics of the two Temples as well as on the condition of the two building complexes and with making recommendations regarding how the congregations could best proceed towards consolidation. Following the appearance of the Joint Committee's phase one final report in January of this year, the task of studying the various aspects of congregational practice and governance in detail and making further recommendations was delegated to five Working Committees. The phase two final report that will soon be published is based in large part on the work of these committees and on the conclusions at which they arrived. The thirty-six members of the Joint and Working Committees are to be commended for their dedication to the goal of consolidation, for their perseverance and effort, and for the thoughtfulness of their deliberations and recommendations. That does not mean that we need to agree with every single recommendation contained in these reports, but we need to show appreciation for the hard work and rigorous effort that went into their production, and we must respect the sincerity and integrity of those who served on the committees.

My position in favor of consolidation has been publicly known from my High Holiday preaching last year, from my articles in our Temple bulletin, and especially from the letter issued jointly by Rabbi Datz and myself. I remain firm in my position and in my conviction that consolidation is something that needs to happen. And it needs to happen now when both congregations are in positions of relative strength, not when one or both are on the verge of collapse. Hesitating to pursue consolidation now because the issues that need to be resolved are divisive does not serve the interests of the community. The issues will still be divisive and contentious one, two or five years from now. Perhaps, the late Christopher Hitchens was right – that one cannot generate light without also producing some heat. Preserving the status quo and waiting to see who is the last player standing is to my mind unworthy of us and disrespectful to our separate congregational legacies, both of which need to be honored and incorporated to the greatest extent possible into the culture of a consolidated congregation.

Rosh Hashanah marks a new year and imparts to us an awareness of the passage of time, which inevitably brings changes. Think of how technology has changed our lives just in the past two decades, in the way we communicate with each other, order goods and service, access media

and entertainment, and store and process information. Consider, as well, the changes that occur in our lives as we age – not always desirable ones from our point of view, as they affect our health, our energy, our capacity to do the things we have been accustomed to doing. Under the best of circumstances, however, aging does impart wisdom and an ability to discern what is truly important in life, and it is that perspective that I hope we could maintain as we contemplate change on the communal level.

Judaism has changed over the centuries in response both to changing circumstances and to the currents of contemporary thought. The era of Biblical Judaism during which kings ruled over Israel and Judah, prophets communicated the word of God to the people, and priests officiated at the altar in the Temple gave way to Rabbinic Judaism focused on the study and fulfillment of Torah as interpreted by rabbis, who saw themselves as heirs not only to Scripture but to an oral tradition going back to Moses at Sinai. The Judaism of the rabbis endured for a millennium and a half and was well-adapted to the spiritual needs of a people lacking political sovereignty and dispersed throughout the world. Even during those fifteen centuries when the Rabbinic system of observance remained intact and held sway, new practices and customs were introduced and traditional concepts and beliefs about God and Torah were reshaped under the influence of mystical or philosophical thinking. The dawn of modernity at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed the Enlightenment, the Emancipation of Jews in Western Europe, and mass migration from the Old World to the New, all of which presented challenges to the continuity of Rabbinic Judaism and brought about vast changes in Jewish life. In Eastern Europe, secular modes of affirming Jewishness apart from religious observance emerged as an alternative expression of Jewish identity, while in Western Europe and America, the Jewish religious community splintered into denominations, each with its own ideology and loyal constituency. In religion, even in a faith tradition as ancient as Judaism, things cannot and do not stay the same.

All of the branches of contemporary Judaism- Reform, Conservative and Orthodox - are successors to the heritage of Rabbinic Judaism. Some would appear to be more directly in line than others with the beliefs and the way of life that derive from the academies of Babylonia and the Land of Israel and from the pages of the Mishnah and Talmud, but even those who identify as Orthodox are to some extent selective in their observances, “picking and choosing” what is

compatible with their temperament. For those who do not subscribe to the traditional belief in the Divine origin of *halachah*, Jewish religious law, or even to Conservative Judaism's ideology regarding the binding nature of *halachah* (and I would suspect that includes most of us), our observances and our style of worship are more a matter of preference than of submitting ourselves to what we believe the will of God requires. Religious convictions should be respected. And preferences, especially when they are passionately held and of long standing, should be accommodated where possible, but they (preferences) do allow for compromise. There are questions of religious practice that divide our two congregations, but there is much that unites us. We share the same sacred texts and observe the same holidays. And while there are major differences in the prayer books of Reform and Conservative Judaism (much less so now than a generation ago), we share the same liturgy of *Shema*, *Tefillah* and Torah reading. Most importantly, we share in a common history going back three millennia and in a common Jewish destiny.

Consolidating our local congregations will afford us additional years during which a Jewish religious community in Springfield can survive and perhaps even flourish. We know, however, that our long-term survival depends on our ability to appeal to the Jewish Generation Xers and Millennials, whose notions regarding religious practice and affiliation and long-term commitments to any institutional framework are different from our cohort of World War II babies and Boomers. Temple Israel and Temple B'rith Sholom are far closer to each other than either will be to the Springfield Jewish congregation, community or fellowship of the future in the context of which communal worship, life cycle observances and Torah study will take place.

The penitential season is a time of self-reckoning. It is a time to forego pettiness, to let go of the past (with all of the grudges and bitterness they may have engendered), and to act with grace and with forgiveness, even as we implore the Almighty to show us compassion and grace. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the season to attend to the bigger picture, to pay heed to what gives us a sense of meaning and purpose. Hillel said *im eyn ani li mi li*, "if I am not for myself, who will be for me?" But he also knew that limits must be placed on self-interest and self-aggrandizement, which cannot be the dominant motifs in our life. "*Uch-she'ani l'atzmi mah ani*", he added, "when I am for myself alone, what am I?" We live not only for ourselves but to serve God and our fellow beings, to pursue a higher purpose, and to concern ourselves with the

well-being of the next generation. In remarking upon the increased attendance at worship services on the Days of Awe, tradition cites a verse from the book of Proverbs, “a numerous people is the glory of a king.” On the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, on which we recognize God’s sovereignty over all Creation, having a larger congregation is appropriate as a reflection of the Sovereign’s glory. Think how meaningful it would be to worship, to serve God year-round within a consolidated (and therefore larger) congregation. And what better way of demonstrating that we are thinking not only of ourselves but also of our heirs and successors than by bequeathing them an active and functioning Jewish religious community where they can seek out their Jewish heritage? The bigger picture points us in the direction of consolidation, but that goal will not be served by holding on to grudges and hurt feelings because of something that was said or done twenty or more years ago, by being too quick to blame the other party or attribute bad faith to them, and by being too ready to criticize or disparage the other group while failing to hold up a mirror to ourselves.

Both Temple Israel and Temple B’rith Sholom have their history and their legacies that are worthy of respect and commemoration. We are, each of us, more than a collection of individuals gathered at random but rather a *kehillah kedoshah*, a collective, a holy congregation. We at Temple Israel were chartered as a congregation six decades ago and have been in our building for fifty-five years. Our membership peaked thirty years ago at 160 households, and the number of young people attending our joint Hebrew and Religious School whose families were affiliated with Temple Israel was, if memory serves me, around forty. Over the years I have known many wonderful men and women who contributed generously to Temple Israel, devoted their time and energy to its well-being, and worshiped in this sanctuary, celebrating their joys and mourning their losses here in the company of fellow congregants. We should be very proud of our heritage as a place of prayer, of Torah, and of fellowship. I favor consolidation, but it cannot happen without respect on the part of each of our congregations for the other’s legacy, without each congregation having a seat at the table and a voice in shaping the future of the Jewish religious community.

There is no doubt in my mind that compromises will have to be made, some of which will be uncomfortable for one side and some for the other. The process must not be one-sided but must involve give and take. We are told by diplomats and professional negotiators that reaching

a successful agreement usually involves a final result that leaves both parties unhappy but with which both are able to live. Consolidation cannot be viewed as a zero-sum game in which I win only when you lose. Quite honestly, if consolidation were to fail, we would all be the losers.

At some time in the near future, the process that began with the formation of and charge to the Joint Committee will bring us to the moment of decision, when both congregations vote on whether or not they wish to consolidate. I am a non-voting member of Temple Israel's Board, and I therefore presume that I will not be entitled to vote on the question of consolidation. I do hope, however, that my words carry some influence and that our congregation will go on record in support of consolidating. Let us not squander this opportunity, for I fear that the time may never again be as auspicious as it is now.

Our emotions may move us to resist change, but sober reasoning leads us to the opposite course of action and prompts us to ask ourselves, "Do we want there to be a Jewish religious community in Springfield in the future, where families and individuals can celebrate Shabbat and holidays together, study Torah, and mark both the joyous and the sad occasions in their lives, and where they can find comfort and inspiration from the spiritual heritage of Judaism?" My answer to the question is a resounding "yes". And if yours is too, I see no alternative to voting in favor of consolidation. We can't turn the clock back and return to the past, and we can't sustain our present situation indefinitely. What will come out of consolidation initially might be cumbersome and inconsistent, a patchwork, as it were, and might very well lead to grumbling from all sides (an old Jewish tradition dating back to the Israelites in the wilderness). We will proceed by trial and error, but I am convinced that, if we consolidate, ultimately a congregation truly united in spirit will emerge and will bring strength and resiliency to the Jewish community as a whole. *Ein b'reirah* – there is no other choice.

Our Temple bears the name of Israel, the name by which our people is referred to in the Torah and in the liturgy. The name of our sister congregation alludes to the covenant between God and Israel, *b'rit*, which defines the purpose and meaning of Jewish existence. Let us not forget that all of us within both congregations are equally part of *am Yisra'el*, the people of Israel, and that all of us are *b'nai b'rit*, children of the Covenant. Consolidation and unity are not an impossible dream. Let us pray that the promise contained in the High Holiday Amidah be

fulfilled for us: *v'yei-asu kulam agudah achat la'asot r'tzon-cha b'levav shalem*. “Let all of us be bound together as one to do Your will wholeheartedly.”