

HH Appeal 2013

Good Yontif!

Since this is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, I'd like to take this opportunity to make public teshuva. Hi, I am Maram Epstein, President of TBI, and for over twenty years I attended High Holiday services in college towns across the US, France, as well as Taipei and Beijing--without ever buying a ticket or making a donation. You see, like many Jews in North America, I grew up unaffiliated, with a deep distrust of religious institutions, but with a sentimental attachment to certain aspects of Jewish culture. Because I did not have enough Hebrew to get through the prayers on my own, despite my ambivalence, I counted on Jewish institutions to be around to help me feel Jewish, for free.

Like many in our community I felt very skittish about the role of money in congregational life. HaShem must have a sense of humor since my one condition for joining the Board was that I'd never have to get involved in fund raising. Oh, how quickly I learned. After serving on the board and almost mastering the art of how to read a budget, I've come to see the role of members as parallel to that of the rabbis. They focus on our spiritual kavannah. Our business is the material: the sanctuary, the classrooms, and the gardens that shelter and nurture our souls. The physical and the spiritual are both necessary, and each sustains the other. Both types of work are holy. Maybe that's why, historically, the only time of the year congregations talk about the material needs of the synagogue from the bimah is at the Kol Nidre service.

Irwin Noparstak recently told me about Martin Acker, an atheist and communist, who became a member of TBI when he moved to Eugene in the 60s to take a job as a

professor at the UO. Marty had no use for religion and never came to services, but he joined TBI because he was Jewish and that's what you do—you provide for your community. May Marty's memory be for a blessing. Marty's example made me realize the extent of the generational shift in the US. Many of us, including me, are members of the generation Robert Putnam describes in *Bowling Alone*. Even though we crave a sense of community, we just aren't joiners. Who's got time? Who wants to take on more obligations?

As I look back and think through my reluctance to join a shul or even contribute to one, even as I always counted on finding one willing to welcome me in for Yontif, I realized I, like many Jews, carry a lot of hurt and anger toward institutionalized Judaism. I was not always unaffiliated: my father took me and my three older brothers to the local shul in the heart of old Toronto until I was six—I have old world memories of sitting downstairs with my brothers and father, braiding the tzitzit of his tallis, listening to the Hebrew and Yiddish, and wondering when we'd get lunch. When my oldest brother turned 11, the rabbi learned that our mother wasn't Jewish and he made it clear to my father that he would not bar mitzvah my brothers. We never went back.

It was obvious to me during my first RH service at Beall Hall, that TBI was different from any shul I had attended. I liked the Reconstructionist Mahzor, there were lots of women on the bimah, and R. Yitz's davenning modeled for me, for the first time in my life, the possibility that the traditional liturgy could lead me to a higher spiritual place. I loved the services and what I saw of the community, but, here's another confession, it never occurred to me to go to try out a regular service, or make a donation. I took it for granted that TBI would always be there when I needed it.

My attitude toward congregational life changed several years after I had arrived in Eugene when my colleague, Alan Wolfe, of blessed memory, began fighting pancreatic cancer. I finally experienced community. The lessons I learned about how to care for each other and how to mourn as part of a community were transformative and I began to see the limits of my unaffiliated spiritual life “bowling alone” in the woods. I joined TBI, became part of Chevra Kadisha, our funeral committee, and experienced the profound mitzvah of being there for both strangers and friends who are trying to learn how to cope with loss. In turn, the community held me as I learned how to mourn my own parents. My happiest moments in Eugene have also been at TBI celebrating the simchas of b’nai mitzvahs, weddings, and the amazing torah trek five years ago when the entire community joined together to dance the sefrei torah over to our new home.

More recently, I have come to appreciate all that we do to create a sense of the sacred in our sanctuary. In my professional life, I feel pressured to focus on making more money. Here, I am reminded of the value of making more time: making time for family and friends, making time for Shabbat, and stopping time for the Days of Awe. We are a community rich in kavannah, but still small enough that each person makes a difference: by showing up for a minyan, by helping someone out with a meal, by welcoming someone you don’t yet know into your tent of peace.

One of the posters hanging outside features the following quote from the Talmud. “I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise, I am planting for my children.” I’d like to express my thanks to Martin Acker, Alan Wolfe and the many others who are no longer with us, but planted this wonderful garden for me. I encourage everyone here to think about what you are planting for the children of

tomorrow. I would like to thank the many members of our TBI community for your ongoing generosity that sustains our sukkat shalom, our tent of peace, here in the sanctuary. I want to especially thank those, who, at all financial levels, have stretched yourselves to help pay down our mortgage. I am very pleased to announce that thanks to the generosity of many in this community, TBI NOW has made its goal of making another \$100,000 principle payment before sukkot. The faster we can pay down our mortgage, the sooner we can shift all our resources toward staffing and programming.

May your fasts be easy and may we all be sealed in the book of life for a year of abundant blessings.