

Rosh Hashanah Day 5776
Monday, September 14, 2015
Chicken Soup and the Jewish Community

With every holiday celebration in our home, there are certain foods that are always prepared. Some of these delicacies have even become staples throughout the year. We make meatballs, brisket, kugel, challah, matzah balls, and of course, chicken soup. In any case, each of these dishes is prepared precisely the same way, every single time.

Take chicken soup for example. We use the same huge pot, cover the Kosher chicken with water, add the kosher salt and boil. Once the water is boiling, we add chicken buyon cubes and Osem seasoning, and let it boil for thirty minutes. Then we add the vegetables, always the same ones, and let the whole pot simmer for at least two hours. Most importantly, at least according to my daughter Sophie, we pour the soup into large Tupperware containers and freeze them, so we can skim the fat off the top before eating. Behold, a delicious bowl of chicken soup appears.

I cannot tell you precisely why I make chicken soup this way, nor do I know what others might do differently to make their chicken soup. I am fairly certain my mom makes soup almost identical to mine, and I have taught my daughter and husband to do the same. I imagine, with modern-day gadgets, there are probably easier ways to make chicken soup, but I am rather comfortable with my well-tested recipe.

How many of us have family recipes that we follow simply because it is what we have always done? I imagine many of those recipes were even used in preparation for our Rosh Hashanah meals. Now think beyond recipes. How many of us have family rituals we observe, though we may not know why we do them, or from whence they came? How do you observe birthdays, or anniversaries, the first day of school each year or the occasion of losing a tooth? Perhaps you even have some Jewish rituals in your family. What foods do you always eat on certain holidays? What tablecloth do you use for the special holidays?

We live in a world of ritual and custom. It is a great thing... sometimes. Minhag, or custom, is good. Ritual most definitely has value. However, what we sometimes forget, in our strict adherence of that given ritual, is that the importance of the ritual is not always the ritual itself, but the meaning behind the act.

I would like to share with you this Rosh Hashanah morning some thoughts about Jewish community, as this is our first large gathering together of Makom NY: A New Kind of Jewish Community. For many of us, Jewish community is synonymous with the term synagogue. It is the equivalent of needing a good kosher chicken to make a great pot of chicken soup. We need one to have the other. It is what we have always done.

Many of us perceive the synagogue as an ancient entity that defines Jewish community. Yes, the idea of the synagogue comes from ancient times. It began when the great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed for the second time, and Jews needed a place to gather and pray. The main purpose of the synagogue was to be a Beit Midrash, a house of study, a place to learn, debate and dialogue about Jewish text.

It is important to note as well that for most of Jewish history, the vast majority of synagogues were simple structures. The synagogue itself was not to be the recipient of lavish decor. Rather, what made the synagogue a holy place was the fact that it contained an Ark in which a Torah was held. For most of Jewish history, synagogues were primarily small, modest buildings, sometimes simple wooden structures, even the bottom floor of a rabbi's house. It was only in the last few centuries that we have witnessed synagogues becoming large majestic structures built in communities with resources and desire. ¹

In some ways, the growth of the American synagogue has been miraculous. In a few short decades, the synagogue of America went from being a small shul to becoming a mega center for Jewish learning, worship and social engagement. Jews, and Americans for that matter, chose to belong. The suburban migration encouraged, almost forced Jews to gravitate to a local synagogue. The question was never "did" you belong to a synagogue, but rather, "where did you belong". The individual movements were flourishing, Jewish summer camps had infiltrated the camping market, and Israel trips were great places for family vacations. Everyone belonged.

The main focus of Judaism has always been the life of each individual and their home and family, living in a strong and mutually responsible community. ² The primary focus of Judaism has never been on any building or structure. As Jews, we focus on doing mitzvot, on performing the commandments prescribed in Torah, at least the ones that are still relevant today, engaging in acts of kindness and helping to repair the world.

¹ Adapted from <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/Synagogue/history.html>.

² Gleaned from www.chabad.org

Our mission as Jews, as a part of a Jewish community, is to find ways to keep Judaism alive, to embrace our past and find meaning today that will last until tomorrow and beyond.

For many years, synagogues accomplished just this. They were the focal points of any Jewish community, bringing Jews together in prayer, study and community engagement. Take for example the creation of the Jewish community in New York, particularly on Long Island. New York Jews began arriving from Spain and Portugal in the mid 17th century. By the 1760's, some Jews had settled on Long Island, as well as in Westchester, but it was certainly not like what we have today. Within one century, by 1877, there were 53 congregations in the state of New York.

Many Jews continued to immigrate to the United States in the early 1900's. Most of those Jews resided in the city, but in the 1950's and 60's, Jews began migrating in mass to the suburbs, and Long Island, particularly Nassau County, was a prime recipient for these large Jewish communities. As Jews moved to the suburbs, synagogues were built. Jews felt the pull to be a part of the established Jewish community, and so they joined their local synagogue. And they didn't simply join them – they helped build them. They gave of their time, energy and money to be certain they could provide for their children and grandchildren the Jewish community their parents had only dreamed of.³

As time passed, with the increase of Jews in the suburbs, particularly on Long Island, we also witnessed an increase in Jewish agencies and organizations. JCC's, Jewish Federations, Jewish summer camps, nursery schools, day schools and organizations were popping up everywhere.

³ Some facts taken from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/NewYork.html>.

JNF, ORT, Hadassah, B'nai Brith and so many more Jewish organizations were vying for both attention and money from the Jewish community. As the Jews began to support the entire Jewish community, they became slightly less engaged with their synagogues. This was not a bad thing; it just changed the model. It meant the chicken soup recipe might need to be slightly altered.

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, certainly in a heavily Jewish community like Long Island, synagogue membership was shrinking. This was not necessarily or solely because the programs offered didn't meet the needs and interests of the Jews on Long Island, but because there were simply so many options for Jews, that Jews were spread out among all the synagogues, organizations and agencies.

So here we are today, finding our makom, our place with Makom. We commend the synagogues that are evolving as quickly as the Jewish community is changing. But we also acknowledge that it is hard to change an old recipe, because we are so used to the taste, the flavor, the texture.

Makom NY is creating an intentional spiritual community, as people like Sid Schwarz and others have come to call communities like ours.⁴ We are taking steps to welcome everyone, and to be certain there are no barriers to keep people out. Though we embrace Bar and Bat Mitzvah, we do not perceive the coming of age ceremony at age 13 to be the focal point of Jewish life. There is much to be done both before and after becoming a teenager.

⁴ From <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/from-synagogue-centers-to-intentional-spiritual-communities/>

First, we say to all of you, welcome. In our minds, you are already chevrei Makom, friends of Makom, simply by attending one of our services. And we are truly glad you are here. Some of you are also bonim, or builders of Makom. You have gone one step beyond in helping to support Makom, by giving of your time, talents and financial support so that we can continue to expand and reach much of the unaffiliated and disconnected Jewish community. Some of you engage with Makom at the shorashim level, which means you are helping to plant roots so that Makom will be financially stable for the future. Whichever level you choose to engage, we welcome you, and we are glad you are here. We are thrilled that you have found a makom, a place with Makom.

Makom means place. It is also a name for God. And so our community is a combination of finding sacred space in many different places, the physical space, the programmatic space, and because Makom is also one of the many names for God, we also strive to find a spiritual space. For each of us, these spaces look different. Some of us love the outdoors, love finding a makom, a place outside in God's creations. Some of us love the awe and splendor and grandeur of majestic space, and so we strive to create those awe-filled spaces as well. For some of us, the makom, the place is more about the people in the place, than the place itself.

I recently read an article guiding young families in how to choose a synagogue for the holidays. The article was beautifully written, with intentional suggestions of how a family might consider various synagogues. However, the three pictures that were included in the article were all of large buildings. Buildings are not what make Jews. Jews make Jews. Torah makes Jews. Israel makes Jews. Doing tikkun olam, helping to repair the world, makes Jews. Buildings provide opportunity for us to make Jews.

Makom is not just another synagogue. You will never see a picture of space on our website without people, without program, without Torah, without intention. Makom is meant to be an intentional sacred community, where we meet people where they are, without boundaries, without restrictions, and even our leadership team and myself are constantly re-accessing and re-evaluating as we learn from each of you.

I am a proud product of the Reform movement and I have served wonderful synagogues in my rabbinate. But this, my 18th year in the rabbinate, is a special one. 18, as you may know, stands for chai, or life. And this is the year that I have chosen to devote myself to re-igniting life for Jews and for Judaism. There are many new synagogues across the country; there are not so many new models striving to embrace Judaism through a new lens.

The synagogue, as you heard earlier, is an ancient entity, but the American synagogue that we have come to love, and has also presented great challenges, does not necessarily represent Jewish community anymore. I recently had the privilege and honor of officiating at the funeral of a 37-year-old woman. As I listened to family and friends share with me the details of this young woman's life, I was enamored by the words people chose. She was a beautiful young woman on the outside, but I only knew that from seeing a picture of her on the mantel. The words people shared described her inner beauty, her care and concern for people and animals around her, how she helped to fundraise for non-for-profit organizations, trying to make the world a better place, trying to help those who were less fortunate. Her father said her one fear was that she wouldn't be remembered, and yet she will be remembered, and not simply for the beauty she portrayed on the outside, but more importantly for what was her inner being.

Jewish community must begin to examine what is on our inside. We must realize it is a time for turning. Our High Holy Day Season encourages us to do *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah*, or shuva, means to turn, and return. We begin and end each of our High Holy Day services with return again. Our community is ready to turn. And so, we are thrilled that each and every one of you chose to be with us this High Holy Day season. We embrace you and your choices in wanting to celebrate the Jewish holidays. We hope that many, if not all of you, will choose to find a makom, a place with Makom, beyond these ten days.

This is not your typical synagogue plea from the rabbi desperate to see you before next Rosh Hashanah. This is a plea on behalf of the greater Jewish community, in reflection of the past, and more importantly, in planning for the future. We want to know what speaks to you. What would engage you? Some of you came for the first time to our Rosh Chodesh group, and you were enamored with the depth of conversation and spirituality. Some of you have requested book groups and film gatherings, all in a Jewish context. Some of you enjoyed our challah making and apple gathering, and we will continue to offer such programs. But we need your guidance. This is a collaborative effort, and as long as it is within the mission and vision of Makom, we embrace you and your ideas.

Across the country, we see small buds of new Jewish community, primarily in urban settings. We see people striving to reach the 20's and 30's, striving to engage in the large cities. But Jews often live in the suburbs. Many people are watching to see how Makom will develop. Will we figure out how to reach the 80% of unaffiliated Jews on Long Island? Will we create a financially sustainable model? Will we learn to be more collaborative? Will we listen and to stop saying no so quickly?

The synagogue has been a blessing for many decades, truly a miracle, but the time is now for a new kind, a new model of Jewish community, and we feel blessed that you have chosen to join us, in some way, on this journey. This year at Makom will be a work-in-progress. Our leadership team, which began with a simple meeting of eighteen people back in February, has been working tirelessly, along with a group of volunteers, to imagine what it means to create an intentional community. Here is what we know today, and I can assure you, it will change every day, but we suspect our main mission and vision will remain the same. We have created seven pillars of engagement, and we hope you find a place through one or more of our pillars.

We aim for meaningful t'fillah, deep and intentional worship. We not only want for you to leave a service feeling engaged, with enjoyable music and a good word of Torah, but we want you to want to return, because you found a quiet moment, a meaningful melody, a piece of community. Our model for t'fillah this year will be a monthly musical Shabbat, to occur in the Atrium in Melville, where we will often offer Shabbat dinner, honor upcoming Bar and Bat Mitzvah families, celebrate new births of children and grandchildren, rejoice with brides and grooms, offer prayers of healing and mourn the deaths of loved ones. We will celebrate birthdays and anniversaries together, and simply build our community spirit. Our first monthly Shabbat experience will be held Friday, October 16, and we hope to see you there, if only to give it a try.

Our second pillar is to create keshet, relationship. We are all about people. We want to get to know you, your family, your background, your interests and your desires, your likes and dislikes. We want to share with you in times of celebration and challenge, because we have come to know each other. Anyone who knows me understands that the lens through which I look at life is one of relations.

Long before there was a famous book called Relational Judaism, I wrote a rabbinic thesis on the importance of relationships, and I work every day to build a kesher with someone new, to learn and respect their story, so that we create an even stronger bond.

Our third pillar is simcha, joyous celebrations. We strive to celebrate holidays together, everything from Rosh Hashanah dinners, which we so beautifully shared at our home last night, to sukkot celebrations, to Chanukah latke cook-offs, to Purim trivia to Passover seders and more. If you need a place to celebrate a holiday, you have a place with Makom. Truly, our doors are always open. Our house, and the homes of others in our community, are welcoming places for people looking to connect. We want to celebrate our holidays with you, and learn how we might expand our understanding of holiday celebrations.

Torah is of course a base of our Makom experience. We are offering engaging and hands-on learning for children and adults of all ages. Our youth will learn in informal, creative atmospheres. Our teens will investigate the world around them, and together we will determine how best to attack the challenges that exist within our world. Adults can learn as beginners and as more advanced learners, everything from Torah, prayer, Hebrew, Talmud and more. Sometimes learning will take place around a kitchen table and other times it will occur on a yoga mat. Sometimes learning will be found in a backyard, and other times at the local Panera. But we will study Torah of all kind, together, so that our Jewish story will always be told.

Our fifth pillar is that of kedusha, holiness, and we plan to be with you, our friends of Makom, at the holiest of moments. We want to celebrate with you new life, and we want to mourn with you at times of loss, just as a community should do.

We want to rejoice under chuppot and welcome Bar and Bat Mitzvah families in joy. We want to mark other seemingly less important sacred moments, but equally as impactful and holy. We want to acknowledge retirement, becoming an empty nester and job transition, through ceremony, prayer, community and song.

Of course, we embrace tikkun, repair, repairing the world, repairing our community, repairing the Jewish place within this world. We aim to be present in our own community, supporting just endeavors, and helping those in need. We aim to help our greater world, and have a voice that is heard. We will not all agree how to do tikkun, but we do agree that repair is needed in our world, and that each of us has a unique responsibility to help to make this world a better place.

And finally, we embrace ahavat Yisrael, a love for Israel. We will study the history, culture, language and food of Israel. We will dialogue, and I'm sure argue, over Israeli politics. But ultimately, we will learn how to love Israel, to treasure the fact that we have a Land of Israel and a People of Israel. We will travel to Israel regularly, for the first time or the hundredth time, learning new and different ways to interact with Israel. Our first trip as a community will occur in February of 2016, so please consider joining us on this journey that will be like no other.

Our goal at Makom NY is to meet the needs of the Jewish community on Long Island. We believe everyone can find a makom, a place at Makom, and if you don't see something you like, let us know. What we have now is here because someone suggested it be a part of our program. And by the way, we are making very intentional decisions around our program.

For example, when we realized very few people attend Erev Rosh Hashanah services, we decided we did not need to have a service on Erev Rosh Hashanah, just because it is what everyone does, and so we opted to begin the holiday in a different way.

We will be heading to Tashlich later today, so we can cast away our sins, but instead of placing bread in the water, which has potential harm for the birds and the fish, we are offering the opportunity to write both our sins and our desire on stones, and to cast the sins into the water, and to take some of the stones home, as a memory of our goals for this New Year.

We are of course remembering our loved ones on Yom Kippur, but instead of a typical book that remembers only a name, we are inviting our friends of Makom to share a picture of your loved one, a memory of them, a lesson learned, for they are certainly more than just a name. These are just a few of our intentional decisions, but there will be many more to come, especially with your help.

In our Torah portion this morning, Abraham sets out to find the place that God had described to him, the makom he was searching for. Eventually, they arrive at the place of which God had told him. I was asked if I intentionally chose this Torah portion for this week, and I did not. This is the portion we read every Rosh Hashanah. So perhaps it is b'shert, it was meant to be, that we chose a name for our new community that is mentioned not once but multiple times in our Torah today. Just as Abraham, the very first Jew, was searching for a makom, a place God shared with him, so too are we Jews searching for a Makom, a place that will lead us to a journey unknown, but nonetheless, a journey filled with hope and promise and dream.

May the makom that God directed Abraham to find on our portion this morning be foretelling of our Makom that will allow US to find a place.

Shanah Tovah u'm'tukah.

May this be a good and sweet new year. Amen.

Intro Shehechyanu...