

Lean In To Judaism
Rosh Hashanah Morning
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North Shore Synagogue
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Not so long ago, I stood at a local cemetery, doing a favor for a colleague by officiating at a funeral. Not members of a congregation. The grandfather of the family had died, and the immediate family included his beloved wife, their children and grandchildren. All of the grandchildren had become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, but when we stood at the grave of their grandfather, no one could recite Kaddish for them. Even with the transliteration, it was literally a foreign language to them, I might even say it seemed like a foreign ritual.

On their faces was embarrassment, disappointment and sadness. They so wanted to properly bury their husband, father and grandfather, but they were clearly feeling helpless and ashamed. And so, when we said Kaddish, mine was the only voice you could hear at the graveside of this beloved man.

When our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and in some cases, great-great grandparents came to this great nation, the United States of America, the world was a different place, and the world for Jews was nothing like what we know today. Our relatives came here in hope of something better. They fought for education, for freedom of religion. They fought to be Jewish, and to be Americans. They found balance between their religious backgrounds and upbringings, and the secular world in which they now needed to thrive.

The Jewish community was a tapestry of worlds woven carefully together. Most Jewish families, especially in smaller towns and in the growing suburban community, immediately gravitated toward the local shul, for they needed a place to pray, a place to educate their children, and a place to bury their loved ones.

With every Jewish holiday came a great Jewish food experience – amazing meals with the Passover seder; great, plentiful dinners accompanied the Shabbat experience; a well desired break-fast after a day spent in synagogue atoning for sins. The meals by no means defined their Judaism, but it enhanced their already very Jewish lives. Our ancestors lived within their Jewish community, and their Jewish community embodied their values and their identity.

In many ways, we need to go back to our American Jewish roots in order to reclaim the essence of being Americans and being Jews. Our foremothers and forefathers were steeped in Jewish culture, Jewish ritual and Jewish connection. Their basic identity simply embraced Jewish life, history and community to its fullest. Our generation, in many ways, has forgotten that Judaism doesn't just happen to us; quite the opposite. We must embrace it, or it will simply pass us by.

I'm certain that many of you have heard of Sheryl Sandberg's recent book "Lean In." Perhaps you are somewhat tired of the conversations that have ensued from this book. Since I am constantly surrounded by conversations on gender, I was intrigued by much of what has sparked from this conversation, and I would like to make a parallel between what Sandberg presents in her book and what is happening in our Jewish world.

For those unfamiliar, in this book, Sandberg, who happens to be Jewish and is currently the COO of Facebook and continually on Forbe's and Fortune's top lists, very directly addresses issues of gender in the workforce. For her, it began with an electrifying TedTalk in which she described how women unintentionally hold themselves back in their careers. In her book, she digs deeper into issues of women being encouraged to sit at the table, seek challenges, take risks and pursue their goals with gusto.

That topic is for another day, but I think there is much to be learned from Sandberg's insistence on leaning in to what we care about – leaning in to make the future better. We, the American Jewish Community of the 21st century, must reflect on our history and learn to ***Lean In*** to Judaism. There are many parallels, though by no means is it 100% perfect, between women who don't lean in to opportunity, and Jews who don't embrace Judaism.

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Sandberg speaks in her book about the Chicken and the Egg situation – which one comes first – you all know the story. So often the members of the Jewish community are waiting to be invited into our community, in order to be involved in our communities, claiming what is being offered doesn't really meet their needs. However, once people become involved, they can help the community to evolve to meet their needs as they see fit. It needs to go in both directions. The Jewish community needs to do a better job of reaching out to Jews and inviting them in; welcoming them into our big tent. And Jews need to begin to open the doors – to *lean in* to their local Jewish community, the synagogue, and make it their own.

Sandberg speaks in her book about the fact that there is no one definition of success or happiness. How true this is for our Jewish community. We are realizing in the 21st century that there is no one way to be successful, not as people, not as Americans, and certainly not as Jews. But we do understand that success **MUST** embrace a comprehensive, multi-faceted plan of many paths to a better person.

A century ago, being a member of a Jewish community meant living in a certain place and embracing the Jewish community in your neighborhood. You and your Jewish community were one, and it was virtually impossible to separate the two. Fifty years ago, being a part of a Jewish community meant joining a synagogue. You joined, and the synagogue provided you with life cycle opportunities, education for the children, some adult opportunities and worship events. Today, for many, being a part of a Jewish community has become one of the many memberships or events an individual or family might put on their calendar. Membership at a synagogue is often in equal placement with membership at the club, and religious school for children is often just another extra curricular activity.

When I take Sam and Sophie to our pediatrician, she asks what activities they are involved in each season. Of course, as the children of a rabbi, she assumes Hebrew school to be on the list. But being Jewish can't simply be an activity we occasionally put on the list of things we do. It needs to be so much more a part of who we are; of what guides our decisions and places value in our day-to-day lives.

Sandberg also encourages college graduates to lean way in to their careers. When I read this section of the book, it caused me to contemplate how we encourage our communities to lean in to Judaism. In some ways, the Jewish community for many years asked Jews to lean in by telling them what rules they must follow, often in the negative of what they cannot do, by asking for money, or throwing them on a committee.

We now realize that we, the established Jewish community, need to invite you to *lean in*, so that you might experience the awe of Judaism, the magic of our religion, the magnificent tastes of our rich heritage. We need to invite you to **lean in**, so that you might find answers to your unanswered questions, find faith where you are lacking. We need to invite you to **lean in to Judaism**, so that you might teach us from your hearts and souls, just as we look forward to teaching you.

What do we do to appeal to our community's heart and soul? Sandberg teaches us that we need to be sitting at the table, that we need to shake feelings of self-doubt. So on this Rosh Hashanah, it is truly my pleasure to invite you to sit at our table. Our Jewish community has a table that is open on all sides, with no end in sight. It can be decorated in so many different ways – it simply needs your personal touch. There is always a seat at this table, and room for many hands, and many ideas.

This year we will kick-off a chavurah program. Chavurot are small groups who get together based on interest. Some people might be interested in a chavurah to meet monthly for Friday night dinners. Another chavurah might be interested in enjoying adult only dinners at nice restaurants. Another chavurah might be interested in getting single individuals together, or folks of similar stages in life. When you see the materials about our chavurah program, we hope you will lean-in and join a chavurah. And your experience will be as great as you choose to make it.

Sandberg's book discusses the fact that the world is a jungle gym, not a ladder. Perhaps this is obvious in terms of women and the work force – perhaps not as obvious for the Jewish community. Reaching God, finding Jewish community, there are not always direct lines – quite the contrary, there will be many ups and downs before we get to where we are going. And how often we don't know where

we are going until we arrive. It is so common for us to move backwards in order to make progress. Sometimes we even need to open wounds in order to let them heal.

I'm certain you all remember the children's story "Are You My Mother?" This, of course, is the story of a bird that emerges from its shell to discover an empty nest. The hatchling heads off in search of its missing mother, asking a kitten, a hen, a dog and a cow the question: are you my mother? Each animal responds no, moves on to the car, then the boat, and finally the plane. Only when the mother returns, does the hatchling announce: you are a bird, and you are my mother.

Just the way Sandberg connects this story to the place of women in the workforce, I see an amazing connection to our Jewish community. Just as the bird figures out by simply looking at his mother that she is, in fact, his mother, we Jews should not be ashamed for people to examine our lives and know that we are Jewish, something we are proud to be. If someone had a magnifying glass looking in on our lives, they should find rituals, books, items, customs, conversations and more that would make it obvious from where we came. Today, names do not tell others that we are Jews; we have Jews with all kinds of names, and we embrace this new part of our heritage. But if a stranger were examining your life today, how would they know, without a doubt, that you are a Jew, beyond the fact that you belong to a synagogue. Through actions, values and belief, conversations and rituals, how might a stranger determine to which religious community you belong?

Sandberg shares yet another very Jewish lesson in her book, that we should seek and speak our truth. She teaches that "authentic communication is not always easy, but it is the basis for successful relationships." We must be truthful with one another, respectful, but honest and direct. And we must look for that in our greater community. We are ready to hear your suggestions and your pleas, but we need you to be in partnership with us. Our role as rabbis, cantors, educators and leaders in the Jewish community is to help create a path; but you must meet us on that path, and be willing to walk, jog, run and hike, depending on how the path changes.

We will teach you as much as you are willing to learn, but we need **you** to lean in, to be a part of the journey. We will teach you words of Kaddish, that hopefully

you won't need to say for a long time, but we need you lean in, so you can own them, and embrace them, and understand them, so one day, you will be able to say words of prayer for your loved one from your own lips, in your own voice.

Sandberg has yet another poignant lesson – one I didn't even realize was so meaningful until recently. She claims that women shouldn't leave before they leave. She is talking about the work force, but I find the lesson so fitting for the Jewish community. We are a part of a fascinating time in the life of modern Jews, and Long Island is feeling it before most other communities, perhaps because of the mere number of Jews who live on here. Many in our greater community are defining Judaism for themselves as giving their child a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, making a bris or a baby naming, throwing a huge wedding. Many in our community are choosing to do this not within THEIR Jewish community, but rather as an event for all those to see.

So here is the fascinating aspect of that decision. Every one of our life cycle events is meant to be a way to welcome and embrace someone into our community. When a child is born, we welcome them into our community at the Brit, the 8th day celebration of covenant, bringing a Jewish child into our world. When a child is consecrated, we welcome them into our congregational school. When a child becomes Bar or Bat Mitzvah, we welcome them into our community as a young Jewish adult. When a couple is to be married, we welcome them into the community as a chatan and a kalah, a groom and a bride. When someone converts to Judaism, we welcome them into our Jewish community. And when a person dies, we surround them with the love and support of their community. And we support all members of our families, Jews and non-Jews, children and adults, those who are here regularly and those who come occasionally.

For many in our greater community, they are mistaking these events as the vehicle by which they can be a part of the Jewish community. However, Jewish community is what happens in between all of these events, and these life cycle events are ways for that community, already a part of a family's life, to welcome, embrace, celebrate with and comfort those members of the community who are in need.

We invite you to lean in to Judaism, because Judaism wants to be a part of your life, not just for special events and major holidays, but daily, weekly and monthly. We don't need to do it all, not any one of us – that is a myth. We just need to begin to lean in, more than we were this past year.

And we need to talk about it. Sandberg's final chapter in her book teaches that we need to talk about the issues. Let's start talking about what Jewish community might mean for you. What do you want it to mean for your children and your grandchildren? What is wrong in our Jewish community? Why are people on the fringes? What can we do to excite you, so that you might feel a keshet, a connection, to this incredible heritage.

Judaism has a soul, and you, as its inheritors, are privileged to receive a piece of that soul, with every breath, every moment, every smile, every tear. We have a limited number of opportunities in life to create meaning, so this New Year is a perfect time to examine our meaningful moments, and to see if they are adequate.

This morning we read the story of the Akedah. Imagine if Abraham and Sarah and Isaac had been a part of a Jewish community. How much support, encouragement, challenge and admiration they would have found from others experiencing similar events in their lives. Let us remember – leaning in takes 2 willing feet, a willing heart, and the will to try. And then we can journey somewhere great... together.