

Over the past many months a number of you have asked the question most often asked of rabbis.

Why? Why did you become a rabbi?

It's hard to pinpoint an *exact* moment (although, at another point I'm happy to share some significant ones from adolescence that certainly nudged me in this direction), but my deep connection to Judaism was instilled in me at a very young age by many of those who are no longer here, but whose legacies live on.

I recently received an email from someone who grew up at my home congregation. We have never met before, she is much older than I am, she is also a rabbi, still a member at the congregation where we were raised, and she wanted to wish me *mazal tov* on becoming the Senior Rabbi at Temple Shalom.

In our email exchange she wrote, "You're not related to the (little) Mrs. Ackerman who taught Sunday school a million years ago, are you? It hadn't occurred to me that you might be connected to that clan. I loved her."

"The (little) Mrs. Ackerman" was my Grandma Peggy. She taught 1st grade Sunday School approximately a million years ago, and for approximately a million years. She taught with my uncle in a crib in the corner of the classroom. She taught for decades, waiting for my older cousin to have her as a teacher before she retired. During my first year of rabbinical school I ran into a rabbi in the lobby of the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. "Your grandmother was my favorite Sunday School teacher," he shared with me.

Decades later, *he remembered his 1st grade Sunday School teacher.*

A *mezuzah* in her memory, made by my aunt, hangs in the religious school wing, looking over where she once taught.

And on the other side of that wing is the Sanctuary. I would stand next to Grandma Peggy in that Sanctuary and look up as she covered her eyes during the *Shema* and I'd quickly mimic those actions. To this day, every time I cover my eyes for the *Shema* an image of us standing there next to each other floats around in my mind.

Around the corner from the Sanctuary is a library. A library where I went to morning *minyan* with my dad during the year after my Grandpa Ruby died. I was about 5-years-old. After *minyan*, we'd go to Grandma's house and pick tomatoes from the garden and slice them up to put on bagels with cream cheese that we'd then eat in the kitchen.

And next to the kitchen was the dining room where my extended family would crowd for holiday meals, with my grandfather, and later my uncle, leading *kiddish* over the same silver cup, wearing the same *kippah*, and chanting the same familiar melody.

And down the hall from the dining room was the bathroom with the double sink and a big mirror. I'd squeeze into it with three generations of women, hoping that someone would notice little me standing there, perhaps dabbing some perfume on my neck or wrist, or maybe braiding or curling my hair.

And then we'd get into the car and go to synagogue for *Rosh HaShanah* services, our whole extended family together taking up an entire row, and there I'd find myself again, next to Grandma Peggy, watching her covering her eyes during the *Shema*, and I'd do the same.

I'm jealous that I didn't get to have (little) Mrs. Ackerman as a Sunday School teacher.

But that didn't stop her from teaching me to love Judaism.

It didn't stop her from planting the seeds that would grow into me becoming an educator.

It didn't stop her from instilling in me the values that would lead me to become a rabbi.

It didn't stop her from shaping the life of a grandchild who would one day become a *senior* rabbi of this congregation.

And, so, here I am. In front of all of you.

The granddaughter of a beloved Sunday School teacher.

Taking on the roll of senior rabbi at Temple Shalom.

Here I am, in a career that didn't exist for women until 40 years ago, that didn't exist when my grandmother began teaching 1st grade.

How far we have come.

And, yet, even though women have been rabbis in the Reform Movement for four decades, when many of us close our eyes and imagine a rabbi, we still see a man with a *kippah*, in a suit perhaps, authoritative, and leading from the top.

And so, here I stand in front of you today, appearing more like, "little Mrs. Ackerman," than this traditional image.

And that's a good thing.

Because who you have gotten to know over the past seven years is not the man in a suit, with a *kippah*, leading from the top.

It's me.

The educator. The rabbi. And soon, the senior rabbi. Who stands less than 5 feet tall, but also on the shoulders of giants. Yet, here in my own right.

So many of you in here I know well already, because we've spent the last seven years learning together in Torah study, praying together on the high holidays, immersing ourselves in the religious school, organizing *tikkun olam* projects, programs and initiatives, and working together on committees.

Many of us have gathered together for long hours to envision what education could look like. I've stood here and eulogized your family members and friends, I've beamed with pride on this *bimah* during your children's *bnai mitzvah*, and I've stood under a *chuppah* right here as you married.

And still, there are so many more of you who I need to get know better. I need to spend time with the Silver Spring *Chavurah*, sip with the wine tasters, pray with the Friday night "regulars", learn from our founders, engage with the Renaissance group, brunch with the Brotherhood, and visit those who have built this space but no longer can easily come here on a regular basis.

These are all on my lengthy to-do list.

Many of you have already invited me to into many of these awesome opportunities. And, I, too will be calling you and reaching out asking for your guidance, ideas, input, and time to get to know you better. (And, I appreciate your patience knowing that while some of this will happen in the near future, much of it will happen after July 1st because we still have so much of this year left.)

There is a great deal I need to learn from you, about the history of this place, what you miss, and what you dream Temple Shalom will become. I need you to raise your voices, even, or especially, knowing that we will engage in *makhloket*, in sacred disagreement, because the Talmud teaches, "*Eilu v'eilu, divrei Elohim chayim*," "These words *and* those words, are the words of the living God."

And, I know we are antsy to get moving.

We have been in transition.

And, no, the transition has not been easy. And, no, it will not end when I become the senior rabbi.

Because transition comes with loss.

Because on July 1st I will not be in the school anymore.

Because on July 1st we will be feeling the absence of our cantor, Lisa Levine, as she retires.

Because on July 1st our interim rabbi, John Franken, will have completed his year with us.

But, this transition also comes with opportunity.

We all, lay leaders, staff, clergy, founders, and members who have just joined us, are in a unique place as a congregation, ready to re-explore, re-identify, re-clarify, and re-determine our Temple Shalom vision.

***Kehillah kedoshah*, sacred community, is a product of sacred collaboration.**

Our next transition will allow me, allow of us...and not just allow, but *require* all of us, to step in and support each other in ways that we may not have before.

We have a remarkable opportunity with our professional leadership team next year as Susan Zemsky, our Executive Director, and I will be joined by a music team made up of Emily Meyer and, we hope, an HUC cantorial student, as well as an educational leadership team led by Rabbi JoHanna Potts, and including Andrea Mark, Scott Kravetz, and Xani Pollakoff. And we look forward to having the wisdom, support, and institutional memory of our rabbi emeritus, Bruce E. Kahn. This team approach, while each person having their own portfolio, will allow us to blend and collaborate and interact with worship, education, ritual, life-cycles, and synagogue programming in a way that demands experimentation, review, and reflection. And this team approach will give us the framework, space, and stability so that we, as a congregation, can engage in strategic and thoughtful planning about how the roles of music and education will be filled in the future.

With this new I look forward to us fostering an environment where creative and grounded spirituality will flourish.

Soon, because we have so little time to waste, we will need to engage deeply in a process of worship exploration as we ask ourselves: What do we seek in prayer? What do we need from Shabbat? How do music, Torah, and study, help us along that journey? How can we create sacred community during services, holidays, and through ritual? Who do we need leading worship—lay leaders, musicians, professionals, and clergy—to make this happen? What new-to-us modes of prayer and observances ought we experiment with in order to find renewed energy in our spiritual lives?

I'm going to ask us, as a strong Reform Jewish community to look backward and ask: What from our personal and congregational past, our upbringings, and from traditional Judaism do we find meaningful and what renewed energy might we bring—not for the sake of newness, but for the sake of preventing ourselves from falling victim to *keva* (structure) lacking in *kavannah* (creative intention)?

I am someone who does not typically lead from on high—although sometimes that will be necessary and I will step into that role.

My default is to be one in the center of an intricate web, along with our lay and professional team, leading from within, anticipating what might be coming next, providing the resources needed to help others, and our community as a whole, flourish.

I am here *both* to teach *and* to facilitate learning. I am here to make sure that these walls are a laboratory where we can all find the space and resources to embrace our own Judaism and to determine the paths of our own spiritual journeys.

As a firm believer that we all need to be Jewishly empowered members within our community, I want to emphasize that Temple Shalom is a place to embrace leadership roles: to teach classes, offer care to members in need of healing, chant Torah, lead services, organize groups to go to marches, lead us in Jewish social justice efforts, and more.

These are opportunities to nourish your own your own Jewish journey as well as enhance the journeys of others. And your leadership is necessary to make sure we have the capacity to live out our values.

I cannot do it alone. I will not only be grateful for your leadership, but we, Temple Shalom, will be stronger for it.

I'm going to ask you all to embrace a very important word as I step into this new role.

Repeat it after me.

Experimentation.

“Experimentation.”

Experimentation will be our opportunity to safely push beyond perceived boundaries.

Experimentation will bring about things that we love.

And things we don't so much love.

But, remember that experimentation requires a process of reflection, critique, conversation, and change (including, sometimes, back to where we were before).

Experimentation will give us the freedom to innovate.

And the freedom to make mistakes, even fail.

And even with the framework of experimentation, I'm going to make mistakes. Plenty of them. And I will need you to call me on them, and be kind about them. And remind me to not be too afraid to make them from time to time.

And all of this will only work if everyone—and take a look around the room—look again—think about someone in this room with whom you often disagree—experimentation will only work if everyone in this space (and not in this space) recognizes that we are all striving for Temple Shalom to be excellent—in music, in worship, in adult and youth education, in rituals, in life-cycle events, in social programming, in social justice endeavors, in relationships. Knowing that we are all striving for excellence means benefit of the doubt must be the place from where we start. It means we must be gracious, caring, and supportive. It means sitting across from one another in sacred disagreement and remembering, again, that, “*Eilu v'eilu, divrei Elohim chayim,*” “These words *and* those words, are the words of the living God.”

When we engage in *makhlochet l'shem shamayim*, disagreement for the sake of heaven, with *chesed*, kindness, *chochma*, wisdom, and *emun*, trust, we will be successful in creating spiritual, educational, and justice oriented opportunities that reflected who we strive to be as a congregation.

Just as my grandmother empowered generations of Jews to love, embrace, and live out daily their Reform Jewish identity and values, I look forward to doing the same here, with all of you, together, alongside one another.

This.

Right here.

To be with the people in this space.

To have the opportunity to lead the community we will continue to create.

This is why I became a rabbi.

I am in deep gratitude for, and incredibly excited about, the journey on which we are about to embark.

Thank you for allowing me to travel, to lead, and to also be led, along this sacred journey with you.

And thank you to Rita and Mike, as well as Lisa, Leslie, and the search committee for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you all today. I know you have questions for the committee, so I'm going to excuse myself now and look forward to celebrating with all of you in the Social Hall later.

***L'hitraot*, see you soon.**