

Erev RH- 5774

Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller/ TBT, VTA

How often does a rabbi get up on the bimah and announce her age to the whole congregation? I just turned 54! I've been telling everyone, that I am excited about the number 54. Here is why: its three times chai, 18, which stands for life- seems like a good number since I have given life three times, to each of my three daughters. It is 2 times 27, the age I was when Seth and I met- so its stands for the two of us, and the notion that I have known my husband half of my life. But there is another reason that turning 54 has been so significant to me, a reason that I haven't shared with anyone. You see, my mother was 54 when she died of cancer. There was no future for her, after 54. There was history: the things she had done, her accomplishments, the relationships that were special, but there was no future. Now at 54, I have a history, too- and this year feels like a dividing line, between all that was, and the unwritten future that I will have, but my mother did not. Isn't that what parents wish for, that their children will achieve more than they have achieved?

Number your days, that you might gain a heart of wisdom, teaches Psalm 90. In this year of celebrating our 75th anniversary as a congregation, we've created the opportunity to look back, both literally, on photo albums we have found in cupboards and closets, but also to reminisce about 75 years worth of people, places, events, stories. This October 25, we begin our 76th year- and our future is unwritten. So what is the wisdom that we can take with us, from our 75 year history, into the future that we will write together? I think the wisdom that we can take to heart is found in three words: Build, Care, Relationships.

BUILD. Our founders taught us to build. Build for yourself, build for your family, build for your community, build for the future. Build Jewish institutions, but also build Jewish identities. 50 years ago, we moved into this building- actually, the building those of you sitting in Meister Hall are sitting in, minus this sanctuary. But the

truth is, the most important foundation had been laid before that- it was the desire to be a Jewish community in the midst of this unpopulated agricultural county. There were young families who wanted to create torah school classes, have their children become Bar and Bat Mitzvah with each other, build a sukkah together for everyone to eat in. There were seniors, who wanted to connect with peers. They built relationships with each other, then an institution to connect them into the future, and then a building to be the meeting place for what they were building. What our generation of founders taught us, is to never stop building, and to balance our bricks and mortar building with what we are building in our inner selves. At 75, we have built a building that may or may not be updated for the 21st century, but our future is still passionately committed to building a new generation of Jewish identities. Our history may be about young families who started their professional lives here, but our future is about nourishing/building Jewish identities in our single young adults who live in Ventura and Oxnard,

in the adults who find their way into Judaism, in the college students who seek something that feels safe and comfortable when they walk in our doors, in couples who re-locate to our beautiful county, AND in young families who are growing their family and professional lives here. A community is healthy when it is dynamic, when it is stable but flexible to the needs of its people. To the young families who are part of this community, we say: we remember our history. We are filled with families who once were where you are. It brings all of us joy to see you and your children. There is no part of temple life that is limited to you by virtue of your youth, inexperience, or even energetic children. Creating our Jewish homes enriched us- we want to help you create the programs, the physical space, the emotional space for your journeys. Being a community of many generations, many family descriptions means that one generation can help the next generation build for the future- we see our future before us and our history guiding us.

Ron Wolfson, a prominent Jewish educator, wrote about why synagogues are vital in the work of building Jewish identities. He wrote: My identity may be measured in concrete actions, like whether I light Shabbat candles, give to a building fund, attend services regularly, but my internal identity as a Jew is shaped by relationships with the people around me: they help me see myself as Jewish, for they influence how I work, and with what I fill my free time, the Jewish holidays I observe and celebrate, the way my family defines itself as Jewish, my connection to Israel and to a people, how I hear the call to repair the world, and how I hear the call to find God. Those are not parts of my Jewishness I can grow by myself, on the internet with virtual community or at home with study. These are parts of my Jewishness I build when I am face-to-face with others. I need the place to meet- the synagogue- but the conversation that goes on once I am there is what is so crucial.

Its funny- I go to a professional conference every year at the same hotel in Palm Springs. The place has gone through periods of

being rundown, remodeled. Nobody cares. But we go for the lobby. Not fancy. The light, the couches, the walkways somehow all work to put us in relationship with each other; we find ourselves sitting together in conversation, having a drink here, a group playing guitars and singing over there. It's not the trendiest. But it does foster relationship. It's why I love our atrium during an oneg; our coffee corner, with green options to Styrofoam cups now, the library during Shabbat morning torah study. They are places where the conversations that build and expand us happen.

And this is the second word, I think our ancestors have bequeathed to us. Relationships. We are a small community, where many people have been blessed to live for a lot of years, and many of us have been blessed to live for a significant chunk of life. We are small enough that we can know each other. Our family, our friends, our community is what makes our lives so sweet. We have the opportunity to invest in friends, to put time toward being with others in this community. Sixty years ago, the grandmother's club

would meet. Thirty years ago havurot began, to link people together with new friends- a dozen years ago we begin to create women's rosh hodesh groups. But the kinds of relationships that our ancestors taught us about were more than just friendships. They were relationships of support. When young families moved to Ventura and didn't quite know how to create Jewish homes, there was the Jewish Holiday Workshop Series, where young moms with kids could learn how to create intentional, thoughtful Jewish homes where Jewish rituals could be observed, ritual items displayed on shelves, homemade decorations adorn the walls and recipes baked at holiday time. When there was a death, this was the community that packed a shiva kit to go to a house of mourning, complete with kippot, and a bottle of kiddush wine. Although there is no tradition to have kiddush at a shiva house, the minhag here was to sweeten the pain of loss with a blessing and a swallow of Manischewitz. The strong friendships and deep relationships that built this temple over 75 years is a promise of relationship that takes us into our future.

Here is the place to find significant relationships, people to teach, mentor, to explore life's challenges, and injustices, its frustrations and its joys. How we engage in relationship may change in our future. It may be that we look for email alerts to tell us how and when to bring a veggie dinner over to a new mom or someone going through chemo treatments. It may be that a T'kiah blast sends us to a shiva minyan for a neighbor's loss. But these are the lines of connection that remind us that we are part of a temple rooted in a history of friendship, and committed to moving into the future fostering relationships of meaning between us.

And lastly, if I had to choose a third word to describe the legacy of our first 75 years, it would be to Care. The mission statement written when we were founded in 1938 speaks of a sense of brotherhood, a responsibility to care for Jews and non-Jews wherever we could bring ethical behaviors and moral responses to respond to the needs of others. I think of the many years our members have been in partnership with other faith organizations to

feed the hungry and to house the homeless. There was a time that we had a homeless winter shelter here. We have instilled in ourselves a 75 legacy of caring as a Jewish duty, from the founding merchants who collectively distributed tzedekah in their stores to the homeless men who would jump the trains from LA to Ventura, and find themselves wandering about Main Street in front of the Zander Building. 40 years ago our community adopted and sponsored Soviet Jewish families- the value that as Jews we were responsible to care for others. That is a proud 75 year legacy. Today we look to the future with this same sense of responsibility to care for others, whether it is for those in Israel, or others in Ventura, or people who have suffered from devastation around the globe. We are motivated not just because we sense this mandate as a Jewish community to care, but because we hear the voice within of personal fulfillment, of moving our world toward tikkun olam.

Our history is one of which we should be proud. Our unwritten future is one that invites us to be, in the words of Ron Wolfson, “ face to face in meaningful relationships with Jews and Judaism in a (relational) community where our relationships offer a path to meaning and purpose, belonging and blessing.”

This September 11, 2013, - next Wednesday-- is a significant day for me. I will have lived one day longer than my mother lived. I am determined to learn from her history, and number my days with a heart of wisdom. The wisdom of our ancestors here, and the wisdom of my mother, are really the same: Find ways to Build the Future. Invest in Friendships, and commit yourself to Relationships that are Deep and profound. Care for the world around you, those in need, for in giving is meaning. On October 26, 2013, we open a new chapter, as we begin our 76th year. Our future is unwritten- but I look forward to our writing it together. L'shana Tova.