

TBT: Thrive, Not Merely Survive / 5 Habits of Thriving Congregations

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2018/5779, by Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller

Did you know there are 7 habits of highly effective people? 12 steps to a compassionate life? 8 habits of love, ten steps to earning awesome grades, and 50 ways to leave your lover?

And what if I told you there are 5 habits of thriving congregations? Would we do them?

First we need to know who “WE” are. Because “We” American Jews, who WE are and what WE want, is very different than even a decade ago, let alone last century. Here is who WE are, much gleaned from the 2013 Pew Study on Religion and Public Life.

“We” are more secular than we’ve ever been before- for many Jews, especially millennials, Judaism is more our cultural identity than a religious practice. We care about living ethically and feel inspired by Jewish attitudes on social justice. Our lives are integrated with people of other faiths and races; often in our homes with non-Jewish partners. Most of us feel good about being Jewish, and are open to learning more about Judaism and doing Jewishly, if it is fulfilling. We don’t have such a need for institutions in our lives, we spend money only when we feel personally enriched by what we spend. We want to expose our kids to Judaism, want them to have a Jewish identity but often feel ambivalent or unprepared to help them cultivate a relationship with God. Our families are the centers of our lives. We are proud of our heritage, comfortable being Jews in America, and most Jews don’t spend much time thinking about the future of American Judaism or Jewish institutions.

But there are those of us who do think about Jewish institutions, and while many of our Jewish institutions and organizations originated in the 20th century, the synagogue has been the hub of Jewish life for 2,000 years. It has been forecast that Jews will thrive into the 21st century, but Jewish institutions may not. Personally, I’d hate to think of Jews without synagogues- then all we have is a common heritage, not a roadmap to create a Jewish future. The key is for our synagogues to both respond to what Jews are looking for in their lives, and to inspire Jews in ways that they didn’t know existed, as they grow and deepen in their lives.

Temple Beth Torah, in 2018, is 80 years young. And I say young because, like all who are young at heart, we are willing to keep learning, and growing. Snapshots of who we have been along the way inspire us, visions of what we can be for future generations ignite us. So, as I look at synagogues that are succeeding, in spite of real societal issues like rising intermarriage, anti-Semitism, anti-institutionalism, and rising secularism, here are 5 habits of thriving congregations.

The first habit of thriving congregations is what I’ll call Hands-On Judaism. Parents today want to be hands-on with everything with their kids, which is a great message for building strong families. We spend enough time apart during the week. In thriving Torah schools, parents are right there learning. What that has translated into in some communities are parents who are asking to be trained to be Torah school teachers, so they are hands-on with what their children are learning, from Jewish songs, to discussions on values. In hands-on congregations, the guiding principle is :“don’t do it all for us, show us how to own our own Jewishness”. In these

communities there is a shift away from leaders doing all the teaching, service leading, music, programming, to empowering everyone to be actively involved- the professionals are the resources and the guides. Hands-on Judaism sounds like this: What will the torah study theme be this year? I don't know- let's talk about it and see what topics you all want to prepare and present to each other. What skills do you have to offer? You are an artist?-- Can you design a community project for Hanukkah? You like to play guitar? --Here's the music, you get to lead our next community Havdalah. You like gardening? Let's design outside sacred space together. In other words, people know that their Jewishness will be more meaningful to them if they are actively hands-on in making and living the experience. This shifting from passive to active, is empowering because it means members are sharing what is important to them, from baking Friday night challahs and oneg cookies, to sharing their own stories and experiences; there are many more voices, not just the rabbis or cantors or educators and teachers. The community is hands-on in making everything happen.

2. Spirituality is part of everything. While Jews, especially millennials, may be more secular than prior generations, they are spiritual- as most of us are. In thriving congregations, spiritual moments aren't the exclusive domain of the sanctuary- spiritual moments are woven in to everything-- in board rooms, in classrooms, in beach clean-ups, in Torah study, in movement and meditation classes, in Judaic arts. Spirituality is not limited to prayer- it is about finding Jewish spiritual wisdom when we sit together in bereavement circles, or Rosh Hodesh groups or in silence together. Congregants in thriving congregations care about continually growing, learning, becoming deeper, more aware people. Congregations that tap into the wisdom, the mindfulness, the rich teachings of Jewish texts both past and present, keep nurturing the spiritual in their members.

The 3rd Habit of Thriving congregations is they Work for Justice. Talmud teaches that we can't just know what justice is, we are to be actively engaged in doing it, and thriving congregations today are. Spurred by endless social justice issues here and in Israel, in our local communities, globally, with Jews and non-Jews, this is being driven by millennials and baby boomers who take to heart Leviticus' teaching, Do Not Stand Idly By. We might be tempted to think that this is a response to the current political landscape, or a nostalgia for the activism of the 1960's, but the truth is actually rooted in the evolution of American Judaism. Steven Weisman in his just-published book, "The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion", writes about a profound change that happened to Judaism over the centuries in America. The notion of "redemption" as being a 'futuristic concept of a coming messiah returning all the Jews to the land of Israel' morphed into "redemption" being 'what American Jews would bring to America by our good works'. He writes, "the transformation of American Judaism from a rote devotion to ancient rules of daily conduct, to a more spiritual devotion to its ethical underpinnings...has ... strengthened American Jews' faith in their heritage and their willingness to maintain it. " Indeed, in the 2013 Pew Study, when asked, "what does it mean to be Jewish?" 69% answered "leading an ethical and moral life", and 56% said "working for justice and equality". Thriving congregations report that there are many issues that motivate their members, and that it is a given that they are partnering with other faith communities or non-profits, whether it is local mosques, or foodbanks or the like. Thriving congregations find ways for young families to

engage too, as parents care about more than “one-off, feel-good” events, but ongoing chances for meaningful social justice engagement.

The 4th Habit of Thriving congregations? Radical Openness. Everyone who walks through the door is welcome. It almost goes without saying that the notion of “you don’t look Jewish” is offensive, outdated and completely irrelevant to where American Judaism is today. We are past the era of programming for interfaith couples, or to make LGBTQ members feel at home. Here is what membership in thriving congregations looks like: people of every ethnicity, race, gender, age, socio-economic population, political opinion, living as singles, or with partners *that themselves* are of every race, gender, ethnicity, or faith. Here is what membership in thriving congregations feels like: that I am really truly equal and really truly accepted. No one is “more Jewish” because they have been to Israel, or “less Jewish” because they aren’t a Zionist. No one is more important because of financial contribution, or less important because they’ve only been Jewish for a year or two. Everyone is welcomed and invited to find the path to Jewish life that is what they or their family needs at this moment. Older congregations report that once their old-time membership opened up their hearts to who was walking in their doors, magical things began to happen, and their congregations exploded with greatness. And here is a corollary to radical open congregations- radically open members. Those who come to programs and grumble, “Who moved my cheese? Or, where is my clique of friends?” find themselves more and more on the margins. Those who are thriving are those who see new faces and feel energized, not threatened, or eclipsed; those who look to network, to meet new people with whom they can connect for civic, and social, and neighborhood engagement. This sense of making real connections is important in communities where young families have moved for work and do not have parents around, and in communities where older members have either just come to retire, or have just moved to be near their children and grandchildren. The idea of making friends at one stage of life and not being open to new friends, and the idea of making friends of only one’s own generation, is simply not the experience reported in thriving congregations. People are open to new and Real Relationships.

5. The 5th habit of thriving congregations is Give of Yourself. Reverend Lillian Daniel tells this story in her book “When ‘Spiritual but not Religious’ is Not Enough.” A man had written to say he had been to many churches and had decided he was spiritual, but not religious. Now, on Sunday mornings, he would read the New York Times, and go for a run, finding God in the great outdoors. Rev. Daniel is not impressed with what she calls his “sunshine and butterflies” approach, a faith with no depth, no pushing of oneself to grow, hold oneself accountable, have a responsibility beyond self. The man writes how proud he is of his school age son who had written a report about how children in faraway places suffer from violence and hunger. His son had concluded, “it made me realize we’re so lucky to be living here and not there. “ The dad’s letter to the minister, ends, “that what our religion is, gratitude.” Rev. Daniel responds in her book, “when you witness pain and declare yourself lucky, you have fallen way short of what God would do... I think God wants us to witness pain and suffering and rather than feel lucky, feel angry and want to do something about it.” It reminds me of the quote from Rabbi David Wolpe, who says, “Spirituality is what we feel, theology is what we believe, but religion is what we DO.” And that is why #5 of thriving congregations is Give of Yourself. Not just in social

justice situations, or situations that strikes your fancy- but situations when you are needed to help. Thriving congregations ask their members to give far more than dues, but to give from a far deeper place. Where are you going to roll up your sleeves and do real good for this community and on behalf of this community? What is fulfilling for members is a sense of obligation that is not self-serving, not even convenient in their lives. Giving of themselves when others need them, when they are helping a community both of friends and of people they don't know, contributes to a meaningful life, and real happiness. And when you feel fulfilled, you thrive, and your community thrives.

Five Habits: Hands-On Judaism, Spirituality as a Part of Everything, Working for Justice, Radical Openness both as a congregation and as individuals, and Giving of Yourself. Are those our habits, here at TBT? Could they be?

As we begin a new year, and we look into the promise that lays ahead: You get to make the choice. TBT in our 80th year- will we Survive, or will we Thrive?

L'shana tova.