

Yom Kippur: All Souls Are Welcome Before God

By Rabbi Michael Schwab (Written for speaking purposes)

One of the oldest, sweetest, and well-known tales of the High Holiday season is the story of a young Jewish boy, orphaned as a child and adopted into a warm-hearted gentile family. The boy knew he was Jewish, but little more than that. He lived a simple life as a shepherd, tending the flock and playing his flute as he cared for the sheep.

One fall day, sitting at the side of the road, he noticed person after person traveling to the nearby city of Berdichev. Curious, he asked the travelers where they were going. “We are on our way to spend the High Holidays with the great *tzaddik*, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak.” “High Holidays?” the boy asked. “What are they?” The men laughed, “Silly boy. The Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement! You should not be here with sheep, you belong in the synagogue with us!”

The words struck a chord in the boy. Not knowing what to do, and not familiar with High Holiday ticket policies, the boy simply took his flute and followed the crowd into the synagogue. Never in his life had he experienced such a thing. The sound of the Hazzan’s voice, the

townsfolk engaged in prayer, the moving words of the rabbi. And at that moment the boy also knew, more than at any time in his life, what he did *not* know. He realized he could not read the language of the service and he did not know a single prayer. More than anything in the world he wanted to join in, but he lacked the tools to do so, and nobody, not a single soul, paid him any attention.

All through Rosh Hashanah, and then through Yom Kippur, he sat, seeking a way into this holy community. The time for the Neilah prayers arrived and he understood the sanctity of the waning hour. One by one, the worshippers gathered at the ark, silent and without talking; sensing the gravity of the moment. Something within the boy stirred and with tears in his eyes and unable to contain himself any longer, the boy took out his flute and began to **play**. A joyous flurry of searing notes emerged! All the worshippers froze and stared, “How dare this child create such an outburst?! In appropriate!” With every darting eye turned against the boy, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak *ran* off the bimah toward the terrified child and embraced him. “This boy,” announced the Rebbe, his

voice shaking with emotion, “has saved us all. All day long, I saw that our prayers had *not* ascended to the heavens, and with the gates of Neilah closing, our names were not yet inscribed in the Book of Life. *Only* by way of this boy’s pure heart and the pure prayer of his flute, more true than any prayer offered by any of us today, have the gates of heaven opened. We owe this boy our gratitude. May each one of us in this sacred hour learn to pray as he does.”

Here *we* stand, *our* hearts turned toward God, *our* community assembled for self-reflection, readying *ourselves* to greet this new year with an eye to how we can both improve ourselves and our community. My hope is that *you* feel the sanctity of this moment, like the shepherd boy, and as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, that you know that you are in *exactly* the right place at *exactly* the right time. And I desperately want us all to dwell in that feeling for the rest of the holiday. However, right now I *also* want us to think about who in our community might *not* be here, or perhaps who *is* here but like the shepherd boy might not feel fully included in the shared meaning of this moment. As we open our

hearts and souls to the year ahead, I want to talk to you this evening (morning) about the sacred Jewish value of inclusivity, of being a community for *all* of our members. Who among us, I wonder, is that shepherd boy looking to enter, but lacking the tools to do so? Who is it who stands at the periphery so desperate to be at the center– but fearful that they will not be welcomed in? How can we structure the nature of our own community to truly make a place for all who want to take part – for both their sake and for ours?

I am sure many of you know the famous episode involving the great sages, Hillel and Shammai, and the strange request of the prospective convert. As the story goes, a man once came to Shammai with a religious challenge and said: “I will become a Jew if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Of course, literally doing so is impossible. So Shammai, thinking the man was mocking him or making light, chased the man out of the room. Next that same man went to Hillel and said the same thing. But Hillel did *not* chase him away. Instead, he answered: “What is hateful to you, do not do to

anyone else. That is the whole Torah. Now go and learn it.” And that is just what the man did.

Usually, when we tell this story we focus on Hillel’s quote: the idea that Judaism is based on the Jewish version of the golden rule. However, what might be more important is what he *did*. When an outsider showed up at his doorstep looking for acceptance, especially in such a strange manner, it would have been easy for him to turn the man away. In fact, as Shammai thought, it might have even been seen as the appropriate or understandable thing to do by other insiders in the community. But Hillel acted differently. Instead, Hillel looked *past* the mystifying behavior, the unconventional approach – he looked *past* the reasons why *not* to engage with this person and simply saw a soul looking for a way in. So Hillel found a way - by accommodating his question and responding with a message of love. Once Hillel found a path to open a door for this man, he walked right through and joined his strengths to the community.

This attitude should not surprise us, especially at this time of year, as our tradition tells us that we come from a long line of door openers, stretching all the way back to the very first Jews. Abraham and Sarah are said in the midrash to have kept their tent open on all sides so that they could welcome and include all who wished to enter. Judaism was thus born out of a spirit of *Hachnasat Orchim* – the value of not only *welcoming* the stranger but also *including* them in the community. Add to that the fact that *Bnei Yisrael*, the ancient Jewish people, then grew up under slavery in Egypt. This taught us firsthand what it really means and feels like to be a stranger. The Torah reminds us of *this* fact more than almost any other, as multiple commands to reach out to the stranger and underprivileged use *this* as the explicit rationale. And both at Sinai, and in the moment before our ancestors crossed the Jordan to enter the Promised land, the Torah text is *very* clear that *every single* person was included in the covenant, as it says, “*all* of you: the men of Israel, children, wives, the stranger, the woodchopper to the water drawer *all* enter the covenant” – no matter what age, gender, socio-economic background or ability level. Therefore, in every significant moment of

the Torah and later during every age in history, Judaism has advocated for *inclusivity* and has held as a value that we are strongest and most aligned with God's will when we have opened the doors to the participation of the *entire* community. We have learned over the centuries that an *inclusive* Judaism is a vital Judaism. As it says in the book of Isaiah, quoting God, "*Ki beiti beit tefillah yikara l'chol ha-amim* – My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* people."

However in today's world I am worried that there are segments of our community that do *not* feel included, and it weighs on me. It weighs on me for the spiritual reasons I just articulated and also because I imagine that all of us have had some experience with what it feels like to be on the outside and we know that it feels terrible. Recall a time in your own life when you have felt excluded – recall the feelings and remember what such an experience did to your state of mind, your well-being, your self-worth. Or if you have trouble identifying a moment for yourself perhaps recall moments when you have seen your children, or

other loved ones, be excluded by others – the pain you felt on their behalf for not being accepted.

And it is not just regarding those who feel uncomfortable walking into the synagogue due to a perceived lack of knowledge, or history, with Judaism. There are many reasons people are sometimes not included. I have experience, for example, with parents of children with special needs, who speak of their children's difficulties in attending religious school, religious services, and summer camps. They speak of the angst of watching their children try – and so often fail – to make friends. I know of adults with special needs who no longer have an automatic community at school and search to belong to something, thinking that as Jews the synagogue would include them but often still feeling they aren't fully wanted here either. There are people with physical and medical issues that without accommodations and assistance can no longer participate in the way they used to. They *desire* to participate but they do not wish to, in their words, "be a burden", so they don't come. And there are others who, **for all sorts of reasons**, feel that

they need to stay on the outside, or at least on the sidelines, of our community.

And the flip side of the same coin is that parents and loved ones also tell me of the *joy* they feel when their child, or family member, *is* accepted and *can* be included. Such an experience can *literally* change the nature of the life of both the person with a special need and their family's life as well. As Jacob Artson, a rabbi's son who was diagnosed with autism and has significant physical disabilities wrote, "The *only* difference between you and me, is that I have lots of labels attached to me, like "nonverbal", or "severely autistic", and "developmentally disabled". Jacob is saying, labels aside, we are *all* human beings who want to be included in the "stuff of life" – much of which happens right here in our synagogue community.

To *be* more inclusive of people who are on the periphery, there are steps we can take. To start, following Jacob's wisdom, labeling people is *often* unhelpful at best and is usually downright hurtful. Therefore one small but important thing we can do to make our community more

inclusive is to adopt person-first language to re-invest people with disabilities or other differences with their proper God-given dignity.

Here is one mother's description of her first experience with the power of person-first language: "When my son, Jake, was born, I was . . . clueless about motherhood. I was even more clueless about Down syndrome. For two weeks all I could see was the diagnosis. I cried a lot and thought about all the things Jake would never be. Waiting at pediatrician's office for his 2 week appointment, I felt ashamed and guilty, like his diagnosis was my fault, and I covered Jake with a blanket so no one could see him. A woman in front of me turned around and nosily peeked under the blanket. She said to me, "Is that a Down's? My friend has one of those," - as if my child were some breed of dog! I was horrified. But I felt powerless and I didn't know what to say . . . Finally, when the *doctor* came into the exam room, the first thing *he* said to me was, "You have to remember, he is *not* a Down syndrome child, he is a CHILD, who has Down syndrome, amongst many other characteristics." For the first time in his tiny life I saw my SON. His beautiful almond eyes, chubby little cheeks, and curly hair captured me like never before.

And the tears of anger and helplessness became tears of pride and joy. Suddenly what mattered wasn't that he had Down syndrome, what mattered was that he was Jake”.

Person-first language teaches us not to define people by their diagnoses, whether it be medical, developmental, or psychological. It also reframes “problems” into needs that we can meet. Instead of “Sarah *is* a behavior problem,” we can say “Sarah needs behavior supports” and then figure out what they are. Instead of “Sam *is* wheelchair bound”, “Sam uses a wheelchair so lets find him a space.” Instead of “Jacob *is* autistic” we can say that “Jacob has autism and may need learning accommodations”. Just to be clear, person-first language is more than just careful word choice. It is an attitude of communication which requires us to avoid making assumptions and to speak directly to individuals with disabilities. It requires us to *ask* if someone wants assistance rather than assuming they do. It requires us to *remember* that people with disabilities have something to offer, and are not the sum of their condition. Although it might feel awkward at first, the person-first

approach is not just political correctness. It is about basic respect and it is a dignity that people who have differences, or disabilities, are saying is important to them.

A colleague of mine, Dahlia Kronish, who is an incredibly smart, kind and talented rabbi who also happens to have a condition called dwarfism, delivered a talk to her synagogue in Riverdale, New York. Part of her message was this: be proactive, be direct and be respectful. Her example was, when she was a first year staff member at Ramah-Berkshires, during staff week, close to her arrival, the *head of maintenance* found and approached *her* and asked what adjustments she might need to make her time at camp easier. Dahlia said this proactive question opened up a conversation that led to lowering paper towel dispensers in her cabin, and making other changes that made her everyday life as smooth as possible. It made camp feel like a welcoming environment to her. The point she was making was how wonderful it felt, and how effective it is, to *approach* persons with differences to *ask* what would make them comfortable, in advance, rather than to wait for

those who are already in an uncomfortable space to have to *seek out* assistance that no one thought to give.

What is more, Jacob Artson gives us further advice about inclusion that I think we should all take to heart. He wrote: “What makes a person believe in him or herself? . . . First and foremost, my family has never wavered in their belief that I am a child of God with an equal claim to dignity and respect. Second, I have been blessed to have had wonderful mentors [who] believed I could achieve greatness. Kids with special needs don’t need to be reinforced with “good job” and “good listening” as if we are in puppy obedience training. What we need is stimulation, patience, and **someone to believe in us and notice our little triumphs**. Third, I have found great support in God and Torah. **I think that people vastly underestimate the importance of spirituality for people with special needs...** We *all* need to live with meaning and know that we are not alone in our struggles. Finally, everyone needs a sense of belonging and many of you probably are involved in your [synagogue] for precisely that reason. . .” Love, encouragement,

dignity, spirituality and community – these are fundamentals that *all* of us are looking for and *all* of us deserve.

And thus Artson goes on to propose 3, what he calls, “*mensch ideas*” for our consideration: “1. Inclusion isn’t just about me, he wrote, it is about everyone. The truth is that a shul that welcomes *me* is a synagogue where *everyone* can find a place and people will want to join. 2. It doesn’t take any training to be a leader who models inclusion. It just takes an attitude that *all* people are made in God’s image and it is our job to find the part of God hidden in each person. 3. My favorite Jewish holiday is Passover because it is the story of our people’s journey from degradation to liberation. . . . My journey has taken me through the desert and toward the Promised Land. I look forward to the day when we can *all* stand together at Mt. Sinai as one people, the day when everyone is included and together we bring God’s glory to all of humanity. Our lives are not determined by where we start but by where we seek to go.” Jacob is right and our Jewish community should be

there to nurture each soul's journey in their search for meaning and for elevating their lives.

When we can embrace *this* vision of inclusion, it allows us to see that each person has something special to teach, a unique blessing each soul brings to the world. Rabbi Joanne Heiligman relates the story of a congregant who was repeatedly embarrassed when his son, who was diagnosed with autism, would jump up and down as the Torah was brought out of the Ark. He feared a reaction by other congregants like that of those in the opening story who responded to the shepherd boy and his flute with hostility. Finally a fellow congregant, in the same spirit of the rabbi in our story, came up to him and said, "Every week your son jumps and dances when the Torah comes out. I *love* it! We should *all* be so joyous at that moment." Her comment changed the whole family's experience at shul each Shabbat morning. And it reminds us that some people who have developmental differences, have emotional responses, which are not naturally tempered by social constraint. Thus they allow themselves to fully experience these deeply

human and religious emotions of love, fear, joy, or awe. A way of being that perhaps we can *all* learn from sometimes.

Rabbi Brad Artson, Jacob's father, wrote a moving article about what *his* son has taught him as well. He said, "I want to share with you what my Jacob has taught me about life because what he has taught me is precious and applies to us all. Jacob has taught me to let go of the future. Jacob taught me all the thousands of expectations and impositions that I didn't even know I had . . . We tell ourselves, "Oh, our children can grow up to . . . do anything . . . [but] We don't even know the extent of what we demand of them until they [can't or] won't do it. And then suddenly we realize how very much we want for them and *from* them . . . [Therefore] Jacob reminded me of something I knew intellectually but he has taught it to me in a deeper way: all we have is today, now. Tomorrow may never be, and it will certainly not be what we *expect* it to be. So don't postpone joy, or reconciliation, or love until tomorrow. . . . [Jacob also taught me that] Every child is a blessing as they are . . . Jacob has taught me that what really matters isn't the IQ,

although it's nice. It isn't accomplishments, although those are also beautiful. But what's really the core, what we can't give up, what is the essence - is soul. What is the essence is sweetness and goodness and loving and caring. Our worth is not what we do; it is that we are. . .

[Because] Jacob isn't autistic. Jacob is Jacob. And he is like every other child, precious, and sweet, and beautiful if you can learn to address him in a way that he can respond to . . . [and] I have learned that everybody is somebody's Jacob. And every Jacob has parents who, like me, pray that someone out there will be able to see *their* "Jacob" with love and with compassion . . . We all need to see other people as worthy of our love, not just the ones who are *easy* to love or to respect, but most particularly those who are not: The person at work who keeps saying those annoying things, he is somebody's Jacob. The fellow congregant you avoid after services who irritates you, she is somebody's Jacob. If all we have is the present — and we do —and if everybody is someone's Jacob —and they are — then they deserve your empathy now! Enough with . . . discounting each other, enough with ignoring each other's humanity and needs, that time is gone. My Jacob . . . reminds me to love

the unlovable, because the great *miracle* of life is that if we love the unlovable they become really lovable indeed. And so do we.”

In many ways I believe this miracle is happening here at Beth El and in our Jewish community in general - but at the same time, we still have a ways to go. Which brings us back to the questions we must ask ourselves today: Who *is* the shepherd boy, the estranged person among us seeking entry? What is it that *we* must do to welcome that person in? First and foremost, tonight (today) we open our eyes to those who wish to participate more fully in our community. As my colleague and friend Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove once said, “The Jewish community and our synagogue in particular must become agents towards creating pathways for deeper engagement, not be gatekeepers preventing that from happening. We who are committed to the Jewish future must be ever eager to extend a warm embrace to those seeking to enter deeper into the Jewish fold.”

To be an inclusive community, to make our synagogue reflect Isaiah’s vision of a house of prayer for all people, will also involve

articulating our inclusivity as a way we talk about our congregation – sharing with others that this *is* what we stand for, working *towards* advancing inclusion and being prepared to inform people what we already do to make our community that way.

Thank God we have an incredible membership committee constantly working to make sure all Beth El members and prospective members are greeted warmly and are presented with an open door that invites them in. In particular we have a driving assistance program that can help people who don't drive, get to shul for programs or services. Perhaps volunteer to be a part the membership committee or be a driver for this great initiative. We have an incredible adult education program designed to help any member who wants to know more about Judaism, who desires to develop ritual skills or is interested in deepening their exploration of our great religion. Talk to Ali Drumm, our director of informal education to learn more. Further, another wonderful feature of our synagogue is the continually evolving inclusive nature of our Cohen Religious School education. We have a director, Alicia Gejman, who

has expertise in differentiated learning, we have a dedicated staff person with professional training that can customize learning and introduce accommodations, we have dedicated an additional day (Thursdays) for one-to-one or small group learning with our resource teacher and we have utilized new technology to help make this all happen. Tell people about this and let us educate our community's youth. In addition, we have taken a lead in joining forces with Congregation Beth Shalom in spreading their accessible holiday programming to the entire Northshore through our participation in the leadership of the HUGS consortium that reaches out to families with members that have special needs. Perhaps help us spread the word and volunteer to staff one of these events. In our youth community we have historically had a Peer Buddy program to support participants who would benefit from a partner at programs. If you know of family that has a child with special needs please let them know we would like to get them involved.

In addition as co-chair of the Synagogue Federation commission I have helped lead the larger community in a community-wide assessment

of the state of inclusion in Jewish Chicago and from that created targeted programming to provide resources for synagogues who are looking to do better in this arena. I am proud that Beth El began a Cohort of Practice this year during which we will have professional coaching to take a deep dive into how our individual synagogue can do a better job of including all of its members in a dignified and welcoming way. We need to make our building more accessible, integrate inclusion into the daily workings of synagogue life more fully and be more proactive in anticipating the needs of our various members. The fact is that there are so many who lack the precise keys to enter, each one different, but each equally viewing the Jewish world from the outside. We need to have the right supports in place so that our programming can accommodate any member that wishes to attend.

While this will surely not happen all at once, in the years ahead, our community's mission *must* include the sacred goal of being more welcoming and inclusive. Whether or not we succeed, however, depends not only on better physical accessibility, wonderful inclusive programs,

or a sermon from me. **Our success depends on each of you.** When *you* greet a person with a visible difference walking into this building what *you* say – more than what I say – will determine if he or she will come back. Think about the congregant whose hearing aid buzzes too loudly? How will you respond? What about the seeming high-energy kid, who, God bless him, has trouble sitting still during services and speaks or sings a bit too loudly? Will your eyes, like those of the congregants in our story, shoot darts at that child and his parents, or will your words and gestures communicate that your prayer, indeed the Jewish people, is more complete when our community is welcoming to everyone? One thing I have learned about people who feel they are at the periphery: They don't want our pity; in fact, they don't want *special* treatment at all. All they want is that here, in a synagogue, of all places, they are greeted and received no differently than anyone else, and are accommodated so that they can participate on an equal footing with others. As Rabbi Cosgrove wrote, "What is being Jewish, if not to live with an awareness that we were once strangers in a strange land and to have that awareness inform our interactions? As the prophet Isaiah

teaches us on Yom Kippur, the rituals of Judaism are rendered hollow and meaningless if they are not accompanied by a compassionate and eager welcome of the strangers among us.”

I leave you with this, continuing to transform our synagogue into a more inclusive community sometimes involves nothing more than a kind word, a warm handshake and a generous smile. Because welcoming people properly is best accomplished by visibly giving people the message that they are *valued, important* and *wanted*. And those gestures communicate exactly that. As well, our efforts at inclusion can be further strengthened by community members taking leadership roles in advancing these goals in our congregation. If you would like to be involved, please contact me. So my prayer for today is that in the days ahead, in the years ahead, may we all remember to think beyond ourselves, to be sensitive to the needs of the outsider seeking to come in. For we all deserve to be able to stand together in God’s presence and enjoy the blessings of community. Therefore I pray that we will always be the kind of congregation who, in spirit and in deed, create a

community that celebrates one another, just as Rabbi Yitzhak of Berdichev did with that innocent Shephard boy who sought with all of his heart to participate but just didn't know how. *Kol ha-n'shamah t'hallel Yah*. With *all* of our souls may we praise God. May *every* soul sing God's praises. And may each and every one of us be blessed with a year of health, happiness, peace and sense of belonging. Amen