

**The View from Mt. Sinai:  
Building Our Inclusive Community**  
Rosh Hashanah, 5778  
Rabbi Allison Berry

The sun appeared on the horizon and I could hear music in the distance. Hundreds of thousands of people waited at the bottom of the mountain. People hugged and sang and greeted new friends as if they'd known each other their whole lives. The young ones and the old ones, the ones who had come a great distance and those who had been camped out there literally for years. We stood and we waited.

Thousands of years ago. I was at Mount Sinai. I was there and so were you.

Jewish tradition teaches that the people gathered at the mountain were not only the Israelites who'd left Egypt but all the generations past and all the generations yet to come. God handed the teachings, texts, and traditions of our people to Moses and he handed them to us. I was there to receive them and so were you.<sup>1</sup>

All of us were part of the *shalsholet hakabbalah*. A chain of tradition stretching back and forth across the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>There are a myriad of sources throughout the centuries that expound on the topic of who stood at Sinai. Most sources use both Exodus, chapters 19 & 20 and Deuteronomy, chapter 29 (the portion read on Yom Kippur) as source texts. The Midrash – specifically Midrash Tanhuma in Nitzavim 8 and Shemot Rabbah 28:6 expand on the idea that the current generation and also all future generations stood at Sinai. The Tosefta, Sota 7:5 takes this a step further and emphasizes that *gerim* (converts) were also there. Medieval commentator, Abravanel on his commentary on Deuteronomy 29, expands the conversation about whether people stood at Sinai in physical body or whether it was the non-physical soul that appeared at that moment.

<sup>2</sup> Avot 1:1

But we're getting away from the mountain.-Let me tell you who was there. On my left playing with my kids, were Karen and Michael's children, Lila and Alex. Lila, Alex and their parents are an interfaith family. They like to sit right here in the front row during High Holiday services so the kids don't miss a word.

Standing next to me at Mt. Sinai was my sister Emily, who is Korean American and a fantastic Hebrew School teacher. When she was a student at Brandeis she taught here at Temple Shalom.

Up ahead of us I saw Ryan and her parents. Next spring, when Ryan becomes Bat Mitzvah, she will lead our congregation in prayer using sign language.

Behind me at Mt. Sinai were Temple Shalom's senior members –adults who live at Newbridge and Lasell Village and who are proud of the legacy they have left for future generations.

And standing on the periphery, I saw a new member of our Temple community. Unsure of the cycle of the Jewish year but thrilled to see on their first visit to our building, our all-gender restroom sign. They knew our synagogue would offer them safety and acceptance.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy<sup>3</sup>, we learn that the community that stood under the mountain was made up of many genders, ages, places of origin, and skin colors. At Mount Sinai, the print in the prayer books was large, the bathrooms accessible to all genders and the hallway width was 48 inches. We stood there, those of us born Jewish, those who had chosen Judaism and those who were there because they loved someone Jewish.

Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “the Jewish people is a living *Sefer Torah*, and each of us is one of its letters.”<sup>4</sup> Together these letters of Torah construct our history and our future. They are an expression of our joys, sorrows, and moments of transcendence. When we leave people out, or do not see those asking to be allowed in, we lose letters vital to the integrity of our Torah. When we build sacred, inclusive community we stand together as envisioned at Sinai.

At the beginning of my career I served a small synagogue in New Jersey. Each week a man attended services and sat in the back row with his caregiver. Frank was large and disheveled, and he would often shout in the middle of prayers. I’m embarrassed to admit I was afraid to speak to Frank. I hated the idea that I could say the wrong thing or somehow make a mistake when I talked to him. But there were caring members of the community who prodded me and encouraged me to step up.

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Exodus 19 and 20, Deuteronomy 29

<sup>4</sup> [A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion](#) by Rabbi Jonathan Sachs. The quote “each of us is a letter” is quoted by Sachs from the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov.

It took a few tries – and yes – I did say some things that felt awkward and wrong – but Frank and I slowly became friends. I stood beside Frank on the day his father died and could truly comfort him because I had faced down my own discomfort and opened my heart.

Brene Brown reminds us that when we are vulnerable we are more deeply and completely human. In her 2010 Ted Talk she said, “I spent a lot of years trying to outrun or outsmart vulnerability by making things certain and definite, black and white, good and bad. My inability to lean into the discomfort of vulnerability limited the fullness of those important experiences that are wrought with uncertainty: Love, belonging, trust, joy, and creativity to name a few.”

The congregation in New Jersey could have pretended Frank was not there. But instead, we remembered he too stood at Sinai. Frank’s letter remained embedded on the pages of our sacred text.

As the Jewish community evolves and becomes more diverse, we are challenged to move outside our traditional comfort zones. We debate about who is a Jew and what our acceptance of interfaith families means for Jewish continuity.

A 2013 Pew report that studied trends in the American Jewish community, found that among non-Orthodox Jews, 72% marry someone who is not Jewish<sup>5</sup>. At Temple Shalom, nearly half of all K-6 students are part of an interfaith family.

To those of you here today, we say— you are part of us. We appreciate the many ways you expand our understanding of what it means to be Jewish.

In the words of Rabbi Janet Marder, “You are the caregivers who drive the Hebrew school carpool. You learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish. You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing. You stand on the *bima* on the day of your child’s Bar or Bat Mitzvah and tell them how proud you are and how much you love them.”

To all of our interfaith families: Thank you for being here. We are honored you have chosen this community.<sup>6</sup>

It’s a place that is always evolving.

Twenty years ago, a group of dedicated Temple Shalom parents founded the Gesher program. Gesher was designed to ensure all children at Temple Shalom – including those

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Cohen via Alan Cooperman from the 2013 Pew report, also in the NY Times. See email exchange between Cooperman and Ed Case for confirmation

<sup>6</sup> A Blessing for Non-Jewish Spouses, Rabbi Janet Marder, Congregation Beth Am, 2004. <https://www.betham.org/sermon/blessing-non-jewish-spouses>

with developmental and social/emotional disabilities could access a meaningful Jewish education. Five years ago, we realized that nearly one third of the children attending SHACHARIT, our new Grades K-6 education program, needed specialized learning or emotional support. It became clear that we needed to expand Gesher and we did.

This year, Temple Shalom welcomes a Director of Inclusion as well as other specialized education staff to our synagogue. We offer support groups for both parents and siblings of children with disabilities, and learning in small groups where we utilize a multi-sensory Hebrew reading curriculum and much more. We provide not only educational support to our children but a joyful and non-judgmental environment. Today synagogues from as far away as California and as close as Rhode Island travel to Temple Shalom to learn from us.

But there is still work to be done. Our new goal is to expand this support to every student and every family who attends our education programs – from nursery school through high school. It will take your continued commitment to make this happen.

Our inclusion efforts don't stop with our children. Approximately 115 members of our congregation are over the age of 80. Our seniors love this community, have much to teach us and want to contribute. When you see them at an *Oneg* Shabbat, don't miss the opportunity to talk to them. They have great stories to share about the founding of our synagogue and the many changes they have witnessed over the years.

Our Inclusive Community Task Force supported by the Ruderman Synagogue Inclusion Project<sup>7</sup> is working to expand our reach to seniors and anyone else who might need support when they enter our building. For example, in the south corner of the sanctuary you can a cart filled with large print prayer books, figit toys, hearing assistance devices and information about accessibility in our building.

Our elders are our Bonim - our builders, the founding generation of Temple Shalom - and we stood on their shoulders at Sinai.

I am part of a family who does not fit the traditional Jewish mold. When I was four years old, my parents adopted my sister from Korea. Sprinkled throughout my childhood are memories of attending both Jewish and Korean day camp. I learned to appreciate spicy Korean food and wear traditional *Hamboks* – Korean dresses. I also learned to explain to well-meaning members of our Reform synagogue, that yes, my sister, who did not look like other Jews was also a Jew. These early experiences – knowing my family was somehow “different” and that racism can and did exist continue to shape my vision for Jewish community and my understanding of the world.

I’ve learned from experience there is a tremendous difference between being a welcoming community and being a community that actually includes. We need to allow our perceptions and assumptions to be challenged. We need to be vulnerable and

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.cjp.org/our-work/caring-social-justice/ruderman-synagogue-inclusion-project>

sometimes uncomfortable. We need to be aware that language has the power to include or exclude.

Last year we changed the language on our education, membership, and employment forms so we can be sure to use pronouns that accurately reflect our students', members', and employees' gender identity. And in May we began to educate ourselves about transgender rights as we welcomed a gender-non-conforming educator to our community during Pride Shabbat.

When someone recently asked, "Will my child who is questioning their gender identity or sexuality be safe in our building?" We said yes.

When Ryan's parents challenged us to create a meaningful path for her in our community, we said yes.

We have to say yes more often. We have to say yes when someone asks, "Is my non-Jewish partner welcome on the *bimah*?"

If our seniors ask us for a ride to services, we need to say yes.

"When I come here, will I be considered a Jew when I don't look like other Jews?" We need to say yes.



Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove writes, “When you greet the person of color walking into this building for the first time, what you say – not what I say – will determine if he or she will come back. What about the congregant whose hearing aid buzzes too loudly? What about the child who has trouble sitting during services and speaks or sings a bit too rambunctiously? Will your eyes shoot darts at that child and her parents, or will your words and gestures communicate that your prayer, indeed the Jewish people, is more complete because he is sharing this moment?”<sup>8</sup>

Somewhere embedded on the scrolls behind me, in our ark, is the letter containing Ryan’s story, Lila, Alex, Emily and Frank’s story. One of the letters written on that scroll is also your story.

On this New Year, our story is not yet finished. We are the ones who will write the next chapter. The letters we include, and the community we build, are entirely up to us.

Today is the first day of the Jewish year, 5778. This year, may the story of our people be one of inclusion. May diversity be our strength. May we work to build a world that sees the inherent worth in every human soul. It is when we live these ideals we build the community envisioned at Sinai.

*Shana Tova u’metukah.* May we be blessed for a good and sweet year.

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<sup>8</sup> High Holiday Disability Tool Kit from RespectAbility, p. 19.  
<https://www.respectability.org/resources/faith-inclusion/>