

Good Dreams
Rosh Hashanah Day 1
Rabbi Steven Wernick

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There is a Talmudic teaching that says we only need to pray for three things on *Rosh Hashanah*: *Shloshah tz'rikhim Raḥamim*: *Shanah tovah* – a good year; *Melekh tov* – a good ruler and *Halom tov* – a good dream (*Berakhot 54a*).

Shanah tovah – a good year, that sounds fairly inclusive, perhaps that explains the length of services. The interpretation given in the text, however, makes it clear that the Talmud understands *Shanah tovah* in a very limited sense: we pray for a good harvest. In other words, we pray for plenty to eat, for a good living; for money. We shouldn't be embarrassed by this, especially in these days of economic downturn. When we recite *Unetaneh Tokef* in just a little while we will ask: “*Mi Yeyoni u-Mi Yeyasher* – who shall become poor and who shall become rich?” This year, a lot of people are going to hear those words with a real sense of concern. The stock market is down, the housing market is in crisis, foreclosures are the highest they've been in years, record oil prices has led to increases in basic necessities, a credit crunch has impacted business and student loans, people are postponing retirement and recession is a word you hear a lot. And who knows how the \$700 billion government bailout will really pan out. So let's not be too embarrassed to pray for a *Shanah Tovah* and mean money.

Our *Mahzor* isn't the least bit disturbed about this. When we get to the end of the *Amidah* on page 334 we'll sing: *B'sefer ḥayim brakhah v'shalom u-farnasah tovah* – May we be inscribed in the Book for life, blessing, peace and a good living. Notice that we don't feel the need to qualify the first three items. We trust that God will understand what we need when it comes to life, blessing and peace. But, when it comes to *parnasah*, making a living, we want to make matters clear. We'd like *Parnassah tovah* – a good living.

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So it's OK to pray for a *Shanah tovah* and mean a good living. What is embarrassing, what should be embarrassing, is not prosperity, but the desecration of wealth, the misuse of its power, the confusion of ends and means. This is the mistake that some make when they twist Judaism's emphasis on this "worldliness" into a justification for greed. Instead, those who have made it are challenged to have the spiritual capacity to cope with abundance.

Parnasah tovah – a good living can be interpreted as a living earned in good ways and used for good purposes. *Unetaneh tokef* mandates making the year better for all through *t'shuvah*, *t'fillah* and *TZEDAKAH*. To avoid any confusion about what *Tzedakah* means some older *Mahzorim* had another Hebrew term printed right above *Tzedakah* – *Mamon* – money. So pray for a *Shanah Tovah* and be prepared to share...even when times are tough, especially when times are tough.

Melekh tov – A Good Leader. It's an election year. Do you think we have a prayer? Well. I'd like to make an endorsement for...Democracy. Thank God for Democracy. It's worth a prayer at this season...and a vote too. Are you registered? I hope so, and I hope you will go to the polls on November 4th and pull the lever or push the button, just vote. That's a prayer for good government. Instead of merely praying into our hands, we pray with our hands. And it's a very easy prayer to recite, shorter than this service even.

Which brings us to *Halom tov* – A Good Dream. Seems we need good dreams today more than ever. For how many years and under how many rulers did our ancestors have only their dreams to sustain them? "*Im tirtzu Eyn Zo Aggadah* – If you will it, it is no dream." That is the famous statement of Theodore Herzl, and when he

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said it back in 1897, a Jewish State was only a dream. Sixty years ago, it became a reality. Dreams can come true, when people are dedicated and committed and work very hard. Israel has fulfilled the dreams of so many – Russian Jews, Ethiopian Jews, Jews from European lands and Arab countries – from 600,000 to nearly 6 million people in 60 years, a thriving economy and a vibrant democracy. It's a dream come true.

We send our children to Israel through Confirmation Classes and Birthright, and we go ourselves, to be inspired and to remember that we too have Jewish dreams. Let us not forget that no matter how low we may feel at this moment we still remember how much of the American dream we have achieved; the dream that brought our immigrant grandparents and great grandparents to this land sometimes with only the clothes on their backs. They came here to escape persecution and for the possibility of realizing their dreams. They wanted something more for themselves, their children and grandchildren, economically, politically, socially and Jewishly. Remembering their Jewish dreams begins with recognizing how much our Judaism means to us as a result of their sacrifices and hard work. That's what happens when we travel to Israel, when we send our children to study in Israel, when we contribute to Israel, when we help Israel continue the work of absorbing immigrants, when we join AIPAC and lobby the President and Congress and attend rallies in support of Israel, we strengthen our own dreams of Jewish identity.

Last week I added to my Jewish dreams. To protest Ahmadinejad's appearance before the General Assembly of the United Nations and his continuous calling for the destruction of Israel, the organized American Jewish community held a rally at the UN. While there I had a conversation with Rabbi Joel Myers, the Executive Director of the

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Rabbinical Assembly. He was somewhat shocked to see me; after all, this is crunch time for rabbis. I said that I was there because if Israel or the US goes to war with Iran I wanted to be able to look my kids in the eye and say that I didn't just watch what was happening. That I refused to be silent in the face of the United Nation's moral bankruptcy in that it allows one member state to actively call for the destruction of another with impunity. I told Rabbi Myers that I was there to add my voice to the thousands of others in expressing my support of Israel at this time; and that that was more important than any sermon I could write. I went, as did thousands of others from the East coast, because that's what our dreams of Jewish identity, as they relate to Israel, mean to us.

But as important as Israel experiences are, they are not nearly enough. They may be excellent catalysts for dreams of Jewish identity, but in and of themselves they cannot sustain them. The reason is simple...most American Jews will continue to live here in America. Our challenge is the dream of a vibrant American Judaism. That's why it is so important that we create centers of Jewish life that are dynamic, meaningful and engaging.

For thousands of years the synagogue has been that center. Today, the synagogue is where 85% of Jewish kids receive their Jewish education. It is the place where we gather at times of national and personal crisis for inspiration and at times of joy for celebration. It is through the synagogue that most American Jews learn the values of *Tzedakah* and *Gemilut Hasadim* – Acts of Loving-kindness. The synagogue is the place we come to connect with God and with each other. The synagogue is the place of Jewish dreams.

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How many of us have seen our dreams for Jewish continuity fulfilled right here on this Bima – baby namings, *B'nai Mitzvah* and weddings. It will be that way for my family too this November as Ziva is called to the Torah for the first time. Jody and I have been dreaming about this day since the moment she was born. (I've been planning it that long too!) And we look forward with eager anticipation to sharing our *simhah* with all of you, our family and friends. Every *simhah* brings us closer to the fulfillment of our dreams as a people.

But for those dreams to continue to be fulfilled, we who love and support synagogues have to wake up to the new realities of American Jewish life. The problem is that synagogues (Adath Israel too) are so concerned about survival, are so concerned about the “bottom line,” that we continue to do things the way we've always done them because that is what we know and that is what is comfortable. In the process though, I think we've lost sight of our purpose, of our dream. And if we don't find the courage to rethink and restructure ourselves to be purpose driven, then I'm afraid that synagogues are going to cease to be relevant in the lives of American Jews in the very near future.

Let me explain to you what I mean. If we were to define the purpose of Adath Israel at this moment, based on the behavior of our members, what would we say?

1) We would say that the synagogue exists for prayer twice a year – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These are, after all, the only days on which our Sanctuary is full. We have permanent seating for 1200 people, yet even on a *Shabbat* in which we may have 400 people at a *Bar Mitzvah*; we're still only 33% full. When there is no *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, we have less than 70 people in attendance and pray in the Chapel.

2) Related to *B'nai Mitzvah* attendance is also lifecycle attendance. When it comes to birth, illness and death, the synagogue has a purpose in facilitating these significant moments in our lives.

3) We educate our children only for becoming *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. Judging by the high drop-out rate following *B'nai Mitzvah* and the smattering of attendance we get for our Adult Education programs what other conclusion is one supposed to make? Adath Israel has made great strides in this regard now keeping more than 60% of our *B'nai Mitzvah* engaged in ongoing Jewish learning, either here or at Gratz, but we are, unfortunately, the exception and not the rule.

4) Attend any of our Executive or Board of Directors meetings and one would probably say that “membership” is also an important purpose. How much time do we spend talking about how many member units we have? How many we have lost? And how many we have gained? And how can we get more members? And what’s the revenue implication of that membership? Mostly that question is expressed by asking: “Where can we cut expenses?”

Now I am sharing these thoughts with you on one level, so that you should feel a little guilty. Jewish guilt is a powerful motivator. Jewish mothers have used it for centuries to motivate their children and sometimes their spouses. Why shouldn't I? After all, we expect that when we come to synagogue on the High Holy Days we'll see our friends; we'll catch up a bit and get lectured by the rabbi. I didn't want to disappoint.

On another level, though, I want to engage all of us to not only think out of the box, but quite frankly throw the box away and dream about a new paradigm for the American synagogue. This is not just the challenge of an Executive Committee or a

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Board of Directors or a rabbi. This is a challenge for all of us. By our presence here today we demonstrate our commitment to the Adath Israel synagogue community, to our Jewish identities and to the fulfillment of Jewish dreams.

This is one of those rare moments in time in which the world seems so chaotic and so uncertain that we need the comfort provided by a caring community. We Jews have a 4000 year history that has had its share of ups and downs – huge ups and downs – but our love for one another and our faith in a God who remembers His promises and fulfills them such that tomorrow will be better than today has given us hope and sustained our ability to dream. Perhaps, today *davka*, then, should be a day for dreaming of what yet can be achieved. So I want to share with you my dreams about how Adath Israel can and should become a place to inspire and challenge modern American Jews to have Jewish dreams. I view this as the beginning of a conversation in which you too will share your dreams and together we will strive to turn them into realities.

First of all, I think we need to talk about membership. 80% of every Jewish household in America at one time or another, affiliates with a synagogue, but look at membership at any given moment and only 40% do so. Ask yourself this question: Why is it that so many individuals and families affiliate with synagogues at one time or another in their lives but then move to the periphery or leave altogether? There are a variety of reasons for this, but if you unpack the usual reasons given, it is that most synagogues fail to establish a connection between the individual and the congregation that is so valuable, so meaningful that it would be unthinkable to sever it.

When we think primarily in terms of “membership” we limit our thinking of the synagogue to a “fee-for-service” organization. If one of the major motivations for synagogue membership is to get the kids to the *bima* for the big *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*, then what would keep families involved after it’s over? More than that, if we view Judaism and synagogues as being for the *kinder* and not really for adults, then what’s to keep them involved when the big day is over? As my teacher Dr. Ron Wolfson has said, “This is the cost of the dependence synagogues have on children as the reason for membership and as the focus of programming.”¹

The most critical question to emerge from these critiques is this: What should be the fundamental relationship between the member and the synagogue? I believe that that relationship should be about meaning; about purpose; about holiness. So let’s stop talking about membership; let’s not ask what Adath Israel can do for you, and let’s start dreaming about what Adath Israel members can do for the Jewish people and for our community. Let’s talk about *Brit*. Let’s talk about covenant. A member is one who pays dues to a health club. A *brit* relationship is one in which the partners see themselves as having stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and as having forged a timeless relationship with God, the Jewish people, each other. A *brit* relationship is one in which the partners dream about lasting friendships into old age. A *brit* relationship is one in which the root concept is commitment.

A synagogue like that would have an ambience of welcome that creates a culture of warmth and outreach. It would be a synagogue in which any Jew, who wants to

¹ Wolfson, Dr. Ron: The Spirituality of Welcoming. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont. 2006. Page 16.

come to participate, whether on *Shabbat* or the *High Holy Days*, whether for a class or for a lecture, whether for social justice or for a social, would be welcomed and embraced. Such a synagogue would be an incubator of Jewish dreams for all.

And speaking of outreach, a synagogue with such an ambience of welcome is one that dreams of itself extending its impact beyond its walls and to more than just its members. I have to tell you that if synagogues don't start to do so quickly they may not have much membership to speak of in the future. There is a crisis brewing that nobody is really paying attention to. It goes like this... Synagogue membership is typically highest with families with kids ages 6-13. Today, 50% of every Jewish woman 35 and younger is without a child. What does that mean? It means that the Jewish "family" is aging. It means that as our children become adults they will not look to synagogue membership until much later in their lives. That means that if the majority of Jewish kids continue to disassociate with synagogues following *B'nai Mitzvah* they will most likely be disconnected for almost 25 years. Even those who continue to Confirmation will experience a 20 year "hiatus."

These 20 and 30 somethings are a demographic that until they have kids they will just not be thinking about synagogue membership. And it doesn't matter what the price is -- \$2000, \$1000 or \$180 – synagogues, as we know them just won't be on their radar screens.

This is not to say that they will disconnect from their Jewish identities. In fact, study after study shows that the opposite is true. They continue to connect in new and powerful ways. They haven't rejected Judaism, only those modes of delivery that no longer speak to them. The last few years have, therefore, "seen the emergence of a

string of highly distinctive yet culturally representative ... communities. They feature high Judaic competence, gender egalitarianism, attention to welcoming and community-building, dedication to text-learning and an engagement with social justice activities.”² These 20 and 30 somethings dream about how they can express themselves Jewishly in meaningful ways.

If we dream of these young adults one day supporting synagogues, then we better begin to support them and promote their association with each other through Jewish cultural life and social service activities today. More than that, we better also start to dream about how we can organize ourselves to meet their dreams when they are ready to consider supporting synagogues. The starting place for that discussion is with our dreams and an openness to change so they may be fulfilled.

So let’s dream together. Let’s dream about prayer that is engaging, uplifting and spiritually moving. Let’s dream of prayer that connects us to God, to each other and to our dreams for tomorrow. Let’s commit our Ritual Committee this year to dream about filled pews on more than three days, about families who come to worship God and not just drop their kids off and about adults finding solace and inspiration in meditating on what it means to be in God’s presence.

Let’s dream about Torah study for adults and families, as well as children that have more than the ability to recite chapter and verse. The study of Torah is about transforming Jewish behavior. For example, there’s a *Mishnah* that suggests ten behaviors for which one will be rewarded both in this world and in the world to come.

² Cohen, Steven M.: A Tale of Two Jewries: The Inconvenient Truth For American Jews. Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation. November 2006. Page 7.

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After listing the behaviors for which that is so, the *Mishnah* concludes: “*V’Talmud Torah k’neged kulam* – and the study of Torah is equal to them all.” (*Mishnah Shabbat 127a*)

The idea is that the study of Torah should lead one to these *mitzvot*. Jewish learning should lead to Jewish living. And that leads to the fulfillment of Jewish dreams.

Let’s dream of good deeds, the work of social justice, as a commitment of each and every member. A food drive between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is important. I hope everyone takes a bag or two or three and brings it back in ten days filled with non-perishable food items. The economy is bad for everyone – Jews and non-Jews alike, and more than ever people will need this help. But in the long term, how impactful is such a program? Let’s dream of long-term impactful activities that really make a difference in the lives of others. There is much to choose from; from food insecurity and hunger, to reducing our environmental footprint, to inter-racial or religious relations. We have a few ideas that we will be rolling out this year. Join us. Let’s get a group of people together, roll up our sleeves and create a synagogue that benefits not only its covenantal partners, but the entire community. We need to determine the dream and not let it wither.

Let’s dream of creating moments for healing and a sense of completeness that offers comfort and support at times of illness and loss. At this moment we have many people in the hospital or seriously ill. Sadly, some of them will not be with us next *Rosh Hashanah*. We need to realize that *Bikkur Holim* – visiting the sick – is a *mitzvah* not just for clergy. It is a *mitzvah* for all of us. Let’s put together a group of people who will cook a meal (one meal), or drive someone to the store or to the doctors, or visit someone in the hospital or at home, or pay a *Shiva* call. We have some people doing

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this already. In fact, we have a group of people that for weeks have been preparing meals for one of our families and calling weekly to see what else can be done to help them at this difficult and painful time; probably one of the best kept secrets of the congregation. I dream that *Bikkur Holim* will become a foundational purpose of our synagogue with 100s of people working to comfort and support each other in our times of greatest need. The small act of a single meal, phone call or visit raises the relationship to one of holiness. That's what happens when one dreams of him or herself as being part of a *brit*, part of a sacred covenant.

I am keenly aware that the dreams I've just shared raise all sorts of organizational and financial questions. Chief among them is: If membership dues are no longer a requirement for High Holy Day tickets, or if the synagogue is now providing opportunities for engagement of non-members, what's the benefit of membership? Why would any one want to pay if you can get it for free? And if that's so, then how will we maintain the necessary revenue to keep the lights on, pay our staff and provide meaningful engagement? It's one thing to talk about *Brit*; it's another thing to pay for it. Trust me; I have a vested interest in the outcome. Honestly, I don't know the answer. And I realize that in today's economic reality this is a really difficult discussion. That difficulty though, does not excuse us from facing the challenge and grappling with our dreams for a more meaningful tomorrow. And I know that there are a lot of very smart people here in this room right now, so I'm confident that if we put our heads together we could come up with a bold new approach to synagogue funding to support such a dream, even now; especially now.

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We're already making some decisions toward fulfilling these dreams. We've hired a Director of Synagogue Life, Lynn Gottlieb, to begin the work of dreaming not of "programs," but of *brit*, of engaging people in holy conversation and activities that lead us to think deeply about being a Jew; about meaning and about holiness. Our Board of Directors will begin the work of bringing our dreams into clearer focus and develop the action plans to fulfill them. That conversation is scheduled for October 26. It's open to you too. Come and share your dreams or send your dreams to us in a letter, in an email, on the phone or in person. Dream with us and let's work together to make our dreams a reality.

Our tradition has always had great dreams for our people and for all people. In our *Mahzor* you will find dreams of justice, kindness, love and peace. On *Rosh Hashanah* we may pray for only three things as the Talmud says: *Shanah tovah*, *Melekh tov* and *Halom tov* – but we have many dreams. Maybe that's why *Rosh Hashanah* is two days long – two days and two nights. Two nights for dreams. As the New Year begins, sweet dreams.