

Family and Community Top 5
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B'nai Shalom of Olney
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Several months ago, on Shabbat of Thanksgiving weekend, I shared the following poem written by Judith Viorst, called "Family Reunion", with the congregation:

FAMILY REUNION

*The first full-fledged family reunion
Was held at the seashore
With 9 pounds of sturgeon
7 pounds of corned beef
1 nephew who got the highest mark on an intelligence test ever recorded in
Hillside, New Jersey
4 aunts in pain taking pills
1 cousin in analysis taking notes
1 sister-in-law who makes a cherry cheesecake a person would be happy to pay to
eat
5 uncles to whom what happened in the stock market shouldn't happen to their
worst enemy
1 niece who is running away from home the minute the orthodontist removes her
braces
1 brother-in-law with a house so big you could get lost and carpeting so thick you
could suffocate and a mortgage so high you could go bankrupt
1 uncle whose wife is a saint to put up with him
1 cousin who has made such a name for himself he was almost Barbra Streisand's
obstetrician
1 cousin who has made such a name for himself he was almost Jacob Javits' CPA
1 niece it wouldn't surprise anyone if next year she's playing at Carnegie Hall
1 nephew it wouldn't surprise anyone if next year he's sentenced to Leavenworth
2 aunts who go to the same butcher as Philip Roth's mother
And me wanting approval from all of them. ☺*

(poem called Family Reunion, by Judith Viorst, who has written for the Post and the NY Times but might be most well-known for her children's books like Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day)

When I thought of using this poem for Thanksgiving weekend, it was in the context of how we fit in with our relatives. Our families, both immediate and extended, are composed of diverse personalities, many of whom have different interests and talents. But when it comes down to it, one of the things we seem to want more than anything else is the sense of approval, and even just belonging, from that varied group. We want to feel like we fit in, and that we're doing well and making everyone proud, even though it's not like we really had a choice whether we wanted to be a part of that family or not.

Recently, as I was preparing my remarks for the High Holidays, and had decided that I was going to devote a sermon to the parallels between family and community, it occurred to me that Judith Viorst's poem was a perfect introduction to today's context as well. Because today, too, on this 1st day of Rosh Hashanah, we are celebrating a family reunion of sorts. Whether it's been a few days since this past Shabbat, weeks, months, or a year, we're back together again in shul, looking around at our neighbors, hoping to feel comfortable and fit in. True, it is another kind of extended family, a congregational community, and in that we immediately see a critical difference from our relatives. Unlike with our blood family, we DO have a choice whether to be a part of a congregational family, whether to belong to a synagogue at all, and, if so, which one to join. But one of the primary motivating factors that may first get us in the synagogue door is the

same desire that we have when it comes to family—we seek approval and a sense of belonging to something. Social philosopher Barry Schwartz gave this first-person account of the founding of a new synagogue:

“There was a very deep longing in people to belong to something, something that was larger than any individual, and would accept, nurture, and protect those who had made commitments to it. There was a very deep longing in people to make this congregation, this community, their “haven in a heartless world”.” (The Self-Renewing Congregation, Isa Aron, P.h.D., p. 132)

This desire for a sense of belonging, approval, and safety is just one of many parallels between family life and congregational life. With all due deference to late-night TV show hosts who come up with humorous lists for a living, I came up with a list for us today that’s a bit more serious. I want to share with you **“Rabbi Sunshine’s Top 5 Keys to family and congregational success”**.

Key #5) Create A Sense of Shared Purpose, Beliefs, and Values.

When it comes to intergenerational family continuity, this is an easy concept to buy into. Who doesn’t want their child or children to grow up into kind, striving and generous adults? As parents, we teach them from a young age the things that matter most to us and to our family and try to give them a clear set of moral

blueprints. Without giving them that overarching and definite sense of direction, it is harder to feel confident that they will emerge with identifiable character. There is a wonderful story told of Ralph Waldo Emerson coming upon a group of rural people in the midst of constructing a building. As their product looked a bit odd, he asked to see the architect. “There isn’t any architect,” the man replied. “We’re just building the building. Next week a man is coming up from Boston to put some architecture into it”. ☺ To build the brightest possible future together as a congregation, even coming from varied levels of Jewish involvement and background as we all do and no doubt having come to BSO for an equally varied, and valid, group of reasons, we need to be able to create a shared sense of purpose among us, articulate our community’s values clearly, and buy in to them. We can probably all agree on the importance of Jewish education, and on the importance of teaching Tzedakah, lovingkindness, and being a mensch. But can we agree that God is a part of our world and our lives, that God can make demands of us that are not always convenient to fulfill, that rituals and ethics are equally vital parts of our tradition, and that living a meaningful Jewish life can be hard work but is still well worth it? Tomorrow I will talk more about the nature of mitzvot and obligation, but for the time being I hope we can all recognize the importance of finding common ground and unifying values that will help each one of us, and our children, continue to grow as mensches and as committed Jews.

Key #4) Don't sweat the small things, and look for good

When it comes to our immediate or extended families, if we got hung up on every little thing a family member did that annoyed us, we might find it hard to spend any time thinking about anything else more productive. Similarly, when we are part of a 450 family congregation, no doubt we will encounter minor things that frustrate us from time to time. No one is perfect, whether it comes to our professional staff members or our lay volunteers who invest countless hours of their time in the smooth functioning of the synagogue. Ultimately, when we bring up our concerns courteously and directly to those working on the issues involved, we are more likely to get a positive response and have the issue addressed promptly, and everyone can walk away from the issue feeling good and knowing we're all working together to make BSO a better place. But I want to make another suggestion as well, and that is to reframe our perspective a bit when it comes to what we're looking for. As our Etz Hayim Chumash points out, the Hasidic Rabbi Simcha Bunam came up with a wonderful midrash on a task Jacob assigned to his beloved, and pampered, son Joseph. Knowing that Joseph had already "tattled" on his older brothers before, Jacob instructs Joseph, "Lekh Na R'eh et Shlom Akhekha". Literally the phrase means, go check out how your

brothers are doing, but according to the midrash, it means—go find the Shalom—the peacefulness and integrity, the good qualities of your brothers instead of looking for their faults and slip-ups. Are we looking first for mistakes, or are we looking first for good and the opportunity to praise? It is a valuable lesson for us to learn when many people are working hard in the name of BSO for the sake of our whole community's well-being.

Key #3) Talk to each other, listen, and share

In addition to telling a story about faith, the story of the Akeidah, the binding of Isaac, that we will read from the Torah tomorrow also tells a story about a family that doesn't speak to each other. God tests Abraham by instructing him to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham gets up early the next morning, without a single word spoken to his wife Sarah, takes his son and his servants, and sets off on his mission. On the third day of the journey is the first—and only—record we have of a conversation between Abraham and Isaac IN THE ENTIRE TORAH, with Isaac wondering, “Dad, where's the sheep for the sacrifice?”, to which Abraham responds, “God will see to the sheep for God's burnt offering, my son”, a response which returns them to their silent trek together. Even after the test and the would-be sacrifice is aborted at the last minute, Abraham seems to return home without Isaac—they never see each other again, and Abraham never speaks

to Sarah again, either after returning home. In the words of Rabbi Aaron Bisno, *“this is a story of a family that suffered from an inability to share—they didn’t talk to one another, nor did they listen. The story helps us understand how imperative it is that we share our failures, our pain, and our sorrow as well as our longings and our triumphs. It insists that we be honest with ourselves and seek what we need. And further, the story of the binding of Isaac underscores how essential it is that we listen to others’ pain and that we do so with a caring ear and a kindred heart”*. Even the most painful family tensions and issues should be discussed honestly and openly, with each of us truly listening to the other, even if we then choose to respond in respectful disagreement. Internalizing discontent or spreading it through hurtful gossip and failing to communicate on difficult issues is a sure-fire way to weaken the fabric of a family or a congregation. On the flip side, clearly expressing our diverse needs and sharing our joys and triumphs will bring us closer together and better enable us to withstand inevitable adversity.

Key #2) Pay attention to those you care about

Rabbi Max B. Wall, a retired Conservative Rabbi, once told a story of a young man who had been given a prison sentence. At the moment of the sentencing, the judge reminded him of the distinguished career of his father, a famous lawyer.

“When I went to him for advice or companionship”, the youth recalled, “he would

look up from a book on the law of trusts and say, 'Run away, boy. I am busy.' My father finished his book, and here I am. (A Treasury of Stories and Wisdom for Living at Our Best, Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, p. 92) Sadly, this is a problem that many of us still struggle with in our families in this generation. There are so many different demands on our time, from so many different directions, that it's often hard to find the time to devote to paying attention to those you care about. This, in turn, results in apathy and distance. The same is true in a congregation, especially a congregation the size of BSO. Staff and congregants are always busy with something or other in their synagogue, professional, or personal lives, which makes it difficult to check in on each individual member's well being on a regular basis, but does not absolve us of the responsibility to try. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a noted Reform Rabbi who has worked extensively on the Synagogue 2000 campaign to make synagogues more welcoming and accessible, commented: *"Real community is not merely a loose association of dues-paying members. It is composed of people who know and care, or who at least want to know and want to care for one another"*. (Aron, p. 133) Each member of BSO is entitled to feel valued and cared about, and if people feel that they are not, then the best case scenario is they will distance themselves and the worst is they will take the cue from the famous lawyer in the story—"Run away, boy, I am busy"—and do just that, leave the congregation and find another home. It is our hope that no one

should feel marginalized—as an institution we offer programming for all ages and interests and havurot to help facilitate connections, but as individuals within our community each of us likewise has a responsibility to care and to pay attention.

We can show we care via High Holiday phone calls by the members of the board, greeting each other in the Nursery School and Religious School wing when we are dropping off or picking up children, introducing ourselves to a face we don't recognize on Shabbat and spending some time getting to know that person, or checking in on someone who has been ill, lost a loved one, or even celebrated a simcha recently. When we look up from the books that metaphorically preoccupy us, will we look up with a warm smile that brightens the room and screams “welcome” and “I care”, or will we dismiss and ignore and go back to our reading? What kind of home will our home be?

Key #1) You don't find a good marriage, you MAKE one

A Reform Rabbi from this past century, Rabbi Barnett Brickner, once said, “Success in marriage does not come merely through finding the right mate, but through being the right mate”. Even if we start off by finding a wonderful soul mate, kind, intelligent, caring, and attractive, with whom we desire to spend the rest of our lives, that marriage will not be successful and lasting without hard work on the part of both spouses. The rigors of life and the intensity of the relationship

constantly challenge us to adapt, compromise, and selflessly give all we can give to support each other. Rabbi Brickner's sentiments can easily be applied to congregational life as well. When we are looking to join a shul, we may be able to find a congregation with many merits that appeal to us, but ultimately it is through our individual and collective efforts that our congregation becomes a "good" community and a *shul* in which we want to make our permanent home. Try to think about our commitment to BSO as a labor of love expressive of an intense relationship, rather than simply a labor or an obligation. In that context, when each of us adapt, compromise, work together, and give of ourselves to make the relationship work, then we will find the relationship more fulfilling and our BSO community will reap the benefits as well.

So let's recap--Sunshine's top 5 keys to family and congregational success:

Key #5) Create A Sense of Shared Purpose, Beliefs, and Values.

Key #4) Don't sweat the small things, and look for good

Key #3) Talk to each other, listen, and share

Key #2) Pay attention to those you care about

Key #1) You don't find a good marriage, you MAKE one

I hope these keys will be helpful to your home family life and relationships in the coming year and years. But I also hope that they will aid each of us as we

take a step back and rethink our BSO family life. We've all chosen to enter into a relationship with B'nai Shalom of Olney. In what ways are we prepared to commit to improving that relationship? That's the question each of us must answer for ourselves and our families. It is my hope and prayer that the year 5768 will mark a significant step forward in the vital and rewarding process of transforming our synagogue from a "service center" into a place of mutual obligation and a true *Kehillah Kedosha*, a sacred community. With all of our collective help, Ken Yehi Ratzon, may it be so.