

After the Thank You Notes
Rosh Ha-Shanah Morning, 5765
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Dear Friends,

A little over two weeks ago, Sue and I stood on this Bema in a state of absolute awe as our daughter, Elana became a Bat Mitzvah. I cannot remember a moment where I was so filled with love, joy and amazement as that Shabbat morning. I am a different person as a result of the experience. I truly believe that there are moments in our lives when everything comes sharply into focus – when we realize that all of our hopes, dreams and aspirations have brought us to a place where we are meant to be. Those moments have a transformative quality that is palpable. I know that we are not the only parents to experience this. I'm sure that almost everyone who has stood in our place understands what I'm talking about. From now on, I will view the experience of becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah differently – because I have *been there*.....

And so, this morning, I speak to you as someone who has *been there* -- both as your Rabbi and as the father of a teen-age girl – which, by the way, is an experience for which I am entirely unpreparedbut that is another sermon for perhaps another time.

This is my 9th Rosh Ha Shanah as your Rabbi. It feels like it was only yesterday that Sue, Ethan, Elana and I moved here from Minneapolis. Time passes so very quickly – and with the passage of time comes a realignment of perspectives and priorities. Over the past Eight years I have championed a variety of causes and programs from this pulpit. From opposing the death penalty to supporting the State of Israel, I have not been shy about speaking out for what I feel is essential and just. As our congregation has grown, we have remained committed to meeting the challenges of our changing community. We have worked together – as professionals and lay leadership -- to become the best congregation we could possibly be. And we have, for the most part, succeeded. Congregation Albert is a vibrant and vital center of Jewish Life in New Mexico. And as we have grown, there have been times when we have needed to re-align our priorities. And so, once again, I stand here before you this Rosh Ha Shanah morning to challenge you – to state that **now** is such a time. You see, while Congregation Albert is a unique and wonderful synagogue, I have come to realize that we are derelict in one important aspect of our mission. I refer to the way that we embrace, celebrate and incorporate our young people into the fabric of our community.

There's a book that I'm going to write some day. It's going to be geared towards post bar and bat-mitzvah students, their families and their congregations. It will be titled: *After the Thank You Notes*. I see it as a manual for sustaining and increasing the momentum, the promises, the commitment to Jewish life that families and students experience when they become bar or bat mitzvah.

Unfortunately, all too often, the level of Jewish commitment that our children experience after becoming bar or bat mitzvah plummets once the celebration ends and the thank-you notes are written. Now don't get me wrong; there is a lot for which we can be justifiably proud: we do a *wonderful* job in preparing our children to lead us in prayer, teach and chant torah, and feel connected to our congregation on their special day. I'm also very proud of the fact that the vast majority of our students continue their Jewish studies after becoming bar or bat mitzvah in our *Machon* program through Confirmation. But that is not enough. Maybe we are putting *too* much emphasis on becoming bar or bat mitzvah. **I'm afraid that the message that we are giving our children is that after they have descended from the pulpit on their special Shabbat, they have passed some kind of a test and, as a result, they don't need to be**

involved in the synagogue or their Judaism any more – except for maybe once a week for an hour and half when they come to class.

My Friends, this is the exact *opposite* message of what we should be conveying.

I stand before you this morning to make a plea we need to work together to foster a sense of community for our youth that will serve as a bulwark against the pressures, the dangers, and the upside-down values of our society.

We need to help our children understand that they are part of the future of the Jewish People – and that they have a vital **present** as well. We need to teach and model the fact that, outside of their own homes, the synagogue is the *best* place for them to experience and celebrate not only their Jewish selves, but *every* aspect of their lives. This cannot only happen in the classroom. It needs to take place in a variety of settings: in the home, in youth group meetings and programs, at camp and, yes, in Israel as well.

Last night, I spoke about the 350th anniversary of the Jewish Community in America. I talked about the fact that one of the key issues that American Jewry

has always had to face was the question of continuity and survival. As I said last night, now that we have overcome the problem of **Diaspora**, the key challenge for us is to face the problem of **freedom**. We are all free to be Jewish. We are all free to **not** be Jewish as well. And this is what keeps me awake at night.

There are times when I feel that we are in a battle between Jewish values and societal values – and secular society is winning – hands down.

Recently, I came across an article in the Wall Street Journal that read as follows:

After going to a dozen bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs last year, Laura Jean Stargardt told her parents she wanted one of her own. She said she found the singing inspiring and offered to learn Hebrew. She also said she wanted a big party.

Her parents thought the request was unusual since the family is Methodist. But they co-hosted a lavish party for her and two of her friends last month that looked like a bat mitzvah, without the religion. They booked a country club in Dallas and a disk jockey, invited 125 friends, and hired a professional dancer that Laura had seen at her friends' bar mitzvah parties.

"I wanted to be Jewish so I could have a bat mitzvah," says Laura. "Having the party fulfilled that."¹

¹ Wall Street Journal - January 14, 2004

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry after reading that article. On the one hand, it shows how Judaism has "arrived": we have permeated every aspect of American society. As I said last night -- How the tables have turned! Instead of Jews imitating Christians, Christians are now imitating Jews! I'm told that these so-called "faux mitzvahs" are popping up all around the country. And the caterers love them. And yet, what does it **say** about who **we** are **becoming** when one of our most sacred events can be reduced to a cake, a country club and a disc Jockey?

What are the values that we are teaching our children?

It's a scary world out there. In a recent article in "Pediatrics" magazine, researchers found that there was a direct correlation to the amount of television watched by teenagers and the age at which they became sexually active.

Basically, the more TV they watched, the more likely it was that they would view scenes of a sexual nature. The more such scenes they watched, the more dulled they were to the unique and holy nature of our sexuality and the more likely it was that they would become sexually active at an earlier age.²

The values of our secular society not only distort the sacred, they can be fatal.

Here in New Mexico we are facing a tragic situation: Suicide is epidemic. Our

² PEDIATRICS Vol. 114 No. 3 September 2004, pp. e280-e289

state has the unpleasant distinction of having a rate of suicide that is twice the national average – with teens and young adults making up the majority of those taking their own lives.³ It's safe to say that every High School student in our congregation knows of at least one student who has committed suicide or who has made an attempt. It's no longer shocking to hear about troubled youths who try to take their lives. It's commonplace. Where is the outrage? What is our response? We shrug our shoulders. "It's such a shame," we say, "...somebody should really do something about this...." And then we move on to the next crisis. Just yesterday, Governor Richardson held a summit in Santa Fe on the topic of the epidemic of Youth Suicide in our state. I'm glad to hear that our elected officials are finally waking up to the crisis in our midst.

My friends, we are facing an uphill battle against a society that strips away the sanctity of everything we hold dear and, in a very real sense – threatens the lives of our most precious assets -- our youth.

As a Synagogue, our primary mission must be to ensure that the next generation of Jews will not merely survive, but *thrive*. I can think of no more important task than the nurturing and celebrating of our youth.

³ Abq Journal article, "N.M. Suicide Rate Twice the National Average," by Jackie Jadrnak -, September 6, 2004

And this is the crux of my message this morning. **In order for our children to feel that they are truly a part of our congregation – we need to give them something substantial that respects their intelligence and integrity, and is worthy of their precious time.** We have an excellent Religious and Hebrew School. But it's not enough. In addition to basic Judaism, we need to provide our young people with opportunities to be spiritually fulfilled and intellectually challenged in environments that encourage social interaction and celebrate uniqueness. There is no task more important than this. **We need to re-build our youth program at Congregation Albert.** Now is the time to take a long and hard look at how we, as a congregation support, nurture and encourage our young people.

When I was growing up, the Synagogue was the center of my life. I attended services regularly – with my peers. I volunteered as a teacher's assistant in Religious School. I was actively involved in my congregation's youth group. I spent every summer at Jewish camp, and I traveled to Israel when I was in High School. And I was not alone. The congregation in which I grew up was not unique. It was *expected* that Jewish Youth would be involved in Jewish life. Youth Group was a part of our culture. My synagogue supported

an active Youth program with a youth lounge that was staffed by a team of advisors who were themselves, graduates of similar youth programs.

In many congregations around the country – congregations whose demographics are very similar to our own – this is still the case. It is not difficult to have a vibrant youth program. All it takes is for a congregation to place it high on its list of priorities.

Why don't we have this here? I believe that there are several reasons:

The first reason is that youth programming is not on the “radar” of most parents in our congregation. This is a result of many factors including

- The fact that our children are over programmed: between homework, sports, jobs, our young people have no time for anything else.
- Another factor is that of the changing Jewish family. With over 40% of our membership intermarried, the memories of active Jewish Youth involvement are much less – we have different priorities in our homes. Many of our members are not aware of what an important and positive role an extensive youth program could have in the life of their children

Recently a teacher in our Religious school shared with me the results of an informal survey that she gave to her class last year. This teacher asked the

students how many of them attended a Seder. The answer was shocking: Less than 25%. Hardly any of them lit Shabbat candles on a regular basis. It was quite clear that most of the students saw their Judaism as something that was experienced only at the Synagogue and rarely at home.

Now I understand that this was only *one* classroom. It was not a scientific sample – by any means -- but I wouldn't be too surprised if it was close to being an accurate reflection of much of our congregation.

I say this not to chastise – but to stress the fact that we are facing a crisis. What are the messages that we are giving to our children? I want you all to understand something very basic and very important. No matter how much time, energy and resources we invest in our youth program – the most important factor in educating and sustaining our Jewish youth has to be what happens in the home. If our young people see their parents celebrating Shabbat, participating in the synagogue and the Jewish community and actively living a Jewish life, they will do so as well. If they don't, they won't. Period.

And a word to those who are living in inter-faith households: thank you for being here. Thank you for choosing to have a Jewish home and raising Jewish

children. I have found that it is often the *non*-Jewish parent who is the impetus for providing Jewish education and experiences for their children. God bless all of you who understand how important it is to create Jewish memories for your families. Our job, as your synagogue, is to provide you with resources for the home and opportunities to celebrate Jewish life – no matter where you are **in** your life. And we will continue to do this.

In the past, I've heard from some people – especially some who are long-time members of Congregation Albert -- who feel that we are spending *too* much time and energy meeting the needs of our children, and not enough time and energy meeting the needs of our older members.

While this may be the perception, I must, lovingly, beg to differ.

Our entire Youth budget -- not including staff time, but comprised of camp scholarships, part time youth advisors, special programs and other miscellaneous line items -- is less than 5% of our entire congregational budget.

While we have dedicated Youth advisors, they serve for very little pay on an extremely part-time basis.

All of you have now seen and appreciated the beautiful and much needed adult lounge that Geoffrey Kalmus (z"l), in his wisdom, provided our congregation as a loving bequest. This beautiful space provides a central place for our members to come together, socialize and create community. Now, I want you to contrast this beautiful setting with that of our youth lounge – if you can call it that. Our so-called youth lounge is a windowless, airless closet in the back of the kitchen with no heating or air conditioning that is currently unusable since it serves as a storage facility. This is an absolute shame. What does this say about our priorities as a congregation?

Our religious school is bursting at the seams right now. Every day, more and more families are contacting our tireless and dedicated Director of Education, Leah Schaer, and enrolling their children in her program. The most recent statistics show that we have over 210 students in grades 4-12 who are eligible to participate in a youth group. If we look only at high-school aged youth, we have 75 young people who can participate in TASTY – our Sr. Youth group.

And yet, at a recent Conclave in Phoenix sponsored by NFTY Southwest only 3 young members of our congregation – out of the 75 who were eligible – participated. This is unacceptable.

We can – we **must** do better than this. It is a reflection of our priorities as a congregation – it's as simple as that. What do we want? If there is to be a Jewish future – we need to inspire our youth to love being Jewish – to have life-changing Jewish experiences that go beyond the classroom –even beyond the sanctuary – beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation.

Alan Dershowitz wrote that if you want an absolute guarantee that you will have Jewish Grandchildren – ship your kids off to Brooklyn and make them Chasidim....

This is not an option for most of us – so we need to do all that we can to inspire our youth.

We have a big job ahead of us, but so you shouldn't think that all is lost, I must state that, despite our lack of funding, we do have some wonderful successes:

TASTY – our youth group, while small in number, is a remarkable collection of dedicated young people. Our part-time advisors, Robin Sena and Aaron Citrin are committed to creating the best possible program for our youth. Upon leaving the sanctuary this morning, you will receive information about

TASTY's annual Yom Kippur food drive. I urge you to participate generously and fill your shopping bags to overflowing.

I also want to tell you about the upcoming NFTY Southwest Leadership Training Institute that TASTY and Congregation Albert will be hosting next month. We will be welcoming over 75 teens from all over the region the weekend of October 21-24th. These young people will be participating in Shabbat services on that Friday night and spending the entire weekend with us. We will need host families for participants. I hope that you will open up your homes to our guests. Call the Temple office if you are able to help with this event.

There are other high points in our developing youth program. Our *Madrikhim* - or Teaching Assistants -- in the Religious school are a wonderful group of dedicated young people. Currently we have over 16 *Madrikhim* assisting in our classrooms.

Our annual Youth Play, lovingly produced and nurtured by Dr. Gwen Robinson provides a wonderful outlet for our children's creativity.

Every summer, for one week, Camp Oranim – under the Direction of Roger Goldstein and a dedicated staff of young people -- provides a perfect introduction to Jewish camping for our children and the greater New Mexico Jewish community.

Last year, Rabbi Flicker from B'nai Israel and I instituted a post confirmation program for 11th and 12th graders that met monthly in our homes. We were very pleased with the results and we look forward to continuing again this year.

We are in the process of re-invigorating our Youth Committee. Under the able co-leadership of Dale Cooperman and Karen Barkoff I am confident that we will chart a course for future growth and programming.

There is a lot to be excited about. But it's only a drop in the bucket of what we *could*, we *should* and we *must* be doing.

In order to do more, in order to create the kind of program that will address the needs of our young people we will need to add an additional person to our staff: a full-time, professionally trained Director of Youth Activities whose job it will be to work closely with our professional staff in order to blend informal and

formal education programs and create a dynamic program for our youth. This new staff person will oversee all of our youth groups, create programs, work closely with Camp Oranim, oversee and direct retreat programs and teach in and out of the classroom. Our Director of Youth Activities will work to build relationships with our children. He or she will serve as an advisor, a teacher, a role model, a counselor and a confidant to our youth.

While this is a new position for Congregation Albert, it is not a radical idea. Many synagogues around the country have come to the same realization that such a position is not a luxury, but a necessity. As a matter of fact, Elizabeth Finn – the daughter of our Cantor Barbara and her husband David Finn – serves as the Youth Director of a congregation in Denver. Many, if not most of the Churches in our area has a “Minister of Youth activities” on their staff whose main function is to recruit young people to come to church and find a place to call home. How many times have our children been approached by these churches – with their dynamic and well-run programs? Why aren’t we doing the same thing?

In addition to adding staff and program, it is now time to create a physical place for our youth – a *real* youth lounge – not an airless closet -- where they can come to Temple and feel that they are welcome, they are valued.

It is time. It is essential. It must be done.

The Torah portion that was read so beautifully this morning -- by young people from our congregation -- spoke of the test that Abraham faced when asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. We, as a congregation, are facing a test as well. Will we meet the challenge of caring for our youth? There is no issue that is more important for the health and well-being of our congregation, our community, and the Jewish people than the re-building and nurturing of a comprehensive program for integrating and celebrating our young people. I am committed to working together with our leadership and with every one of you to make this happen -- and soon.

It will not be easy. It will take time and money.

You may be asked to dig a little deeper -- for in rebuilding our youth program, we cannot sacrifice any of the other wonderful programs that we already are offering to our congregation.

Now I understand that not every student will take advantage of what we will have to offer --not yet, at least. But I know for a fact that there are many families - with children in elementary and middle school -- who are eagerly waiting for an expanded youth program. Many of you have already expressed a willingness to donate time, money and resources to make this happen. And it

will happen – I have no doubts. I want to make participation in Youth programs as much a part of our congregational culture as Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

Abraham was spared from having to Sacrifice Isaac. At the end of our reading this morning he returns to Beer Shevah after his ordeal. But the chapter doesn't end with Abraham's return to Beer Sheva. It concludes with a rather dry listing of his family tree. I've always felt that this was a somewhat anti-climatic way to conclude the story. And yet, if you think about it, it is essential. Remember, the test of the Akedah was for Abraham to confront the question of whether or not he and his descendants would have a future. If he were to carry out God's command to sacrifice Isaac, his story -- our story -- would have ended on that lonely mountain. The fact that he did not sacrifice his son meant that he was able to build a future for those who came after him.

My friends, I am asking you, on this Rosh Hashanah, to join with me in building our future. Together, let us work to create a place and a program that will engage every member of our holy community: from the youngest to the oldest.

I want to wish you all a *Shanah Tovah U'metukah* – a good and sweet New Year. *Ken Yehi Ratzon* – May It Be God's Will. AMEN