

There is a story about a woman who is shipwrecked, and survives on a deserted island alone for many, many years. Upon being discovered, the rescuers are amazed to find among the things she built with bamboo and mud and thatch, there is not one, but two synagogues. She explains to them, “Well this, this is my synagogue, and that’s the one I wouldn’t be caught dead in.” Maybe it overstates a bit the division sometimes the way we define ourselves by our synagogues, but the expression does go that you can judge a person by the company that they keep. And that would certainly apply to the synagogue to which they belong. It’s also true that the company we keep not only reflects our inner values and who we are, but it also has an influence on us.

So, I want to tell you some synagogue stories today. Partly because it’s the 75 anniversary of this synagogue. And partly because I would be remiss if I didn’t share a little bit about our synagogue’s history. But these are also for Rosh Hashanah because in the sense that we are shaped and can be reflected by the company we keep, perhaps the values of this synagogue can have some greater personal meaning, beyond the celebration of the anniversary. It’s particularly fitting also because we say in our tradition about Rosh Hashanah, today is the birthday of the world – “*Hayom harat olam.*” We just saw those words on the top of page 207, right after the shofar. They come from an ancient Jewish teaching that explains Rosh Hashanah falls on this date because it is the anniversary of creation. But of course, there is a disagreement among the Talmudic rabbis. One argues that the month of Nisan, the month of Passover, is actually the anniversary of creation. The tradition resolves it with a compromise: “Both opinions are correct: God conceived the idea of creating the world on Rosh Hashanah and actually did it on the first of Nisan.”¹ Rabbi Goldstein explored this text a few years ago and offered a better translation: today is not

¹ *Peninei Halakhah*, Days of Awe 3:3, summarizing the debate from Vayikra Rabbah 29:1 and Rosh Hashanah 27a.

the birthday of the world; today the world is pregnant. It's when she was pregnant with the twins. It is a perfect teaching for today as our congregation marks its 75th year and celebrates the anniversary of its founding.

Temple Sinai was conceived on Rosh Hashanah 1950, when three friends discussed the need for a new Reform Judaism in general and a new home in DC for that new vision. They resolved that they would soon take the steps to make it real. Three months later, they held their first Shabbat service at the DuPont Plaza Hotel with seven or eight couples.² Those folks agreed to continue and arranged for a weekly space at the Wardman Park Hotel. Despite snowy weather, 50 attended the next service, and it kept growing. Then, on March 27, 1951, Temple Sinai was officially born with a meeting that approved a constitution and by laws, adopted the name Temple Sinai, and received its charter from the Reform Movement. By the Fall of 1951, we had about a hundred members and when we held our first Rosh Hashanah service seventy five years ago today at the First Congregational Church on 10th and G, the room was over capacity with nearly 800 people. There was no *schreckensfanfare*, but within a few years – before we even had a building of our own – Temple Sinai had over 750 members and 950 in the religious school. That trend is back – today we have over 1,300 members, the highest in our congregation's history.

Now, I want you to forget about the numbers and the dates. Let's focus, instead, on the principles behind Sinai's creation, how they continue to guide our congregation today, and how they can inspire us, individually, for the new year. Three themes run through the writings and reflections of our founders. One, they critiqued the "doctrinaire" character of Reform Judaism and Reform congregations, and they had the audacity to think they could make something better. Two, they believed in being a "congregation of equals," where your wealth, status, or appearance did not get you better seats for the holidays or different

² Allen deFord, Jacob Gichner, Julius Jacobs, Lawrence Koenigsberger, Sylvan Oppenheimer, Nathan Siegel, Harold Strauss, and their wives. From "Notes for Rabbi Eisendrath – Consecration of Sanctuary," Oct 1961 in Temple Sinai Archives, Box, "Sinai Founding." Some Temple Sinai archival records list an eighth founder, Robert Goodman.

treatment. As a congregation based on equality, they worked boldly for justice and fairness for everyone in society. Third, they believed the teachings of Judaism are an ethical system with a message and application for our own day. Like Isaiah in the Yom Kippur haftarah, they believed helping the poor and making a just society were as important as heartfelt observance of rituals and holidays.

It is no coincidence that the first bat mitzvah in the entire DMV area was at Temple Sinai. From its inception, our religious school made no distinctions between genders and expected everyone to learn the same things and live Jewishly. The first woman to be elected as president of a Reform congregation was Lenell Ammerman, here at Sinai. When the congregation bought this land and designed their aspirational home, they started first with a religious school space, then a social hall, and third the sanctuary. That reflects an order we still hold today: to study and understand the foundations of our tradition and how to apply them in our lives; to gather a community of people caring for each other; and to bless it all and make it holy.

A few years ago, we conducted a study of our Davis Center for Social Justice and its impact. Many said there was not much difference among the area's congregations when it came to social justice work. One respondent commented that every congregation claims they marched with Martin Luther King. Sinai's history is, I think, a little different.

In 1964, Dr. King sent an emergency telegram to be read to the Reform Movement's annual rabbinical convention. He described the desperate conditions in St. Augustine, Florida, and the violent backlash he anticipated for the sit ins and direct actions to come. King had been arrested already and wrote from his jail cell, asking for 30 rabbis to join the fight immediately and lend their honor, the reputations, and their bodies to the cause. Of the 500 rabbis at the conference 16 answered the call, of those 16 rabbis – two, Balfour Brickner and Eugene Lipman, were Temple Sinai rabbis. You may know their names from the Lipman and Brickner rooms downstairs.

The rabbis were attacked by klansmen and segregationists and their arrest was the largest mass arrest of rabbis in American history until that time. They published a letter from their jail cell about why they came to St. Augustine. In these words, we hear Rabbis Brickner and Lipman alongside the echo of Temple Sinai's founding ethos: "We could not pass by the opportunity to achieve a moral goal by moral means – a rare modern privilege."³ They continued, "Each of us has in this experience become a little more the person... we always hoped to be (but [had] not yet been able to become)." Most congregations did not, as it turns out, march with King. But our earliest rabbis and the people who founded this Temple believed in the power of aspirational Judaism put into practice. It is a rare modern privilege to have the opportunity along with a place – this place – to help us become a little more the person we always hoped to be but have not yet been able to become. *Hayom harat olam*, the world is pregnant with possibilities for a better way if we will but take the steps.

Temple Sinai has also lived up to its founding values in its relationship with Israel – the state, its people, and its policies. One of the early, big controversies at Sinai unfolded when Rabbi Brickner and some members demanded that our religious school and worship services adopt the Sefardic pronunciation of Hebrew – no longer saying "Shabbos" or using the old yiddish pronunciations – but using Hebrew as it was being spoken in the newly formed state of Israel. It was a sign of solidarity and commitment to Israel as a model for our practice and an inspiration for a new era of Jewish culture.

Rabbi Lipman exhibited this profound commitment to Israel as well. Before joining Sinai, he served as an Army chaplain in Europe during WW2 and the post war US occupation. During those years, the British still controlled Israel – then called Palestine – and blockaded Jewish immigration both before, during, and after the war. As you may know from books or movies like *Exodus*, the Hagganah and Jewish forces orchestrated waves of illegal immigration to

³ https://jwa.org/sites/default/files/mediaobjects/Why_We_Went_2of3.jpg

get Jews into the land of Israel. Rabbi Lipman and his wife Essie worked closely with the Hagannah to support their operations. As an officer, they had a spacious, private apartment that they used as a safe house of sorts for Hagganah agents. Rabbi Lipman used his credentials to usher Hagannah trucks filled with Holocaust survivors bound for the illegal ships through checkpoints and border crossings.

Our founders committed Temple Sinai to supporting Israel as independent and democratic Jewish homeland AND they fought for equality and safety for all people wherever they saw the need. They rejected Jewish life that becomes set in its ways and they hired and supported Rabbis who lived that same vision and gave space for the voice of justice and for curious honest learning, especially when it came to Israel.

The 1979 Camp David Peace Accord between Israel and Egypt elicited some backlash in the Jewish world. Not everyone was happy. A group formed in Israel called, *HaMakhteret HaYehudit*– The Jewish Underground. They carried out terror and intimidation attacks against Palestinians. They wanted to disrupt the peace plans. They also sought revenge for terror attacks on Jews, and they wanted the Palestinians gone so they could dwell in every inch of the promised lands as they understood it. They planned and almost blew up the Dome of the Rock and, on June 2, 1980, they carried out a series of bombing attacks against the mayors of Arab towns – Bassam Shakaa, the mayor of Nablus, lost both of his legs, and Karim Khalaf, the mayor of Ramallah, lost one of his legs. A third victim targeted, El Bireh mayor, Ibrahim Tawil, escaped the bomb at the last minute.

Just weeks before that, the Israeli government had deported two Arab mayors, following a Palestinian terrorists attack that killed six yeshiva students. Those two men came to the US on a speaking tour, seeking to explain the Palestinian cause to anyone who would listen and to gain support for reversing their deportations. To call them “persona non grata” in the eyes of most Jewish institutions would be a great understatement. Most American Jews were hostile.

On June 3rd, the day after the three mayors were bombed by the Underground, Temple Sinai hosted the deported mayors. That year, Rabbi Lipman preached in his sermons about Israel as the manifestation of a Jewish dream. He cited chapter and verse of all the prophetic messages urging us that peace and coexistence are the surest signs that “*Ki Mitziyon Teitzei Torah* – that Torah is alive and coming forth from Zion to the whole world.” He along with Steve Meyer, then president of the temple, z’l, would not bow to the hatred and racism from other Jews about Palestinians and the rightness of their quest for a safe home – alongside our own right to a secure and free homeland.

Here’s what happened (summarized from an article dated June 4, 1980 from JTA):⁴ Under massive police protection, the Arab mayors spoke at a tumultuous two-hour meeting held at Temple Sinai. Police ejected five persons from the temple and pushed back demonstrators outside. A smoke bomb was set off inside the temple, later claimed by Meir Kahane’s Jewish Defense League. Jewish organizations called on people “to expose and boycott” places like Sinai that gave platform to the Palestinian cause. When asked if settler groups or Kahane could also speak at the Temple, our then executive director reiterated Sinai’s commitment to providing space to explore difficult issues even when nobody else will. Meir Kahane spoke at Sinai just a few months later.

I don’t share these stories merely as a tribute to Sinai’s history or its rabbis. I share these stories to demonstrate the values for which we continue to stand today. I share these because you cared enough to choose this synagogue maybe without even knowing its history and founding values. You are here because on some level you seek that rare modern privilege about which our forebears wrote: to achieve something moral and to become a little more of the person you’ve wanted to be.

⁴ <https://www.jta.org/archive/ousted-arab-mayors-appear-at-tumultuous-session-at-temple>

HaYom Harat Olam - Today the world is filled with ripening promise for you. Today, the Shofar and the history of Sinai say the same thing: you should live a Judaism that matters in 5787. You should be meaningfully guided by Jewish wisdom and experience, even if that means going against the grain and facing doubts and dismissal from within the Jewish community itself. Those three guys from Rosh Hashanah 76 years ago left us a nice temple that's only gotten nicer in the past few years. And you're already a member or a guest. So this year I invite you to take this next step and to really become a member of those values and those principles. To be the better person of your aspirations.

Shanah Tovah.