

We Need Each Other

Prepared for Delivery

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I am honored to speak here today, in this sanctuary, in this city, at my family's congregation, at the invitation of our ordinees. I am here in support of you, our newest colleagues. I'm honored to preach today at the pulpit of Isaac Meyer Wise, founder of our seminary and our movement. And to this Cincinnati faculty, I so appreciate your scholarship and leadership, your warmth and friendship.

דע מאַן באַט, וואָס אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ
*Da m'ein bata u'lan ata holech.*¹

As we learn in Pirke Avot,
Know where you came from, and know where you are going.

Where did you come from? How did each of you get here? Many of our out of town guests travelled, perhaps across great distances, to support our ordinees. I drove down Madison Road from my house, about 15 minutes away.

But the question can be deeper than that. What brought you here, to Plum Street Temple, this historic and honored sanctuary? Who set you on the journey that led you here?

For our ordinees — Karen, Rachel, and Rocky — This is the moment to reflect on this text.
Know where you came from, and know where you are going.

I believe that telling our own stories has the power to shape how we show up in the world. When we share our journeys, we come to know each other, and we better understand ourselves.

Da m'ein bata. Know where you came from.

I am the first rabbi in my family, as far as I know, and I come from a family of committed lay leaders and Jews, going back generations.

¹ Pirke Avot 3:1

My great-grandfather, Abraham Brenman, was an international Vice President of B'nai Brith. My mom's parents, Martin and Edith Piper, founded a synagogue that chose to be non-denominational - which ordonees of this seminary have served. My dad's parents, Debbie and Chuck Goldberg, built their family and community in Brooklyn, and my parents, Alison Piper and Allen Goldberg, joined a Reform synagogue, committed to family Shabbat dinner every Friday night, and taught us that each person is created in the image of God.

And then they sent me off to Reform Jewish summer camp. There, in Western Massachusetts, I met rabbis who went in the pool and played wiffle ball and taught Torah. They were real people and the Torah was deep and meaningful and it was ours and it became mine and I realized - I could do this, too. I could look through the lens of Jewish tradition and meaning and give it to the next generation.

At that camp, at a blue picnic table, I met one of my rabbis, Aaron Panken, who had just started out as HUC-JIR dean of recruitment. Each summer, for many years, he would ask "Ok, LPG (my initials) Are you ready to join us yet?" One decade ago, he ordained me at Temple Emanu-El in New York City. I miss Aaron and aspire to live up to those blessings he gave me every day.

At that same camp, I met my husband, Rabbi Neil Hirsch, who answered a call to serve here - as senior rabbi of the Isaac M. Wise Temple, the spiritual leader and steward of Plum Street Temple, a beacon for this city, a birthplace of our movement and a home for our seminary.

Know where you came from, know where you are going. Before beginning my role with Women of Reform Judaism, I served a Reform congregation in Massachusetts.

During that time, when I was pregnant with our second child, I was flagged for additional testing for fatal fetal anomalies, for a pregnancy that might not be viable. I was simultaneously involved in organizing two dozen Reform synagogues across Massachusetts to adopt the Roe Act, which would preemptively enshrine reproductive rights in the Massachusetts constitution, anticipating a decision like the Dobbs case, which erased the federal right to an abortion. Our own state representative was resistant, citing her Catholic faith. Leaving my second round of prenatal tests, the legislation reached a crucial vote. I called that representative and I said - "This vote is about me, and it also isn't. I live with a level of privilege that means I will always have access to the health care that I need - but not everyone will." "No, you have my vote," she answered - "I understand the distinction between my own values and the choices others will make."

Our daughter was born healthy, and Massachusetts protected reproductive rights, and despite the Dobbs decision, every time that residents of a state are asked if they want access to abortion, from here in Ohio to New York and Arizona — a majority of the residents of that state say yes. Because when we ask people if they want control over their own bodies, they say yes. And yet, the challenges to women's rights and the safety of people who can become pregnant are still so profound.

For our ordinees, your journeys are your own. Rachel, Rocky, and Karen — each of you have moments and stories, family and friends, mentors and teachers, that brought you to this day. Call one of them to mind now, or maybe you can even catch their eye here in this sanctuary. Now you are about to join a sacred cadre of leaders who serve our Jewish world and beyond. You will weave your own story into the fabric of the Jewish people.

Know where you came from, and know where you are going.

This is a text for an ordination day, for the conclusion of counting of the omer, for our own spiritual ascent to Sinai tomorrow with the festival of Shavuot, and for the beginning of the book of BaMidbar.

When the Israelites left Egypt - a couple of books ago, or at the very least, seven weeks ago at the beginning of Passover, or at the very most, a couple millennia ago — they were heading for the Promised Land.

From the very start, we disagreed about where that land was. Our tribalism goes back as far as the new book of the Torah that we begin today, when two and a half tribes wanted to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan river as they prepared to enter the land. And they still agreed to come and support each other against any common enemies.²

Most of us were headed for the Promised Land - To the land of our ancestors - for the majority of the Israelites who left Egypt, they were returning to bury Joseph, to bring home his bones, to be a free people in our land. Many thousands of years later, we've moved around the world, to North Africa and Spain, Babylonian and Poland, South America, North America, Israel, and everywhere in between.

Da'mein bata - We know where we came from. In the 1800s, a group of rabbis and leaders believed what we do now: that faith should be accessible, integrated into our lives, and present in the public square.

We know where we came from. Here, in this magnificent sanctuary, it couldn't be clearer. An American house of worship, across the street from central churches and City Hall. The place where, for 150 years, men and now women and all people have been ordained rabbis of our people.

We know where we came from, and we know how we got here. We stood for something. That all people should be equal - with equal involvement in religious life. That being a person of faith should also mean being a person of substance. That we should stand up for our values and speak about theology.

² Numbers 32; Numbers 34

We know how we got here. By welcoming the orphan and the stranger. By embracing the convert and the curious. By opening our communities to Jews and people of all backgrounds and journeys - interfaith families, LGBTQ folks, Jews of color, and everyone who takes that brave, Nachson-inspired step, to walk over the threshold and into our lives.

We know how we got here. By building institutions, congregations and coalitions. By shaping a denomination that to this day is the largest and most diverse in North America. Not unlike Benjamin Franklin's quip at the end of the Constitutional Convention — we have ourselves a movement - if we can keep it. If we can stay in covenant with each other, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular. If we can keep connected to each other, despite our cynicism or bitterness about what once was. Instead, it is time to offer a vision of where we are going, and why we are here, right now.

We are all Elijah, and that still, small voice calls out - and God's question rings in our ears: "Why are you here?"³

When Rebecca, our matriarch, struggles with her own painful pregnancy, she speaks directly to God:

אִם־כֵּן לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי

Im ken, lama zeh anochi

If this is so, why do I exist?⁴

Why do we exist? Rebecca gets at the core existential questions of individual humanity and collective purpose, while also voicing the struggles of women and people who can become pregnant.

It's an organizational best practice to ask - "if our business or non-profit or seminary or synagogue stopped existing tomorrow, would anyone notice?" The answer is almost always yes - yes, people would notice. Would they find somewhere else to go for their needs? Maybe. In a world often driven by scarcity, donors look to shore up the most effective organization. It's on each of us, leaders of local communities or broader institutions, to articulate the unique value-add of our own communities - or to open new pathways for connection.

Why do we exist? We exist to care for each other, and to make the world more just and whole. To be in covenant with God and each other. And because we exist, as humans, we need each other.

We need each other. Everyone - try that with me. We need each other.

³ 1 Kings 19:12-13

⁴ Genesis 25:22

This was the chorus at an interfaith vigil for immigrants and refugees in Washington, D.C. last month, where I was proud to represent our movement, leading a thousand clergy and people of faith in song and prayer, to declare our shared commitment to welcoming the stranger. Along with two dozen national faith denominations, the URJ and CCAR, representing all of us, joined a suit challenging the rescission of the “sensitive locations” policy that strictly limited ICE from immigration actions in houses of worship.

We need each other, declared Pastor Stephanie Kendall, senior minister of National City Church, where we gathered that evening, just a few blocks from our US seat of government. Each faith leader wove these four words into our own preaching:

We need each other!

This statement is both universal and particular. It does not appear, directly, in any one holy book or scroll. At his inaugural lecture as faculty of Union Theological Seminary, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel z”l declared: No religion is an island.

“Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance,” [he explained. He continued: We] “share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together...Disorder in a small obscure country in any part of the world evokes anxiety in people all over the world...Horizons are wider, dangers are greater ...No religion is an island. We are all involved with one another.”⁵

David Ellenson z”l, taught us about two covenants - one universal, one particular.⁶ Jane Evans, WRJ’s first Executive Director, embodies universal and particular leadership. She served WRJ and our movement from 1933 until 1976. During that time, she supported sisterhoods, and led the charge for women to be ordained rabbis and cantors. And she led the women of the Reform movement to pass resolutions with universal impact, opposing child labor, advancing civil rights, and ensuring access to birth control for all.⁷

We feel that pull to the universal. And as soon as God makes the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, we need each other as a people. For Eugene Borowitz z”l, this covenant between the Jewish self and God is lived and expressed in community. God makes this covenant with the Jewish people, not with individuals. To be in covenant with God, we need each other.

We need each other now more than ever. We need each other for the spiritual lift that comes from gathering in sacred, physical community, to fulfill sociologist Emile Durkheim’s concept of collective effervescence, when the sum of the parts of humanity, gathered for spiritual and ritual activity, becomes greater than the whole.

⁵ <https://utsnyc.edu/wp-content/uploads/Heschels-No-Religion-is-an-Island.pdf>

⁶ <https://3hq1d3.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/peoplehood12.pdf>

⁷ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/evans-jane>

We need each other and we are responsible for each other. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh* - all of Israel is responsible for one another.⁸

Even when we disagree, when we see the ugliness and feel the baseless hatred for and from our fellow Jews - we need each other and we are responsible for each other.

We need each other and we need to speak up. For immigrants and refugees, for those falsely imprisoned, deported, and denied their first amendment rights. We need to speak up for our democracy, for those who would hide their hatred for the other in a gesture of care for Jewish safety. Jews are safest in vibrant, open, multi-faith, multi-racial democracies.

We need each other, as a people, in Israel and all around the world. We are Yisrael - God-wrestlers⁹ - it's only natural that we should wrestle with each other, because when we wrestle with the Jewish people, we are wrestling with ourselves.

We need each other, and we need you, Rocky, Rachel, and Karen. We are all colleagues now, bound together in our sacred calling.

We need your thought leadership. As you leave behind final exams and midterm papers - continue to study and write. Contribute to the CCAR Journal, publish op-eds, share your sermons.

Know where you came from, know where you are going, and know - the verse continues - to whom you will be accountable. We need you to hold us to account, and, as covenant requires, we'll do the same. There is no early or late in the Torah, and there is no early or late in the rabbinate - we are all learning and we should all be listening. We are all accountable to each other.

We need each other in the communities you are heading out to serve. We are here to welcome you and support you.

And you need each other - still. Your Cincinnati cohort, your classmates celebrating ordinations in New York and Los Angeles. Hevruta doesn't end with your smicha - and I hope that each of you will make new connections, find new teachers and mentors as you continue on your way.

We need each other, as a movement - and we need you to join us in shaping this next chapter, too.

Know where you came from, know where you are going.

⁸ BT Shevuot 39a

⁹ Genesis 32:25

Here is where I believe we can go:

Together, we can reinvigorate in-person gathering - from our local congregations to North American events. Long before COVID and remote work, we have been geographically diffuse; gathering in person reminds us and reinspires us to be a movement.

Let us recommit to inclusion and belonging - to ensure we are as welcoming as possible of all people, from all backgrounds, including diversity of opinion. We must welcome dialogue and as the leaders of our communities, set standards for respectful debate.

And we can renew our resolve to embody our prophetic tradition to speak out, according to our values, to bring more justice and care into the world. This requires scholarship, pastoral support, organizing and advocacy, grounding in text, and a clear sense of why we are here.

Know where you came from, know where you are going. No religion is an island, and no congregation, no community, no rabbi, stands alone.

Joseph, our ancestor, stood apart from his siblings - both through his own vanity and his father's favoritism. His story is a cautionary tale for our time.

וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאִמֹר מַה תִּבְקֹשׁ

Va'yimtza'ei'hu ish v'hinei to'eh ba'sadeh va'yishal'ei'hu ha'ish leimor mah t'vakesh

a man - an ish - a mysterious person - came upon [Joseph] wandering in the fields. This one asked [Joseph], "What are you looking for?"

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אָחִי אֲנִי מְבַקֵּשׁ הַגִּידֶה־נָּא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רֹעִים

Vayomer et-achai anochi m'vakesh hagidu-nah li eifo hem ro'im?

And [Joseph] answered, "I am looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are?"¹⁰

Despite himself, Joseph knows what we know. When we stand apart from each other, our brothers and our sisters, our fellow tribes, we all suffer. We all end up in the pit, bound and broken, famished and afraid.

Know where we came from, know where we are going. We need you, our newest leaders, and you need us, and the world needs us all, now, more than ever.

Now it is time for you to share your visions and your Torah. With gratitude to God - Here you are. We need you, and we need each other.

¹⁰ Genesis 37:15-16