

**WHAT I LEARNED ON MY SABBATICAL  
OR  
THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME!**

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When I was in rabbinical school, I heard a group of rabbis talking about how when they went on vacation they would look for synagogues where they could worship in the style that they liked, because they said, that they couldn't pray the way they wanted to at their own congregations.

I was really shocked, and very saddened. I couldn't understand why someone would want to be a rabbi in a congregation where they felt they couldn't express themselves spiritually, a place where they felt they were just doing their job, and not actually participating in worship and celebration, not being the type of Jews they wanted to be.

And now, 13 years into being a rabbi, I still don't understand it.

When I went on sabbatical, I had some general expectations of what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to slow down, avoid my computer, be able to forget my telephone, and just spend time with my family.

But, I wasn't doing this sabbatical solo. Our family chose to go with my dear friend, Jackie Ninio, and her family. Jackie is a rabbi in Sydney, Australia, and she was also on sabbatical. As it turned out, it was a real revelation for me to go on this journey with her.

We are both out 13 years, we've both only served one synagogue since ordination, and we are both older mothers with young children. We decided to explore what congregations were doing to make their members happy, and what rabbis were doing to make themselves happy.

We met privately with Reform and Conservative rabbis and attended their Shabbat services. For me, it gave me not only an opportunity to learn from them, but also to look at what we do well, and what we don't do well, from a different perspective. Both distance and comparison helped me see our congregation in a new light.

One of the things I quickly learned however, was just how different the challenges are in Los Angeles than in Sacramento. While there is a richness to the LA Jewish community, both financially and in terms of resources and Jewish culture, there is a shallowness of the Judaism to be found there as well.

One of the problems for many synagogues in Los Angeles is that it is *too easy* to be Jewish. You don't have to affiliate or participate in the organized Jewish community to have a wonderful Jewish experience.

You can go to museums and plays, participate in adult education, you might live in a neighborhood that is predominately Jewish, or even go to a school where more than 75 percent of the kids in your public school come from Jewish families. You *never* feel like a minority, and you *never* have to worry that you're more than five minutes away from a good deli.

Many of the Jewish professionals we spoke to used the phrase "fee for service" to describe the relationship many of their members had with their synagogues. They talked about the many families that come to them who see the synagogue as a place where they will pay dues for a few years so their child can become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and then once they get the product they wanted, they leave.

Sadly, what these people don't realize is that Judaism is not about life cycle events. A Bar Mitzvah is not a private coronation, it is about being part of something larger than yourself, being part of an extended family, a community . . . a community that feels a sense of responsibility for you, and you for them.

While we might have a lot less Jews in Sacramento, and more Jews who are unaffiliated than affiliated, what I have seen is that to be Jewish in Sacramento means having made an active, positive choice to be Jewish.

You have to look for the Jewish community, you have to bring yourself to the community, because if you don't, the community won't exist.

While this puts a greater burden on the individual, it also grants them a greater sense of ownership as well.

Whether we became a part of the Jewish community by birth, by marriage, or by conversion, all of us here have made the choice to create a vibrant, meaningful and supportive community.

It is extremely rare in our congregation that someone joins the temple when their child is in 5th grade, and then leaves the temple right after Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In fact, I can only think of that happening twice in the last five years. The fact that I can count the families who have done this, shows what an anomaly it is. But sadly, this is a too common tale in larger urban Jewish communities.

Attending services while away was interesting for me. We celebrated Shabbat at two Reform, one Conservative, and two unaffiliated congregations. These experiences were important for me, because it helped me to remember what it feels like to walk into an unfamiliar place, filled with people I don't know, use a siddur that I don't usually use, and hear melodies that were new to me.

Even sitting in the pews, instead of standing on the bimah made me appreciate the fact that *I* really don't like it when there is a lot of stand up and sit down going on in a service, and I feel shy about introducing myself in a new setting.

And while there are many things that I enjoyed in the different services, over and over again, I was reminded of how much I actually really like *our* services here at B'nai Israel.

When I was a student and heard those rabbis speak derisively about their own congregations, I made a promise to myself that I would only work at a synagogue where I wanted to be a member. I figured if I wasn't enjoying the service on the bimah, how could anyone sitting in the congregation enjoy it?

I love our services not only because I like the way we pray, I love who we pray with.

As a rabbi, I have the privilege of having an opportunity to get to know each of you, spend time with you, study with you, hear *your* stories, *your* pain and *your* joy. So when I step onto the bimah, I am standing in the middle of *my* community.

But it saddens me to know that many of you don't get to have that same experience -- that even when this room is full, some of you might be feeling painfully alone.

I think that we do a good job in attracting people to our temple, but a mediocre job at integrating people into our community.

If we want B'nai Israel to be a welcoming congregation, each of us –the staff, the board, and all of our members, have to make the effort to welcome the stranger, to reach out to those in pain, and to celebrate with each other during holidays and life cycle events.

Each of us is responsible for modeling what it is we want to receive. Or as our faith teaches us, we must do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

If we want our services to be spiritual, we need to bring our spirit – our ruach – to our worship. When someone sits next to someone who isn't afraid to sing and is having fun, it is much more likely they will sing and feel relaxed and enjoy what is going on as well.

If we want others to talk to us, let us also make the effort to talk to them.

If we want to feel like this is our sacred space, we need to bring our own special gifts to the mishkan, to our tabernacle. We need to look within our own hearts and ask what do *I* want to bring to create a sacred community, what are the special talents or passions that *I* want to contribute?

I cannot create a holy community, and you can not create a holy community. But as Rabbi Harold Schulweis has taught, “God is not in me, God is not in you. But between us.”

God is not to be found in the text, or in the melodies, or in our programming, but in our relationships with one another.

It is when two people engage with each other in an honest, open, and welcoming way that the *shechinah* can dwell in our midst.

One of the rabbis I met with was a real inspiration to me, and what her congregation has done is something that we at B'nai Israel should aspire to. Rabbi Sharon Brous is a Conservative rabbi who about five years ago started an amazing congregation in Los Angeles called Ikar. It is a congregation that is really different than any other congregation I've seen.

Ikar does not call itself a synagogue, but it is a *k'hillat kodesh*, a sacred community. They are focused on creating a sacred community where spirituality and social justice are integrated into everything they do.

Rabbi Brous talked about how she and her members saw themselves as being in a *brit* - a covenantal relationship with each other.

She believes that when a person becomes a member of IKAR, they feel that they are entering into a sacred relationship with their rabbi, their staff, and all of the other people who are drawn to their community.

They know that each person has something unique to offer, and that the nature of their community is determined by the love, talent, and involvement of each of its members.

This year our board will be focusing on this very idea, of how we can better appreciate the blessings that each of our members bring to this sacred community.

We will look at how we can better engage our congregants in the life of the synagogue, taking the time to hear each other's stories, to listen to each person's concerns, to create relationships, and to strengthen, and deepen, our sense of community.

One of the things that I was saddened by on my sabbatical, was seeing how many of my friends and colleagues who are in a similar place in life as I am, were feeling burdened by their responsibilities. They were burned out, expressed cynicism, and wondered how many more years they wanted to be at their synagogues, or even be congregational rabbis at all.

When I left Sacramento, I was tired, exhausted really, and more than ready for a break. But I wasn't burned out. And except for when I was coveting the fabulous sanctuary chairs in one of my friend's synagogues, I didn't even feel a drop of envy for my Los Angeles colleagues. But most of all, being *there* reaffirmed for me how happy I am here.

Shabbat Shalom.