

**Chesbon Nefesh**  
Rabbi Mona Alfi  
Congregation B'nai Israel - Sacramento, CA  
September 22, 2007 - Yom Kippur 5768

This year is the 7<sup>th</sup> Yom Kippur that I have stood on the *bimah* as a rabbi at this congregation. Each year as I watch our past presidents hold the Torahs, and listen to our Chazzan chant the Kol Nidrei, I cannot help but to think of all of the generations that have come before me.

I think of the past Rabbis and the Presidents, I think of the congregants who sat in this room in years past, whose names we will sadly have to read later today at Yizkor. And I think of the children who, God willing, will be born between this Rosh HaShanah and the next.

I feel as though on Yom Kippur, we stand in a delicate balance between two generations, looking both backward and forward in the same moment.

Yom Kippur is a day of *chesbon nefesh* – a day of accounting for our souls. On this day, as we immerse ourselves in this season of taking an accounting of not only of ourselves, but of our community, as we read the penitential prayers, I wonder, how will we be judged, not just as individuals, but as a community, and as a congregation?

What would those generations on whose shoulders we stand say about our congregation today? Would they be amazed at what grew out of that little store-front service on Rosh Hashanah of 1849? Would they be proud at seeing how we continue to be engaged in the life of Sacramento? Or would they be shocked at how different the Judaism we practice is from their own?

And I wonder about those generations that have yet to be born. I wonder, what they will say about the foundation we are laying for them? Is it strong and is it nurturing? Will they find meaning in our traditions and comfort in our faith? Will it inspire them to embrace Judaism, or to run far from it?

So often we think that the day to day decisions we make are inconsequential, that they affect only us, or last only for a moment. But when we participate in the life of a congregation, the decisions we make can be far reaching.

On Yom Kippur we are reminded that what we say and what we do matters. Not just today, but tomorrow and the day after, and onward into the future.

Part of what is entailed in a *chesbon nefesh* is engaging in the *vidui*, or confessional prayer. Most Jews associate confession with the Catholic tradition. But it is an important part of Judaism as well. Our tradition teaches us that each night before we go to sleep, we should say a prayer of confession, just in case we pass away in the night. And a similar *vidui* is said by us, or for us, as we lay on our deathbeds.

Our tradition teaches us that we should engage in a vidui, a final confession asking for forgiveness, for the things that we did knowingly and unknowingly that might have hurt others. We are taught that by doing this both daily and before we pass away, we are constantly reminded that we do not walk through life by ourselves, but rather that our actions affect so many, whether we are aware of it or not.

But these viduis – both the nightly and deathbed versions, are individual confessionals. They are short and to the point, and are general in their pleas for forgiveness.

The Yom Kippur vidui is very different. It is not only longer and more comprehensive, but it also recognizes that our lives are being judged along with the community in which we live. The language is always in the plural, and it lists in detail the sins that have been committed not only by particular individuals, but by association, our community as a whole.

The text is clear, each of us bears responsibility not only for our own actions, but for the actions of the larger community, and for our leadership. There is no pointing fingers at someone else, but rather at all of us.

The prayers remind us that in history we will be judged not only by our own actions, but also by the actions of our generation. If an injustice is occurring, each of us bears the responsibility to change it and to rectify it.

I remember talking to my grandparents when I was a teenager about the Japanese internment camps in California. They told me about their friends and acquaintances who had their businesses confiscated and had been sent to the internment camps.

They were shocked when I asked them, what did they do to stop it? I wanted to know not only what they did, but also what the Jewish community did, to speak out against this horrific injustice.

They looked at me with shock and surprise. It was clear that it never occurred to them that it was not only the government that would be judged harshly for what had happened, but that they would be as well.

From their perspective, they did not see what it had to do with them. As Jewish Americans, they felt their own place at that time was precarious. They believed that Jews who spoke during a time of war out would have been accused of disloyalty.

They were surprised that in my eyes, their silence had made them complicit with what the government had done. After all, I reasoned, hadn't I been taught that part of the horror of the Holocaust was that so many ordinary citizens had remained silent as their neighbors were carted off? Hadn't they taught me that there is no such thing as an innocent bystander?

Each of us, my grandparents and I, saw the situation differently. We were each looking at it from the perspective of the generations that we were raised in. As first generation Jews who had personally felt the sting of institutionalized anti-Semitism, they were shocked that I would think it would have been safe for them to speak out during the war.

And, it was equally incomprehensible for them to understand how safe I felt in both my American and Jewish identities that I wouldn't think twice about publicly challenging our government.

It was also the beginning of my awareness that there would be a generation that followed me, that would someday question me, and my peers, about the choices we made. It was only then that I began to realize that I would be held accountable, not just for what I did, but for what my generation would do.

The *vidui* is ultimately about self-reflection and communal responsibility, it demands us to think about what our legacy, and the legacy of our generation, will be.

Will future generations look back at us with gratitude or with regrets when they see the world that we will be handing over to them?

Last year I stood on this *bimah* and asked you to recommit our congregation to social justice and social action. I invited you to join the Social Action Committee's 1<sup>st</sup> "Torah in Action Shabbaton" on Simchat Torah. I was delighted on that day, to see over 100 people attend the all-day retreat here at the Temple.

It was an exciting day. Throughout the afternoon we discussed and debated different issues of concern to our congregants. And at the end of the day, with strong consensus, three topics were adopted, and later voted on and endorsed by our board for us to focus on as congregational wide projects.

Our congregation made the commitment to put gay rights, the environment, and adopting a local underprivileged elementary school, as priorities.

The gay rights committee hosted a Pride Shabbat last June, marched in the Gay Pride Parade, and sponsored tables at the Pride and Rainbow Festivals. Our board passed a resolution unequivocally stating our support of civil and human rights for the LGBT community. And our members participated both in helping plan and in attending the community vigil after the death of Satendar Singh, a young man who was violently attacked in Sacramento this summer because he was presumed to be gay. We are also working with the Sacramento JCRC to combat the growing hostility towards the gay community here in Sacramento.

The sustainable living committee sponsored a number of educational events at the temple, as well as helping B'nai Israel become more "green." They are raising awareness both in our congregation, and beyond our walls about organic farming and are working

with local food banks to provide fresh, organic foods to the poor and supporting community gardens and local farms.

And the work our volunteers have been doing with the Jedidiah Smith School has been inspiring. By "adopting" the Jedediah Smith Elementary School, we have made a commitment to mentoring students, fund-raising for the "no child left indoors program," bringing in members of the community to talk to children about career opportunities, as well as working with school officials to identify specific needs that B'nai Israeli can help fill.

Through our work at the Jedidiah Smith school we can have an impact on our local community by giving children an opportunity to imagine and to strive for a better future than is being presented to them.

Our work on the Gay Rights Committee is already having an impact on other synagogues nationwide. I have received calls and emails from rabbis from across the country thanking us for the work we are doing, and our willingness to take a leadership role on this important human rights issue.

Our sustainable living committee has had a significant impact on our purchasing and consuming practices at B'nai Israel, and has been our voice of conscience in helping us explore how we can improve our congregation, as well as educate our congregants about what they can be doing at home.

It is amazing to see how in such a short time, we are already having an impact on the larger community.

But as Rabbi Tarfon taught "The day is short and the task is great... You are not required to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to abstain from it." (Pirke Avot 2:20-21).

We have accomplished a lot in this last year. But there is still more to do. Tikkun Olam does not require that we repair the entire world, but to at least do what we can to heal our little corner of it.

This year at the Social Action Shabbaton on Saturday, Oct 13, we will be looking to see how we can expand our congregation's involvement and education in these three areas, as well as increase our participation in Sacramento's Interfaith activities, and infuse social action opportunities into our congregation's holiday celebrations.

More information about the Shabbaton can be found on fliers in the foyer, as well as in the October Koleinu. I hope to see many of you here on October 13.

I want to express my admiration and appreciation for all of the work the congregation has done over the last year and in our ongoing commitment to *tikkun olam* and social justice.

I also want to ask that we take on two new commitments that the board has already dedicated themselves to – lifelong learning and creating a more caring and welcoming environment here at B'nai Israel.

Tikkun Olam, a commitment to education, and community building have always been three of B'nai Israel's core values, and what has attracted people to our congregation.

But over time a congregation grows, and changes. We get comfortable in our niches and complacent in our routines. Yom Kippur reminds us to shake up our kaleidoscope and to take a fresh look at what we are doing, to put our priorities in order, and then act on those values.

When the board decided to put a renewed focus on social action, lifelong learning, and nurture a culture of caring, it was part of a *cheshbon nefesh*, taking an accounting of our congregations spiritual well-being, as well as remembering that what we do now will affect the future of our congregation, and our congregants.

By focusing on *tikkun olam*, lifelong learning and fostering a culture of caring we are creating an environment of healthy aging both for ourselves and our congregation. We are ensuring that our congregation will be able to respond to the changing needs of each generation.

We are also facilitating a healthier process of aging for ourselves, no matter how old or how young we are. Healthy aging begins at birth. Just as what we put into our bodies when we are young will affect our health when we are older. What we put into our minds and into our souls when we are young, will affect how we respond to life as we age.

Judaism has always put life-long learning as a priority. The Talmud teaches "*Ain kemach, ain torah, v'ain torah, ain kemach.* (Pirke Avot 3:17)" Without substance we cannot learn, and without learning, we cannot be sustained. Learning is for our souls what food is for our bodies, it is what we need to survive.

One of the first people I met at B'nai Israel was Judge Leonard Friedman. He was, and continues to be a role model for me. He lived Jewish values in every area of his life. But what I was particularly struck by was his thirst for knowledge. Even after he retired from the bench he continued to take classes at Sac State and participate in the temple's weekly torah study.

He delighted in learning new things. He was one of the most educated men I've ever known, a renaissance man in the breadth of his knowledge, and yet he exemplified the Jewish teaching from Pirke Avot, where Ben Zoma asks "Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone. From all who would teach me, have I gained understanding. (Pirke Avot 4:1)"

Over the course of the next year, we will be taking a critical look at seeing how we can expand and deepen our educational offerings at B'nai Israel. We will be doing this across

the board, for all age-groups, and all experiences, including the classroom, camp, retreats, guest scholars, and Shabbat services.

We want and need your input. Because what we offer should reflect what you are searching for. During the course of the year you will have opportunities to let the staff and our committees know what you would like to see here.

Leonard Friedman was a model for me, not just for how to live a Jewish life, but how to age well. He was both a teacher and a student until he passed away. And his memory is a constant reminder to me that we get out of life what we put into it.

At the core of every synagogue are the people. The origin of the Jewish synagogue dates back the first Diaspora, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before the common era. Its original purpose was as a Beit K'nesset – a gathering place, a place where we could come together as a community, a safe haven from the outside world. And for most of us, this has remained its most important function. It is what draws us here, and if we find what we are looking for, it is what keeps us coming back.

The most important thing that any of us can do as part of this congregation is to reach out to one another. From a simple gesture like welcoming a visitor or someone who came to temple by themselves, to attending a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or participating in a *shiva minyan*, each of these are important opportunities for us to be there for one another, to connect on a meaningful level.

The Hineini committee, formally known as the Caring Committee, has taken on some of the most important work of the congregation. From the joyous acts like making *kippot* to give to children who are named in the synagogue, to visiting our homebound patients, and making calls after a death.

This is vital to the life of our congregation, and we need more people to help. It doesn't have to be all the time, but something. How wonderful if each of us took the time even once or twice during the year to offer a ride, make a call, deliver chicken soup, or usher at a service.

There are many ways to serve a congregation and make it a more welcoming community.

Working on a committee, volunteering in the library, or singing in the choir. These are also opportunities that they can help create a more nurturing environment here at the temple.

Whatever we do is less important than the act of doing something. It may be cliché, but is true. The more we give of ourselves, the more we receive.

Last night we handed out fliers with the many ways to get involved in temple life. I'd like to echo the words of our president, Jeremy Hollis, and urge you to look over the list and see what interests you, something that is meaningful to you, and then go for it.

What we do as individuals, and as a congregation, will one day be judged by future generations. What we do now matters. The programs we create, the activities we participate in, they affect the type of congregation we are today, as well as influencing the type of community future generations will inherit from us.

I urge you during the course of the year, from this Yom Kippur to the next, to participate, at least once during the year, in one of each of the three areas that I have spoken about today.

Find an area of social action that speaks to you, and do something. Either volunteer at a food bank, clean up the riverfront with our congregation, march in the Gay Rights parade, or mentor a child at Jedidiah Smith.

Find a class that you want to take or teach at B'nai Israel. Help with the Jewish film festival, or sign up for the Adult B'nai Mitzvah program. Come for Israeli dancing, or for a class about Israel. Or just as important, get involved in planning our educational activities by sitting on a committee or helping bring a special speaker to town.

And throughout the year, help us strengthen the bonds of our community. Each time you come, introduce yourself to someone you don't know. Wear your nametags at services. Or offer a ride to someone who cannot drive.

And if B'nai Israel feels too big, get involved in one of our communities within B'nai Israel, our Interfaith group, Sababah, our group for adults in their 20 and 30's, the Leisure League, a *chavurah*, Brotherhood or the Women of B'nai Israel. Each of these groups provide opportunities to make new friends, and to find a way to feel more at home in the larger B'nai Israel community.

While certainly in many ways the Jewish community that we live in today is very different than the one built by the Jewish pioneers of Sacramento, there are some things that have not changed.

We continue embrace the core values upon which they founded B'nai Israel, a commitment to social justice, a belief in lifelong learning, and a passion for creating a caring and meaningful Jewish community.

By embracing our legacy, by being engaged in these activities, in whatever ways we can, we are not only honoring our past, but ensuring that our legacy will also be one that we, and future generations, can be proud of.

On this Day of Atonement, when all of our deeds are judged, may the Holy One find us worthy successors of those who have preceded us, and may we be judged with kindness and understanding by those generations who will follow us. *Ken yehi ratzon.*