

In the Year 5800...

Fifteen years from now, to the day on the Hebrew calendar, we will all gather together again and celebrate an auspicious occasion. In fifteen years, we will commemorate a century: the Hebrew year 5800. And though we will roll up to services in our self-driving autonomous cars and have to be reminded to put down our augmented reality smart glasses, the Jewish people will still be gathering for the same holidays and the words will be, mostly, the same. On a cosmic level as well, our place in the universe, as individuals, as a people, and as humankind, will likely take up about the same amount of space, with some margins for error.

What will change, of course, is us. The “who” will not change, not really. Of course, fifteen years from now, the “when” certainly will change; our “where” will shift. Our “why’s” will develop, and we will have more tools and capabilities for the “how.” The question for tonight, our Rosh Hashanah 5785 celebration, is about the “what.” The “what” is the things we build. What have we done in the fifteen years between now and our centennial celebration? What ideas have we allowed to flourish? What organizations and institutions have we supported? What causes have we galvanized? What is the world that we have created?

There is a character who appears in the Talmud named Honi HaMeagel, Honi the Circle Maker. Truthfully, we do not fully know what it meant for Honi to be a Circle Maker, but in one of his stories, when the Jewish community needed rain, Honi drew a circle in the sand, stood there, argued with God, and made it

rain. One rabbinic leader said to Honi after, “if you were not Honi, I would have called for your exile [for speaking to God]...However, what can I do to you as you nag God and God does your bidding, like a child who nags a parent and the parent listens.” Honi knows how to speak truth to power, to advocate, to make change when it is needed in the here and now.

In another story, Honi encounters a man planting a carob tree. Curious, Honi asks the man how long it will take for the tree to bear fruit. The man replies that it will take 70 years. Honi is intrigued and asks why the man plants a tree when he will never enjoy the fruits of his labor. The man says: “**I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.**” Honi then falls asleep, for 70 years, like you do. He awakens and meets the son of the planter, enjoying the fruits. He then goes and meets his own grandson, and hears his own teachings voiced in the house of study. What Honi learned was that he had impacted the Jewish world in ways he could not imagine. The future did not match his expectation, but it was a strong future nonetheless, because he took action in his lifetime. His story concludes as he prayed to God, who looked upon Honi with mercy, and Honi died. Honi’s death was an act of compassion on behalf of God because he was a man out of time. But God granted him this compassion because, like the carob tree, Honi planting had born fruit. Honi had a “what.”

Fifteen years from now, in 5800 we will sit at Rosh Hashanah services and reflect on the foundation we have built. How did we use our voices today, in 5785, for the sake of tomorrow? What did we build? What seeds are we planting to be enjoyed in two generations?

Since the tragic events in Israel of October 7, the American Jewish community has seen a massive growth in engagement. Back in May, eJewishPhilanthropy, an online publication about trends in the Jewish organizational world, published an article detailing a “surge” in American Jewish life. The study the piece is based upon details that prior to October 7, about 83% of Jews in America would self identify saying that they are “somewhat, not very, or not at all” engaged in Jewish life. 8 in 10 Jews in America identified as NOT actively participating in Jewish life. 80%! By May 2024, of those 8 in 10 Jews, half would now say that they ARE interested in being more engaged, if they have not already become so. Unaffiliated Jews are saying that they are open to affiliating with synagogues in ways they have not in twenty years. Day school enrollment is through the roof and Federation’s are having record fundraising years. This is overwhelming growth and, by the way, these are averages.

At UM, here, we are seeing even more growth. One example, comparing this year to last year, UM Hillel’s Shabbat participation has grown by 60%! This is not just good engagement on the part of staff and students, though the hard work of our Hillel leaders has been incredible, but also indicative of an attitude. There is excitement in the air to engage with Judaism. In addition, while you might

expect that the main two areas where we would see increased Jewish engagement are on antisemitism education and Israel advocacy, the main cited desire amongst American Jews is to engage more deeply with Jewish tradition. No doubt, Israel and antisemitism need to be a clear focus of our people right now, but the “whats” of the Jewish people, the life that we want to build, is grounded in our roots and heritage, not solely current events.

Yes, it is deeply ironic that our increased Jewish engagement across America seems rooted to and the result of senseless Jewish tragedy and trauma. I cannot fix that with words on a bima tonight. But I can offer this perspective: moments like this are what propels the Jewish community forward.

One hundred years ago, the Jewish community was supercharged. Mass amounts of immigration had fueled participation in American Jewish life. Zionism had become mainstream. Jewish non-profits like B’nei B’rith and Hadassah were having record fundraising. Religious schools were no longer an experiment, but a bonafide community institutions. The foundation for much of what we know today, was built by the 1920s.

While we often regard that time period as being foundational, Professor Jonathan Sarna makes the case that the success of the Jewish community in America in the 1920s was not the result of mass immigration but rather, the reactions of Jewish Americans to concerning trends in the 1880s. On the eve of large scale Jewish immigration at the turn of the 20th century, the Jewish world was facing existential questions. There were religious schisms as the birth of the

Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox movements contended with the meaning of “American Judaism.” At the same time, rising antisemitism was threatening the Jewish community, particularly from the populist movements of the day. Jews faced antisemitism from both the right and the left. At the same time, Jews were often more concerned with copying their Protestant neighbors in an effort to create community relations and assimilate more easily into American society, than gathering Jewishly. These existential fears of the place of the Jewish community in the world spurred Jewish engagement, but not from stodgy well established communities, but from demographics outside the norm who wanted to see change and build a more stable future.

In this time period, the Jewish institutions of today began to spring up. Significantly, the Jewish Publication Society, the first major American Jewish publishing house and the most well known publication of the Hebrew Bible, was founded in this time, not by old rabbis, but by young people, recent college graduates. Ray Frank, a secular Jewish woman worried that with assimilation, Jews would forget their heritage and never have the energy to plant the seeds of the future. So she founded the Sunday School movement. Today, we take for granted rolling our eyes when our parents make us schlep to temple at 9am on a Sunday. When the first trickles of immigration came to the US, Emma Lazarus, another secular Jewish woman, rallied people to create benevolent societies and worked to support the poor. Her efforts are part of the foundation of how we talk

about social action and social justice in Judaism today. Her service to the “tired, huddled masses yearning to be free” is etched on the Statue of Liberty.

These three groups were builders. They were Honi. They never could have imagined what Judaism looks like two generations later. But they had dreams. They had “whats.” Passions that compelled them to care for and look after the Jewish community and make an impact that would be long lasting, even against the unknowns of the future.

We don’t know the future. Every day we see news that shakes us, scares us, and makes us wonder, what possibly could happen next. Most of our actions, however, have little bearing on what happens on the other side of the world. Rather, our opportunity, our responsibility, is to build. To ensure that there is something here that is bigger, brighter, and bolder than what we have today.

So, what is your what?

What will we do as a Jewish person for the next fifteen years? We have a world of carob trees, planted for us by our ancestors. What will we plant?

Will we build things to strengthen our cultural identity, by creating a food collective that preserves Jewish recipes for the elderly with no grandchildren to taste their matzah ball soup?

What about building something to ensure the success of future Jewish leaders?

Maybe we will find new ways to move our Jewish world online, to bring access to learning and excitement to those who never had access before?

What are the populations that have not been properly engaged? What are the rituals that have not been touched for centuries, desperate to be reawakened? What problems do you see today that you know you can help solve?

Judaism does not work unless we do something with it. Judaism is not something to be shoved in a closet only to be looked at twice a year. It only works if we take it out, if we engage with it daily, if we fumble and make mistakes with it, if we ask it questions and debate the answers.

Judaism does work when we are passionate. When we have arguments for the sake of heaven. When we are our authentic selves, even if that self does not look like the assumptions of the past. When we take it seriously but not ourselves.

If you have ever felt frustrated by Judaism, if you have ever felt outside it, if you have ever felt like you were not being heard by Judaism, now is your chance. Now is your moment. And if you have always been inside of Judaism and never felt alone, now too is your moment. There has never been a time in Jewish history that is more primed for you to build and plant. Every single person here has an opportunity. That opportunity is to plant not only for the year 5800, but even after, for the generations we will never know but will inherit us and read our words no less.

“I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.”