

The idea of setting aside time to focus on repentance and atonement sounds like it should be centered on the individual, a kind of private ritual. Each of us has done things for which we need to do teshuvah and atone, but my sins are different than your sins, so it would make sense if I were to spend my time very differently than you would spend your time. But that's not the way we Jews do things. *Kol yisrael areivim zeh lazeh*, all Jews are responsible for one another. We might be doing individual spiritual assessments and individual teshuvah, but we gather in partnership as a community to atone together. In Judaism, very little is done in isolation from community. That is to say, it can be done alone, but we encourage each other not to separate from community, as Hillel said, *al tifrosh min hatzibur*. Prayer can be done alone, but we enhance the experience in community and consider prayer in minyan to be a superior mitzvah, for those who are able, than staying home as individuals or families. Shabbat and holidays are times to connect with others, celebrate, and learn a little Torah together. Many mitzvot are focused on supporting other people and building community. Even a home based celebration such as the Passover Seder is an opportunity to join with others. The Biblical celebration explicitly instructs us to gather together in groups large enough to consume an entire lamb.

It is fitting, therefore, that we spend some time this Yom Kippur looking around us, considering the state of our community and considering what we might do to raise up the community and help it continue to meet our needs for years to come.

We exist to serve those in the Jewish community in Grand Rapids who seek a spiritual path incorporating traditional Jewish practices. We exist to serve those who believe that Judaism welcomes you as God created you, regardless of your sex or gender or skin color and fully include every Jew in all parts of religious life. Our mission is to create a welcoming, inclusive, and engaging sacred community. We are the only synagogue in Grand Rapids filling that space. Not Chabad, not Temple Emanuel. We exist to continue to hold that center.

There is tension in holding a space like ours. We ask you to coexist with people on the field of Jewish practice who may hold different political beliefs than you, who may hold a different kind of job than you, who may have a different level of income than you, or who may have a different kind of education than you. We recognize as well that this center space incorporates a range of Jewish observances, from those who are very meticulous about kashrut or Shabbat observance, to those whose Jewish practice centers around social or environmental activism, to those whose spiritual life is rooted in intellectual engagement. The Conservative movement, through the lens of serious study of Torah and Rabbinic literature, affirms a spectrum of beliefs regarding gender and orientation, so we welcome both those whose gender does not match their biological sex and those who believe strongly that biological sex is determinative. There is no doubt that this creates tension in a community, but we believe, I believe, it is important to hold this tension.

We might keep kosher differently, but we can sit together and eat food from the synagogue kitchen. The synagogue's food policies have been crafted with the hope that each person in our community can find something they can comfortably eat.

Some in our community use Shabbat as a day to stay off of electronic devices and social media. Others observe Shabbat by coming to this building for a service or by celebrating at home with a special meal. For others, Shabbat is not such an active presence. But we come together by creating an intentional space in the building in which we can feel the active presence of Shabbat, even if we don't observe Shabbat in our personal space in that way.

Much has been written and said about the state of the state of Israel, in which recent legislation has determined that a narrow political majority, representing a minority of voters, can impose its will on the whole of society. My desire to stand with the State of Israel does not affect your ability to protest the current government of the State. Your protest of the current government does not affect our ability to come together to celebrate Israel's birthday.

We prefer to create a space in which majority and minority exist together, neither one imposing on the other. If you want to be called to the Torah as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah and celebrate growing into manhood or womanhood, you may. If you want to be called to the Torah as a non-gendered individual mi-beit, from the house of, your parents, you may do so. Your ability to function as a non-gendered individual should not affect my ability to function as a gendered person. My desire to have a wife of the opposite sex should not affect your ability to access an all-gender bathroom.

Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer wrote a beautiful reflection about finding balance while tuning her violin.

With thumb and forefinger, I apply firm but gentle pressure, and rotate the tuning peg up and down; intentionally ringing the string out of tune—too flat, then too sharp, dancing on either side of the desired pitch, feeling for the boundaries of 'in tune.' I wiggle the peg back and forth until somewhere along the route between sharp and flat, I hit the sweet spot. I can feel that 'in tune' string vibrate through my whole body. It's blissful, and all the sweeter because I know what it is to be off key.

From years of tuning my violin, I learned that finding balance requires stepping off balance, stepping out of comfort zones, off key, into complexity, and feelingly finding our way back home.

As we tune, attune, and atone this year, may we never shy away from the off-key nor the complexity, always listening for the sweet sound emerging from the dissonance.

This is to emphasize that we are a multi-tonal congregational. My note of balance is not the same as yours. As we tune our community, balance requires stepping off balance, stepping out of comfort zones, off key, into complexity. Our vision is to create connections between individuals in our Jewish community through religious, educational, and social programs that attract participation of all our members. Achieving that vision that requires compromise. Each individual won't get everything they want. Some of our members want to work towards climate stability in Grand Rapids. Others want to work for a stronger Israel or to reduce antisemitism. Some want to work for greater inclusiveness within our congregation, and others are hyper-focused on Torah or Shabbat or prayer. Not every person will find fulfillment in everything we do. But if we do it right, every person will find something to connect to. And that can happen when each person invests themselves into making things happen.

We will thrive when we share Torah that speaks to traditional Jewish practice, the development and refinement of the soul, to a connection to Israel, or to the benefit of the world around us, Jewish and not. Torah is meant to be challenging, not just to affirm what we already believe. Torah can be provocative, Torah should have depth. If Torah is only a political echo chamber, it may be politics dressed up as Torah. If Torah surprises you and stakes out a counter-cultural position now and then, it may be an authentic voice asking for your attention.

We need people to take care of the building and congregation, raise and manage its funds, make sure that we are fulfilling our mission and assist with programming. A congregation cannot

survive when leaders are asked to volunteer full time. We need to share the load. We need to cooperate and make room for others to share responsibility. We need to let the organization and its programming evolve and do things differently as new people take responsibility.

Finally, we need your support. You're heard this from the president. This institution needs your support and your presence. We need you to show up and participate. If traditional Judaism is important to you, then we need to see you and hear your voice. If you are able, we'd like you to raise your level of Hebrew or learn to read Torah or chant a Haftarah or lead part of a service or assist with the gabbai duties of the Torah service or serve as an usher. We cannot thrive without a continual stream of new people willing and able to participate.

A first century rabbi known as Honi the circle drawer, came across an old woman planting a carob tree. He said to her, "How long will it take the tree to bear fruit?"

She replied, "It will take 70 years."

"70 YEARS!", cried Honi. "You're not exactly a youngster. Are you certain you will live another seventy years to enjoy the fruit of this tree?"

"Perhaps not," said the woman. "However, when I was born into this world, I found many beautiful carob trees planted by those who came before me. Just as my ancestors planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will have carob to eat."

Each generation pours its time and effort and money into maintaining a synagogue for the next generation. To be open to welcoming new people as you yourselves were welcomed. To work towards the synagogue's vision, to participate, to recognize the good works, to recognize that a small community is limited only by the number of people willing to pitch in to make things happen. To be selfless - not to think about what I want and need, but about what others want and need.

May this community unite its hearts and minds to form a beautiful rainbow tapestry of individuals coming together for the common good.