

Today, I want to talk about JFK Jews. No, I'm not reaching back 66 years to talk politics. I learned about JFK Jews from my friend Joel in Seattle this summer, and just a couple of weeks ago, my friend Rabbi Joshua wrote about them in his substack, although he didn't call them JFK Jews.

Our religious experience on an average Shabbat begins at 9:30 and ends around 1:00, when the last person leaves the Kiddush. Some Jews like to pray. Some Jews like to socialize and eat. Prayer, socializing, and eating are all part of the religious experience. If you like both, *kol hakavod*, wonderful, but if prayer is not your thing, you may be a JFK Jew. A Just For Kiddush Jew, JFK.

Some of you are the kind of people who love Jewish prayer and ritual, who get spiritual nourishment from going to a synagogue on Shabbat mornings. Some of you are not driven by desires for that sort of spiritual sustenance, but you appreciate other kinds of spiritual nourishment, like a nice lunch or a nice kiddush. Creating an environment where people can come and stand together around a table of food or sit down together for a meal is a sacred act. Connecting people, creating new friendships, providing newcomers to Grand Rapids with a place to call home and a group of people to call family is a religious duty, a kind of mitzvah.

There is a midrash about the Lulav and etrog that we shake on Sukkot that speaks to the experience of the Days of Awe, the *Yamim Nora'im*. It suggests that the four different species of plants represent four different types of people. The etrog, which smells heavenly and, prepared properly, makes tasty preserves or candy, represents people who do lot of good deeds and study a lot of Torah. The palm branch, which has taste – think hearts of palm – but no smell, represents people who know Torah but don't do good deeds. The myrtle, which has smell but no taste, represents people who have lots of good deeds to their credit, but don't know much Torah. And the willow branches, which have neither fragrance nor taste, are the people who don't know Torah and don't do good deeds. The midrash suggests that atonement happens only when all four types of people are together like the bundle of the lulav and etrog, that each atones for the other, and that without all types of people present, atonement doesn't work. The mitzvah of the lulav and etrog only works when you have all four species and these holidays only work when we have all kinds of people bringing themselves into the community.

So we need JFK Jews. There should be no shame in sleeping late and arriving at 11:45 for Kiddush or for lunch. This is your community. When you walk in the door, you will find people who welcome you as you are, and for who you are. You'll always be welcomed and I'll always be glad to see you. You might have small children or physical issues that mean that you are not the kind of person who can get up and moving at 9:00 or 10:30 in the morning, but if you can get here by noon, we'll have a nice Kiddush and maybe even a nice lunch for you. No matter what time you arrive, we know that you have chosen to come in for a reason. No matter what that reason is, no matter if you are here for the religious experience of talking to God or for the religious experience of eating with a community, I'm grateful for your presence.

To those of you who come weekly, to those of you who participate and lead the service, a word of caution. As tempting as it might be to see yourself as superior to those who show up on less frequent occasions or the JFK Jews who come for the good meal, please get control over yourself. Know that I appreciate you and without you, it is likely that our synagogue community would really struggle. But I hope you come as frequently as you do, and help us lead services or read Torah primarily because it nourishes your soul, not because it allows you to look down at

those who do less than you. If you come early and consistently help us make a minyan, I appreciate you. Please don't stop coming early and please don't look down on others who don't come early. I want you to focus on the satisfaction you get from serving God and your community in the way you do and be happy that others might get satisfaction from serving the community differently than you. A person who can make a sizable contribution yearly but rarely, if ever, steps through the doors of the synagogue is supporting the congregation. A person who gives to the best of their ability and volunteers to help prepare food for a holiday is making a great contribution.

This is your community. As long as you support the congregation and maybe even sponsor a kiddush now and then, you will always have a space around the table, no matter what time you arrive.

One caveat: Our ability to have Shabbat and festival services depends on the people who support the minyan. On rare occasions, we get to the point of the service when we need a minyan to continue with the Torah reading, and we still lack a minyan. So we might break for Kiddush early, around 10:15, and hope we get a minyan within the next 1/2 hour. On those weeks, if you come for Kiddish at noon, we'll still be happy to see you, but there's no more Kiddush!

A community takes all kind of people to be successful. JFK Jews, Jews who read Torah and lead or assist with the service, Jews who take aliyot and other honors, and Jews who sit in the pews and have a conversation with God, and Jews who stand in the back or outside the door and have a conversation with each other. We need people to prepare food and we need people to clean up after Kiddush. We need people to sponsor the lunch, and we need people to welcome newcomers.

May this new year bring us opportunities to find connections for ourselves that touch our souls and create meaningful connections for others; may our bodies and our souls find nourishment in prayer, in community, and in Kiddush; may we find God both in the tefillah and in the buffet line.