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Congregation Beth Israel
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Journeys and Community

Where my heart is, my feet will carry me. –Hillel

After driving for 5 hours on an unpaved dirt road amid banana and bean fields we finally arrived at the hamlet of Nabugoye Hill; a small village in the green, rolling hills of south eastern Uganda. Just a couple months before one of the most uncomfortable car rides of my life, this community, that was about to welcome me as one of their own was unknown to my sense of Jewish geography. And for good reason: they live roughly 9000 miles away. Yet, a group of Jews, called the Abayudaya (meaning from the tribe of Judah) have lived in this spot in eastern Africa for about 100 years, observing the laws and teachings of our rich tradition.

When I visited their village seven years ago, the Abayudaya lived in many ways like their neighbors in other villages surrounding Mt. Elgon. That is, without electricity, running water, roads, and modern medical supplies. Nowadays, their living situation is a bit different, thanks in large part to the generous help of so many Jewish communities throughout the world. They now have a guest house now, so even you can stay there. Regardless of what they now have, what sets them apart from most other Ugandan villagers and city dwellers is that they choose to live a full Jewish life. The Abayudaya all live together in connecting villages, kibbutz style, and they observe and celebrate the festivals and life cycle events just as we do. I remember one of the villagers telling me – while huddled with ten children around a table playing driedel in the moonlight – that their outlook for the future is brighter than their neighbors' simply because they have a deep

sense of community and shared values and traditions. Life is not easy for them, but their dedication to a Jewish life and Jewish education for their children has given them purpose, hope and meaning. Being part of a supportive and tight-knit community is what keeps them going.

My wife Nicole and I arrived in the Abayudaya village just as Shabbat morning services were beginning during the week of Chanukah. Only a few moments after I stepped foot in the Moses synagogue, a service leader came up to me and asked if I would like the honor of *hagbah*, the lifting up of the Torah. Humbled, I accepted without hesitation. As I walked down a dusty, creaky wooden floor to the front of the synagogue, past mothers nursing their babies on my left and men of all ages wearing *tallitot* on my right, I felt a nervousness in my belly that subsided immediately as I realized that I was part of their Jewish experience. We were acting out our common Jewish heritage *together*.

This adventure occurred while on winter vacation from Rabbinic school in Israel. And it was specifically during this unusual encounter that I realized how I had made the right decision to pursue the rabbinate after spending 6 years in the business world. As fascinating as the brokerage industry is, there was that inner voice urging me to pursue another passion. As our sage Hillel once said, "*Where my heart is, my feet will carry me.*"

Though I may not have realized it growing up, my heart always knew where I needed to be. I grew up in a family that for generations has been active in various Jewish communities. My mother's father, Jacob, of blessed memory, who built a synagogue in Fargo, North Dakota, arrived in America at the turn of the 20th century with his Yiddish speaking mother, siblings and the family Torah they smuggled out of Lithuania. Fleeing their home quickly, they had to choose what precious possessions to take with them. Of course, they chose their family Torah.

Their decision deeply touched me. I feel privileged to have read from it during my Bar Mitzvah and I look forward to teaching from it here in our community. Today, this baby Torah rests in the ark behind me and will make its home in the ark at Beth Israel. Plans to officially dedicate the Torah are percolating now in my head.

My father, on the other hand, came from 4 generations of assimilated Jews in San Francisco. Neither my paternal grandfather nor his father were strongly observant Jews. My father longed for the presence of Judaism in his home. I think that is one of the reasons he admired and emulated his father-in law Jacob. Observing how dedicated Jacob was to Judaism inspired my father to become an equally dedicated synagogue and Jewish communal lay leader in San Francisco. To this day, I admire their leadership skills and have watched how others have approached them for advice and support. I have seen their commitment and hold in highest regard their labors on behalf of their Jewish communities. Being a rabbi has enabled me to continue their pledge of service to the Jewish people and most specifically, to the Beth Israel community. After only two months on the job, I have witnessed many congregants who share this value.

This is a glance into my journey. What is yours? How does Hillel's quote resonate with you? Where is your heart going to take you this year?

There are many themes during the High Holy Days, but one of the most significant is that of remembrance. According to our Tradition, today is actually called Yom Ha-Zikaron, the Day of Remembrance. This theme is also in our liturgy, our Torah and *haftarah* portions and there is even a custom to visit the graves of our loved ones during Rosh Hashanah. Yes, we are supposed to reflect on our lives and take an accounting of how we acted this past

year. But we are also encouraged to revisit our journeys and meditate on those who came before us and their influence on our lives.

We are sitting here together for a reason. I encourage you to review the events and people that helped shape your journey, which led you to where you currently are. For some, I imagine that coming to High Holy Day services is just what you do. For others, I know that you are rediscovering your roots or are on the path to living a full Jewish life. And still others are here for a spiritual experience. Perhaps the person next to you nudged you to come tonight. Nevertheless, your heart brought you to them. Your heart brought you here. Looking out from up here on the bima, Beth Israel looks like a strong, dedicated and vibrant community.

I seem to have arrived at Beth Israel at an exciting time. Membership is increasing, the Religious School is busting at its seams (we had 90 children the first day, that's up from fifty something last year) and then there's the new building. It's not just a plot of land anymore, but an active construction site with the shell of our new home taking shape. This is happening. I know this has been a long journey. It has divided some of us, and brought some of us together. There's going to be more arguments, that's a certainty, but I can just feel that there's going to be even more embracing and joy this coming year. We are not at a crossroads now. We are well past that point. From my perspective, I couldn't be more proud of the shape we're in. How extraordinary to be a part of Beth Israel at this point in the congregation's long history.

When my colleagues ask me about Beth Israel, I tell them that I see a thriving Jewish community in the Pacific Northwest committed to the future, committed to innovation, committed to justice, committed to inclusivity and committed to our sacred heritage where

people from various Jewish backgrounds can observe Judaism how they feel most comfortable. Your collective hearts, your passion for Judaism, however you practice, is leading Beth Israel into a new era. I am so thankful, and lucky, to be on this journey with you.

My prayer this new year is for all of us to deepen our bonds with our friends, community members and loved ones, for us to periodically revisit our personal journeys and finally, for us to recognize the importance of a Beth Israel community. We may not function like the Abayudaya – living and practically doing everything together – but we can model their dedication towards the collective. In fact, I think that’s what we do well here. May your feet take you to where your heart is. May this truly be the year of Hillel. Shanah tovah.