

Rabbi Joshua Samuels
Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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Relational Judaism

While walking in his cornfield in Iowa, Ray Kinsella hears a voice whisper out, “If you build it, he will come.” This, as many of you know, is a scene from *Field of Dreams*, the 1989 film starring Kevin Costner, Burt Lancaster and James Earl Jones. (It also happens to be one of my favorite movies.) Not long after Kinsella hears this voice, he begins to convert much of his corn field into a baseball field. Some of his family members think he’s *meshugena*. Miraculously, however, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, a deceased hall-of-fame-worthy ball player, appears on the field and is followed by a whole host of his contemporaries who have been itching to play since entering the world beyond.

“If you build it, he will come” is one of the most memorable and quoted lines in American film history.ⁱ Recently, this line has resonated with me in a completely different way. At this moment we have an extraordinary shell of a synagogue sitting on our gorgeous 14 acre property off San Juan Boulevard. Many of you have taken tours in it, seen pictures of the building process and progress and contributed to the capital campaign. Some of you are even involved in making decisions about the new site on the congregation’s behalf. What is going on at the site is nothing less than astonishing. I brag about it to all of my colleagues.

Many of you are acutely aware of how long this project has taken. Last year at this time, there was a cement hole in the ground. In just this year, which is a blink of the eye compared to the time it took to finally get here, we have seen this hole transform into a building with walls, Jerusalem-style stone masonry, a roof, a 14,000 square foot basement, an area for: the kitchen, a pantry, bathrooms, an elevator shaft, a beit midrash, or library, offices and even some extra space. The sanctuary, along with the social hall, is the *pièce de résistance* of the space. The exposed wooden beams are striking and the huge south-facing windows looking out onto what will be a large patio with the woods as a backdrop will be breath-taking. And this is just the actual synagogue building I’m talking about. Standing outside you are surrounded by tall trees with birds soaring high above. The location is peaceful. I can only imagine what else will one day sit on our property: a senior-assisted living home, a Holocaust memorial, playgrounds, gardens, a ball field, and maybe even the outdoor infrastructure for a day camp, a retreat center, or an overnight space for our youth. The possibilities are endless. The ideas will come from you.

What is actually being built is not a new synagogue. What we are building as a community is an inter-generational Jewish center that will serve the North Sound and Pacific Northwest for the next 100 years. This center will allow all of us—and those not born yet—to engage in Jewish culture, religion, literature, cooking, camping, and many other facets of our rich heritage. In other words, it’s more than just a shul. It will serve a far greater purpose than a place to gather and pray.

So how does the line from *Field of Dreams* connect with all of this? Well, many of us are hoping that once this building has an occupancy permit and is operational (which can be accomplished as soon as we wish), Jews will come out of the woodwork and membership will not only increase but those already who belong will come more often. “If we build it, they will come.” This is true in a sense. Our current building is not accessible to our friends who are physically handicapped or who need assistance to enter. Perhaps the most important thing we are doing is creating a handicap accessible center. People will be

able to literally “roll right in.” And, with our new space, we’ll be able to offer many more Jewish experiences too.

I am extremely positive about the whole process as many of you are aware. I hope we can all see this vision of what Jewish Bellingham can become and continue contributing to the cause. This project deserves no less than 100% participation, not just from Beth Israel, but ideally from the whole Jewish community in the area. It is our responsibility as Jews to create and sustain a healthy and thriving Jewish presence wherever we are. And we are here.

However, no matter how state-of-the-art a building is, what will get more people to experience the many joys of Judaism with all of us is: us. In other words, the single most important factor in introducing and creating lasting and meaningful Jewish experiences is relationships.

Judaism, after all, is a religion and culture based on connections between people. We pray in a minyan (a quorum of 10), we mourn together, we learn Torah in a group and we celebrate holidays together. There is very little that we do as individuals in Judaism. Jewish asceticism, after all, never had much very success. In fact, the first time God says something is “not good” is when God notices man is alone.ⁱⁱ

In his new book, *Relational Judaism*, Ron Wolfson, Fingerhut Professor of Education at American Jewish University in Los Angeles, has one message: “It’s all about relationships.” People will come to synagogues and attend programs, but they will stay, he says, for relationships. What will help Beth Israel thrive in the next 100 years, beyond a new physical space, is a different way of looking at engaging and retaining Jews and non-Jews.

Luckily, Beth Israel is very much a relational community. Yet, we should not lose site of the fact that we all have a choice to affiliate and participate. And if we are not developing meaningful relationships with others who are on a similar journey, then Jews and non-Jews alike will search out other outlets for Jewish expression. And believe me, there are plenty of single-focused outlets for just this. Nowadays it seems like synagogues are becoming obsolete with the DIY (Do-it-yourself) attitude that has permeated our culture. It’s certainly not a bad thing—taking Judaism into your own hands. In fact, it can be empowering. Many of these organizations target specific demographics too. What many of them lack, however, is the potential for lasting relationships amongst their constituents. This is what we can and ought to provide.

Jewish communities and synagogues, with far larger budgets than ours, have created cutting-edge programs to engage as many Jews as possible. However, programs do not retain Jews. They excite us and they challenge us, but once the program is over, that’s it. The crowd goes home. Rarely will a stand-alone program deepen a participant’s relationship to the Jewish community and each other.

In a 2002 survey of New York Jewry (the largest American Jewish community), 65 percent of respondents answered affirmatively to the following question: “Do you feel that being Jewish is very important?” Ten years later, the number had fallen to 57 percent. Even one of the most observed of all Jewish holidays took a hit; the percentage of people who said they never participate in a Passover Seder grew from 8 percent in 2002 to 12 percent in 2011.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite all our efforts in the American Jewish community at creating innovative programming, the numbers are going down. So it can’t be about programming.

If money and programs aren't doing what we thought they'd do, then what will? What will strengthen the bonds amongst Jews and our non-Jewish friends and family? What will allow them to see the value in supporting and belonging to a Jewish community such as Beth Israel? What will encourage parents to continue sending their children to Religious School? What will be the reason children want to continue attending after their b'nei mitzvah? What will be the reason parents stay connected to Beth Israel once they become empty-nesters? What will influence seniors to participate and take on leadership roles?

The answer is once again: meaningful relationships.

As Wolfson writes, "Success is not butts in seats, not more programs, not more one-offs. The question Jewish institutional leaders should ask is not, did people enjoy the event or the experience? The key question is: Did we engage each person in a significant relationship with Jews and Judaism through their participation in the organization?...Did we create new leaders willing to engage peers and others in community? Did we guide them to grow in their relationship with Judaism in one or more of these ways: connection to self, to family, to friends, to Jewish expression, to community, to Jewish peoplehood, to Israel, to the world, to God? Did we demonstrate how Judaism is a path toward meaning and purpose, belonging and blessing?"^{iv}

"Relational Judaism" is a buzz phrase right now within the American Jewish community and certainly within the Reform and Conservative rabbinical community. It speaks to both participants and leaders.

So is all this relevant to us at Beth Israel? Is this what we want?

Though we have a nearly full room now, well over 200 families and many things going for us, such as a new Jewish center under construction and a growth boom in our religious school in the last couple years, people still leave and choose not to belong for a variety of reasons. This is just the nature of the ballgame. But it doesn't have to be. We don't have to accept this.

Beth Israel, in many regards could serve as an example to other synagogue communities. I know that some of our best practices would go a long way in other Jewish centers around the country. For example, everybody pitches in. Each family is assigned to host a Shabbat oneg. We prepare for events together and clean up together. No one else does this for us. These acts embody what Relational Judaism is about: bringing people together.

We welcome everybody who steps into the sanctuary during services. It's quite hard to walk into our community and not engage in conversation with our greeters, membership committee members, or anyone else. Everyone who attends a service or program is treated with kindness. We really want to know about everybody who chooses to join us. Welcoming people into our community is one of our strengths. We excel at it. If I meet someone at an oneg and forget their name, I know I can go over to anyone else and ask what that specific individual's name is and they will respond with the name and story about the person. This is what Relational Judaism is about.

We also have a wonderful Torah Study and Shabbat minyan community. These two regular groups have in a way created a community within a community, a havurah. We study together. We pray together. We eat together. When you do this many things together over a period of time, you get to know one another through meaningful conversations and experiences. I would surmise that some of the "regulars" come so they can be surrounded by friends and others who share their passions more so than for the

commentary on the parsha, the davening or the lox and bagels. It's about being with people. In fact, "In their study of American religion, Putnam and Campbell assert the number one reason people remain members of congregations is because of their friends."^v

And how can I leave out our hospitality? I am already looking forward to eating ice-cream at Anne Brown's home next summer with our new families and lay leaders. There's a reason this is such a fun event: it's at the home of a very gracious and generous person. It's comfortable. The focus is less on the synagogue and more on getting to know each other. We listen to each other's stories and make connections. We find out why we are all here and what brought us to this place. The more sharing and listening we do, the greater the chance of us entering into an I-Thou relationship with our community. And once this happens, bonds are created.

Finally, at the beginning of any adult study session I lead, from Torah Study to a Thursday evening course, I usually say, "Before we begin let's share something exciting or memorable that happened to us this past week." Or "What are you looking forward to this coming week?" By sharing these stories we become more than a group of learners, we become people in relationship with each other. We are brought into the lives of others and we share our joys with them. After all, learning in a Jewish community ought to be different than learning in a college classroom.

As you can see, we are very much a Relational Community and we ought to be proud of it.

But we can do more. We have to do more. Our future and survival depend on it.

What else can we be doing?

"Sociological studies indicate that a trip to Israel, along with summer camp and Jewish day school education, impacts personal Jewish identity" more than anything else.^{vi} In other words, these three outlets have been proven to instill in the participants meaningful Jewish experiences that do not end when the person comes back home or graduates. A deep connection to one's Jewish heritage and peoplehood has been established and participants want to add to these life-changing experiences. Perhaps we need to help send more children to camp. If we want to create a generation of dedicated and inspired youth who will be more likely in the future to become leaders in their Jewish communities, we must help and encourage them to attend Jewish summer camp. At the very least, they will bring back a renewed enthusiasm towards their background.

Speaking of our youth, how wonderful will it be when they can gather in their own "Youth Lounge" at our new synagogue? It will be a space for them to create community, away from their parents and teachers. I can already see them hanging out, working on projects for the community through art or music, and even doing homework or challenging me to a game of air hockey. We can all dream.

I'd like to encourage you to attend the URJ Biennial in San Diego this December. This experience will serve two purposes. It will allow us to interact with other Reform Jewish educators, lay leaders and others who want to strengthen the movement. More importantly, once you have been on a retreat, an Israel trip or attended a convention with fellow congregants, your relationship changes. Once you spend more than just a program or service with someone, you begin to form deep relationships whose bonds are rooted in shared transformational events.

Our Religious School Director, Sagit Hall, and I are interested in organizing a weekend Shabbaton retreat, away from Bellingham, for part of our religious school community as well as taking some classes to a guided low ropes course near the beginning of the year. Sitting in a classroom once a week is not necessarily a breeding ground for friendships. Sagit and I are also interested in developing a more bonding experience amongst our Gan Yeladim (pre-school aged) parents. They should be getting to know each other rather than following their children around.

This is an area where the new synagogue will help tremendously. Right now, there is little space for parents to mingle during or after Religious School. Actually, there is little space for anyone to comfortably schmooze with each other. At the new site, there will be comfortable and inviting sitting areas within an earshot of the ball field, religious school entrance and the tot and older kid playground.

There is more.

I would like to suggest we try something different on Shabbat. When Shabbat lands on the 5th Friday of the month in November, January, May and August, I would like all of us to celebrate by inviting friends and community members to our homes for a Shabbat meal. Let's bring the experience of Shabbat at temple to our homes. After all, Shabbat is primarily a home observance. Some of you might be thinking, "Oh, I see. The rabbi wants a night off!" I will be inviting you to my home for Shabbat dinner too. I want to get to know you outside of our synagogue walls. I want my conversations with you to last longer than the time it takes to eat a cookie at an oneg. A shared meal combines nourishment and connection. Once you have shared a meal with someone at your home, your relationship deepens immensely.

I remember our first Shabbat in Jerusalem, just a day or so after Nicole and I arrived for our year abroad in 2005. We went to Shira Hadesha for services. When it was over, we had nowhere to go for dinner. We went out and found one of the few restaurants actually open. Had we known then, we could have walked to the front of the prayer space, next to the ark and waited for people to pluck us out and take us home with them for a meal. We can model this kind of hospitality.

Should there be a desire, I would welcome a lay-led service for these specific dates.

Another way we can make Relational Judaism permeate Beth Israel is through learning. This year we are introducing "Living Room Learning." Once again, being in someone's home makes us feel like we are a part of a much smaller community. Experiencing Judaism, experiencing who we are as a people, ought to be a comfortable experience no matter what we are doing. No one should feel intimidated.

For centuries, Jews have been gathering in the *beit midrash*—the house of study—to sit in pairs around tables in face-to-face encounter with a text between them.^{vii} This is called *Hevruta* study. *Hevruta* comes from the Hebrew word, *Haver*, friend.

With Living Room Learning, you open your home to a small group of people (around 8), come up with a Jewish topic and I will bring the materials to study. We can sit around your living room, noshing on sweets and discuss any number of Jewish topics that pique your group's interest. Invite your friends, neighbors, anyone that would like a casual evening filled with *haverim*, friends, and Jewish learning.

I cannot wait, however, to also lead classes in our new *beit midrash*, or library. We will study Jewish texts, discuss issues, learn from each other, watch films, all in a comfortable room while looking out at the beautiful view.

Finally, let's look at how Relational Judaism might look aesthetically in our new home. Currently, downstairs in the hallway is a wall filled with black and white pictures from the 20th century. Some of you are in those pictures. Most of us are not. Most of the people are deceased. Imagine walls in our new space (in the foyer?) filled with colorful new pictures mixed with those from previous generations. Let's gather pictures of us living Judaism and interacting with each other from the 21st century. When we had the Camp Kalsman poster standing in our small entryway, children would stop in their tracks, look at pictures of their friends, smile and say things like, "I wish I was there now." We need to create this kind of excitement for everyone. I want to see pictures of us studying together, eating together, laughing at the Purim shpiel, dancing around the sanctuary with our Torah scrolls, playing gaga, voting on the best shakshuka and more. We should be reminded daily of who we are and what we love doing, all in a Jewish context.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, our New Year; a time to look at ourselves in the mirror, reflect on who we are and envision where we want to go. Now, with a new year in front of us, it's time to carve this new path together. We are all one big *mishpucha*, family. The journey might not be for everyone, but I have no doubt that it will deepen our bonds to each other and our rich heritage that we are so lucky to a part of.

I look forward to watching both our new synagogue and our community continue to grow. May we move into our "Field of Dreams" and infuse it with this new way of living Judaism.

ⁱ This quote is ranked #39 of the most famous movie quotes according to The American Film Institute. This list was revealed on June 21, 2005, in a three-hour television program on CBS.

ⁱⁱ Gen 2:18

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob B Ukeles and Ron Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002* (New York: UJA-Federation of New York, 2004), www.ujafedny.org/jewish-community-study-2002

^{iv} Wolfson, Ron. *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2013. p. 23

^v *ibid*, p. 59

^{vi} *ibid*, p. 71

^{vii} *ibid*, p. 170