

"Building a Better Community"

I hate when this happens because it throws my entire schedule off. However, I guess looking back, I'm glad it did!

It was Friday and I was doing my shopping at Kroger. If you know me, I want to "get in and get out"! I was at the frozen fish section. A man came up to me whom I have never met, saw my yarmulke, and started talking to me. He told me about the virtues of fish and healthy living, gardening and the weather. Out of the blue, he said, "Let me tell you something. You have two of the *finest* human beings on the planet at your congregation." He was referring to two doctors who attend to him and go to B'nai Jacob Synagogue. He spoke of them not just because of

their medical expertise but their incredible bedside manner. “What a blessing they are to the community and what honor they bring to your congregation and people,” he told me.

I am glad I was delayed at Kroger because just that morning I was talking to one of those “finest human beings on the planet.” He was actually feeling quite guilty because, with his insane schedule, he struggles to get to synagogue once or twice a week.

Maybe this sermon will help.

Between now and Passover, we add four additional Torah readings to our Shabbat morning service. Beginning tomorrow, we take out an additional scroll and read a few lines from the book of Exodus, a passage called “Parshat Shekalim”. Here is what is read:

“The L-rd spoke to Moses, saying: When you take a census of the Israelite people.... this is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half shekel by sanctuary weight...the rich shall not pay more than half a shekel and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving this L-rd’s offering... it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the L-rd” (Exodus 30:11-16)

Translation: Moses was ordered by G-d to take a census of the nation. He did it using a small tax, a half-shekel for every person. This was a necessary measure to determine troop strength as well as to provide a yearly tax for what would be the annual maintenance of the tabernacle.

Today, many congregations use this passage as an opportunity to remind their congregants of their annual commitment to maintaining synagogue life. Some

congregations use this time as a drive to raise additional funds.

I think, homiletically, this Torah section has something else to teach and that is how to build a better community. This half shekel tax teaches us a very important lesson about community: everyone counts. Everyone gave the half shekel; it wasn't a lot, but everyone had to give the same amount, rich or poor. And that sent a powerful message to the Israelites: the tabernacle belonged equally to every single person, without regard to social status or wealth. The half shekel taught that everyone brings something unique to the community. Indeed, it was a half-shekel to teach us that we are an incomplete people unless we join with others.

Are you listening, doctor? Take the half shekel to heart, my friend.

I hear about synagogues in particular and organizational life in general, that a handful of people are all that matter. I respectfully disagree. True, in every organization a few people end up doing 90% of the heavy lifting, but everyone has an important role in a community.

An equal role.

A synagogue may have a board, but it is not a board that makes a congregation or a community. It is different people doing different things that make a synagogue alive and vibrant, from the minyan-goer, to the Friday night service attendee, from those who come on Shabbat morning to those who attend our weekly classes and activities. Everyone contributes to the vibrancy of a

community. The half shekel declares we are not complete without everyone being counted, whether by giving financially, offering time, or yes, by making the name of our community and our synagogue one of blessing. We are all equally important.

You know the old joke where the rabbi on Yom Kippur wishes his congregants a happy and healthy Passover since he probably won't see most of them for seven months, if not longer? Well, a very interesting phenomenon is occurring at B'nai Jacob Synagogue. Yeah, we also have our "two times a year" folks, but not as many as you think. In a given two weeks, I see most of our congregants at synagogue because we are an active and diverse place. Different people have different reasons for

being here and all make up the material of this shul's beautiful patterns.

Last week, for example, we had congregants who came to our Art Show and then a whole *different* group who came the next day to hear our speaker from the Jerusalem Post. We also had different people each day for our daily worship, our adult education classes, Hebrew school, youth discussion and Sunday school. Next week, we will see a whole different group for our annual Sport's Award Banquet.

Last week, which participants made the most impact on the vibrancy of our community? Which people made the biggest difference? You all did. Our congregation is so respected and admired because each person gives us something that we cannot do without.

You look at the churches, temples, and organizations around the country that are successful and it is not because they have a tremendous board of directors or a large endowment. The ones that are “alive” are those where *everyone* feels they have an important role to play. You want a better community? Make everyone feel they have an equal part, that they bring something to us and that they are important.

That is the half shekel theory of building a better people. Everyone has an equal role to play.

The secret to building a better community and people is creating a place where everyone can feel they have a role. There is not one class, not one service, not one project that is more important for the well being of our

Charleston Jewry. And there is not one person who is more important or more valuable.

Tell me: who is more important than the large group who came to Hospice House last week for Talmud class to visit with Ferne and Bob Nearman, prompting the staff to comment on how active our Jewish community is in Charleston. And tell me: who is more important than the 80 or so who came to hear our speaker from the Jerusalem Post who was so taken aback by the crowd that he thought he "was in New York". Or what about all the people who regularly come on Saturday morning causing our last visitors to say they cannot believe we maintain such a traditional Shabbat morning service. And who is more important than the members of our synagogue who come *as often as they can* but by their work in the greater

community bring glory to our people and our community for the work they do. *Everyone gives an half shekel in our shul.*

The half shekel is the reminder that a Jewish community is only made possible when every single person feels they have a role. We each count and we each are in a position to add to the vitality of this community and this place. May we rise every morning and realize we are all a part of a special community and we all do our part to building a better people.

AMEN