

“What Happens when the Rabbi and the Pope Meet”

Since last High Holy Days, I found myself sitting alone more often than usual. Sometimes I sat alone in my study at home, in my office at Temple, or here in the sanctuary. But sometimes, I sat in rooms filled with people talking, and still I felt alone. Those feelings began after October 7th but deepened when I returned from Israel in February.

Since then, I assume that we've all felt dislocated from the larger community in one way or another. More than a few of you told me that family and friends who held opposing views created a rift in your relationships. They failed to hear you talk about Jewish values and Israel; and others didn't even take the time to try. Those relationships failed to thrive. Like you, I grew unhappy because I was alone and isolated, but not for too long. I'll share with you what eased me out of my isolation. Real change started with Jewish wisdom.

Our Sages taught, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” Then as now, it was a safety warning as much as it was an urgent message to those who felt isolated. It was a safety warning because any place outside the boundaries of the community was dangerous. Outside the boundaries without food, housing, healthcare, counseling, and spiritual engagement could lead to human suffering. And it was an urgent message because the Jewish people thrives only when we work together against internal and external threats. Rather than step out, I leaned in. I invited you to do the same.

Likewise, Psalm 90 teaches us, “The days of our years are three score and ten, or by reason of strength, four score years. But a thousand years in God's sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night. Teach us, therefore, to number our days, that we may attain a heart of wisdom...Establish the work of our hands that it may long endure.”

From this Psalm we learn that our lives are limited but not without purpose. Rabbi Schactel wrote, “Faith enables us to differentiate between being small yet meaningfully related to the Divine.” (The Shadowed Valley). God's presence is everlasting and our presence is finite but not without an eternal purpose. As long as we're here, we're commanded to Choose life; to be optimistic and hopeful for us and for others, too.

The rise of antisemitism and its violent effects are huge obstacles, but we live in a stream of history. This is our time to do what our ancestors couldn't do for themselves in Europe just 80 years ago, or many times for hundreds of years before that. History has also shown that Judaism thrives in democracy but not in regimes that are benevolent only as long as it serves its current despot.

Past generations left us this inheritance and understanding. We now have a contemporary commitment to the same enduring principles of God, Torah, and the people Israel. We need to see ourselves as empowered to make an indelible impact on the world while we're here. Because when we are gone, we will be remembered for what we did in our day, too.

This is Congregation Beth Israel's 170th year. The founders of Beth Israel organized us in 1854. The timelines that show how generations of families are linked to our congregation's past and present is a testament to the staying power of Jewish life and purpose. To build from an

enduring inheritance of faith and sacred texts creates a future that continues to resemble its core values, its essential truths, and its faith in One God. As long as we are here, our mission is mingled with our personal and secular aspirations, but not without a strong and vital Jewish foundation.

This became crystal clear to me this past summer. Last July, I received a special invitation in a phone call. It was from TMO, The Metropolitan Organization, a branch of the IAF, the Industrial Area Foundation. It's an 80-year-old organization founded by Saul David Allinsky, the son of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. Houston's lead organizer asked if I was available to join a small group of interfaith leaders, clergy and lay, most of whom I knew, on a mission to Rome, for a meeting with Pope Francis.

As some of you know, that invitation was presented to me last year but the date was the evening of Rosh Hashanah. I kindly explained then that though the date was not on the Pope's calendar, it was on mine. I had to decline. But this year, I made my way to Rome.

On August 27th, 18 of us gathered for a full day of preparation. Our agenda with the Pope was a report on community organizing work that benefited the vulnerable and underserved in the west and southwest of America. We were told by the Pope's emissary to Latin America and the southwest that he was very interested in hearing evidence of our work. In Buenos Aires, where he is from, and in countries where dictators rule, community organizing is akin to an uprising. He was intrigued by the work we did with the people for the sake of the communities where they lived.

During our preparations, there were moments when feelings of isolation could have surrounded me again. After all, I was the only Jewish person among the 18, and obviously the only rabbi. Thankfully, an opening prayer, spoken beautifully by a priest from San Antonio, ended with acknowledgement of "the Lord of all people." How grateful I was. I spent my time with the group ably working with them, listening to them, and offering my input. By day's end, I was ready for some rest. For the first three nights in Rome, I stayed at a convent where the single room and hard twin bed was consistent with expectations of their austere life --- though not mine. But, exhausted, I slept.

On the next day, we met for another four hours to sharpen our presentation. When our work was done, we walked to the Vatican gates. There we went through security, which was much easier than TSA at IAH. But then, two priests and a rabbi were no match for two brawny Italian security guards.

As we entered Santa Marta, the Pope's residence, we were welcomed warmly into the large living room where our meeting would take place. A circle of chairs lined an area rug that created a more intimate space for us. The large chair in the circle was clearly for the Pope. At 3:00pm, promptly, the doors opened and we rose to greet Pope Francis. Using a walker, he came around to shake our hands and say hello.

The meeting began with a quick introduction by each of us. Catholics, protestants, and me, in addition to a couple of agnostics and disaffected Christians, completed the roster. Then the agenda began. Our TMO lead organizer reported on the work that we're doing in our communities. And, then I was called on to share my story with Pope Francis.

In my own words, translated into Spanish, I said to Pope Francis:

I am Rabbi David Lyon, a rabbi serving Congregation Beth Israel, in Houston, Texas, the oldest synagogue in Texas, celebrating 170 years. It is a prosperous congregation that adheres to

prophetic teachings to engage in the larger community. IAF, I said, has made me a better rabbi. In partnership with Cardinal Daniel DiNardo and Bishop Ogletree, I have stood shoulder-to-shoulder on immigration, just wages, and gun safety. It's a sacred partnership. With methods I've learned from community organizing, we've made a difference while we've fostered human development around social justice issues, over time. There we meet people who we would otherwise not know, and with other faith communities we make a difference for the most vulnerable among us."

In conclusion I said, "Your Holiness, in a 3rd century text called the Mishnah, we're taught that "it is not our obligation to finish all the work that needs to be done, but neither are we free to desist from trying. The day is short, the work is long, and the Lord is waiting."

His eyes expressed his affection for the teaching. The Pope and I made a connection. Suddenly, he asked his aide to bring in copies of his encyclicals and other writings for all of us to have. In Spanish or English, each of us was handed a small stack of pamphlets and books. It felt to me that from one man of sacred text to another man of sacred text, we exchanged words of wisdom founded in our respective faiths. Indeed, even a brief reading of the small books revealed his holy teachings for his people about living a life devoted to enduring lessons, values, and hopes.

The meeting continued through the agenda and we were treated --- truly gifted --- 90 full minutes with Pope Francis. It could have gone on longer, but the agenda was concluded. Throughout the hour-and-a-half, Pope Francis held our attention with personal comments, humor, and boundless humility. Before he left the room, he said, "I know that you brought items for me to bless." We took out the items we brought with us and held them in our hands.

From two Catholic friends of mine, I lifted their rosaries in my hands for the Pope to bless. And when I returned those items to my friends in Houston, they were, in a word, in awe. Before the Pope left the room, each of us gently shook his hand, again. He looked well and he was very present with us. His final words were blessings of encouragement in our work.

Thankfully, we were allowed to sit in the room and debrief. As we were seated again and had a moment to ourselves, I must admit to you that I was deeply moved. Firm as I am in my Jewish faith, I couldn't help but be moved by the Pope who leads over 1 billion people in the world with his words, his gestures, and his role in history. The emotional impact of that encounter was a profound awareness that I, a Jew from Houston, and a Jew in Israel, and on that day, a Jew in Rome, was not alone or isolated. Now, when I see a picture of the Pope, I don't see a stranger in the Vatican; instead I see the man who sat just feet away from me and helped me feel part of something much larger than all of us. The universal message rooted in our shared Abrahamic faiths spoke truths about humanity reflected in our care for all of God's creations.

At dinner that night, the lead organizer looked at me and said, "Rabbi, I'd like you to share a prayer for us." In my prayer, I acknowledged the place and power that God had given us to assemble with Pope Francis and to feel the obligation and the blessing to do this shared holy work." Together, we said, Amen.

To be honest, I've been bursting to tell you all about it. And also to tell you that I finally emerged from my deepest sense of loneliness and isolation. Though our years of life are finite, as Psalm 90 explains, the difference we make can be eternal. We're more than finite, and we

are not simply small. We are part of a continuum that places us in history at a time of general economic prosperity for Jews around the world; at a time of Israel's sovereignty as a nation, not seen for nearly 2000 years before 1948; and at a time when our people, around the world call on us to make a difference for the sake of a future we will not know for ourselves.

That long range plan is more than some of us can comprehend. But it's like a rabbi from Houston sitting down in Rome with the Pope of the Catholic Church; it's a small step in a raging stream of history where few Jews or rabbis have had that much time with a Pope, and with one who was also humble and generous with his prayers for all God's children.

So I bring today, not the Pope's blessing, but rather the blessing that the Pope conferred on me and my fellow-travelers. It's an assurance that though Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur don't appear on his calendar, his regard for the Jewish people is sincere. His comments in the press should remind us that, though he stands above ordinary people in the eyes of Catholics, he is a man whose words are evaluated and criticized even by his own followers. But I've learned first-hand to judge Pope Francis like we judge each other. We cannot judge him on his intentions, which I believe are true and good; but only on his deeds, which makes him a human being like us, even if he's a very, very special human being.

My hope for you is that you will emerge from any loneliness you've felt this past year. Perhaps my renewed strength can be part of yours, and together we'll enter the Jewish New Year and what awaits us with greater confidence and faithfulness. I know that it's easier to say than it is to do. Every time we experience another antisemitic rant, anti-Israel attack, or fear a future of unstable Jewish life, we might retreat. And I know that less loneliness doesn't equate with greater power or strength, but it can when we see around us and within the community-at-large just how many people want what we want for the world, too.

In a few days, Houston's Jewish community will gather to remember October 7, 2023. Together, we'll acknowledge the first anniversary of the horrific experience and prolonged war. And then our national election will define our future in America, and the ways we'll live and advocate again. Between our religious and national holidays, we'll have ample time to look inward and outward to discover who we are, who we have become, and who we must be.

Being Jewish is part of our identify and purpose. Being an American is, too. From all the holy places on earth and from my heart to yours, may this New Year be sweeter and more peaceful for us and all God's people everywhere. Amen.