

Erev Rosh HaShanah 1 Tishri 5777/2 October 2016
Delivered by Rabbi David Novak, Israel Congregation of Manchester

Baruchim ha'baiim!

This is our traditional emphatic welcome for gathering for a bris or a wedding,

Each a joyous celebration of Jewish continuity!

Your presence tonight is just that:

Jewish continuity.

Your presence animates this sacred space as your breath united with others in creating holy community.

Baruchim ha'baiim.

You are here to acknowledge

With I hope a great deal of gratitude

Another year in your life,

Another year in the community of Israel Congregation of Manchester,

and

Another year of the Jewish peoplehood!

You may ask:

how is it that we have survived?

As Tevye says: It isn't easy.

Still: here we are.

Another definition of Jewish history quips:

They came to get us. We won. Let's eat.

Yes it is a bit flip.

But you tell me: What other people has suffered the way we have for thousands of years and is still here.

Smaller, but kicking.

“Good times and bad times,” sings an old-time character in a Sondheim musical, “I’ve seen them all and it’s clear: I’m still here.”

We are still here.

Good for us.

There remains much in our world that makes us wring our hands with concern.

This is true when our Jewish brothers and sisters find themselves in harm’s way around the world. We always hold them close to us.

Here, in the United States, we are so blessed to live in a county that allows us to freely express our Judaism. Our ancestors were fortunate to come to this country from Germany, Eastern Europe and other Jewish communities from around the world.

They found freedom here and planted roots.

We are the fruit of those plantings.

And how lucky we are that Israel Congregation is one of thousands of synagogues in our country where Jewish life thrives.

For synagogues are truly the backbone of Jewish life.

Vibrant synagogues are those that stay true to their past while always evolving to meet the needs of the present.

Think for a moment about the synagogue, shul, temple, or shtibl that you attended when you were young.

What was worship like?

All Hebrew with people davening?

Largely in English and formal?

Did men and women sit together or were they separated by gender?

Was the building grand? Humble? A storefront? An architectural masterwork?

Now think about where you are sitting in this moment.

A vibrant rural synagogue in one of the most beautiful parts of the country where we come together to pray, to learn, to socialize, and to be in the company of other Jewish people and those who support them.

How wonderful that in Israel Congregation's life we have continued to evolve.

There is nothing sadder to my eye than when a former synagogue becomes a church or, like the old houses that are in some of the museums in our area, installed as displays, much like those that are found in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

That is why your being here in this moment, bringing this sanctuary to life is indeed a profound and wonderful act.

One of the ways Israel Congregation truly shines is how we welcome people who visit.

People are often surprised, in a good way, that in our corner of rural Vermont, there is a beautiful building sustained by our community.

Which is why, as sustainers of Jewish life in this part of the world, we always want to have the best possible reputation and that begins by making people feel welcome in our home.

Let me share with you a story:

Ten years ago Yuval and I were in Fairbanks, Alaska serving the world's most northern synagogue, Or HaTzafon, the "Light of the North."

The reputation was hard won after a synagogue in Norway claimed that title. After comparing latitudes, Or HaTzafon was north of the 64 latitude, making it, by a fraction, the most northern.

Now, the rabbis of the Talmud would never have imagined a place where there was 24 hours of daylight or mostly nighttime. So there was a bit of rabbinic freelancing in determining Shabbat times!

In any event:

That summer we ran a summer camp for the children of the community called Camp Ki Tov. One day we were running a contest among the children. It was about bringing them closer to the Jewish identities in this extremely rural location.

One day, a couple unknown to anyone in the Fairbanks community stopped by.

They were from the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

They introduced themselves as Chuck and Carol.

Chuck shared with us that their mission was to visit every synagogue and take pictures of it in their travels, much like many of us do today.

We asked them what congregation they belonged to in the under-synagogued populated Upper West Side.

They astonished us when they said, “none.” We asked why. They said: “We never feel welcome.”

We asked Chuck and Carol to become our judges for the contest with the children, must to their surprise.

They were able to see the joy in the children’s faces as they were stunned to find in tiny Fairbanks, Alaska an active synagogue filled with Jewish children.

Their expectation was to find a remnant of a synagogue; they found one that was open, joyful, welcoming.

Imagine what Chuck and Carol would say if they came through our doors.

They would say that they were welcomed.

They felt known.

And they were, like in Alaska, amazed that Jewish life is thriving in our corner of Vermont.

Being welcoming is all of our responsibilities.

We never know what motivates a person to step into ICM.

It could be that they are longtime synagogue members in another place delighted to find a synagogue here.

Or it could be the first time they are entering a synagogue in many years.

It could be an opportunity for healing a previous hurt from Jewish life, of recovering a connection to what is valuable about being Jewish.

We don't know. Which is why welcoming is the best antidote to any ill will that may exist from the past.

So for those of you who might be afraid of not knowing someone's name, don't worry. Go up to them and give them your name--even if you've seen them before. Ask them nicely to remind you of their name. They'll be glad you asked--and many times they, themselves, don't remember other people's names.

Engage them in conversation. Don't let them stand alone.

During worship, a class, a program or whatever they come for, sit with them. Be there informal guide to what's going on.

As they leave or as you leave, make sure you hope that they visit us again.

When people think of Israel Congregation, it is my fervent hope that they describe us as:

Warm

Welcoming

Meaningful

So the next time you see the Chucks and Carols of the world peeking through our doors, let them know that they are in the right place: Israel Congregation.

B'ruchim habaiim!