

ANNUAL MEETING-2019 TEMPLE MICAH

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

Dear Friends,

There are so many different ways for us to consider the past year. It was a year worthy of Dickens with its highs and lows.

We welcomed the return of now Rabbi Stephanie Crawley and basked and marveled at her growth and talent.

and

We came together in sorrow and increased anxiety as we mourned the murder of American Jews at prayer in Pittsburgh and Poway.

We had a packed year of Sunday morning speakers bookended by the authors of two books reviewed in the same November 18, front page New York Times Sunday book review featuring new books on American Jewish life—as we heard from our own Steve Weisman (THE CHOSEN WARS) in November and then Robert Mnookin (THE JEWISH AMERICAN PARADOX) just a month ago. We each prepared in our own way for Meryl's retirement—an emotional hit for our community.

There is much I wish to report on this morning. Please bear with me as I discuss—hopefully at not too much length but with sufficient detail to satisfy the curious—three major areas of interest.

1. Our Long Range Visioning Process with Richard Harwood and the Harwood Institute
2. The Innovation Fund and its significant undertakings
3. Our cantorial search

LONG RANGE VISIONING—

Temple Micah is a very different Temple Micah than the one Louise and I came to in 1983—just as American Jewish life and America itself are both vastly different.

We have been blessed as a community in countless ways. We are a larger community, we are financially much stronger, our staff has grown many fold. I feel blessed to be a rabbi at Temple Micah. I am regularly in awe of who we are—

you who finds your way into becoming part of Micah and thus creating and helping to define us.

I feel grateful—truly grateful for the strong bond between the staff and the board. I think one of our greatest strengths—perhaps our greatest strength is the covenantal bond of trust we who work here feel with the lay leadership. I know that I feel this deeply.

I want to thank each board member who is here this morning—those of you rotating off the board—Allison Harwood, Todd Jasper and our past president Ed Lazere—even as I welcome our new board members and those who return. Thank you to all of you for your wisdom and dedication—for sharing your great strengths with this wonderful community.

So—as I think about Micah and consider our growth and the many changes over the year, I think about the place that Micah holds in Washington Jewish life, in American Jewish life.

I love Micah because of the position at which we sit. I think of Micah as sitting at the intersection of normative and generative. I like it there. I, in fact think that American synagogues in general should strive to sit at such a place.

As a way of explaining what I mean, allow me to read for a moment an excerpt from a piece I wrote at the request of Rabbi Lederman for the URJ web site.

“What should synagogue life include? What should comprise a fulfilling year in the life of a synagogue?...

A full answer certainly includes celebrating the liturgical calendar year of [Shabbat](#), holy days and festivals; marking the sacred lifecycle moments of those in our communities, birth, [b’nei mitzvah](#), marriage, mourning, illness, recovery, achievement and setback; adult education, social action, social justice, community care, and mere community togetherness all play a role. A synagogue should strive to do all of the above with excellence, grace, wisdom, and beauty. These should be the standards against which we measure all that we do. I am committed to the significance and centrality of all this, but I ask myself, what else?

I remain unsatisfied. I have a restless temperament by nature and want synagogue life to offer more. My teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman has suggested that synagogues are challenged, “to balance our emphasis on a community of care with a community of profundity.” I find myself asking what goes into being a “community of profundity.” In an address to the [Central Conference of American](#)

[Rabbis](#) (CCAR), the professional arm of the Reform rabbinate, the late Rabbi Harold Schulweiss once asked if the synagogue was a place of ideas....

I (therefore) ask myself if the Temple Micah experience is provocative and filled with life. Do we reflect the vibrancy of the world around us? Do people find us relevant, wise, informed, and challenging? Is there a sense of growth and passion here or do we simply cycle through the calendar year?

As a way of institutionalizing our desire to push ourselves to be more, we created an Innovation Fund. The back-story is the interesting part. An out-of-town regular visitor to Micah once commented that part of what makes Micah distinctive in her eyes is what she called, “our shared language.” When asked to clarify, she pointed out that she hears phrases at Micah regularly that she does not hear elsewhere. We aspire to be “a laboratory for the American Jewish future.” We like the idea of “being an experiment in what is religiously possible in a Jewish context.” “If it’s not broken, break it.” We “like to fail because in failure there is learning.” We are here to advance the Human Project.

You see—I believe that we are, on the one hand—a regular American synagogue. You can come here for Shabbat. A child can enroll in Hebrew School and become bar mitzvah. We offer the complete life cycle of services. We offer the complete holiday cycle of services. You can come next week on Shavuot and have a piece of cheesecake. We are in part—a regular synagogue. There is another part—the lay-staff partnership yields so much activity that is generated and created by the membership--—wise aging, Wednesday lunch and learn, Hineni, Tuesday morning dance, Thursday music.

The congregation has achieved a kind of open flexibility--We all assume that Liz Lerman is a regular feature, we have an intellectual curiosity that is rather remarkable so that our speakers over the years include a who’s who of American Jewish or religious intellectual life—Michael Walzer, Leon Kass, Robert Mnookin, Larry Hoffman, Riv Ellen Prell, Ari Shavit, Judith Shulevitz, Diana Butler Bass, Alvin Rosenfeld, Walter Reich—our own Alan Cooperman, Steve Weisman and Erica Perl—to name but a few. This list could go on and on. We created the Elul project, we pioneered skype Hebrew, we shook up Sunday morning education to create the Machon, Boker Tov on Sundays is a zany Jewish educational experience, we are tinkering with the Haftarah cycle, we welcome interns all of the time and seek to learn from them, we send staff on to rabbinical school—we

maintain a restless posture in trying to create a an ever re-animated American Jewish life. We do see Micah as a laboratory for the American Jewish future.

How does all this have to do with our long range visioning? I can tell you—the more the congregation grows—the more energy it takes to simply maintain the norm. This is for several reasons—

- the norm has become so exciting

- there are more meetings of every type for all of us to tend to—bar bat mitzvah, weddings, conversions, counseling, just inquiries about anything and everything.

- therefore, the larger we have grown and more we simply do—it remains harder and harder to give full muscle to exploring new possibilities because the regular has such ongoing, ever growing demands. Witness the energy that has gone into re-creating the oneg –kiddush system. That is just one small yet important example.

Now—from the day I arrived here—those many years ago—there has been a certain ambivalence in the congregation about size and growth. There was even a time before I arrived that the congregation considered capping the membership. From the day I arrived, I was clear that I was against a membership cap—strongly against one. For me, that turns a congregation or community—into a club. I believe that a synagogue –by definition-- has an ongoing covenantal ongoing obligation to the wider community. The question therefore is—how do we grow and maintain our personality and values.

This is one strong reason that I first sought some kind of long range thinking opportunity for us.

Additionally, we are large enough and complicated enough to have greater explicit understanding of who we are and how we operate. It is time for that.

After many years of considerable thinking by several different committees about how to look at ourselves and consider our future, the Board ultimately decided that our own member and past Board member, Rich Harwood—should be the one to lead this effort with his Harwood Institute. A team of Micah people has now been working with Rich and members of his staff for several months and we have reached the phase of community conversations that will begin this summer. Watch your mail, e-mail for sign up opportunity. There will be 5-7 this summer—

each to be attended by 12-15 people. After a Holy Day pause, they will continue thru the fall. Rich has trained as many as 18 members of the congregation to serve as conversation leaders and note takers. There will be ample opportunity for everyone to participate in a conversation. That is the entire point—we want to create as broad a conversation as possible. This is the roadmap and Harwood—the work of our future visioning.

2. INNOVATION FUND—

The Haftarah project will continue to go forward in the coming year. Samantha Frank—the driver of the project—is now Rabbi Samantha Frank. She will be with us one weekend a month in the coming year as well as the High Holy Days—(possibly two weekends in January and February). A word on Rabbi Frank—We are not the only ones to recognize her gifts--Next week she will be honored by the newspaper, the New York Jewish Week as one of 36 Jewish stars to watch who are under the age of 36—great excitement for her—great excitement for us. (INSTAGRAM--MODERN RITUAL)

Sometime this year, we plan to begin introducing the new Haftarat to our regular Shabbat morning services which means that our bar\bat mitzvah students will be learning them. Rabbi Samantha Frank will now have the distinguished position on our staff of Temple Micah Rabbinic Fellow. She is excited. We are excited. I am very grateful to all of you who continue to support our Innovation Fund.

Innovation Fund Part 2—The Temple Micah Storefront Project. Some of you have heard bits and pieces on this project. This is another major undertaking of our Innovation Fund. About 2-3 years ago, I wrote a short two page dream idea for Temple Micah to rent a storefront on a commercial city block and open a funky Jewish drop in center—think Christian Science reading room meets trendy, coop coffee shop—but it is Jewish. My thinking on this was rooted in the sociology of American Jewish life and the place and role of the American synagogue.

In the 1950s, Marshall Sklare, the first academic sociologist to seriously study American Jewish life, coined the term “Ethnic Church” to describe the American synagogue. What counted here was Jewish ethnicity—no one took faith, theology, the stuff of religion very seriously. The synagogue was the place where ethnic Jewish identity came alive. Prayer was an ethnic activity—its not like people were searching for God. The word spirituality hadn’t been invented. By the 1980s, my teacher, Larry Hoffman had coined the term ethnic fortress to describe the synagogue. The ethnic church had evolved into a fortress—a place

to combat assimilation, inter-marriage and the fear of decline in Jewish culture and Jewish identity. Hoffman challenged synagogues to reinvent themselves—abandon the fortress mentality and become spiritual centers. A spiritual center is, by definition, in dialogue with the outside world. A spiritual center seeks wholeness, depth, meaning, a pertinent religious message for those who enter its doors, a place where one might encounter the sacred. Micah has striven to be this kind of place.

We are now nearly two decades into the 21st century and it is my thinking that the American synagogue has to evolve again, expand its mission, definition and reach. We can see that there are those for whom mere entry into a synagogue is a kind psychological hurdle. We are in an era where all of the great institutions of American life are being questioned as to their necessity, their authenticity, their relevance. The synagogue is no exception. This is not only being driven by the young—although it is being driven by them—but also—how many Americans drop out of their churches and synagogues for reasons of irrelevance. We are in a new era. Hence the Micah Storefront—for anyone seeking a Jewish experience or wisdom—Jew or non-Jew. We believe after all that Torah ---in all of its manifestations is the carrier of a deep and sturdy **universal** message.

Thus Storefront Began-

Rabbi Beraha had a series of conversation from 2017-2018. In the summer and fall of 2018, he led alternative services and classes in coffeeshops, bars and other settings—that we rented—all thru our INNOVATION FUND.

We learned that we were nowhere near ready to take on the responsibility of renting our own storefront.

So—we sought funding for the Storefront Project—which in this next huge step is being partially funded by the Jewish Federation of Washington, one additional outside funder who wishes to remain anonymous, and a Micah member funder who wishes to remain anonymous —as well as our own Innovation Fund. Four different funding sources are coming together to make this happen. The \$\$\$ are NOT insignificant. Again—thank you to our anonymous funders, the Federation and all of you who support the Innovation Fund.

What does this mean for Micah? This project is now spearheaded by our dynamo duo Rabbi Josh Beraha and Rabbi Stephanie Crawley. They will each be devoting up to 1/3 of their time to make this Storefront project happen. The Storefront will offer regular –but not weekly-Shabbat services, Jewish learning and

conversation opportunities as well as an introduction to Judaism class for those who are simply interested in Jewish life—perhaps seeking conversion to Judaism. Storefront remains a floating operation—a pop-up to use today’s terminology. The offerings will be at different coffeeshops, bars and other venues around town. We are not ready for our own permanent storefront rental.

With this time commitment from our two young rabbis, we are in the process of expanding our staff by hiring a new education director for the Machon. Rabbi Beraha will remain the rabbi assigned to the Machon and will continue to have a strong presence in the Machon for both teachers, students and parents—but the day to day –week to week running of the Machon will be turning over to our new educator.

With the addition of an educator, Rabbi Beraha will have more flexibility in his schedule for his Micah rabbinic duties.

Rabbi Crawley will be folding what we have called Next Dor into Storefront—so our 20s-30-s outreach will now be done thru the Storefront Project. As Rabbi Crawley wrote “Ten years ago, we began formally engaging people in their 20s and 30s through Next Dor. This initiative was meant to create a space in Washington DC where a programmatic model was replaced by a relational one, connecting people to our rabbis and staff, each other, and Temple Micah itself. Ten years later, it is time for Next Dor to grow and change. We aren't losing the soul of Next Dor- the relational model, emphasis on deep learning, creative ritual, and low barriers to entry. Now, we are looking to take everything we learned from Next Dor and expand its impact and footprint, moving outside our walls through the Storefront Project.”

Storefront activities will be well advertised—anyone will be able to drop in and see what is happening.

With Storefront happenings we will also be returning with a bit greater frequency with what for so many years had been our norm—one rabbi leading Shabbat services-rather than two or three of us on the bimah.

One last word—Storefront is a huge step in keeping Micah fixed at our place of normative and generative. You see-it takes planning and \$\$\$ to keep us where we want to be. Again—kudos and thanks to our INNOVATION FUND which helps keep us moving forward. THE Innovation Fund relies on your generosity as does everything that we do.

3. CANTORIAL SEARCH

Last Fall we formed a cantorial search committee. From the beginning I knew that we had a mighty task before us. As over the last twenty years, our position had grown from very, very part time—being paid as piece work—by the service ---to the full time and very significant position that it is for us today. I thought that we should seek our cantor thru the professional cantorial placement service of the Reform Movement—and to put it most simply—search for a cantor—in much the same way we search for a rabbi—the rabbis have a placement system in the movement—so do the cantors. The placement system is for cantors who are members of the American Conference of Cantors—graduates of the Hebrew Union College cantorial school. This was a significant and new step for us.

I also knew from the beginning that we had a very tough road to hoe as we have strict, high and uncompromising expectations. We were seeking far more than a beautiful voice. We want a spiritual presence who could sing beautifully—someone to lead into prayer.

We were not limiting our search to **new** graduates of the cantorial school—which by the way is far smaller than our movement rabbinical school. The only campus with a cantorial school is NYC. This year’s class had 4 students graduating. We were interested in applications from experienced professional cantors around the country.

We entered the system and received close to twenty applicants.

At our very first meeting of the committee last October, I said that we had two jobs—to find a cantor—or if that failed to come up with a plan B. We worked hard on the professional cantor front—interviewing, recruiting applicants. There were two very strong—even brilliant applicants —both of whom withdrew their applications for very personal reasons having nothing to do with us. I would even say that the only reason that we got those two applications is because of our reputation.

As we pursued plan B—---either a short term solution that would enable us to continue the search a second year or else someone who like Meryl was not a professionally educated cantor and part of the American Conference of Cantors-- one person’s star shone brighter and brighter—Debra Winter—who happens to be a close friend of Rabbi Crawley.

Those of you who remember Rabbi Crawley's welcome service last December heard Debra sing. Debra wowed our committee—She wowed us all. She graciously accepted our offer to come to us with an initial two year agreement—and we created what I think is the rather elegant title of Worship Music Artist borrowing a bit from the title of Larry Hoffman's book THE ART OF PUBLIC PRAYER. Debra will now lead us in this role as she joins our senior staff.

Debra will be beginning with us in late August. I am thrilled to be welcoming her to our Micah community as we mark a huge transition.

Our cantorial intern, Ilana Goldman, will be with us for part of the summer and the high holy days but not next year. We have no monthly cantorial intern for the coming year.

Finally—before I close—I want to thank our talented Micah staff—all of them are models of dedication. This morning let me single out the ones who are here—my partners—Teddy Klaus---Rabbi Crawley and Rabbi Beraha—and Rachel Gross. You make coming to Micah each day a great adventure and much fun. Thank YOU to you all!

Finally---our summer intern is here Thalia Halpert Rodis. Thalia will be with us until mid-July. Let us welcome her warmly—Thalia will be entering her final year of rabbinical school in September.

I fear that I have gone on long enough. I continue to love Micah and feel deeply energized and inspired by my work here.

I want to thank all of you who really make Micah what it is.

And finally—I want to really thank Louise—TGL—who is the real brains behind so much.

Have a great summer.