

Our Garden Is Blooming: Inspiring Worship, Interesting Conversations & Engaging Judaism

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Just a few years ago, when we looked at our house, we fell in love with the backyard. The previous owners were clearly skilled gardeners. Our backyard contains a perennial garden with blooms throughout the season and a trellis covered with roses that have the most brilliant color and sweet scent I have ever experienced.

Of course, I had no idea how to tend to a rose vine or to tend a garden for that matter. During our first year in the house, I enjoyed the blossoms, clipped some for the house, and at the end of the year, my mom showed me how to prune the vines. So, over the years I've been pruning the vines, but each year the number of blooms has decreased...I had hardly any blossoms this year...some of you probably know what's coming!

I just learned that you are also supposed to feed the roses. Who knew?! They certainly receive water...when it rains...but it ends up they need food, like a reward for blooming to fuel the plant...of course, the vine withers, the blossoms fade, without fertilization...

I'm not surprised. I should have known this. In order to receive this beautiful gift of roses, I had to do something to earn it, to participate in the process, to be involved in their growth. Spirituality and synagogue life is not so far off from gardening. It takes effort. It takes engagement. It takes effort to engage in spiritual practices like prayer, kashrut, keeping Shabbat and meditation. It takes engagement to sustain a practice long enough to learn the technique and find the meaning behind the action/ritual. Synagogues rise and fall based on the effort that is put into their management and cultivation. Synagogues require dedicated professionals and most importantly a significant percentage of the congregation that is passionately engaged and actively cultivating the synagogue's mission.

And, just like the roses, if we don't feed the plants, they will die. If we don't nurture our souls with study and prayer and meditation, they will wither. If we don't pour our energy and talents and interests into our congregation, if we just show up, it will wither as well.

I'm going to say something that some people might not like, but as beautiful the design of our synagogue, as rich as its interior spaces were with memories and visions of a thriving community filling its walls with song and prayer and art and learning, the building was withering. The ceiling was sagging, the carpet was unraveling, the walls were crumbling. Our renovation plans give much-needed attention to our synagogue so that it can continue to be the Beth El that serves as a meeting place for the generations and a center for study, prayer and social action that enriches our members and contributes to the greater community around us.

And, to me, our congregation is about so much more than our building. The building provides a context, a place to meet, a place to come for love and support and wisdom and

guidance...but it is not the only address for Jewish living. Our congregation is about the people who make up Beth El. And wherever the people are, that is where Beth El should be. That is where we should be learning and growing and engaging in Jewish traditions and creating our own new rituals and new approaches to Jewish life so that it remains ever vibrant, fragrant and fruitful.

In gardening and in synagogue life, you get out of it what you put into it. And what you get out of it is extraordinary, miraculous and awe-inspiring. You put in a seed, you water it and fertilize it...you pull out the weeds that choke the new plants...you make sure it gets the sun it needs...and, eventually, amazingly, a plant shoots out of the ground, and then a bud emerges on the shoots and soon a fruit is growing, green at first and then over time, ripening to a beautiful pure red that calls your eye's attention and causes your mouth to water before you've even plucked it...The more attention you pay to the garden, the more likely you are to get good results—Each year I do a little more with our vegetable gardens. The first year I bought plants at Home Depot, put them in the ground and waited for fruit. The greatest effort I exerted was in digging the holes. I didn't weed the garden or stake the plants and quickly my garden was a mess of stalks and leaves and mangled plants---all good munchies for the deer. The next year I planted the plants and weeded the garden; soon I was staking and weeding and feeding and watering the plants. The more I tend the garden the more blessings we enjoy and the more tomatoes keep popping up on the vines...what a beautiful sight!

The greater the efforts, the greater the bounty. In the synagogue, the more planning we do, the more people that are involved, the more we are engaging people in what they are interested in and calling on people's unique talents, the more successful we will be, the more we will create projects and experiences that transcend our individual efforts and create a harmonious tapestry overflowing with power, inspiration and meaning---like these tapestries...This was not the project of one artist or one educator, these murals were created as a result of the partnership between the artist, the rabbi and cantor and educator and each and every student, young and old, who came to learn and paint and sing and create. The creative force, divine inspiration, artistic gifts---these are the energies that flow within our community and help us to serve God.

This year at Beth El, we are faced with a unique challenge. How to continue to grow and thrive in a limited space? Now, in gardening, that means you would prune back the plants and shrink the garden. But, I wasn't willing to see our community shrink in a year of building, a year of growth and development. We still have a beautiful space to pray in the Rudd Auditorium. We still have an amazing congregation filled with people of all ages who want to learn and grow. So, this year, we did not hold back. We are continuing our vision of Beth El as a place where interesting conversations are taking place, inspiring and engaging worship is being experienced, and Jewish traditions are being engaged and updated for the 21st century. In fact, you will be receiving in your inboxes and mailboxes, before Yom Kippur, a Blueprint of Beth El's Programming. We are growing and expanding our vision of who Beth El is—we are more than this building. Beth El is a

community of people who live and work throughout the area. You don't need a sanctuary to have a service. You don't need an auditorium to have a dinner. You don't need a classroom to learn and study.

What makes Beth El unique is not its building, although the building is going to be amazing! Our space is going to be open to everyone, accessible at every level to everyone. Our space is going to reflect our values—it will be inviting and engaging, it will be warm and welcoming and beautiful. Our space will enable us to honor our traditions, observe the holidays, celebrate the lifecycle and our synagogue will have room for innovation and experimentation. Just as one takes pride in a well-tended and planned out garden, you will be proud of your synagogue. You will feel good welcoming friends, family and visitors into our synagogue. You will find your place, your *makom*, and you will know that Beth El is, was and always will be your spiritual home and the spiritual center for our community.

The year of building and renovation is a year of opportunity. Judaism can not live confined to synagogues. We are going to be studying in people's homes and in the pubs, we are going to sharing meals in people's living rooms and worshipping under the stars and spread out throughout the community. I am going to be offering a lunch n learn program in a local law office. I am going to local pubs to meet members of the Tribe, twenty- and thirty-something's who want to meet other Jews, hang out and talk about whatever's on their mind... with the Rabbi! We are going to be organizing potluck Shabbat suppers and celebrations throughout the community and planning a *Shabbaton* weekend retreat at a nearby camp so that we can experience Shabbat in a new setting, sharing it with community members, exploring Judaism together.

It is my hope that in this upcoming year, we will each feel empowered to live a Jewish life that is real and meaningful as well as traditional and egalitarian. I wanted to be a rabbi because I wanted to help people find meaning in Jewish traditions and Jewish living and bring them to the realization that being Jewish is rewarding not oppressive, being Jewish expands our lives rather than limits them, doing Jewish gives our lives meanings and purpose and connects us with a greater purpose.

When you receive the Blueprint for Beth El's Programming and Education you will see the goals we have set out for the year. If you come to services on Shabbat, it is my hope that you will find greater depth and meaning in the prayer experience and Torah study. You will be encouraged to participate and share your thoughts, your voice, your dreams and your passions. We will give you the tools to develop a personal spiritual life, to take on new practices and mitzvot to celebrate Jewish living with your family and community.

If you come to study and learn at Beth El, you will experience Learning that connects Torah and tradition with our everyday lives and interests. I have a vision for Beth El as a communal gathering-place in which we can share the wealth of talents and creativity in the congregation and through our sharing connect our interests with our Jewish identity. In this *Beit Midrash* for the 21st century—there might be discussion on ethics, parenting,

translating Jewish texts for our modern lives; there could be artists workshops discussing and creating Jewish art? Jewish writing? Actors' workshops in which we engage the ancient family dramas told in the Torah! The more we feed our souls, the more we engage our interests and tap into our sources of inspiration, the more dynamic and alive we will be and our community will be.

The last part of my vision goes beyond the walls of the synagogue and congregation. We, as a community have always understood that we can not only be involved in our own needs and building our own home. We are part of a larger community. We need to be active and productive members of the greater community. We need to Engage with others—

It is my hope that in the future we continue the important work we do in the community through the Interfaith Soup Kitchen and Food Pantry for the Oranges, staffing a homeless shelter with the Interfaith Hospitality Network and volunteering with Habitat for Humanity.

It is also my hope that we push ourselves to engage our neighbors on a deeper, more personal level. It is my hope that we build forums for interfaith dialogue and learning like our winter program bringing an imam, a minister and a rabbi here to discuss the three major faith traditions' interpretations of the Binding of Isaac. In particular, we need to study Islam, learn more about Muslim traditions from Muslims and bridge the wide gulf of apprehension, misunderstanding and suspicion that remains between the Jewish and Muslim communities. We need to create lasting, sustainable interfaith engagement so that we can really make an impact in the world and change our community and our own understanding of the world.

Let's go back to our garden for a minute. On this anniversary of the creation of the world, we remember the first garden and the first humans. They were placed in the garden *l'ovdah u'l'shomra*—to work it and to protect it. We were meant to work the soil from the time we were put on this earth. We weren't just placed on this earth to take, to receive, to consume, to rest/relax and be cared for...we were always meant to engage, to work, to be active players in the cycle of life so that we could feed our bodies and feed our souls. Working the land kept us engaged with creation, connected to the Creator and giving back to the Creator and other creations through our care-giving and cultivation.

At this point you might be remembering the end of the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve broke the one commandment God gave humanity—not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They did so and their punishment was that they would toil in their labor on the earth from that moment forward. Working the land got more difficult. The punishment wasn't working the land, it was the kind of work that was now going to be required. The land would not yield fruit so easily as in Eden. But we were always meant to work—*la'avod*. We were always meant to engage with creation and engage with the Creator so that we could better understand the gifts we possessed and our human limitations, so that we could better understand the power we have in this world, and the

power that we do not possess, that is possessed by God...And the work that is done in service of God is the work of Eden.

What will happen if we don't work the earth. It will become dry, choked with weeds, lacking in nutrients and life-giving force. And we will become disconnected from the process of Creation and a powerful path for connection with the Creator. What happens if we do not work our Judaism, if we allow our traditions and texts to become stale...

As you may be aware, over the past two years we have been taking a good, hard look at the Shabbat and prayer experience at Beth El. It has been a great learning process for the cantor and me as we engage with the prayers with fresh eyes. We are looking at the prayers as opportunities for connection—with each other and with God. We are not just looking at the *luach* which tells us which prayers must be said when....We are really trying to be conscious of how we feel in the prayer experience, how you are feeling and what kind of experience we are hoping to create. And, it has been an eye-opening process. It is not easy. For me, there was a time when I realized that I was just coming to services, checking the page numbers, making sure everyone knew where we were and where we were going and offering my interpretations of the Torah's teachings.

I realized that it had become stale. I was just showing up, I was just doing what I was supposed to do...and that's not enough...I needed to remember why I was doing it, what interested and excited me at the beginning...and re-engage...I began to study prayers more when I wasn't in services, I tried to slow down during the service so that I could focus on the meaning of the words I was saying, sometimes I just read the *amidah* in English so that I can listen for different resonances and meanings in our tradition (that's right, the rabbi said she prays in English sometimes, so if you need to , you should do it as well!). The cantor and I have been listening to different sounds, experimenting with new music, seeking out new sounds and new rhythms to resonate in our bodies and wake us up, draw us in and bring new energy to our worship—our sacred *avodah*, our sacred work.

We aren't just meant to show up. We aren't just meant to say the words, even if you don't understand what they mean. You need to understand. You need to know what you're doing and why you're doing it and if you don't like the first answers, you need to seek out other ones. The Cantor and I are here as your teachers, mentors and guides.

I truly believe that the future of Judaism hinges on our engagement with prayer and ritual. For too long we have been doing things because they are tradition, because our parents did them, or our grandparents, or because we feel commanded to do them...but, we don't feel much more than that. For many people Jewish practices have become stale, worship has become stale...the vine is withering...if we don't do something soon, the traditional prayers will remain on pages in prayer books that sit in empty sanctuaries.

And if that doesn't do it for you, I offer this last thought. In every other area of your life, you probably demand a higher level of accountability, accessibility, understanding and connection. Why not in synagogue? Why not in prayer? Because you aren't sure what

you believe in God so you're not sure you really want to start understanding and digging deep?! That's ok, you're not the first one to question and challenge and struggle with doubts. We all struggle with belief in God, faith and doubt and we will talk more about that on Kol Nidre.

Services should not be the penance that you serve for a week of engagement with earthly matters so that you can then enjoy the reward of Kiddush. Worship is *avodah*, it is sacred, joyous work, the kind of work that took place in Eden, that requires our effort and engagement, our energy and spirit. You don't have to turn your mind off when you enter the prayer service, you shouldn't. You should open your mind, open your heart, engage with the traditions with everything you've got!

We are thirsting for meaning in our lives / a place to share our passions / a place in which we can grow / a place where we can connect with the ancient wells of meaning and tradition—Torah, *tefillah*, rabbinic teachings, mitzvot. Like the poet in Psalm 63 our souls thirst for connection/our beings yearn for connection like a parched and thirsty land that has no water... We are thirsty and hungry and that which can quench our thirst is right in front of us, all around us.....Jewish teachings, Jewish traditions, Jewish community, Torah, mitzvot, lifecycle celebrations, the prayer book....they contain the fertilizer, if you will, that will sustain our souls.

Our synagogue is a garden. It is a sacred space in which we each can grow, be nurtured and connect with something greater than our own selves. Through engaging worship, creative learning and engagement with our community, we will find a nurturing, challenging and exciting path through the garden of Jewish life. The future of Beth El is bright. Our vision is clear and together we will create the most beautiful, fragrant community in which every individual is valued, engaged and encouraged to share only the best of him/herself. Read over your Blueprint, mark your calendars with the dates of the programs and services that interest you and come to synagogue as often as you'd like. The doors will be wide open. And, if you heard me mention something that interests you, something with which you would like to be more involved, help to create and plan....let me know. Send me an email, write it on your mitzvah card. The more we put in, the more we will get out. It's that simple. Feed the roses. Smell the roses. Enjoy Creation!

Shanah tovah u'metukah!

May we all be blessed with a sweet, happy, healthy, prosperous & inspiring new year!!