

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5775/2014
“Annual Campaign 2014”
Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels
Beth Shir Shalom, Santa Monica, CA

Two Jews – three opinions. Six-hundred thousand Jews, 1.2 million opinions – at least. When the ancient rabbis imagined the six-hundred thousand Jews who escaped Egypt arriving at Mt. Sinai, there was something they could **not** imagine: how all of those Jews could agree to accept **anything**, how much the more so the Torah, all at the same time. So, because the rabbis were the rabbis, they made up a story in which all six-hundred thousand of us agreed on the same thing at the same time. They found the foundation for their story in the literal translation of Exodus 19:17 which does NOT say that the Jewish people stood **at the bottom** of Mt. Sinai; instead, it says we stood “**under**” the mountain! In the Talmud R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said that this means that God overturned Mt. Sinai, like an inverted barrel, over the heads of the Jewish people. Then, we heard God say, “Now, if you accept the Torah, all will be well and if you don’t, this will be the place you are buried.” We accepted the Torah. Smart move.

Another rabbinic story explains why it was **us**, of all the peoples of the world, who received the Torah. The story describes how, long before the Jewish people were even on their way to Mt. Sinai, God “shopped” the Torah from one people to another to see if they would accept it. Each nation asked for a sample of the laws in the Torah and when they were told variously that they would be forbidden to murder, steal, commit adultery, etc., they all passed. As a last resort, God gave the Torah to us.

So, we became the Jews either as the result of being intimidated into doing so or because God ran out of choices, neither of these alternatives being much of an auspicious beginning.

Now, all these centuries later, here we sit in a city named for a Catholic saint. We are the Beth Shir Shalom iteration of that long ago moment at, or under!, the mountain. What are some of our responses to being presented with the Torah?

- “We’re just looking, thank you.”
- “So many to choose from! What do you mean there’s no choice?! What do you mean we have to take them all?! What do you mean our opinion doesn’t matter?!”
- “Is there a smaller size?”
- “Boy, if you take some of this stuff at its plain meaning, it’s pretty harsh and demanding. We’re SURE you didn’t mean it that way! Right?!”
- “We need to think about it. Can you put it on hold?”

As I said last night, you’re in luck that you chose to sit here for these High Holy Days because THIS rabbi and THIS community validate every one of those responses and more. THIS rabbi and THIS community celebrate the process, the energy, the potential BETWEEN the commander, metaphorically speaking, and the commandees. We celebrate questions that come from engagement and wrestling with our tradition. We celebrate soul-dancing to new melodies and words and older melodies transformed in surprising and inventive ways. We do all this with an Early Childhood Center whose main purpose is to make mensches out of our kids and a re-imagined Religious School we call JELLI, the Jewish Experiential Living and Learning Initiative, because we’re not trying to SCHOOL our kids into being “RELIGIOUS”; we’re trying to help them find their own spiritual core and to use the journey to make the world a better place for all people. We support various responses to Sinai moments through a Youth Program that **accompanies** the successes and challenges of young adulthood **with** a fluid interpretation of Jewish values and a real embrace and true caring. We support our individual and communal tussle with our own notion of commandment with adult programs that stretch the mind and the heart. We support the ever-emerging experience of Sinai with Shabbat, Holy Day and holiday celebrations and commemorations infused simultaneously with a search for the deeper spirit of our tradition and an urge for new expression, music and rituals that resonate to our emotions.

And this year, we do all this with a renewed and reinvigorated sense of joy, hope, pride and confidence in who we are and who we are constantly becoming because Beth Shir Shalom LIVES its name;

We ARE the home of the song of peace. And this year, I come to you with my own renewed and reinvigorated joy and hope and pride and confidence to ask you to participate in something we have never done before.

Today marks the beginning of the Beth Shir Shalom Annual Campaign, a four-month endeavor from now through the end of Chanukah, that will fuel the many and varied services we **give each other** with the funding needed to fulfill our expectations. Some of you already know that my family put new flooring in SOME of our classrooms with funds gathered to honor the memories of Leonard and Elaine Comess, my wife's parents and my children's grandparents. We need to **finish** that project, to the tune of \$8000 – so that all of our rooms are welcoming and appropriate for all of us of all ages. And we need to do SO much more. Our Annual Campaign will help us do the work of learning and teaching, the work of Tikkun Olam, fixing what's broken in the world, the work of building and maintaining relationships with other spiritual communities, that well of relationships from which true peace will usher forth, the work of creating and maintaining a place and a community that are safe for all of us emotionally and physically, the work of Jewish visioning and imagining so that our expression of Judaism continues to make a strong contribution for the present and the future of the Jewish people and all humanity.

Some of you aren't members – yet – and you may not think my appeal applies to you. Some of that number are among the many who call me “your rabbi” because I have been there for you for a baby naming, a wedding or a funeral. For some of you, our building was here for you as well, a place to gather in celebration or grief. **Now**, you have a vehicle, our Annual Campaign, to do some sustaining of this community so that we will continue to be a unique, boutique, innovative-with-a-little-mystique expression of Judaism that continues to be present for you and the community at-large. It takes all of our help and all of our commitment to keep us present. And...

To the members of Beth Shir Shalom, you have my unending gratitude for your belief in our endeavor, your moral support and your creative contributions. Pew Research recently found that fully 72% of Americans believe that religion is losing its impact on our society. We

are a glorious exception to that statistic. When we provide brunch for AIDS patients and their families at County USC, the Beth Shir Shalom brand of religion has an impact. When we take over for Meals on Wheels on Christmas day, we have an impact. When I travel with our 9th graders to Sacramento and our 10th graders to Washington so they can lobby about their passions, we have an impact. When we twin with the Muslim community and the Black Baptist community, we have an impact. It takes all of our help and all of our commitment to keep that impact going.

I'm looking for twenty-five households, members or not-yet-members, to join Toby and me in donating \$720 between now and Chanukah, 720 being a multiple of 18 because the numerical value of the Hebrew word "chai", "life", is 18. If you donate \$720, or more, either as a one-time gift or divided into four monthly payments, you will be listed as a "Chai" giver for our first, ever Annual Campaign. I'm also looking for twenty-five "Chalf-Chai" givers who can donate \$90 or more per month. And I'm looking for households who will give us four monthly payments or a one-time payment of any amount to be listed as Friends of our Annual Campaign.

Now, if I was a Black Baptist preacher, like our friend Pastor Shane Scott, I might shout out to you right now, "Will you help?!" and, in receiving an unenthusiastic mumble in response, I would ask you again, "Will you help?" Then, chastened by the first weak answer, all would shout back a positive, "Yes we will!" Well, I'm a Reform rabbi who tries to sing and play like James Taylor so, I can't do that. But I want you to hear my message, my appeal, in your heart. I want you to hear it in your soul. I know how much Beth Shir Shalom means to me. This is, you are, we are my Jewish dream in constant process, ever growing more beautiful and meaningful for every one of us. You matter to me. This community, this Beth Shir Shalom matters to me. I know that Beth Shir Shalom matters to you as well and that you **will** enable our constantly evolving dream through your gift to our Annual Campaign. Can I get an "Amen?"