

Ten Years Serving the Community of Temple Beth Am

*Rabbi Jason R. Levine
Temple Beth Am, Seattle, Washington
August 18, 2023 / 2 Elul 5783*

Ten years ago, when I was first installed as a rabbi here at Temple Beth Am, I began my remarks that evening with a version of this:

One of the first things I was taught in my sermon-writing class was to never ever talk endlessly about yourself. So, let me do just that and introduce myself to the community. I am Jason Levine, newly ordained rabbi from Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati campus. I was born to two New Yorkers, but my twin sister and I grew up in St. Louis and Cleveland and am a very proud Midwesterner. But I've also lived or worked in a total of 9 states and 2 countries. I am annoyingly proud of my alma mater. I'm a tennis fan, but don't ask me to play; I'm not very good. I'm an amateur drummer too, but don't ask me to play that either until I get some lessons. I love classic movies, I'm a big James Bond fan, and my favorite movies are Field of Dreams and the Princess Bride. I have been involved with two creative problem-solving programs for kids since I was 8 years old, Odyssey of the Mind and Destination Imagination. I love toys and stuffed animals, and keep plenty of them in my office, because if you don't have the moments to feel like a kid, then where's the fun in life? I'm a foodie who loves spicy foods and to try new places, but as I am now an official Seattle rabbi, I can openly admit that I have never had coffee a day in my life. I'm an introvert and proud of it.

Most of this is still true today. But now, I am also a husband of the most amazing woman, Anna, a father to two incredible daughters, Elena and Raia, a dog dad, Winnie, a homeowner, someone who absolutely loves the Pacific Northwest, and I still have never had coffee a day in my life.

Also, ten years ago at my Installation, I told a classic rabbinic tale, one which has been hanging inside my office every day since my arrival, and it is still a guiding light today as it ever was. A classic story tells about the great Chassidic Rabbi Zusha of Anipol, who was found agitated and upset as he lay on deathbed. His students asked, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the great things you have accomplished, your place in heaven is assured!" "I'm afraid!" Zusha replied, "Because when I get to heaven, God won't ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moses, or Abraham, or David, or Akiva, or Maimonides?' God will ask 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say!?"

I still love this story and hold to it so tightly. I firmly believe that my job working in the Jewish community is to help each person travel along their Jewish journey, to explore and enrich their own Jewish identity. I have tried to live this idea for the past decade here.

At the same time, ten years later, I would like to add another level. Yes, we should be more like ourselves, but we also must embrace ourselves within community, both our role to encourage, nurture, and support others, as well as how we sustain and enrich our community

itself. My favorite metaphors, that I have used many times over, are our tapestry and our web. We are deeply interconnected, in our fight for justice, in our highs and lows, in how we are responsible for each other. I always tell new members when they join Temple Beth Am, that we are the lucky ones because they have joined us. We are now a different community and a better community because of the gifts each person has added to our tapestry. We continue to change and grow with the blessings each person brings, and I hope that always remains.

To that end, I have realized how blessed I am working on the inside of a community such as this. I get to meet and be exposed to so many people, from all segments of Temple Beth Am. I do recognize that this community is big, especially far bigger than it was when some of you originally joined, and there are a lot of people, but I often worry that we fail to see the full breadth and beauty of how much so many people offer. I am still tickled when I introduce two amazing people to each other, only to realize that, even though both are members, they have never met or encountered one another. What a loss and how many amazing moments and connections we are missing.

I know that with 900 families, we have 3000 opinions, about the past, present, and future of a synagogue or Jewish people, and not everything falls everyone's preferred way. But perhaps the most valuable tool of all, is sharing our stories, experiences, and adventures with each other, challenging pre-conceived notions, learning new ideas and artistic expressions, growing our Jewish identities together.

That's also why I love the image of a web, how each person is so connected to so many others. I do have to admit, and I worry about this in the months ahead. If your connection to Temple Beth Am is primarily through me, or one of the other rabbis, and then I depart my full-time role, and as a result, you feel disconnected and unmoored, then, truthfully, I have failed. If your connection to Temple Beth Am is only through one strand of the web, we have failed.

Yet, this is not who we have been, nor who we shall be. I have always said that, among the many blessings of Temple Beth Am, what drew me here so much is the incredibly involved and engaged community. This proven true time and time again, and I know this strength will only grow and grow and grow. So here I give thanks, because I am so humbled and grateful for so much and so many.

To Ruth Berkman, Leslie Redd, and my Search Committee, thank you for taking a chance on me and giving me space to thrive.

To the incredible committee chairs, lay leaders, social justice leaders, volunteers, and more within this community, thank you for your passion, commitment, and inspiration.

To my students, of all ages, from SEED, to the Gan, to B Mitzvah, to the youth community, to adult learning, thank you for pushing and challenging me, helping me become a better educator, and opening my mind.

To the Board of Directors, past and present, I have been endlessly overwhelmed with how much you love and care for this community. We are in good hands, and our future secure, because of your loving guidance.

To the presidents under which I have served, Elizabeth Asher, Bryan Rutberg, Shelly Cohen, Betsy Mauer, Ben Glatstein, and Greg Berkman, I have had a unique and strong relationship with each of you. You helped weather so many moments with your wisdom, leadership, and humor. I am forever indebted to how much you have inspired me.

To the staff of Temple Beth Am, thank you for the long hours, determination, creativity, and amazing camaraderie. I actually have to turn to the congregation for this one. I know that the people of the community are the heart of the Jewish people, but in truth, the staff, including our remarkable Facilities Team, is its backbone. Let me lovingly remind you that they do not work for you; they work for our people and our mission. They work their darndest, to a level most people do not realize, and I wish us to more earnestly express our gratitude and appreciation of them.

To Davida, my dear friend, thank you for your trust. Thank you for pushing me to keep learning and exploring, to be innovative and look forward.

To Rabbi Dana, my friend for so many years, thank you for your humor, your creativity, your authenticity, and your support. Your shine brightens us all.

To Rabbi Ruth, my friend and mentor, thank you for never giving up on me, for teaching me so much, helping me seek my true voice, and guiding me every step on my path to who I have become today.

Let me conclude and turn back to my community, to say, from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Over the past decade, I have been present for joys and sadness, learning and wrestling, justice and protest, creativity and struggle, stumbles and growth. Thank you for giving me the space to learn who I am, even as I still am figuring out who I will become. Give yourself that space as well. "Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?" Our journeys are ever-going and a magical trail of experiences and adventures. Embrace them all, and I will still be there, as a member of our community, standing alongside of you.

So, to my Zusha of a community, as I transition from one place to another, let me leave you with this thought. Who are you? Who are we? Not who have we been, nor who are we now, but who will we be, supporting one another, in our majestic tapestry of blessings, in our interconnected web of relationships, as one Beit Am, one house of the people, together?