

“Push. Push! PUSH!” by Rabbi Tom Heyn – March/April 2016



When you walk into any institution or place of business, there should always be a sign that helps you know exactly where you are. It should convey to newcomers something that is unique about that place. Case in point; this sign in a veterinarian's waiting room: *“Be back in five minutes. Sit! Stay!”* Or this sign at the reference desk in a music library: *“Bach in a minuet.”*

I wonder: what sign would be most appropriate in the waiting area at Temple Israel? What message might convey a quality that characterizes our congregation? One message that comes to my mind, especially now, is from Psalm 100: *“Serve Adonai with joy!”*

Many of our members experienced (or read about) our recent Scholar-in-Residence weekend with Rabbi David Jaffe (Feb 19-20). He spoke about changing the world from the inside out, bringing together our collective imperative to pursue justice with the practice of *mussar*.

As we learned, *mussar* is a Jewish tradition that consists of contemplative practices designed for the purpose of personal and spiritual growth. By focusing on one *middah* (character trait) at a time, it is possible to gradually improve all areas of one's life. The more effective we become in transforming our

own lives, the more effective we become in transforming the world.

Even though Rabbi Jaffe was with us for only a few days, the teachings he shared with us will have a lasting and positive effect on our community if we practice them. One exercise he recommended was that members of our congregation, who choose to participate, would focus on one character trait each month. A *“middah of the month,”* so to speak.

That seemed like a good idea and an easy one to implement, so I suggested that we begin with the *middah* of *“gratitude.”* For the remainder of February, those of us who chose to, spent a little more time than usual reflecting on the many things for which we are grateful. It was an easy and immensely gratifying exercise. We also decided that, for the next month, we would focus on the *middah* of joyfulness. Joy would be our *“middah of the month”* for March. (Stay tuned for our *middah* for April.)

Joy is a perfect trait to focus on in March because it's the month that coincides with the Hebrew month of Adar. As it says in the Talmud, *“When the month of Adar comes, joy increases,”* culminating in the raucous celebration of Purim.

It's also a great *middah* for me to focus on personally, as I would like to experience more joy in my life. It's possible there are others who would like that, as well. Who wouldn't? The best thing about being part of a spiritual community like ours is that we can support and be supported by others who share similar goals.

So how do you experience more joy in your life? Well, you can start by laughing. Try it in a group. At first it might feel a little forced, but within a few minutes you may have a room full of people laughing uncontrollably.

Even just smiling can make a difference. You've probably heard that it takes more muscles to frown than it does to smile. I've heard it said that "when someone annoys you, it takes 42 muscles to frown. But it only takes 4 muscles to extend your arm and smack them upside the head." That might not be the exact quote, but you it was something like that.

Laughing. Smiling. Dancing. Singing. Celebrating. These are all good for increasing joy, and we already do a lot of that at Temple Israel. We occasionally dance during the iOneg (interactive oneg) programs after our Friday evening services. We even have a few people who dance DURING our Friday evening services.

Of course, we also do lots of singing in our services and occasionally at the iOneg, such as during our recent Yiddish sing-along with Moyshela. And our Scholar-in-Residence, Joey Weisenberg, will have us singing for an entire weekend, March 11-12!

As for celebrating, we'll be doing that too at our Purim carnival on March 13 and our congregational observance of Purim on March 23. That will include a Star Wars Purim shpiel. To miss that, you won't want.

It's worth noting that Purim is not only about joy but also redemption. It teaches us that redemption can lead us to joy, but joy can also lead us to redemption. And exactly thirty days after we celebrate Purim, we'll commemorate an even more amazing story of redemption – Passover. One redemptive moment leads to the next. As one great Yiddish sage once said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single 'oy.'" But we know it ends in "joy."

So think about what sign would tell newcomers that they have arrived at Temple Israel. If we were an optometrist's office it might say: "If you don't see what you're looking for, you've come to the right place." Or a hospital maternity ward: "*Push. Push! PUSH!*"

Temple Israel is a place where our members pursue justice but also where we laugh, smile, dance, sing and celebrate, giving birth to an ever-deepening sense of joy and satisfaction. I think an appropriate sign would be "*Serve Adonai with joy!*"

Next time you see me, you may find me laughing. If not, remind me to laugh and I'll thank you for it. Not only is it part of my spiritual practice these days; it may turn out to be the best way for all of us to serve the interests of our families, to serve our communities and, in turn, to serve *Adonai*.

With joy,

Rabbi Tom