

The Need for Social Infrastructure

– by Rabbi Gregory S. Marx

Before I begin my remarks, please take a moment and turn to the person sitting next to you on your left and say to them, “*Gut yom tov*. You look wonderful today.” Now please do that to the person sitting on your right. Feels good, doesn’t it?

Let me begin this sermon with a question.

Q - How many of you know that St. John’s Lutheran Church in Ambler closed this past year?

It is a tiny little neighborhood church that has been a community anchor for over 100 years. I have been in that church many times, most recently to stand with the pastor as she stood up to White nationalist who threatened them for resisting racism in America. Their pastor stood with us following the shooting in Pittsburgh and has demonstrated wisdom, inclusion and a progressive understanding of Christian doctrine. Now the church is closed and its assets will be sold off. The membership, if they are mobile enough, will scatter to the remaining Lutheran churches in the area.

Q - Did you know that one of New York’s oldest Reform synagogues sold it’s building last month?

The Syracuse shul, Concord Temple was founded in 1839 but its membership only has 350 families, a decline from over 800 in the 1970s and 80s. So the magnificent building with its stain glass windows and carved mahogany will become luxury apartments for Syracuse University students. I find this tremendously sad.

We are witnessing, all across this country, before our very eyes a shift in culture. All across Philadelphia and beyond, with Beth Or a unique exception, **we are witnessing a staggering number of synagogue and church mergers and closings**. Reform, Conservative Orthodox, mainline Protestants and evangelical houses of worship are all contracting. Ironically, as the Middle East is becoming increasingly religious, we are seeing a marked decline in our civic and religious communities in the West. Some will tell you that its only liberal houses of worship that are in decline and that more fundamentalist institutions are growing, but this is not the case. **We are all witnessing a dramatic decline in membership and engagement**. I wish it were not true, but it is.

Churches and synagogues are not just places of faith, but rather of social capital and community.

Here, we meet each other. Here we debate each other. Here we tear down the walls of loneliness and build what is essential for our world. **Here we turn to one another, to our right and to our left and build community.**

I have often thought that we can never all agree on our values and principles. I am well aware that there are Blue Jews and Red Jews, those that on the Fourth of July would have gone to the steps of the Library of Congress for the Carol King Concert and there are others who would have gone down the street to the Lincoln Memorial for the “Salute to America” parade. We will never all speak with one voice. And that’s fine. But **we do need to get together and find places where we can share our life’s struggles and values. We need places of common ground where we can talk to each other and learn from one another.**

So this morning I want to talk about the importance of a term I call, “**Social Infrastructure**.” I learned it this summer at Chautauqua from an NYU professor, Eric Klinenberg. He argues quite convincingly that **our day and age is being transformed from a society where we used to have social networking to a world where everyone is essentially alone and civic life is rapidly becoming a phenomenon of the past.**

Of course, we need physical infrastructure to function. We need good roads and bridges and we are rightly concerned that our bridges are decaying. Our roads are filled with potholes and our transportation system is so antiquated and in need of expansion that it is costing commuters billions of dollars in lost business opportunities. Well, we need to worry about our crumbling social infrastructure too. In fact, I sometimes think that this is more important. **Social infrastructure is our oldest and most powerful resource for turning disconnected “I”s into a collective “we”**. It’s the alchemy that turns selfish genes into selfless people, egoists into altruists, self-interested striving into empathy, “just me” into sympathy and compassion for others.

From this pulpit I see, what you already know to be true. **Public engagement is down in favor of a more self-centered life**. We are shifting from a world of faith and communal involvement to a life that is defined by our jobs our posts and our Linkdin profile.

We are taking more selfies than photos of others. **A life of service is being replaced by one of entitlement.**

For generations our social fabric was built on public institutions like churches, synagogues, community centers and libraries. Now they are disappearing and we are becoming increasingly lonely.

In 1950 22% of Americans were single. 4 million people lived alone, which accounted for 9% of all households. Today, 50% of all Americans are single. 31 million souls live alone, which accounts for 28% of all households. One in four homes in America have only one person living in them. Now many people become single following a unique path. Some suffer the death of a loved one, or a divorce. Some are single just having graduated from college and are making their way, and others choose to be single, rather than settling for any partner. But the truth is, this is a profound change in the landscape of our country.

Public spaces are closing and apps are opening. We are looking up less into the face of each other and increasingly looking down into our cell phones. Take a look at people walking down the concourse at the airport or walking down the streets of Philly. So many are just **walking like Zombies** staring into their screens. So much looking down has resulted in an evolutionary change to our skeletons. Recent studies have observed that in the bodies of the young, we are growing a bone spur at the back of our necks, because of continuous downward gazing. It's not just our culture that is changing; it's our very evolution, our posture, our outlook. We are congregating less in communal places where we engage our neighbor and are moving to places of isolation. **Our public places of civic engagement are being replaced by Amazon stores, Starbuck's coffee shops, charter and cyber schools and for a while, until they started closing, malls.**

I live in a neighborhood of 81 homes. This past month, the HOA organized a picnic for the families. Laurie and I thought, it is good to know your neighbors and build some relationships with the newer families that have moved in. So we went. It was a crazy day for us. I had Sunday school in the morning, and unveiling in the afternoon, and the Confirmation class over to our home at 5. But we thought this neighborhood gathering was important. Ten families showed up. You may say, "so what?" What does it matter if or where people congregate? Societies change and we should adapt to that evolution of culture.

Well it does matter. At the malls people talk about merchandise. At the coffee shops people speak about their job prospects and resumes. They stare in isolation into their computer monitors or phones, rather than engage with each other. In charter schools, rather than public schools, the values taught might be devoted to a particular religious practice, ethnic culture that can run contrary to our American unity and civic priorities. In Libraries we discuss the arts,

sciences and literary ideas. At places of worship, we discuss matters of politics, and civic engagement and yes, occasionally even God.

My synagogue in Miami Beach helped shape me into the man I am today. My Rabbi, Cantor and teachers gave me many of the values I hold to this day. Fortunately, my childhood shul is still strong but that is not the case for many others. **How many still have their childhood synagogue still open?**

I also went to a public school, as did my children. And in my public school, I learned to get along with all sorts of people who were not like me. That is a critical value today and we are losing that institution, especially in Center City. In no time, we will see our Philadelphia public schools collapse and the children in them fail, not because the schools and teachings are inferior but because the most troubled and disadvantaged students will end up going to there, with more privileged children going to private, cyber and charter schools. Public schools must survive because it is in the melting pot of these schools that we build up our communities.

Raise your hands if you went to public school when you were a child. It worked then for you and me. I am not so sure that is happening for most of the children of Philadelphia.

Drive down Franklin Parkway and tell me what do you see? You will see the great civic institutions that were built by last century's leaders: an art museum, a science museum, a natural history museum, a cathedral, a public fountain and a Free library. Tell me what new great public institutions are we building in Philadelphia today: I can think of two: Sporting stadiums where we go to compete, yell obscenities and support professional gladiators and Casinos, where mostly the elderly go to smoke, drink and play the slots. I find it rather sad, that the great civic buildings of today are modern coliseums to compete and the loneliest places imaginable, casinos. Have you ever looked at the faces of people playing the slots? They do not look engaged with others and they most certainly do not look happy, despite the ads on T.V.

As a child, I remember my mother making coffee in a large percolator. She would invite neighbors over for a cup. She kept a frozen Entemman's coffee cake in the freezer just in case company would stop by? I was told to never touch that coffee cake just in case, she would open her doors to a neighbor just stopping by. Now, no one just stops by. And if you do, you have to call from the driveway to make sure you don't get shot walking up the driveway. I'm exaggerating, I know. But it has changed. Today, should someone just stop by our home, we hide and pretend that we are away. We crouch low and crawl in our kitchens so that the person standing outside doesn't see that anyone through the

window. Instead of coffee cake, we have a ring doorbell that communicates with the intruder from wherever we may be without having to actually be there. How our social contract has changed.

Our national mantra is no longer “We’re all in this together”, but rather “I’m free to be myself.” Even the tourist motto of our great commonwealth has been changed from “You got a friend in Pennsylvania,” or “America starts here,” or even, “Pennsylvania Memories last a lifetime,” to, now I can’t make this up, “Pursue your own Happiness.” I find this marketing lingo that celebrates me and me alone on my singular quest for joy, terrible and a far cry from our previous slogans lifting up friendship, Independence and family memories. Unwittingly we are destroying ourselves.

While so many are rightly focusing on the opioid crisis, I want to bemoan another often ignored problem, that results, in many cases, from loss of social infrastructure. Almost a quarter of 14-year-old girls have self-harmed in the course of a year? This is a deeply disturbing trend. A fascinating book, *IGEN*, is a thoroughly researched study of American children born in or after 1995: the first generation to have grown up with smartphones. Jean Twenge, its author, observes that **rates of life satisfaction among American teenagers has plummeted since 2012, while depression and suicide has rocketed upward.**

It’s no surprise, but the author notes what we intuitively know; **social media and smartphone addiction has played a significant part in this pathology.** Young people are spending between seven and nine hours a day on their phones. The result has been a **loss of social skills, shortened attention spans and sleep deprivation**, but above all, **anxiety.** There is a new fear among teenagers today. It’s called, (FOMO), which stands for “FEAR OF MISSING OUT.” Kids are constantly comparing themselves with the glossy images of their contemporaries, they are constantly posting pictures of themselves doing fun things often staged, to create the impression that they are on the “in circle.” And it is making them according to Twenge, “scared, maybe even terrified.” **They are “both the physically safest generation and the most mentally fragile.”**

Alone we are so...alone. **Without a shared history or community, we are left as anxious individuals, lonely, vulnerable and depressed, struggling to survive in a world that is changing faster than we can bear and becoming more unstable by the day.**

We need to get to know each other and build up the social connectivity of each other and we need to start in our own community. A few months ago, 32 Beth Or Members went to see Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish. Not only were we moved by the production, but we built relationships with

each other as we travelled together. Meals that matter, Sisterhood and Brotherhood gatherings, Israel trips, like we had this summer, board retreats, Shabbat services with open dialogue after the sermon and so much more, all build up our social infrastructure. I ask you if you have not engaged with us, please do. Look at the calendar, find something and participate. It’s good for us and it’s great for you.

Elie Wiesel once asked: **“What does it mean to be a congregation?** It means to care about each other. Pray? We can pray at home. We come together as a congregation in order **to share in each other’s lives and in order to share in the life of the Jewish people — past, present and future.”** We come together to listen to each other and respect each other’s differences.

Once the Gerer Rebbe decided to question one of his disciples: ‘How is Moshe Yaakov doing?’ The disciple didn’t know. ‘What!’ shouted the Rebbe, ‘You don’t know? You pray under the same roof?’ You study the same book? You serve the same God? — Yet you tell me that you don’t know how Moshe Yaakov is, whether he needs help or advice or comforting? How can that be?’

The truth is that **people may join Beth Or because of our wonderful programs and our offerings, but you will stay because of the relationships and friendships** that you make here. I need to tell you something about the importance of this community. A young boy of ten years old in Beth Or suffers from cancer. He has had numerous surgeries, chemo treatments and doctors’ visits. I visit him regularly and stand with his parents who are beside themselves with worry. Then one day, they tell me that they are flying to Boston to get a second opinion as they confront some tough choices. You see, he may need another more serious surgery. I ask, casually, “On what airline are you flying?” They tell me, “Jet Blue.” “But how can he sit in a coach seat, with much of his body in stitches, and with braces on his legs?” I ask. They tell me, forcing a smile, that they have bulkhead seats. But I can’t imagine this boy, who has never been on an airplane, by the way, flying to Boston, all scrunched up in coach. I get in my car and I call a member of our community. I tell them the story. And in ten seconds they offer to fly him up in a private jet to Boston. Their only concern is whether or not he can climb the eight metal steps up to the plane. I call the family...they say he can. And it is done. So a young boy with so much *tzurres* and his parents, with so much heartache, flew in comfort and style, for this little boy’s first airplane ride. Rather than dreading the trip to see more doctors, he looked forward to it. And it’s all because of a member’s generosity and huge heart. This wouldn’t have happened outside of a community like ours. We need social infrastructure. It’s what keeps us whole.

That is why so many of us are members. That is why we belong. **Not so we can receive, but so we can have the mitzvah of giving.**

The great British author, Henry James called America a “**hotel culture.**” A hotel is where you eat and sleep, but never fully unpack and move in. You never set down roots. You never really own the place. You can mess up your room knowing that while you’re out, someone else will come and straighten up. You care nothing for the people who live next door for soon you’ll be checking out and moving on. Sovereignty matters; not responsibility. The customer has no attachments, only a series of limited-liability partnerships... **In a moment of crisis, he’ll call for Emergency Roadside Judaism. Otherwise, he keeps his distance.**

As a country, as individuals, as citizens....**we needs to reject the hotel culture in favor of the “shul culture.”** We need to reject the hotel culture in favor of the Beth Or culture, where we care about each other. Help each other. Talk to each other. Cry with each other and fight with each other. **We need Jews who are more than just a consumer of services who check in and check out. We need congregants who come together and value, create and support the foundation of our civilization and build a lasting social infrastructure.**

This is our place of social infrastructure. It is not only vital to this shul’s future; it is the bedrock of America, the foundation of society. It will keep our children happier if they are a part of the community. They may not know it, but they need it.

My friends, together, in shul, we are stronger, safer, healthier and, believe it or not, we are better off we have an Entemanns frozen in the freezer just in case.

The Room Where It Happens: Finding Your Purpose in Life

– by Rabbi Stephen Weiss

No one else was in the room where it happened
The room where it happened
The room where it happened
No one else was in the room where it happened
The room where it happened
The room where it happened
No one really knows how the game is played
The art of the trade
How the sausage gets made
We just assume that it happens
No one else is in the room where it happens

This song is the key to understanding what is, for me, the central message of the smash hit musical Hamilton.

The entire play is built around the relationship between Alexander Hamilton and his “frenemy”, Aaron Burr. Hamilton, the young, brash immigrant from the Caribbean, experiences a meteoric rise from obscurity to become a central figure in the founding of our country. Burr, who becomes something more like a footnote, in the end will be most remembered for shooting Hamilton. Throughout the play, Burr expresses his surprise and dismay that this neophyte somehow has managed to succeed where he has not. His frustration is captured in this song in which he seems mystified as to how Hamilton managed to cut a deal with Madison and Jefferson to move the capital to the Potomac in exchange for control of the nascent nation’s banking system which would remain in New York. At the end of the song Burr laments that:

I wanna be in the room where it happens...
I’ve got to be in the room where it happens
Aaron Burr may want to be in the room where it happens, but he never is in that room for one simple reason: Burr has no reason to be in the room. He has no vision, no purpose.
Remember Burr’s advice to Hamilton:
Talk less, smile more
Don’t let them know what you’re against or what you’re for

Burr is like Alice standing before the Cheshire Cat. “Would you tell me please,” asked Alice, “which way I ought to go from here?” “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat. “I don’t much care where,” said Alice. “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the cat.

It doesn’t matter to Burr which way he goes, whose side he takes. Burr wants to stand out, but he doesn’t stand for anything as long as he can get ahead.

And because Burr only cares about getting ahead, he has never contemplated what he really wants, what his own purpose really is.

In another song, Burr sings:

And if there's a reason I'm still alive /
When so many have died /
Then I'm willin' to wait for it.

Wait for it. Burr has no passion in life, no sense of higher purpose. He is just waiting as if it will suddenly just hit him out of the blue without any effort on his part. Wait for it becomes a refrain associated with Burr throughout the play. Burr is willing to wait to discover the reason he is alive. He'll wait his whole life.

Not so Hamilton, who sings that just like his country, he is young, scrappy and hungry and he is not throwing away his shot.

Sure Hamilton, just like Burr, wants to make a name for himself. But Hamilton knows what he wants that name to be, what he wants to be remembered for. Throughout the play we hear again and again about Hamilton's ideas, his vision for the new nation he is helping to create. He understands that the colonies are struggling under the oppressive taxation of their British masters and that they need independence in order to flourish and pursue their own destiny. And he is willing to lay down his life to secure that freedom. He has a vision for a national banking system that will tie the states together and also maintain the importance of New York City. He is also outspoken against slavery. When Hamilton sings "I'm not throwing away my shot" he doesn't just mean his shot at fame, he means his shot at accomplishing his dreams, his dreams of a better life, a better society, a better nation.

And the question we are bidden to ask ourselves on this night, on this most holy day of Yom Kippur, is **who do you want to be like?** Aaron Burr or Alexander Hamilton?

Q - **Are you waiting for life to happen to you? Or are you making life happen?**

Q - **Are you mostly concerned with getting into the room where it happens?**

Q - **Or are you most concerned with what will happen in that room?**

Q - **Do you know what you are passionate about?**

Q - **Do you know what are your priorities and goals in life?**

Q - **Do you know what is the legacy that you seek to leave behind?**

Q - **And what are you willing to do to make that legacy a reality?**

The great German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, author of *I AND THOU*, wrote: **"Every person born into the world represents something unique. If not, they would not have been born."** That is to say: **there is a reason that you are here, a purpose you are meant to fulfill.** Our challenge in life is to uncover that purpose and to work for its realization.

It would be nice if in this next segment of my sermon I could tell you each what is your divine purpose in life. But life is just not that simple. Once, years ago, Oprah Winfrey had an episode of her television show where in its opening segment she promised to reveal the purpose of life. What an attention-getter. Can you imagine all the people tuned in to that episode, glued to their TVs with their VCRs running? But it turned into one of those endless-delay network-type tricks where they always say, "Now, coming up, right after this commercial break, we'll tell you." "Stay tuned. Right after these messages." And then, when the whole hour was over, and Oprah hadn't said anything about it, she looked into the camera, gave a little shrug and said: **"Well, the purpose of life? You've got to figure that out for yourself. LOOK WITHIN."**

Look within. That's what these Days of Awe are all about, aren't they? Looking within. In Hebrew we call that *Heshbon HaNefesh* – taking an accounting of our soul. During these days we are bidden to examine our character, to look unflinchingly at our flaws and failures and ask ourselves how we will seek to mend them in the coming year. Until we can honestly confront our own moral failures we cannot ever achieve true repentance.

But a full soul accounting requires that we look not only at our character deficits but also at our character assets, to embrace and nurture those nobler aspects of ourselves that help us, in the words of Hamilton, to "Rise Up", to strive to be our best selves, to be ready to sacrifice for the good of a higher purpose.

On these days we are bidden to ask ourselves how we can utilize our character assets to invest in those around us and create a better world. How do we live up to the potential that God has planted within us and to our role as Gods partners in the divine plan? This in the end is the meaning of one aspect of the covenant God forms with our father Abraham when God says: *v'heyeh bracha* – **"Be a blessing."** And in your quest to uncover your life mission, I can offer you this much guidance: Your purpose – in whatever many forms it takes — is to be a blessing.

Q - What does it mean to be a blessing?

Let me share with you a story.

Once, long ago, a Jew was wandering deep in the forest when he came upon a house nestled among the trees. What a strange place for a house, he thought. He circled the house and the door was open, but it seemed that no one was home. He knocked on the door and called out, but no one answered. Curious, he stepped inside. The first floor was one large room filled with tables overflowing with oil lamps, and they were all burning brightly. He tried to count how many there were, but they seemed endless. As he stood there, an old man appeared by his side.

What are these lamps? The Jew asked. Ah, said the old man. Each of those lamps represents a human soul. You mean, asked the Jew, there is a lamp here for every human life in the world? Yes, said the man. Well then, said the Jew, where is mine? And the old man pointed out a shiny silver vessel spouting a glowing oil wick. That flame, said the man, is you. As the Jew watched, another one of the flames weakened, flickered, and went out. The old man pointed to the extinguished lamp and said when the flame dies out, that life has reached its end.

The Jew stood there gazing at the candles for some time, trying to comprehend the meaning of this strange experience, when he noticed that the flame in his oil lamp was also weakening and sputtering. He panicked, fearful of death. "What do I do?" He cried out, but as he turned around he saw that the man was gone. With no one to watch and not wanting his own light to extinguish, the Jew picked up a nearby oil lamp and lifted it up so he could pour some of its oil into his own. Just then the old man reappeared and gripped his arm like a vice, forcing him to lower the other oil lamp. It does not work that way, said the man. In order to make your light burn brighter, you must pour the oil from your lamp into others.

That, my friends, is what it means to be a blessing. So look within and **ask yourself how you can make others lights burn brighter.**

Q - How will you be a blessing in the coming year?

Q - How will you be a blessing to your parents?

Q - Your spouse?

Q - Your siblings?

Q - How will you be a blessing to your employees, your coworkers, your employer?

Q - How will you be a blessing to this synagogue?

Q - To your community?

Q - To Israel?

Q - How will you be a blessing to the downtrodden and the stranger?

Q - What are the gifts that God has given you that you can nurture and pay forward, so that you can be a blessing to others?

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who once said: **"The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."**

Q - What difference will it have made that you lived?

Q - What legacy will you leave behind?

Q - Whose lives will you have touched?

Q - If you can figure that out, you will know your life's purpose.

This year **let's make this the room where it happens.**

Right now, right here in this holy place, on this holiest day of the year, let us make our own "backroom deal" with God, a deal only known in the room in our hearts.

Let us pledge to God that we will offer ourselves up in God's service, to recognize our purpose and be a blessing to others by seeking to Rise Up and be the best that we can be, and in being a blessing to others, may we ourselves be worthy of Gods blessings.