

Seven Reasons to Come Back to SHUL

Due to the global pandemic, the Jewish values of *piku'ach – nefesh*, saving endangered lives, and *sh'mirat hanefesh*, – protecting our own lives, rightly predominated. As a result, we've held services and classes on Zoom. As it turned out, Zoom was quite a blessing, enabling us to meet with one another, to talk with each other, to laugh together, to cry together, to study and argue Torah together, to worship together.

We have continued using Zoom and other virtual channels for religious services, classes and meetings, but we have also resumed services live in our Beth Tikvah home. We are excited and nervous. Because the pandemic does not seem to be completely over yet, and some argue there may still be some risk; thus we put in place protocols to ensure our safety and to ensure that we all feel comfortable. These protocols will probably change over time. These protocols, call for all those in attendance be vaccinated, and wear face masks while in the building.

This sort of decision to return with special requirements may well be what most synagogues and other faith communities are doing. For us, these guidelines have been welcome and reassuring. For others, they feel inconvenient and frustrating. For everyone they are awkward.

So, *nu*, you ask,

– “Rabbi, if our gatherings have protocols, and our services adjusted, and we can still attend via technology, why should we even meet in person?”

For some, this is a sincere and valid question. Of course, if you have a health concern, praying from home may be the medically right choice for you. But when your health and life situation enables you to attend, it's important to reflect on the importance of praying in our Beth Tikvah home, so that our desire to meet grows instead of atrophy. So here are seven reasons (seven's a great Jewish number!) to come back to Beth Tikvah as soon as possible!

1. *We're embodied creatures.*

We're embodied souls, created in God's Image. We are not ethereal beings made to float in virtual space. We're not just pixels and screen names, headshots on Zoom. We're human beings.

We're designed to see and hear and taste and touch and feel our way through the physical world God made.

In recent months, we've seen the power of our online world. Let's thank God for that. But we have also felt its limitations. No loving couple gladly accepts a “long-distance relationship” as a permanent ideal. Neither should a loving synagogue family.

2. *We are Am Echad, one people.*

We are all different: we think about God differently, we process the world differently, we bring different perspectives to Torah study, we pursue justice differently, different parts of prayer touch us differently, and we observe and celebrate differently.

Nonetheless, we are intricately knitted together. We're not INdependent but INTERdependent. Our spiritual gifts are like eyes, ears, hands, and feet that each play their part in the body's maintenance and vitality. But like any healthy body, we shouldn't want to stay dislocated.

3. *We are family.*

Whether you believe that God is literally or metaphorically our Parent, we all see ourselves as part of a family that supports each other in many ways.

Healthy families live together, laugh together, cry together, and help each other. Parents with grown children, like God, love when the adult kids get together—and those parents are only fully satisfied when everyone is present. For those who do not join us, we must continue to reach out in order to connect with them. But all who are able should seek to gather for our life-enhancing family reunions on Shabbat and holy days.

4. *There's nothing like singing together.*

While *davening* (praying) on Zoom has been powerful in its own way, we have not been able to sing as one community.

However, singing on Zoom cannot compare to congregational singing. Indeed, at the beginning of Friday night services we sing Psalm 95 called *L'chu N'r'an'na*. It tells us that we (plural) should come together *biz-mirot*, with songs!

Singing together glorifies God by placing God in our hearts, and singing together, even when we are not quite in tune, uplifts all of us. Singing together symbolizes our unity and our love for each other, but we can't sing to each other through a screen.

5. You have a job to do.

If you're a part of a family, you bear responsibilities to it. When we gather, we each have a job to do.

Services are not for Rabbis alone; they are for every Jew. Each of you has spiritual gifts meant to be used, and every synagogue community desperately needs everyone to be as active as they can. When we stay home, we can still listen and give and call virtually. But there are many ways we simply can't sustain or encourage one another as deeply as when we are physically present, in our sanctuary, where we are apt to be more fully focused.

6. Our worship is a witness.

We know many who walk through the same broken world as we do, but without our hope and our map. Each week they suffer challenges that make them wonder about life and its meaning. But we are often the ones they turn to, for we become their models of people who love Judaism and serve each other in the most generous and gritty ways. It's powerful to be seen in such a way, and it inspires us to be and do better.

7. Smiles and greetings change lives.

Smiling and greeting are simple activities that seem complicated. Our Rabbis talk about greetings, and how they can transform ourselves and those whom we greet.

The fact of greeting and the art of greeting is central to human relationships.

- Happy greetings remind us of shared joy and shared hopes.
- Awkward greetings declare that everyone deserves recognition, even while we may have a distance between us for which we need a conversation.
- Avoided greetings remind us that we have conflicts to resolve and hearts to reconcile.

Every greeting enables hospitality and cultivates selflessness opening doors to God's Presence. Even if these greetings are masked, touchless, and distanced, they are still life-shaping micro-events.

I look forward to giving you greetings and receiving yours.

You may not be able to return right away.

You might need to exercise caution for yourself or for those you love.

You might need to keep watching from a distance for a while.

But when the time is right, I hope you'll join us. After all, our gatherings now are, ultimately, a taste of heaven.

The Bible's vision of heaven doesn't look like a quarantine, a livestream, or a Zoom call. It's an encounter that is *panim el panim*, "face to face."

So let's gather together again—in person as soon as we can.

Bring your joy, your love, your hopes, your gifts: we will all be better for it, because we are always better together.

... and remember,

Jewish life needs to be LIVE!