

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769
Our Stained Glass Windows on the World
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One of the loveliest parts of my recent sabbatical was living in Denmark, for six weeks. Denmark is one of two home countries to my partner, Karen. And like Israel, Denmark is a place we want our daughter to consider home.

Summer time in Denmark feels magical because of the extended twilight that stretches well into the night. The sky is light until eleven pm and by three am the morning light begins to dawn. Our house had many windows and few curtains and so my perspective on the world was infused with a brightness, a luminescence, that gave me new energy and inspiration.

I can now better appreciate why light has always been a symbol of hope in our tradition, and a metaphor for God. So penned the Psalmist, “God is my light and my salvation” [Psalm 21:1].

Before I say anything else I want to thank all of you from the depths of my heart for giving me this opportunity for rest and renewal. Not every congregation understands why sabbaticals are important, and I do not take this rich experience for granted. I can tell you that I needed it more than I had realized. This sabbatical will allow me to continue doing my work here, in the way that I want to – with vitality, inspiration, and compassion.

Tonight, in the darkness of the new moon, we are gathered together on the threshold of the New Year. We’ve come to lift up the light, to celebrate the hopes and potentials for what we can be, for what the world can be; to remind ourselves that we have before us a new day; and like every day, every moment, an opportunity to recreate ourselves. On Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, we celebrate God’s creation and rejoice in our active role as human collaborators.

Judaism instructs us to see the world both truly as it is and how it ought to be. We are challenged to see both the beautiful and where there is room for a great deal of

improvement.

As Jews we wear unique prescription glasses. Our lens is Torah. While primitive in parts, overall the Torah provides us with a progressive agenda for the future. Torah commands us to pursue justice, to work for peace, and to love our neighbor as our self. Torah describes a society that is radically egalitarian, in which the law ensures that there will be an equitable distribution of resources so that no one goes hungry.

Torah instructs us to care for the natural environment and to cultivate it like a garden; Torah reminds us to be sensitive and compassionate towards all life, including the smallest creatures. Torah teaches us that every person is made in the Divine Image and is deserving of respect. Torah calls us to free those who are enslaved, to protect the young and to have reverence for the old. Torah demands that we break out of the circle of self-concern, care for others, join in community and live our lives focused on the goal of creating a better world.

We LGBT Jews, our friends and family, we wear an even more particular pair of glasses – like a prism, enriched with myriad hues and varying shades of light and dark, with textures both coarse and fine, like stained glass windows.

Tonight, our very own stained glass windows from our Dolores Street sanctuary have been replicated for us here at the Herbst, compliments of our newlyweds, Alex Ingersoll, and Martin Tannenbaum and created by Andrea Guerra and Hershy Hirschkop,

Every time I look up at these windows, I feel inspired by their relevance. I see a vision of what I want our world to be. Let us take a closer look at our windows to see the stories they tell, and the messages they reflect back to us about our worldview.

Jay Wolf Schlossberg Cohen and Lucinda Shaw originally crafted our gorgeous windows in 1997. In order to reflect the diversity and complexity of our congregation, the artists conducted comprehensive research on the history and philosophy of Sha’ar Zahav, including interviewing our members, visiting the old *shul* on Danvers and Casselli, attending services, and studying our archives.

After months of gathering material, the artists set out to design a spiritual portrait of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav that would link our unique Jewish experience to historical Judaism and reflect the spirit and beliefs that are particular to our community.

Inspired by the customary opening of our services the lower sections of the right and left windows show congregants linking arms in song.† The diversity of our congregation is represented- in terms of sexuality, age, gender and religious expression. Included amongst those linking arms are 2 women, 2 men, a mother and baby, and an older man. Some wear *kipot* and *talit*; some do not.

Floating above the images of the right and left windows, is the opening prayer from our Shabbat evening services, “*hinei ma tov*, how good it is for us [in our rainbow of identities and affections] to dwell together.” This prayer represents the heart of our congregation.

The midsection of the left panel is the Castro district, including our original home at Danvers and Caselli. For many of our congregants, the Castro district served as the gay and lesbian “Jerusalem,” a neighborhood that welcomed us, nurtured us and helped us grow.

Parallel to this depiction in the mid-section of the right panel is another important scene in our Jewish history- the exodus from Egypt. It is represented here by Miriam and other women dancing by the Red Sea, set against the mountains of Sinai. Notice Miriam’s blue arms stretched skyward with a tambourine, which represents the rising sun of hope and freedom.

The lower section of the center panel continues the linking of congregants with our ultimate link directly to the Torah, completing the bond of the congregation to its spiritual roots.

In Jewish tradition, the Torah is known as the tree of life, *Etz Chayim*. From the spindles that hold the parchment, we see trees growing outward. According to the artists this is the only symbol of mourning in the work, with the trees representing those at our cemetery and reminding us of our congregants and community members who have been lost to AIDS, cancer and other illnesses.

While any great work of art leads to countless insights and interpretations, tonight I will focus on the Torah verses inscribed in the center of our windows. Four passages were chosen to reflect the character of our community and speak to our vision of a world redeemed. Tonight, I will speak briefly about two.

On the far right hand column, the verses take us to the story of God telling Abraham and Sarah that they will give birth to a child. They respond with laughter and disbelief. The passage was selected because of the miraculous gayby boom in our congregation. Our gay founders in 1977 could never have imagined that one day Sha'ar Zahav would be bursting with SEED...lings., saplings, as it presently is.

Twenty years ago, our community was being decimated by AIDS; now we have over 150 members younger than 20. The number of children in our Friday night Shabbat programs, our Beit Sefer Phyllis Mintzer, our *bnei mitzvah*, and our post *bnei mitzvah* programs, means that the legacy of our queer past is being passed down to the next generation. We are raising up ambassadors who will go out into the world and spread our values of love and respect, pluralism and diversity, *DAYENU!*

† If you are looking for an antidote to the darkness and despair in the world today, I invite you to engage meaningfully with our young people. We at Sha'ar Zahav have created a variety of ways for folks who not raising children of their own, as well as those who are, to help transmit torah, a torah of love, your torah of countless personal truths to the next generation. *L'dor vador.....* We need you to help shape and instill the values of the next generation because our experiences as Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgender people and Allies, give our children a foundational lens through which they can multi-facetedly perceive, and hence transmit Torah themselves.

“Young people have always played a key role in social movements,” writes the 30 year-old, Indian American Muslim Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core and author of the amazing book, Acts of Faith, “from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa to the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. We live in an era where the populations of the most religiously volatile areas of the world are strikingly young. Seventy-five percent of India’s one billion plus are not yet twenty-five. Eight-five percent of the people who live in the Palestinian territories are under age thirty-three. More than two-thirds of the people of Iran are under age thirty. The median age in Iraq is nineteen and a half. All of these people are standing on the faith line. Whose message are they hearing?”†

Patel describes the faith line as divided between those on the side of religious totalitarians and those who are religious pluralists. The religious totalitarians insist that there is only one legitimate interpretation of being, believing and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, condemned or killed.

On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together. Religious pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance for diversity and requires that we build positive relationships with one another. Pluralism proactively seeks the wellbeing of each community in order to ensure the health of the whole.

Our Jewish faith warns against the idolatry of totalitarianism and teaches us instead to love the stranger as ourselves. Our social vision – of justice, equality, the dignity of all people rests on the belief that all human beings carry the image of the Divine and are therefore of infinite, incalculable value. This is our worldview.

Which returns us to our stained glass windows, upon which we read, “You shall love the stranger as yourself.” “*V’ahavta ha-ger camocha.*” Love of the stranger appears in the Hebrew Bible thirty-six times, more than any other verse in the Torah. God loves the stranger. As the philosopher Hermann Cohen put it, “The discovery of the stranger is the discovery of humanity.”

We, who were strangers in Egypt, Spain, Germany and in Laramie, Wyoming, Newark, California, Chicago, and LA, we know the heart of the stranger; we have been that stranger in ancient times and recent days.

We know from first hand experience how it feels to be the outsider, the feared Other. We who have been strangers in every land, as Jews, as gays, as lesbians, as transgender and bisexual, - this is our lived experience! The Torah we need to transmit comes directly out of our own life stories. By being out and open about our identities, our struggles, our reasons to rejoice, we enable people to love the stranger in their midst.

The Hebrew word for stranger, *nochri*, comes from the same root *nun-kuf-resh*, as the word for recognition, *hakara*. So it is, that once a person receives recognition that person will cease to be a stranger.

Let me share an anecdote from my own life. Lilah and Karen and I are the only Jewish and queer family in our local Dojo karate community. Lilah and Karen have been

studying for two years now and are deeply ensconced in this mostly Latino and Asian community. I am keenly aware of our minority status and how much our family contributes to the diversity of the community and their community adds to ours. This is one place in my life, where being out as a Jew and a lesbian helps break down stereotypes and ignorance and builds up understanding through relationship.

I'm sure the majority of us here tonight have similar examples of places in our lives, where bringing the fullness of our identity into relationship makes us aware of our otherness, our strangeness, our uniqueness in ways that we otherwise often take largely for granted, here in the bay area, in the 21st century.

Never before have we had so much freedom, so much political bandwidth as we do now, here in the Bay Area, and now in the state of California. We are in a position to use our power, our voice, our strength and resources to reach out to those who are still scared, who are persecuted.

And with the economic crisis that looms, how will we help each other and those who are facing loss of their livelihood, their savings and in some cases the food on their table?

It is possible to fulfill our goals and obligations to embrace the strangers right here at Sha'ar Zahav and in the larger community in which we live. Our ground-breaking work with the San Francisco Organizing Project is one excellent model for how we can collaborate around justice. Meeting with people, who are different from us, we see that while we do not have catechism in common, we do have tears in common. We may not have dogmas in common, but we have fears in common. We may not have messianic saviors in common, but we share common visions. We can achieve a greater good when our personal pain and struggle become a point of connection and empathy with others. Building real relationships with people across race, religion, class, in our own city enables us to fulfill the torah of honoring the Other.

When we don't take the time and make the effort to know the stranger... our ignorance leads to fear of the other and that fear can lead to antagonism and ultimately to war.

Perhaps each of us can begin to imagine ourselves on a kind of war-to-peace continuum, in terms of our own inner life and our actions in the world. Most of us are not warmongers, and most of us are not perfect peacemakers. We fall somewhere in between.

In his work on conflict resolution, Rabbi Michael Gopin writes of a particularly powerful kind of peacemaking: “the arduous discipline of perpetual personal contact with a wide variety of people with whom you may have serious differences.”

This strikes me as an important practice that each of us can take on, to some degree. It may feel like too much to engage in “perpetual personal contact with a wide variety of people.” But how many of us have developed a real relationship with even one person whom we really disagree with? (Let’s leave family members out of the equation!) How many of us really try to understand the views of people whose opinions seem ludicrous, baffling, or even immoral to us?

Such a relationship requires an investment of time and patience, a willingness to find common ground, to build up trust and then to listen and to share our different points of view.

Pluralism is not the surrender of debate or the bleaching of passionate conviction. The House of Hillel argued, debated, and disagreed with the House of Shammai on major issues, but they maintained an ethic of openness and respectful tolerance. “Who is strong?” the rabbis ask and answer, “They who are able to make friends of adversaries.”

Perhaps in the coming year, each one of us could commit to developing one new friendship with someone, whose opinions, are Strange, are Other than our own. Perhaps this is a good year for us to get involved in other communities, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, with some of the churches in our SFOP consortium. If we can, perhaps the prophecy of global reconciliation is more than a vain hope.

“In our orchard, of Congregation Sha’ar Zahav,” wrote Rabbi Yoel Kahn, “some of us will plant the trees; others of us will take the seedlings under our care. Some will water and feed the saplings; others will shape and guide their growth. Some will stand at the gates, always watching over; others will visit at special occasions of the year. All who have tended this orchard, whether we live to see the day when our trees come into flower or not shall be blessed by the harvest.”

May our new year be filled with windows of opportunity to learn and live and transmit more Torah; to build mutually enriching relationships across the lines of faith, race, class, sexuality and gender... so that we can mean what we pray, “hinei ma tov umanayim --- how truly good and beautiful it is to dwell together.” Amen.