

RETURN
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Have we done this before? Because this feels very familiar.

In all seriousness, it is truly a blessing to be back, speaking to you from this Bimah, and serving Beth-El Zedeck again, this time as Associate Rabbi.

Because it is a blessing to be back, I would like say a blessing, after which I ask that you respond with a hearty affirmation of "Amen."

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, מְחַיֶּה הַמֵּתִים.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who revives the dead.

This may seem like a strange blessing to recite at this moment. A שְׂהַחֲיֵנוּ might seem more appropriate. However, according to Jewish tradition, this blessing is not just about God's powers over life and death. It is recited by a person who sees a friend after a separation of more than a year, as if to say, "from my perspective, you have been revived; You are no longer just a memory, but a real person in front of me." Standing in the presence of the Beth-El Zedeck community in this moment, I am feeling revived and enlivened.

Let's take a trip down memory lane. In 2013, I arrived, a newly-ordained rabbi, bright-eyed and full of enthusiasm, ready to share and teach Torah. If you remember Rabbi Dennis' remarks about the stages of the rabbinate on Rosh Hashanah, I was definitely in that first stage. I wanted to make every congregant a maximalist Jew, and change the world by teaching everything I had learned in seminary.

In my three years here, I learned so much about being a rabbi from Rabbi Dennis and the example set by Rabbi Sandy. I learned about synagogue operations and professional life from Gale and Shari. I learned about educational best practices and creativity with George. I learned about collegiality and built a friendship with Cantor Melissa. I formed many relationships with congregants, and some became friends.

After three years, my rookie contract was up, and it was time to move on. I became the rabbi of Congregation Or Atid, in Richmond, VA, where I implemented many of the practices and policies that I learned here, and applied them in a way that I think turned out to be successful. Being the rabbi and sole employee of a small, southern congregation was a formative experience, especially because the last six years

have been particularly challenging, both as Americans and as Jews. Throughout those years, I navigated many situations by asking myself, WWDD, "What would Dennis do?"

Upon departing six years ago, I was presented with a reproduction of the beautiful drawings of the various locations within and around Beth-El Zedeck, created by KP Singh, the original of which can be found on the wall across from the Atrium of Remembrance. We displayed it in our home in Richmond and would walk by it daily. Every now and again, Jena and I would look at that art and reminisce about our time here, saying to ourselves, "Wouldn't it be great if we could go back to Beth-El Zedeck?" And then we would laugh it off, "ha! That'll never happen!"

During these past six years, I still maintained some connections with Beth-El Zedeck, as Dennis, Melissa, and I kept in touch. Dennis and I have exchanged emails a few times over the years, and he called me during the early days of the pandemic to see how I and my congregation were faring during those challenging times. I emailed Sandy to express condolences on the passing of her mother. I emailed Melissa for some music resources many years ago. She texted me to tell me about the closure of the BJE, and I reached out to her last year after the passing of her father. I was also receiving Beth-El Zedeck's weekly Shabbat and condolence emails. I was happy to stay connected.

My journey back to Beth-El Zedeck began because the stars were aligned, both figuratively and literally. In October of last year, I gave notice to my previous congregation, as I felt it was time to move on to bigger things. In December, when I was actively in search for a new pulpit, I received a condolence email from Beth-El Zedeck regarding the passing of Alex Star, of blessed memory. I have received these condolence emails over the years, many of which were beloved congregants with whom I formed meaningful relationships. Something about reading of the passing of Alex Star compelled me to reach out to Rabbi Dennis and Cantor Melissa.

I emailed them expressing my condolences. In response, both Dennis and Melissa thanked me for reaching out. Dennis emailed me his eulogy, and Melissa sent me the video recording of the funeral. In my reply email, after expressing my gratitude to them, I just happened to mention that I was moving on from my congregation, and if they knew of any rabbinic positions opening up, to, you know, keep me in the loop.

The next day, I received a phone call from Rabbi Dennis. He informed me that a rabbinic position at Beth-El Zedeck was opening up in the summer of 2022, and suggested that I apply for it. The possibility of returning filled Jena and me with excitement and anticipation. After that phone call, things moved quickly. A week later, I interviewed with the Executive Committee, all of whom were old friends. Two weeks after that, I interviewed with the Rabbinic Search Committee, all of whom were new congregants that I had not yet met. By mid-January, I was offered the position as your new Associate Rabbi, which I happily accepted. It was a whirlwind of a time, and as Jena can attest, because of the excitement I felt during that period, I basically did not sleep for three weeks. When the news went public, our social media, email, and text

message alerts were non-stop for hours. We heard from friends and congregants who we hadn't seen in years welcoming us back. It was overwhelming in the best way.

To those of you who reached out in that moment, thank you. I'd also like to extend my thanks to the office staff who have made my transition back so smooth, and to Shari Lipp-Levine for her guidance, and everything she has done to assist Jena and me. Thank you to Rob Kirsh and the search committee, and to Todd Maurer and the Board of Directors for taking a chance on me, again. Thank you to Gale Halperin, for all your wisdom, insight, and behind-the-scenes phone calls that helped me navigate that very crazy period of time. Thank you to Cantor Melissa for your continued communication and friendship. I look forward to meaningful and creative collaborations. I would especially like to thank Rabbi Dennis for your faith in me as a colleague and a mentee, for thinking of me for this position, and for reaching out with the phone call that began this process all those months ago. I hope to continue to learn from you in the months ahead, and hopefully beyond.

Six years is a long time to be away. Some things are the same; other things have changed. In my estimation, the adults haven't changed very much; maybe a few more gray hairs, including myself. It's the kids! They are the ones who have changed! My previous confirmation students are now post-college, establishing themselves in the world. The children at whose B'nai Mitzvah I officiated are now off at college. The little faces I saw in the early grades of religious school are now approaching B'nai Mitzvah and being confirmed. The babies who I helped to name are now elementary age. There are also many who have joined this community during my time away who I look forward to meeting. And there are those who are no longer with us, who have gone to their eternal rest, whose passing I was not here for. Such is the full cycle of life for which a synagogue community exists to support and celebrate.

To refresh your memories, I'm originally from Baltimore, like the Colts. I love super-heroes, baseball and football, classic movies, and rock 'n' roll, and I like to pepper the Torah that I teach with pop culture references. Right now, it would be really easy to make a Star Wars reference, something along the lines of "Return of the Rabbi." But that's too easy. I would rather reference "A New Hope" and "Empire Strikes Back," the first two movies of the classic trilogy. The first movie is full of unbridled, uplifting enthusiasm and energy. However, the second movie possesses a maturity, more nuance, and well-rounded character development, while still maintaining the swashbuckling fun of the original. I'm sure you'll agree that the sequel is better than the first installment.

But this moment is not just about me and my return. It is equally about you and your return. The past two years have put up tremendous obstacles to being part of a community, and much of what we do in life can now be done from home: shopping, playing games, taking in entertainment, and socialization. We can video chat with people from near and far. We can watch the latest Tom Cruise blockbuster or the newest entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe on a streaming channel from the comfort of our couch, or go to YouTube to watch clips of the Rolling Stones' latest concert. We can watch our favorite teams play on TV, and with close-ups and replay, we might feel

like we have the best seat in the house. But sitting amongst thousands of individuals cheering as a collective body, united in a common purpose, is a very different experience. The Stones may sound great through the speakers on your mobile device, but it is no contest when compared with being surrounded by thousands of people singing along with Mick Jagger as he belts out "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," and looks in your direction as if he is singing directly to you.

The power of in-person experiences is all the more impactful when it comes to matters of real importance, for instance: living a purposeful Jewish life, cultivating our inner spiritual lives, and forming meaningful bonds with our religious community. Judaism only exists within community, and Jewish practice is contrary to living in solitude. There are no Jewish monks or nuns. Shabbat and holidays are the occasions when family and friends come together for meals and rituals. Many Jewish prayers require a minyan, a gathering of at least ten adult Jews, and according to tradition, the Divine Presence rests upon us when a minyan is gathered. Beyond the ritual mitzvot, we have interpersonal mitzvot, the ones that require us to interact with and care for others, and call upon us to improve our own conduct with respect to each other. A prerequisite for being a righteous and good person in Judaism is that we must be in community, when everyone's different personalities challenge us, motivate us, inspire us, anger us, and uplift us. That is when we are called to be our best selves.

When we achieve a mutual, uplifting, and meaningful bond with another person, God is the bridge in between. Most of us do not find God in buildings or books or even hearts, but rather in the relationships that are created between people. These are the teachings of modern Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, best explained by Rabbi Sandy in her book *God In Between*. When we come to synagogue, it is not necessarily to find God, but rather to encounter others who seek connection, purpose, and common traditions. We create sacred community and invite the Divine Presence to rest upon us. As we are able to be together again, we no longer have to watch the most important moments of the Jewish year unfold on a screen, and can take part in them ourselves if we so choose.

This is the first High Holy Day season in three years that we have been able to celebrate in community, as the world returns to some semblance of normalcy. Even so, many of our members are joining us via livestream. We now form a multi-access congregation of those in person and those who stay connected through the miracles of technology. Either way, we are grateful that you are with us on this holiest of days.

The first chapter of the Torah tells the story of God creating the world. After each new element of the world is created, God says that it is טוב "good," and after the creation of humanity, God says that it is טוב מאד "very good." In the next chapter, we find the first thing that God identifies as not good. After creating the first human being, God says, לא־טוב הֵיִוֹת הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ "It is not good for a person to be alone." (Gen. 2:18) The psalms affirm this in a verse that we know so well: הִנֵּה מְהֵ־טוֹב וּמְהֵ־נָעִים שִׁבֵּת אֲחִים גַּם־יַחַד "How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to dwell together in harmony." (Psalm 133:1)

The High Holy Days are the time when Jews show up and make their commitment to be part of the community. It is a time of return. When we speak of return at this time of year, we usually mean an internal, spiritual return. This year, I encourage us to think of it in a literal, physical way. It is not just a time **of** return. It is a time **to** return, as you are able to do so. And not just to services. The art by KP Singh, to which I earlier referred, contains a quote at the bottom which reads, "As *Beit Tefilah*, house of prayer, we reach for God; As *Beit Midrash*, house of study, we reach into our minds and souls; As *Beit Knesset*, house of gathering, we reach out to our neighbors and community." In the coming year, opportunities abound to gather for prayer and ritual, study, social action, and celebration, and I invite you to return as we strive to be a Beit Tefilah, a Beit Midrash, and a Beit Knesset.

Yom Kippur is the quintessential time of gathering for the Jewish People. We sing together, we confess together, we remember together, we cry out to God together. We are called to be active participants in our inner and collective lives. To those of you who are here, and to those of you who are watching, I invite you to be active participants in our congregation. For those who are not yet ready or able to return, we will provide opportunities to connect from a distance, and will welcome you with open arms when you feel the time is right.

On Yom Kippur in ancient times when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Jews would pack themselves into the *Ezrat Yisrael*, the courtyard of the Jews within the Temple complex, standing shoulder to shoulder. The pinnacle of the day was when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the center of the Temple where God's presence dwelt, and pronounced the name of God that was otherwise forbidden to be said. The suspense was palpable, as he disappeared behind the curtain to that sacred room in order to encounter the Divine. It is difficult for us to imagine the anxiety of that moment for our ancestors, as they wondered whether or not the High Priest's petitions would be accepted and if his actions would atone for the collective transgressions of the Jewish People.

In recognition of the awe and sanctity of the moment, everyone in the Temple bowed low to the ground, an action we will reenact in our service later today. A Midrash tells us that, even as the multitudes of Jews got down on their knees, the courtyard miraculously expanded, making room for everyone to be able to bow, to fully participate in that powerful religious experience. When the High Priest finally emerged safely, the joy was overwhelming, and a great celebration ensued. These moments were an emotional rollercoaster, from anxiety to elation, as life and death hung in the balance.

As we have navigated the last 2½ years, we have experienced similar feelings that our lives were hanging in the balance, even as we wanted to be in community and embrace the Divine Presence. Today, when we are finally able to gather together in person, we have the opportunity to return and experience a similar joy as our ancestors. Here, in our sacred space, on this sacred day, and on every day that follows, there is room for everyone to stand, to sit, to celebrate, to mourn, to support, to learn, to come together in community as we all together encounter the Divine.

As we gather like our ancestors did thousands of years ago, let us return, emerging from a time of isolation and distress, and embrace the joys that come with being a covenantal community. There is Torah to be learned, relationships to be built, and a lot of catching up to do. Our liturgy beckons us:

הַשִּׁבְנוּ יי אֵלֵינוּ וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יִמְיֵנוּ כְּקֶדֶם

“Return us to you, and we will return; renew our days, as of old.” (Lam. 5:21) This Yom Kippur, may we return, spiritually and physically, to our Beth-El Zedeck home. To this, let us all say, Amen.