

Shabbat Shalom - and happy 2nd birthday to KICKS.

This week's parasha - Ki Tissa - tells the story of a community's rocky and somewhat uncertain beginnings. It is fitting that our 2nd birthday should fall on this week's parasha - not because we can relate to the episode of the Golden Calf, to Moses's furious anger, or to the Levites who slaughtered the Israelites who built the Golden Calf - but because we see the creation of a community, with all of its messiness, its trials and errors, and ultimately, its success.

A bit more than two-years ago, there was a clear void in Brookline that was starting to be noticed. While there were certainly options for Friday night davening, none were energized, empowered, AND egalitarian. For those of us looking for the "Empowered Judaism" of independent minyanim, there was a noticeable gap waiting to be filled.

I can recall a number of conversations, with different groups of people, all wondering the same thing. Could we start a Friday night minyan? And if we did, what would it look like? Who would come? Where would it be? (Notice how overly confident and perhaps a little naive we were - the question wasn't "would anyone come?" but "who would come?").

At about the same time, Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman was working here at KI as a rabbinic intern. Feeling similar struggles and having similar conversations, she merged the two divergent groups into one.

I'll fast-forward the story and tell you that we chose March 12, two years ago, for our "KICKS Kick-off". We advertised all over the interwebs, by word-of-mouth, and, of course, Facebook. Not knowing what to expect, we hoped to get 80 people. We had 48 "yes's" on the FB event (yes, I checked).

By final count, we packed 160 people into this chapel. It was hot, squishy, standing room only - and It. Was. Awesome.

So how did KICKS come to be what it is today?

The initial leadership team clarified our values and set up some guidelines. Very little of what happens here on any given Friday night is not deliberate. We have someone greeting outside the door because from the very beginning, it has been a value that we want this place to be welcoming and inviting. While we use the green Sacks siddur as our main prayerbook, we make transliterated siddurim readily available, so all can follow along.

Despite many conversations about what to do if there isn't a kiddush sponsor, often asking the question how can we find more people to sponsor kiddush, the KICKS Leadership Team often digs into their own pockets to buy food to ensure that we have a tasty and robust kiddush after davening. Why? Because, again, from the very beginning, we determined that the way you build community is by socializing, preferably over food.

You might have noticed a few other aspects that we do deliberately - established from the very beginning:

- * We have a davening corps - the people who lead us in davening at KICKS are not necessarily more trained than the average congregant, but they have committed to attending semi-regular meetings of the davening corps, to enhance their skill level, and help them thoughtfully plot out KICKS davening.
- * We aim to make all aspects of KICKS accessible to everyone, without lowering expectations. We don't require an academic dvar torah, but at the same time, don't want to give the pulpit over for personal gain.
- * And speaking of dvar torah....we made a rule that they should be no longer than 5 minutes. Which, if I haven't already broken, I'm sure I will soon.

Lastly, I think the most important decision that we made, in line with our values, was the space that we're in right now. We're not davening in my living room. We're not in the basement of a church. And we're not even renting a room from KI. We ARE Kehillath Israel's Friday evening davening - just a bit more songful and empowered than it had been in the past.

I can not understate this point - we used to call KICKS a "co-dependent minyan" because we are not an independent minyan but we were clearly a break from the traditional synagogue model. The leadership team actively chose to buck the current trend and NOT create something new from scratch. We chose to put our faith in the synagogue - a centuries old institution - standing on the shoulders of giants, of the generations who have come before us, building a better, stronger Jewish community. And I'm proud of that choice. I think we have a stronger KICKS community because of it, and I think that KICKS has strengthened the general KI community. We used to be "co-dependent", now, without a doubt, we are "an inter-dependent minyan".

So on the cusp of our 2nd year, where do we go from here?

Much like the Israelites in the desert, we haven't been perfect. We've tried, repeatedly, to take a census and to figure out, once and for all, who ARE the people sitting in this congregation and what do they want out of their Friday night experience? The Israelites collected a voluntary half-shekels from each eligible member....we've tried other ways, but still haven't quite figured it out.

We strive to be an inter-generational community, and while we've been successful at welcoming almost everyone to KICKS services, our dinners are still primarily attended by those in their 20s and 30s, and our leadership team is entirely under 40, and until a few weeks ago, without kids.

The downfall of any community happens when the power is concentrated in too-few hands. With Moshe being the only person that God was communicating with, there was a lack of transparency, and the people rebelled. They were searching for a god that they could relate to, and when HaShem wasn't serving them in the way they needed, they build another one. It was a low point in our people's history, but not one to which we can't relate.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, Bezalel and Oholiav set out to finish the work of building the Tabernacle. Bezalel ben Or ben Hur is called first by his name, then his father's name, and finally identified with his grandfather's name. Or HaChayim says this is because the work that he did (the building of the Ohel Moed) helped fulfill his grandfather's name - Ben Hur. Their work allowed the Israelites to repent for their sin and truly become b'nei hurim, a free people.

These are two men endowed with God-given artistic talent. They were chosen deliberately for specific skills that they had to offer the community. Unlike the census at the beginning of the parasha, where everyone was asked to participate, here we see specific people using their talents to better the community.

And this the point with which I will leave you - for the past two years, the KICKS Leadership Team has used their talents to lead this minyan. We've had a number of very talented people step up for specific roles, such as coordinating dinners, organizing special events, and making this community run. We owe these leaders a debt of gratitude. And we owe it to them to continue to step up, to use our God-given talents to be a greeter, to organize events, to volunteer to wash dishes, to sponsor kiddush, and to pitch in wherever we can.

Shabbat Shalom.