

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 - The Messy Middle

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Shana tova. I said it last night and I'll say it again. It is a real joy to be here with you, to stand on this bimah and to see so many of you here. Already it is a better start to 5782 than last year!

I want to talk about The Big Dig. For **25 years**, the City of Boston planned, organized, replanned, fought opposition, overshot their budget, and endlessly frustrated residents to (only mostly) complete the Big Dig. The \$14.8 billion project was perhaps better known for the complaints, frustration, and tension that it created than for the actual results. It was the most ambitious highway restructuring project ever undertaken. Anywhere. In the entire world. It was compared to “surgery without anesthesia for Boston’s Residents.”¹ And it ended EIGHT YEARS behind schedule.

It was also whoppingly effective. According to the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Boston’s Carbon Monoxide levels dropped 12% thanks to the reduction in traffic jams after the project was over. Traffic, while still not good, massively improved. And with the creation of 45 parks and major public plazas, some of the city’s most beautiful spots became accessible to the wider public².

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/20/opinion/notes-from-boston-big-dig-bluster.html>

² <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/the-big-dig-project-background>

Sometime in the middle of the project, the construction company put up a bright orange billboard on the side of the Central Artery that read, “Rome wasn’t built in a day. If it were, we would’ve hired their contractor.” It was a brilliant piece of advertising, designed to lower the frustration levels of commuters sitting in the seemingly endless traffic. And it worked.

It worked because being in the middle of a long project, designed to change the way we live our lives, is really really hard - and sometimes it helps to laugh. More importantly, it always helps to feel seen - to know that we’re not the only ones frustrated and at our wits’ end and ready to explode. To know that we’re in this together.

Friends, right now, we are in the middle of a long project, nowhere near the finish line - that’s true for just about anything in our lives. We’re stuck in the middle of a pandemic that we had thought was coming to an end; a synagogue with changing leadership and shifting demographics; an American political system that only feels successful when the people you voted for are in office; and a news cycle that seems endlessly depressing.

So, this sermon is my equivalent of the Big Dig billboard. Life is hard right now; our lives lack certainty, the world feels totally unpredictable, and someone thought it was a good idea to go back to releasing TV shows one

episode per week. But we are in this together; remember, Rome wasn't built in a day.

I wish I had a slogan that could make you chuckle every time you got the dreaded phone call that you now need to quarantine, or could put a smile on your face whenever the synagogue makes a decision that you disagree with. If I did, please know that I would put it on a billboard across Pond Street. At least until the town made me take it down.

There is a name for where we are right now: "the Messy Middle." In all ventures, there is a beginning, a middle, and an end. We typically recognize the beginning and the ending and the emotions that come with them, but the middle is what tends to cause us agita: we may waver on our goals, wonder if we'll ever complete the work, and second-guess our abilities.

Friends, we are **in** a messy middle - whatever journey we're on began a long time ago, and it's nowhere near over. All this time, we hoped that the work that we've been doing would get us to the finish line - and we're overwhelmed at the realization that we may still be near the beginning.

But we as a People have been here before and can get through this; if you need proof, look no further than the Israelites' time wandering in the desert. That particular story began with a bang - literally, with the crash of thunder on Mt. Sinai, and then again when Moses smashed the 10

Commandments - and in its conclusion we find a sense of fulfillment as we enter the Promised Land. But it's easy to forget that the middle of the story was mostly a disaster; there was bickering, complaining, longing for the old ways (even if those old ways were slavery), and a change in leadership due to overwhelming fatigue. In short, the middle was so incredibly messy that it completely changed the definition of success that had been established forty-years prior.

Middles have a way of doing that to you. But the best thing about middles is that, by definition, they are followed by an ending.

As a community, we haven't had an easy road recently. We are in the middle of our own Big Dig - and sometimes it's hard to see the light at the end of the Tip O'Neill tunnel. Over the past decade, we've had more than our share of struggles; some were thrust upon us unexpectedly, while others came about by our own efforts, intentionally or unintentionally. I am often struck and inspired by the way so many of you have taken steps to shape our community into one that you can be proud of, that you are energized by, and that you are inspired to share with your friends, neighbors, and children.

Some changes required monumental efforts. You stepped up to serve on a committee that shifts the direction of the synagogue. You've created programs, dedicated your energy to producing events, and held our community together throughout a pandemic.

And some changes are miniscule on their own, but when added together, change our trajectory and allow us to become the best version of ourselves.

James Clear, author of the book *Atomic Habits*, describes three layers of behavior change: changing outcomes, processes, and identity. He writes: "Outcomes are about what you get. Processes are about what you do. Identity is about what you believe."³

A community is its identity. Changing our processes or our outcomes doesn't have anywhere near the impact as coalescing around a consensus and creating a single shared identity. I'll give you an example:

Put aside the restrictions of the pandemic for a moment. Are we a community that serves kiddush after Shabbat morning services? If we are, then everyone knows to expect a small nosh, at a table with their friends, in Berger Hall after services. <PAUSE> But what if we're more than that? Could we be a community that prizes the hour after services on Saturdays? I ask because the *outcome* of serving some food after davening is different

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from the *process* of turning shul into a warm, welcoming place for everyone - even those who might not wish to attend services. To do this, we would add tables and chairs to our food, add some programming, and generally make shul an enjoyable place to be from noon to 1pm on Shabbat afternoons.

And then I would ask it a different way: are we a community that believes that kiddush time is the most valuable hour of the week? Because if we are, then our actions would change again. If we think that Shabbat afternoon kiddush provides us with an unparalleled opportunity to make connections, to teach and learn, to welcome both friends and newcomers into the fold, and to ensure that everyone who needs one has a Shabbat lunch... then we would do things differently. For example, we might invest more in the food that we serve. We might build habits of introducing ourselves to two new people before getting in line for food, and have designated greeters at kiddush - or better yet, designated *seaters* whose job it is to make sure that newcomers have a place to sit with members who will welcome and include them. We might make “to go” boxes of Kiddush for people to deliver to congregants who couldn’t get to services that morning. With a small shift in perspective, we change not only our outcome, but our identity - we are no longer grabbing a bite with friends, but rather building bridges with those who might bring with them the next great change at Temple Israel.

Needless to say, this change goes beyond that one hour. Are we a community that values diverse programming, that sees Mishpacha Minyan, Tot Shabbat, Israeli Dancing, and Hazak as opportunities to welcome and involve people in our community? If we are, then it is incumbent on us to not only participate in these but to actively support them. In fact, it is our responsibility to know what is happening in our community, even if it isn't our "cup of tea," so that we might help someone else find their place here.

So the question becomes: how do we move past the messy middle? How do we make this messiness work for us and for our community - and help us reach our potential, to change our identity into one that achieves the goals we set out to achieve?

There are many small changes we can each make to help shift us toward our ideals, both as individuals and as a collective group. One that I want to highlight is how we talk about ourselves. Temple Israel's theme for 5782 is "Better Together: One Community, Many Voices," because while we are all individuals, we are better together than apart. And while the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, we still want to recognize and lift up the fact that we do have many diverse voices - none more important than any other.

You'll see this theme over the course of the coming year in many different ways. First, you may already have noticed that I have been sending this message over and over again, because this is the lens through which we are learning and teaching Torah this year. Temple Israel's leadership is planning this year with a focus on appreciating our community's many disparate voices, and you will likely find that we are gently nudging you to do the same.

A great example is the speaker series that we have planned for this fall. "Eilu v'Eilu" is a phrase from the Talmud that means "these AND these" - in other words, "*both* of these things can be true at the same time." Whether they are held up by different people or one individual, it is possible to hold multiple truths at once, and we are bringing in 4 very powerful speakers to help us learn how that can be and how we can benefit from it. Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal is the head of both the USCJ - the conservative movement's congregational organization - and of the Rabbinical Assembly, the conservative rabbinical governing body. He was a long-time congregational rabbi and a kind soul from whom we can learn. Rabbi Dan Judson is the Dean of the Hebrew College Rabbinical School and has tremendous first-hand experience holding together a community with diverse views, particularly on Israel. Rabbi Amy Eilberg is a world-renowned educator and author; the first woman ordained by the Conservative movement, she specializes in healing, peace, and justice work. And finally, we are bringing in Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin from the One

America Movement, a faith-based organization dedicated to bringing polarized religious communities back together. This pandemic has taught us that it is possible to find ways to be together, even when we are physically apart; unfortunately, we have also come to recognize that we can be miles apart even while we're in the same room. These programs - along with many others in the works - are designed to help us find our way back to one another.

And if you need an uplifting moment and want to get to know some of the members of our community in a new way, I invite you to walk through the Lang Galleria sometime this holiday season. Displayed in each of the cases along the walls are examples of artwork created during the pandemic, by members of our community. It is an incredible window into the lives and talent of our friends and neighbors.

Author and motivational speaker, Brene Brown has a phrase that I want us to embrace called a "call to courage." We establish a call to courage, she writes, by thinking about the parts of our lives where we want to be braver. Where do I need to stretch myself? Where do I need to grow? How can I support myself and others in a way that's brave? These are perfect Rosh Hashanah questions, as they lead us to contemplate who we want to be and how we can fulfill that vision. Sometimes the bravest and most important thing you can do is Just. Show. Up. Having the courage to simply be present, even knowing that you can't control the outcome, is at the heart of

the “Better Together” vision. You cannot change a community watching from the sidelines, and so I invite you to call yourself to courage and join us in steering our shared community toward becoming our best selves.

I want to conclude by sharing with you a poem called “Crossings” by Jericho Brown.

Crossings - from The Tradition by Jericho Brown

The water is one thing, and one thing for miles.
The water is one thing, making this bridge
Built over the water another. Walk it
Early, walk it back when the day goes dim, everyone
Rising just to find a way toward rest again.
We work, start on one side of the day
Like a planet’s only sun, our eyes straight
Until the flame sinks. The flame sinks. Thank God
**I’m different. I’ve figured and counted. I’m not crossing
To cross back. I’m set
On something vast.** It reaches
Long as the sea. **I’m more than a conqueror, bigger
Than bravery. I don’t march. I’m the one who leaps.**

Friends, we are not crossing this bridge out of the messy middle to just cross back. We are on this journey together, to be changed and to end in a place different than where we began. No one could endure 25 years of the Big Dig if it didn't massively improve their lives. And those forty years in the desert would've been worthless if they didn't fundamentally change the Israelites.

My blessing for us on Rosh Hashanah is that we leap forward and cross the bridge with no intention of crossing back. May we see ourselves as brave community builders who thrive on building relationships amid the complicated narratives of our fellow journeyers. May we open our hearts to truths deeper than we can imagine and stories more powerful than we can tell. May we look to the future - to a middle less messy than it is now but likely nowhere near the finish line - with hope, determination, optimism, and, most of all, excitement.

Shana tova.