

Rabbi Sara L. Gilbert
 Beth Israel Congregation
 Erev Rosh Hashanah
 1 Tishrei 5773 / September 16, 2012
 Pirkei Avot. 2:5 Do not separate yourself from the community...

Henei ma tov u' manaiym, shevat achim gam yachad. A line from Psalm 133, how good it is for brothers, and sister to sit together. And that truly is my feeling this evening. We are here again at the turning of the seasons, the new moon of a new year on our calendar. We've come together at our precious synagogue, in this holy space of our sacred sanctuary at a most unusual time for us. It is not frequent that we are together on a Sunday evening. Friday evening regularly, some Sunday mornings. But tonight we're all here because it is the evening of Rosh Hashanah. And this is where Jews are on Erev Rosh Hashanah, together, at their synagogue, to observe the holiday.

That is accurate, I am sure. You have come to pray and to sing and to reflect on the past year, and to contemplate the year to come and express your hopes that it will be good, or better. All great Rosh Hashanah practices. You have come to be close to God, because God does inhabit this sacred space. . . . But you know that you can commune with God anywhere, from your own bed at night, from the mountain top to our west. You don't have to be at synagogue to commune with God. So to be totally frank, I am thinking that each one of you has come for another, very important reason or reasons, too: to be with people whom you like very much, or people whom you might like to know better, or people whom you haven't seen for a while and you are caring or curious about how they are doing, or even people you don't necessarily love, but who are your fellow congregants. You have come to be with your spiritual, Jewish, familiar community. *Hillel oh-mair: al teef-rosh meen ha-tzee-boor.* Hillel says: Do not withdraw from the community.

Do not separate yourself from the community. It is recorded in Pirkei Avot, a section of Talmud. What could this mean? The commentators acknowledge the face value of this important teaching: The *Vitry Machzor* is more of a reference volume than a prayer book, that contains decisions and rules concerning religious practice, responsa by

Rashi, as well as piyyutim, poems for the high holydays. It was compiled by Simcha ben Shmuel of Vitry, a French Talmudic scholar, a pupil of Rashi. He died in 1105.

The *Vitry Machzor* instructs that if one withdraws from the community, the two ministering angels - presumably the ones who come to every home on Friday evenings - we sing about them in Shalom Aleichem - the two ministering angels lay their hands on his head and say: "May so-and-so who withdrew from the community not be witness to the comfort of the community." It is clear - you've got to be part of the community for your own sake. When you need them, others who are part of your friendship circle, group, organization, will be there for you. And, too, taught the fifteenth century Spanish scholar SHimon ben Zemach ibn Duran by way of a parable: in a bundle of reeds, each single reed is weak and easily breakable, but as part of the bundle, a person is unable to break it. You singly are vulnerable, you together are strong. Your community needs you to bring it strength in numbers. It is a two-way street, as we all surely realize. Community is to your advantage, is beneficial, is helpful. Community is also dependent, needy, reliant. If you or you or you were not here, we would all be the worse off.

So as I planned my message to you, and thought about the cycle of another year beginning for us at Beth Israel, and contemplated this teaching from Pirkei Avot, Do Not Separate Yourself from the community, a point and a concern became very clear. It is that this community, your synagogue, your spiritual home, your assembly of Jews and their family members, your 100 + year-old congregation, is incredibly important. And I have to tell you that, at times, I fear that you don't realize how noteworthy and significant and precious your community is. Let me explain.

There is a major upheaval going on in the American Jewish community, maybe even the international Jewish community, and in the greater community, too, an upheaval going on as we speak. In general, the old structures, organizations, agencies are not working in the way that they used to do so. Maybe it's due to the economy, but there have been bad times before. I would say that it is probably due to a changing social

demographic influenced a great deal by a technological revolution that the world has never before experienced. The baby boomers and their older siblings followed in our parents' footsteps supporting not just religious organizations, but all kinds of civic clubs and groups. That's what being a grown-up meant for us. That was great. We did it. But the next generations are different. Generation X in their young forties and thirties, and the millenials, those now in their 20's, want to explore their own paths. Traditional groups are not for them, if I can generalize. The millenials have the world at their finger tips. Whether it's a smartphone or facebook ortweeing, or plans that I don't have the vaguest idea about, anyone can be "friends" with thousands in any state, in any country, reaching any friend with the instantaneous tap of a thumb. Who needs to wait for a monthly meeting? Or drive across town? Or open snail mail? Or even walk across the room to answer a phone, to be in touch? And who needs the wisdom of the oldsters when, with a tap of the same finger on the google or yahoo screen, all the teachings of the world can be kept in your pocket. Whether history, current events, science, the arts - it is all here. I-can-know-it-all, very easily.

But with this technological world of personal independence and incomprehensibly vast information, comes a new kind of isolation, too. Look around at too many social gatherings or workplaces or malls, and notice how many of the young adults are attending to their little, or large, screens rather than to other human beings.

Now I don't think that any one of us would speak against the technology that has brought great benefit to humankind. For I do think that each of us would know & recognize the antidote to the technological isolation gripping the world in this 21st century. Do not separate yourself from the community, our sages taught millennia ago. What amazing foresight they had! That is why we are here tonight, why we 80-somethings, and 70-somethings, and 60 and 50 and 40 and 30 and 20-somethings have driven across town to be together. For we are seeking community. We are searching for others who will provide personal affirmation, acceptance and inspiration. We are looking for real facetime, in the original sense of the word, not on a little screen. And we are not

looking for dogma, rigid leadership, authoritarianism. We are not looking for synthetic grandeur and pretense. We are not looking for labels or pigeon holes. We are looking for authentic warmth and welcome, and meaning and connection. And that is exactly what Beth Israel is all about! You are it. And sometimes I worry that you are not realizing it. You are cutting edge in meeting the needs of the 21st century Jew. You are a best-kept secret. You are hiding your light under the proverbial bushel basket. When some friends from the Denver suburbs came to Shabbat evening services last month because their son had moved to Ft. Lupton and they wanted to encourage him to come to a synagogue, they were awestruck. Having lived in several states, and travelled all over, Sharon and George left that night saying that Beth Israel was the friendliest synagogue they had ever attended. I was bursting with pride!

Yes, at the current time, we are an aging congregation, and we have money problems (that EVERY organization is experiencing - Where have all the deep pockets gone?), But although this is true for us we cannot lose sight of some very important points of the Beth Israel story. Yes, we have worries. We cannot rest on our laurels, as glorious a past as we have, of which everyone is very proud. But also, Beth Israel has an amazing future. Because Beth Israel is just what almost every thinking, sensitive Jew out there is looking for! Beth Israel is cutting edge. People are looking for grassroots, bottom up leadership; Beth Israel has no leadership cliques. Beth Israel has no authoritarian salaried rabbi running all aspects of synagogue life. People are looking for friendliness - we all hear stories about walking into other shuls where no one says hello. That has never happened at Beth Israel. People are looking for a place where their voices can be heard. Literally everyone is welcomed into our choir, no auditions here. And seriously, on all levels, everyone is respected and nurtured, whether you are a new Jew, or fourth generation in the congregation. Whether you've studied Talmud or Zohar, or need to learn the aleph-bet. Whether you are intermarried, or single, or gay, whether you are a professional or are between jobs. There is a place in our pews, and at our tables, on our committees and at rox and bagels for you. You possibly have not heard the statistics out there. On average, at established

congregations, attendance at Shabbat services averages about 21 people per 100 membership units. We have only 65 members but very frequently have 40 people at our services. We are amazing! And it is because everyone is welcome. Everyone matters. Everyone is family. This little shul on the prairie really is a place to call a spiritual home. And that is what everyone is looking for!

Tonight, I place a challenge before you. Because the future of our congregation is in your hands, yours and yours and yours and yours. Not in the hands of a membership committee, nor of a 30 year-old rabbi who sings and dances and plays the guitar, nor just your co-presidents or Board. I know that so many of you have taken your turn carrying the burdens of Board offices and committee chairmanships. But we can allow no excuses now. Some thing very precious is at stake right now. We need to add to our numbers to insure the future health of this sacred community. Each one of you needs to make it a personal mission to think positively and creatively, to spread the word and invite people in. Each person must seek ways, take responsibility, to achieve what even the traditional commentators called centuries ago, the general salvation for the entire community.

I know that it seems like too many Jews you might encounter out there do not want to come to a synagogue. But we are not a synagogue of bad memories and disappointing, cold experiences, or of frightening rabbis. This is not an ordinary congregation. Beth Israel is unique, extraordinary, a very special spiritual community. We welcome and nurture all Jews and their families. We cannot keep that secret any longer. We cannot allow our light to be hidden. Remember ibn Duran's parable in his commentary about community. A bundle of reeds is strong because of the individuals who come together to be part of something, someplace greater than themselves. We all are important, and others are important, too. We need others. Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not let others separate themselves. *Henei ma tov u' manaiym, shevat achim gam yachad.* How good it is for brothers, and sisters to sit together.

L'shana tova - blessings for a good new year, for each of you, and for our precious community.