

*Rabbi White's Remarks at the 2009 Annual Meeting of Temple Sinai*

*Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to his disciples: Go and see what is the straight path to which someone should stick:*

*Rabbi Eliezer says: A generous spirit*

*Rabbi Joshua says: A good friend*

*Rabbi Yose says: A good neighbor*

*Rabbi Simeon says: Foresight*

*Rabbi Elazar says: A good heart*

*Rabban Yochanan said to them: I prefer the opinion of Rabbi Elazar, a good heart, because in what he says is included everything you each have said.*

This text comes from Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of our Fathers from the Mishna, the first code in Rabbinic Jewish law. It's a book of aphorisms, of moral teachings designed to guide our relationships with one another. But I think Rabban Yochanan's beautiful, yet simple teaching, like all of Pirke Avot, reads differently in a crisis. Its one thing to talk about being generous, being a good friend and neighbor when things are easy and good. Quite another when people are afraid, when friends and neighbors are losing their livelihoods, when we ourselves might feel threatened by circumstances beyond our control. And so how we, here at Temple Sinai, have responded to this severe recession, should be a point of pride for us all. I believe we have responded just as Rabban Yochanan has taught: with a good heart, as good neighbors and friends, and with the foresight to secure our mission as a dynamic force for liberal, living Judaism in our community.

This crisis brought into focus the reality that we are both a community and a corporation. As a community we are an organic, fluid, electric bouquet of thousands of individuals, some with an intense attachment to our temple, and some with a more tangential sense of belonging. But we are, as well, a corporation. A building and a staff, with a budget and with personnel policies, with governance and legal obligations.

As a community we engage in sacred tasks, drawing people closer to communion with the Holy One and with one another through prayer, through communal mourning and celebration and through sacred study and acts of social justice.

As a corporation we focus on accounts receivable, on hiring and maintaining staff, on insurance, and all the other mundane realities that impose on a multi-million dollar organization. And this year, the bottom fell out.

More and more of our members suddenly suffered catastrophic financial losses; others have lived every day with the fear that they, too, would lose their jobs. As a corporation, we were forced to re-evaluate everything we do here and find a way to meet our responsibilities with less. Our budget reality was more severe than in any time in my tenure. Yet with Michael Shaffet guiding us, we responded to these challenges with a *lev tov*, with a good heart, calmly, never losing sight of our priorities and our values.

As a community more and more of our membership, for the first time in their lives, were unable to meet their financial obligations to us. More and more came to see us, fearful. Some even unable to meet basic needs like for medicine, therapy, college textbooks. And here, too, so many of you reaffirmed the goodness and the deep compassion and generosity that define Temple Sinai. You stepped forward and you gave, insisting on anonymity. The infirm got their medicine. The kids went to college equipped. Others stayed in therapy. Some got assistance in other necessary ways, thanks to the generosity that has always been a touchstone of the members of Temple Sinai.

We are a corporation and a community. And Rabban Yochanan was right: because each of the individuals who guide and sustain our congregation has a *lev tov*, a good heart, we as a congregation are generous of spirit, wonderful neighbors and we act with foresight, never losing sight of our ultimate responsibilities as a *kehilah kedushah*, a sacred center, responding to the Holy One's call, with the Torah's values embedded in everything we do.

And tonight we welcome and express our gratitude to new leadership. New trustees who have inherited a strong and healthy congregation. As well, we note a change in presidential leadership. I'll have more to say about this at our installation service. But for here, I just want to say that it has been a privilege to serve with Richard Laskey as our president.

As our building was being completed, we began to speak about reaffirming our essential mission as a center of Torah. For Richard, sacred prayer and study are at the heart of his life. He authentically and passionately lives these sacred callings. Richard always made sure that our commitment to learning in its broadest sense, and to vital, engaging worship, permeated every discussion, and that they became a hallmark of our congregational work. He and Abbie, whose exquisite teaching of the Holocaust has inspired and transformed her students here, have both modeled piety and have made our learning opportunities richer, more varied, more exciting and better attended than I can ever remember. Richard's eloquence, humor and love for our members have engendered warmth and openness throughout our community. Richard, we are all so very grateful for your leadership. Without question, you possess a *lev tov*.

And you pass the baton to Barbara Kessler, whose wisdom, and whose thoughtful, sophisticated guidance I have sought for years. Among Barbara's goals for her presidency is leadership development, drawing more and more into the circle of decision making, and inspiring our leaders to even greater purpose and to a richer journey of connection with our synagogue, each forging his or her own individual pathway. We look forward to what we know will be a wonderful two years, with Barbara at the helm, guiding this synagogue.

As we all look around and see how other institutions, corporations and even industries have responded to this crisis we see recklessness, we see a denial of responsibility, we see a lack of concern for human dignity, let alone for basic human needs, and we see enormous greed and self-entitlement. But we have seen none of that here. Temple Sinai is a warm and caring community primarily because of the way our lay leadership runs it. And within the greater Roslyn community, we are known for our open, accessible welcome, for the way we try to embrace every family, for the creative programming we offer, always evaluating, always trying to improve, because our leadership grants the encouragement that makes coming to work a blessing.

As we prepare to enter what will be a very, very challenging year, perhaps even more challenging than this current one, let us remember Rabban Gamliel's admonition: Let us always lean toward goodness in heart, because we will then also act with generosity, with friendship and with foresight. And may God continue to bless our work. Amen.