

Polydoxy and Authenticity: On the “Why” of Temple Beth-El

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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On Wednesday, you received an email from our temple president, Gary Slobin, and our executive vice president, Jordana Levine, about the visioning process our leadership is doing to chart the future of Temple Beth-El.

On Monday, May 13, at 7 p.m., we will have a congregational meeting at which our Visioning Team will present what we’ve learned and what we’ve been working on—and invite your feedback. I want to ask you to please make every effort to attend the meeting. This is about the future of our shared spiritual home, and your participation is critical to our success.

This is a complex and dynamic process and there are a lot of moving pieces. But the driving force behind all of it is actually quite simple: It’s what we call “vision.”

A vision is a clear picture of who we want to be as a congregation three years from now and beyond. Our vision is for Temple Beth-El to remain a vibrant center of Reform Jewish life in Great Neck for many years to come. We’re clear about that, and we’re committed to making it a reality.

To get there, though, will take work. Great Neck is a different place than it was 25 to 30 years ago. Our community is aging. The constituency for Reform Judaism in our area is smaller than it was back in the day.

That won’t shock anyone here. After all, as I like to say, “If the only store in your town with the word ‘Depot’ in its name is ‘Sukkah Depot,’ you might live in Great Neck.”

So, making our vision a reality will take clarity of purpose. That’s why our Visioning Team began our work by thinking about the foundational questions: Why does Temple Beth-El exist? What do we seek to accomplish by being here, and how and where are we going to accomplish it?

The Visioning section of our temple website includes excerpts from our Vivid Vision statement addressing all these questions. In the coming weeks, I will be devoting a sermon to each of the big questions contained in the Vivid Vision: our Why, our How, our What, and our Where.

The strategy guru Simon Sinek says that every healthy organization starts with Why: Why do you exist? So, that’s where our Visioning Team began its work, and that’s where we’ll begin tonight.

Here’s our Why: “An open and inclusive congregation committed to the full and equal participation of every member, Temple Beth-El’s mission is to support you in defining and being your authentic Jewish self.”

I want to focus on this part about “defining and being your authentic Jewish self.”

“Authenticity” is a challenging concept. How do you know if something is authentic or not? Who gets to say whether something is authentic or not? How do you answer these questions when it comes to Judaism and Jewish people and your own Jewish self?

For some people, these questions are easy: An authentic Jew is someone who wears a black hat and a long beard and does all the things people who look like that do.

You'd be surprised how common that view of authenticity is even among *Reform* Jews. But while it's fun to romanticize it, to borrow a bit from Eddie Murphy, "you know that I know that you know that I know" that no one here wants to live that life. Why not? Because it's not authentic to who *you* are.

It's not that they're authentic and you're inauthentic, God forbid. It's that you can't be your authentic self by allowing someone else to impose their definition of authenticity on you. Spiritual authenticity can only come from within *yourself*.

So, when it comes to your Jewish life, who gets to say what is authentic and what isn't? The answer is: you and you alone.

This religious philosophy goes by a fancy name coined by the influential HUC professor Dr. Alvin Reines: "polydoxy."

As you might infer, polydoxy is different from orthodoxy. In fact, it's the *opposite* of orthodoxy.

"Orthodoxy" (with a lowercase o) is the view that there is only one correct way to believe and practice, whereas polydoxy is the view that there are many different ways to believe and practice. In fact, the number of legitimate ways is at least as many as the number of people who choose to belong to a polydox community, since each individual person has the right to decide for himself or herself what to believe and how to live.

In other words, in a polydox Jewish community, each person is free to draw on the vast reservoir of Jewish tradition to tailor-make their own unique form of Jewish belief and practice that suits *them*. While there will surely be a lot of overlap from one person to the next, no two people's Judaism will be exactly the same in every single respect, because no two *people* are exactly the same in every single respect.

Reines's critics argued that polydoxy is unworkable because a community with 500 different forms of Jewish belief and practice would be chaotic and disconnected from each other. And while I sympathize with that concern in theory, I think Reines has been proven right in practice.

My guess is that if you could plot out on graphing paper the particular Jewish belief-and-practice system of each individual in this chapel tonight, you would find that everyone is a little bit different. We're like a patchwork of dots, some clustered here, some scattered around here, some way off over here or over there.

And that's how it should be. As the Mishnah teaches: "When a person stamps many coins with one seal, they are all exactly alike; but when the Holy One stamped each person with the seal of the first human, not one of them is like any other."¹

Each individual Jew is a whole world unto themselves; each one of us is far too complex and nuanced to find full expression in a one-size-fits-all religious form.

Orthodoxy (again, with a lowercase o), by its very definition, negates the absolute uniqueness of the individual human being by attempting to corral him or her into an externally mandated set of beliefs and practices. This makes authenticity impossible.

The opening passage of this week's parashah illustrates this poignantly.

It recalls the incident of Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, who were burned up by a divine ball of fire for performing a religious act that wasn't specified in the rule book.

In condemning them for their transgression, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik says that “they were overcome by ecstasy and by the need to express their emotions.”²

But I don’t condemn them; I sympathize with them. After all, they were just expressing themselves authentically. The problem was that the orthodoxy of their day couldn’t accommodate their individuality.

The authentic Jewish self can only find its fullest expression in polydoxy. Why? Because polydoxy rejects the imposition of any and all dogma except for one core principle: what Reines calls “the Freedom Covenant.”

As Reines explains, “The Freedom Covenant states that every adherent possesses an ultimate right to religious self-authority and the freedom, consequently, to believe and practice as she or he chooses so long as there is no infringement upon the rights of others”³ to do the same. Polydoxy, he says, offers us “the maximum possible” amount of freedom while living as part of a community.

A polydox Jewish community is not constituted by people who necessarily dress the same or think the same or believe the same things and make the same life choices. Rather, it’s constituted by a group of people who share a commitment to the principle of individual freedom and the desire that everyone should be able to find their own place and be their own authentic self.

To quote Reines again: “Instruction in a polydox community can be used to educate but not to [indoctrinate⁴]. By education is meant imparting information in such a way that the student has the capacity to judge the truth or falsity of the information critically and objectively. [This] requires...imparting accurate and unprejudiced information, presenting all sides of an issue, and the creation of a learning environment in which the information...can be accepted or rejected without fear of punishment. ...

“The Freedom Covenant prohibits [indoctrinating], for [indoctrinating] takes away a person’s ability to make a free decision, thereby violating the person’s right to autonomy.”⁵

That’s a lot of philosophical-speak. But here’s the bottom line: Temple Beth-El exists to be a place where you have the freedom to explore Judaism in ways that feel right to you so you can make your own religious choices and be your most authentic Jewish self.

That’s our Why. And especially in this environment, I think it’s a pretty good one. It means that we offer something unique and valuable to the North Shore Jewish community.

And we have to sustain and nurture it; because, especially in today’s polarized environment where certainty and tribalism rule, a free-thinking, polydox approach to spirituality and community is something the world *needs badly*.

That’s a sacred responsibility; it’s *meaningful*, and it’s exciting.

I hope you’ll help me and our team make this vision a reality.

1 M. Sanhedrin 4:5

2 As quoted in R. Avishai C. David, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, “Shemini: The Transgression of Nadav and Avihu”

3 Alvin J. Reines, *Polydoxy: Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion*, 34

4 Reines’ original term is “endoctrinate,” which he distinguishes from “indoctrinate” in a technical philosophical sense. I have used “indoctrinate” here for the sake of simplicity.

5 Reines, 45-46

