

LEAVING HOME AND MOVING IN:
A NEW CHAPTER IN A CONGREGATION'S LIFE

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ABSTRACT

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The Jewish tradition has long taught that the meaning of the religious life is not to be found in the experience of “coming home.” Rather, it is to be found in the polar opposite: the experience of leaving one home for another.

Four thousand years after Abram left his ancestral home, a 150-year old Temple faced a similar dilemma: whether to remain in its beloved sanctuary that served the community for more than a century, or to move to a new home. The decision was gut-wrenching, nearly resulting in a split of the congregation. The process began in 2010 and culminated in the opening of the new Temple in 2014, in time for *Kol Nidre*, the most sacred service of the Jewish year. Our hypothesis is that a move marks a new chapter in a congregational narrative, because it changes relationships among the members, with the clergy, and with the religion itself. Our experience was that the move was initially detrimental to congregational cohesion; it took four years not only to raise funds, but more importantly, to re-discover our story and the relationships that comprise it.

Two research questions were examined: 1. What was the root cause of the disruption? 2. What interventions were employed to ameliorate discord, and empower the faith community to rise to a higher plane of responsibility and purpose? The methodology

was to interview 20% of the congregation utilizing members of the Local Advisory Committee. The interviewees represented members of both sexes and constituted a cross section of generational cohorts: Builders, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials.

Results revealed the age-old tensions in the meaning of sacred place in the Jewish tradition. Builders and boomers wanted a palatial Temple that would endure for generations, while Gen Xers and Millennials favored a humble tent, akin to the portable tabernacle that the Israelites carried with them in the desert. The younger people also wanted a more home-centered than synagogue-centric approach to Jewish practice. There is a paucity of literature on the subject of congregational moves, and this thesis intends to amplify discussion on this important topic.

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For my mother, Thelma Feinberg (1922-2015)

"A true woman of valor"

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a saying in the Talmud, *Makdim refuah l'maka*: even before the onset of the malady, the healing already exists. It is another way of saying that embedded in congregational stories of problems are stories of promise.

During the past five years, Temple Israel succeeded in raising \$7 million to build a new home in the suburbs of Akron, Ohio. The journey, however, was not straightforward. It nearly split the congregation. Members who trace their family history to the origins of the Temple 150 years ago, and to the construction of its magnificent, 105-year old sanctuary in downtown Akron, experienced the prospect of moving as a profound loss, a rupture in their personal stories and that of the congregation, as well as a diminishment of their stature as guardians of a prestigious past. The move can also be described as a break, or perhaps a new chapter in the congregation's narrative, comprised of people's stories and legends that have been handed down from generation to generation.

“Ecology” is a term that usually refers to the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment. Bookchin's notion of “social ecology” can be

used to describe the dynamics of a congregation, for what is a congregation if not the totality of relations among the members, the institution, and perhaps the religion itself?¹

Several years before I discovered the Drew D.Min. program, I found myself performing a kind of narrative research on the effects of the move on Temple Israel's social ecology. I was ministering to people who needed to tell their stories. Listening to people's conflicting memories of the past and their conflicting feelings about the move gave me new insight into an essential teaching of Jewish theology: as gut-wrenching as it may be, people need to leave one home for another in order to grow.

Before entering the Drew D.Min. program, I kept a journal of the stories people told me, imagining that one day I would read them and either laugh or shed a tear, or both. Never in my wildest dreams did I consider that these notes would find their way into a doctoral thesis along with many other interviews conducted by myself and a group of lay people.

The project proceeds as follows. It begins with a theological reflection on conflicting meanings of sacred space in the Jewish tradition. Then it tells the narrative of the Temple, composed of people's stories, prior to the prospect of a move that gained momentum in 2009. The narrative reveals a story of exclusivity: a Temple that wanted to be a magnificent sanctuary, situated on top of a hill that was the envy of the rest of the Jewish community.

However, beneath the gorgeous dome dating back to 1905, there were fault lines in a fragile social ecology. The Jews of German descent who started Temple Israel in 1865 practiced a form of "internal" anti-Semitism. They admitted Jews of Eastern

¹ Murray Bookchin, "What is social ecology?" *Harbinger* 2, no. 1 (1983): 6.

European descent only when they needed more money and members. Inviting a handful of them to serve in positions of leadership did not happen until 1987, when a capital campaign to repair the Temple was necessary: a cadre of successful young men whose parents could not have dreamed of attaining the status needed to belong to the Temple was recruited to perform the fundraising.

Then the project explores the inter- and intra-congregational strife that began when the possibility of a move started to gain momentum in 2009. This chapter is called “Break Script” because it represents a rupture, or maybe the emergence of a new chapter in the narrative. “Break Script” examines how the conflict over leaving Temple Israel’s beloved home was heightened by a rift between a small group of major donors and the board, on the one hand, and the general membership, on the other.

The tension persisted through the final months of the building project. In the summer of 2014, the war in Temple Israel resulted in the delay of special Jerusalem stone and a *Ner Tamid*, Eternal Light, created by a famous Israeli artist. Although we promised that the construction would be completed in time for *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, due to an array of confounding problems, our contractor completed just enough of the construction to make our new home ready for Yom Kippur in 2014, literally just in time for *Kol Nidre*, the service considered by Jewish tradition to be the most sacred occasion of the year.

In the beginning of the process of leaving and moving, I cultivated a group of members from a variety of backgrounds and professional disciplines who have continued to address several questions. Was this solely a physical move, or has the move positioned us to become a congregation transformed and transfused with new spirit? What was the

larger purpose of the endeavor and was it truly worth the capital—financial and social? The group that has contended with these questions has emerged as our congregational “brain trust,” as well as the core of my Local Advisory Committee.

The Talmudic teaching that the healing is embedded in the malady applies to our situation. Once the finishing touches of the construction were completed, the outstanding pledges collected, and the healing between members began to happen, we still had to contend with questions about the future identity and direction of Temple Israel.

Throughout the journey, we kept saying that Temple is more than a building. Temple is all about relationships. As a result of the move, relationships have undergone a process of change. The old cliques that felt they “owned” the Temple for decades have loosened their grip on the reins of power, and new relationships are forming. Young families are joining and gaining a sense of belonging. To paraphrase Jeremiah, “There is hope for our future.” We are starting to practice what Dr. Ron Wolfson calls “relational Judaism.”² The essence of his work is that congregations get so entangled with committees and jazzy programming that they forget their age-old purpose: to be a place to make friends and fulfill our essential need for connection with our fellow human beings, as well as to the sacred.

The Talmudic sages expressed a deep truth: “Before the malady appeared, the healing remedy already existed.” When I arrived in 2009, a sense of doom and gloom pervaded the old Temple. It felt as though people were making themselves ready to go down with the ship. Seven years later, we are living a narrative of optimism for the future. It will take patience and time to ascertain if the new Temple proves to be the catalyst for

² Ron Wolfson, *Relational Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013).

change and renewal that withstands the challenges of the twenty-first century. But the journey itself, physical and spiritual, is what the Jewish religion is all about.

The theological foundation of this thesis is that Judaism is about leaving one home for another. It is also an essential part of the human experience. Judaism is not about going home. It is about leaving home in order to grow. The journey does not conclude, because the destination is open-ended.

This is why my favorite verse in the Torah is found in Moses's final entreaty to Pharaoh. He said, "You must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings...Our own livestock too, for we *shall not know how we shall serve God until we get there*" (Exodus 10:24-26). These words are a reminder that Judaism is a journey without an endpoint. We will never get "there," wherever "there" is.

Purpose Of The Project

Martin Buber once said, "In the beginning is the relation."³ This project will examine the effects of the Temple's move on relationships. Specifically, three types of relationship will be studied: between congregants and one another; between congregants and the Temple; and between congregants and Judaism. My primary hypothesis is that a move inherently changes the social ecology of a congregation.

I will endeavor to answer two research questions:

1. What are the root causes of change, both positive and negative?

³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 24-25.

2. What interventions can be employed to ameliorate discord, restore congregational cohesion, and empower the faith community to rise to a higher plane of identity and purpose?

Scope Of The Project

Buber's insight, "In the beginning is the relation," goes to the core of Judaism. If there has been an overarching precept that spans 4000 years of Jewish history, it is the concept of the *Brit*, the covenant between God and the People of Israel. We misunderstand Judaism if we think about it in the narrow terms of a "faith." The covenantal relationship is more about belonging than believing. It is also about a theology of risk: doing the right thing without expectation of reward, and doing the Jewish thing in partnership with God who offers no guarantees.

Originally, I intended not to consider issues concerning individual spirituality. However, in the twenty-first century, Jews are seeking personal spirituality as never before. In this era, Rabbis, Jewish educators and communal leaders both lay and professional, must take seriously individual needs, including spiritual yearnings that are often met through participation in small groups called *Havurot* that meet in private homes. Congregations that fail to affirm the do-it-yourself (DIY) Judaism sought out especially by the younger generations, such as that portrayed by Professor Vanessa Ochs, do so at their own peril.⁴

However, I will not examine how the move has changed our interactions with the other congregations, Jewish and non-Jewish, as well as with secular institutions, such as

⁴ Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007).

the Jewish Community Center. In hindsight, I ought to have done so or found a way to engage a clergy colleague in the process, and perhaps appointed him or her to my Local Advisory Committee (LAC). As we will discuss, the departure of Temple Israel left a yawning hole in the interfaith community of West Akron, and we are working hard in partnership with clergy colleagues of other faith traditions, to repair the damage to the religious ecology that our departure created.

Theological Reflection

This thesis begins with a reflection on the conflicting meanings of sacred place and space that are found in the Jewish tradition. Temple Israel's leaders were intent on building a palatial new Temple. However, a question remains unanswered: Might it have been better to construct a humble, portable *Mishkan*, like the one the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness to the Land of Promise? As I shall discuss, this question has weighed on the minds of our greatest rabbinic sages for centuries: which model of sacred space is "right" and Jewish, fulfilling God's needs, not those of human beings?

I will also consider one of the most compelling narratives in the Jewish experience: *leaving* home is more important than *coming* home. This might sound odd or at least counter-intuitive. "Leaving home?" Isn't home where we want to be? Isn't home the epitome of safety and security? At the end of the day, don't we all yearn to find our way back home? (That is how the meaning of God's command to Abram, *Lech Lecha*, "Go Forth," is usually explained.)

Maybe this is so--but Judaism contends that it is very the moment we leave home that real transformation occurs. Just about every classic story in the Torah involves

individuals leaving home. As a result of these leave-takings, people are transformed in profound ways. Consider, for example, the Patriarch Jacob who fled home and the wrath of his brother Esau. After living a convoluted life, with many twists and turns, Jacob becomes Israel. Had he remained in the home of Isaac and Rebekah, this inner transformation would not have happened.

But the most dramatic and epic leave-taking story in the Torah occurs when the Israelites leave Egypt. At this point in their history and for the past 4000 years, the emphasis shifts from the individual to the communal. The Israelites escape into the wilderness, where God is revealed to them at Mt. Sinai.

While it might seem strange to say that Egypt was the Israelites' home, one of the many lessons of the story is that as oppressive as their conditions were, Egypt became the Israelites' home during their enslavement. In fact, the story indicates that they felt a little too much at home, too much of a sense of false comfort there. Bear in mind how reluctant they were to leave and how much they pined away for the good foods they remembered eating in Egypt during their wilderness wanderings, when their sustenance was only the Manna sent by God.

And the challenge of leaving home is not just Jewish. It is fundamentally human. Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden in order to become adults, responsible for their actions and decisions. A fuller exploration of these competing obligations—to leave home for the sake of the future and to remember the past—represents one theological dimension of this project.

The other theological dimension is an examination of the meaning of sacred space in Judaism. According to the tradition, while God consecrated time, it is up to human

beings to consecrate space. The Biblical injunction from God to Moses, “Let them build for me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8), has long defined the work of sanctuary-building as a human responsibility. God’s role, on the other hand, is the sanctification of time. For example, in the story of creation, “God blessed the Seventh Day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that God has done (Genesis 2:3).

The Rabbinic mind prioritizes sacred time over sacred space.⁵ The fact that the Sabbath, the Holy Days, and the Festivals are observed *B’Zmanam*, at their appointed time is more significant than *where* they are celebrated. Why does Judaism maintain this prioritization? One answer may be that time has long been viewed as God’s handiwork. Another answer may be that Jews are a peripatetic people. Although we leave one home for another, the Jewish calendar remains constant. In view of the collective experience of the Jewish people, the sanctification time transcends the consecration of space.

Although Judaism emphasizes sacred time over sacred space, throughout the centuries, Jewish communities have created their own sacred places that their congregations occupy. However, the Jewish tradition has emphasized that the magnificent synagogues of Europe, some of which survived the Holocaust, as well as the large congregations that are found across North America, were built for human needs, not God’s. These theological reflections enrich the narrative research that serves as the methodical approach of this project and defines it squarely as a work of applied social research in a theological context.

⁵ Schachter-Shalomi and Joel Segel, *Jewish with Feeling: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

Research Method

Working with my Local Advisory Committee (LAC), the goal was to listen to the stories of about 20% of our membership of 500 families. The interviewees represented both sexes and constituted a cross-section of the following generational cohorts: Builders (born prior to 1945), Boomers (born 1946-1964), Gen Xers (born 1965-1980), and Millennials (born 1981-1992). Participants, all over the age of 18, were randomly chosen within their cohort groups. Members of the Executive Committee and congregational leaders had the opportunity to participate in qualitative, in-depth narrative research interviews. When possible, interviews were recorded.

Members of the broader congregation also had the opportunity to participate in an abbreviated version of these interviews, sometimes using memorabilia from the old Temple to evoke memories and stories. A qualitative questionnaire explored the following areas: the effect of the move on relationships with the Temple, other congregants, and Judaism itself. In addition to these core question areas, respondents had a chance to tell their personal and family history in the broader Akron Jewish community, as well as in the Temple.

Members of the LAC were trained to use these questionnaires, conduct interviews in person, and record the findings. Each interview lasted about an hour. Permission to record interviews was obtained. To ensure confidentiality, the recordings and responses were maintained by me. In addition, the volunteer members of the LAC were trained to recognize problematic responses, and offer referrals for counseling. I am aware that as a participant-observer in the process, my work contained some research bias. The bias

stems from the fact that because I was so engaged in the process for six years, a degree of objectivity in the analysis may have been compromised by my own personal feelings, both positive and negative, about some personalities in the narrative. Also, a Rabbi can never be just a participant-observer. He or she has influence over the actions and choices of other people, and this influence affects what is observed. Awareness of this bias was a first step in dealing with it. Then, sharing observations with others--in my case the LAC and colleagues outside my ministry setting--afforded more objectivity. In the end, however, my methodological approach was guided less by “objective” evidence than on what felt right, good, and Jewish.

Analysis and Reporting of Findings

This project performs a textual and contextual analysis, utilizing the congregation’s narrative as the primary text. The material is thickened with insights from the Torah and Rabbinic literature, as well as recent social-scientific research, both inside and outside the orbit of contemporary Jewish scholarship. Our focus is on the need we all have to leave home to discover our true purpose. We have no choice. When we find the strength and the courage to take a step beyond our front door, when we embrace the unknown terrain, when we encounter the world as it is, that’s when we truly live. This theme runs like a golden thread that joins the stories of Abraham and Jacob, Moses and the Israelites. It is also our story in Temple Israel—leaving a beloved 105-year-old home to be transformed in the course of our journey to a new one. As the thesis unfolds, I examine the effects of the move on and between the generational cohorts, as well as the

interventions that sustained us as a congregation, making it possible to begin a new chapter in our story.

Conclusion

The process of writing this thesis can best be described as an adventure of discovery. Like most Jews, even in seminary, I was taught that the core story of the Jewish people was about coming home. But the experience of leading a congregation through a move from a beloved home to a new one taught me the opposite. The Jewish story, from the times of the Torah until today, is about leaving one home for another. And the process can be gut-wrenching, especially if it is not broadly supported by the congregation, as was the experience in my ministry setting. As a result, the congregation nearly split; and conflicts between and within generational cohorts are not completely healed. In a sense, we have moved in, but the ministry is not complete. It has only just begun.

The research reveals that changes in the design of sacred space afford new possibilities for worship that engages the younger generations. It also teaches that Temple Israel, and perhaps other congregations like it, must affirm the needs of young Jews to practice a DIY Judaism in small groups, known as *Havurot*. Feeling this affirmation, these small groups can be loosely affiliated with the larger Temple, with the hope that young families will want their children to receive high quality religious education and socialization experiences that the Havurot alone cannot provide. The research also indicates a need for displaying Jewish customs in public spaces. This lesson is learned from the burgeoning success of *Chabad*, also known as *Lubavitch*, the Orthodox

movement known for its rapid growth in the second half of the twentieth century through outreach to the unaffiliated. While the Lubavitch readily crosses the church-state boundary that is a cornerstone of American society, the responsibility is ours as Reform Jews to protect this boundary. However, we can learn from the hospitality of “open space” or “Big Tent” Judaism to rethink invitational presence in venues such as supermarkets and shopping malls.

Recent surveys of Jewish life paint a picture of doom and gloom. However, the “ever-dying” Jewish people has overcome such periods in its history many times before. In our era of radical individualism, people crave relationships. Relational Judaism is not new. In my grandparent’s generation, men had *shul*--or synagogue--buddies. And they went for the simple but glorious purpose of being with their friends. If they did not show up for a week a two, their *shul* buddies might drop by their homes just to make sure they were well. This sense of community cohesion has been lost in contemporary congregations, which place so much emphasis on committees, formal membership, dues paying, and jazzy programming.

In several large cities, those congregations that have broken the program model and embraced or re-embraced relational Judaism are thriving. I contend that we can do the same in mid-sized cities such as ours if we are willing to accept the theology of risk inherent in the covenantal relationship that has been the foundation of Judaism from ancient times until today.

At the end of the thesis, I suggest some lessons learned from our journey for the young Rabbi who will succeed me upon my retirement in the summer of 2016. Perhaps these lessons have implications for the Reform movement as a whole.

Reform Judaism is at an inflection point. It is a source of pride that we are the largest movement in American Jewish life. But we often lose sight of the fact that our congregations are tapestries of relationships, and these tapestries are wearing thin, as Builders pass away and Boomers retire and move to warmer climates.

As if in a letter to the young Rabbi, I suggest that if I could have one wish for Reform Judaism, it would be this. There was a time that seems like yesterday or the day before, when we Boomers, the generation of his parents, were seekers who believed that they could change the world. Along the way they lost these ideals. The time has come to reclaim them, to resume the journey walking hand-in-hand with family members and good friends.

Judaism has long taught that we cannot reclaim our stories in isolation. It can happen only in relationship with others. Some of us have the disposable time and treasure to sustain the Jewish institutions for the younger generations until they are ready to take ownership and responsibility. To meet this challenge we need the support not only of the local Temple, but also of the national movement. The focus must not only be on attracting new members and young families; the light needs to shine on the Boomers who can support the Temples until the young generations are in a position to do so themselves.

The “right” and the Jewish thing to do is often the human thing to do, in the broadest sense. The Torah teaches that Adam and Eve had to leave the garden in order to become responsible adults. In other words, the need to leave the safety and security of home is a large part of what makes us truly human. The Torah also tells us that the covenantal relationship is inherently a risk. The God of all does not want us to follow blindly and offers no guarantees. God wants not just our faith, but also our belonging in a

community. And the communities we build are never static. Whether it is a glorious, permanent sanctuary or a portable Mishkan, we cannot exempt ourselves from the responsibility to build a place for the sacred in which God will say: “I want to dwell in your midst. I want to be your neighbor.”

CHAPTER 2
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS:
LEAVING HOME AND MOVING IN

Sunday, September 28, 2014 was a gorgeously sunny day in Akron, Ohio. The weather was a perfect fit for the glorious occasion that would be celebrated by the city's largest synagogue. After five years of bitter conflict over whether or not to leave our beloved sanctuary of 105 years and move to a new home in a suburb of Akron, and after an intense and divisive capital campaign, the new Temple was built and ready for us to make into our new home.

Well...almost. Due to a variety of circumstances, our new sanctuary was not ready for Rosh Hashanah services, as had originally been planned. The decision was made to hold our first service in the new Temple on Yom Kippur, 10 days later. The contractors promised that most of the work would be completed by then.

According to the Jewish tradition, when a synagogue moves, the congregants march with the Torah scrolls from the old sanctuary to the new one, and the best day for us to perform this sacred task was the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But since the distance was too far for us to walk, we rented buses for most of the trip and walked for about a mile to the new Temple. The Torah scrolls were passed from member to member and from generation to generation. Perhaps this age-old ritual is an expression of our worldview of going and letting go.

Unbeknownst to the wider congregation, before our communal celebration began, a group of clergy from the local interfaith ministerium met for a short, informal spiritual moment in the old sanctuary before departing to conduct services in their own churches. The sanctuary had been a hub for interfaith services and social action through the years. In my research design of this project, I did not consider the effect of the move on the relationships with the other churches and clergy, in view of the fact that the Temple and its Rabbi had been a unifying force in the community for decades. In hindsight, this research would have been illuminating.

As the Christian clergy departed for their pulpits, Temple Israel's members arrived in the parking lot. Father John Yanner, a semi-retired priest from our neighboring Catholic church, felt the urge to accompany us to the buses and offer a blessing before we embarked on our sacred journey. Father Yanner was an iconic figure in Akron who passed last year. His being with us on that incandescent morning felt surreal. It seemed as if Jethro, Moses's father-in-law and Midian priest, was there to bless us as we ventured into the future.



Figure 1: Father Yanner blessing our Congregation as we leave our old home

The busses dropped us off at a parking lot. The Temple members passed our ten Torah scrolls from one set of arms to another, as we marched into our new home. We felt part of a journey that was larger than any of us. After months of conflict, the Temple began to cohere as a community. The ritual of the march was a unifying force for a congregation that nearly split.



Figure 2: Marching to our new home behind the Temple banner

After the congregation entered the new Temple, the past Presidents placed the Torah scrolls into the Ark. The Bible, in I Kings 8, describes the elders and priests lifting the portable Mishkan, which their ancestors carried through the desert into the most sacred precinct of King Solomon's Temple. Traces of that Biblical scene emerged in the present. In a sense, the Torah scrolls have supplanted the portable Mishkan. Throughout

the millennia, Jews have carried the Torah with them whenever they left one home for another. And we have placed the sacred scrolls into the Holy Ark of our sanctuary with the hope that this sacred space will last forever. Reflecting on permanence, the reader is invited to look closely at the picture below and focus on the cover of the scroll which reads, “in memory of the six million.”



Figure 3: Past presidents and Rabbi telling a story in the Ark of the new Temple

This Torah scroll belonged to a synagogue in the former Czechoslovakia. After murdering the people of the town, the Nazis took the Torah scroll to a warehouse in Prague for a museum Hitler wanted to create for an “extinct” Jewish people. During the Communist era, the scrolls were preserved by righteous gentiles. Before the end of Communism, the scrolls were “rescued” and given new homes in congregations throughout the free world. When the last of the scrolls was placed in the ark, we formally became a *Kehillah Kedoshah*, a Sacred Community. Providing a closing benediction after the service was a highpoint of my more than three decades in the rabbinate.



Figure 4: Rabbi blessing placement of the last scroll

Reflecting on the Czech Torah scroll after the festivities placed our five-year journey in a new light. Having overcome our own intra-congregational conflict over leaving home, it was impossible not to forget that through the centuries Jews have had to flee their synagogues and homes in the direst circumstances, and many did not live to move into their new homes. The Jewish theology of risk-taking, leaving home and rebuilding is borne out of historic experience. In spite of the conflicts that Temple Israel had to endure during the previous five years, September 28, 2014 turned a totally inclusive and joyous celebration of *Hannukat Ha'Bayit*, a dedication of a new sanctuary for the Jewish people.

We misunderstand Judaism if we insist on thinking about it in the conventional sense of a “faith.” It is a way of life that prioritizes belonging to a people over believing in God. What has held the Jews together through the millennia? What is the source of their collective cohesion? It is the stories that they tell about themselves and their

forbears, tales which are passed down from generation to generation. These stories are imbedded in the synagogues that have been built on every continent. They are the true bricks and mortar of a congregation. Without the stories, there would be no communal life.

One of these stories, perhaps the core narrative of the Jewish people, is about a journey from one home to the next. It begins when God says to Abram: “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). The rabbinic tradition is divided about where the journey would lead. Although the *p’shat*, or “plain sense” answer is the Land of Israel, there is a nuance in the text. The Torah does not simply say *Lech*, meaning “go forth.” Rather, it says *Lech Lecha*, meaning “go into yourself.” Abraham’s journey is not just to a physical place. It is also a journey inwards, a search for his true self. The meaning for the descendants of Abraham is that the journey is twofold, physical and spiritual; and from that day forth, the journey of the Jewish people has been open-ended.

In one of his final entreaties to Pharaoh, Moses says: “We shall not know how we will serve God until we get there” (Exodus 10:26). Because of the ambiguity in the question of where “there” is, the rabbinic sages who lived more than 1500 years after the Exodus offered competing ideas about the meaning of the journey. The majority of sages viewed the purpose of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt as the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham: delivering them to their home in the Land of Israel. That is the *p’shat*, the “plain sense” of the Torah narrative.

However, a minority of the sages maintained that the primary purpose of the Exodus was not simply to enter the Promised Land or to receive the Torah on Mount

Sinai. Rather, it was to build a dwelling place for God on earth. According to these sages, the Holy One sanctified time in the creation of the world, and Moses's primary task was to consecrate space in the building of the divine abode.¹ In the Torah, God said to Moses: "Let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). According to the minority group of ancient sages, for this reason alone, the Israelites were redeemed from bondage. To drive home their interpretation, these sages pointed out that after Moses received divine instruction, the primary narrative--the story of the Israelites' wilderness journey--abruptly halts. Moses ascends Mount Sinai, while an anxious people build the Golden Calf. The narrative that would seem to connect these seminal episodes is abruptly broken. But the Torah is not linear. Beginning with Exodus 25, chapter after chapter is devoted to the minute details of the construction of the Tabernacle. And then we read the story of the Golden Calf and the broken and re-issued tablets of the law.

Because the lavish accoutrements detailed in Exodus 25-30 far exceeded the resources of former slaves, the text was probably written by the Levitical priests who served in King Solomon's Holy Temple of Jerusalem, hundreds of years after the Exodus took place. What better way could there be to legitimate the building of the Temple and their stature in it, than to weave the building project into the Torah narrative? But the questions for us do not concern the authorship or dating of these chapters, how the Israelites acquired gold and dolphin skin to build a majestic Tabernacle in the desert, or why the construction project was wedged into this place in the Torah narrative.

Our concern is the meaning of Mishkan, the "in-dwelling" of God. Conflicting interpretations can be found in the *Midrash*, the oral or "parallel" Torah of the rabbinic

¹ Baruch Sienna, "Makom: The Place Of Space in the Jewish Religion," *Jewish Education News* (1989): 9-18.

sages, which started to be written in the early part of the third century C.E., several hundred years after the destruction of the Second Temple. (Solomon's Temple was levelled by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E.)

The divergent interpretations of the Biblical symbol of Mishkan can be summarized as follows: 1) the Israelites constructed the desert tabernacle as a model of what would become the *permanent* Holy Temple of Jerusalem; 2) the Israelites constructed a *Mishkan*, intended to be carried with them anywhere they would journey; or 3) some of the sages recognized that God could not be confined to a particular place. As the Israelites proceeded along their fateful journey, the divine presence dwelt within their encampment, consecrating the community and making the Israelites a "Kingdom of Priests" and a "Holy People."²

In addition to these Midrashic traditions, later commentaries ranging from the rationalism of Maimonides's philosophy to the mysticism of the Lurianic Kabbalah, propose that the Mishkan was never intended to meet God's needs. It was constructed to fulfill human needs. Voices from the Hasidic tradition and the neo-mystical Jewish Renewal movement of our time have gone further, suggesting that the only dwelling place God has ever desired, so to speak, is the human self: each person internalizes his or her own Mishkan.

Teachers from the Jewish Renewal Movement point to the idea that the purpose of Abraham's journey was not to go to any geographic place, sacred or secular. Reminding us that the Torah says *Lech Lecha*, "go to yourself," they teach that Abraham's journey,

² Baruch Bokser, "Approaching Sacred Space," *The Harvard Theological Review* 78 (1985): 279-299.

as well as ours, needs to be inwards, for God's dwelling place can be found within the recesses of our hearts.

Let us examine these conflicting images of sacred space in more detail. Some of the sages showered great praise on Moses and his chief architect Bezalel for building a glorious, permanent edifice for the in-dwelling of God on earth. This Midrashic interpretation of Mishkan is based on a legend that God imprinted on the palm of Moses's hand the blueprints of the permanent Tabernacle when he was standing on Mount Sinai.³ Based on these renderings, the Bezalel built a precise model of the Tabernacle, which, hundreds of years later, King Solomon replicated on the grandest imaginable scale in the construction of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem.

This Midrashic tradition also draws on the text of I Kings 8 to substantiate the view of God's abode on earth as the permanent Holy Temple.⁴ In this Biblical chapter, we find a vivid description of how the elders and the priests placed the portable Mishkan that had been carried through the desert by their forbears, into the Temple that King Solomon built. The imbedding of the portable into the permanent can be viewed as a symbol of a divine abode that would transcend time itself. Once the portable Mishkan was placed within the holiest place of the Temple, essentially the epicenter of sanctity, Solomon prayed, "I have now built for You a stately house, a place where You may dwell forever" (I Kings 8:13). In a sense, Solomon completed the work of Moses in consecrating a dwelling for God that would be as eternal as the Holy One.

³ Avivah G. Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 203-228.

⁴ Bokser, 280.

It is important to realize that from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., memories of what was supposed to be permanent remains part of the fabric of Jewish ritual life. Jews pray facing east, in the direction of the Holy Temple, and a prayer for its restoration is to be uttered three times a day, according to the liturgy. At the end of Yom Kippur and the Passover Seder, Jews say, “Next year in Jerusalem.”

As important as the power of memory is, the dominant stream of the Midrashic tradition interpreted the meaning of Mishkan in a radically different way. It is important to keep in mind that the Midrash was written after the destruction of the Second Temple; and by this era, the sages felt free to castigate Moses for not creating a simple, portable place for God to dwell. One example can be found in a source found in *Midrash Tanchuma*, a compendium that is attributed to rabbinic sages of the third century. Rabbi Joshua, one of the most respected among the sages, taught, “When God told Moses, ‘Build me a Tabernacle,’ he should have erected four pegs and stretched a plain tent over them...and God said, ‘My *Shekinah*, the divine presence, will be with you wherever you go’.”⁵ It is interesting to note that the word *Shekinah*, which conveys the image of God’s sheltering presence, is a feminine noun.

Why did Rabbi Joshua and his school focus on the essential *portability* of God’s dwelling place? The answer is both theological and historical. To understand the crucial period of third-century Judaism, we need to look back several hundred years earlier. When the Second Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 C.E., the sacrificial cult could no longer operate. Not only this, but most contemporary scholars agree that the

⁵ Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Exodus* (Jerusalem: Maor Wallach, 1968), 196.

gradual demise of the most ancient form of Judaism as set forth in the Book of Leviticus preceded the actual destruction of the Second Temple by at least 100 years.⁶

The great *Tanna'itic* sages, most notably Hillel who were active around the time of Jesus, were envisioning and teaching a new conception of Judaism that did not include the priesthood or ritual sacrifices. *Tanna'itic* Judaism laid the foundations of the Jewish future: a way of life based on community, belonging, worship, and the performance of *Mitzvoth* (good deeds).⁷ The permanent Temple and all of its trappings comprised an obstacle that blocked the path to the preferred future.

Although some Jews, even in our time, yearn for the re-building of a Third Temple, the rabbinic sages who followed the *Tanna'im* contended in no uncertain terms that the people were better off without it. According to legend, a Roman Emperor sometime in the fourth century, offered to build a new Temple for the Jews, but the rabbinic sages said “no.”

By the third century, all hopes for a restoration of the past were dashed by the defeat of the revolt against the Romans led by Bar Kochba in 138 C.E. Some Jews, including the luminary Rabbi Akiba, considered him to be the Messiah, a savior sent by God. But the opposite of a messianic era transpired. Bar Kochba's revolt spurred the Romans to turn the Land of Israel into a bloodbath. A higher percentage of Jews were killed by the Romans than by the Nazis in the Holocaust, and the survivors of the second century massacres fled to the four corners of the earth.

⁶ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began* (Norwich: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

⁷ Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1972).

A nucleus of scholars remained, relatively insulated from persecution in an enclave in northern Galilee through the third and fourth centuries. They were among the most prolific sages in all Jewish history, authoring volumes of Midrash, as well as the Mishnah and the Talmud of the Land of Israel (not to be confused with the Babylonian Talmud).⁸

Rabbi Joshua, who wrote the Midrash that castigated Moses for not recognizing the essential portability of the Mishkan, did so in order to encourage the people who were already living outside the Land of Israel to grasp this truth. Setting up a simple, portable Mishkan was not only a pragmatic way to maintain Jewish community in distant lands; more importantly, it reflected the authentic meaning found in the Torah. When God said to Moses, “Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them,” the form of Mishkan that God desired, so to speak, was a plain sheet held up by a few tent pegs. It had to be as portable as they were.⁹

Although the tradition has long emphasized the human responsibility to construct God’s dwelling place, be it portable or permanent, Judaism has also recognized that God cannot be put in a box. As the Israelites journeyed through the desert, the Torah describes God in human terms as walking about their encampment.¹⁰ In his final oration, Moses tells the people, “Since Adonai your God moves about in your camp in order to protect you, and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy...” (Deuteronomy 23:15).

⁸ Mark Warshofsky, *The Two Talmuds* (New York: URJ Press, 2010).

⁹ Zornberg, 283.

¹⁰ Bokser, 290.

Such episodes are scant and are invariably connected to the rules of ritual purity, which are beyond the scope of this project.

But what is pertinent is how the sages of the Midrash, hundreds of years after the Torah was written, dealt with the image of God walking through the Israelite encampment. Essentially, they drew a comparison with the Garden of Eden. Just as God walked through the Garden, God also walked through the Israelite camp. In addition to depicting God in Human terms, the Rabbis also imagined God as Shekinah, a sheltering presence that protected the Israelites in their wilderness journey.

Why did Judaism, in its beginnings, imagine God as a presence within and without, virtually contradicting the mandate in Exodus 25 to build a home for God on earth? One answer might be that Judaism is all about relationships, and any physical structure is an impediment to a direct, unmediated relationship. As Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, “God is in search of man,” and “Man is in Search of God.”¹¹

In the rabbinic imagination, God entered the Garden in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis; and subsequently, God walked through the Israelite encampment in search of relationships with human beings. Because of the potential of a covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people, all Israel could become a “Kingdom of Priests” and a “Holy Nation.” Woven through Jewish history is the divine thread of what Buber called the I-Thou relationship.¹² It is a partnership that needs no physical Mishkan and breaks through spatial boundaries.

¹¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *God In Search of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); also *Man is Not Alone* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1965).

¹² Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947).

Moses Maimonides, who lived in the twelfth century during the Golden Age of Spain, is viewed by many as the greatest Jewish philosopher of all time. He suggested that because such an ideal relationship with God is virtually impossible to sustain, people build sanctuaries to fulfill their own needs. Maimonides wrote: “God commanded them to build the Tabernacle, for us to offer therein our prayers...this commandment comes not out of God’s needs to dwell in an earthly dwelling among humanity, but rather out of God’s knowledge that we need it and we must train ourselves to serve God outside of it.”¹³

Maimonides’s teaching was re-stated by one of the greatest Hasidic masters, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter, also known as the Gerrer Rebbe, who lived at the end of the nineteenth century. What makes his work unique is that he came out of a *shtetl*, a small town in Poland, and made it to Warsaw where he received a secular education at the university before returning to succeed his father as head of the Ger Hasidic dynasty.

While living in the big city, he was struck by a paradox. The Jews who were assimilating into the wider society were building extravagant synagogues. He was also aware that a similar process was unfolding in the Jewish communities of many large European cities. In Prague, Moscow, Berlin, and Vienna, secularized Jews were building magnificent synagogues, perhaps as a sign of their hope for permanence in the society.

In his major work, known as the *Sfat Emet* or “Language of Truth,” the Gerrer re-stated the Midrash of Rabbi Joshua, chastising Moses for not making a Mishkan with a plain sheet and a few tent pegs. The Gerrer said that Moses ought to have found a few pieces of driftwood on the desert floor and built a humble shack, instead of the lavish

¹³ Moses Maimonides, *Hilchot De’ot--Book of Knowledge* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1975).

Tabernacle made of gold and every manner of finery. He saw the assimilated Jews of Warsaw repeating Moses's error by building prominent synagogues and fulfilling their needs, not God's. He wrote, "It is only our sinfulness, our distance from our true selves, which makes us feel separate from God, which makes us build majestic structures for God to dwell in."¹⁴

The Gerrer went on to say that when we perform *Tikkun Atzmi*, the work of repairing ourselves and healing the alienation between ourselves and God, we come to the realization that the "dwelling place" of God is within the human heart.¹⁵ This truth can be found in the *Midrash Tanhuma* of the third century, which states, "The divine presence does not rest within the Tabernacle, on account of the Tabernacle, but on account of the Israelites, for each of their hearts is a Tabernacle of God."¹⁶

The Malbim, a nineteenth century follower of the Kabbalistic tradition, echoed this insight: "Each one of us needs to build a Tabernacle to God in the recesses of our heart." This scholar goes on to interpret the word *Bayit*, meaning "house," which appears in God's promise to make a dynasty for King David that is found in II Samuel 7:11. The Malbim's interpretation suggests that the *Bayit* is not a House of God in a physical sense. King David is being instructed to transform his very self into a *Bayit*, a Tabernacle, in a spiritual sense, making himself into an altar, to offer up, as it were, everything he has and everything he is to God's service."¹⁷

¹⁴ Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2012), 111.

¹⁵ Green, 111-114.

¹⁶ Zornberg, 227.

¹⁷ Leibowitz, 301.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi, who died in 2014, founded the Jewish Renewal Movement. While this approach draws on the Hasidic and mystical traditions, the Renewal Movement has infused the broader Jewish community with a new desire for spirituality. Not surprisingly, Reb Zalman believed that a truly mutual, covenantal relationship with God would break through the confines of any physical place; and in his mind, the purpose of the religious life is to make a Mishkan in one's heart. Schachter found a kindred spirit in the great Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who came from the same Hasidic dynasty in Poland. One of Heschel's most profound ideas was to conceive the Sabbath as a "Palace in Time," and a Judaism that reclaimed the sacredness of time, as opposed to sacredness of place.¹⁸

About sixty years after Heschel wrote his seminal work on the Sabbath, Schachter amplified these thoughts, which he believed that Jews living in the twenty-first century need to hear, perhaps more than they did 60 years ago, as their parents and grandparents were establishing themselves in the opulent synagogues that they built in suburbia in the post-Holocaust era. Schachter wrote, "Once we had a Temple...It was destroyed. We built another Temple...that too was destroyed. Our whole underlying structure changed. We found out that we needed to replace the Holy Temple in space with the Holy Temple in time--the Sabbath, which sustains our connection to the Infinite."¹⁹

¹⁸ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, 5th ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

¹⁹ Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Jewish With Feeling* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2005), 158.

Mishkan and the Ministry Context

All of these conceptions of Mishkan have come to the surface in our move to the new Temple. In hindsight, what surprises me is that these divergent conceptions of sacred place are deeply imbedded in our Jewish tradition and usually are considered to be the domain of rabbis and scholars. However, in our ministry context, they were expressed in the relationships of people with little or no formal background in Jewish Studies.

Our research in our ministry setting suggests that the idea of God's dwelling place means different things to members of different generational cohorts that comprise our congregation. To the Builders and Boomers, Mishkan means the construction of a permanent dwelling place for the community. Early in this reflection, a picture was included that depicted the elders and priests of King Solomon's Temple lifting the portable Mishkan into the Holy of Holies they thought would last forever. The ancient image came to the surface, so to speak, 3000 years later.

It should come as no surprise that for many of our GenXers and Millenials, Mishkan has a radically different meaning. What seems to resonate for these cohorts is the idea of the self as Mishkan. Study groups on material cited earlier from the Hasidic and Jewish Renewal movements sustained the younger generations' engagement in the process. Moving forward, our research suggests that small groups, or *Havurot*, that meet in people's homes but which are connected to the Temple will evolve into the most compelling model of community for many of our multi-faith families, who comprise about 70% of our Millenial constituents. Looking back to September 28, 2014, very few Millenials participated in the opening of the new Temple. The issue of sacred space is far less significant than establishing relationships.

Rashi, the eleventh century scholar who is considered by many to be the greatest teacher of Torah, proposed what had to have been a radical idea of sacred space for his cultural context. He taught that concepts of Mishkan as permanent or portable, or as the idea of God not needing a dwelling place are all in service of the relationships humans can have with each other and with God. In a comment on Exodus 25:8, Rashi taught, “Let them make me a sanctuary...the substantial object, the sanctuary, what is it, in essence?” His answer was, “A sanctuary is a house of holiness—that is, not an *object*, but a space in which holiness is potential.”²⁰ In other words, space in itself is inert. But we have the potential to transform that space to do Godly things. The actions and rituals that we perform as a community have the potential to lift us to a higher plane of relationship with God and our fellow human beings. And these good things can happen in a permanent or portable Mishkan, or the intimacy of a family room.

Thus far it seems that our journey of *Lech Lecha*, which was Abram’s journey, has been both forward and inward. After a little more than a year in our new home, we have had time to reflect on who we are and what we stand for as a community, as we remember the past and sanctify the present. As Jews, we must not forget that the future is never permanent. We can strive to build beautiful Temples, but we must also remember that God resides in our portable sanctuaries and the inner recesses of our hearts.

²⁰ Arthur Green, *Speaking Torah Volume 1: Spiritual Teachings from around the Maggid’s Table* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2013), 158-159.

CHAPTER 3
REMEMBERING OUR PAST:
THE NARRATIVE OF TEMPLE ISRAEL 1865-2009

For many American Jews, Christmas Day it is a day to perpetuate a well-loved tradition: going to their favorite Chinese restaurant for a decidedly non-kosher meal. But for the Jews of Akron, Christmas Day, 2015 was also a time to remember the past. Their favorite Chinese restaurant closed on December 1st, after fifty years of serving good food to overflow crowds. The owner called to tell me how much he would miss us this year. For Temple Israel, China Gourmet served other purposes. Because it was a few blocks from the old Temple, many Executive Committee and other closely-held meetings were held in its secluded dining area. The restaurant also had a basement that accommodated groups of our members who wished to celebrate joyous occasions, such as an anniversary or a baby-naming.

The closing of China Gourmet brought back memories of the early months of my tenure. In the private dining area, I ate lunch with some of the Temple's elders, especially a woman named Edna who served as a guardian of the stories and memories of the Temple's past.¹ The purpose was not merely to share their reminiscences; it was to fathom the narrative of the congregation. A narrative is not just a history--that I could get

¹ For reasons of confidentiality, all interviewees are represented by pseudonyms.

from reading old bulletins and going through the archives. Through the years, I have observed that narrative draws on the memories and stories that people tell about their Temple, their relationships, and also themselves.

When I arrived in 2009, Temple Israel was at an inflection point. The members were deeply divided about whether or not to move from their beloved 105-year-old home and build a new Temple in the suburbs. Regardless of the outcome, my first priority was to fathom the narrative by listening to their stories. As the narrative unfolded, it was possible to discern several inflection points, episodes when decisions were made that defined and re-defined the identity of the Temple in the broader scope of Jewish and human values. These turning points included the decision to form a Temple in 1865, to build a magnificent edifice in 1905, to renovate the old Temple in 1987, the decision to move in 2009, and the completion of the new Temple in 2014.

In our theological reflections, we considered the conflicting meanings of sacred space in the Jewish tradition. At every turning point, the Temple defined itself as a permanent Mishkan, a sacred place that would last in Akron forever. It is only now that a new generation of Jews and diverse multi-faith families are beginning to explore the portability of the sacred and the search for the Holy in their own hearts.

When I began my tenure, I realized that the move could be experienced either as a rupture in the narrative or as a new chapter in it. Either path would have an impact on relationships: the members with one another, with the Temple, and perhaps with Judaism itself. In all the lunches with Temple members at China Gourmet, I listened to their conflicting stories and memories in order to discern the larger narrative. This chapter attempts to tell it. It draws largely from the stories of members who belong to three

generations: Builder, Boomer, and Gen X. Their stories illuminate age-old Jewish ideas about sacred space, and the tensions between them reflect the conflicting ideas embedded in the tradition. What amazes me is that they were expressing competing meanings of sacred space and did not know it.

The Torah contains a legend about a woman named Serach, not to be confused with the matriarch Sarah. She was one of the 70 members of Jacob's clan who went down to Egypt and lived long enough to make the Exodus out of Egypt. Her role in the Torah narrative is to show Moses where Joseph's bones were buried, so that the Israelites could keep the promise of burying him in the Land of Promise. The Torah suggests that Serach lived for more than 300 years; but the Rabbis of the Midrash went one step further: like the prophet Elijah, Serach was granted immortality. She appeared at junctures in time when the people become disconnected from their narrative; and she said to them, "I remember. I was there." One such juncture was the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the Diaspora in 70 C.E. The Rabbis of the third century credited Serach for keeping the Jews Jewish after the destruction by miraculously speaking to them, reminding of their past and their purpose in history.

Edna was Temple Israel's Serach. She died last spring, shortly after we celebrated our 150th Anniversary, which she co-chaired. Seven years ago, when the congregation voted me in to be their Rabbi, she organized the reception. The coffee and tea were served from gorgeous silver urns that gleamed from fresh polish. The cups and saucers were fine china. Edna told me that this was how it used to be: "In the old days, the ladies of the Sisterhood regularly polished the urns, baked the pastries, and served the food wearing white gloves. Tonight was the first time in many years that a group of us held a

Temple function like this, except most of the women couldn't find their white gloves. I know exactly where mine are.”

At the end of the evening, Edna said, “When you get settled in, my husband Ira and I would like to take you to one of our favorite restaurants. It's Chinese. You don't keep kosher, do you?” Most young Reform Rabbis do keep kosher, while many colleagues of my generation observe a loose form of Biblical Kashrut, by not eating pork or shellfish, or mixing milk and meat. Rabbinic selection committees are not allowed to ask a candidate about his or her dietary practices. I replied that I don't keep strictly kosher and enjoy Chinese food. Edna was relieved.

Several weeks later, Edna called me and we met in the private dining area of China Gourmet. Her husband Ira was there. He said, “This is where a lot of Temple business was done thirty or forty years ago when I was the President. If we didn't want the congregation to know about a meeting, the men got together here. We didn't have women on the Board until the 1970s. Edna pushed for that. And I have to tell you that I don't think that moving the Temple is a good business decision.” Ira also mentioned that a campaign to renovate the Temple was held in the late 1980s. He acknowledged that the neighborhood was better in those days and that the young families live in the suburbs. But he insisted that Merriman Road is still our home and that we are not going to leave. “We can do what we did in the 1987 campaign: raise \$2 to 3 million to keep the building going.” He did not say much more that day or the other times he joined Edna to meet me at China Gourmet.

Edna dominated the conversation: “The Temple started in 1865. You may not know this, Rabbi, but I come from one of the original families. There is no one left in

Akron whose family goes back that far. My great-great grandfather came to Akron from Germany in 1850.” Not that long ago, many American Jews of German descent felt superior to those whose forbears immigrated to our country from Eastern Europe. As we will discuss, this prejudice had significance in the history of Temple Israel.

Until her final days, Edna clung to the belief in the inherent superiority of her Germanic lineage. This is how she described her father: “When the Civil War broke out, he had a factory that made uniforms for the Union Army. There were about 50 Jewish families at that time. Like my father, most of them were doing very well, considering that they were newcomers, not just to Akron. But as successful as they became, they were proud of our great German culture.” It was also a great source of pride to her that Ira came from a prominent German-Jewish family in Pittsburgh.

Edna continued, “By 1865 there were enough of us to form a Temple. The founders were intent on maintaining the customs of the Reform Temples they came from in Germany. They were people of stature. Men were fined 25 cents if they dared to cover their heads, which was considered an Orthodox practice.”

Edna also told me that President Lincoln sent a congratulatory letter when the Temple was established just two weeks before he was assassinated. Somehow the letter got lost in the archives. However, echoing the Biblical Serach, Edna said, “I saw it. I know it’s there.” The letter probably was written and will be found someday.

On the national level, the Temple did rise to a position of prominence. It was invited to be a founding member of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now called the Union for Reform Judaism. In 1873, Temple members travelled to Pittsburgh to sign the charter which established what is now called the Union for Reform Judaism.

Edna told me that the charter, bearing the signature of Temple's first president, Abraham Polsky, can be found in the entrance to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Polsky was an interesting individual in his own right. When he came to America from Germany, he started out as a peddler, but by 1865 he owned Akron's largest retail store.

"How I miss the old days," Edna kept reminding me. "We had a huge Consecration service when the children began Sunday school, as well as a Confirmation service for 16-year-old boys and girls who stayed in Sunday school." These customs, which were adopted by the German Reformers in the early nineteenth century, have no basis in *Halacha*, Jewish law. They were probably imitations of Protestant practices. In many American Reform congregations, Confirmation took the place of the Bar Mitzvah until the 1950s. Edna continued, "Our services were all in English, except for the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, which the Rabbi recited. The English of the Old Union Prayer book might have been old-fashioned, but it was gorgeous. You may have heard that I used to be an English teacher." Interestingly, about ten congregations across America continue to adhere to this form of "Classical Reform" Judaism and use the Old Union Prayer Book, replete with Thee's and Thou's.

Edna added, "You may also have heard that our Rabbi was called "Minister," which was the custom in Germany. That was changed by Rabbi Taxay in the 1940s. Our Sisterhood was called the *Schwesterbund* [a term used by the original Reform congregations in Germany] until the 1930s." In Temple Israel, and in many other American Reform congregations, the choir sang German hymns until World War II when

it was necessary for Reform to cut its ties with its German past. However, in spite what the Nazis did to our people, many were still proud of their German cultural origins.

People came to services on the High Holy Days and on a Sabbath when they had to recite the memorial prayer for a departed loved one. The services had so much dignity and decorum. There was a magnificent organ and choir. Everything was so orderly and proper. Children were not allowed to make noise or giggle as they do today. One of Edna's friends told me, "When I took my sons to Temple, even to Sunday school, they wore white shirts and ties. That was the required dress code. My sons, and the other children, behaved like little angels. How dare the young mothers bring their children wearing jeans and T-shirts and let them run up and down the aisles! In the old days, the ushers would have told them to leave."

At a later meeting at China Gourmet, Edna said, "We didn't start Bar Mitzvahs until the 1960s, and that's when things started to change. Men started to cover their heads and wear prayer shawls, of all things! Even the Rabbi didn't wear a prayer shawl in the old days." Ira added, "In the 1960s, we started to allow people from the Conservative synagogue to join, because Temple needed more members. The decision was very controversial. We did not ordinarily socialize with those people. Their parents came from Eastern Europe, so they were more religious. Some of us felt that they wanted to turn the Temple into a conservative synagogue. We really didn't like it, but we needed the numbers. It was strictly business."

The tension between Temple's German Jews and those who came from Russia and Poland requires a bit of amplification. Some of the early members, German Jews like Edna's great-great grandfather, were counted among the city's economic elite--just a

notch below the rubber barons. Akron was quickly becoming the rubber capital of America. By the early twentieth century, the Jewish community of the city had grown as immigrants arrived seeking economic opportunity. This wave of immigration was comprised mainly of Jews from Russia and Poland. Struggling to make ends meet, they lived on the Eastside, among other poor ethnic groups.

Adhering to the customs and practices of the old country, they formed orthodox synagogues that operated out of storefronts. As Edna put it, “We had nothing in common with ‘those people.’ Our group lived on the Westside, in beautiful homes. Our neighbors were wealthy Protestants, some of whom were founders of the rubber industry. We wanted to fit in and were very private about being Jewish.” Akron was unique among medium-size cities of that era, in that there were no “red lines” or “gentlemen’s agreements” that delineated where Jews could and could not live.

However, there was a line that they could not cross. Frank Seiberling, founder of Goodyear, was a notorious anti-Semite. He established a country club within walking distance of Akron’s most prominent Episcopal Church. The membership rosters of the club and the church were virtually identical. Edna proudly told the story of how her grandfather wanted to build a Temple on a par with St. Paul’s, maybe grander. This is a fascinating case of the Jew, the perennial “other,” attempting to outdo an “in group.” But this was what the founders intended: to prove that they were every bit as affluent and prominent as the members of Seiberling’s exclusionary club. It is also important to note that this “in group” of Jews was intent on “othering” Jews of Eastern European origins. How paradoxical this was!

When the Temple was built in 1905, there was nothing distinctively Jewish about it. There were no Stars of David, Lions of Judah, or small Mezuzot on the doorposts. Inscribed on the dome were the famous words of the prophet Isaiah, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7). Aside from this universalist reference from the Hebrew Bible, passersby would not necessarily imagine that this magnificent sanctuary was the home of a Jewish congregation. But that was the intent: to build a sanctuary that looked like a magnificent Protestant church, *sans* cross.

The Temple was built as a direct response to anti-Semitism. And yet, paradoxically, it practiced its own form of exclusionism by not admitting Jews of Eastern European descent even if they managed to succeed in business. As Edna put it, “they were too ‘pushy’ and visibly Jewish. We were more private and discreet about our faith.” This behavior can be viewed as a form of “internalized anti-Semitism,” with one ethnicity feeling superior to another, even though they shared the same religious heritage. This behavior can be observed in Israel today: Jews from Europe wield social and economic power over Jews from Middle Eastern countries. In the 1920s and ‘30s there were a few exceptions to this unwritten policy: a Judge, and a family in the jewelry business that would go on to own Sterling Jewelers—one of the world’s largest chains—as well as Akron Children’s Hospital.

By the 1950s, many children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants were doing very well in business and the professions. A number of them aspired to join the Temple, as a sign of having “made it,” but the membership committee discouraged them. Their place, so the members of Temple Israel thought, was the conservative synagogue. The membership committee scrutinized an applicant’s financial records and civic reputation,

and, more often than not, found a reason to say “no.” Temple Israel wanted to be a House of Worship that was the envy of the rest of the Jewish community, comprised of an exclusive clique. But it certainly was not a “House of Prayer for all People.” It was as exclusive as the country club that Seiberling founded. Below is a picture of the old Temple in all its splendor:



Figure 5: The Old Temple Israel

Ira told me that the Temple began to change in the 1960s, in part because the children of the nucleus of German Jewish families were not returning to Akron after they left for college. The membership rules were loosened, and Jews of Eastern European descent were admitted, but only if they did well financially and belonged to the right social circles. Since Akron was America’s “Rubber City,” the economy was booming. The Rabbi during this period built the congregation to nine hundred families, almost twice the size of the congregation I inherited.

But the change was not just the result of new members who came from Eastern European roots and more traditional Jewish backgrounds. Temple Israel, and most

Reform congregations in North America were gradually reclaiming Jewish practices, such as the Bar and Bat Mitzvah, infusing more Hebrew into the services, and drawing closer to the State of Israel. Much of this cultural shift can be attributed to Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967. The victory awakened a sense of pride in Jewish peoplehood. The need to maintain Jewish identity as a private matter was fading as Jews were impacting all areas of society.

The 1960s and '70s were a period of religious and cultural awakening for the Temple. The descendants of the German Jews who founded the congregation were gradually replaced by a new generation of leaders and activists: baby boomers with Eastern European roots. Let us explore an inflection point in Temple's narrative that happened almost thirty years ago: the campaign to renovate the old Temple in 1987.

A man named Dave invited me to lunch at China Gourmet to tell me his story. His father owned a grocery and their family, Jews of Polish origins, would never have been allowed to join Temple in the old days. Dave also spoke about his best friends Sid and Dan who also came from the old neighborhood. They spent the summers at the swimming pool of the Jewish Community Center, while the Temple kids went to expensive sleep away camps or stayed with their parents at Rosemont Country Club, a small but prestigious operation, which was built by Temple members in the early 1950s.

In Dave's words:

Sid, Dan, and I did very well by the time we were forty. Go figure. I went to Kent State to become a shop teacher. The pension and benefits were attractive. Then one day, my wife and I decided to buy a couple of run-down houses as fixer-uppers. I did most of the work myself and flipped them. In a few years I stopped being a shop teacher and went into the construction business. The family who owned Sterling Jewelers asked me to build out their stores in malls all over the country, including Alaska. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would do so well.

Dan and Sid's fathers also struggled to earn a living. They went to the orthodox synagogue, even though they weren't orthodox. Then they went to Kent State together. They became CPAs and got their law degrees in night school. They started a small accounting firm which they grew into the largest practice in the region. Last year, they sold it to BDO, the national corporate accounting company. Now they spend half the year in Aspen. Dave, Sid, and Dan remained friends all the years.

Back in 1987, the Temple was in trouble. The membership was declining, and the building was in terrible shape. Dave said, "Could you imagine that they invited Sid, Dan, and me not only to join the Temple, but to take charge of the building campaign, as well? My father said he would have a heart attack if he ever set foot in a synagogue where he couldn't cover his head. Guess what: we took him to services on Yom Kippur and he had a mild heart attack."

This is how Dave told the story: "Sid, Dan, and I took charge of the building. Although the Temple was getting smaller, some of the members had a lot of money. We looked at a plot of land not far from where we would eventually build the new Temple. It was the ideal time to move." So the idea of leaving one home for another started to surface. It might have been a reasonable risk to take. The membership was down to about 600 families. But a number of them were young, and the religious school was the largest in the area. If the Temple moved closer to where they lived, it could have been possible involve them more in the congregation and attract some members from the conservative synagogue that was already too small to have a good religious school. Furthermore, because Temple was more welcoming to multi-faith families than the conservative

synagogue, the new location might have attracted a number of new people who lived nearby.

However, the old guard, the German Jews, wouldn't listen to word one of a proposal to sell Merriman Road and build a new Temple. In their minds, the sanctuary on Merriman Road was supposed to last forever, and they were clinging to the memories of a glorious past. Dave said, "We would need to raise about \$2.5 million plus the cost of the land, another million dollars, which was not a small sum in the 1980s. And fixing Merriman Road would cost about \$2.5 million."

Sid said, "I was a young CPA and attorney and I knew that building a new Temple was the right business decision. In hindsight, we really wanted to get admitted to the Temple. So we proceeded with the renovation campaign. The three of us had a little fundraising experience from our involvement in the Jewish Federation campaign. We knew we had to set an example, so each of us put down \$100,000--not bad in those days for a couple of forty-year-old guys who started with nothing. And we wanted some recognition for our donations. I wanted to name the social hall for my mother who died when I was in college."

This idea really upset the old guard. I remember Edna saying, "We were never flashy about giving money. Not a single room was named or dedicated in 1910. We were more refined and always did things more 'tastefully.'" Dave said, "Sid, Dan, and I, together with my friend at Sterling Jewelers who also came from a family of poor Russian Jews raised about \$2 million. We were about a half a million dollars short, because the old guard did not give what they could afford." Dan said, "It was an unusual

exchange: we gave money and raised more from our friends. In return, they let us into their 'club,' bestowing on us a little prestige.”

The story is told that when the Board voted to take the \$500,000 from the endowment, Ira almost had a stroke, because of an unofficial policy of not accessing those funds. Dave said, “I’ll never forget the arguments. After all the work we did and the money we contributed and raised, Sid, Dan, and I were still made to feel like outsiders. At the Board meeting, they blamed us for raiding ‘their’ endowment.”

Sid said, “At the next Board meeting, the three of us were determined to push through a motion to assess the non-givers--mostly the old guard German Jews who had money but gave little--a certain amount over a five year period. Some of them threatened to quit. A few did but most of them stayed. We were also able to recognize the people who gave large gifts by putting their names on rooms, and we put up a ‘Tree of Life’ with the names of all the contributors.”



Figure 6: Tree of Life with names of benefactors

Edna’s reaction to the Tree of Life amazed me. She said it looked “gaudy,” lowering the distinction of the Italian marble walls that dated back to the construction of

the old Temple. What amazed me was the degree to which her sense of stature and aesthetics merged.

At another lunch at China Gourmet, Dave told me, “Being in the construction business, I knew what I was talking about when I said that the old Temple would not last more than thirty years. The kind of artisans who created our magnificent dome no longer exist.” Each week was accompanied by another crisis in the building. A heavy rain or snow caused another leak in the dome. The water caused sections of carpet to buckle. Pews became unusable. The boiler broke down on more than one occasion. Our maintenance crew managed to keep the building on life support. But still the old guard was in total denial. They clung to memories of a glorious past that were embedded in the marble walls of the old Temple.

Early in my tenure, I met with a family of Gen Xers whose son was preparing to become a Bar Mitzvah. They went to Kent State from the same town in New Jersey and found good jobs in the Akron area after college. The husband Matthew said, “I really didn’t care about the building or the location when we joined in 1995. I came from a conservative background and belonging to a synagogue has always been important to me.” Julie added, “I’m not Jewish, but we agreed to raise the kids as Jews. We tried the conservative synagogue and were told that the kids would have to go through a full conversion in order to attend the religious school.” Matthew said, “Even though I grew up conservative, the Temple was more welcoming to us. The religious school was larger and stronger than the synagogue’s, and the kids were accepted as full Jews.” In the early ‘80s, the Reform Rabbinate agreed to accept the principle of “patrilineal descent,” which meant that the children of Jewish fathers, not just mothers, were Jewish.

Julie said, “The women in the Sisterhood were very nice. I wasn’t the only non-Jewish wife in the group. The kids started religious school in September. By December, I was frying potato latkes, the traditional pancakes, alongside the other women for the big Hanukkah dinner. Nobody pushed Judaism on me. But I feel like a Jew.”

Matthew added, “I also liked the fact that they welcomed us even though I wasn’t making a lot of money. Because we had three kids in the Hebrew School, they gave us a break. In turn, I did a lot of volunteer work. I built a new Sukkah Booth for the Festival of Sukkot and served as an usher at services about once a month.” Matthew continued, “Our son is about to be a Bar Mitzvah. Although I don’t care about how the Temple looks, I am upset that it is not ADA compliant. My father who’s coming up from Florida will have a hard time making it up the staircase, which I’m sure was once very grand. I hear people talking about moving. It will be tough for them, but we have to go.”

What do stories tell us about the narrative of Temple Israel? The overarching theme is about relationships and how these relationships were challenged by obstacles and change. Each time the Temple encountered an inflection point, the social ecology changed as well. The narrative begins with the story of a group of Jews who came to Akron from Germany. Even though they were bent on assimilating into the mainstream, the Temple gave them a sense of belonging, of community. When they encountered anti-Semitism, they felt much more Jewish than they realized, and built a Temple on a par with the most prominent church in town.

However, the cohesion had a paradoxical effect. Just as they were excluded from a prestigious country club, they turned Jews of Eastern European descent into the “other.” This practice gradually ended as the Temple needed more members. At the inflection

point of 1987, when the building was in dire need of repairs, three sons of parents who would never have been allowed to join the congregation became the leaders of a renovation campaign. In spite of their strong case to leave the old Temple for a new home, their words fell on deaf ears. In addition to posing a great deal of resistance, the old guard did not contribute sufficiently to complete the repairs. In spite of their accomplishments, Dave and his friends were treated like outsiders. They were viewed as men who lowered the standards--charitable and aesthetic--of the Temple, rather than saved it from ruination.

However, Temple Israel has remained the dominant Jewish institution in Akron because Dave, Sid, and Dan brought in their friends. By the time Matthew and Julie joined in 1995, the gates finally opened, and Jews of all backgrounds and multi-faith families were welcomed. Like the generations before them, the Gen Xers and Millennials, more than half of whom are multi-faith families, have found community here. Because they have brought their friends to Temple, we have had a modest uptick in membership. More importantly, the Builders and Baby Boomers came to believe that the Temple has a future, even if their own children have moved away. We have come to the next inflection point in Temple Israel's narrative: leaving Merriman Road and moving to our new home.

CHAPTER 4

BREAK SCRIPT: THE NARRATIVE FRACTURES

Who owns a congregation? Among other themes, this chapter will probe that question. Some people would answer that the membership owns their congregation; and others, the Board of Trustees and duly elected officers. And many would say that the members with great wealth possess the most power. Through the years, however, I have come to a radically different understanding of who owns a congregation. The real owners are not the people. The “owners” are the stories of the congregation that are passed down from generation to generation. These stories comprise the larger narrative of the congregation. The stories take on a life of their own, sometimes converging and other times diverging from one another.

If any individual or group possesses power in the community, it is the guardians of the stories, the Serach-like figures, like original Edna, who know where the bones are buried. As mentioned earlier, Serach was a member of the Patriarch Jacob’s original clan who went down to Egypt. She lived long enough to accompany the Israelites out of Egypt. Just before the Exodus, she reminded Moses where Joseph’s bones were buried, as if she said, “I remember. I was there.” Temple Israel has other Serach-like figures: Myrtle, who remembers every document in the archives (curiously she disputes Edna’s claim that the Temple received a letter from President Lincoln); and Mort, who can instantaneously locate every fuse and wire in the old Temple. His knowledge is invaluable, since we

leased it to a Charter School that is seeking state approval to purchase it. Meanwhile, his total recall of every inch of the building has saved us thousands of dollars.

To truly understand a congregation, especially the essential question of ownership, it is necessary to learn the narrative, beginning with the guardians and then reaching out to the newest members. It is almost like reading the Torah narrative--that is, if one believes that the Bible is an interweaving compilation of stories written and rewritten through the generations, perhaps divinely inspired, but not divinely authored. As a Reform Rabbi, I represent a tradition that emphasizes the human redaction of the Torah, viewing the whole question of authorship up to individual belief. Many Reform Rabbis see ourselves as heirs to a centuries-old process called Midrash.

When the ancient rabbinic sages read the Torah, they were fascinated by breaks in the narrative. For example, they pondered the question of why, in the Book of Exodus, five chapters describing the construction of the Tabernacle that the Israelites carried with them in their desert wanderings, seem to have been inserted in between the story of Moses's ascent up Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, and his descent from the summit, only to smash the tablets upon seeing the Israelites dancing around the golden calf. The sages were fascinated by the question of who owned the Tablets--the Israelites, all the nations of the world, or God. The answer is not simply any one of them. In a sense, the particular stories, as well as the larger narrative, own themselves. How remarkably similar is this answer to the one of who owns a congregation.

When the rabbinic imagination fell into these breaks in the script, out came Midrash. This genre of literature, which began to be written in the third century C.E., was

not merely a commentary on Torah, as many readers understand it. It was, as Neusner pointed out, a process that yielded a parallel Torah.¹ By diving into the breaks in the written Torah, the sages unearthed profound truths that possessed the weight of scripture and sometimes contradicted it.

Research on the narrative of a congregation may be viewed as a form of modern Midrash. No congregational narrative is linear. The road travelled by people of faith is not like the Autobahn, the German superhighway that hardly has a crack in the concrete. Oftentimes, a congregational narrative will have a break in the script. And out comes a narrative of concern, evoking a Midrashic meaning.

Such was the case in the story of Temple Israel. The break in the narrative probably began to emerge when new members were admitted, largely due to economic necessity. This is what transpired in 1987, when the three young men whose families came from the “other side of the tracks” were invited to join in order to lead a campaign to repair the Temple’s sanctuary on Merriman Road. In spite of their guidance that the patches would last a few decades and their fervent recommendation to move, the old guard was not ready to leave their home. And it wasn’t a financial investment that kept them there. The attachment to the old Temple reflected the power of communal memory.

The “break script,” the Midrashic moment in the narrative finally occurred on April 1, 2010, which, coincidentally, was the congregation’s 145th Anniversary. The story centers on the actions of two outsiders to the Temple’s social ecosystem, who each put down \$500,000 to buy a plot of land in the Akron suburbs that five years later would

¹ See Jacob Neusner, *Scriptures of the Oral Torah* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

become our new home. The stories of these men illuminate an ancient paradigm.

Sometimes it takes outsiders, like Moses and Aaron who were not truly members of the Israelite community in the slave pens of Egypt, to inspire the process of leave-taking, from an old home to a new one.

Gabe is a member of the Builder generation who made a fortune in scrap metal. His partner, Lou, is a Baby Boomer, who made his millions in real estate development. Although Gabe was never observant, he had been a member of the conservative synagogue. Through the years, he harbored a deep sense of resentment over the Temple's restrictive policies. In the 1960s, when he began to become successful in business, he wanted to join, but was turned down by the membership committee.

A first generation American of Russian-Jewish descent, Gabe never finished high school. During the Great Depression, he had to work to help his family survive. By the 1960s, however, he was a wealthy man. Even though his business was making millions, he did not care about mingling in the "right" social circles. This changed when Gabe's first wife died in the 1990s. His second wife was a descendant of Abraham Polsky, a wealthy merchant who was one of the Temple's founders in 1865. It was important for her to be more deeply involved in the Jewish and general community. So Gabe would have been admitted to the Temple based on her lineage and involvement. More importantly, by the 1990s, the Temple needed his money.

Lou's story is a little different. A Baby Boomer, he grew up in the Temple and has been a member for all 67 years of his life. His mother was a descendant of one of the founding German-Jewish families. But since his father was of Eastern European Jewish

background, even though he was the most prominent oral surgeon in town, the family was never part of the inner circle. This changed in the 1980s. One successful real estate venture led to the next. He was invited to serve on the Board and to be a leader of the 1987 renovation campaign.

Lou and Gabe became friendly over a business deal to build a Super-Walmart in a suburb called Fairlawn, outside of Akron. The subject of building a new Temple came up in conversation. Lou said that he knew of a large parcel of land whose owner fell victim to the recession. The price was right. The owner of the property wanted \$1 million, half of its value before 2008. Lou and Gabe agreed to put up \$500,000 each and donate the land to the Temple.

They told their financial peers, both in the Temple and in the wider Jewish community, that the magnificent sanctuary on Merriman Road that served the congregation for more than a century would cost more to repair than it would to build a new spiritual home on this site. "I'm in the business," Lou said. "I know." Gabe added: "The neighborhood is declining and young people, like my children and grandchildren, moved to the suburbs years ago. It's hard for them to get to Temple in time for services. The new plot of land is perfect, because it's where the young group lives." Gabe and Lou came to the consensus that they had been taking risks in business all their lives. And if they didn't take this risk, the Temple would cease to be.

At first, it appeared that Lou and Gabe were acting independently. However, Dave, who had served as co-chair of the 1987 renovation campaign, agreed to serve as the congregation's interim President for the crucial year of 2010, when Temple's future

would be determined. Dave was aware of Lou and Gabe's plan and enthusiastically approved it. As President, he believed that he had the discretionary authority to accept the gift. Having had experience with capital campaigns, he also understood the importance of having a "quiet phase," when the major gifts are secured. He understood the importance of Gabe and Lou talking to their friends, in order to secure large gifts from their peers. Then the public phase could be launched. The general rule is that 85% of a campaign must be accomplished privately through major gifts, before approaching the broader constituency.

The purchase of the land to build the new Temple was made during the week before Passover. This period contains a special Sabbath, *Shabbat HaGadol*, "The Great Sabbath;" and it is a long held tradition for the Rabbi to deliver a major sermon that Friday night. I felt compelled to talk about the meaning of a Talmudic statement: "If a piece of Matzah falls into your hand, don't delay. Eat it as fast as you can." It pertained to our present situation: the piece of land fell into our lap through the magnanimity of two of our members. "The time to act, to build, to leave our old home and venture into the future to a new home is now." Although I felt passionately about giving this message, I knew that it was too early to make the news public.

However, in Akron's enmeshed and entwined Jewish community, news of the land purchase spread like wildfire. In spite of the desire maintain a "quiet phase" for soliciting major gifts, Dave recognized the need for obtaining the Board's approval for a decision of this magnitude before proceeding further. Prior to calling the meeting, he spoke with the Temple's lawyer, who scrutinized the Temple's constitution. The lawyer

determined that the Board had the authority to accept the gift of land and to authorize a fundraising program to build a new Temple.

I will never forget the lunch that Dave and I had at China Gourmet right after Passover ended. It was the first non-Passover food we ate. Then we went over the composition of the Board and were dismayed by our conclusions. The Board members *thought* they controlled the Temple. In reality, however, the old guard retained ownership. Who *owns* a congregation? The answer is often not the Board or the membership. The owners of a congregation often have deep roots, going back generations. They often wield more power and influence than newer members who have great wealth.

As Ira, Edna's husband, said to me: "I was President in the 1970s. I don't want to go any more meetings. Besides, any important decisions are made among our group." Although Gabe and Lou were making tremendous contributions to the new Temple, the old guard would not turn over ownership to them. Ira and his friends fought bitterly, arguing that they could fix up the old Temple for \$2-3 million, just as they had done in 1987. But not one of them was ready to announce a significant financial commitment to the old home to make the essential repairs. That was the case in the previous renovation campaign, as well. The guardians gave far less than their fair share. The dynamics of why they imagined that their prestige was more valuable than money continues to baffle me. The Jewish tradition has long taught the precept of giving *Tsedakah*. It does not mean charity, but justice. For centuries, rich and poor alike have given *Tsedakah*, because it is the right thing to do.

In spite of the stories of resistance to Gabe and Lou that were already reverberating throughout the broader Akron Jewish Community, Dave was determined to forge ahead. At the next Board meeting, he convinced the officers to vote unanimously to accept the gift of land from Lou and Gabe, and move with a capital campaign to build a new home for Temple Israel. A sense of elation filled the congregation. Lou commissioned a famous architect to make a model of what the new Temple might look like. Many of those who previously opposed the move seemed to feel a sense of hope, even elation over what the future could bring.

But I worried. The Jewish tradition has long taught that a congregation is more than a building. It is an ingathering of relationships. In my first eight months as Rabbi of Temple Israel, I realized how fragile the relationships were that comprised it, far more fragile than those which comprised my Temple in Chicago. The reason, perhaps, was that in Chicago we had a flourishing Jewish community before the recession, whereas in Akron, our death rate far exceeded our birth rate. So if one member got upset about something, rumors about the problem became magnified and spread like wildfire.

The century of tension between the old guard and gradual inclusion of newcomers would linger for decades. For the old guard and some of their children, already Boomers, the power of memory of what once was seemed greater than the hope of what could be. And they were already mobilizing behind the scenes to unravel the Board's vote to leave their century-old spiritual home.

I wondered, did Edna and Ira take me to all those lunches at the China Gourmet during the first few months of my tenure, purely because they would want me to be their

advocate against a move, in case it would come up? Although I worked discreetly with Lou and Gabe behind the scenes, publicly I remained neutral, stating that I would be the Temple's Rabbi whether we remained on Merriman Road or moved to the new property on Springside Drive.

But I knew that my enthusiasm and support for the project would soon become public. And I also anticipated that Lou and Gabe would come to me to direct the capital campaign. Initially, they listened, but selected a consultant from Cleveland with the wrong skill set in the field of development. So the project fell into my lap. I believed that I would succeed in raising the money. But I also sought advice from mentors and friends, and the consensus was that I would inevitably become a lightning rod in the discord. For this reason, perhaps, many clergy do not relish the thought of a move, much less getting involved in a capital campaign.

After about two months, the sense of elation that was felt in the congregation came to an abrupt halt. Working in secrecy, Edna, Ira, and their friends obtained a sufficient number of signatures from members to sign a petition, required by the constitution, to call an emergency congregational meeting. I will never forget that Sunday morning. A lawyer among the negative voices brought a court reporter to record every word.

A motion was made to vote down the purchase of the land. In more than three decades in the Rabbinate, I have never attended a meeting with as much anger and acrimony as this one. The hostility was generated by the sense that Gabe, Lou, and Dave usurped what was not theirs in the first place--ownership of Temple Israel and the

authority to make a decision of this magnitude on their own. The unanimous vote of the Board to authorize the purchase of the land on Springside and proceed with a capital campaign was viewed by some as “group think” and by others as sheer manipulation.

The meeting was held in October, 2010, shortly after the Jewish Holy Days. There were whisperings that a faction would not attend services at Temple Israel. They would rent space and hire a freelance Rabbi. Dave completed his time as interim President and Janet assumed the top leadership position. It is worth mentioning that Temple is far behind other Reform congregations in having women serve in top leadership positions, both lay and professional. Janet was the second woman President in our history. Her superb interpersonal skills held the congregation together; the faction that wanted to break off for their own High Holy Day services did not gain momentum, largely because of her personal phone calls to the angriest members.

The Holy Days were behind us. But those who mobilized the congregational meeting to vote down the move to Springside insisted in holding it in the sanctuary, not the auditorium, where the Temple’s annual congregational meetings are held. Why this insistence on using sacred, not secular space? The answer perhaps was that those who demanded to put a halt to the move wanted others to remember the services, the Bar Mitzvahs and other events that were celebrated in the once truly magnificent sanctuary under the glorious dome; and pledge both never to forget, and also never to leave.

Janet, Dave, Gabe, and Lou sat on the *Bimah*, in the seats normally occupied by the Rabbi, Cantor, and lay leaders during religious services. The invectives hurled against them revealed a level of anger that I had not encountered in more than three decades as a

Rabbi. Some were furious about a few men acting on their own and others were outraged over the very idea of the move. “Why don’t we just repeat the 1987 renovation claim,” they argued, refusing to listen to the calm, logical presentation made by Lou that it would end up costing more and the new Temple would attract young, unaffiliated families by virtue of its proximity to where they live.

Janet, who is a skillful peacemaker, pushed through a vote to table the motion, and hold a formal congregational referendum in ten weeks. At the end of the meeting, as the result of Janet’s motion, the temperature seemed to go down. But as we were leaving the sanctuary, a fistfight nearly ensued between Dave and another member. They had been longtime friends and business associates. Tempers flared, however, because the other guy believed that his old friend had no right to make this decision. The mantra of those who opposed the move can be described as follows. “Who are Lou and Gabe, anyway? What right do they have to shove their decisions and their scheme down the throats of the membership?”

I maintained the position of serving as Rabbi for the entire congregation. So I spent day and night listening to both sides. Many of those who insisted on staying seemed most concerned about the memorial plaques that were inscribed with the names of their departed loved ones. Temple is about community, but it also about memory and memorialization. There is a Jewish ritual called *Yahrzeit*, meaning the anniversary of a loved one’s death. People who come to Temple only on that one Sabbath each year call the office to check and double-check that the small light next to the memorial plaque inscribed with their loved one’s name would be lit and that it would be listed in the

weekly brochure and read by the Rabbi. A person might quit the Temple if these things are not scrupulously observed, because the commandment of *Zachor*, remembrance, is embedded in our DNA.

Other people worried about what would happen to the pictures of their confirmation classes. Would they get lost in the move? Dozens of people called me just to cry over leaving the place where they celebrated the rite of passage into adulthood. These pictures had the most meaning for those who did not have a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, before Reform Judaism reclaimed these rituals, because they had no family memento or photo of the day they became Jewish adults. Although each youngster was given a Hebrew Bible, perhaps it got lost. In those days, it was not customary for families to hire photographers for their own Confirmation kids, as is common practice today.

Still others threatened to resign and others just quit the Temple, saying they were unhappy with me, the Cantor, the President, or the Executive Committee. Over time, however, when they were impressed with our palatial new Temple, many formerly angry members rejoined.

At the other end of the spectrum, people were calling to say that the decision to leave our home for a new one was the right thing to do. The move was long overdue. The old Temple spoke to the needs of a previous era, with an elevated Bimah, or altar, and immovable pews. It was majestic, expressing the grandeur of a glorious past.

However, the building was not handicap-accessible. Finding a parking space on the Holy Days or for a large Bar Mitzvah was difficult. No one wanted to walk too far, because the surrounding blocks were getting dangerous. On the one hand, people felt

nostalgia for the old neighborhood; on the other hand, we had several scary incidents. The Cantor was badly beaten one evening after choir practice by gang members who perpetually gathered at a convenience store a few blocks away. In hindsight, the move was not instigated by prejudice. Member safety and the high cost of hiring off-duty Akron police were factors, to be sure, but not major ones. As we will discuss, the Temple misses our interfaith and interracial neighbors, and we are taking steps to restore these relationships in spite of the distance from our old home.

During the weeks preceding the congregational referendum, I observed people sitting in opposing camps in different parts of the sanctuary for Shabbat services. Afterwards, the groups sat at different tables or stood in clusters at opposite ends of the social hall for the *Oneg*, or fellowship time. The people who were divided had been friends for a lifetime before the decision to move was made. And then there was corrosive gossip about how much this person gave or the other refused to give.

I feared the upcoming referendum with each passing day. The possibility of a split was very real. People from the conservative synagogue were soliciting our members to join, and a few did. For years, the relationships among Akron's three congregations had been positive. We respected one another's boundaries and did not poach each other's members. But the upcoming referendum started a synagogue war. What would the other synagogues do if we succeeded in leaving our old home for a gorgeous new Temple? Would they lose congregants because our new Temple would be a fancier place to have a Bar Mitzvah or a wedding? On the other hand, what would happen if the motion to move would be defeated? Would our self-image as Akron's most prominent congregation be

tarnished? Would we survive as a community? Or would the shattering of lifelong relationships between members be the death knell of our Temple community? The other congregations would undoubtedly gloat over our failure, and poach our people with a vengeance. I also worried about my own professionalism and sought continual guidance from mentors. The people who opposed the move trusted me with their stories and feelings. Yet it was harder and harder to remain neutral, to resist letting people know where I stood and what I felt.

The Jewish tradition has long taught that inner transformation occurs not when we come home, but when we leave one home for another. This theme runs like a golden thread through the Torah Narrative. Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden so that they will live their lives as adults, responsible for their actions and decisions. Then God comes to Abram and tells him to leave his father's house in his native land of *Ur-Kasdim* and head out to a land that God will show him. It's notable that God doesn't immediately tell Abram where he will be going. And in truth, the final destination is not that important. The critical thing is that Abraham leaves the security of home, and takes a risk--a leap of action--to enter his new home. If he had chosen to remain in the security of the place where he was born and grew up, there would be no Judaism.

At a later point in the Torah narrative, when Moses tries to negotiate with Pharaoh before the most devastating plague, the Law-giver says, "We will not know how to serve God until we get there." The teaching is that we never get "there," wherever there is. It is the act of leave-taking itself, the moment in which Abraham and his descendants choose

to leave behind the known and the comfortable for nothing more than a promise--this is the moment that the Jewish tradition defines as *real* spiritual transformation.

The ten weeks between the emergency congregational meeting and the formal vote went very quickly. The issue was not just where we would be or who we would become, the most frightening question was, would we still be a congregation, a community? In December 2010, Temple Israel held its vote. Snowbird members voted by mail. The votes were counted and recounted by two representatives of each side. It felt like we were counting chads, as in the Presidential election in Florida.

I kept wondering, what had happened to us? If the level of trust was so low, perhaps we had ceased to be a congregation. The results were narrow indeed: 52% in favor of moving and 48% opposed. A food fight nearly ensued over whether such a narrow margin constituted a mandate. Larry and Gabe lifted us out of these quandaries by each donating an additional \$500,000. These gifts instilled confidence in those who yearned to build a new Temple. However, a great deal of work would have to be done for us to become a community again.

CHAPTER 5

EMERGENCE OF A NEW NARRATIVE

Something exciting is happening in Temple Israel. A sense of spiritual renewal is in the air. We are virtually settled into our new home, but the journey has not come to an end. We are experiencing the emergence of a new narrative. Perhaps it is a new chapter in a 150 year narrative, following the fracture discussed in Chapter 4. Whichever way one conceives the change, we are a different Temple than the one I entered in 2009. The change can be experienced in many ways. To be sure, the move has impacted relationships. But it has also engendered a spirit of experimentation, a way of practicing Judaism that integrates but departs from the past. As we shall discuss in the Conclusion, the design of our new sacred space has made this sense of innovation possible. However, much of this innovation is taking place outside of our campus. It seems that we are living in the midst of the age-old tension between the permanent Temple and portable Mishkan, the simple tent.

In early January 2016, a committee named *Dorot* celebrated its fourth anniversary. This Hebrew word means “generations,” and the committee members originally included Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials. The committee was formed to be a “brain trust,” to envision the future of our congregation in the twenty-first century. Before the construction of the new Temple was complete, Dorot was created to help us fathom who we are and what we might become, as well as imagine the stories that future generations

will tell about us, especially in this period of our journey. These stories represented the real bricks and mortar of the congregation--not what the contractors were using to build our new home.

Dorot was also created to study several recent national surveys on trends in American Jewish identity and affiliation that were produced in the early twenty-first century, and consider their implications for our local context. It is important to recognize that Jews are not alone in having to contend with seismic changes in the American religious landscape. In 2010, Robert Putnam and David Campbell wrote a seminal book entitled *American Grace*.¹ The book deals largely with the issue of “religious inheritance,” the degree to which religious affiliation and identity is passed down from generation to generation. The authors describe the diminishing interest of Gen Xers and Millennials in organized religious life. In addition, they focus on the rise of the “nones,” people with no self-identified religious affiliation. By the early twenty-first century, that number skyrocketed to 25%.

By contrast, Putnam’s recent book *Our Kids* describes his own childhood in the 1950s in Port Clinton, Ohio--not far from Akron. Putnam, who eventually converted to Judaism, describes the churches in the community as places where all the youth felt relatively equal, and the percentage of “nones” was about 3%.² To gain an interesting historical perspective, it is also worth looking at *Small Town in Mass Society* by Arthur J.

¹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

² Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

Vidich.³ He came up with a similar composite of broad-based participation in mainstream Protestant churches during the same period of time, and suggested that *de rigueur* church membership served as a stabilizing influence in society. Very few people in 1950s America, especially in small towns like Port Clinton, Ohio, wanted to see themselves, or be seen by others as “nones.”

The Pew Research Center Study of 2013, entitled a “Portrait of American Jews,” reinforced the data which that was collected six years previously in a survey called “Faith Matters,” which undergirded the superb analysis Putnam performed in *American Grace*.⁴ The “Pew Study,” as it has come to be called, indicated that the percentage of Jewish “nones” was 20%, includes the Orthodox community, meaning that the percentage of Jewish Reform “nones” is much higher. Perhaps the most alarming data are an intermarriage rate of 71% and the fact that, among these multi-faith families, only 33% of their children are being raised as Jews.

Dorot was in large part to think about what these trends would mean for us after the move into our new home was accomplished. Essential questions would have to be addressed: how would we reach out to multi-faith families who lived in the area, knowing that the conventional model of membership and dues would likely be a source of further alienation; what kinds of programs would make them feel welcome; and how could we move toward the goal of being one community for Jews by birth and by choice, intra- as

³ Arthur J. Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1958).

⁴ “Portrait of American Jews,” *Pew Research Center Study 2013*, accessed 10/13/2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/>.

well as inter-married families? In the 1950s, Temple Israel was a homogenous Reform Jewish community, much like the churches that Vidich studied. Sixty years later, the landscape could not have changed more dramatically.

A long held saying describes us as the “ever-dying Jewish people.” It means that Jews continuously face periods of doom and gloom, such as the current trends that are described by the various studies; but somehow find ways to overcome the most formidable obstacles. From the beginning, Dorot proceeded with a spirit of optimism, exploring paradigms that were already flourishing in the wider American Jewish community, but would be new to Akron. For example, we experimented in what has been termed “public space” Judaism.⁵

As the name implies, it marks a radical departure in the meaning of sacred space, from the permanent edifices that Jews created in the twentieth century, and the palatial Temple that we built in the early twenty-first century, to contemporary expressions of the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle that the Israelites carried with them in the desert. This movement is also called “Big Tent” Judaism, because affiliated and unaffiliated Jews, as well as non-Jews, are welcomed into a sacred space that is constructed temporarily, in a secular place.

In the 1970s, the Lubavitch Hasidim, also known as Chabad, mastered this concept.⁶ They upset the mainstream Jewish community by lighting Hanukkah *Menorot*

⁵ “Faith Matters Survey 2006,” Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed 3/14/2016, www.ropercenter.cornell.edu.

⁶ “Big Tent Judaism: Embracing Choices Expanding Communities,” accessed 3/14/2016, www.bigtentjudaism.org

in public places, including the lawn of the White House. Chabad has flourished during the past forty years, and other Jewish movements, including Reform, have imitated their approach, because it definitely meets a need among Gen X and Millennials.

In its inception, Dorot wanted to experiment with this approach in our local context of a medium sized city in the Midwest. On Passover 2013, for example, they asked a supermarket if they could make *Matzah Brei*, the traditional dish of fried Matzahs, in the store. The idea was to captivate interest by using a “surprise factor.” Walking through the aisles, unaffiliated Jews might be attracted by an aroma that brought back childhood memories of eating Matzah Brei their grandmother's’ kitchen; and non-Jews would also be attracted by the novelty of the food.

Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, who founded “Big Tent Judaism,” predicted the kind of informal conversations that would ensue from such surprise encounters with Jewish experiences that evoked memory: “my mother made it another way,” or “in my house, we ate Matzah Brei with honey.” Sometimes non-Jews would ask why Jews eat Matzah on Passover, and an unaffiliated Jewish parent in a multi-faith relationship would recount family stories.

Olitzky points out that these activities run contrary to how the Jewish community functioned in the previous century. These “low bar,” “easy access” activities are not to be construed as membership drives. Someone has a taste of Matzah Brei and is not pushed to join the Temple a few seconds later. The key to Chabad’s burgeoning success is its de-

emphasis on formal membership; and Reform Judaism may head in a similar direction, according to Rabbi Richard Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism.⁷

Dorot also added new rituals to Temple's life. One of them was to hold a Seder on the second night of Passover that was open to the community-unaffiliated Jews and non-Jews. As the idea percolated in the Temple community, there was resistance from the old guard: "We don't do that...it sounds like they want us to become more traditional and maybe keep kosher...that's not how we used to do things."

However, the members of Dorot recognized that if the new Temple would be more than an empty shell, our community would have to embrace rituals in an authentic way. In the twenty-first century, liberal Jews, and perhaps Jewish "nones" are craving an authenticity that would have shocked the founders of the Reform movement in America. Thus, in planning the Seder, the committee did not want the ritual to devolve into a "show and tell."

The program exceeded our expectations. It *felt* right. It was authentic. And about 200 people attended, many of whom were from multi-faith families who probably would not have participated in a Seder if this was not made available. Some of our non-Jewish guests, who had attended "mock Seders" held at their churches, felt gratified to experience the real thing.

Several unaffiliated Jews and non-Jews expressed an interest in learning the recipes for favorite Passover foods like Matzah ball soup. After the holidays, members of Sisterhood provided a class, explaining variations of traditional dishes that originate from

⁷ Richard Jacobs, "The New Reform Agenda" (lecture), *URJ Biennial*, November 2015.

different cultures. Adhering to the “Big Tent” model, no one was pressured into joining the Temple. Yet a few of them did, perhaps because of the lack of pressure.

But more than anything else, Dorot got together for four years just to imagine the future. They understood that Temple will always be more than a building, and they dreamed about alternative Sabbath and Holy Day services, potluck Shabbat dinners and informal gatherings at private homes. This version of sacred space is a modern adaptation of an age-old idea of Mishkan: direct, unmediated relationship with the God who walked about the ancient Israelite encampment in the wilderness can also occur today in a living room or inside the recesses of the human heart. Many Millennials crave this form of liberal Judaism that would be more authentic, spiritual, and relational than the Reform Judaism in which they were raised.⁸

Four years have passed since the group was formed. Having lived in the new Temple for over a year, the work of this “think tank” has become more significant than ever. At the end of the anniversary breakfast, Janet quietly said: “Did you notice, Rabbi, that we were the only people over 50 in the room? The Baby Boomers we originally put on the committee have found other things to do.” Then Janet said some words that struck a chord: “It’s their Temple now. They are the ones who will carry our story forward.” Why? The answer perhaps is that the members of the Dorot intuitively grasp that we misunderstand Judaism if we think of it in terms of a faith. Judaism is about belonging to a community that has long gained its cohesion, its cultural continuity from stories. The use of stories to sustain culture is universal among humans, but it goes to the essence of

⁸ Joseph Telushkin, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem Schneerson* (New York: Harper Wade, 2014).

the Jewish experience. Without our stories that go back 3500 years, the Jewish people would have ceased to be.

Is Janet's perception shared by others? Are we experiencing a changing ownership and the emergence of a new chapter in our narrative? Is this transformation becoming widely accepted across the generational spectrum? Before we reflect on these important questions, let us explore what we have learned from our research. About 90 interviews of Temple Israel members were conducted by me and the Local Advisory Committee. The survey instrument that we employed, approved by the IRB, is Appendix 1. We also used pictures and symbols from the old Temple in the interviews to evoke memories and emotions. Sometimes the interviews themselves were a ministry, supporting people to restore their sense of belonging, of being part of a community. Perhaps our experience will be helpful to other congregations, if they make the momentous decision to move from one spiritual home to another.

The underlying purpose of the research was to study the effects of the move on relationships—between the members themselves, with the congregation, and potentially with Judaism itself. The working hypothesis was that, in spite of the theological “rightness” of leaving one home for another in the Jewish tradition, the journey forward is inherently disruptive to the cohesion of the congregation. Because a Temple must be more than a building, it is important to understand our story, and, to borrow the title of an important book by Larry Golemon, to “find the story” of Temple Israel.⁹

⁹ Larry A. Golemon, *Finding Our Story* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

The congregation chose its new location because it borders on Medina County, the fastest growing county in Ohio. It is located forty minutes south of Cleveland and people get excellent value for new homes. The traditionally Jewish suburbs of Cleveland's eastside, such as Beachwood and Shaker Heights, are much more expensive. But the conventional thinking has been that if Jewish life is important to a young family, they will make the financial stretch to live in Beachwood. Those who opposed the move used this reason to substantiate their position.

However, those who supported leaving our home contended that the long held value Jews found in living in close proximity to other Jews is much more significant for Builders and Boomers than for Gen Xers and Millennials. Young Jewish families were already living in Medina, which once was an anti-Semitic area.

But times have changed, and we have a long list of names of Jewish families who now live there. The Jewish population of Medina may never rival Beachwood's, because of its rich and varied opportunities for Jewish religious, educational, and cultural life. Of course no one can predict the future with certainty. Maybe in twenty years, Medina will become a hub of Jewish activity. In the short term, however, we believed, from the outset, that the young families who live in Medina would gradually migrate to the Temple.

This prediction turned out to be correct. In our first year in the new Temple, we attracted ten new families, all multi-faith, who wanted to send their children to Hebrew School. However, what we did not factor into our predictions was the mobility of this cohort. Let me offer a composite of one such family. He went to medical school and completed his residency in Akron. Then he did a fellowship at the Cleveland Clinic, and

after finishing the training, took a faculty position at the Clinic. Because he trained in Akron and his wife, who had no religious preference, came from elsewhere in Northeast Ohio, it was logical to buy a home just across the Medina County line, literally blocks from the Temple. If they walked to services, they would pass the home of LeBron James. His commute to the Clinic from his home in Medina is easier and shorter than it would be from Beachwood.

The leadership of Temple was grooming him for the future. He grew up in a large Reform congregation in New Jersey and was a counselor at a camp run by the Reform movement. His wife, who is not Jewish, was becoming active in the sisterhood and supported his involvement on Dorot and the Temple Board. Then one day he received an offer for a faculty/practice position at a medical school in Texas that is ranked no.1 in his specialty. He sought my advice and I told him it was an offer that he could not refuse. And so, when he announced his decision to resign from the Temple and head to Texas, a genuine sense of loss was felt throughout the congregation.

A major concern among our young families, especially those from multi-faith backgrounds, is the issue of dues. Builders and Boomers understood that synagogues have budgets and that it has been a matter of pride for them to insure that their religious institution was on sound financial footing. Gen Xers and Millennials don't see the world that way. Simply put, they resent having to pay to pray. And their non-Jewish partners sometimes grew up in churches where they simply passed the plate. The fact that the

Temple needs money to pay their children's Hebrew School instructors is not high on their list of their priorities.¹⁰

Let me paint another composite. The dues for family membership and tuition for two kids in the religious school cost about \$3000 per year. The wife, a physician, is the daughter an old Temple family who returned to Akron to be close to her parents and practice in a local medical group. The husband, a lawyer, is also Jewish, and came from New York. His family dropped out of their conservative synagogue because they felt it was not worth paying dues to a synagogue they did not use after his Bar Mitzvah. In New York and other large cities, it is possible to buy tickets for the Holy Days without belonging to the congregation. The parents of the doctor were so embarrassed by what their daughter and her husband were willing to pay that they quietly covered the difference.

Before we consider what these composites and others like them may mean for the future of Temple Israel, and perhaps other congregations across the country, let us consider the kind of Jewish community that Generation Xers and Millennials are forming among themselves. In Akron, a group calls itself "Rubber City Jews," reminiscent of the days when Akron called itself "America's Rubber City." The group includes members of both the Temple and the Conservative Synagogue. Most of their gatherings are social, but they occasionally meet in one another's homes for a potluck dinner and Sabbath service. They have gathered for a celebration of the Festival of Purim and for their own Passover Seder.

¹⁰ Ron Wolfson, *Relational Judaism* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2013).

Whether the group is more Reform or Conservative, liberal or traditional hardly seems to matter. They show up at the social events and informal religious activities because the unofficial network of “Rubber City Jews” enables them to make friends. As Putnam put it: “Americans may select their congregations because of theology...but the social investment made within the congregation appears to be what keeps them there.”¹¹ Again, the image of the portable Mishkan comes to the surface. The palatial new Temple does not yet resonate for the young generations.

The interviews conducted with members of this generational cohort suggest that although they develop relationships among themselves, they do not possess a strong sense of loyalty to the Temple as an institution. The question for this group is: “What’s in it for me and my kids?” A composite of an incident illustrates the conflicting priorities of the generations.

One intervention we employed to maintain the cohesion of the congregation before the move was to hold a series of Sunday morning “Bagels with the Board” programs in the old Temple, several months before we moved. These informal sessions were intended for members to share ideas and vent feelings. They were not well attended, and it was probably the least effective tool we used in healing the fractures within the congregation.

One Sunday, however, a group of Millennials showed up. They wanted a state-of-the-art playground to be constructed adjacent to the new Religious School wing. The idea made a lot of sense. Families could “hang out” after school was over, and perhaps we

¹¹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 174.

could run a day camp in the summer. There were no other playgrounds in the area, and perhaps it could attract new families.

The response of a Board member shocked me, especially since he had a son and grandson in the congregation. The playground would have been ideally suited for his own extended family, since they live within walking distance of the new Temple. However, the father, a Boomer, blurted out: “Do you have any idea how much a playground like that costs? Do you have the slightest idea of how it would affect our insurance premiums? Why don’t you and your friends start raising money and quit complaining!”

The young people bolted from the room. A few of us spent the rest of the day on the phone, trying to keep them from leaving the Temple. This incident had a paradoxical effect. The relationship between the Gen Xers and Millennials got stronger. Later interviews revealed that it made them determined to increase their participation in the “Rubber City Jews,” and strengthen their relationship with Judaism, but on *their* terms.

Over time an interesting relationship between the “Rubber City Jews” and the Temple unfolded. The young families, including those from the Conservative Synagogue, were eager to send their kids to our Religious School, but refused to pay anything but a token amount of dues. Historically, the Temple and the Synagogue had an informal policy of reciprocity. Through the years, many conservative families sent their kids to our Religious School because it had a larger number of kids. Now both congregations faced the same challenge: young families were unwilling to pay full dues even if they could afford it. The membership committees of the Temple and the Synagogue agreed to take it

easy on the young families, fearing that it could lead them to sever ties with institutional Judaism.

Interviews with this cohort yielded a pattern. Relationships among this generation solidified. New friends were made from within the Jewish community. However, relationships with the Temple as an institution, except for the religious school, were extremely fragile. But their connection to Judaism was significant. What they were looking for was a “Do It Yourself” approach they could use in private homes.

To the consternation of some of our Board members, I used my rabbinic discretionary funds to purchase copies of Vanessa Ochs’s important book, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* and other resources to distribute to as many young families as possible.¹² Her book is probably far and away the best resource available that connects Millennials to an authentic Judaism that is also engaging and innovative. Anyone in for a session of Torah Yoga? Ochs suggests that the connection between Torah study and Yoga practice can be found in Jewish mysticism.¹³

Since most of our Millennials are multi-faith families, I was aware that the odds of keeping their children involved in Jewish education were not great. Thus I decided to support “Rubber City Jews,” even if the idea of a “synagogue without walls”--a modern version of the portable tabernacle found in the Torah--ran contrary to everything we were trying to accomplish by building the new Temple. It is as though the age-old tension

¹² Vanessa L. Ochs, *Inventing Jewish Ritual* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007).

¹³ Ochs, 17.

between the permanent Temple and portable Mishkan is being played out in our medium-sized Midwestern city.

I also reminded my fellow Baby Boomers that there was a time in our lives when we, too, were seekers, and that DIY Judaism has roots in the 1960s. That was when the *Chavurah* small group movement began, and the Jewish Catalogue series--the first DIY guide--was published.¹⁴ There is also an abundance of evidence suggesting that many Boomers have started to become seekers again, at this stage in their lives.¹⁵ Having done well in business or the professions, many feel the desire to complete the journeys they began in the 1960s. People who participated in the marches and sit-ins for the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movements seem to have undergone a collective loss of ideals in striving for successful careers, and are now looking to regain them. And this is a phenomenal opportunity for our Temple and other Houses of Worship. The following story helps to shed light on this theme.

The idea that Janet shared with me after the fourth anniversary of the Dorot committee regarding a shift in the *ownership* of the Temple may have been premature. The Baby Boomers remain in control of Temple Israel, both formally on the Board and informally through networks of friends and business associates. Building the new Temple would have been impossible without them. Interviews with Boomers yielded some amazing insights that pertained both to them and to myself, as a member of this generational cohort.

¹⁴ Sidney Schwartz, *Jewish Megatrends* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2013).

¹⁵ Putnam, *Our Kids*, 127.

It seems that our parents contributed to buildings because they wanted recognition and affirmation. In Temple Israel, the descendants of the founders didn't need to pay for this affirmation. It ran like blood through their veins. And newcomers, particularly from Eastern European Jewish ancestry, viewed it as the achievement of a lifetime to be accepted by the Temple. Paradoxically, the Temple functioned with its own internalized anti-Semitism. It functioned as much as an exclusionary club as a House of Worship, perhaps more so. Men like Gabe and Lou paid a high price in the 1970s and '80s to be recognized and included. But as much as they contributed, they still were treated like guests rather than true members.

Baby Boomers are a generation of seekers, looking for self-actualization, meaning, and a belief they once held that they could change the world. Let me paint a composite of a woman we'll call Anne. Her husband, a successful dentist, died suddenly. Her father, a self-made millionaire who started out as a working man, died in his nineties a few months later. Anne's financial advisor suggested that she make a sizable gift to the new Temple for tax purposes. I interviewed Anne several weeks after the solicitation. She told me:

Rabbi, you have heard that I was a wild gal at Ohio State back in the '60s. Sure, I smoked pot and got arrested. Dad came down to Columbus. I don't know what he did, but I didn't have to spend the night in jail, and the arrest was never part of my permanent record. I had a VW bug, and three of us filled the car and drove all over southern Ohio. You remember the 'flower' children, Rabbi. I was one, but most people here don't know that how lucky I am. If I had gone to Kent State, I might have been one of the students who was shot by the National Guard. I was very active politically and found myself in the front lines of every student demonstration to end the war in Vietnam.

I guess my parents were worried about me, as well. I was running around with non-Jewish guys. People didn't do that so much in the 1960s, at least not publicly like I did. So my parents sent me to Israel one summer. It must have been in 1968 or '69, because the Six Day War was over, and

every guy I met told me stories of his exploits during the war. For sure, they were exaggerated. But every Israeli I lived and worked with on the Kibbutz had a sense of purpose. Everyone felt they belonged to something bigger than themselves.

Then I came home, went back to Ohio State, met Joe who was finishing dental school, and got married. We had a happy life, but somewhere along the way, I lost my ideals. Now I want to get back to feeling that I'm making a difference in the world. That's why I made the donation to the new Temple. I know the trouble we're having getting the young people to take some kind of responsibility. My cousin who lives in Los Angeles tells me that they're having the same problem in their Temple which is four times our size. Meanwhile, I don't want their children to be deprived of a good Jewish education because the parents are thinking of themselves and their needs.

As I and the members of the LAC compared notes about our interviews with the Boomers, we realized that these encounters surpassed our expectations. Originally, we figured that they wanted their name on a plaque. But they really wanted so much more. The campaign brought them back to the '60s, when they thought they could change the world. Maybe that's why they got so angry with their friends who wouldn't give or who left the Temple, and then came back without having to give. The people who started the campaign thought they were starting a movement, perhaps reclaiming the ideals they held in the '60s, but gave up as they entered the real world. The people who held out from participating in the campaign shattered the illusion that together they could finish the work that they began.

The interviews with members of the Builders Generation took us deep into the sea of Jewish values. Earlier, I spoke about a couple of men in that generation, without whom the new Temple would never have been built. But there were also elderly people who outlived their savings and participated in the Campaign, even though they subsisted on very tight budgets.

Virtually every Builder we interviewed wanted to meet in the new Temple. The first thing they wanted to see was a picture of their confirmation class, taken when they were 16 years old. Somehow, we anticipated this, and packed each picture ourselves, not passing the job to the commercial mover. Taking these elderly people, mostly women, to see their confirmation class picture on a wall in the new Temple was probably the most important act of ministry we performed in the process of leaving one home for a new one.

One story stands out. Let's paint a composite of a woman named Miriam. Her husband died last summer and she must be 95. Miriam came from an old Temple family. She met her husband during the War. He was a Naval officer on a special assignment with Goodyear. Mort was an extremely bright man, a graduate of MIT, at a time when the school had a Jewish quota. He was a poor boy from Baltimore. Right after the war he married Miriam and they made their home in Akron.

As gifted as Mort was academically, he had difficulty adapting to the business world. In hindsight, he often said that he should have used his GI Bill benefits to earn his Ph.D. and pursue an academic career. Instead, he joined Miriam's older brother in the construction business. They didn't get along and parted ways after Mort returned from being recalled by the Navy for the Korean War. Through the years, he made a decent living by building a strip mall here and an apartment building there. He never had the stature to be President of the Temple, but he was a worker on every committee and respected by everyone.

Why am I telling you this story? When the Temple underwent the major renovation project in 1987, Mort's business was slow. So he devoted every day to

overseeing the subcontractors, making sure they did it right. For 25 years Mort kept the blueprints in his possession. He knew where every fuse was and where all the wires were connected (He was a certified electrical engineer). If anyone had the right to cling to the old Temple, it was Mort, for he knew and loved the building more than anyone. Also, in 1987, he strongly advocated for building a new Temple, along with a few other men.

At that fiery meeting in the early months of Janet's Presidency, Mort got up and explained, in his logical engineer's way, why remaining at the old Temple was no longer tenable. Everyone revered and trusted him. His voice gave credibility to everyone who wanted to leave and helped to diffuse the anger of those who wanted to stay. Without his words of wisdom, I'm not sure that the Temple would have emerged from that meeting as a community.

With the passing of people like Edna, and with the Baby Boomers having made their transformative gifts to build the new Temple, perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a new narrative. And if we are, we find ourselves in the midst of a tension about the meaning of sacred place. We just raised more than \$7 million to build a Temple that would be on a par with the great synagogues of our country. However, our Gen Xers and Millennials want a DIY Judaism that meets in people's homes, where they are.

Ironically, it is curious to note that this term, DIY Judaism, dates back to the First Jewish Catalogue of 1965.¹⁶ Although they are willing to acknowledge the need for a state of the art educational facility in the new Temple, no one in this cohort is prepared to take responsibility for raising money for it, even though some of them inherited the

¹⁶ Richard Siegel and Michael Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalog* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965).

means, and maintain relationships with young families that are fortunate to be in such circumstances. So if we are turning the page to a new chapter in our Temple's narrative, it too will be filled with its own formidable responsibilities, divergent points of view, and intergenerational conflicts.

Most importantly, future generations must come to the realization that Judaism is more than a religion. What binds us together are the stories we pass down from generation to generation. If these stories are widely held, not just in the possession of a core group of guardians, then Temple Israel will retain the vitality required to leave its new home for another one, because history teaches that such a time will inevitably come.

CONCLUSION

MOVING BEYOND THE NEW TEMPLE AND TOWARD OUR FUTURE

Our celebration of Hanukkah in 2015 was marked by the revamping and the renewal of a ritual that dates back about a century. The change did not concern lighting the *Hanukkiyah*, the eight-branch candelabrum, eating *latkes*, the traditional potato pancakes, or spinning the *dreidel*, the game of “top” that is fun for children of all ages. Rather, the innovation concerned a shift in the timing of the ritual of our Consecration service from a Sabbath in late September at the end of the High Holy Day season to the Sabbath that falls during the eight-day Festival of Hanukkah. This shift was possible because Consecration has no theological or Jewish legal significance. The early Reformers of the nineteenth century created the custom, perhaps imitating practices of German Protestant churches of that era.

In spite of the service’s lack of religious foundations, the shift in the timing of Consecration had meaning in terms of the story of Hanukkah. The Hebrew name means “dedication.” Just as the Maccabees rededicated the Temple, our youngest students were being consecrated and dedicated to begin their religious training. The accessibility of the Bimah and the openness of sacred space in our new Temple made the shift in this ritual an enjoyable experience for people of all ages.

Last year, during the research phase of the project, we used pictures of Consecration and other classes dating back to the 1930s, as well as memorabilia that are

much older, as a means of eliciting memories of the Temple's past. Professor Douglas Harper of Duquesne University has addressed the subject of "photo elicitation of memory." Suggesting that it has a physiological basis, he wrote "the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts of the brain that process verbal information. Thus, images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words alone."¹ Our experience with the use of pictures demonstrated how powerfully they evoke memory. But no consecration picture on the walls of the Temple looked like this before:



Figure 7: Hanukkah Celebration 2015

During that wonderful celebration in December, 2015, I found myself thinking about a grande dame who visited the old Temple regularly and always looked at the Consecration pictures that dated back to the 1930s and '40s, perhaps remembering the days of her youth. Invariably, she said, "The children were all dressed up. Wearing white,

¹ Douglas Harper, "Talking About Pictures: A Case For Photo Elicitation," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002).

they looked like little angels. They behaved so well, not like children today. Mrs. Bressler, our Head Teacher for decades, was from the old school--very strict.”

Stories about Mrs. Bressler are vividly remembered by our Baby Boomers, as well. Every Sunday they were afraid that she would call their parents for the most minor infraction. Often they snuck out of Sunday School through a secret opening to buy candy from a store a few blocks away. If they were caught, she would march them into the Rabbi’s study. And if the Rabbi called their parents, they really got into trouble.

Mrs. Bressler was her strictest self at the Consecration service. The grande dame would remind me: “Mrs. Bressler taught them to respect the decorum of our Temple. Not one of our children dared to step out of line or giggle as they processed down the aisle. Each girl put a white flower in a vase. They all said a prayer--in English, of course--and the Rabbi blessed them....but now the children run all over the sanctuary. Their parents refuse to control them.” I have a vivid mental image of the children carefully climbing the steep steps up to the “Altar”--the term used for the Bimah in Reform Judaism until the 1960s--in the Consecration services that I led in the old Temple.

The stories of Gen Xers and Millennials unfold in a direction that is the diametric opposite of their parents. I hear them say: “We want our kids to have fun in services. This way they’ll feel comfortable with Judaism when they grow up. It’s good that the Rabbi lets them run around. We would never have been allowed to do that. As far as Consecration goes, the service was totally boring. We didn’t want to go when we were kids. Our parents said we had to, but we won’t force our children. Besides, we both work.

On Friday evening, we're too tired to put on dressy clothes ourselves, let alone make the boys wear starched white shirts and ties and the girls wear fancy dresses."

The experience of my generation of Rabbis reflects this seismic change in parenting practice, as well as the old Reform ideal of "dignity and decorum" in the sanctuary. When we began our careers, parents took children out of the sanctuary if they made the slightest noise. Parents were not permitted to take their very little ones to services, in order to maintain "dignity and decorum" in the sanctuary. Towards the end of our careers, however, we encourage the kids to come into the sanctuary and have a good time. Even so, I and many of my contemporaries maintain the practice of having them leave during the sermon and the *Kaddish* (memorial prayer) which happen at the end of the service.

Last year, as the Temple settled into our new home, there was a positive buzz in the air. Families who had never identified as Jews started to come to activities geared for parents with young children. These activities did not require their joining the Temple. Despite opposition from some of the older members that they were getting a free ride, we contended that these "low bar," no-strings-attached programs would be the most effective way to begin the process of engaging them in the future. Since 70% of these families represent a blending of faith traditions, the process of engagement and affiliation will take time. But we can facilitate the process if we afford them the opportunity to make relationships with their contemporaries, which include both intra-and interfaith families.²

² See Sidney Schwarz, *Finding a Spiritual Home: How a New Generation of Jews Can Transform the American Synagogue* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights, 2003).

One of our benefactors who made a substantial commitment to the new Temple grasped this truth, and decided to subsidize the first three years of religious school tuition, as long as the young families made a token contribution toward their Temple dues. The result was the largest group of religious school students in my seven-year tenure. And virtually all of the new ones came to Consecration. The dress code was casual but neat. Take a look closely at the Bimah, if you will, and notice that it is low to the ground. It is also wide enough for a group of youngsters to get a little rambunctious and enjoy themselves:



Figure 8: Temple Israel's new Bimah

By contrast, the Bimah in the old sanctuary was barely wide enough for the Rabbi and Cantor and it was so elevated from the ground that I constantly feared that children would fall off during the service. Now the Bimah is a place for a group of lay people--not just the clergy--to feel closer to the sacred and to one another. The message we told the

architect to convey is that the entire Temple is about relationships. More than the Temple, relationships are the very essence of Judaism. Recalling Martin Buber, “In the beginning is the relationship.”

The man standing to the right of the Ark in *Figure 8* has an interesting story. Coming to Akron from New York after completing his radiology training 50 years ago, he has become a fixture of the Jewish and general communities. After retirement, he has travelled to third world countries to teach breast imaging to local physicians. I invited him to stand on the Bimah at this special service not only because he displays the highest ideals of *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world, but also because the *Hanukkiyah* we lit on that special night was a gift from him to the Temple. He purchased it in Israel shortly after the Yom Kippur War of 1973, when he went there to assist Israeli physicians who were overwhelmed by the numbers of patients who needed care. His presence at the Consecration service added a certain aura, a God-engendered story, so to speak, that not only linked the generations within the congregations, but also the congregation to the wider experience and responsibility of the Jewish people.

Early in the process of designing this thesis, we posed the research questions: what interventions can be employed to ameliorate the discord that inevitably accompanies a move, interventions which can also potentially empower the community to rise to a higher plane of identity and purpose during this daunting period of time? The answer circles back to the realization that Jews were a people before they had a religion; and belonging to the people and the community have always been more important than believing. Thus we designed the Temple to have an ambience where these relationships

could grow organically. The social ecology, the tapestry of human relationships inevitably changes after a move, but the fabric can be made more resilient and durable if we do the right and the Jewish things in the course of the journey.

Nearly two years ago, as the finishing touches were being put on the Temple, we wondered if we would emerge from the turmoil as a cohesive community, sharing a compelling vision and purpose. Some of us were aware of the risk we took: would the \$7 million we raised have been for naught? As it turned out, the risk and the conflicts were worth it. When I enter the sanctuary I have a glimpse of a future of light that beams through the one hundred-year-old stained glass windows that we brought with us from the old Temple.

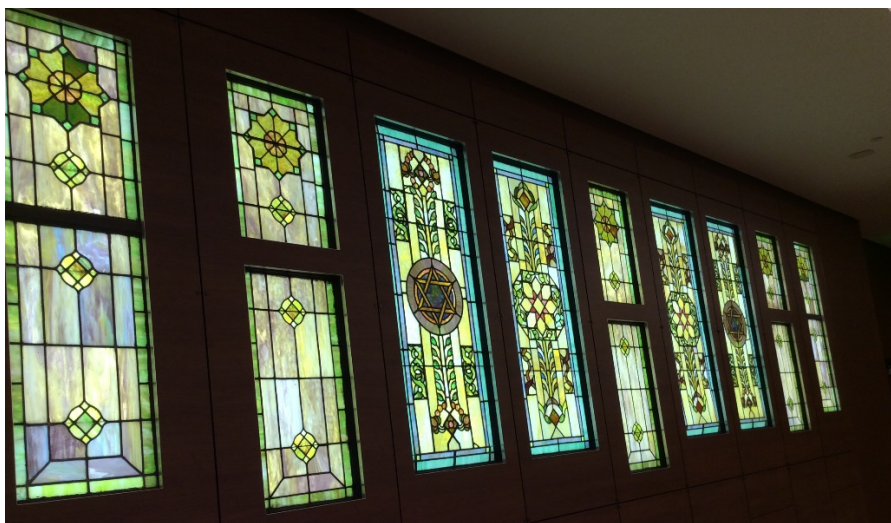


Figure 9: 1905 windows in the new sanctuary

Fast forward to the present. A few of our families cling to the idea of “Classical Reform Judaism,” in which the performance of ritual and adherence to Jewish law are totally optional. In planning for the dinner before the Consecration service, Sisterhood

learned that some families adamantly insisted on having sour cream with their potato pancakes, the traditional Hanukkah latkes alongside the main course of brisket of beef, which violates the Biblical prohibition against eating meat and milk. At the same time more and more of our members are searching for a Judaism that feels authentic. Chabad understood this and it remains a key ingredient of their success. And so the Sisterhood scoured the markets of Akron and Cleveland to find *faux* sour cream to satisfy the people that we were adhering to some semblance of Kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws. Temple Israel, like many Reform congregations, is headed in the direction of more traditionally observant Jewish practice. The “sour cream war” was a signal that Reform Judaism, both in our Temple and on the national level, must convey a rich sense of authenticity if it is to thrive in the twenty-first century.

I plan to retire from Temple Israel in the summer of 2016, and my successor will be from a generation younger than me. Reform Rabbis in their 30’s and early 40’s tend to be more traditionally observant than my contemporaries. For years, Temple Israel clung to vestiges of its Classical Reform past. Cookbooks printed by Sisterhood in the 1950s contained dishes made from shellfish. Pork was forbidden, but crab and shrimp were acceptable. At Bar Mitzvah parties held at the Temple, these old ways sometimes prevail. But they are slowly coming to an end. I hope that the “sour cream war” of 2015 will never be repeated, and that I will succeed in engendering a more traditional environment for the younger colleague who will follow me.

My successor has already been chosen. There was a great deal of competition for the position, because our accomplishment of building a palatial new Temple became

widely known in the Reform movement. The young Rabbis who were invited for an interview stated how much the new Temple was a major factor in their search.

But I want to leave my successor more than a building. I want to leave him with an understanding of what it meant to leave one beloved home for another, and the effects on relationships that inevitably happen in such a period of transition and change. I would like to leave him with a copy of this thesis, to impart to him the lessons that I learned.

One lesson is the opposite of what he was taught in seminary. Judaism is not about going home. It is the story of a people that leave one home for another. Jewish history is filled with stories of involuntary leave-taking, times when people had to escape to save their lives. Is this not what happened in the years before the Holocaust? Those who did not see that Nazism was anything but a phenomenon that would blow over, and those who could not obtain an exit visa from Germany ultimately perished.

However, in the American experience, leave-taking happens for other reasons. Sometimes, as in Temple Israel's story, the leave-taking happened because a group was determined to build a magnificent new building in spite of powerful memories that called on others to stay. That was undoubtedly the dream of those who built the old Temple and perhaps they also experienced resistance from those who wanted to remain in the first Temple Israel building on Howard Street. We have no data to document this, but from the days of the Torah to the present, people resist leave-taking and change because the pull of memory is so powerful. The builders of the Temple on Merriman Road thought they built a House of God that would last forever, and its 105 years of service to the Jewish

community of Akron, Ohio was not an insignificant span of time. The builders of the new Temple have the same dream.

But the more important lesson I will teach my young colleague is the effect of the move on relationships. The wounds have almost healed, but not completely. Members of the Builder generation remain divided, even though the most vociferous among those who bitterly fought against the move have passed away. The source of tension in this cohort predates the campaign to renovate the old Temple in 1987. The Temple was built by Jews of German ancestry as a reaction to the building of an anti-Semitic country club, but it quickly adopted its own form of internal anti-Semitism by excluding Jews of Eastern European origin. The tension between the old guard that believes it still *owns* the Temple and the “newcomers,” Jews of Eastern European origin, who are now in their 80s and ‘90s and contributed a great deal of money in the past and present order to be accepted into the “club” persists to this day.

This tension was passed down to the next generation, the Baby Boomers. The major source of conflict in this cohort was not as much over lineage as it was over the capital campaign. Longtime friendships were broken over who contributed substantially and who, in their eyes, did not contribute sufficiently, or at all. Some of the leaders of the campaign for the new Temple were successful Boomers of Eastern European origins who were recruited to join in order to lead the renovation campaign of 1987. An enmity persists between them and Builders who refused to contribute to the new Temple, which they feel is not theirs.

The Gen Xers and Millennials are cohorts that are the most enigmatic. On the one hand, they want a first-class religious education facility for their children; on the other, very few are stepping forward to take responsibility for owning and paying for it in the future. The formation of “Rubber City Jews” may be a sign that they are seeking not a palatial Temple that will last forever, but a portable Mishkan, a simple tent that might be set up, so to speak, for a dinner followed by a brief service in a private home. Although some Boomers sought out a form of DIY Judaism in the 1960s, the concept has truly come alive in their children’s generation.

Another lesson for my successor concerns the interventions we employed, as we journeyed from one home to another. The most effective were the interviews themselves, particularly those that used pictures and other memorabilia to evoke memories. The fact that our brains are wired that way substantiates the use of this methodology in other pastoral contexts. The interviews were not just the foundation of the research for this thesis; performing the surveys was a Mitzvah, the right thing and the Jewish thing to do. It was a ministry that enabled us to persevere as a community. My successor will need to continue this process. Although the new Temple has been built, the journey is not complete. A long held Jewish tradition is that the journey of our people, our community will never be complete, for it does not end in a particular place. Leaving one home for another is part and parcel of the Jewish experience.

While I understand the aspirations of the Gen Xers and Millennials, the new Rabbi who is their contemporary will be more suited to meet their needs. One of the most important interventions I employed was to support “Rubber City Jews” and other clusters

of young people who wanted to practice their Judaism in a portable Mishkan, often their living rooms, remaining loosely connected to Temple and in some instances the conservative synagogue. They are excited about using a DIY approach to Judaism to inform their religious practice.

My support for their aspirations was worth the pushback I received from those who built the Temple. My successor will need to further educate them that some form of combination of small group and Temple affiliation is both right and Jewish. The new Rabbi will also need to educate his cohort that they need the Boomers who have the resources and the influence to lower, if not eliminate the boundaries between the movements that broadly comprise liberal Judaism.

In a recent visit to Akron, he wanted to learn how I was able to ask a man who had already given \$2 million for the new Temple to give another two or three hundred thousand to cover the budgetary shortfall in our religious school. I told him that that the donors will be around for a while, and advised that he not get enmeshed in fundraising. As a young person with a great career ahead of him, he needed to know that the process is fraught with risk.

His energies should focus on nurturing relationships with the clusters of young people who are seeking a form of Judaism that may prove to be the opposite of the magnificent Temple that we built. The direction in which he proceeds will be his choice, and he needs to ready himself for another thing they don't teach in seminary: a theology of risk, which is often the right and the Jewish approach to the confounding

circumstances and omnipresent ambiguity, both internal and external, in which most contemporary American synagogues must function.

Perhaps these lessons learned have implications for the Reform movement as a whole. We talk about “relational Judaism” and “audacious hospitality” at our national conventions. But we fall short in grasping the truth that these things necessitate a theology of risk. The Torah tells us to care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. Yet we fail to fulfill this Mitzvah when we have membership committees focused on enticing young lawyers and physicians to become members, and then the volunteers become dejected to learn of their crushing student debt that inhibits their ability to pay dues.

What are some solutions? We have learned from Chabad’s burgeoning success of displaying Judaism in the public square. Although we must guard the separation of Church and State, which Chabad does not, holding fried Matzah demonstrations in supermarkets does not breach the church-state divide.

If I could have one more wish for Reform Judaism, it would be this. There was a time that seems like yesterday or the day before, when we Boomers were seekers who believed that we could change the world. Along the way we lost these ideals. The time has come to reclaim them, to resume the journey walking hand-in-hand with family members and good friends. Judaism has long taught that we cannot reclaim our stories in isolation. It can happen only in relationship with others. Some of us have the disposable time and treasure to sustain the Jewish institutions for the younger generations until they are ready to take ownership and responsibility. To meet this challenge we need the

support of the movement. The focus must not only be on attracting new members and young families.

The “right” and the Jewish thing to do is often the human thing to do, in the broadest sense. The Torah teaches that Adam and Eve had to leave the garden in order to become responsible adults. In other words, the need to leave the safety and security of home is a large part of what makes us truly human. The Torah also tells us that the covenantal relationship is inherently a risk. The God of all does not want us to follow blindly and offers no guarantees. God wants not just our faith, but our belonging in a community. And the communities we build are never static. Whether it is a glorious, permanent sanctuary or a portable Mishkan, we cannot exempt ourselves from the responsibility to build a place for the sacred in which God will say: “I want to dwell in your midst. I want to be your neighbor.”

APPENDIX: SURVEY

1. Please tell us about your family's history in the Akron Jewish Community. (When did your family get here? Which congregation did they join? When and why did they join Temple Israel?)
2. Tell us about important events in your family's life in Temple Israel. What was your and your immediate family's most important memory?
3. What is your dearest memory of the old Temple? Which relationships did you form there? What else was important to you in the old Temple (use artifacts to evoke memories)?
4. What is special about Temple Israel that make it different from other Temples you have been to?
5. How much of this specialness has to do with the old Temple itself, as opposed to the people-clergy and lay people?
6. We moved into the new Building on Yom Kippur. Tell us about your thoughts before the move—what were you thinking, feeling, and imaging?

7. We have been in the Temple for almost one year. How have things changed since the move? What things happened that made the move difficult? What things helped you to accept the move?

8. What could have been done better?

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