

Kol Sasson Kol Nidrei Appeal 2013 – Daniel Weinberg

I am honored and humbled to speak to you today, as we prepare to fully enter into a new year as a community. This year is especially significant, as we are preparing to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Kol Sasson Congregation. What an incredible milestone it is to reach 10 years old. I know. I spend a lot of time with 10-year-olds. 10 year olds are on the cusp of adolescence, beginning to assert independence, but still holding on to certain aspects of childhood. A 10 year old is no longer a baby, but is certainly not yet an adult. We have come far in our life, but we still have a long way to go.

The first 10 years of life we change and grow more than the all the rest of our lives.

Everything is new.

Little is predetermined.

Our support systems are clear, we're not responsible for much, and if we fall there's not far to go.

But, we lay the foundation for the future.

It is a LOT of work to be the parent of a small child.

You have to be there all the time just to make sure the basics are taken care of. At the beginning, you have this living, breathing creature in front of you who is completely dependent on you for his every need. It's an *awesome* responsibility. Eventually, this infant begins to slowly build independence. First they crawl and then they walk.

The work, however, doesn't get any easier. There are messes to clean up, noses to wipe, diapers to change, tears to dry and much more.

But, even though the work is endless, the rewards are also without measure. Watching a small child begin to develop language, to recognize the world around, establish a place within that world, to begin to gain control over motor skills – eating, dressing, crawling, walking, running – are each nothing short of miraculous. We experience so many emotions while watching a child take his/her first steps. Pride in his progress towards autonomy, anxiety over the increased dangers she will experience through her newfound independence, and comfort in the knowledge that while he will fall down, he doesn't have far to go, and you are still there to pick him up again.

Those involved in the early days of Kol Sasson, can also relate.

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Kol Sasson first met on a Friday night in December of 2003. 4 years later, in January of 2008, we began meeting every Shabbat morning. Like a small child, those first few years were tenuous. We were a fragile community, needing the constant work of our core members just to get a minyan. We met sporadically at first, and occasionally had to cancel due to lack of participation. Slowly, we began to meet more regularly, but like a baby is dependent on parents for her every need, Kol Sasson progressed as a result of the sheer will power of our founders.

Erik Erikson was a 20th century psychologist and psychoanalyst, known for his theory on psycho-social development. Erikson's stages of psycho-social development explain eight stages through which a healthily developing human should pass. In each stage, the person confronts, and hopefully masters, new challenges. In Erikson's theory, the primary conflict of this early stage of development is autonomy vs. shame and doubt. The existential question is, "Is it okay to be me?"

We weren't even to the point of forming our identity; we were simply struggling to exist. We didn't yet have a consistent meeting place. We didn't even meet on a consistent basis at first. But we were here, and we knew that this was the beginning of something significant. In 2006, we solidified our existence by incorporating as a 501c3 organization and holding our first High Holiday services.

The existential question in Erikson's next stage is, "Is it okay for me to do, move, and act?" These years – from approximately 2006-2008 - were spent establishing the basic elements of who we are. Our existence had been solidified, but it still wasn't clear what that meant. We elected officers, began meeting weekly for Shacharit on Shabbat and chagim, started having weekly Kiddush, children's programming, membership dues, engaged a rabbinic advisor, etc... Nevertheless, we still struggled to get a minyan weekly. We often had to hire someone to leyn. And, as an institution, we continued to prosper entirely dependent on the whim and will of a few core members.

During this time, however, we also established a mission statement.

Our mission is to support, encourage, inspire, and transform Jewish lives.

There it is. We had established a purpose, allowing us to move on to our next stage of development.

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Erikson's next stage is industry vs. inferiority, and asks, "Can I make it in the world of people and things?" Not only did we now solidly exist as a community, but we had also established a purpose. Now we could begin looking outward. We began growing our community, reaching out to others to join, and establishing relationships with other individuals and organizations. We sent members to JOFA conferences and Independent Minyan Conferences. We developed strategic relationships with the Center for Jewish Mindfulness, Limmud Chicago and Uri L'Tzedek. We also learned from *individuals with unique and provocative perspectives on emerging movements and contemporary issues facing observant Jews*. In addition to our own talented teachers, over the course of this time period, we welcomed Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Maharats Rachel Kohl-Finegold and Ruth Balinsky Friedman; David Shyovitz, Ruth Messinger, Simmy Chavel, Samuel Klein; Rabbis Daniel Sperber, Elie Holzer, Josh Feigelson, Sam Feinsmith, Marty Lockshin, Ari Hart, Levi Lauer, and others.

During this time, we also further solidified our infrastructure. We established a kashrut policy with the goal of making our community as inclusive as possible, while still being true to our guiding principles. We ratified by-laws and passed our first official, annual budget. All of this has brought us to our 10th year.

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When Elie Holzer was here, he talked about the work it takes to get to the milestone of 10 years and he offered us a blessing. He talked about the difference between a pit, *bor*, to collect water and a well, *be'er*. In ancient civilizations, the most important thing to a community was its water source. If the water source was outside of the walls of the village, they would have to dig a cistern – a *bor* – and fill it with water. This cistern required constant attention; it had to be refilled regularly. Without this attention, the *bor* would dry up, and the community would die.

He contrasted that with a similar word *be'er*, a well. While both are used for collecting water, the difference is that when you dig a well, it connects directly to an underground source of water. It does not need to be constantly replenished; a *be'er* is self-sustaining.

The other difference between *bor* and *be'er* that Elie referred to is spelling. *Bor* is spelled bet-vav-resh, while *be'er* is spelled bet-alef-resh. If you picture the aleph, the vav is slanted and there's a little yud at the top. The yud stands for 10 and represents our 10 years.

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As Sarah and I were discussing this, we looked at the aleph and thought we could see even more. The vav on a slant reminded us of a mezuzah surrounded by two yuds on each side. We all know the story of the compromise that led the mezuzah to be neither completely vertical, nor completely horizontal. The Mishna Avot, chapter 5, says that the conflict of Hillel and Shammai is, “Machloket L’Shem Shamayim,” a conflict or disagreement in the name of heaven. The Alef in Be’er also represents a compromise surrounded on both sides by the divine presence.

To turn the *bor* into a *be’er* we have learned to compromise, build consensus, and value every member of our community. We have also learned to do this work “l’shem shamayim,” by allowing G-d to surround us on each side.

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Once you move from a *bor* to a *be’er*, the Sfat Emet uses a story from Bereshit to talk about how to access the water contained in the *be’er*. The Torah describes how Jacob arrives in Lavan’s village and sees the shepherds standing around the well with their sheep. He asks them “Why are you standing around and not watering your sheep?” They point to a large stone on top of the well. The stone is too heavy for one or two men to roll off; they have to wait until all the shepherds have arrived and together they move it. Jacob asks them if they know a man named Lavan in their town. They answer “yes, we know him, and in fact, here comes his daughter Rachel.” Jacob looks at Rachel, is struck by her beauty, and inspired by the sight of her, Jacob single-handedly rolls the stone off the well and invites the shepherds to water their sheep.

Those of us who have read this story, usually interpret it as an account of a young man trying to impress an attractive woman. But the Sfat Emet says:

“Yesh b’chol davar nekudah hanotenet hayyim v’zeh be’er basadeh.”

The well is not simply a well. It symbolizes the source of everything that makes life possible and worth living. And the stone is not just a stone. It symbolizes all the things that block our access to those life-giving waters. Our challenge, says the S’fat Emet, is to do what Jacob did, to summon all of our strength and remove those stones that block the well.

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We as individuals, and as a community, need to ask ourselves what are some of the stones that we have to lift out of the way so that we can reach the water in the well?

Rabbi Harold Kushner further develops this idea. He says:

In the scene in the Torah, Jacob says to the shepherds, “Why are you standing around in the hot sun? There is water right in front of you. Drink it. Refresh yourselves and your flocks. You’ll feel better.” They answer him “You’re right. We’re thirsty, our sheep are thirsty and some cold water would taste wonderful. But that large boulder is blocking our access to it. We can’t move it.’ Jacob rolls the stone off the well and says to them “You see, it’s not as hard as you thought. Believe in yourselves, believe in a source of strength beyond yourselves, and you’ll be surprised by what you can accomplish.’

Which brings us to the next stage in our development... adolescence. Erikson labels the crisis of this next stage as “identity vs. role confusion,” and the existential question is “who am I and what can I be?”

Standing on the cusp of adolescence can be a scary place. The immediate future appears to hold challenge, conflict, and turmoil. Adolescence is a time of change, and most of it isn’t easy. The good news is that the outcome of adolescence is full-fledged, independent adulthood, however, most 10-year-olds are not able to have this perspective.

Most 10-year olds are caught up in the drama of the day-to-day. They can’t fully grasp what’s on the other side. And that’s appropriate. It’s a time to explore and grow and make mistakes.

As an organization, we also want to spend these years learning, growing, exploring, making and learning from mistakes, and broadening our horizons. But unlike an adolescent child, we as an organization do comprehend that on the other side is adulthood. Possibly to the dismay of some parents in the room, few 10-year old children sit down to come up with a plan for where they want to be in five to ten years. We on the other hand are fortunate to have the chance to do that.

Because we are about to embark on a strategic planning process, I’d like you to take a moment and imagine what Kol Sasson looks like 10 years from now.

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We are celebrating our 20th anniversary; an adult in the community.

What do you see? What is our voice? What is our role?

How have we transformed lives? Impacted the greater community? Our families? Ourselves? Skokie? The world?

When Matan Lieberman is a freshman in college, how will he describe to the other students on campus what Kol Sasson is?

Further - what will it mean to be a partnership minyan?

What is our role in that conversation?

What will our relationship be with other partnership minyanim in the world?

How will we impact the institutions around us? How will we go beyond a group that basically just gets together for a few hours a week?

How will we cultivate high quality family and intergenerational experiences?

Will we be part of creating new institutions or helping to change existing ones?

How will we be a thought leader? How will we advance the idea of using **critical inquiry** to approach Jewish life within the traditional framework of halacha?

Many of our members already write and post articles of interest online. How will we harness our individual efforts and join forces? Will we create a Kol Sasson blog where articles, questions, etc. are posted by members for people to read, discuss, and write about? Or maybe we'll create ways to continue processing our divrei torah with a broader audience during the week?

How will we continue to imbue our tefillah with beauty and kavana? Will we meet to daven more often? How will we innovate so that we stay fresh and relevant? How will we learn and teach new melodies to expand our knowledge base

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collectively and individually? Will we send members to conferences? Will we build an online repository of davening resources and melodies?

What will it mean to be part of the kol sasson community? How will we support and nurture our community? How will we be good global citizens? How will we help strengthen other similar communities? How will we help those who are struggling or in pain? How will we celebrate our simchas and successes together?

And what structures do we need to have in place so that we can carry out our mission? How can we set ourselves up to have all the tools required to be successful?

- Do we need our own Torahs?
- Do we need to hire professionals?
- Do we need our own physical space?

(after all, growing up does eventually mean moving out of your parents' basement)

How do we get our message out? What's our brand? Do we need a new virtual space? A new website? A Logo?

My charge to you tonight and as we work through the strategic planning process is to think about these important questions.

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I can happily say that our fiscal house is in order. We've had something like a 40% increase in membership over the past few years and we continue to grow rapidly. Our membership dues cover our weekly expenses and allow us to maintain our status quo.

The appeal I am making tonight is not for money for our day to day. Tonight - I'd like you to make a pledge towards our future.

Towards our potential.

Towards the strength and power that this amazing collection of people can harness when we work together.

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I want you to pledge money in support of the vision of our 20-year-old self... Toward the idea that Kol Sasson as an adult will be a leader. A strong voice.

A voice that supports, encourages, inspires, and transforms Jewish lives.

We each have our own personal vision for what that 20-year-old looks like. Like the mezuzah, we are going to spend time together compromising and figuring out what the collective vision is. We will likely have disagreements in the process, but we must remember and ensure that the work we do is *l'shem shamayim*, as we continue on our journey building this holy community together.