

Dear Rabbis, teachers, family, and friends....

Becoming a part of this minyan was a very simple choice. Close walking distance? Check. Good kids groups? Check. The incomparable Bob Rubin? Check. Done deal, sign us up.

Of course, it goes beyond this. In this *minyan* of wonderful people, we have found likeminded folk that share our vision of a traditional, yet progressive Jewish future. It is clear that *Kol Sasson* has not been afraid to challenge the status quo in this community. This is true in many respects. The most obvious is that we have stood firm on the inalienable and *halachic* right of women in the ritual sphere. I am invigorated by this, and draw strength from the amazing women and men in this community that give much of their time, energy and talent to ensure this partnership *minyan* – one of the first of its kind – succeeds.

When I heard the term “partnership *minyan*” for the first time, I actually thought it referred to the other way in which this shul has challenged the status quo; the fact that there was no full time rabbinic leader. In my mind, I had assumed the “partnership” aspect was that the community had taken the responsibility to move beyond the traditional and ensconced role of “head rabbi” by using our collective *????* to make it work. Now hey – THIS was cool. THIS was different. To use a very cliché and wildly overused term in the Jewish community lately, THIS was... innovative. While the newness of this idea was awesome, it was also...daunting and a little bit scary. I compare it to the emotion when you enter a serious relationship, get married, or have children – there is an enormous amount of responsibility involved there. Can we do this? Can we succeed with a model that has no blueprint?

This past week, there was an article in the Forward by Jay Michaelson on this very topic, entitled “Don’t Call the Rabbi – Make Your Own Rituals.” In it, Michaelson makes a passionate plea for what he calls “empowered Judaism,” and argues for a DIY Jewish ritual culture that is not entirely dependent on congregational rabbinic leadership. He says: *“American Judaism has created a class of professional Jews, notably absent in Israel, who sing our prayers, learn our scripture and perform our rituals for us. It’s infantilizing, and it’s alien to the very notion of Jewish religious responsibility.”*

I can’t say that I have my mind entirely made up about this subject, but that last sentence rings very true for me. We seem to be doing fine here at Kol Sasson, and best I can tell, the lack of a rabbi has caused us to come together in ways not many other congregations do. Rather than explore all of the obvious reasons known to us as to why having a full time rabbi might be a good idea, I’d rather use the next few minutes exploring the possibility of continuing on our current path without one.

So why now? Why after so many years of pulpit and congregational rabbis being at the helm have we begun to entertain the idea of doing away with that altogether? Why is this concept so “radical” but all of a sudden intriguing in 2011? In this

remarkable age of the “prosumer,” any sentient human being has the free tools and ability to not only consume whatever content they want, but the clear ability to produce it – hence “prosumer.” Even young children have the ability to customize, remix, and redistribute anything they want online, very easily. Empowered Judaism is a natural by-product of this culture. Michaelson paints a very stark reality: we don’t *need* rabbis to get married, have a bar mitzvah, conduct a funeral, or even for a bris. On that last one, though, I’d be pretty sure to play it safe.

Our *parasha* this week, *???-????* actually ties in beautifully to this discussion. And I’m happy to say that instead of consulting a rabbi as to what he thought about this topic, I was able to do this analysis all by myself, thank-you-very-much.

Over the years, the traditional community has come to call Moses “Moshe Rabbeinu” – or Moses, our teacher/rabbi. In this *parasha*, on what would ultimately be the last day of his life, we see **the** archetypal community teacher, our faith’s first “Rabbi”, laying out the ground rules for what life should be like without his constant guidance. How appropriate this is for our discussion this morning!

The Torah specifically notes that all kinds of people are present to hear Moshe outline the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people: the priests, communal leaders, the water gatherers and the wood collectors. Why specifically mention everyone/ all these types of people? It is because the children of Israel aren’t simply there to listen. They aren’t there to have someone else do sacred work **for** them – this is a covenant for the entirety of the nation. Everyone is included, everyone is necessary, and everyone must take the awesome responsibility of Torah upon themselves, no matter what job or responsibilities we have. That is the task assigned to us all.

In *mesechet Psachim*, the *gemara* tells us of a story of Rabbi Yosef, who basically dies and is later resuscitated. Upon coming back to life, he describes what he saw in the great beyond: "I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top here, are on the bottom there; and those who are here regarded as lowly, are exalted in heaven." This is to say that we may have been conditioned to believe that a communal leader, rabbi or priest is superior to the wood-hewer or the water carrier. But this hierarchy or structure is simply a human construct. As the opening *pasuk* states:

D’varim 29:9 : ‘*???? ???? ???? ????*’ – ALL of us stood that day in front of Hashem on the same level. All of us.

The feasibility and practicality of the empowered Judaism model is also clearly outlined later in this *parsha*:

D’varim 30:11 :

*“For this mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not hidden from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who shall go up **for us** to heaven, and*

bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who shall cross the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?" Rather, the thing is very near to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it."

The second portion of our double-header parsha is *Vayelech*. What I take most out of *Vayelech* is actually something I got from G-dcast this week. If you're unfamiliar with G-dcast, think of 5 minute, animated divrei Torah from culturally relevant Jewish scholars and quasi-celebrities. It's fantastic and you should check it out. *Vayelech's* video this week is narrated by Mayim Bialik, former star of the NBC show Blossom from the 90's. Bialik now has a PhD in neuroscience, is an actress on the show "The Big Bang Theory," and as of late has become what some might call a recent B'aal Tshuvah.

Bialik notes that in *Vayelech* we are commanded to write our own sifrei Torah. As we know, this mitzvah can be fulfilled by actually writing one, commissioning one, or even paying for a letter. She goes on to suggest that there is another alternative: being a living Torah, and embodying its values in everything we do. Perhaps if we did that, it will allow us as a community to feel like participants in this thing called Judaism, rather than consumers of it.

Please don't take my words to mean that the rabbinate is unnecessary, or that the ultimate decision to have a full time synagogue rabbi is a wrong and anachronistic one. It may in fact be the right decision for most; perhaps even for us.

But the mere fact that I am standing here giving this dvar Torah is proof that this empowerment model can pay dividends. I would consider myself a fairly active Jewish person with a very committed Jewish family, and yet, this is the first time I have given a D'var Torah since my bar-mitzvah. I'm not even sure that I wrote that back then, so technically this could be my first.

I haven't even been a member of this shul for two months - yet I believe that during this short period of time, I have grown exponentially in spirituality - and me being up here is but a small example of this. I believe many others can and will follow.

I will always have my personal "rebbe" for matters above my own paygrade. as we are instructed to do in the adage :Buy for yourself a friend and make for yourself a rabbi. And I will happily embrace any decision made by this community to bring someone on full time.

But for now, ??? ????? ?? – It is not beyond our grasp, and it is not impossible. We can do this well if we so choose, and we can be examples for the rest of the Jewish community.

Shabbat Shalom