

THREE IS A MAGIC NUMBER

Yom Kippur, 2016

Three guys walk into a bar.

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

Three is a magic number. A man and a woman had a little baby, and there were three in the family. (This is a reference to Schoolhouse Rock)

The world stands on three things: on learning, on service, and acts of kindness.

Three things avert bad destiny: repentance, prayer, and charity.

Three major festivals provide the legs of the year in our religious tradition: Passover, Shavu'ot and Sukkot.

Again, and again, and again.

Three sets of Shofar blasts,

The rule of three asserts itself in our religious imagination.

We Jews have a trinity within our faith; though it's very different than the one familiar to many Christians. The Jewish trinity is made up of the three pillars of God, Torah and Israel.

These are the three ideas I believe I serve. Indeed, even in Abraham Infeld's theory that there are five components to Jewish identity: Memory, Israel, Hebrew, Family (peoplehood) and Sinai (Covenant), the idea of community is contingent on each of us choosing three.

Were each of us given a piece of peppermint candy and asked to choose only three of our senses by which to experience that peppermint candy, any two of us will have at least one

point of shared experience. It might be taste, it might be smell, it might be touch. But that one point of connection will allow us to bond over a shared experience of the candy. The rule of three creates community.

Three eating together is a gathering requiring an invitation to recite grace after meals.

If three eat together and do not share words of Torah, it is as though they ate food consecrated to idols.

Three judges form a court of Jewish law.

Kol Nidre is repeated three times,

Three times a day we are called to prayer,

Three times a week Torah is given and read.

A synagogue provides three services; a meeting-hall, a place of worship, and a house of study.

A Loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.

A loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter. (This is also a reference to Schoolhouse Rock)

Three is a magic number.

This morning, I wish to talk to you about three ideas that drive me as the rabbi serving this congregation. Over the next five years, it is my hope to build upon these ideas and work with you to help this community live up to its promise and its purpose. It is my hope that you will rise to the challenge placed before you this morning by our president-elect and reach out to at least one Jewish person or spiritual seeker that is looking for a place like this. And when they ask you “Why? Why attend, let alone become a member or supporter?” You will be able to offer a simple, clear, three-point value proposition.

Tradition, Education, and Inspiration.

Tradition. Yes, I am going full Tevye. Tradition and its richness. Tradition is not only Shabbat and Holiday observance, Life Cycle events and other rituals, but the mores and values behind them. Tradition is the passing down of family recipes, instilling memories from one generation to the next. Tradition is the wisdom not only written down in our holy scripture, but the explanations and insights told or whispered from master to student for thousands of years. Even the name we use for this place, “a Temple” is an echo of the old ways, the first ways. We live in an age where we have seen unprecedented acceptance and assimilation into a host culture—so much so that we are in every measurable way part of that host culture. Yet that host culture is so strong, the pull of assimilation so great that we risk losing any distinction at all. Intermarriage is at 71 percent.

Our communal age is higher than average because as we have gotten successful, we’ve had fewer children. Ensuring our tradition survives is more difficult now than it has been in the past, and in order to do so, our institutions must remain flexible, risk-taking, and disruptive. Like many Reform communities, we have attempted to make worship relevant and engaging; we have musical shabbats, special themes, and the like. Yet I have also pushed for increased respect for tradition; push-back against the idolatrous worship of self and convenience. Sukkot should be celebrated on Sukkot! We are not masters of time, we are masters of what we do with the time we are given. This respect is part and parcel of the Tradition. Jewish Tradition is to say that we have a covenant; Autonomy is not the same as Antinomianism. You can choose but you are not a religious authority. In fact, by definition, I am—but you are free to choose to ignore my counsel and I won’t take it personally or

excommunicate you. As a Reform rabbi, on behalf of the Tradition, I claim a vote, not a veto. We have choices, freedom is given, but just because we identify as a Jew does not make every action we take Judaism. Now I want to differentiate clearly between Minhag (custom), and The Tradition. Making Motzi at the bottom of the stairs is a minhag. Making Motzi at all, blessing food we eat and expressing gratitude for what we have received? That is The Tradition.

Too many of us fail to see that tradition does not serve us all the time, sometimes we must serve the tradition. That is the meaning of religious discipline; of Jewish tradition. The secret of Jewish immortality is found in our commitment to Tradition. We honor the Sabbath. We remember to notice the work of creation, and remember that we were slaves. Shabbat is our testimony. Shabbat is Shabbat, The Jewish day of rest, and I don't roll on Shabbos. Except when I do, because like all of you, I struggle with what I want to do, what I feel I should do, and what I feel I need to do. Community supports the keeping of tradition because we do not have to try to do so alone.

As individuals and as communities, keeping and preserving the Tradition requires education. It is no accident either that Education is the keystone of our Tradition. I have heard it said many times that this congregation was founded so that those Jews that found themselves here or chose to live in these parts had a place to educate their children; education being the process and techniques by which the tradition previously mentioned can be passed down and kept alive. This is as good a reason as any-better perhaps-to found a synagogue. Any religious practice that ceases to include education ceases to be Judaism. Judaism is first and foremost about seeking knowledge about God, and ourselves, and the

relationship between the two. Judaism that does not include serious ongoing study is window dressing, a charade, dress up. Why else should we be known as the people of the book? And therefore, the education that takes place in a Jewish community must not be solely pediatric. It needs to be inclusive and broad. I hope to bring back Torah on Tap, but this is but one way to present opportunities for continued learning and personal growth. Whether it's Chai Mitzvah, a series of Sunday lectures and panel discussions, or individual study, a congregation that wishes to remain relevant and vibrant must offer education for all, especially those that might not come from traditional backgrounds. Family and interfaith education programs are critical. An imperative. I want this congregation to be a community of life-long learners.

That learning is the rock upon which we draw Inspiration: Our tradition and our educational work is ultimately given to us so that we can inspire Jewish living and inspire Jewish lives for generations to come. We seek to create 'wow' moments of awe, of gratitude, of healing and of encouragement. The Tradition and our Education can and should be entertaining; in the ancient sense of the word; an entertainment of the soul and intellect that cause us to gasp in awe and delight; breathing in that substance that inspires. To inspire is to put breath into something, to animate it.

This place, this house of God should be a place where we are restored, refreshed and re-inspired. This is where I feel we have the greatest challenge, alas. We spend too much time tearing each other down, criticizing, condemning, negating. Whether this is because we fear change, or worship control, or believe ourselves to be smarter, more educated and more experienced than our brothers and sisters, the end result is stasis and decay. My dear

friends: All of us pulling at the same time is not the same thing as everyone pulling together in the same direction. And to achieve anything that requires us pulling together requires a shared vision and a culture that inspires commitment through encouragement, acceptance, inclusion, respect and personal examples. People need to be inspired to donate of their time and resources, people need to be inspired to give of their lives to this place. Allow yourself to be inspired, not threatened, by other's successes, or ideas, or efforts.

More importantly, more than ever, being meaningfully Jewish is not a given. It's too easy to slip away or be Jewish as a general ethnic category devoid of any substance. We inspire each other when we make commitments, when adults choose to become Adult B'nai Mitzvah or take on a leadership position despite all our other commitments. When you demonstrate to others, and particularly to the youth of this congregation that Tradition and Education matter, you serve to Inspire. When you demonstrate the values of the tradition and the outcome of education, you inspire. When you participate or take a chance, you inspire me, at least.

These three: Tradition, Education, and Inspiration are the outcomes of Kneset, Tefilah and Midrash. They are the soul of this enterprise. I ask you to support me in making these a priority for this community, to join me in committing to these values and to doing the work that is required to see them bear fruit. Hatima Tovah!