



Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

“Are You Chicken Or Not?”

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It’s a story I love to tell. In fact, you may have heard me tell it before, for it describes the DNA of Leo Baeck Temple more dynamically than any other story I know. It was about seven years ago. We were in the midst of a congregational visioning program, which began with “Link and Learn” gatherings in our congregants’ homes. Interestingly, our Link and Learn program from way back then is featured in the current edition of Reform Judaism magazine as an exemplary tool for temple visioning.

And for us, it was. We learned a great deal about our congregants and our congregation in those house meetings. But one has always stood out in my memory. A group of twenty or so Leo Baeckers were gathered in the living room of one of our longtime members. We were going around the circle, asking people to tell us their names, when they joined our congregation, and their reason for joining Leo Baeck Temple. In the circle was this young woman – a mother of a grade-school son – who had just joined LBT that year. And when she was asked why she joined, she said, “I come to Leo Baeck for community – to connect on a personal level with other people. That’s how Leo Baeck is different from all the other temples I visited.”

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed our hostess – a long, longtime Leo Baecker – developing a contorted look upon her face. “*That’s* not what makes Leo Baeck Temple different!” she declared. “Social action is what makes Leo Baeck Temple different! That’s why we come here!”

Said our new member, “Well, I joined because this was the place where people were interested in getting to know me and my story.”

Said our hostess, “But this is where we talk about the world and what it should be – and how to change it.”

And I remember thinking to myself, “These ladies are saying the same thing – they just don’t know it.”

The new member that day is greeting the new Jewish year for the very first time as our temple’s President. But she’s been around now. She gets this place. And she’s still here to create community and

connect with others. And she's determined to do her part in giving new purpose to our temple's social justice heritage. And she – just like an ever-growing number of our congregants – has come to understand that the two go hand-in-hand. You don't get one without the other.

When it comes to the first half of that equation, it may seem self-evident that synagogues exist to create human connection. But it was never treated as self-evident in our tradition. In fact, go back to the very first temple... *the* Temple, built by King Solomon... and you'll see that it was constructed with a purpose. The ancient midrash teaches that Solomon chose to build two gates into the Temple court – on opposite sides of the compound. So people were literally forced into encounter with one another... as soon as they entered, they saw the faces of other people, with whom they would mingle and share stories. And after that great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the midrash says it plainly: “They would repair to the synagogues instead.”

So from the time there ever was a synagogue, its first purpose was to create genuine human bonds – and that was before we humans turned this world into a fast-paced, utilitarian frenzy of loneliness... before we built cities in which people would be cocooned in their own automobiles... in which other people would become merely traffic, the impediments I seek to circumvent in order to complete my “to do list.” King Solomon had no idea how desperately we would need that primary function of the synagogue that he first imagined. But the desperation is clear to us, for I've simply lost count of the number of Leo Baeck congregants who have purportedly joined this temple for one reason – a preschool, a Bar Mitzvah, a rabbi in time of need – but then discovered they were really here for that and a whole lot more. They came, they thought, to check another consumer need off their run-around-town list, but in the process, they found what is perhaps the last communal institution devoted to encouraging them to be human, to be real. And upon making that discovery, they fell in love with the interpersonal life raft that is Leo Baeck Temple.

This is why the legendary 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber famously wrote, “All real living is meeting.” We simply cannot achieve sanctity in this life while closed, sequestered from others. I remember learning this from the most renowned of my college professors, social theorist Henry Giroux, who has now published more than fifty books about how we learn, grow and are shaped by our encounters with one another. He recently wrote, “Individuals are told that the misery they feel is a personal flaw that they must bear in isolation... Misfortune is viewed as a private disgrace.” So what does a sacred community like this do – if it's doing its job? It “translates individual problems into public concerns.” It enables us to discover how *not* alone we are in our pain – and how *not* alone we can be in combating that pain, for all of our sakes.

And this is where seeking relationship in Jewish community and seeking to change our world for the better become one and the same. For as contemporary Jewish philosopher Carol Ochs writes: “Interpreting our own experiences and hearing stories of others *as if they are Torah* opens us to creative possibilities.” It is the sharing of stories – the amassing of stories – which establishes our kinship. We

discover that we suffer from common disillusionments and possess common yearnings. We are not alone. There are many, many others who want the same things that we want for this world. And emboldened by seeing each other... hearing each other... feeling each other – we can acquire *power*. A loaded word – power. But strip away the connotations, and you’re left with the definition: “The ability or capacity to act effectively.”

This is how every movement for social change that has ever succeeded took root. Nothing ever changed in this world simply because a rabbi gave a great sermon about it. Change has happened when women and men, sharing a purpose that binds them, have banded together to make their presence and their truth felt.

In the late afternoon on February 1, 1960, four college freshmen from North Carolina A & T sat down at the long, L-shaped Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, just off campus. One of them, Ezell Blair, asked the waitress for a cup of coffee. “We don’t serve negroes here,” was the response. A black woman employee, noticing the confrontation, approached the young men to tell them that they were acting stupidly. They didn’t move. An hour later, the front doors to the store were locked – and still they did not move. When they left a short time later through a side door, they discovered a small crowd outside... and a photographer from the *Greensboro Record*. Said one of the four, “I’ll be back tomorrow with A & T College.”

By morning, there were twenty-seven men and four women seated at the counter. Most were from the same dormitory that housed the four freshman who had been there the day before. They were dressed in suits and ties, and they sat at the counter, doing their homework. The next day, students from the local “Negro” high school brought the number of demonstrators to eighty. The next day, there were 300. By Day 6, there were 600, some in the store and others crowding the street. A few of them were white – but there were also white teenagers waving Confederate flags and setting off firecrackers.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his article “Small Change,” describes what happened next: “By the following Monday, sit-ins had spread to Winston-Salem, twenty-five miles away, and Durham, fifty miles away. The day after that, students at (two black colleges) in Charlotte joined in, followed on Wednesday by students at (two colleges) in Raleigh. On Thursday and Friday, the protest crossed state lines, surfacing in Hampton and Portsmouth, Virginia, in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and in Chattanooga, Tennessee. By the end of the month, there were sit-ins throughout the South, as far west as Texas... Some seventy thousand students eventually took part... These events in the early sixties became a civil rights war that engulfed the South for the rest of the decade.”

As we know, the civil rights movement was not for the faint of heart. Those who participated, black or not, were risking their safety and their freedom. They were threatened, beaten, jailed, and sometimes even killed. So we would naturally assume that the activists willing to go through with such a thing were those most ideologically driven by the cause. But Stanford sociologist Doug McAdam researched the

matter and discovered, interestingly, that the difference between those who stuck with their activism in the civil rights movement, despite the dangers, and those who bailed out was the depth of their personal bonds with others in the movement. McAdams therefore calls activism a “strong-tie phenomenon.” If you were relationship-deep in the civil rights movement, you were involved... and if you weren’t, chances are that you had much less of a stomach for it, even if the cause was very, very dear to you.

This was certainly true of the four freshmen who got everything rolling in Greensboro. Gladwell describes perfectly the power of shared story when chronicling their relationship. They were college roommates. Three of the four went back to high school together. And they did what all college roommates do – they smuggled beer into the dorm and sat talking until late in the night. And they shared the stories that bound them – the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the desegregation fight in Little Rock. One night, one of the students suggested the Woolworth’s sit-in. But they doubted it would work. And they were afraid – deathly afraid. So they talked about it for a month, before finally, one turned to the others and asked: “Are you guys chicken or not?” And the next day, Ezell Blair somehow worked up the courage to ask for a cup of coffee that changed history – “because he was flanked by his roommate and two good friends from high school.”

That’s how it’s done. The pattern shows up again and again in practically every successful movement for social change. There’s no shortcut. People who fix the ills of society – whether in their neighborhood school or in a faraway land – are going up against the relentless momentum of the status quo. And they have to possess the courage, the will, the persistence, the refusal to coalesce that creates a new status quo. Otherwise, everything stays the same.

So if you’ve been wondering why all of those email petitions you sign seem to produce little of substance... or why Congress can’t seem to do anything right, regardless of who’s in charge – it’s because we’ve deluded ourselves into believing that real change can happen without real relationship. If Greensboro in 1960 was a demonstration of what sociologists would call “strong-tie activism,” then email petitions and Facebook campaigns are what we might call “weak-tie activism.” And while weak ties are very effective at increasing numbers – after all, I have 1,307 very, very close friends on Facebook – it’s pretty hard to get much of anything done by a giant network of people who really aren’t connected to each other or committed to each other in any meaningful way.

Now, I suspect that at least a few of you are thinking, “Rabbi, did the paperboy stop delivering the news to you this year? Did you miss the Arab Spring, in which entire governments were overthrown by movements organized on Facebook? Indeed, Facebook and other social media engines have been instrumental in the Arab Spring. But why? First, because the story that is shared by the victims of Arab dictators is deeply embedded in millions. And second, because Facebook was perhaps the only means for Arab citizens to communicate with one another that the dictators hadn’t already suppressed. It’s a little different for us here in America. When we’re outraged about something, we, too, take to Facebook – but with somewhat different results. Take Darfur, for example. I think we’d all agree that the situation in

Darfur is an outrage. And Facebook has been used to organize us. Malcolm Gladwell presents the results: “The Facebook page of the Save Darfur Coalition has 1,282,339 members, who have donated an average of nine cents apiece. The next biggest Darfur charity on Facebook has 22,073 members, who have donated an average of thirty-five cents. Help Save Darfur has 2,797 members, who have given, on average, fifteen cents.” If the dark-skinned Darfurians are counting upon us to unite by Facebook to save their lives, they’re in for a disappointment.

No, if we want to create the kind of world we always say we want, we’re going to have to do it the old-fashioned way. It so happens that the very thing that will make our temple life stronger – the building of real relationships, the sharing of our stories, the discovery of everything we have in common... the pains, the hopes, the visions – this happens also to be exactly what is needed to make our neighborhoods, our city, our country and our world stronger.

The well-known guru of social capital, Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam, has laid out the facts. Our emotional isolation from one another is itself one of the main causes of the societal weaknesses we most decry. Failing schools. Struggling children. Rising crime. Political incivility. Philanthropic decline. Even premature death – believe it or not, Putnam has found that social isolation causes us to die sooner. All of this happens in a world where we choose not to relate with one another – where we try simply to drive around one another through the traffic jam of life, while our road rage increases as rapidly as our sense of hopelessness.

There is a solution – for our souls, for our temple, and for this world that needs us. And it’s the same solution that’s being utilized in medicine... and in prisons... and in history museums... and in philanthropy. They are all awakening to the power of personal narratives – the power of story. And if they all get it, we, as a Jewish community, have no excuse not to. After all, Rabbi Larry Kushner rightly states: “Hermits and monasteries are noticeably absent from Jewish history; we are a hopelessly communal people.”

It is time for us to take our place in that story – that history. Over the past few months, a dedicated group of more than thirty Leo Baeckers has been working to begin the task of organizing our congregation for relationship and for action. They are just like you. They are men and women. They are young and old. They are long-timers and newcomers. They are left, center and right. They are spiritualists and atheists. And most of all, they are gung ho on telling their stories and on hearing yours. They want to know: What is it that keeps *you* up at night? What happened in your life – recently or a long time ago – that created a passion in you for changing our city or state or country or world in some specific way? What is that vision that burns inside of you – but that you cannot make happen all by yourself? We want to know.

Perhaps you raised a child who struggled with substance abuse, and you now are devoted to protecting others from that heartache.

Maybe you grew up in a home of Holocaust survivors and have been highly sensitive to the importance of religious freedom ever since.

Perhaps you're trying simply to provide a decent education for your children, and you truly wonder whether you'll be bankrupt by the time they're through with college.

Maybe you watched what happened to our nation in Vietnam, and it changed your sensibilities about war and peace forever.

Perhaps you're trying your best to find quality elder care for yourself or your parents, and discovering that it costs way too much and is too hard to come by.

Maybe you see your children heading out into a world where it will be hard for them to find a decent job or ever afford a decent home of their own.

Perhaps you're alarmed by the silence out there as our planet warms – and you wonder whether this Earth will be able to sustain your grandchildren or great-grandchildren someday.

Maybe this economy has left you frightened – truly frightened – for your own well-being, and it's made it hard to sleep at night.

I don't know what your story is. But I know that the stories I just described are held by people sitting in this room – because we have begun to tell them, myself included. Those stories, and so many more. We need to hear them, for they're who we are. So during the next several weeks, our congregation will be engaging in what we are calling a listening campaign. Members of our organizing team would like to arrange a one-to-one meeting with you. It will cost you nothing but forty-five well-spent minutes of your time. You'll get to share your story with someone who really wants to listen and knows how. And you'll get to hear their story, and in the exchange, your life at this temple will become richer and realer.

Our team has had nearly a hundred of these meetings already, and now we're looking forward to many hundreds more. So you found a pencil and a card on your seat when you arrived. I won't hazard a guess as to the various things you may already have done with those cards. But if by chance yours is still intact, we would love for you to fill it out, and immediately after I finish – during what Rabbi Timoner, Cantor Kates and I lovingly refer to as the “sermon review”... you know, that quiet minute of organ music when you turn to your neighbor and exchange your grades for the sermon that just ended – some of your fellow congregants will come down the aisles to collect your cards during the sermon review. And if by chance your card is already gone or damaged or doodled on, let me assure you – we've got a lot more. A lot more.

And I'm going to make a promise to you. If you fill out that card tonight, you're going to hear from a fellow Leo Baecker before Yom Kippur – just to open the conversation and begin coming up with a plan to meet. And then once we've finished with all the one-to-one meetings a couple of months from now, we'll start gathering in small groups in each other's homes – to extend and deepen the storytelling, to build our relationships community-wide, to enrich the experience of being a Leo Baeck Temple congregant. We'll also start to look for common themes in our stories – the concerns that unite us, the changes we want to see. Hopefully, we'll find some things that we can really organize around. And then, maybe, we'll turn to each other and ask, "Are you guys chicken or not?" And if we're not, we'll work together to figure out the best way to amass our power to effect real change on those issues of shared concern. We may go looking for another faith community or two who want to sit at that lunch counter with us. We may even go looking for a whole bunch of faith communities and civic communities that want to join us in filling the lunch counter and the street outside. It's hard to say right now what the product will look like, but I can tell you what the process will look like, because the process is already underway. It looks like one Leo Baecker eye to eye with another, speaking the kinds of deep truths that we used to speak late in the night with a beer in our hand in a college dorm room – opening heart and soul... and past and future... holding our hopes in each other's hands. And it will be holy, for as the Chasidic master Menachem Mendel of Rymanov taught, "Human beings are God's language."

The great Rabbi Yossi in the Talmud tells *his* story: "On a dark night, I came upon a blind man carrying a torch. I asked him, "Why? If you can't see, why do you carry a torch?" The blind man said simply, "I carry this light so that people may see me."

We walk blind through the dark night of this crazy, break-neck speed, lonely life. And somewhere along the line, we got the impression that because we can't see as well as we'd like in the midst of this blur, we should just put down our torches. No. We need to carry our light, for we need to be seen. We need to be heard. We need to be felt. By each other, in this last, blessed place where we still get to matter – and in this world, where we had better make ourselves matter.

This is the day for sounding the *shofar*. In the Torah, we are taught that the horn was to be sounded for two purposes. The long, single blast – *tekiah* – was sounded to assemble the community... to bring us face to face with each other. And the short, staccato blast – *teruah* – was sounded to say it was time to move.

This is the day for sounding the *shofar*. *Tekiah* – let us meet each other, face to face. *Teruah* – let us marshal our might, and move forward. And when this day has ended and tomorrow comes, let us follow the call of the prophet Isaiah: *Kashofar harem kolecha* – "Raise your voice like a shofar... raise your voice like a shofar!"

We have heard over the years many sermons on social action in this temple. It's time now for us to *be* a sermon on social action in this temple. Are you chicken or not?