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Unpacking Our Religious School Baggage

Sometimes just before dawn I lie in bed and stare up at the ceiling and wonder if it is day or night. The dull light that resembles both the twilight and day break plays tricks with my mind. In the hectic progression of the week, each day is a blur. One moment it is time to wake up and start the juggle of life, the next moment night has fallen, and then it is time to get ready to do it all over again.

Now that we have arrived once again at Rosh Hashanah, I feel the same way. Where has the year gone that once again we find ourselves here recalling the old year and looking forward to the next? As Americans we have experienced a year of history: the first African American President was elected, we have felt the hardship of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

And what about us? How have we changed? At this moment our synagogue is filled with countless personal recollections from the past year; stories of celebrations and achievements, loss and defeat. Did we succeed in changing over the past year? Or, do we find ourselves still stuck in the same place, weighed down by the same burdens, the same baggage, unable to move forward?

We all have baggage. We pack it, *shlep* it, and sometimes even pay for it. Most of us carry too much of it. We've all been there. We've all been at the ticket counter moments before a departing flight only to be told we are over the weight limit or have one bag too many. These days, too much baggage comes with a hefty price.

It happened to my family this summer. We trudged up to the counter – two adults, two two-years olds, two car seats, two backpacks, and, one large suitcase. What else were we to do? We hardly had enough hands for the one piece of luggage. It was stuffed tightly with everything the four of us would need for several weeks on the East Coast. Sure enough, we were over the weight limit. And after our best effort at looking desperate and pathetic, several attempts to get our boys to cry, and a dramatic plea to the Southwest manager, we still had to pay.

We've all been there. But what a relief it is to turn our baggage over to someone else after carrying the heavy load through the maze of checkpoints and scurrying travelers.

Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, is the time to for us to check our spiritual baggage. As we get older, as we acquire more stuff, the actual number of bags we carry tends to multiply. So does our emotional and spiritual baggage. In order to get the most out of these

High Holy Days, we must unpack our spiritual baggage and try to unload some of the weight. Curb-side checking, though, is not an option. Spiritual baggage requires much more work.

I have come to recognize several common pieces of spiritual baggage that weigh us down and often get in the way of leading a fuller spiritual life. I would like to unpack one spiritual suitcase in particular tonight. For many of us, we picked up this piece of luggage years ago when we were younger. As we open it up and look inside, we see our religious school experience staring back at us.

A few weeks ago I asked the members of our Education Committee and the members of our teaching staff the following question: What is the first word or image that comes to mind when you think about your time in religious school? Here's what they said: "boring, torture, carpool, friends, getting in trouble, being talked at, boring, waiting to be picked up, didn't get to sleep in late, boring." One teacher said, "yay."

My own recollection? I didn't mind it. I actually liked learning Hebrew. But let's face it, I'm not the norm. I became a rabbi after all! A colleague of mine jokes that maybe someday he'll write a book called, "Hebrew School: where even the good kids misbehave."

Most of the studies and literature say that Jewish supplementary school, what we call Religious School, Sunday School, or Hebrew School, has been the weak link in the world of Jewish education. What would you say? Raise your hand if you have negative associations with your attendance at religious school? Take a moment to look around. And if you were not raised Jewish, perhaps you had a similar experience. I grew up in the heart of Catholic Boston, where my Catholic friends said that their religious school, C.C.D., stood for "central city dump." I only found out while researching this sermon that it actually stands for "Confraternity of Christian Doctrine."

I do not think that any of our dedicated religious school principals and teachers intended for us to have a bad experience. I honestly believe they were trying their best with limited time and resources. But somehow we acquired this baggage.

And we have carried it around for too long. It is time for the cycle of "I suffered through it so you will too" to stop. Because the alternative is too hefty a price. The alternative is something I worry about. It is something we should all worry about.

I think a lot about our kids at PTBE and how hungry they are for moral sustenance and spiritual nourishment, food for the heart and soul. Think about what the world looks like through their eyes. All their lives they've heard about war and terror. They saw the Twin Towers fall. They've grown up seeing marriages fall apart. They see celebrities fall into disgrace. They hear grownups talking about global

warming and curbing our carbon footprint. They see corporate executives sink into scandal and live among grownups who are anxious about the plunging economy and losing their jobs. They see teen violence on the news in the form of high school shootings and Virginia Tech, and now many of them have experienced it right down the street at Hillsdale High School. They grapple with the rise in teen suicide here in our community; in the last half a year, three teens killed themselves on the Caltrain tracks in Palo Alto. With so much senseless misery, it is understandable why teens want to retreat to their virtual world of Facebook and plug into their ipods.

This turmoil is troubling to all of us. In the midst of such chaos, I find myself wondering what we have to give this generation who are hungry for guidance, for meaning, for something stable, for something that lasts.

When Moses spoke to the Israelites in the days before he passed away, he pointed them towards the Promised Land with words that have resonated through the years, "*V'shinantam I'vanecha* - You shall teach these things to your children, speak of them when you are at home or on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up." (Deuteronomy 6:7) Moses asked a small and beleaguered people to become, in the words of Rabbi Janet Marder, "a nation of teachers, carriers of a great tradition." He told them that their future depended on passing the gift of their tradition to the next generation and the next.

But in order to realize the transmission of the tradition, Moses asked something even more difficult and more radical of his people. "*V'ahavta et Adonai elohecha* ...You shall love *Adonai* your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:5) Our tradition links these two verses together. "We can only pass on to our children what we ourselves love. We can only place in their hearts what comes from our own heart and soul." (Moses Alshekh)

And this is why we must unpack our own baggage. We must find ways to pass on the beauty of our tradition, to pass on what we love about Judaism, to pass on the wisdom and love that are in our hearts and souls. Teaching is our holy task; education is a labor of love.

Fortunately, there are national organizations like the Jim Joseph Foundation right here in San Francisco that are working to help us re-image Jewish education. There are many venues for Jewish learning – early childhood education, Jewish day schools, summer camps, NFTY, Israel trips, and the best place – at home. Yet, the congregational school continues to enroll the majority of students. To strengthen these schools presents both challenge and opportunity.

The Avi Chai Foundation recently conducted a study called, *Schools That Work: What We Can Learn from Good Jewish Supplementary Schools*. (Jack Wertheimer, 2009) The report notes common challenges: a scarcity of qualified teachers; fewer hours devoted to an already part-time school by over-programmed families; no one is quite sure how to teach Hebrew, or how to balance teaching Hebrew with everything else. And *bar* and *bat mitzvah* is still treated as *graduation day*: one-third of students drop out after they reach this milestone and 55% leave within two years.

But at the heart of the report are six noteworthy characteristics of schools that work and descriptions of ten schools that are meeting these challenges and thriving. Good schools intentionally develop a community, such as the synagogue that fully integrates their students into Shabbat morning worship and the full range of synagogue activities. Good schools take Jewish study seriously and make Jewish learning experiential, such as the synagogue that is known for combining quality classroom time with a range of options, including youth groups, *shul-ins*, choirs, a drama club, and family-based social action projects. Good schools make students and teachers feel valued and engage the entire family. And finally, the best schools have vision. Good schools define a vision of their ideal graduate and the means by which they will attain it.

This year at PTBE we are joining those out in the field who are seeking to explore what makes a good congregational school. An interim team of talented educators, together with our education committee of extremely dedicated lay leaders, are taking this year to focus on our education programs, to take a close look at what we do well and what needs improvement.

We have some exciting innovations in place for the coming year, including a K-6 family retreat, increased focus on the arts and more attention to special needs, class trips for our teens, and our new teen program, *HaMerkaz* – where teens are at the center. Our educational theme of “*Kedusha* – Where Do You Find Holiness?” will aim to bridge our learning across the grades and between children and adults so that we will begin to share a common language. And because the name religious school carries so much baggage, we are experimenting with new names for our programs.

Although we at PTBE also struggle with the drop off rate after *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, I hope you will allow me to brag for a moment about our statistics-defying post-confirmation program. This year, we have a record number of 22 high school juniors and seniors choosing to learn with me and other teachers every other Wednesday evening. These teens give me hope that one day, when they are asked about their religious school experience, maybe they will have a different kind

of response. In some instances we have even seen a reversal of the generations; a passing up instead of a passing down, from young people who have brought their parents and grandparents back to Judaism.

But I am also keenly aware of the amount of work that still needs to be done. While the staff and I are whole-heartedly devoted to thinking through our curriculum – what we teach and how we teach it – I believe there are three other big pieces of the puzzle that all of us here tonight can do not only to revitalize the religious school, but to truly become a congregation of learners¹ and teachers. Here is our challenge:

First, we must create a community of practice. Students need to see the Jewish values that we teach them put into action. This means that whether or not you have school-age children, whether or not you have grandchildren, the next generation needs all of you to be models and teachers. They need to see you studying, volunteering with SSH (Sunday Sandwich *Hevre*) to feed the hungry, and giving blood on Sunday mornings. They need to see you participating in committees and coming to hear a speaker in the evenings. They need to see you becoming *b'nai mitzvah* as adults and traveling to Israel. They need to see you here in the sanctuary, singing along, struggling with the prayers just as they are. How can we tell our *b'nai mitzvah* about the importance of being counted in a *minyan*, the importance of continuing and staying involved, when the *minyan* they look out to from this *bima* on any Shabbat morning is mainly invited guests, and only a few of our own temple members?

We would not expect children to be readers without adults reading to them. We would not expect young people to be kind if we did not speak and act kindly ourselves. We would not expect kids to eat healthfully if we did not model healthful eating. And we cannot expect young people to develop strong Jewish identities if we are not learning and actively participating in Jewish life.

But we don't model Jewish living and learning only for the sake of our children. We do it for ourselves as well. If you still carry your own religious school baggage around with you, then it is time to find something positive in Judaism for yourself, by your own choice, on your own terms. If you ended your own Jewish education at the age of 13, know that there is nothing more rewarding than returning to a sophisticated tradition through adult eyes.

And speaking of role modeling, children learn the most from those they are closest to. Family engagement is the second piece to becoming a congregation of learners and teachers. In a recent New

¹ Isa Aron, *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*.

York Times Magazine interview, billionaire Jewish philanthropist Charles Bronfman explained why he wants nothing to do with the synagogue. Asked if he practiced Judaism when he was growing up, he said, "No. When I was supposed to go to synagogue on Saturdays, my father went to the office. What made him think I was going to go to synagogue if he left? The hell with that." Our kids see through a mixed message. They know who we are and they see what we do. (Rabbi Marder)

We will have to overcome our building. Like most suburban synagogues in America built in the fifties, we have a separate school wing for children. In the fifties and sixties, Jewish identity was still a given. Adults had common memories of Yiddish jokes, Jewish food, Jewish neighborhoods, and, as Philip Roth once put it, an "us against them" mentality. (*Becoming a Congregation of Learners*) But this is no longer the case and it is no longer ok to merely drop the kids off and think we will make them Jewish in two hours. We need to find ways for children and parents to experience Judaism together while learning simultaneously at their own levels. I once heard a colleague say the sign of a successful education program is a full parking lot.

It will take a while to change culture. A dad who was considering signing his 3 year old up for our monthly Bagels and Blocks family program joked with me, saying, "You mean I have to go to Sunday School, too?" If you want to get rid of the baggage, then yes.

Finally, the time we do spend together must be valuable. We have to value our students, our teachers, and all of our members who choose to spend their limited time here. We all have so many choices of what to do with our time. The way we value each other is by paying attention, by saying it matters to me that you are here. This means that we make the most of your time here. If you are only here for four hours a week, or two hours a week, or more or less, then every moment must count. Not surprisingly, most people respond positively when they feel valued. The more valued they feel, the more positive their associations will be to being Jewish. What would it sound like if instead of asking, "Do I have to go?" kids and adults said, "I need to go, I count, I matter, I don't want to miss out."

This is why I personally made sure there was Peet's coffee, not the usual temple coffee, available for parents on the opening day of our school last Sunday. Better and stronger coffee is symbolic of the quality we are striving for. This is why, on a deeper level, we are introducing a *Brit Kavod*, a Covenant of Respect, into our education programs. And this is why I believe that Judaism in general, and PTBE, specifically, is an antidote to the scary, shaky world we are all living in today.

The message of Rosh Hashanah and even the message of Judaism every day is that there is meaning amid the chaos. This is our faith. This is what young people especially hunger to hear, see, feel, and trust. They need to know that we are part of a bigger story – a story that began in slavery but rises toward freedom, human dignity, acts of loving kindness, and the pursuit of peace. We need to all know that the story isn't finished yet; our tradition calls each and every one of us to write the next chapter.

V'shinantam I'vanecha – You shall teach these words to this generation and the next. You shall speak of them and do them, when you lie down and when you rise up. We shall check our baggage at the door, and together we will rise up in wisdom, insight, and holiness.

L'shanah tovah.