

YK Morning – 5786
“Ten Lessons - Our Legacy”
October 2, 2025

Many of you know that I have a fraught relationship with math. Over more than 30 years I sat in countless meetings, misreading budget numbers with a confidence that was always a source of laughter. I would argue about some finance item and someone would gently tell me that my math was off only by a factor of ten.

For this I blame my sixth grade math teacher, Mr. Odell Edward Jack back at Central Sixth Grade School in Englewood, New Jersey. For some mystical reason I was placed his math group that year, the highest one.

Mr. Jack taught us how to multiply matrices, the beginnings of algebra and, wait for it, math in bases other than 10. I screwed up doing problems in base 8 so badly that it cost me a place in the class and they demoted me. I have clung to the number 10 for dear life ever since!

I like **10's**. So does our tradition. **Ten** is essential to Jewish religious understanding. How? Here are **ten** examples:

According to the Rabbis:

- 1) Creation occurred through **ten** statements.
- 2) There were **ten** generations from Adam to Noah.
- 3) There were **ten** generations from Noah to Abraham and Sarah.
- 4) God gave Abraham **ten** trials, culminating in the command to sacrifice Isaac.
- 5) There were **ten** plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians.
- 6) There are **ten** commandments given at Sinai
- 7) There were **ten** spies who declared the land of Canaan to be unconquerable
- 8) It takes **ten** women and men to make a minyan, the quorum required for public prayer.
- 9) There are **ten** days of t'shuva, of repentance in the High Holiday season
- 10) And, of course, today, Yom Kippur, is the 10th day of the new year!

Over the last 37 seasons with you I have come to learn challenging lessons about who we are, our hopes, our fears, our successes and failures. Since this will probably be the last time I get to share my heart with you on this holy day, in this holy space, as the

holy community we call Sinai, I would like share ten of these lessons with you here and now.

1. **Blessing/B'racha** בְּרָכָה

More than any lesson, I have striven with all my might and heart to impart to you clearly, and with certainty, that each and every one of you is a living blessing, a gift, not only of God, but a gift to everyone in your life.

Some welcomed this message, others thought I was soft in the head. But if we are not blessings to ourselves and to each other, we can't live up to the command that God gave to Abraham and Sarah as they began our spiritual heritage: **Veh'yei b'racha**. Be a blessing. Just know that you are a blessing to yourself and others and your life will have a value beyond counting.

Over the years, I have shared this with you through words, song, touch, smiles and warm embraces. I pray that that long after I am gone and Temple Sinai becomes something new, you will not forget this truth.

Lesson Learned. B'racha. Be a blessing. Don't worry about acquiring them. You don't have to prove to anyone what a blessing you already are.

2. Misfortune/Mazal Ra (not Tov!) מזל רע

In 2006 there was rainstorm so powerful it altered the course of Temple Sinai's history! The roof over our auditorium collapsed and water flooded the entire main floor where we sit today!

What followed was a wonderful, collaborative, reimagining of this sacred space. We determined to make this pulpit accessible, to lower the access point for the Ark so that anyone in a wheelchair could bring out a Torah scroll.

We created an open space in front of the pulpit for informal seating and, for many years at Mostly Musical Shabbats, dancing – adults and kids together with our wonderful band, the one that Hersh Merenstein insisted on calling “White Sabbath.”

We built an entire campaign around the damage in the building – the Standing At Sinai campaign. We rededicated ourselves to fulfilling a vision of each and every one of us standing at Sinai to receive Torah and blessings.

Lesson learned. Misfortune, **Mazal Ra**, is inevitable. It will happen as surely as our fast will end at sunset. What matters most is not what happens to us, rather what we do in response.

3. **Brokenness/Shever** שֶׁוֹר

There are moments when you witness families falling apart in front of your eyes. It happened on this pulpit more than 30 years ago. A bar mitzvah student, whose family went through a difficult divorce, had come early to the building to take pictures. I was still home when I received a panicked phone call from the young man, who, scared out of his mind, told me through tears that his father and his mother's father were having a fist fight on the pulpit. They had literally drawn blood.

I rushed to Temple and walked in as members of this broken family were screaming at each other. I raised my voice and ordered them apart. The young man shook as he told me they had an argument over Torah honors, like who went first and who stood with whom.

Even with me there they raised their voices again. I finally raised mine and ordered everyone to be silent.

I firmly told them who would stand where and when and that my decision was final. One family member objected and asked who was I to tell them what to do?

I said I was the rabbi and that my only concern was this wonderful young man, who was still shaking. When she kept arguing I said that I would cancel the entire bar mitzvah if they did not follow my instructions. Which they did, silently stewing at me the whole time.

I have never forgotten that morning. The hard lesson I learned was that broken families have shards. They can rip us open and draw blood. After that I made sure to work out every aspect of a bat or bar mitzvah service in advance, especially with divorced parents. I was not soft at these meetings, but blunt. Nothing would get in the way of the wellbeing of the child, even at the threat of canceling the service.

Lesson learned. Out of **Shever**, or brokenness, can come clarity of values and purpose. I have ached inside for all of you who have been broken by loss, trauma, addiction, illness and despair. We are all broken at times. It is our sacred task is to help bind those wounds.

4. **Forgiveness/S'licha** סליחה

Almost every year at High Holidays I have asked you to forgive me for times in which I have let you down, disappointed you, offended you. The fact that none of these actions was intentional is pretty meaningless. It does not diminish or excuse the bad experience you had from me.

My list of sins and errors is endless: There was the time I simply forgot I was supposed to be at an unveiling. Another time I went to the wrong cemetery. At one funeral I got the name of a family member wrong and the entire family winced visibly.

There have been times when I expressed my opinion too strongly or not firmly enough. Some believed I was leading the congregation to ruin. Early in my time with you, a Temple Sinai founder called the president after 10 at night on Shabbat and demanded I be fired because I was “changing everything.”

For some I have advocated too much on social justice while others believe I have not nearly done enough. When it comes to Israel some of you who think I have not been sufficiently loyal. Others insist I have not been sufficiently critical. You're both right. I

am smack in the center when it comes to Israel, its politics and policies.

I must admit I have occasionally been hurt here myself. But we always worked things out by coming together, unafraid to be honest and loving at the same time. I came to understand that even when you hurt my feelings, it was not out of malice, but from some unmet need or desire.

Lesson learned. The beauty of this sacred community, its secret sauce, is that over my years, we valued s'lichah, forgiveness, over resentment. Mutual forgiveness made it possible not only to go on, but to grow. And so we have.

5. **Kindness/Chesed** חֶסֶד

I want to praise this Family of Families for, over time, creating a culture of kindness, which in Hebrew is **Chesed**, one of the attributes of God.

When I arrived there was incredible anger and bitterness regarding the crises and challenges that Temple Sinai faced. In my first Executive Committee meeting, the air was thick with words I could not say around my mother. I was stunned.

I told our leaders that this was not ethical. Their treatment of each other would mirror how they treated the rest of the Board and the congregation.

Over time, we softened both words and attitudes. We finally were able to get past the dreaded “meeting after the meeting,” you know, that horrible “after” conversation in the parking lot where people vent their spleens.

We learned to show kindness to everyone, even those we thought were flat out wrong. Creating this culture of kindness, even in the face of challenge and crisis, kept us from crashing on the shoals of anger and bitterness.

To be honest, I am more proud of this than anything else we have done together. Creating a culture of kindness allowed us to be fair, ethical and inclusive. It helped us not only survive lean times, but attract others who had kindness to give or needed it for themselves.

Lesson learned. Chesed, or Kindness is more important than **Kesef**, money. It is how a congregation can be both holy and whole.

6. **Gratitude/To-da** תודה

I want to publicly thank every single one of you who I have engaged with over my years at Sinai. I have a vice that I will share with you – I am terrible at writing thank you notes. I often put off sending a thank you note for months. It is embarrassing.

Yet, you have showered me and my family with so much kindness there are not enough trees in the world to make paper for all the thank you notes that you properly deserve. You have hosted me (and sometimes my entire family). We have shared countless lunches, cups of coffee, receptions and gatherings and I have always been touched by your hospitality.

You have even invited me into your living rooms when I came to ask for money! And given me cookies (my secret weakness) to boot! And when I have asked for your support you have been extraordinarily generous. Your kindness and generosity made it possible for us to thrive for decades after people wrote us off.

Lesson learned. Todah means gratitude. And I say to you today: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

7. **Tradition/Masoret** מסורת

I would like to share what I said in my last Shabbat sermon before retiring in June, 2020 about how we have striven to be more authentic in our Jewish learning and practice over our years together:

“Learning here was barely adequate in 1988 when I arrived. I was horrified to learn that our b’mitzvah tutor was teaching our kids to read Torah from a piece of paper with English transliteration that was simply put on top of the scroll. When I insisted our kids could do more and that it was unacceptable to read English letters instead of Hebrew, he quit on the spot. “What do you expect,” he asked, angrily. “They’re Reform!”

Since then we have had bar and bat mitzvah students who have held their own with kids who go to Jewish day school.

And adults have risen to the challenge of better Jewish learning as well. We have adults in our Shabbat minyan who read Torah flawlessly, who translate perfectly, who interpret brilliantly.”

Last week at Rosh Hashana I sat in the congregation and kvelled at all the wonderful volunteers who read Torah and Haftara so beautifully. No clergy needed for that here! A sacred community that embraces Torah! What more could a rabbi ask for?

Lesson learned. Embracing **Masoret**, our Tradition, grounds us and makes us more authentically Jewish in head, heart and hand.

8. **Face to Face/Panim El Panim** פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים

When I retired in 2020, we were suffering the worst of the Covid pandemic. That spring we realized we could not ask people to come to the building for fear of their health and safety. So we livestreamed our services to make it possible to feel as if we were still a praying community. Teaching went online as well. Though it sustained us during that difficult time, to me it felt flat and distant.

Thank goodness we have come through pandemic relatively intact. We are more or less back to being in person for nearly everything, although livestreaming has been a blessing for many.

Yet I believe in my heart of hearts that the most powerful and lasting connections we make are in person, panim el panim, or face to face, we say in Hebrew.

From naming and blessing 200 or so babies here and in your homes;

From standing in front of the Ark with 800 of your bat and bar mitzvah children and blessing them;

From blessing more than 400 of our teens who wrote their own Confirmation services, writing from the bottom of their souls;

From offering my Torah to adults who gave up their precious evenings and Sunday mornings to learn with me;

From sitting with you in countless hospital rooms to offer Mi Shebeirach blessings of healing for those who recovered and those who did not.

We have embraced in the face of the death of your most precious ones, those who have left this world after long lives and those whose lives were tragically cut short. Together we have shared stories and kept love alive with tears and laughter and hugs.

Of course, all of this and more is being done by Rabbi Fellman and Cantor Reinwald, who continue the sacred tradition of in-person Jewish connection.

Lesson learned. Holy encounters and connections are deepest when they are in person, **Panim el Panim**, face to face.

9. **Ha-Makom/God/Place** – המקום

In Genesis, chapter 28, my namesake, Ya-a-kov (Jacob) runs for his life from his murderous brother, Esau with only the clothes on his back. When he stops for the night, he gathers stones around his head and dreams an incredible dream: He sees a ladder stretching from Earth to Heaven with angels going up and down on it. And he receives a message from God, who says he will be protected on the road and come back to his family's land in peace.

When he wakes up he realizes something amazing has happened. He declares, "A-chen YHVH ba-MAKOM ha-zeh v'a-no-chi lo ya-da-ti - Surely God is present in this place and I did not know it!" (Gen 28.16)

Our commentators emphasize that God's presence could be felt more powerfully in that place where Jacob dreamed than any other locale. They emphasize the use of the word Makom, meaning "place." But this presents a problem: Isn't God everywhere, in every place?

The very word in the Torah for "place," Ha-Makom, is used by our Sages to name God. God is both "Ha-Shechina" – the Indwelling

Presence of the Divine we feel within and “Ha-Makom” – God’s “everywhere-ness,” God’s unlimited presence in the world.

Look around you here, Ba-Makom, in this place.

Look up at the stained glass surrounding this room, set in colors which traverse the hours of the day, from dark blues to green-orange and back again to dark.

Look at the magnificent piece above the choir loft, the Naftali Bezem rendering of the Lion of Judah and the walls of Jerusalem.

Look at the Ner Tamid, the eternal light above the Ark, shaped like the dove of peace while forming the Hebrew word “Shaddai,” one of the names of God.

Look at the Ark doors, representing the Ten Commandments. Surely, God is in this place!

Now look around this room at each other. Go, on. Look! There are faces you know and love, faces you may or may not recognize, faces of complete strangers. All with light dancing in their eyes on this holiest of days.

God is certainly in this place and we know it.

Since 1969, when this sanctuary was built, we have found God in this room over and over again, with tears of joy and sorrow, with feelings of awe and connection, believing that we are part of something larger than we can even imagine.

If God is in this place how can we bear to leave it? Here's how: If God is truly Ha-Makom, everywhere, then God is not limited to this space. The God who protected Jacob on his journey, will certainly accompany us as we travel down to Fifth and Morewood to our new home. The God who we feel here lives within us and will be with us when we fondly say goodbye to this sacred space. God will follow us to the new building and we will rekindle the fire of our divine connection there.

God is certainly in this space. But in the end, it is not because of its beauty or even ritual objects. God is in this space because of you. You make God present and alive when you pray, sing, embrace and, today of all days, open your hearts to repentance and forgiveness.

I will miss this Makom, this space, this place where I have encountered God so richly and so often. But I refuse to suffer from the dreaded “edifice complex.” I look forward to encountering God “down the street” as we say, with you, in our new home, with a new name as well.

Lesson learned: Ha-Makom means both “place” and “God.”
As one Chasidic master taught, “Where is God? Wherever we let God in.”

10. Love/Ahava אהבה

Several years ago I spoke of my hope that Temple Sinai would become not just a “Kehilla K’dosha” or holy community, but a “Kehilla Ahuva” a *loving* community, based on the notion of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Beloved Community.”

The name “Kehilla Ahuva” never stuck, however. It was awkward to say. It seemed forced.

But somehow, we did it. Without ever calling ourselves a Beloved Community, we created one where all could experience love.

You could have green hair or multiple piercings and be loved.

You could have little concern for Hebrew or tradition and be loved.

You could push for more or fewer rituals and be loved.

You could sing too loud or even out of tune and be loved.

You could be liberal or conservative and be loved.

A prominent Jewish business leader once remarked to me that some synagogues love their buildings. At Temple Sinai, he said, you love each other. What a testament to who we are, who we have become and who we hope to be in our next chapter with our friends down the street in our new home!

Lesson learned. **Ahava**, or love, is not merely desirable for our holy community. It is essential. Over the years I have known most of you, please know that I come to love you as I hope you have come to love each other with a love that is genuine, a deep and thoughtful.

I would like to end with a song I wrote when I got here in 1988. It is called “Welcome to Temple Sinai.” I would sit on the floor with my guitar kindergarteners and sing the following:

Welcome to Temple Sinai
(words/music by Jamie Gibson, copyright 1988)

Welcome to Temple Sinai
Welcome to someplace new
Your teachers and your Rabbi
Want to say hello to you!

You are so very special
Each and every one
This is your song
So sing along
And, oh, we'll have some fun!

Temple Sinai – that's the place for me!
Temple Sinai – we're happy as can be!
Temple Sinai – that's the place to meet!
Where people, songs and learning are
So very, very sweet!

Cute, right? It's no Fred Rogers tune, but...Well, that was then.
This is now. So I wrote a new version for this moment, this special

community in this special, holy space in which we may never celebrate Yom Kippur again:

Welcome to Temple Sinai
Welcome to someplace great
I want to share some love with you
Before it gets too late

You are so very special
Each and every one
This is your song
Try to sing along
Before we are all done

Temple Sinai –it's people that we love!
Temple Sinai – they're all that we dreamed of!
Temple Sinai – we make each other whole!
With love and faith and spirit
We will cherish every soul!

Lesson learned. Temple Sinai – where we make each other whole. Where we cherish every soul! Here in this sacred place.
And wherever we go. Whenever we go to our new home.

Forever. Wherever. Whenever. Forever. Every soul. All of you.
Every soul. All of us. Every soul. Every soul.