

I am going to begin today by asking everyone here to take a minute and take a quick look around. Do you see anything different?

If you were looking closely, you might have noticed a few new additions to these rooms. The most obvious additions are the New Mahzorim--the new High Holiday prayerbooks you are holding in your hands. These new prayerbooks replaced the beloved, and well-worn black Silverman Mahzorim that we have used since PJC was founded 58 years ago.

Up here on the bimah, you might have noticed that we have beautiful new flower boxes on the both sides. If you have x-ray vision--or a good short term memory, you may also have noticed that all the silver Torah ornaments have been polished and repaired, thanks to the generosity of Al Solomon.

Those of you seated in the ballroom might have noticed a new sheen on the ballroom floor, new paint on the walls and tulle now decorating our ceiling.

Put all these new additions together and I think we could say that Plainview Jewish Center is starting to look a little spiffier these days. The changes are even more profound upstairs, where our school has undergone major renovations and seen the introduction of brand-new Smart Boards a state of the art computer lab.

Were we to do this same exercise next year, we would likely see even more significant changes. In partnership with our new caterer, Robert Ian Caterers, we are just at the beginning of the process of updating our beloved building.

Looking around at all that is changing, and all that is slated for change, we might ask ourselves, "what's the point of putting all these resources into making our building look more attractive? Aren't there better uses of our limited resources than simply making the building look pretty?" These are not rude questions, asked only by curmudgeons who resist changing anything. These are questions we should all be asking. Because making the synagogue look good should not be an end in itself; but rather a means to an end. And if so, then we have to ask ourselves, what is the end that justifies all this effort and expenditure?

I would like to answer this question by sharing with you a story I learned from my colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein. The story takes place in a town where there are two synagogues. One synagogue is elegantly appointed; the Torahs are crowned with gold, not silver, and the ark itself is made of gold. In this synagogue, an old rabbi opens the doors to the sanctuary every Shabbat and every holiday, and waits for the people to come. But as the years go on, fewer and fewer people show up for services; until, eventually, the rabbi finds himself alone in the opulent sanctuary. From then on, he comes in to the synagogue each Shabbat, recites a few prayers, opens the ark to check on the Torahs, and returns sadly home.

So where are all the Jews? They pray at a small, ramshackle synagogue on the outskirts of town. This synagogue has a leaky roof, mismatched chairs and wobbly little table for reading from the Torah. But the congregation is too poor to even own a Torah. Each week, they take a makeshift scroll made from scrap paper and two wooden dowels, and spread it out on the

reading table. An older Torah reader, who can no longer see, "reads" from the ad hoc Torah by heart. Everyone knows the little, improvised Torah isn't the real thing, but they dance and sing with it anyway out of sheer love for the word of God.

One Shabbat morning, when the rabbi of the opulent synagogue opens the golden ark, he hears rustling inside. It seems the Torahs are trying to escape. "Where are you going?" the rabbi asks. "To the little synagogue on the edge of town," the Torahs answer "Why go there?" the rabbi challenges the Torahs, "you have a beautiful home here, where you are dressed in only the finest gold and richest fabrics?" "We are going," the Torahs reply "somewhere where we will be carried and kissed, opened and read from, danced with and embraced". And as they utter these words, the Torahs fly past the rabbi and out the door.

The rabbi has no choice but to follow the Torahs to the ramshackle synagogue. Entering the small sanctuary, he takes a seat in the corner to watch what will happen. Eventually, a member of the synagogue brings the Torah over to the rabbi and invites him to dance with the scroll. Grudgingly, the rabbi agrees, even though dancing with a Torah seems downright undignified. But as he begins to dance, and joins his voice with the congregation in song, a feeling of tremendous warmth washes over him. The rabbi realizes that this tiny, makeshift synagogue is where the Torahs belong.

Here at Plainview Jewish Center, we have never been in danger of becoming like the opulent synagogue in the story. We have never treated our synagogue like a showplace; a space to be admired but not disturbed. And even though we are beautifying our building now, our outlook isn't changing. Having a great looking synagogue is not, for us, an end in itself. We don't want our synagogue to be admired--or at least not only admired. We want our synagogue to be used.

And we are doing a great job. Our building is busier and more active than it has been in a long time. We are not only holding more catered events than we have in recent years, but also more classes, more meetings, more programs, more services. We are cleaning up and opening up rooms that haven't been used in years. Some days, we have groups squeezed in every nook and cranny, including the main sanctuary and the small chapel. Even as we are starting to look a little more like the fancy synagogue in the story, we are continuing to function like the humble little synagogue, with activity and energy all around.

What is the secret to the success of the little synagogue in the story? As the rabbi in the story quickly learns, the secret is that a synagogue is not about the rabbi, or the even the Torah. The synagogue is about people. People make a synagogue what it is and people determine a synagogue's present--and its future.

Think about it. There are many factors that bring people into the synagogue. They may have heard good things about the Rabbi and the Cantor. They may live close by. They may have been raised in similar congregation or identify with the denomination the synagogue belongs to. But there is one factor above all others that keeps people coming back to synagogues: the

people. To demonstrate this point, I could cite scholarly studies from Synagogue 3000. But instead, let's just ask for a show of hands for people here who agree with the following statement: "I joined and/or stayed at Plainview Jewish Center because people greeted me warmly and I made friends here. (pause). That's a lot of people. More than anything else, it is the connections we make with others that keep us here. And we call these connections "community".

Of course, it is possible to belong to our synagogue--or any synagogue--and not feel like a part of a community. We may decide that we are just here for the services the synagogue offers--High Holiday tickets, education for our children, Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In theory, we can consume these services without making a connection to anyone in the synagogue. But the experience of being part of a community, of making these connections, is the most important thing our synagogue can offer to any one of us.

Many of us, I am sure, look back on our childhoods and remember fondly how connected we were to a series of communities. We had family close by; we knew our neighbors, and even the corner grocer, the neighborhood baker and the family that ran the local clothing store. Today, many of these connections have become weaker or simply no longer exist. Families are more spread out. We very often don't know our neighbors. And we shop for the most part at large chain stores where we are just one of thousands of customers. So where do we make connections these days? Where do we find people who will share the good times with us and support us in times of trouble. Where can we go to feel cared about and care for others? Where can we connect with people who share our values, our tastes and our experiences? Our synagogue can be that place--the place where, to paraphrase the Cheers theme song 'everybody knows your name'.

It may well be that the most important thing synagogue life offers us is community. We really owe it to ourselves to take advantage of this wonderful gift. Each of us needs to take the initiative to reach out to others we meet. I can personally vouch for most people here--we have a lot of terrific people here in our community. They're great--once you get to know them. And for some of us, that may mean having to overcome some anxiety about putting ourselves out there, some natural shyness. I know that may not be so easy. But I promise it will be worth everyone's while. Every one of us, from the shyest person in the room to the most gregarious, needs community. Sometimes we have to push ourselves a little to get what we need. And I hope that when we see others pushing themselves to connect, that we are always able to respond with a warm smile and an outstretched hand.

What community can do for us, though, is only half the story. The other, very important question is, what can we do for community? Which brings us back to our story about the ramshackle synagogue. What made that synagogue, like PJC --not like the opulent one across town, "the place to be? It wasn't the rabbi or the cantor--they didn't have one. It certainly wasn't the caterer or the well-appointed building. It was the people. People, you and I, all of us

together, make a synagogue. Not only do we make a synagogue by being a community, but also by giving that community its direction, its character its dreams and aspirations.

In fact, the synagogue, our synagogue, is a place where people, individuals and small groups, can make a tremendous amount of difference. If we want to talk about the resurgence of Plainview Jewish Center, we have to talk about what some amazing individuals and small groups have done to enrich, enliven and strengthen our community.

A few examples among many. We have talked a lot this year about the new technology we have introduced in our school; our Smartboards and our Computer Lab. A small but visionary task force of volunteers came up with this idea; one dedicated volunteer took charge of the project and carried it through faster than any of us thought possible. The service for families with young children that just ended in the Youth Corner was initiated by three very passionate volunteers. In just its second year, this service is filled to capacity and run very capably by volunteers. By the way, our family service in the Kirschner room was also created and is still strongly supported by volunteers. We are now holding a High Holiday food drive for the second year in a row. The impetus for the food drive came from a volunteer, the execution, and the collection this year are being done entirely by volunteers.

What I have shared with you are just three examples of projects that originated in the past couple of years with an individual or a small group asking "what can we do for our community?" if I had time, I could name dozens more, large and small. I would love to think that the motive force for all we are doing here at PJC is our amazing staff. But the truth is: what makes us not just a functioning synagogue, but a vibrant, energetic and creative community, is you--our volunteers. You, all of you, who give of your time and talents to PJC are responsible for our 58 years of history as a thriving congregation. And you are responsible for the resurgence that I hope will lead the way to at least 58 more.

Volunteers make our community. Volunteers help us to be creative and responsive, caring and dynamic. The power of volunteers to bring good things to our community is immense. And that is why we at PJC have designated this year as "The Year of the Volunteer". Last Sunday, we held our first ever Volunteer Fair at PJC. This fair was the product of yet another tireless and dedicated group of volunteers, our Volunteer Engagement Committee. For four hours, representatives from dozens of groups, committees and arms of our synagogue gathered together in the ballroom to showcase the wide range of volunteer opportunities available in our synagogue community. Just seeing everyone gathered together was an awe-inspiring sight. We are truly a diverse community full of dedicated people who want to make a difference.

The Year of the Volunteer didn't end with last Sunday's Fair. It was only the beginning. This is the year in which we will be asking each other to make--or reaffirm-- a commitment to strengthening our community by volunteering. The commitment does not have to be a large one--even an hour of volunteering can make a huge difference. And, in the words of the

Talmud, "anyone who can do more, will only benefit". Not only do we benefit the community when we give of our time, but we also benefit ourselves. Volunteering is a great way to meet some fantastic people. Volunteering is also great way to feel good about making a difference. Volunteering is truly a win-win that helps us get more about of being a part of our community while helping others as well.

We don't normally do appeals from the bimah on the High Holidays. But this year, I am going to make a slight exception. This year, the Year of the Volunteer, I would like to ask you to make a pledge. I'm not asking you for a monetary donation, I'm asking you for your time. As much as you can afford to give--whether that's a little or a lot. You don't have to turn down a tab on a pledge card. This can be a pledge between you and God. Pledge to give some of your very valuable time and talents to volunteering at PJC. If you "pledged" last year, consider increasing your pledge. If you haven't pledged yet, make the commitment this year--the Year of the Volunteer.

Finally, take a moment now for one more look around this room. There's a lot more to see than new mahzors, pretty new flowerboxes and a nice start to updating our ballroom. The most beautiful sight we can take in, in fact, the sight of our PJC family, gathered together in celebration and in community. We are PJC, and PJC is what we, together make it. May we always finding caring community within these walls. May we always use our talents and our energies to make our community a place where people, and even Torahs, want to be.