

**Creating Community:
some reflections on the power and passion of belonging
Erev Rosh Hashanah
2009 / 5770**

Rabbi Lutz:

Throughout the years I have been so blessed to share in your lives, to hear so many of your stories, to hear very often of the gratitude you feel towards this community that has been here to support you to celebrate with you, to comfort you – to bless you as together we make this journey through life, as together we attempt to create that Promised Land. Unfortunately, too often, the stories are known by only a very few. Too often we are unaware of the role this community plays in so many lives. We remain unaware of the way in which we touch each others lives and the power of his community in creating those moments.

On this erev Rosh Hashanah,, as we begin a new year in our journey together I have asked four members of our community to share their stories with us. I have asked them to tell us a bit about their passion for this community, about the meaning and purpose that has been created in their lives due to the journey we have all shared together. I only wish that we had time to hear from each of you. I have heard so many of you speak with the same passion that we will hear tonight. I hope that in the coming days and weeks you will do just that: send me your stories about what this community means to you, I would love nothing better than, with your permission, to share your stories and experiences of this sacred community that we might all become more aware of the ways in which we have touched each others lives and, in so doing, shared in the bounty of God's blessings.

In order of their comments we will hear tonight first from Chuck Mondrus, and later in the service Emily Lutz, Gregg Garfinkel and Lisa Kantor.

Chuck Mondrus

My name is Chuck Mondrus and I am member of the TAS Board of Trustees. As some of you may know, I was brought up in the very Jewish community of Skokie Illinois just outside of Chicago. My family was a member of Temple Menorah – a reform congregation; in a way, not unlike the social climate hear at TAS. My dad was active in the Men’s Club and my mom with Sisterhood. My father held every office in Men’s Club until he became president. Eventually he would go on to be the temple president. All my parent’s friends were families of the 400 member temple, each knowing each other. The thing was, I just took this closeness of people for granted. Since I didn’t know any different it all made sense to me.

I had long since forgotten that feeling of community I had grown up with a Temple Menorah. I suppose I passed it off as just one of those things that was back in the time when you actually knew your neighbors, rode your bikes or walked all over the area – not something that exists these days.

In 1995 having just moved to the North Valley I was shopping for a temple to raise my daughter, Mary, in. You see, I never was a Bar Mitzvah nor did I have a very good knowledge of Jewish history but I wasn’t going to let that be an option for Mary. I just knew that it was important to raise my daughter with a full and true understanding of the Jewish traditions.

I remember the first service I attended at TAS. It was a family Shabbat service during the summer and so it was outside. Rabbi Brown was sitting at a keyboard, Cantor Linsky and then, Director of Education, Barry Lutz both played guitars. What a wonderful service – the music and the way the clergy related to those of us sitting in the amphitheatre was remarkable. I think I even remember Rabbi Brown saying the Barry Lutz had recently enrolled in rabbinic school. I wonder if he ever followed through with that. Well, I was hooked on TAS. Not only did we join, I pulled Mary out of a secular daycare to enroll her in ECEC.

I joined the Men’s Club early on. They made me feel so welcome and they bestowed on me many activities to work on and chair. How lucky I was! Wait, that’s a good thing right?

Through the ECEC I met many parents of the children and through the men of the temple I meet their families. All of a sudden I realized that I had rediscovered something that had been missing from my life all these years – a sense of community; belonging! You see, we are all one family here with the common goals; one of which is instilling in each of our children a Jewish Identity. Somewhere along the way I sharpened my Jewish identity as well

I met Laurie Kendall while working on the Religious School board of education here at TAS. Having just become a single dad, Laurie and her daughter Casey started joining Mary and I on outings to Disneyland and Universal Studios. One day Casey said to Laurie, “Mama, we’re like a real family”. Out of the mouths of babes. Laurie and I were married in October of 2000 with Rabbi Lutz and Cantor Linsky officiating.

Let me give you a recent example of how wonderful this congregation is. This past Saturday, we celebrated S’lichot. It started off with family activities and dessert for well over 100 people. We then had a beautiful Havdolah service led by Rabbi Lutz, Cantor Linsky, Rabbi Hankin, Rabbi Shawna, and Rabbi Samansky. The latter two are newly added to our staff and both are products from our own religious school. Rabbi Hankin is the regional director of the URJ. We are a Rabbi’s temple if ever there was one.

After some brief study sessions we went into the sanctuary for the formal part of the evening – taking the “street clothes” off the Torahs and dressing them in their High Holy Day Whites. Looking around the room I saw friends I have cultivated over this past 14 years, parents of our daughter’s friends and some the teenagers themselves.

Sitting on the Bema were religious leaders and friends – one in the same. Rabbi Lutz had put together a wonderful service generously allowing for readings from the other three Rabbis. And how cool is it to be lead by Rabbis who spent time at our temple as children. I’m not sure who was beaming the most, Rabbi Lutz or me. And Cantor Linsky – true to form - put just the perfect spin on the musical part of the service.

About 2 years or so ago, Rabbi Lutz was elevated to Senior Rabbi and chose to lead our congregation in a new direction. He empowered the lay leadership to take responsibility for the future of our community and a “long range planning committee” was organized. Adding Synagogue 2000 programming via Synaplex offered special weekends at TAS celebrating various holidays and special events. This is just one of the many activities that have been added so as to offer more reasons to come and get involved.

The amazing thing is the way the clergy dovetails with the congregants. We have programs come from the TAS staff as would be expected, but we also have as many that originate from a members idea and are embraced by our Clergy. There’s no room for ego here at Temple Ahavat Shalom; too much to do, too little time to do it in.

I just want to leave you with one last thought. You may remember the movie “As Good As It Gets”. There’s a line Jack Nicholson said to Helen Hunt’s character in the movie. He had taken her out to eat and was trying to pay her a complement. He says to her, “you make me want to be a better man”. Well TAS makes me want to be a better Jew. I have already told you my knowledge of Judaism was weak at best when I joined having not been a Bar Mitzvah. Well next August 2010 I am personally inviting everyone here to join me as I will finally become a Bar Mitzvah. A little late but much the wiser for it.

Everyone here at Temple Ahavat Shalom is a goodwill ambassador with their own special stories – please open your minds and hearts to let them in.

Shana Tova from my family to yours.

Emily Lutz

Now I know you are all thinking that I'm just up here because I'm the rabbis' daughter. However being a RK, that's a rabbis' kid, does not necessarily mean that you are passionate about your community, well... I guess in my case it does.

Being a high school senior entitles you to a number of privileges, leaving school early, special senior activities, and of course prom; and still, there is only one thing encompassing our minds, college applications. Applications are daunting, something we have been dreading since we were given frightening speeches by our 9th grade counselors. So accordingly guess what my first English assignment was, writing an application essay. I grudgingly sat myself down to begin the process, and pulled up the UC prompt which begins by stating: Describe the world and community you come from. Immediately my mind soared to the place where I grew up, to my personal community, to Temple Ahavat Shalom.

A community is somewhere you feel safe, somewhere to grow and learn about the world and yourself, and over the years I have done just that along with my best friends in the entire world. Going through preschool, Sunday school, Hebrew school, and confirmation at the temple I was bound to make a couple good friends, however that doesn't even begin to describe the incredible relationships I have created at temple. My friends here have never fit in the normal friend range. Not because they're strange and crazy, well...maybe they are, but mostly because the word friend doesn't illustrate the significance of their presence in my life, the only word to describe them is family.

TAS is just as much of a home to me as the place where I sleep every night. I've learned all the nooks and crannies, all the best hiding spots, and the best places for hanging out with friends. I've spent hours sitting in my dad's office doing homework, or it might have been spent trying to stash as much candy as possible from his desk into my pockets. I've also spent Friday nights in the youth lounge attending Shabbat Houses for Junior TASTY, and countless hours sitting in the youth lounge planning meetings or immensely enjoying myself at TASTY events. Overall if you were to accumulate the amount of hours I've spent at this temple it would most likely equal or surpass the hours spent at my home. Yet, this isn't what makes TAS so important to me, because a community isn't just a building or things we place inside it, its people. All of you are what makes this place important; you make this the most special place in the world to me.

Shabbat Shalom

Gregg Garfinkel

My name is Gregg Garfinkel. My wife is Julie, who became a full-fledged member of our community on Friday, July 24, 2009, when she converted to Judaism in a beautiful ceremony officiated by our Rabbi Lutz and Cantor Linsky. Our two boys, Ben (8) and Brandon (5) are graduates of the Early Childhood Education Center. I have been a member of the TAS community for almost six years. During this time, my family has celebrated and shared many good times with the TAS community. During this time, my family has also looked to the TAS community for support as my incredible wife continues in her courageous fight against cancer.

Rabbi Lutz asked me to say a few words about what the Temple Ahavat Shalom community means to me. Here are my thoughts.

Community to me is where everywhere I look I see a friend. Where dropping off my boys at religious school is like an episode of Cheers - without the beer, of course. Where I feel at home and safe. Where pictures of my family and friends adorn the walls of the ECEC and the pages of the TAS website.

Community to me, is where I feel selfless. Where I want to participate in events, like the Fall Fest, to bring happiness to others and to make the temple experience a great one for all. Where a Sunday morning line-up with names like Fogel, Gluck, Korduner, and Recht is a formidable force to be reckoned with, and strikes fear in the hearts of the other teams in our Synagogue Softball league.

Community to me, is where I share values and beliefs: where our cultural and religious beliefs forge a common bond; where I have the privilege of hearing Cantor Linsky's beautiful voice and the benefit of Rabbi Lutz' wisdom, humor, and guidance.

Most importantly, community to me is a place where I seek and receive support: where Sharon Weinberg and Debbie Lieber provide a home cooked meal over after the passing of a loved one; where Debbie Chesler, the Director of the ECEC, brings your child home because your wife is under the weather and you are stuck at work; where your softball teammates assist in an e-mail campaign to ensure that your wife becomes the Honorary Bat Girl for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Community to me is meeting Gordon Recht at the Islands restaurant for a beer (and closing the place down) so that we can discuss the trials and tribulations of dealing with breast cancer, and our wife's courage in doing so.

Community to me is where close friends, and not so close ones, ask "how is Julie. . . how are you" . . . and mean it. Community means knowing that you are in the thoughts and prayers of others and that you always have a shoulder to lean on, and a shoulder, ear, or hand to lend. TAS is my community.

Lisa Kantor

L'Shana Tova.

My name is Lisa Kantor and I am honored to be President of Temple Ahavat Shalom.

People ask me all the time why I have been involved in Temple leadership for over a decade, and why I would ever take on the responsibility of being Temple president. The answer for me is easy: I am passionate about TAS. And the reason I am passionate about TAS is because I am passionate about all of you.

We have stood together in times of crisis, through the Northridge earthquake, the JCC shooting, 9/11 and the recent national recession. You have stood by me in times of personal tragedy, comforting me with your presence, your prayers and your love. You set an example for me with your dedication to social action, from providing gifts to the needy and feeding the hungry, to donating blood and fighting for social justice. You set an example for our children by being committed to educating them in the Jewish way of life, and by continuing to educate and challenge yourselves to commit to a Jewish way of life long learning. You bring me joy when I watch you doing Israeli dancing on Friday nights, or playing ga-ga in the amphitheater, or singing karoake on a warm September evening, or flipping pancakes for hundreds of hungry children. And I feel such joy when you greet me with a smile, a hug, a kiss, a kind word, or when you ask how I am, and you listen when I tell you. I am inspired by the countless hours you spend on important committee work, planning events, developing "2020 vision", embracing the possibilities, thinking outside the box, sharing the word on the capital campaign. I am awestruck when you worry about one another, insist that we do what is right, try to reach out to those who are frustrated or disgruntled, and make and nurture lifelong friendships.

I am blessed because I was a stranger to this strange land we call the San Fernando Valley, and you welcomed me with open arms, gave me a place to call my own, and offered me the chance to feel God's presence in my otherwise ordinary life. And I am blessed by those who created this amazing place, this precious community, and handed it to me on a silver platter, asking only that I maintain and cherish it for those who come after me.

I am touched by the beautiful services that I attend in this warm and welcoming sanctuary. Tonight, of course, so perfectly began our High Holy Day season, setting the mood for self-reflection and soul-searching. But also, each Friday night service, each funeral or minyan I attend, each Synaplex, each holiday, and each time we meet and simply bless the bread or say Shehechianu, I am touched and inspired by - and passionate about - our amazing clergy, the directors of our schools, our teachers and our staff - by their dedication, boundless energy, and many talents and gifts which they willingly share with me.

I am passionate about TAS, because I am passionate about all of you. We have shared nearly twenty sweet and joyful years, and I wish for you another year of peace, health, happiness and, most importantly, passion.

Rabbi Lutz responds:

Tonight we have entered the New Year. In Hebrew this day is called many things – one of which is *Yom Harat Haolam*: the birthday of the world. More specifically, this day is considered to be the day on which Adam and Eve were created. This is our day of creation as well. Everything at this moment is only potential ... the book of our lives in the coming year as white and unblemished as our beautiful Torah mantles. We exist for this brief moment, like Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. And so, tonight I want to share with you a little known story about Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden.

After their exile Adam and Eve had lived East of Eden, I know some of you remember the book? Have seen the movie? In any case, Adam and Eve lived together, tilling the earth, raising children, struggling to make a living and stay alive. After a lifetime of struggle, with the children now grown and out of the house, they decided it was time to travel, to see the world before it was too late. They journeyed from one corner of the globe to the other exploring all of God's wondrous creations: the stood on the top of high mountains, trekked across vast deserts, walked amid lush forests and sailed across magnificent seas. They watched sunrises over endless wilderness and watched it set into the boundless ocean.

Towards the end of their journey they came to a place that seemed so vaguely familiar. There in front of them was a beautiful garden and as they gazed upon it, as if out of nowhere an angel appeared brandishing a fiery sword. Fearful of the angel, Adam and Eve backed away. But then they heard a voice, equally familiar, calling out to them. "My children, you have lived in exile for many years now. Your punishment is complete. Come now and return to My garden." And with that the Angel disappeared.

However, after so many years of toil and struggle Adam and Eve had become a bit cautious. "It has been so many year," said Adam, "remind us what it is like in the Garden." "The Garden is Paradise!" God responded. "In the Garden there is no work. You will never again have to toil and struggle. There is no pain or suffering either. In the Garden there is no time – no yesterday, no tomorrow, only an endless today."

Adam and Eve thought about this. They considered a life with no struggle, no pain, no passage of time. Adam looked at his wife. He looked into the face of the woman with whom he had worked so hard to create a life, with whom he had toiled to make bread from the earth, to raise children and build a home. He saw in the lines of her face all the tragedies they had overcome the joys they had celebrated. He looked into her eyes and say all the laughter and tears they had shared.

Eve looked back at Adam. There she saw the moment of jubilant celebration and unbearable pain. She remembered the life changing crises and many moments of tenderness and love. She remembered moments of new life and moment of death.

As they remembered they took each others hands. Slowly a smile crossed their faces and together they shook their heads. "No, thank you," Adam replied. "That's not for us," Eve answered, "Not now." And then she turned to Adam, "Let's go home." And Adam and Eve turned their back on God's Paradise and walked home.

What gives our lives purpose and meaning, what gives our lives depth and character is the journey we take together, striving always for a paradise of our own creation. In sharing life, In sharing love we

create our own paradise. Even in moments of pain there is Paradise. It is in those moments when we truly come to understand the power of love to heal and to give us strength.

Tonight we have been blessed to hear from three who have shared with us the importance of this community, how Temple Ahavat Shalom has been for them a place of Paradise. Three very different stories all with similar themes of love and support of meaningful human connection a place for celebration in times of joy and a place of comfort in times of need. Temple Ahavat Shalom is our Garden of Eden. It is a garden of our creation. But our Garden too, is East of Eden, and depends therefore on our toil, our commitment, our ongoing participation and dedication. Simply put, we are each God's hands it takes the direction of those we have welcomed to leadership this evening and the ongoing gifts and contributions of your own hands and souls.

May we all, indeed, be inscribed this year for a good year, a year of blessing, when the works of our collective hands will bring added strength and blessing to this sacred community and through this community bring a bit of healing and Paradise to the world beyond. Amen.