

The Team and Me: The Responsibilities of Congregational Membership

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Countryside Community Church Guest Sermon / January 5, 2020

I'd like to tell you a story about my grandfather, Lou Marks. We called him Pop. He passed away four years ago.

Pop may not have been too popular here in Nebraska, because he was a big booster of the University of Texas Longhorns football team.

When we were growing up, he used to wear this t-shirt he'd gotten from the coach: the shirt the players wore during practice.

It was a plain white shirt, with two words emblazoned on it in burnt orange. On top, in large letters, was the word "Team." Underneath it, in smaller letters, was the word "Me."

I didn't understand the shirt when I was a kid, and I remember asking Pop: "What does Team-Me mean?"

So he explained: See how the word "Team" is on top, and it's larger than the word "Me"? It reminds me that I am part of the team, but the team is bigger than me. It means the team needs me, and I have to put the team first.

I've never forgotten that shirt. In fact, when Pop died, my brother had Team-Me shirts made for all the grandchildren, and we wore them under our suits at the funeral.

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These lessons I learned from my grandfather are important for us to think about as faith communities, whether we're talking about a Jewish synagogue, or a Christian church, or the Tri-Faith Initiative we share.

The first one is that our congregation is a team – *our* team.

I know it's kind of a sports word, but I like it because it tells us something about what a congregation ought to be.

A team is more than just a group of people who happen to belong to the same club or show up at the same place from time to time.

A team is a group of people who share a mission, and feel *ownership* of it and *responsibility* to it – and they work together to bring their mission to life.

At Temple Israel, we have a mission, just like Countryside has a mission, and we each have core values to support that mission.

At Temple Israel, we talk about four core values. These values are emblazoned on the four pillars of the Community Court right in the heart of our building, in both Hebrew and English:

--The first is Torah, which means transformational learning that inspires purposeful living.

--The second is Avodah. That means service to God and community through spiritual practice and sacred leadership.

--The third is G'milut Chasadim – which means kindness and support for our members and for the broader world.

--And the fourth is K'hilah – which means building meaningful relationships in our Temple Israel community and the other communities we're part of: the Tri-Faith community, the Omaha Jewish community, and the broader civic community.

These values were handed down to us by the ancient sages.

Our mission is to make them real and impactful for everyone in our congregation.

To support each other on the journey, to contribute in the best ways we can, and to step up and take our turn leading the way.

In sports, we call that a team. In life, we call it a *family*.

We talk about this a lot in Judaism, but I'm not sure it's really entered the synagogue culture the way it ought to.

Frankly, I think you in the Christian faith community do it a lot better than we do.

And to my mind, at least, Countryside Church is exemplary in this regard. We have a lot to learn from you, and we *are* learning from you.

But for many of us in the Jewish community, our relationship to the synagogue is transactional. Maybe that's true in the church community, too. After all, Rev. Elnes *did* ask me to come give this sermon here today!

When I say “transactional,” I mean: We pay our dues, and we figure that, in exchange, that gets us access to worship services, and clergy to officiate life cycle events, and a program here and there if we want.

Kind of like a gym membership gets you access to the treadmill and spin classes.

But membership in a congregation is not meant to be transactional.

To be a member of a holy community like Temple Israel or Countryside Church is to be part of a *team* – a *family* – that cares about each other, and takes responsibility for each other, and works together to make the community great for *everyone*.

As my former colleague Rabbi Kedar says, when you're part of a congregational family like this, it's not transactional – it's *transformational*. It changes you, and enriches you, and lifts you to new heights.

The Talmud – which is one of Judaism's core sacred texts – says that “all members of the Jewish community are responsible for one another.”

That's our Jewish version of “Team-Me.” I'm sure Christianity teaches the same thing.

We should put it on a t-shirt and wear it as a reminder to *live* it.

Because transactional religion is flat and lifeless. But transformational religion is a pathway to meaning, and purposeful living, and deep connection with God.

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The second lesson I learned from my grandfather is this: the team – the family – is bigger than just me.

Not only is each of us in our respective congregations just one person in a community of hundreds of families, but we are also just one small part of something even bigger than *that*.

In 2021, Temple Israel will celebrate 150 years as a congregation, the oldest one in Nebraska.

We're part of a Jewish communal family here in Omaha that spans the dimension of time – *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation.

Many of our members are second generation Temple members, or third generation, or fourth, or even fifth generation members of our congregation!

And not only that. We trace our *spiritual* ancestry across the ages and across the world to Mt. Sinai. Our tradition says every Jew who would ever live was there that day.

It's the same for you as Christians. You're part of a faith tradition extending all the way back two millennia, to Jesus and the Apostles.

And just like us in the Jewish community, to be part of that tradition means more than just reading about it as an historical artifact, as something that happened a long time ago.

In the mysterious realm of the spirit, you know *you* were there, too – and somewhere in the deepest part of your soul, you remember it. And that's why you're here.

So this family we're a part of? It's far, far bigger than any of us.

Membership in what our rabbis call *k'nesset yisrael* – the cosmic faith community that transcends the bounds of time and space – is a sacred responsibility. We're the trustees of the past, the present, and the future.

As we say to every bar and bat mitzvah kid at Temple Israel on the morning of their celebration service: God has entrusted this tradition into *your* safekeeping.

If we want this thing to succeed, and to keep going, it's on *us*, and no one else.

If we want a vibrant, transformational congregation, *we* have to create it – *continually*.

Not just the clergy and the staff. Not just the president, or the board. *All* of us. Together.

My former colleague used to say something else I tell our team all the time: “If it's only as big as me, it's too small.”

If the clergy are at the center of the congregation and your connection to it, it's too small – because clergy come and go.

If you rely on the clergy and the staff to create church life for you, it's too small – because we're only a few people.

The connection you have with *each other*; the Christian experiences you create *together*, the Tri-Faith experiences *we* create together, that enrich your life; the impact *you* make in the world together as bearers of God's light – these things are *far* more important, because they're the things that are lasting, and make us strong.

As I see it, your Countryside community excels in this. The way your congregants take initiative to create ministries and groups of various kinds, and take leadership in making this the incredibly vibrant community it is, is such an inspiration to me and to all of us over at Temple Israel.

But of course, we can always do better. No matter where we are on the spiritual ladder, there are always more rungs to climb.

So let's work together to build something transformational that will outlast all of us here, and continue the chain from one generation to the next – not just in name, or a building, but in a holy community – a *team*, a *family* – that is bigger than any one of us.

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Which leads to the final lesson – and I'll say it to each of you directly, as I said it to my congregation at Rosh Hashanah this year: *You* are part of the team, and the team *needs* you.

None of us can create and sustain a transformational faith community on our own. Nor are we meant to.

Judaism and Christianity are communal religions, not individualistic ones. It's really hard to be Jewish or Christian all by yourself.

We need everyone – we need *you* – to play your part in making this family work.

Do you remember the movie “Keeping the Faith” with Ben Stiller and Ed Norton?

Ben Stiller plays a rabbi, and when he and his friend the priest are shooting hoops and commiserating about the life of the clergy, he says: “My congregants want me to be the Jew they don't have time to be.”

But here's the thing: you can't be Jewish vicariously. I don't think you can be Christian vicariously either.

--Whether we're Jews who stood at Sinai or Christians who received the revelation of Jesus, each of us entered into a personal Covenant with God.

--Every one of us has the responsibility to honor our Covenant by our actions. In Judaism, we call it doing mitzvot. In Christianity, it's doing good works. Whatever we call it, that's what it is to be a person of faith.

The responsibility is yours every bit as much as it is mine – and you can't outsource it.

--Every one of us is obligated to visit the sick, and welcome people who are new, and comfort the bereaved, and help prepare the food so the grieving family doesn't have to...

and to pursue peace and justice, and to pray with the community, and be there for our fellow members just as they're here for us.

We clergy are here to *teach* you how to do these things, and what they mean in our respective faith traditions, and why they're important – but we can't do them *for* you.

Because each of us has a covenant – an agreement – with God, to be holy, and to serve the community, and to make the world better.

You have so many congregants who are shining examples of this, and so do we.

They give of their time, and their talents, and their passions to make our congregational family great for everyone.

They are blessings and examples to all of us.

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As we begin this new year, I'm asking you to think about your membership in this congregation in a new way.

Think of it as being part of a team, part of a family.

Think of it not as a simple transaction, but as a *mutual commitment* we make to be there for each other and do sacred work together.

I'm asking you to take ownership of your faith and your community in a way that speaks to you.

I believe each one of us has our own pathway into religious life, our own pathway to connection with God and community that inspires us and stirs our passion.

And it's different for everyone. What's meaningful to me may not do it for you.

Each one of us has to find our own pathway. And that may mean trying out a dozen different things until you find it.

But when you do find it, you'll know it. Because it will spark a fire in your soul, and energize you, and you will feel alive, and purposeful, and driven to pursue it.

So, find your pathway.

Ask yourself how you can give, and where you can make an impact, and how you'd like to grow – and help us make Christianity at Countryside Community Church transformational.

This team *needs* you. This family *needs* you.

Happy New Year.