

How Lovely are Thy Tents

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Author's Note:

This piece was written during Beth Am's second year, 1988, though it was not published until three years later. It reflects my sense of the congregation's early ambitions and successes. Since then, Beth Am has grown, declined, and grown again in size. Two of its four founding families left town within a couple of years of its inception, and so many other congregants did as well during the tough economic times of the late 1980s that we often joked that a moving van ought to be the congregational logo. Through all of this tumult and change, Beth Am has remained a warm and welcoming community, a rich spiritual home. More than a decade after I wrote this essay, the sensibility it describes remains wonderfully alive.

The Hagbah's actions are as varied as they are significant. Raising the Torah aloft to be blessed, cradling it while the Haftarah is chanted and then carrying it through the congregation--each is an important series of moments within the Shabbat liturgy, calling attention to the centrality of the Torah to the service and to our lives. They are as well visible testaments to the heft and sheer power of its words, which have increased in strength precisely because they have been chanted year after year, across time and place.

But these are also moments when the annual passage of time is recorded. Each week, like the turn of a clock's hand, the right scroll expands as the weekly parsha is wound up with those that have preceded it. By Deuteronomy the whole is out of balance, a fact I struggled with during this past month of Elul. But as I unsteadily raised the Torah, wishing my right arm was as strong as my left, the Torah's imbalance provided a sudden, tangible reminder of two joyous events: A new year was fast approaching, and it was one that would have a special meaning for the members of Congregation Beth Am of San Antonio, Texas. When on August 27th (the 14th of Elul) the Hagbah carried the Torah through the congregation and then returned it to the ark, it was the fifty-second time we had witnessed its journey and return. Beth Am's first year of existence had come to a close.

A successful close at that, if one can judge from the steady increase in members (we started with four families and ended the year with more than fifty), the development of an innovative Shabbat service that has consistently drawn well, the creation of a flourishing religious school and the hiring of a rabbi for one shabbat a month for the next year. These are only first stages of a long-range plan which includes hiring a rabbi full-time and constructing our own building, but they are important signs of growth, of the institution's maturation. How else can one explain the recent nostalgia for the pioneering days of last summer? We have, in our own minds at least, come of age.

What a difference a year can make. Last August we could not have imagined even having the luxury of thinking retrospectively. Then we were consumed by a prospective vision: Each decision, each act--each day even--seemed to determine the congregation's future. So we worried about which siddur (and thus liturgy) to adopt, struggled over the best means to educate our children, and wondered how to engender a spirit of tzedakah and tikkun. Grappling with these formidable issues was easy, however, when compared to the exasperation generated by a budget that has a mind of its own! And as we argued and compromised our way through these discussions, we were frequently drawn back to that most fundamental (and nagging) question: Why were we starting a new synagogue?

The answer is complicated, depending as it does on the personal experiences of those who have worked to make Beth Am grow (and in that sense this account may not be representative). But in the main the Congregation emerged in response to a number of familial, social and liturgical needs that seemed not to be met by San Antonio's three

other synagogues. Among these needs were a strong family orientation, full equality for men and women, and participatory services that would draw upon the past and present, seeking to weave together a traditional liturgy with modern sensibilities. Beth Am falls, in short, somewhere between the Reform and Conservative movements, a middle ground that is reflected in the congregation's selection of *Vetaher Libenu* for its siddur; it contains considerably more Hebrew than the Union Prayer Book and its striking interpretations are devoid of the sexist language that riddles *Sim Shalom*.

Given this orientation, why did we not simply establish a *havurah*? After all, the general ideals of that movement--its desire for a family-centered and innovative expression of Judaism--would seem to match our ideological concerns. The match is imperfect, however, especially in one important respect. As Ira Silverman recently argued in "American Jewry: Strengths and Weaknesses" (*Sh'ma*, 18/341), the *havurah* movement contains an internal flaw: Its emphasis on anti-institutionalism and anti-professionalism makes it difficult "to sustain groups and activities over time." That in turn makes it less attractive to middle-aging parents with young children, the Jewish education of whom requires to some degree both institutions and professionals.

And Beth Am's demographics reflect a decided 'boomer' influence (what doesn't these days?), one complete with its own boomlet of children. Our path seemed clear: The only way to realize the collective commitment to teach our kids synagogue skills and to encourage their proficiency in Hebrew, the only way to link these to our desire to create home and congregational environments in which the ruach of Judaism would flourish, was to establish a new institution.

We might not have reached that decision had we lived within a large Jewish community in which there were a range of options by which to express one's Judaism. But we do not: Jews comprise perhaps 1% of the city's total population of one million. It seemed possible that a new and mainstream congregation could have an immediate impact by expanding and strengthening the formal, institutional possibilities available. It appears to have worked, for more than one-third of the current membership was unaffiliated prior to Beth Am's emergence.

Not ever thing has worked according to plan, of course. Our overriding concern for instance with the education of the children, with the need for a creative approach that somehow would avoid the pitfalls of the traditional Sunday School setting, forced us to confront two things: Few in the congregation had either the training or the time to devote to the enterprise; moreover we do not have access to the abundant resources in Jewish education available in New York or Los Angeles. In the face of these complications, the education committee devised a curriculum in collaboration with the local day school, then contracted with its staff to teach it on the school's campus several afternoons a week, a sharing of resources from which both institutions benefited. The concept may well be unique in the United States; at the very least it might serve as a model for other synagogues in similar situations, and one congregation in San Antonio has already followed our lead. Out of poverty has come riches.

Other conundrums are less easily resolved. In fact more than once we have been hoisted on our own petard! A case in point is the congregation's assertion of equality between the genders. Equality has been achieved in many respects--both men and women are regularly called to the bimah for *aliyot* and there are more women than men on the board. But committees are another matter, with men dominating those concerned with ritual, while women are concentrated on those revolving around education and congregational events such as *onegs*; the traditional separation of spheres, it seems, is hard to shake.

No less ironic are the complications that have arisen with the presence of large numbers of children in services. The hope (and policy) has always been to encourage their attendance and participation in all Shabbat celebrations; a dull roar is all we ask. And in the beginning that is what we got. But that ran smack into another congregational desire--time for intense adult study with which the babble of small voices can certainly compete.

This situation was partly (and unintentionally) resolved by a measure designed to enhance child care for those who chose not to attend services. Each week the education committee has devised a hands-on activity that is frequently coordinated with the Torah portion or impending holidays. The problem is that these activities have been too engaging; the younger children especially find it hard to pull themselves away. Now the fear is that we are not as family-centered as we claim to be! A committee is currently working on creating a children's portion for the weekly service in the hope of better meeting the needs of parents and children within the context of services themselves. The search for such a happy medium may prove Sisyphean but it nonetheless cuts to the heart of Beth Am's sense of itself.

How these and a host of other concerns will pan out in the future is unclear. Uncertain too is whether Beth Am will have a future; we cannot of course predict if we will be able to build on the successes of the past year and thus legitimately claim to be the first new congregation in San Antonio since the 1920s. But even if it does not survive, all will not have been in vain. For me, it has been an extraordinarily rich experience. Through Beth Am I have learned how powerful can be the feeling of gathering together with a group of friends (old and new) to celebrate the sabbath, to watch as tallit-draped arms (men's and women's) stretch out to touch the Torah as it carried among us, to listen to the children lead us in the singing of "Adon Olam" that brings services to a close. The opening song, Ma Tov, has underscored something else--the possibility of joy within Judaism, joy best captured in its first line: "How lovely are thy tents, Oh Jacob!" And Beth Am is a lovely tent indeed.