

“What We Build Together”
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Shir Tikvah

First Universalist Church of Minneapolis
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Rabbi Latz: Good morning everyone. So I’m going to start off with some gratitude, I’m going to share with you a little bit about Shir Tikvah’s history, I’m going to try to teach a little torah, talk about co-location, and make sure I’m done in eleven minutes. So!

[laughter from the audience]

[someone from the congregation shouts, “good luck!”]

Rabbi Latz: Thank you!

It’s really, a joy and an honor to be with you this morning. And I want to extend my deepest gratitude to your Pastors who are beloved friends and truly an inspiration. Pastors Crow and Schroeder, MacKenzie, Hutt, and Aron Tenbrink- all of whom I admire so greatly, and I hope you realize how unbelievably blessed you are to have these leaders. They’re not simply for being brilliant and decent and beautiful colleagues—which they are—but after the shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh last October, they were among the first people to show up and to stand with Shir Tikvah and the Jewish community of the Twin Cities. It would have been really easy for them—for you—to run away from the pain, to be legitimately afraid. Instead, they ran towards us, arms wide open, hearts overflowing with love. Our Board Chair Bruce Manning was here at the early service this morning, and on behalf of all of us, I want to offer deepest gratitude from all of us at Shir Tikvah.

I also want to thank your extraordinary lay leaders—Eric, Cindy, Nancy and a lot of the folks we have the privilege of working with on co-location. Not only are your pastors and your staff great, but the leaders you’ve selected to lead this

congregation are really wise, humble, funny, hardworking, dedicated and seem to have the ability to produce meetings and emails at a volume I have never seen in my life! So! [congregation laughs] You are wise to keep electing them. It's nice to have—it's nice for Shir Tikvah and First U to have presidents that we love and adore, isn't it?

So, a very brief story of Shir Tikvah for those of you who don't know: We were founded in 1988 as a home for progressive Jews who believed in serious Jewish study, soulful worship, deep community engagement, and lived justice. For our first six years, we met at the St. Paul JCC. Our original eight families in fact met at Green Mill Pizza. That's where the first official board meeting was, and I don't want to know what they had on their pizza... Then, in 1994, we bought our home on Minnehaha Parkway from you all and have lived there for what will be a quarter century this summer. In the past 30 and a half years—we're finally 30-something!— we've grown from eight families to 540 households, which is around 800 or so adult members, and we continue to strive to live at the intersection of spirituality and justice, to marry the work of the sanctuary with our soul work on the streets. As a community, we've worked over the past thirty years to help settle Somali refugees; We continue to partner and dialogue with the Muslim community—which just as a side note—to be synagogues and mosques together in 2019, it should be a lot easier, and it's hard work. We challenged the ballot amendment that would have restricted the right to vote. We, like you, serve as a Sanctuary and Immigrant Justice congregation; We helped lead the way to marriage equality in Minnesota; We are currently engaged in a campaign against gun violence lead by our youth. Adults, we should listen to them and get out of their way. And we are currently partnering with Jewish Community Action, which is kind of like the Jewish ISAIAH, to restore the vote and care for the earth and reduce the impact of climate change.

Five years ago, we made a substantive commitment to racial justice. It's one of our three congregational priorities and it now infuses much of who we are and what we do—from our social justice work to our Jewish education. Not a lot of books produced synagogues in the last hundred years that actually have Jews of Color in them! We're working on it... We are striving to build a beloved community that seeks justice and equity and human dignity. We are deeply grateful to be your

partner in so much of this inspiring, agonizing, and holy work. You have taught us a great deal, and I hope in turn we can share some of what we learn with you all.

So, a little Torah! Each week, Jews read a section of the Torah. This week, we are in the book of Exodus, which is the second book. The Israelites are newly freed, and we find ourselves in the desert, so just take a moment and like... think about being in the desert. I often wonder how my people made it to Minnesota, but that's a different sermon! We find ourselves in the desert awaiting God's instruction for what's next, and we must decide what are going to do. You see, freedom isn't so easy. God called Moshe up the mountain to commune for 40 days. Now, I admit, I'm breaking one of the ten commandments and I'm going to tell you how jealous I am. 40 days of solitude, quiet, no whining or complaining, no carpools, no dishes to wash, no tweets, no laundry! Sounds—for lack of a better term—Divine.

But the experience of the newly freed Israelites at the base of the mountain—those who felt left behind- was anything but fabulous. They were frightened; terrified really. You see, Egypt was bad. Slavery was bad. But the structures and the systems of Egypt were all gone. Now, don't get me wrong—I'm not going to be all nostalgic or try to glorify for the Israelites the unpaid labor, the inability to worship God, the constant beatings. But the text itself tells us that the Israelites were complaining because they knew what to expect in Egypt: they knew where their food was coming from. They knew who was in charge. They knew which task masters to avoid. They understood how things worked. It made sense to them, even though it was immoral and unjust.

Freedom was terrifying.

And now Moshe—their trusted leader who spoke on God's behalf—was gone from their midst—and the people's anxiety grew exponentially. We read in Torah,

וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי־בָעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן־הַהָרַ וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם | עֲשֵׂה־לָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים
:אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ כִּי־זָה | מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מַה־תְּהִי לּוֹ

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who

shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מִה־הָיְתָה לּוֹ:

We don't know what happened to him.

In that forty-day sojourn when that Moses communed up the mountain, the people's fear was overwhelming. They lost their leader, or so they thought. They were in despair. So they gathered together and they took the jewelry that they had taken out of Egypt, and they melted it down, and they built a molten calf—a solid, hard, brilliant, beautiful calf—to worship.

Now, you don't have to be ordained as a Rabbi to figure out why they built it. We know why they built it. People who are afraid do wild things: They lash out at people who are different. They build walls. They produce more weapons. They build up a trillion dollar fear industry. They seek blame instead of responsibility, revenge instead of justice.

But we also know how the story continues. What happens? Moshe comes down the mountain and in a fit of rage, sees the calf, and what does he do? He smashes the 10 commandments. After he and God calm down (after berating the people, of course), another set of 10 commandments are produced.

But what happened to the shattered pieces of those tablets? What happens when something we value deeply, that we treasure, breaks? What happens when it is someone we trust who breaks it?

Midrash, which is the corpus of rabbinic literature that seeks to answer questions raised by Torah—like what happened to the ten commandments—teaches that, amidst much great Rabbinical debate, the people gathered the broken shards of the tablets and placed them inside the Mishkan—inside the holy tabernacle that they would now build together—and they carried them with them for the 40 years of their desert sojourn.

You see, God decides in these last chapters of Exodus to inspire the people to build a Mishkan— a portable tabernacle. God calls on each of them to bring their gifts forward. And so everyone contributes to the building of God’s sanctuary. It seems like this works for us, too, right? We carry inside our bodies, in our hearts, in our kishkes—our guts—broken shards as we strive to build whole lives. Jewish tradition teaches that we must empathize with the broken pieces without turning them into false idols that we worship. God and Moses—both of them—realized that the impulse to build, to create, is real. It’s a driving hunger inside of people.

The way through the brokenness and the fear, the shattered pieces of stone that comprise our lives, it seems from these stories in Exodus, our task is to try to build something together.

It is the choice before us right now. While the current administration of our nation would have us build a calf of white supremacy and a wall of xenophobia, we as Shir Tikvah and First Universalist are faced with a similar question: In the midst of our fear, what will we build?

What are we going to build?

The great leader, poet, activist, thinker, human rights giant Audre Lorde (z”l) (of blessed memory) once said, “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

To use our strength in service of our vision.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain... just want to hold that phrase for a minute... there is a Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. I told Bruce before the service that I want to be the Chief Rabbi of South Minneapolis. [congregation laughs] Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs offers a solution to the Golden Calf Conundrum. He says, “There is only one solution: to make the people co-architects of their own destiny, to get them to build something together, to shape them into a team and to show them that they aren’t helpless, that they are responsible and capable of collaborative action. Genesis, the opening of the book of the Torah Hebrew Bible, begins with the Divine creating the universe as a home

for human beings. Exodus ends with human beings creating the Mishkan—the holy tabernacle—as a “home” for the Divine.

To shape us into a team.

To show us that we are not helpless.

We are responsible.

We are capable of collaborative action.

We are powerful together.

I am here today in part because our two congregations, as you know, are seriously doing an unbelievable amount of work to explore co-location—not because either of us is failing or shrinking. We’re the two congregations in Minneapolis who are growing and thriving. We’re doing this because we have expansive vision. Because we seek to build something together. Because we wish to be co-creators, co-collaborators, of a neighborhood and a community that dismantles anti-Semitism and white supremacy and racism and collaborates to build a world of mutual respect, trust, justice, and love. Because we dream of a world where we are brave, where we are brave as we confront our internal prejudices, our fears, our longing, and our dreams, where we are not helpless, but responsible for our own destiny. Because together, Shir Tikvah and First Universalist are looking to privilege compassion over fear, racial justice over structural inequality, hope over cynicism and despair.

And, we enter those meetings and those emails, those conversations as hard holy work, humbly. We know that it’s possible that this might not work, despite our best intentions. I hope it does. But it’s possible it might not. But the work of being together in holy conversation, of really seeing and listening to each other deeply, I would argue that that must somehow be for the sake of heaven.

14 months ago, in this very sanctuary, we held the funeral service for my best friend. Some of you knew her. Her name was Ann Kaner-Roth (ז”ל) (of blessed memory) and she was a leader in our nation and our state for marriage equality and served as the Deputy Secretary of State. She died at 49 years old from a brain tumor. I never knew it was possible to feel so broken and so empty, so spiritually shattered, like those tablets.

Death always invites reflection and introspection; you already know that. I'm not teaching you any Torah you don't already know. It's one of death's awe-filled gifts, no matter how unwelcome.

Here's what I learned on a cold winter day in December—very similar to a day like today—as I shoveled dirt onto the casket of my best friend:

We are here for the briefest of moments on Earth. The great poet Mary Oliver (z"l) (of blessed memory) who died a few weeks ago, asks us a great, humbling, and brave question to each of us: "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

In this sanctuary, as I mourned one of the people I loved most in this world, I found a part of my answer: I want to join with other soulful, broken, beautiful, fabulous people and build something with meaning and purpose, something that will, in the words of Hamilton, that will outlast me. A structure that houses two great communities seeking to transform our souls and transform the world. A home where peoples of different religious traditions can come together, grow each in our own way, and do the hard and holy work of facing one another in all of our brilliance and all of our brokenness—and perhaps, inside this one wild and precious moment we're alive—make something, together, more holy and more whole than we could alone.