

Reflections on Rosh Hashana

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Hello. My name is Philip Katz. Last year, my wife, Ellen Forman, and I were co-presidents of Kahal B'raira. That experience, along with a fair amount of time I spent working on committees and few other leadership positions in our 8 years at KB, has given me a great perspective about KB and Humanistic Judaism.

I was attracted to Humanistic Judaism the moment I heard about it. The only disappointment I have is that I didn't learn about it earlier. Here I feel at once safe and challenged. The words I speak, the blessings I chant, the songs I sing fill me, inspire me, and bring me joy. The people I meet here are kindred souls who I smile to think of, who I'm always glad to be with and who make my experience here so rich. KB has become a very important part of my life. For our guests tonight, I hope you see a glimpse of this in our service and in the people here. And there is so much more, so visit our Sunday programs and check out our Shabbat services as well.

But I also find it challenging to answer some basic questions about KB: Who are we? What is it called when we gather on Sunday mornings? What do we call Kahal B'raira? What does it mean to be a Humanistic Jew? What does it mean to belong to a congregation of Humanistic Jews if you are not Jewish? Of course, there are quick, superficial answers to these questions. But getting deeper and more substantive answers is worthy of some thought and discussion. Last year, KB began a strategic planning process that led to a Summit in June. A recommendation from this summit and in subsequent discussions, was that we discuss these questions of identity to better inform our direction forward.

Starting a new year is an opportune time to begin exploring these issues. I don't mean just today or for the High Holidays, but for the rest of the year – that would be a good start. What a great way to celebrate the 30th year of KB's existence!

However, I am, by nature, an organizer. That means I don't actually do anything or think of anything myself, I get other people to do it. Our community is fortunate to have a wealth of creative and insightful members who can explore these questions and help us explore these questions together. We have mahdrikim in our congregation, we have philosophers in our congregation, we have other great thinkers. I hope over the next year that we explore our identity, our nature, our existence, our place in our community and in the world.

On the other hand, you're a captive audience. So...

I grew up in a conservative congregation. I really liked it. I made connections to my religion, to my history, my culture, my heritage. But as I started to read the translation of the prayers, I became less and less connected to that particular faith. The liturgy seemed so wrong to me. First, because of the very strong emphasis on a God, a controlling male God at that. Second, it wasn't just acknowledging a God, but praying to God. I am lying when I pray to a God - even if he/she/it did exist, I don't believe he would want us to pray to him. I found I could no longer participate - like many of you, I'm sure.

While that happened, I still kept the connections to my heritage, culture and history. While I felt distant from my synagogue, those experiences, strangely, remain some of my strongest childhood memories - the sights, the smells, the feelings. When I walk into any synagogue, I am immediately brought back. I instantly recall my childhood, recall the prayers, my body starts to devan. It's hard to explain, but I know I am welcome, I know I am Jewish.

When Ellen and I got married 14 years ago, we wanted to have a Jewish wedding, but did not want to bring God into our ceremony. We didn't know about Kahal B'raira or Humanistic Judaism then. So we wrote our own ceremony. We wrote what we now know as a Humanistic Jewish ceremony. We modified traditional Jewish blessings to acknowledge human potential. We focused on the Jewish tradition of making a marriage succeed as an example of the way we hope that all people learn to live in peace with each other and in harmony with their environment.

Several years later, I saw a pamphlet about KB in a friend's apartment – I can remember it clearly. This pamphlet described the Judaism we tried to create for ourselves. It described a community that fit our values, our beliefs, and our Judaism.

It was a miracle!

To me, Humanistic Judaism is acting - not praying. It means not hoping for change, but working for change. The nature of Humanistic Judaism in general and Kahal B'raira in particular, is that we cannot sit passively, we must do – as we have read and said in our service this evening.

Humanistic Judaism also has a strong component of faith, faith that people will work to improve themselves and their world, and faith that we will produce meaningful change. Rabbi Don Pollack likes to say that KB is built on faith more than any other congregation he knows.

The doing nature of Humanistic Judaism, is both external to the congregation and internal. We do what is right in the world, do what we can to make it a better place, do what we can to further the causes of peace, justice and fairness. We are familiar with the phrase Tikkum Olam, to repair the world. Greg Epstein, a soon-to-be Humanistic Rabbi more aptly calls it B'niyyat Olam, or building the world, which does not assume the world was once a perfect place that has been broken and so needs repairing, but just a place that we want to make better.

But this doing nature of KB means that we must also do what is right within our congregation. We must act to build our congregation, what I call B'niyyat Kehillah. Not only do you get out of KB what you put in, but it's also part of who we are as Humanistic Jews. This means putting time and energy into our congregation. This means recognizing and acting on the fact that we all have a vested interest in its health and vitality. For our guests who are not members of KB, your B'niyyat Kehillah could be to join us or to become more active in the organizations to which you belong and communities in which you live.

Joining and being active in a KB committee has you work with a smaller number people and brings you closer to the community and builds community – and you are practicing B'niyyat

Kehillah. Coming to Shabbat Services or Saturday Supper Clubs brings B'niyyat Kehillah, as well as personal fulfillment. Being here today and at future holiday events, singing, clapping and participating brings B'niyyat Kehillah. While contributing to a charity, like the Jewish Fund for Justice, is B'niyyat Olam, contributing to KB is B'niyyat Kehillah. Participating in a social action event, whether service-based or politically-based, will allow you to reach out as well as reach within our congregation, both B'niyyat Olam and B'niyyat Kehillah. I know that the Sunday after toiling in the soil at the Food Project, those who were involved look at each with more acquainted, more knowing, more loving eyes.

We can each practice B'niyyat Kehillah in our own way. Today and in the days ahead, as we think of ways to make ourselves and our world better, think also of B'niyyat Kehillah. This year, as Kahal B'raira discusses more of who we are and what we are and why we are, I hope each and every one of you can find opportunities to practice B'niyyat Kehillah. As a member of the congregation and a member of humanity, I will do what I can. As an organizer, I will continue to find ways to empower our congregation to do the same. I hope you will join me.