

FROM THE EPiC DIRECTOR
(Engagement, Programming and Communication)

Reprioritizing Compassion

I can honestly say that the past two months that I've worked with Ohavi Zedek were among the most rewarding of my career. I had an almost non-stop stream of support from our community including staff, lay leaders, congregants, organizational partners, city leaders... it was truly astonishing. It wouldn't be too much to say it restored my faith in humanity.

It also was a deeply difficult period. Being hurled head-first into management of a large community organization with little onboarding or training meant constant scrambling, mistakes and frustration.

In one month, I experienced a 10-day period which included my first Rosh Hashanah working with this (or any!) synagogue, the twentieth anniversary of 9/11—which I have a deeply personal connection to, having been an emergency responder to the attacks; a rapid-fire and sometimes very scary local BDS campaign where I was one of the representatives of the Jewish communities in Vermont to the City Council, and then Yom Kippur.

My new physical therapist recently told me that I need to learn how to “discharge my nervous system.” I think she's onto something.

The truth is I don't mind the high adrenaline lifestyle and I'm genuinely happy to be supporting our community. I'm happy when you support us, too.

There's one thing I do mind: and that's when we treat each other harshly. I bring a new perspective to Ohavi Zedek and with that comes change. But even before my arrival, change was in the air. We have to adapt to declines in membership, the pandemic, and cultural developments. If we don't, we won't exist anymore. Change is hard. I know that. That does not mean we have to be hard on each other.

I believe deeply in a culture of feedback. We need feedback to grow and to thrive. A friend of mine likes to say he's a rough diamond always being cut and polished. OZ is like that, too. Without feedback we would perish. But what I expect is to be given feedback in a constructive and compassionate tone. One of love. One that assumes that you know we're trying.

My belief is that the Jewish community itself is sacred. The collective, to me, is precious. In Vermont where I've lived for 14 years, but still feel like a stranger, when I get to meet a Jewish person for the first time, I often feel like I've known this person my whole life. I can't explain it, but I feel it, and I cherish it. I feel a great privilege in being tasked with holding our community and cultivating it. So when our tone is harsh or disrespectful to each other it cuts me deeply.

I understand that many of you have been around OZ a lot longer than I have. Your history and institutional knowledge are invaluable. Yet there is no privilege that ever justifies being harsh to staff, or lay leaders, or really anyone. We can dislike things. We can disagree. (If we didn't now and then we wouldn't be Jewish!) But no longevity, wealth, or status justifies harshness.

Recently I picked up the phone in the office when it was ringing off the hook even though I was in a meeting. I talked with an angry congregant for a few minutes. I did my best to help them and went back to my meeting. Later it turned out I'd forgotten to do one of the things they'd asked me to, which is actually fairly unlike me.

I realized later it was because I was so jarred by their tone that I forgot to write down what they'd asked. I fixed it, of course, but it just got me thinking about how counterproductive this interaction was. Kindness would've gotten us both so much further, so much faster.

It's okay to let me know if you have a problem with me or with anyone or anything else. Feel free to send me a note saying “this is hard for me, can we talk about it?” or “can you help me?” I will always make time for that. It's not okay to shout, mansplain or be disrespectful. Not to me, and not to anyone actually.

The pandemic stress—or languishing—is weighing on us all. It's making it harder and harder to be our best selves. Our doomscrolling and isolation are leading us to our worst tendencies.

Today I'm asking you to remember that we're doing the best we can. Assume we're trying our hardest to help you. Assume that if you aren't getting what you want or need, it's because there are real barriers.

I'm asking you to reprioritize kindness.

Reprioritize compassion.

Prioritize our community.

This is a hard time. An intense time. A time for us to hold each other in the best ways we can under the current constraints. Let's make every interaction with each other count in a positively impactful way so we can lighten the mental load for the whole community. If the Jewish community is sacred, let's treat it that way.

*~ Joanna Grossman
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