

**Rabbi Scott Fox**  
**Temple Israel Long Beach**  
**Rosh HaShanah Evening Sermon 5781 / September 18, 2020**

Gavin Belson is not the kind of CEO you would expect from a Silicon Valley corporation. He is neurotic, dons a suit, and slicks his hair back behind his constantly strained face, eyebrows always pressed together as if trying to pinpoint or squeeze out the piercing headache he wears on his face and all his other features. He runs a mega-corporation, with hundreds, if not thousands of employees swarming about the campus with ID badges hung around their necks like conference-goers or Freshmen college students on their week of orientation. His spacious office is long, full of floor to ceiling windows and decorated with guitars that look a little too pristine to have much music in them. His office staff waits on him reporting on various schemes and shenanigans. Gavin Belson, you see, is a character in the TV show *Silicon Valley*, headed up by the incomparable Mike Judge. Contrast Belson to Richard Hendricks, a much more familiar archetype of the tech world. Also neurotic but effeminate, tall and lanky with casual street clothes and a crippling anxiety. For most of the show, Richard's office is shared with a handful of other young, driven, up and comers in a Silicon Valley incubator, an old bungalow home in Palo Alto built in the 1950s and likely still more expensive than the majority of office spaces around the world.

The history of this show, now in its sixth season presents Gavin Belson and his company, as the giant established mega-corporation, flush with cash, workforce and public stock, and Richard's burgeoning business as the underdog with its awkward title and sparse resources. Oddly enough however, throughout the show Richard's company goes from a novel idea, to a multi-million dollar investee, and back and forth again constantly. Similarly, Belson's company begins to waiver as the core products become obsolete and even among the hundreds of employees there is a vacuum of talent and creativity that forces the company to chase other businesses to market, playing a copycat game and hoping to win out from luck and a deeper pocket. At one point after the stock prices

begin to spiral he gambles their resources on a risky venture, loses, and in order to refill the company coffers sells out advertising space. The episode ends with a camera facing the sleek offices of Belson's company as a crane hoists a giant sign for El Pollo Loco in front of one of the tech giant's programmer lined buildings.

I love this show for so many reasons, it's funny, the characters are just odd enough to be interesting and just predictable enough to be relatable, and it raises a fantastic question: how do we value something? Even in the business world, where a vast array of interacting elements are boiled down to a number accessible via Wikipedia, where a company that has very real expenses, overhead and profit is given a number, a cash accreditation of what the overall company is worth, even then the speculation about real value, actual liquidity and condition of assets, and potential future worth can cause investors, complete with genius, training, talent and legions of researcher worker bees to shift their understanding of the status of a corporation or startup enough to delineate more money than some small countries to a particular body of accomplishment and potential, and then withdraw that same sum only a short while later. The majority of this activity of course takes place on the stock market, which is mercurial enough to be the only thing reported on every day throughout the year by most major news outlets. And if this is difficult enough for a world of business that operates on a strict drive for profit, how much more difficult is it to answer the question of how to evaluate an enterprise conveniently and deliberately titled and structured as a non-profit.

I think the only way to answer this question is to ask the analogous shareholders in it, the people that both stand to lose and gain from its failure and success. In our Jewish world we don't have a body of investors who hold stock in the company of our synagogue, and if we did they would be disappointed in the cash dividends, instead we have stakeholders. The people who rather than purchasing a section of the Temple invest their heart, time, sweat, energy, and yes money, into this grand adaptable 2000 year experiment of public service and communal collaboration. To that end, I wanted to

know what the stakeholders of this beautiful community have invested in it, and perhaps from there clarify its value.

My original plan was to work with the lay transition team and ask members to host a series of house gatherings. But I don't know if anyone noticed, there is a global pandemic, which complicated that particular goal. Nevertheless, the very talented and flexible team sprung into action and adapted the gatherings. We adjusted the number of participants and moved the entire thing online. Nametags were easier to make, the commute was shorter and in the course of less than two months I met a fifth of our entire membership, about 200 people. What a delightful way to join a community, with the warm welcome of smiling faces, open hearts and conversation. My favorite part of those meetings was exactly that, meeting the many different people who call Temple Israel home. I loved learning about the various backgrounds, inspirations and paths to our shared spiritual home. You told stories of your time with family long since passed, people on the professional team that inspired you then and now, and gratitude for the staff and lay leaders who are keeping our community tightly knit even when we can't gather in person. In our conversations I asked simple and open-ended questions about the history of Temple Israel, the community today and hopes for the future. And three themes emerged.

The first was that learning is central to this community. One person after another described finding their way into Temple Israel through an Introduction to Judaism class, a lecture or discussion. For many, Shabbat is all about cracking open that historic tome of Torah and commentary, discussing deep questions with a varied and intelligent group of people. And of course, our vibrant Torah Center. The space where our young people learn about the same actions, questions and stories that have captured our hearts and minds for millennia. There is something fundamental to that experience and it is a welcome doorway for so many of us to find our spiritual home at temple. I heard story after story of how members of our community wanted to share this tradition with

their children, and how the school became truly a center for their learning and connection to friends and family.

And Temple Israel is in good company, the entirety of modern Jewish practice is concentrated on this learning. The people who innovated a new kind of Judaism as the Jerusalem Temple rose and fell 2000 years ago gave us the gift of a practice centered around it, all of our rituals, prayer and gatherings with the instigation, framework or goal of learning. There is something elemental about it, at least within the Jewish community. We learn with joy, always looking for new ways to approach our texts, stories, and each other. Our holidays center around learning, knowing that the practice has value in and of itself. Like honey on the letters teachers used to drop on learning tablets to draw children to the gift of epiphany, sharing with them, that as they learn to walk with their legs, that this is how we journey with our minds.

We do study *lishma*, for its own sake, but there is a natural outcome of this learning, that spurs us to action. And so we come to our next theme.

The second theme that came out of these virtual meet and greets was the pride and importance of Temple Israel's place in the wider community. I was inspired to hear about how we are involved in the leadership and makeup of just about every Jewish organization and institution in the Long Beach area. It would be very easy for our community to remain complacent, happy with our own work and confine ourselves to a bubble of our own making. A synagogue can be, and in many ways is, a world in and of itself. But instead, our synagogue has moved out from the inspiration within our circle and taken good work to the greater Jewish community. We serve and support one another and find a myriad of ways to do so. Our hands are the hands of this community. This commitment also extends well beyond the bounds of our Jewish world. Both within the synagogue, and in partnerships, as volunteers, and as leaders in organizations around the greater Long Beach area, our members are driven by the work

of justice and are active in the cause in our city. Temple Israel generates humble leaders of positive change. Our community is keenly aware of the work of *tikkun olam*, that this world is in the process of completion, and that if we want a world closer to peace, that we are the ones to do the work of getting there.

The third theme was by far the most prevalent. It came up in every single conversation, and often multiple times. It not only seemed to be one of the greatest assets of the community but one of the greatest values as well. An indicator that this is a community able to do the work it aims at. Now it needs to be said, that among every one of these themes there is plenty of room to grow, plenty of work still to be done, and we would not be a human or real community if everything was perfect. It would be nice, but it's not real. So too with this. But when I asked about what drew people to this community, what caused you to become a member in the past and what excites you about calling Temple Israel home today, the overwhelming response was that this is a warm, welcoming and inclusive community where everyone does not look the same, and so that means that you can find others like you. That this is a community with an amalgam of hundreds of members from disparate backgrounds, where the celebration of differences is so much a part of the fabric of the congregation and done with so much love that the word family came up time and time again. This, I believe, is of the highest importance to this community, that it is a place where everyone can join, be a member and have a voice regardless of gender identity, age, race, background, level of Jewish knowledge, type of education, economic status, regardless of how they talk, what they look like, when they joined the temple, it is a fundamental value of this congregation that everyone is a full member. This speaks volumes about how Temple Israel views its own value and how it utilizes its resources, this community sees its highest purpose in people.

Years ago I went on a trip to El Salvador with a handful of other Jewish scholars. We stayed there in a colorful dormitory, tiled floors, and shared rooms, the modest building

rested in the middle of a dirt road that led from one end of a small village to another. We would begin our day by studying together, pouring over sacred texts and sharing with each other our favorite forgotten verses and sources. Our discussions were made even more fruitful by the makeup of our traveling community, Jewish scholars also from a myriad of different backgrounds. That trip was the first time I had ever met someone who was to become a maharat, a Modern Orthodox woman rabbi ordained by the prominent East Coast Orthodox figure Rabbi Avi Weiss. We also had secular Jewish scholars, and various other expressions and backgrounds of our greatly historied, multitudinous (mull-teh-tu-din-us) and proudly diversified tradition. After our discussions we went out and worked on various projects, planting fruit trees in a fledgling farmer's field, renovating community parks, and playing with children after school. In the evening we spent time with our neighbors in their homes, listening to their stories and hearing about the history of the town and their personal struggles during the recent civil war. I was deeply moved by the experience, and felt tremendously grateful to have been selected as a beneficiary of the program but was having some trouble feeling like I had something to bring back with me, some reason for using the environmental resources and the generous sponsorship that carried me across a continent to this small town. One of our last days we got waylaid en route (**on** root) to our service site. A group of us stood out in the mild heat while the group leaders evaluated the situation and as we chatted among ourselves a farmer, with a plastic tank on his back, like Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*, came by to spray the crops at the edge of his property right by where we were standing. One of the people in our group struck up a conversation with him as he came near. After a moment of speaking she would translate for us what they were talking about. Emboldened by our group study, my fellow traveler asked the farmer about the pesticides that he was using on his crops. He shared his source, a common story in that region, he received them from a major conglomerate corporation that sells pesticides around the world. He continued on to describe the health problems associated with their use. I was heartbroken to hear his story and also puzzled that if he knew that was the outcome of using the chemicals

why he would continue to use them. I always figured it was a matter of information, and that if farmers knew the risks that they might make other choices, but here was a farmer who knew full well the issues with using the pesticides and decided to continue anyway. One of the other people in the group must have been wondering the same thing because she asked him the question. His answer still shakes me to this day, he said consumers in the US aren't willing to spend enough on organic produce for him to make a profit, given the crop loss and the extra work that goes into growing without pesticides he couldn't afford to work without chemicals, at least this way, he said, he has enough money to eat. I was embarrassed, I knew about organic produce, understood that it was important for the environment, but I hadn't realized the entirety of its effect on farmers and how my actions made me complicit in that. We buy organic produce not for ourselves, but for the people growing our food. I needed the human connection to really understand this. Before that meeting I heard it as another thing to do, something that fell in the category of "should." Now every time I buy produce I see that farmer's face. I share this story to illustrate what is at stake here. It wasn't until I flew down to El Salvador, talked face to face with a farmer, and heard his story that I realized the reality of the problem. In our synagogues, we do this same work of humanizing one another. We can't do the work of truly knowing the needs of our neighbor until we meet each other face to face. Missing that risks dire consequences.

And so we return to the value of a synagogue, our synagogue. It's in people, not quantity, web traffic or numbers of views. It is possible, especially now when you can literally see the number of participants in a Zoom Room, to measure the value of an initiative, of a program, by how many people attend, but I would like to suggest a different measure. The goal of our work is not to perform magical formulas for supernatural results, or create a product with entertainment value, our goal is to help us see and connect more deeply with the humanity and divinity in ourselves and others. This is critical work.

And that is the work that our congregation does, we start with learning, which leads us to act and that action causes us to see the humanity in the people around us.

And so Temple Israel is where we remind ourselves of what it means to be human, to find that beautiful spark in ourselves and others and let that shine. We find holiness through humanizing, finding a way for people who would not otherwise have been engaged with one another to share moments and do so intimately. Where children can spend time with seniors, artists with accountants (some of whom are both), and we can sit and sing together, bear our souls in a public space made appropriate for communal self-reflection. Where we go to be a person and find others to do it with.

And so I ask us to keep doing this work. To turn to each other in the deepest of ways and let our inner self shine. I pledge to be present, to be another in this community and always human. May we continue to see one another deeply, in this beautiful company of souls.