

I'd like to tell you one of the most important stories in Jewish history.

June in Jerusalem in the year 68. The city was under siege by the Roman legions. Hope was all but lost for the one powerful Israelite nation.

Living within the city was Yochanan Ben Zakkai, an important sage of the Jewish community. He foresaw the eventual destruction of Jerusalem, but was unwilling to allow for the destruction of the Jewish people. He needed a plan to get out of the city.

His students announced that he was very ill, and a few days later, Rabbi Yochanan "died". They placed ben Zakkai in a coffin and carried him out the city gate.

Once out of the city, the formerly dead Yochanan Ben Zakkai emerged from his coffin and walked into the Roman camp. He was captured and brought before Vespasian, commander of the legions. And ben zakkai greeted him "Peace be unto you, oh great King of Rome. Peace be unto you." And Vespasian responded, I am no king. Rome already has an emperor, Nero. For this insult you will be put to death. But just at that moment, a messenger arrived from Rome. "Nero is dead, and the senators have made you, Vespasian, emperor."

Vespasian looked to Rabbi Yochanan. You knew this before it happened, he said. Before I return to Rome, ask of me something I can grant you as a reward.

And ben zakkai's request changed Jewish history. He said "Give me Yavneh and her sages." And Vespasian agreed. Yavneh was no great city. It was a small settlement in the north of Israel, near Tiberius, with a small Torah academy. Ben Zakkai knew that Judaism's survival could not be reliant upon Jerusalem. So long as Torah was preserved, Judaism could endure. And this is what Rabbi Yochanan requested.

A short time later, Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, and the residents dispersed throughout the land, and the academy in Yavne became the new epicenter of Jewish life.

The sages of Yavne had a problem to solve. Jerusalem and more specifically the Temple was, for the last thousand years, at the heart of the Jewish religion. What could compel a Jewish community to maintain not just a religious practice but the feeling that remaining Jewish was of value. They discussed, and wrote things down, and threw out what they wrote and wrote it again, and The final set of laws and traditions they compiled as their answer they called the Mishna. It includes the laws of prayer, jewish holidays, kashrut, legal codes, crime and punishment, family law, purity laws, and even a section of really good one-liners called pirkei avot.

And the Mishna worked. Judaism survived despite persecution, and great distance between communities.

It is a bit miraculous to think that for all of those centuries this very small population of individuals spread all over the world preserved Judaism . It would have been so easy for our

ancestors to say “forget it”, to give up hope. But they didn’t. And why not? Was it an ultimate faith in God? Or Dreaming of being a people redeemed in their homeland? I think those certainly contributed to it. But more than clinging to faith or land, the Jewish people stuck together because the laws of our tradition gave them purpose. It made them feel necessary. They had a place and a role to play in Jewish life. This is the Mishna’s great innovation. The Mishna made it impossible for someone to be Jewish alone. Outside of the 3 festivals, the Torah doesn’t mandate communal gatherings. It’s easy to hide away on your farm. But the Mishna mandates daily gatherings of the community. In order to pray..a daily task..., you have to be with at least 9 other individuals. In order to give gratitude for your food, reciting birkat hamazon, you needed at least 2 others. In order for a community to function properly, everyone relied on each other to show up, and if one person didn’t feel they were needed, the system collapsed.

A 17<sup>th</sup> century folktale illuminates this perfectly.

A town is preparing for a visit from a great rabbi. To celebrate his arrival the town wants to through a big celebration. So the decide to build a huge wine cask in the middle of the square, so tall you can only reach the top of it by a ladder. Each family commits to bring one jug of wine to help fill the barrel.

In one home, Mendel and his wife were talking. We aren’t the richest family, they said, we don’t have lots of wine to spare, so what if we filled our jug with water instead of wine. One jug of

water mixed among the rest of the town's wine surely couldn't dilute it that much.

So when it came time for Mendel to climb the ladder, he went up and poured his jug of water into the wine cask.

The day of the great celebration arrived. The villagers presented the rabbi with a kiddush cup and offered him the opportunity to bless and have the first drink of wine, but when he poured the contents of the barrel into his cup, it was pure water. Not one villager had actually brought wine to the barrel, each one relied on the other to fulfill the town's needs.

A community where individuals do not see their personal contribution as necessary, ceases to be a community. A community that feels intrinsically obligated to each other endures.

During the early times of Covid, we rediscovered the importance of having vibrantly connected community. Forced out of our communal home, we found new ways to stay connected, to feel necessary. We called each other just to check in. We thought, what would a shabbat service be without me there on zoom? What if no one else shows up. SO we did. We felt needed by others, and frankly, we needed others too.

And now once again we are leaving our communal home. Thankfully, this displacement will be temporary, and as Rabbi Cohen said at Rosh Hashana, the time will fly by. But let's not make our waiting for the new building a passive one, just sitting

around waiting until it's done to come back. We need to use the coming 18+ months to double down building our community, making sure everyone feels as though they don't just have a place here, they have a responsibility.

I'd like to suggest some mitzvot that we should participate in more fully in the coming months. I don't just want you to do them. These should not be heard as "suggestions." Think of them as the 10 mitzvot of CBB community building. I want you to feel obligated. I want you to see this room, the people in it, look around, see all the people you are connected to whether you know it or not. And on our livestream you are home but you are part of this. When our people were offered the torah, they said yes! We will do whatever it says, and then we will understand. They said yes to the obligation before they knew what it was. I'm asking you to do the same. I'm asking you to commit now to 2 things. One of the first nine, plus the 10<sup>th</sup>.

So, here they are 10 mitzvot you can engage with the coming months and years to benefit your community, to build relationships, and to find a place of meaning.

1. The mitzvah of visiting the sick. You can fulfill this by being part of our Caring Community program, individuals who visit and call members of our community who are sick, or homebound, or in need of some other special help.
2. You can do the mitzvah of welcoming the guest. Recently I met someone in town who is Jewish, and has lived here for

decades, friendly with some people who are congregants, but has never been to a high holy day or shabbat service here. So I invited them to our high holy day services. And they said you know, in 30 years, I've never been invited. Now, in those 30 years could they have looked us up, reached out, come on their own, sure. But if we think our community is as special as it is, shouldn't we be wanting to invite our Jewish neighbors to be here with us? WE can do more to bring into the fold those who still feel like guests here.

3. You can do the mitzvah of Tzedek Tzedek tirdof Justice shall you pursue. Sign up to volunteer in one of our many justice projects. Between Givat Haviva, our many opportunities with our NEFESH initiative, and our newer Eco-Team, along with many other projects at CBB, you have the opportunity to bring more justice into the world.
4. You can do the mitzvah of Giving honor to the deceased. The greater Santa Barbara jewish community has a chevra Kadisha, a burial society, that is tasked with the responsibility of preparing our deceased loved ones for burial in a traditional fashion. This includes a ritual washing and dressing of the deceased, and sitting guard over the casket until time for burial has arrived. This society is open for anyone to join who is willing to perform any these tasks. This is one of the most holy mitzvot you can do because it is in a category of mitzvot where there can be no reciprocity. A deceased individual you honor

cannot return that same honor to you. This mitzvah is particularly important and I hope you consider being part of the chevra Kadisha.

5. You can be part of the mitzvah of welcoming new life into the world by bringing a meal to a family with a newborn. I can say from experience, that this generous act is immensely important to keeping parents of newborns sane, and you can feel good knowing you have nourished the next generation of Santa Barbara Jewish life.
6. You can do the mitzvah of building new community. During this time away we will be engaging our communities in new ways including based on where you live. You probably live near congregants you have no idea are just around the corner from you. We want to engage these circles of proximity, and we'll be looking for neighborhood leaders willing to reach out, quite probably to people they don't know, and welcoming them. You can be part of that with us.
7. You can engage in the mitzvah of study. Between introduction to Judaism, the melton classes, torah study, daf yomi, Sunday morning live, conversational Hebrew, and more, there is no shortage of opportunities for learning. Commit to one, learn this year, and you'll find yourself feeling connected to everyone you are learning with.
8. You can do the mitzvah of consoling the bereaved in our community. Send a condolence card to someone who lost

their parent. Be counted in a shiva minyan, and bring food with you to provide a meal of consolation. Even better if it is for someone you don't know. What better way is there to show how connected we are with one another.

9. You can perform gemilut chasadim. Random acts of kindness. Let me give you an example of this. During covid, my wife and I were "gnomed". Now what does that mean? One day we came home and there was a small gnome on our porch next to a plate of homemade cookies with a sign around its neck. You've been gnomed by someone who cares about you, now pay it forward and gnome someone else. IT felt so good to know that someone thought of us. Now it doesn't have to be a gnome. Become a chalk fairy. Surprise someone with a challah one day. (novel concept voice) Send a letter. Imagine the love we'll spread through these random acts. But keep an eye out for those gnomes. Rumor is they are already out in the community.

Those first nine, pick one. This last one is for everyone.

10. And finally, you can perform the mitzvah of honoring shabbat. Shabbat is the natural time when we come together as a congregation for prayer, song, and food. And it's going to feel a bit strange at first, being in a new place. Which is exactly why we need you at our Friday night and Saturday morning shabbat services. Don't wait



around for us to come back here. More than ever we will need to see you, in person. To each of you here, I am obligating you, as much as any reform rabbi can obligate their congregation, to come to one shabbat service, just one, in the first two months that we are out of this sanctuary. You have 8 shabbatot to pick from. You can come to more than one if you want, but you have to come to one. Our community is relying on you. You have a role. You are needed.

Those are your options. We'll publish the list and who to be in touch with to get involved so you can remember what you agreed you would do. Now is the time to lean in. Lean in to adding more mitzvot in your lives. Lean in to being extra aware and engaged of the individuals in the community around you. And no matter where we are for the next two years, we will be building, together, a warm and vibrant house of living Judaism. G'mar chatima tova. May you be sealed for goodness in the year to come.