

Talk about sacred milestones!

As if it's not enough that we mark the New Year together,
With all its openhearted hope;
looking backward and ahead all at the very same moment,
THIS year, making it even more momentous, we—as LT—turn 70!

...One leader, a few months ago, honestly questioned:

“75 seems like it should be the big year? WHY 70?”

And so, I enthusiastically explained:

70 is a major marker in our tradition, biblically, and beyond...

Jacob and company when first settling into Egypt were 70, all tolled;
the round number which represents our peoplehood...

When 70 are gathered, there you find the family of Israel...

And the elders of Israel are 70. Leading in good faith is somehow bound up in that figure.

Yet of all the noteworthy numerology,

The most well-known 70-tale is the Talmudic legend of Honi [HaM'agel]

Renowned first century BCE rabbi/circle-maker/miracle-worker.

As the story goes: Seeing a man planting a carob tree,

Honi asks him how long it will take for that tree to bear fruit.

“70 years,” the man says.

“And are you so certain you will be around in another 70 years to see it?”

The man, his hands still dirty with soil, replies:

“As my forebears planted for me, so do I plant for my children.”

Now usually, that's where the story ends.

But, as if meant for this moment, the tale in the Talmud continues...

Honi sits down to have a meal and, having eaten to his heart's content,

is overcome by sleep. So, crawling into a comfy crag in the hillside.

he takes a nap off the beaten path...When he awakens, venturing out,

Honi sees a man gathering fruit from that same carob tree just planted,

but amazingly, now fully grown. “Are you the one who planted this tree?”

“Oh no, it was my grandfather before me.” And Honi realizes that he's slept for 70 years...

[BT, Ta'anit, 23a]

Marking 70 as a temple community, these holy days call on us to open our consciousness;

To perceive the wonder of our temple-tree now grown...

Turning 70, wide awake to the connection to congregation we share,

we are compelled to consider:

How does being a part of this place guide us in navigating the landscape of our 21st

century lives with individual integrity and shared commitment of heart?

Now you might be thinking: Aren't these Days of Awe about turning inward;
the introspective work that leads to personal renewal?

Isn't this holy day first & foremost, all about ME, not WE?

YES, but in the framework of faith we share, we are never truly 'alone.'

Much as we prize our individuality, our rational independence,

Human beings—it turns out—rarely think for themselves.

Evolutionarily speaking, we have risen to the top of the food chain because of our unique human ability to *think together*...[NY Times Book Review, Y.Harari,4.23.17]
We are independent rational agents only in the context of the greater group which grounds our being and forges our frame-of-reference.

According to The Knowledge Illusion

by cognitive scientists Professors Steven Sloman and Phillip Fernbach,
In our increasingly more complex world where pundits hope to sway public opinion
On everything from climate change to healthcare to immigration,
Our responses are far less reliant on our own personal analysis of their facts and figures
Than they are the perspectives held by our group affiliations.

The communities which inform our values even as they often hold our hearts...

The great caution of group-think, when it comes to the faith community, isn't hard to fathom.

Can we remain steadfast in our collective membership, in our case,

To this congregation & the movement it reflects, without sacrificing our sense of self?

In one of the great screen depictions on the nature of 'religious community,'

Monty Python's "The Life of Brian,"

A huge crowd gathers, having followed the mistaken messiah,

Brian of Nazareth [born on the same day in the next stall over...]

With his back against the wall, Brian imparts what he assumes will be

A liberating message—freeing up his followers to think for themselves,

And him, to live without the crowd at his heels.

"You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody.

You've got to think for yourselves. You are individuals."

To which the enthusiastic followers chant in perfect unison: "Yes! We are individuals..."

...IF group buy-in means checking our brains at the door,

if adherence to the group leaves diversity on the outside,

Or follows false messiahs who make promises that can neither sustain nor save us,

Count me out...

And thus, the uniqueness of this sacred community we share....

For our connection to Congregation is affirmed not by feeding us doctrine,

Some agreed upon answers, but by nurturing in us the ability to articulate the questions.

Which is why LT is the ultimate faith-group affiliation:

modeling for us how to think together, so as to compel us to think for ourselves.

There is no better way, then, to mark our 70th than to recognize the story of our origins.

For remembering how we started—the planting of our Temple sapling

And how the Tree of Larchmont Temple life began to blossom and grow;

enables us to affirm our collective purpose...

Indeed, by celebrating the spirit with which LT was watered and weeded,

reaping the harvest of our planters' commitment,

we can share the fruits of LT which have elevated us to nourish our world...

Planting...

June 28th, 1948...125 Woodbine Avenue

With a couple dozen gathering on a hot summer night at the home of Mrs. Arnold Belchetz, [Pearl was her name, but in the minutes, back then, women were known as wives alone]

Two UAHC Rabbis, Albert Baum and Leonard Schofer, who'd become the founding clergy
Shared a discussion on establishing a congregation in Larchmont...

As the founding Recording Secretary's notes attest:

"At the time of this writing we don't know yet whether the formation of a liberal Jewish congregation in Larchmont will be a success. But if high spirits and unselfish cooperation are considered as prime creators of a flourishing community then we have no doubt that the expected rich spiritual fruits will grow out of the seeds..."

Our founders were planters as in Honi's days, but they had one thing even Honi lacked: They watered that initial seed with hopeful faith.

Sacred suburbanization to be sure, this was a moment in history—Our history:

"A reawakening of spiritual desires of this generation after two devastating world wars, the wish to have the growing generation understand and feel the contents of our Jewish faith, and the filling of a gap for those families which lost closer contact with their religion and its meaning led a small group of responsible citizens to invite Jewish unaffiliated residents of Larchmont to this preliminary meeting...Those present have witnessed the hour of birth of an infant sapling that should [only] grow...with spiritual and physical strength." [William H. Hartley]

Civic duty was thereby sanctified in establishing this community of faith.

Indeed, as just a few weeks later,

Rabbi Schofer presented to the new officers as a candidate for founding rabbi.

His concluding remarks mirror the congregation's highest hope:

"I believe in Democracy. I like Larchmont because this congregation is made up of intelligent men and women...Trustees chosen because they are good people, not because they are the largest potential contributors. I feel that this Temple may be the proving ground for transforming Jewish culture from a Ghetto philosophy, which it has been, into a democratic philosophy for America."

Implanting Jewish values aligned with America's vision,
this congregation would pave the path to an enlightened future.

...Having, that first year, established weekly worship in various locations round town,
and running a Sunday School,

with upwards of a hundred families connected, the building committee,

headed by Max Jellinek, reported to a Special Congregational meeting—May 18th, 1949...

"We are fortunate that I can offer you a 20-room house in a most wonderful location...

Approximately one acre of grounds suitable for expansion, with playground [and room] for outdoor affairs...With certain changes, we can have services for about 325 people."

The fact that the Building Comm. & Board had already approved, made it a shoe in...

But, as they say, "Location, location, location..."

Buying was one thing; building, a whole 'nother question...As the chair continued:

“We are fortunate to have as our neighbors two wonderful Gentiles...It is important for you to know this because I shared [with them that] it will be a Jewish Synagogue...in the house next door...His reply was... “Well, I know, and if I can be of any help to the congregation, I wish you would let me know.” The neighbor on the other corner felt in essence, the same...Monsignor Floyd McGuire from the church gave us his opinion when asked that he does not think for one moment that a Synagogue on Larchmont Avenue would devalue anyone’s property...This, in case someone is worried.”

Some were worried alright...

For after all permits for building at what we know today as the Blum Building were obtained and contractor’s work beginning,

The Trustees of the Village of Larchmont denied use of our building for its planned purpose, In violation of zoning laws, never before enforced...

At the October 10th, 1949 LT Trustees meeting, Pearl Belchetz made her report;

A telling moment in time:

“I was asked to contact ministers to find out if we could use their facilities and also to acquaint them with the actions of the village Board....I showed him the letter...

Rev Coffin, of St. John’s Church, said:

‘Anti-Semitism is increasing and when Jews push, it increases even more, and this fact depresses me. I will speak to some people, but I need time.’

[Pearl B continues] I told Rev Coffin that he might push, but he said he no longer has much power. Rev Coffin then phoned me [just] an hour later and reported that he had spoken to the Mayor and that he told him a meeting of the Village Trustees would be held tonight, and the Mayor promised decent action.”

An achievement in the establishment of religion

that reverberated from our little Village of Larchmont,

as an article in the NY Times reported a week later...October 18th, 1949,

“The Larchmont Temple, a Jewish congregation that bought for \$40,000. a twenty-room house at 75 Larchmont Avenue for conversion into a place of worship and was denied village permission finally won a partial victory.”

Noting that the Village Board made its historic decision at 1 am,

Claiming “questions of fire safety are largely involved...”

The piece goes on to quote three local clergymen:

“It is our hope that there should be no possible grounds given for the accusation of race prejudice or religious bigotry in the conduct of the hearings or deliberations of the board of trustees.”

Seems Rev Coffin, of St John’s Episcopal, Msgr. Deegan, of St Augustine’s Roman Catholic, and Rev Floyd McGuire of Larchmont Avenue Presbyterian Church had penned a letter just prior to that meeting which the Mayor carried with him to it, and clearly took to heart.

Our very being is the blessing of open hearts transforming closed minds;

Of a unified voice standing up against vitriol,

in defense of human dignity—and the right to be different...

This Tree of LT is a testament to the truth of its founding:
For the planting would never have taken place
without the support of this divergent Larchmont faith community,
insisting on a diversity they viewed as a blessing.

Thus, the **Fruits of our 70th Harvest:**

We are here, today and every day, to be upstanders for human understanding,
To defend the dignity of difference.
Which means every faith system, any potential neighbor,
That Muslim mosque, that Evangelist church, that Hindi Shrine...
affirmatively contributing to the conversation is valuable & vital...
In navigating the landscape of 21st century American life
We need one another, divergent—at times, diametrically opposed, to survive and thrive....

Watering—Strengthening the Sapling...

December 1950, Kal Druck, our third congregational President,
Introduces a discussion of Friday night services at a Congregational meeting by stating
“With the deepening world crisis, Jews need their temple community and their religion more
than ever. It is the only rock to which we can cling.”

What ensued was an open dialogue on making services more satisfying to more members.

HOW?... As his Temple News column that month promises,

“Henry Stampleman, chairman of the After-Service Forum comm. and Rabbi Schofer
are taking steps to get more people to stay after services, *which will only run an hour.*

Rabbi Schofer announced the following topics for after-service Friday PM Forums:

“The Jewish Culture of South Africa,” [Dec 15th]

Musical program or Motion Picture [Dec 22nd]

Influence of Judaism on Modern American Writing [Dec 29th]

Then, in January, a four-part program devoted to 4 major books,

Beginning January 5th with The Guide to Confident Living by Norman Vincent Peale.

Attracting congregants to Worship with snazzy after-service programming
was a 50's Reform innovation...

for what wasn't attracting members to services was...Services.

As LT's president inherently understood, we needed a sense of community,
the interconnection which came from being together...

WHY we were together was the question!

It took one of our Youth Group teens to step out on a limb,

And, long before it was in vogue as “Spirituality,” set forth the challenge.

From a Guest Column, April 1960,

The Rabbi's Message, entitled “Teenagers & Religion,”

from a guy you may know today as our past BBM & Ritual Comm Chair

wonderful temple leader, then but a 17-year-old LT teen, Tom Landau...

“As a religiously inclined person myself, I can truthfully say that the teenager who
excludes religion from his life is leaving out something important. In the
pressured teenage world of college acceptances and social life, one needs to be
able to turn away from his everyday existence and find spiritual relief...”

17-year-old Tom understood what the grown-up Temple Trustees did not...

It was not about easy answers, but searching the hard questions, as he continues...

“With a lack of religious emphasis at home, it is no wonder I have heard friends of mine scoffing at their Jewish faith saying: “How do you know there is a God? Have you ever seen Him?” For them there is no God; no faith whatsoever...”

And Tom’s answer to such religious indifference?...

A uniquely Reform educational approach; Something totally radical:

Learning as a search for life-meaning.

“In our Religious School, we are given the best possible background in history and Bible, but what good is this if we are not taught the meaning of prayer. Most of us leave Sunday School without knowing how to pray, or why.”

Teenager Tom Landau somehow sensed what it takes for the Tree to grow,

As he concludes his guest column:

“Religion is important. The seed of our faith in God should be firmly rooted when we are young so that the fruits of faith will flourish throughout our lives.”

Post-Script...

My friend Dr Tom Landau not only attends Chevrah Torah weekly, with wife Judy, but regularly checks in with his rabbi to talk about questions raised by life’s contradictions and the impossible challenge of living a life in faith...

And through the exchange, we are both strengthened;

Not by finding answers, but in knowing we are searching together.

This Tree of LT is an ever growing,
ever inclining network of leaves and branches...minds and hearts
intertwined and all tangled up as we are, with one another,
searching for some sense in a world which often seems to deny it...

Thus, the **Fruits of our 70th Harvest:**

We are connected every day by our lifelong search for meaning;

Affirmed by a faith that makes room for every question,

And leaves space for the inevitable struggle...

Understanding, “It is a Tree of Life for those who hold fast to it”

And in our LT Tree, those who hold fast to each other....

Blossoming—Bringing Fruit to Bear...

September 24th, 1954...

Just six short years after its initial planting, the Dedication of our Temple Building,

Yes, in which you are now sitting, 75 Larchmont Avenue, took place

on the virtual eve of Rosh Hashana.

As Pres of the congregation Larry Sobel writes:

“This New Year we enter even more inspired because of the completion of the exterior of our Temple building. We may take great pride in what has been done by all of us...

However, I have become ever more aware that a Temple is more than a physical building...”

Rabbi Schofer’s Dedicatory Remarks from that Friday night reinforce this refrain:

“As the sun sets on Sept 27th, ushering in the New Year, we will begin our first services in our new Temple. For the first time we will be able to accommodate all our family in our own Temple home... We will compliment ourselves on the immense material achievements of these past six years as they are made real in the bricks and mortar of our Temple building... We will be tempted to allow our pride to overshadow our reverence. Yet, the new Temple is but a beginning of an infinitely more difficult task...For only insofar as this new building helps us come closer to making real God’s Truth is it worthy of all the efforts of the past and the action our future demands.”

“Making real God’s Truth...”

Had our successful construction not done just that?

It is astounding that LT’s leaders were not afflicted by the Edifice Complex;

That even as they worked to build this place,

they understood LT’s aim was beyond any address or singular space...

And, even more, that our founding generation perceived a purpose

Beyond self-perpetuation—a sense of mission to which they were called.

LT was not merely here to feed/fill its own members,

But to reach out through acts of repair in order to nourish those in deepest need...

Indeed, in the years immediately following...the call echoed.

Sept, 1956...Rabbi Schofer initiating a Year of Service.

...Then, as if responding to the Prophet’s call...

Dec, 1958...a Program series by HIAS on aid for Hungarian refugees

Jan, 1959...LT Sisterhood Translating Books into Braille,

A new Read for the Blind Project chaired by the inimitable Mrs. Bernard Sumberg,

Rhoda, still righteous pioneer LT founding member at 99...!

April, ’59...A Youth Group guest column entitled “Justice”

Challenging LT teens to do more than Think, but to Do Right...

LT’s aspiration was to open its members’ eyes to a wide-scoping vision

Of not alone who we are today, but who we must become...

Thus, Jan., 1960...With past President Kal Druck elected to the UAHC Board,

The front-page Temple News feature is from immediate past-President, Larry Sobel,

Reporting on a contingent of LT’s leaders’ attendance at the 45th UAHC Biennial,

most notable for what transpired at that national gathering of Reform Judaism,

And how it helps LT “make real God’s truth.”

Sobel reports:

“The leaders of our movement have always spoken out for social justice...

Dr. Eisendrath, in his State of the Union address, criticized us as individuals and as a group for giving mere lip service to the true principles of “Doing Justly.”

Next day...As a body, the delegates endorsed the establishment

of a new center for Social Action in Washington, D.C....”

[What would soon become the Religious Action Center]

History in the making as our congregation’s history is unfolding...

Sobel makes the inherent LT connection...

“It would be hard to believe that we as individuals, or as a congregation, disagree with the principle of Social Justice. The difference of opinion stems only from the actions that may be taken in its name...The real question is not “Is Social Justice correct?” but how shall the Union, the Congregation, the individual, implement it.”

Sobel then asks the question that remains ever-current.

“Shall our Social Action Committees become political entities or shall they so educate the members of our congregations that, by their example and adherence to Justice, its principles will be proven to the world...”

The hottest front-burner faith debate on the rabbinic circuit this past few months has been the question of Politics and the Pulpit...

Among the most well-regarded pulpit Rabbis in America, [Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in LA] David Wolpe, at the start of summer penned a piece entitled “*Why I leave Politics Off the Pulpit*” He finished with what seems to be a fair statement:

“All we hear all day long is politics. Can we not come to *shul* for something different, something deeper? I want to know what my rabbi thinks of Jacob and Rachel, not of Pence and Pelosi.”

I couldn't agree more, with one key qualification.

We're not here to review candidates or put forth party platforms.

But we are here to advance the cause of justice, to stand up for righteousness, rooted in the deepest teachings of our Covenant, and the seeds our founders faithfully watered and nurtured.

URJ President, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, counters Wolpe, cautioning,

As he taught early August in his weekly Ten Minutes of Torah, asking:

“How many of us who became Bar/Bat Mitzvah can still chant our Haftarah?”

Recounting how if you woke him up at 3AM he could immediately belt out his Haftarah, our President continues, “But do any of us know what they mean?”

Doubtless that the majority of our *Haftarot*, like most, voiced the vision of the prophets, calling for our response to the pain & rights of others, thus, by our actions enabling “*righteousness to flow as a mighty stream...*”

Rabbi Jacobs rightly points out,

the core prophetic teachings call us to practice a Judaism of Social Justice.

As the Prophet Jeremiah warns: “*Woe to the person who builds his house with unrighteousness.*”

Why did 13 LT women, along with Rabbi Miller/Cantor Scher spend 4 days in DC end of April?

To form our LT Delegation at this year's Consultation on Conscience,

That same RAC's gathering to educate for advocacy...to foster world repair.

From economic justice and a strong health-safety net

To human rights for refugees to criminal justice reform,

Issues of inequity abound...

And in this fractured day and age in which we live, a society often split,

our response is nothing less than the core of our responsibility.

What you do is your decision; *that* you do is God's demand.

As UAHC President Rabbi Eric Yoffie put it 20 years ago:

“A Reform Synagogue that does not alleviate the anguish of the suffering is a contradiction in terms.” [Yoffie, UAHC Exec. Comm Address, 1998]

This Tree of LT, Our House, was built, not with brick and mortar
but with helping hearts and outreaching hands... to be much more than a building...
Thus the **Fruits of our 70th Harvest** call upon us to respond
to the brokenness we cannot help but see
With courage and conscience, by making whatever difference we can...
To provide a meal, or a coat, or a job, or healthcare, or a home...
For those who'll otherwise go without...for those who could be us...
Making real God's Truth by bearing fruits of justice & compassion,
We bring to fruition the blossoming of a more humane & holy world...

IF Honi showed up today, along with the likes of Pearl Belchetz, Rabbi Schofer,
and early 1950's Presidents Kal Druck & Larry Sobel, they'd no doubt be very proud
That we are a healthy 830+ households, with a vibrant leadership and engaged membership;
a congregation that links the generations & celebrates every soul...
But I'd bet among the first questions they'd ask us would be:
SO How goes the harvest?
They'd want to be certain that the Tree they planted was still bearing fruit,
Yes—nurturing our Jewish spirits but just as essential,
Nourishing a world so in need of our hearts and our hands...

For LT was meant to be a Multi-Branch Tree
Planting in the soil of sacred diversity from which we all sprout,
Celebrating the dignity of difference...a faith that learns from & works with others.
LT was nurtured to be an Intertwining Tree,
Connecting every person on our search for life meaning;
Sustaining one another in our questions and our climb...
LT was built to be a Giving Tree,
Bearing fruit to help sustain the disadvantaged,
reaching out with Prophetic spirit to help restore our world.

SO may our 70th reaffirm the responsibility we share:
To tend the tree of our Temple Community in Covenant;
The connection to congregation that gives us roots,
Loves the uniqueness of every single leaf,
and encourages us to grow outward and upward...
Bringing blessing to all in need of its shade and comfort to all who call it home.
So with the Great Gardener's helping hand, may it continue to grow.
AMEN...