

The Building Blocks of our Lives
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Four years ago, A.G. Sulzberger, the current publisher of the New York Times made an observation about the future of journalism: “The newsroom should be built out of Legos, not bricks. . . .The right structure for today won’t be the right structure for tomorrow.” Legos are easy to disassemble and reassemble into something new and different.¹

I spent a lot of time thinking about Legos earlier this summer as we were packing our Los Angeles home and faced stacks of plastic drawers of Legos that my wife, Karen, had meticulously organized.

When my boys were younger, before smartphones and Fortnite consumed their free time, they loved building Legos. Every trip to Target or Toys r’ Us (of blessed memory) required a visit to the Legos aisle. Being pushover parents who also love Legos, we rarely left the store without at least a small new set. When we got home the boys would tear into the box, build the set, play with it for a while and then put it aside. Eventually it would get taken apart, the pieces sorted and placed into the meticulously organized plastic drawers.

Each drawer held a specific size. This one was for two by twos; another for two by fours, and two by sixes. Karen kept the original instruction manuals so we could build the structures again; but more often, when we wanted to build something, we took Legos from the plastic drawers and built something completely new.

¹ *Build Your Synagogue out of Legos Not Bricks*; Rabbi Joshua Rabin; eJewishPhilanthropy on Feb. 7, 2018. Based on an idea in the New York Times Innovation Report of March, 2014. <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/build-your-synagogue-out-of-legos-not-bricks/>

For many of us, Legos provide happy childhood memories; and present memories too. Legos were building blocks of childhood. They helped teach us to follow instructions, problem solve, and count. They helped develop fine motor skills. They helped inspire imagination and creativity.

Legos were literal building blocks of childhood, and metaphorical building blocks of our lives. They enabled us to build something according to plan, enjoy it for a while, then take it apart to build something new. We might have used a collection of bricks to build something similar to the original, or something completely different. Whether built from an instruction manual or from our own creativity, we still used the same bricks to build something beautiful from its core.

Legos are a metaphor for our lives. When we are born we are like a pile of Legos. Our parents build us according to the instruction manual, doing and providing for us in the way they believed we should be assembled. Just as with a Lego set, there are 'life Legos' of different kinds; values, ideals, beliefs, aspirations, ideas, experiences and more.

As we grow into adulthood, we look more closely at the bricks that form our foundation. We notice that some of them are damaged; they need to be repaired, replaced or removed. Perhaps what we had built previously is not right for us anymore and needs an overhaul.

So we take it apart, and build again; the structure looks different, but still uses many of the same pieces and some new ones too; they're just arranged differently.

Each year, as we enter into these Days of Awe, we are given an opportunity to take a close look at our "life Legos." We evaluate who we have become and what we need to repair, replace, or remove. We look inward and ask ourselves; am I content? Am I finding meaning? What are my greatest sources of joy? What is my purpose? And, if need be, do I have the courage to disassemble the Lego set and rebuild the structure again?

Tom was a successful attorney for many years but felt that something was missing from his life. He recognized that he felt most alive and engaged when he attended the Shabbat morning minyan at a local synagogue. Eventually he developed a passion for Jewish learning, community building, and leadership. After much soul searching he decided to become a rabbi. So, at age forty two, he quit his job, returned to school, and five years later was ordained.

Tom's wife and children were deeply affected by this career change but supported Tom on his path. The result, after years of sacrifice, was a content and happy Tom. Twenty years later, his rabbinate continues to fulfill and inspire him.

Tom looked at the building blocks of his life. He disassembled much of what was there before, examined all of the blocks, and decided which would remain, which would be discarded, and which new pieces were needed for building a new structure. Any change from one's expected life trajectory is difficult; following that trajectory requires courage and faith. Tom had both and created something brand new for himself that brought greater joy and meaning to his life.

Tom was fortunate to have had a choice in how to build his future. We are not always so lucky. Sometimes things happen that necessitate change. A marriage, once strong and secure, implodes. A man dies suddenly just months before he is to retire. A woman loses her job; a child becomes ill. A family loses their home. The structure collapses.

However, despite being in a pile, the bricks remain, ready to be sifted through and reused. We rely on our strength and resilience to examine what broke, determine what needs to be fixed, and begin to rebuild.

This cycle of demolition and rebuilding is a significant part of the spiritual process of the High Holy Days season. It began seven weeks ago with *Tisha b'Av* when we observed a somber day that marked the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. We then counted the days of Elul, which provided consolation, hope, and encouragement that we can rebuild our

structure. Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur mark our great moral and spiritual reconstruction following a period of destruction.

Rabbi Alan Lew teaches, “decline and destruction precede renewal; tearing down is necessary before rebuilding is possible. And all of these things—fullness, decline, destruction, renewal, tearing down, rebuilding—are actually part of the same process, points on a single continuum, consecutive segments of a never-ending circle.”²

During the High Holy Days we perform a *Heshbon Ha’Nefesh*, an accounting of the soul, a spiritual audit. We review the past year to examine which areas of our lives were filled with goodness, and which areas need improvement. We decide which blocks need to be removed, and what needs to be added to help us become the best version of ourselves.

Construction, destruction, and reconstruction are not only a part of our spiritual lives; they are part of our collective history. Jews who left or fled Eastern Europe to build new lives for themselves in the United States reinvented themselves; the original Halutzim, pioneers who made Aliyah to pre-state Palestine, built an autonomous Jewish community; a generation of Holocaust survivors rebuilt extraordinary lives even after having nearly all of their blocks taken away.

Our ability to adapt has enabled us to survive expulsion, pogroms, and genocide. We are different from what we once were, but still stand upon the same foundational building blocks that ground our heritage.

² Rabbi Alan Lew; *This is Real and you are Completely Unprepared*; p. 53

In the year 70 of the Common Era, a few hundred years after the first temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, but during a second siege of Jerusalem, a rabbinic leader named Yochanan ben Zakkai was smuggled out of Jerusalem. He met the Roman General, Vespian, who would soon become Emperor.

As the Romans prepared to destroy Jerusalem, Yochanan asked Vespian to spare Yavneh, a small town outside of Jerusalem; it would become a home for scholars and leaders. Vespian agreed and Yavneh was spared.

Jewish tradition teaches that because these rabbis were protected, the study of Torah endured and Judaism was preserved. Jerusalem was destroyed and was no longer the physical center of the Jewish people. Sacrifices in the synagogue ceased. The foundational blocks that supported Judaism for centuries were now reassembled into something new.

Jerusalem was now a spiritual center and represented a vision for the highest ideals and aspirations of the Jewish people. Prayer replaced sacrifices. Rabbis replaced Priests. The foundational building blocks of prayer and learning remained; they were just constructed and organized differently and, because of that, Judaism prevailed.

Eighteen hundred years later a unique historical opportunity added a very different set of building blocks to this foundation. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise introduced a new vision of Judaism to America. He originally thought his Reform Judaism would simply be American Judaism. He and his ideological counterpart, Rabbi David Einhorn, created new liturgies based on the old ones.

They emphasized Prophetic Judaism over Halakhic Judaism. They built a new and modern expression of Judaism that reflected the values, priorities, and aspirations of Jews in mid to late 19th century America. It was different in many ways, the same in others.

Today the Jewish people are the descendants of the Judaism created by Yochanan ben Zakkai two thousand years ago, as well as by Wise, Einhorn and many other leaders who inspired contemporary Judaism.

Future leaders will replace our blocks of today with new ones to create expressions and practice of Judaism that will be relevant, vital and thriving for the generations to come. That is why, as Sulzberger suggests, our institutions should be built with Legos and not with bricks.

This is especially true for synagogues. They are much different today than they were sixty years ago, forty years ago, even twenty years ago. A synagogue today requires compelling reasons to exist beyond it being a place to go for the High Holy Days and have your children become b'nai mitzvah. We no longer belong just for the sake of belonging.

The synagogue today must be agile and innovative in order to thrive. It must provide a pathway for one's personal spiritual journey. It must be infused with purpose, not just programs.

We must be able to articulate why the synagogue is important and think beyond just the tangible and transactional benefits it provides for us. Why is the synagogue important to you?

Is it the center of your spiritual life? Is it where you explore what it means to be an engaged partner with one another and with God, through which learning, worship and justice work enrich your lives? Do you support it financially because you know that synagogues, imperfect as they are, remain the center and home address of Jewish life?

Jews of my generation don't have the same commitment to synagogues today as my parents do. So, we must discover new reasons and motivations to be part of a synagogue. What are they? We are still figuring it out.

Many of you have told me about your friends who are former Shir Ami members. Why are they no longer members? How can a synagogue in 5779 inspire former members and the unaffiliated to join, and stay connected to a synagogue community that is rooted in spirituality, justice, learning and heritage? Why should people invest in a synagogue—Shir Ami or any other synagogue?

As my friend and colleague Rabbi Paul Kipnes suggests we should invest in our synagogues and be members because “being part of a synagogue allows you to be part of a larger community... of YOUR people.

“Being part of a synagogue means promulgating values that your tradition, and you, hold dear.

“Being part of a synagogue community is like ensuring that your “room” is still there even if you go away to college. You can always come home. Or if you are an adult, you can not show up but we are still here.

“Being part of a community teaches future generations that being a Jew matters, even if you aren’t a power user of the synagogue at the moment.”³

Throughout its four-and-a-half-decade history, Shir Ami has always tried to answer the question, “why be part of Shir Ami?” In those years, Shir Ami added new blocks, both literal and figurative, to this structure. I’ve spent the summer hearing many of your stories about the early days at the George School, then the years on this campus as Shir Ami grew and expanded. You who were so committed to the vitality of Temple Shalom dismantled your bricks, brought the best of them to Shir Ami and have incorporated them into this structure. I’ve heard about the way it used to be, and the way it is now. Not better, not worse, just different.

³ From a public post on his Facebook page.

One of the most significant differences is the recent change in clergy. Hiring a new senior rabbi and a new cantor at the same time is highly unusual. However, the foundation is the same. Clergy provide spiritual and moral leadership, and a comforting pastoral presence. We are just new clergy blocks on the same foundation. Change is hard. It can be disorienting for some, exciting for others. In time we will all regain our equilibrium, and we will be able to examine the building blocks anew, with fresh eyes.

Last December when you voted to make me your rabbi, I acknowledged some challenges to be addressed, opportunities to pursue and and aspirations to fulfill. That was then, this is now, and now is the time to get busy.

As we move forward, we will be guided by a new mission statement that we will create that better defines why we exist, not just what we do.

We will endeavor to be great, not merely good, in all that we do. We will need to possess the collective courage to determine not only which of our bricks should remain, but also which bricks need to be reinforced or removed.

We will aspire for more of you to be more than just “dues paying members’. We hope you will invest your time, talent and treasure into this extraordinary enterprise.

We will focus squarely on the quality of our relationships, ever mindful that relationships sustain congregations. Every person who walks through our doors, or connects with us in the community, must feel valued, whether they come twice a week or twice a year. At the High Holy Days, and all year, nothing is more important than how we treat each other. [keep this in mind as you make our way out of the parking lot this afternoon. . .]

All that we do, explore, discuss, and debate will be done thoughtfully, respectfully, deliberately, and collaboratively. We will need to be patient and open minded, embrace the change and, yes, trust the process because, in time, Shir Ami will become, once again, a beacon of light and inspiration for our community and beyond.

A.G. Sulzberger, the New York Times' biggest cheerleader for digital media suggested four years ago that the newsroom of the future should be made of Legos, not bricks. The same idea applies to our synagogues and our lives. Legos are easy to dismantle and reassemble in a different form. They use the same bricks; they're just arranged differently.

Legos remind us that the right structure for today won't be the right structure for tomorrow, however, the building blocks for that structure are squarely in our hands; we just need to use them well.

The Briskins brought our collection of Legos with us to Pennsylvania. They are still neatly organized in drawers. We haven't taken them out and built something with them yet, but it's comforting to know that they are there and, when we are ready, we'll take them out and begin building something magnificent. So may it be for our lives, our synagogues, our community and the entire world.

AMEN