

Taking Risks for our Missions – Rosh Hashana Day 1 5775

From the beginning of his life, Abraham demonstrates a clear sense of mission. He is the first monotheist, the first missionary of the one God. Whether it's battling the polytheistic rulers of his homeland, leaving everything for a more fertile theological playing field in Canaan, or binding his son on the altar, he consistently takes risks for the sake of his primary calling, imperiling other sacred, yet secondary missions – such as being pioneer of a people.

Though our people wrestle endlessly with the justice of Abraham's decision concerning Isaac in the akeda, tomorrow's Torah reading, we undervalue its message about Abraham's clear sense of mission – and his tolerance for risk in pursuing it.

Hannah's devotion to God, the subject of today's Haftara reading, is as fraught with risk as Abraham's, if but expressed much differently. Abraham's risk-taking for God is public spectacle, whereas Hannah's pursuit plays itself out in the private sphere of the family and the existential regions of her soul. Hannah risks Penina's needling, Elkana's failed consolation, and Eli's dismissal to stay faithful to the God of her deliverance, who ultimately answers her prayers for a child.

Abraham and Hannah are rich with righteous mission, and self-confident in taking risks for that mission.

These two Biblical heroes stand in counterpoint to 21st century America, where mission and appropriately-managed risk run in deep deficit. The modern era has overloaded and thereby muddled our priority list. It has left us unprepared to pursue core missions. And it has undercut our confidence to take risks that align with our primary callings.

What is about the modern era that has stymied the mission-pursuing/risk-taking enterprise? How do we restore it? And what role can Jewish tradition and our synagogue play in the process?

Jennifer Senior provides answers to the first question in [All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood](#), her exploration of all that confounds parents as we try to fulfill the core mission of parenting in the modern era.

Building on observations by the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead, Senior notes that, in the traditional societies we emerged from, we trained our kids for lives we knew. We knew personally the societies our kids would live in – our societies. We knew where our kids would live – next door, or down the block. We trained our kids to take up our professions – on the farm, in a guild, or with a trade. We provided our kids with the education to conquer what we already knew.

America always bucked these trends somewhat, Senior points out, with its creed of mobility and change for each generation, but that only applied to the few.

In the past few decades, however, our assumptions as parents have been upended on a mass scale, Senior writes. We are now training our kids for “lives that will look nothing like the lives we lead.” Technology becomes obsolete in ½ a generation. Children move across country, if not across the globe. Who knows what professions they’ll take up, and whether those professions even yet exist? Who knows what subjects they should learn to prepare for these undefined professions, what languages they’ll need for them, and what cultures they’ll encounter along the way? Just what are the rules for preparing kids for today’s world? If they exist, we feel blind to them.

As Senior writes, threatened by the vast unknown from every angle, we parents respond in a panic. We “sequester” our children into synchronized day-long, risk-averse schedules which leave precious little time for our kids to be kids and “give few chances for them to take constructive and tangibly relevant risks themselves.” We give our kids the message that the world is a dangerous place, and obsess about whether our kids are “moral, productive, comfortable, sensible and capable of fending for themselves.” We plow the fields wildly to seek our kids’ ill-defined “happiness” – and to prevent them from “falling behind” in the equally ill-defined race with their peers. Stripped of familiar ends, the sole subject of our confidence becomes training our kids to be good, strong people for their expeditions.

As parents, we are stymied in mission and in taking risks for that mission.

Raising kids in a rapidly changing world is a bold exercise in risk as a whole, Senior suggests, at the same time that it makes us gun-shy about taking risks within the enterprise itself, because of all that we don't know that stands in front of our kids. And who's to blame us?

David Ropeik and Paul Slovic of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis outline the major factors that skew our perception and assessment of risk in the modern day. Among these factors are:

1. *Our greater awareness* of remote risks, due to information immediacy and the tendency of the media to exaggerate the relevance of these risks to our day-to-day lives – which Ropeik calls, in another article, “the drumbeat of drama and danger.”
2. *Our lack of trust* in the people and institutions, including the government, communicating to us about threats, both immediate and remote.
3. *The proliferation of man-made risks* – whether it be the penetration of the ozone layer, the radiation from cell phone towers, or the effects of pesticides.

In Ropeik's words, “the new technologies of our modern world have offered us wonderful new benefits, which also pose a host of new risks. Some of these risks are physically real. Many are only phantoms of our perceptions. Both contribute to an undeniable real sense of worry and apprehension that extends far beyond the next 24 hours.... The cumulative load of

modern threats may be creating an even greater risk that is largely overlooked: the risk that arises from misperceiving risks as higher or lower than they actually are.”

4. *The effects of stress.* Ropeik continues, “As a result of some of the decisions we make when we are fearful, some of the choices we make when we are not fearful enough, and because of the ways our bodies react to chronically elevated levels of stress, the hazards of risk misperception may be more significant than any of the individual risks about which we fret.”
5. *Our unwillingness to tackle risks that seem out of our control,* as opposed to those that we, often wrongly, assume to be under our control – such as driving safely while using a cell phone.

Acutely aware of risks, mistrustful of those communicating to us about them, unable to discern the remote from the immediate, struggling to isolate the benefits of technology from its risks, overwhelmed by all that’s out of our control, and stressed out, we are in no position to make smart decisions concerning risk. We are consequently misguided in those that we take or hesitant to take them at all.

As parents, consumers and citizens in 21st century America, it is simply hard for us to move forward with confidence toward predictable and desirable outcomes.

Therein lies the contrary magic of the synagogue – and the Jewish tradition that envelops it -- more so than ever. The synagogue is a place guided by rich content (our texts), guideposts for behavior (mitzvot), defined opportunities for growth, and the confidence born of covenant (brit) between human beings and God, and between Jews and God, which we reaffirm today on Rosh Hashana. At its best, the synagogue reconnects us to what is permanent and rooted in the world and cultivates an environment where we discern meaningful missions and feel comfortable take measured risks toward these ends.

The missions come both small and large, in each of the above components, contributing to the ultimate mission of serving God and the community. We can participate in making sense of the texts -- understanding both their eternal messages and their cross-pollination with modern mores. We can embrace new mitzvot, both ritual and ethical. We can serve the community in leadership positions. These are just some of the opportunities.

So why don't more of us join these and other missions of the synagogue? Maybe because they involve taking risks, and we just don't have the self-confidence to take them, for all the reasons stated above. More parochially, we feel grossly unprepared to tackle Jewish texts, and don't want to feel or appear to be dumb. We feel our Hebrew is weak, and how are we to improve that in middle-age? We diminish our observance, and see ourselves hopelessly far from the halachic ideal. And how much more can we volunteer or lead when we feel we can't properly perform our core functions at home and in the office?

Our synagogue needs to notice when people are interested and extend our reach to help people overcome their legitimate inhibitions, take risks and become fuller participants in the covenantal womb of the synagogue.

There are plenty of interested people – members and visitors alike -- who hint that they want more time under our covenantal canopy -- beyond saying kaddish for their loved ones, beyond discussing the Rabbi's sermon over Rosh Hashana lunch, beyond appreciating our services for life-cycle events. Who's to say they don't want more? We're too shy, too respectful to a fault, sometimes, to ask.

Helping people overcome their feelings that they aren't up to the snuff of Jewish tradition, without the foundation on which to build richer synagogue involvement, that's a trickier task. But that's where the stories of our fellow congregants come into play.

I want to share with you the words of three of our congregants who have read their own internal cues, sensed the needs of the community, and, most relevantly to this d'var torah, responded to the encouragement of our members, to take risks for growth in our sacred space. At moments both large and small in their lives, they have responded to the adage of Hillel, the sage: "If not now, when?"

A few people took their first steps guiding Jewish learning this spring and summer, at Saturday Night Learning (SNL), the brainchild of Mitch Parker.

Mitch encouraged David Bernard, a regular participant, to lead a session. David writes,

“I enjoyed doing the research. I found interesting facts about the Chanukah story and the Greeks that I was sure most of the other SNL folks would find interesting. I was a little nervous at first, but enjoyed it. I received compliments. The group is friendly and helpful, so there [was really] nothing to worry about.”

David, albeit with a bit more apprehension, also delivered a brief d’var torah at one of the Shabbat in the Park gatherings. Through both experiences, David notes,

“I realized that small synagogues in particular need their members to stretch themselves. It benefits the shul and helps the members feel needed and a valuable part of the congregation. Since so many B’nai Israel members are well-educated and accomplished (even if not all well-educated Jewishly) we have a lot of opportunities to create new leaders. Every time we encourage members to stretch themselves by leading services or organizing events or whatever, we also make our shul a richer place open to more points of view. I am grateful that I was asked to participate.”

Rebecca Tron took a different path. She writes that B’nai Israel’s rebirth as an independent synagogue made her want to contribute more to synagogue life. This, combined with the desire for new purpose after her father, Samuel Tron, passed away earlier this year, motivated her to, “pick something in line with my interests and abilities. I already had the curiosity about Torah reading, years of

listening to opera, the ability to read Hebrew – and to carry a tune. I leaped at the chance” when Torah reading classes were being formed. Rebecca says that “Linda’s lessons, her setting a game plan, and her optimistic encouragement helped a lot.”

Rebecca describes her first time reading Torah.

“The first time I read Torah, I was both excited and nervous. The only times I had sung in public were occasional school chorus things -- never solo. But the warm reception from the B'nai Israel community made that moment one of the high points of this year. And the stage fright goes away when I’m focused on the task itself. I’m just in the moment, with only the words of the Torah and the trope that expresses their meaning. I LOVE doing this. It’s an honor – and it’s fun.

“What I didn’t anticipate was the continuing support and enthusiasm from the B’nai Israel community. Since then, Mindy has encouraged me to learn to read Haftorah, and I had the honor to learn the High Holy Day trope.

Another unexpected discovery has been an appreciation for Biblical Hebrew, the structure and the poetry.

“My next step is to learn more weekday Torah readings, more Haftarot, and each year to add on more sections to the weekday readings I’ve already done, with the goal of eventually chanting a full Shabbat Torah reading. I might also decide to learn the trope for the Megillot.

“Going further outside my comfort zone, but still within the range of possibility, would be learning to lead davening at weekday services.

“My advice to others would be, pick something *a little bit* challenging, but within the range of abilities you already have. Don’t pick something too close to what you already do every day, or it will just feel like extra work. Above all, go with something that fits with your interests, so that you WANT to do it.”

Michael Golob, our morning minyan gabbai, also was inspired to take a risk when BI became independent.

“Linda Jacobson, Jeff Eisman and Frank Elias devised the ingenious method of saving the West Bloomfield families by renting space from Temple Kol Ami. Linda Jacobson committed enormous amounts of time and energy to make the concept successful. Fred Shuback stepped up big time by leading himself all of the Sukkot services, which is an enormous undertaking. Rabbi Berger agreed to be our spiritual leader although he already had a full time job and a young family.

“All of this brings us to the crisis of 2009. There no longer was a custodian who would open the building each day. We didn’t have a rabbi or ritual director to steer the daily minyan in the proper direction. In short, I was the last one standing who could bridge the gap until others were brought up to speed. Given the reality that others had stepped up enormously, I felt compelled to do my part to open the building each day and continue to

attend morning minyan on a daily basis. It was the least I could do to contribute to our new synagogue, and I still feel that way -- to help in any way possible to assist the members who really do the heavy lifting. The fact that our membership is participatory makes our synagogue unique. Our members can't rely on others to keep the synagogue running because we don't have that luxury. To me, that's a benefit, not a handicap, because our synagogue has a unique feeling and I am proud to do my part however minimal it is compared with others."

David, Rebecca, Michael and so many others should be sources of inspiration to all of us, to overcome our inhibitions to take risks to become more active in our shul. The three of them took measured risks in domains they knew a little about, but that still required a healthy stretch. They were encouraged by the community and its multiple exemplars, and have become exemplars in their own right. They felt, and continue to feel, really good about their initiatives. And they now play significant roles in helping the synagogue fulfill its mission.

We ought not hold our Jewish inspiration so close to our vest. We need to let it flourish as we inspire others to come closer to the fold, a saving grace in a time of broad uncertainty and personal paralysis.

"Are you missing something? We think we've found it." That was our ad in the Jewish News, and it's what sets BI apart from the rest in our region, because we look to each other, as a lay-driven community, for inspiration, confidence, risk-

taking and exemplarship – as we maintain and grow our robust, highly-participatory, traditional egalitarian community -- at times both big and small in our community's life.

Before concluding, I would be remiss if I didn't mention that one such moment stands before us right now as a community. The summer closure of a walking path through the back of our shul parking lot to its entrance threatens our self-definition as a community that promotes walking to shul and shemirat Shabbat, the observance of Shabbat, and more practically speaking, impedes the ability of a significant number of our walkers to get to shul easily and safely, particularly in the winter time. The whole thing is very concerning, particularly considering that not enough of us have taken the risks of leadership to wade our way through what is a much more complex problem than meets the eye. If more of us don't step up, the situation poses a real existential threat to our Shabbat morning community and shul-going experience.

We've faced a legion of obstacles to our mission as a community and overcome them by taking risks. I need only mention the risk of becoming independent, finding a new home, and creating a working partnership with Kol Ami, of which Michael speaks. Or the risk taken in finding the appropriate space for high holidays and transforming it into an authentic Jewish prayer space – something which perhaps could only be done in America, but still takes character and kavana. As a community, we don't back down from challenge and risk. Now represents another moment.

Conservative synagogues have not traditionally been hotbeds of risk-taking. They have been rather places where complacency rules, where people come to observe Jewish life happening, and have it done for them by the clergy.

We do it differently and are succeeding, in the spirit of Abraham and Hannah, by taking risks for our mission, and enabling others to do the same. Our continued thriving depends on the same. What risks will we take for our mission?