

## The Zucchini that Looked Like the Hebrew Letter Vav

He came to my office in the weeks before Rosh Hashanah.

I hadn't seen this congregant in a while, and had an intuition that something wasn't right. So I had sent an email checking in. For some time, I didn't get a response. Then, as the month of Elul entered, he suddenly needed to connect.

Things had been rough. He was underemployed and money was tight—tight enough that most fresh vegetables had disappeared from his table. In his own words, when balancing his scarce resources, he couldn't even afford a zucchini. At this season, that's a pretty inexpensive vegetable.

Home wasn't ideal either. He felt trapped, and as oftentimes happens to people, he was wallowing in shame about his circumstances.

And then the tears came—along with an explanation for his long absence. He didn't want people to see him in such dire straits. He didn't want pity. He didn't want to be seen as a failure.

"If I don't feel safe bringing my brokenness to my synagogue, what does that say? What are we here for if we can't be real here? What are we doing? And so I came to see you, so you could see me, so I could be seen."

Although I've changed details to protect the congregant's privacy, I am grateful for his permission to share this story. Ultimately, his story is about all of us. It is about who Neveh Shalom is, and who we might yet be. It highlights a gap between who we are and who we still need to become.

Why are you here tonight on the holiest night of the Jewish year?

Are you here from a sense of nostalgia? Do you remember attending with parents or grandparents?

Are you here out of a sense of guilt or responsibility? Because this is what Jews do on Yom Kippur or because you'd feel bad if you weren't here?

Are you here because it's good to spend a day in self-reflection?

Are you here to listen to the cantor? He's really quite good, but don't tell him I said so. Can't let him get a swelled head on a sacred day like this.

Are you here because your friends are here?

Because you like ritual?

Are you seeking to connect with God on this day of forgiveness?

Those are all good reasons to be here.

Our synagogue should *also* be a safe place where we can be loved and seen. It should be a place where we can joyously engage in Jewish living—for its own benefit, and as an antidote to the antisemitism I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah.

There are three common names in Hebrew for a synagogue.

It is a *beit kenesset*, a place of gathering;  
It is a *beit midrash*, a house of learning;  
And it is a *beit tefilla*, a house of prayer.

As important as all those functions are, this man's story reminded me that ultimately, it's not the adjectives that are essential, but the word that

precedes them. A synagogue is supposed to be a *bayit*. A house. A home. The place we go when we are down on our luck, or celebrating our successes.

Many of us are feeling tremendously anxious about the state of the world and the state of the country. Maybe we have zucchinis on our tables, but that doesn't mean that our lives feel any less precarious. If the synagogue isn't a place where we can bring our brokenness, our anxiety, as well as our hope and yearning, then what sort of home are we?

We find the origins of the synagogue first in the *Ohel Moed*, the Tent of Meeting, and then in Solomon's Temple. There is a key difference, though, between synagogues and those holy places.

The *Ohel Moed* and the Temple were commanded by God. God provided instructions both on *how* to build and *where* to build. Because God set those spaces apart, they contained an absolute *kedushah*, a divinely created holiness.

The synagogue is *not* a place of divinely sanctioned *kedushah*. For that reason, most of the laws and customs that were observed in the Temple have no place in the synagogue. The physical space of the synagogue has no special sanctity. Rather, the synagogue depends on us to raise it up through the way we behave here and the nature of our relationships.

The synagogue is one of the most remarkable examples of the kabbalistic concept of *itaruta de'letata*, "an awakening from below." The people of Israel spoke it into being so that we could continue to speak to God. How profound!

The synagogue became Jerusalem in exile, **the home of the Jewish heart and soul**. It is the ultimate expression of monotheism – that wherever we gather to turn our hearts towards heaven, there the Divine Presence can be found, for God is everywhere.

This notion of a home for the Jewish heart and soul finds profound treatment in the wealth of interpretations given for a verse in Exodus, namely: **וַעֲשׂוּ לִי, מִקְדָּשׁ; וְשָׁכַנְתִּי, בְּתוֹכָם**. "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, and I will dwell in them [betokham]" (Exodus 25:8). The way the verse reads in Hebrew, you'd expect it to say, "They shall make me a sanctuary and I will dwell in *it*."

But no, the Torah teaches us that when we make a sanctuary, God doesn't come to dwell in *it*, but to live within **us**.

What does this spiritual teaching mean in down to earth terms?

*Hazal*, Our Sages of Old, offer some answers. Always careful readers of the Torah, they noticed that the most common letters in the Torah are the "yud," the "vav" and the "hay."<sup>1</sup> Those three letters form God's most sacred name, the tetragramaton, or the Y-H-V-H that we pronounce as Ado-nai.

If you have a bit of a good visual mind, you'll also note that the letter that connects those two silents "heys" is the "vav." Of all the letters in the alphabet, the "Vav" is the connecting letter. On its own, it means "and." It changes the tense of verbs from the past to the future, and from the future to the past. Finally, "vav" is also the word for "hook." It even looks a little bit like a fishing hook.

Our Sages also noticed that the curtains in the original synagogue, the Ohel Moed, or Tent of Meeting, were all hung by their vavim, by their connecting hooks.

Vav is both a hook, and also a connector of the past to the future, and the future to the past. Combining these insights, our Sages understood that the synagogue is meant to be a place of connection. An institution that is

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<sup>1</sup> There are 31,522 "yods" in the Torah, 30,509 "vavs", and 28,052 "hays" in our Holy Torah.

larger than any one of us precisely because it joins us together. It is the place that connects us to each other, and to those who came before us; it joins us to those who are still to come; and it allows us to meet with our own souls. As a consequence, we also are able to connect to God and understand that we are in a sacred union with all of life.

Which brings us back to home, and the synagogue as an attempt to build a *תרבות טוב*, a good society which is a home for all. Home is supposed to be the foundational place where we learn those lessons of connection. Where we learn self-esteem. Where we can peer inward and feel secure at what we find—not because we aren't all a bit of a mess inside at times—but because we understand that we can be accepted *for* that mess.

There's a famous letter by the great Jewish scientist, Albert Einstein. In it, he wrote, "A human being is part of the whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind."<sup>2</sup>

The only way back home is to resist the splintering forces of entropy, it's to seek the "vavs" which hold holy places like this together. It's why we focus on *teshuvah* on this deeply potent evening, because fundamentally, *teshuvah* is the most powerful force in the world, it is what stitches together the tears and brokenness of our world and of our own souls.

*Teshuvah* is the way we overcome the horrifying delusion that we are all alone. Every sin for which we must atone is at essence an action we took that split us off from the whole. Every word of the *viddui*, the Confessional, points to the behaviors we engaged in which separated us from one

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thymindoman.com/einsteins-misquote-on-the-illusion-of-feeling-separate-from-the-whole/>

another. *Teshuvah*, you see, is how we heal our country, one small person and one small community at a time.

And yet how well are we doing when a congregant has to hesitate before bringing the fullness of their humanity into this sanctuary? When he is ashamed to ask for material and spiritual assistance? When he doesn't feel worthy to be seen? What sort of home are we then?

I want to be fair. One zucchini story does not adequately describe who we are and what we stand for at Neveh Shalom. After all, this individual in the end *did* feel safe enough to bring their truest self into these doors.

Additionally, I could tell you a dozen stories that paint a different, more appealing picture. How one congregant spiritually adopted one of our indigent members, and became, in effect, their case worker, ensuring that the person got the medical treatment they needed.

About the thousands of meals we prepare each year to feed the hungry. How we have hosted a couple of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings here for many years so that those who are suffering can find their own way to connect with something greater than their illness. Many of you have similar stories as well. Some of you have nurtured deep and genuine friendships here, people with whom you can share the fullness of your soul. Neveh Shalom *is* a place of connection. *We are an Oasis of Peace...* and we still have work to do...

Ultimately, what one zucchini story reminds me, is that we can't fix America. We can't even fix Portland. Not completely. But we *can* ensure that Neveh Shalom is a home for our souls. More importantly, we can make sure that we have a soul for our homes—by which I mean we must remember that we are not our intellects. Or our careers. Or our personas. We are not polished social creatures. We are not any of the adjectives we use to describe ourselves to ourselves and others.

No. We are souls. Striving, yearning, hungry, desperate, loving souls. Beyond our optical delusion of separateness, we are carriers of the Divine Spark, that infinitesimally small speck within that reminds us, "we are not alone." We are vavs of connection; and it is safe to embrace our souls without shame.

When we are seen in this way, we are transformed in the deepest way possible. When we see others in this way, we give them a profound sense of affirmation. For every one of us is loved with an *ahavah rabah*, with a great and undying love.

*Why did you come here tonight?*

Would you feel comfortable bringing your depression into these walls?  
Your rage or shame?

Your weakness? Your greed and pettiness? Your prejudices?  
The fullness of your being?

Would you be willing to stare these down till you uncovered your deep need to belong and how that has sometimes led you to make bad choices to find the acceptance you need and which is your birthright?

Do you believe you would be seen and accepted if you did bring the most real parts of yourself here?

I invite you to carry these questions with you over the next 25 hours, and in the months to come.

When we can all answer yes to each of those questions, we will have built a "*tarbut tov*"—a good society, and a *bayit ne'emanah*—a true home.

Tzom Kal. An easy and meaningful fast to us all...