

Shabbat Shalom -

While most people know that I have worked at Best Buy, far fewer people know that I have been a middle school science teacher, am a committed vegetarian and once, even dabbled as a day trader. Surprised - you should be - I haven't and am not any of those things. But, those are some of the answers I have given people when they ask me what I do while I am on vacation. You see, when Shayna and I travel, I often don't tell people I am a congregational rabbi. I do this, not because I am embarrassed or concerned for my safety, although that is sometimes the case, but rather I do so because I don't always want to share that particular part of my life with strangers. What's more, I don't always want to hear people's theological concerns or that their cousin took Hebrew in college. And I especially don't want to hear that while I am sitting by the pool. After all, I may be the guy studying Talmud by the pool, but I am most definitely not the rabbi, who is studying talmud by the pool.

In my entire life, only once was I not able to pull off my alter ego. A few years ago, Shayna and I spent a few nights at a vegetarian friendly bed and breakfast in Croton on the Hudson, NY. On the last day, as the owner drove us back to the train station, I informed her that all my kitchen questions weren't because I was a vegetarian - but rather, because Shayna and I kept kosher. The owner glanced up from the road, looked in the rear view mirror and replied, "a guy who always keeps his head covered with a baseball cap and is married to someone named Shayna - I had a feeling you weren't only vegetarians - you were keeping kosher!"

Anonymity can be a wonderful thing. It allows us to, if only for a few moments, step out of who we are and either blend in with the background or start fresh. I am sure we can all remember the first time that we entered a school or a new job, and no one knew who you were. You were a clean slate - at this new job, no one would

remember you as the guy who burned the toast in the office break room. No one would know you were the guy who never refilled the copy machine with paper. No one would remember the time you accidentally left half of the trip participants at the airport.

And while at times that anonymity is helpful, it can also be unpleasant. Maybe it was the first day of school where you didn't know who your friends were going to be where your classes were located. Maybe it was the first day of work where you didn't know what was expected of you or when where to go for lunch. Or maybe it was your first time visiting Temple Emunah. Which prayer book do I use? Do I sit for Hatzi Kaddish or Stand? And once I figure that out - which kaddish is Hatzi Kaddish?

Or - maybe the anxiety came after services. After you folded your tallit and put it away, after you followed the masses towards the Social Hall, after you compiled your lunch, and stood there - watching a few hundred people happily chatting about their respective weeks' and debating the points in the rabbi's sermon - while you simply stood there, holding your bagel.

I remember my first time experiencing a Temple Emunah kiddush. It was a chilly March day and after being shown around the different services that weekend, I was whisked into the Rabinovitz Social hall to meet over 300 not-yet-friends - all who knew me and I didn't know. To make this process easier, this shul, did something that no other shul did. Temple Emunah armed Shayna and me with a Kiddush Body Guard. It was Laura Blumberg's job to make sure that we not only had the chance to meet many congregants, but also found 15 minutes to sit down and enjoy the delicious kiddush.

For some, kiddush is the most important part of coming to the synagogue. It is during the kiddush that strangers become acquaintances and acquaintances become friends. Friendships are forged and long time friends reconnect. It is where Temple Emunah transforms from a Beit Tefilah, a house prayer and a Beit Midrash - a house

of learning to a Beit K'nesset, a place where people gather - to create a community. And I know this happens because when I walk around the kiddush, I don't hear people asking - what did you think about the rabbi's sermon or what did you think about the Torah reading - but rather because I hear, "Hey Murray - did you try the sesame noodles!"

My parents aren't members of a shul and they are perpetually shul-shopping. On Saturday night when we call each other to say hello, they like to report their experiences. I ask, "How was shul?" And they answer, "the rabbi gave a great sermon," or "the cantor was great," or "the sanctuary was too noisy!" I then ask, "and how was the kiddush?" To my dismay, they always say the same thing. "We left, we didn't stay." "Ma!" respond, "that's where you meet people - that's where you find out if the community is really welcoming - if they really are open - if they really are warm."

What takes place in the Rabinovitz social hall says as much about our community as does our daily minyan, last Sunday's Israel rally, and our extensive work with regards to Keiruv. It is our opportunity to show Temple Emunah at its best.

And yet - it can be a place that is challenging. When you don't know anyone, Kiddush can be uncomfortable. It is a potential minefield for explosive interactions. And sometimes, every now and then, someone says something that crosses a boundary or does something that gives members and non-member a bad impression.

We find these boundary violations especially present in this week's Torah reading. Joseph, a dream interpreter, beloved by his father, can't help but share his dreams with his brothers and anyone who will listen. Rather than committing all of his thoughts to his diary, he makes it a point to tell his brother's about the details of each dream.

The text reads:

9 Joseph dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing, down to me." 10 And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. "What," he said to him, "is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?" So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

Perhaps Joseph shouldn't have shared so much.

Shul, and particularly kiddush, is one of the few places in our world where people of different ages, genders, social norms and expectations interact.

Conceptually, you could end up sitting next to someone who is very different than you. With different expectations and sensitivities. And this can be challenging.

So much so, that some religious organizations have distributed handouts to their congregants on how to avoid potential hazards during kiddush. The Unitarian Universalist Church recently distributed a flyer entitled "Coffee Hour Caution...advice for older adults greeting young adults in Unitarian Universalist churches." I'd like to thank my brother in law Eitan for forwarding the document to me - he received it, not because he is a Unitarian universalist, but because he is on the board of an independent minyan, the Washington Square minyan, in Brookline.

The flyer advises:

1. Avoid asking: How old are you? Why? Is age so important? There's no good answer. Just avoid this one altogether. Rather they suggest that you ask - What did you think of the service today?

2. Avoid asking: What do you do? Why? For those who are un or underemployed, work is a tricky question - and assuming someone is a student implies you think they are a certain age. Give them the chance to talk about whatever is meaningful to them, which might not be school or a job. Rather ask - so tell me about yourself. I have taken to the habit of asking people - so tell me about yourself, work - hobbies, interests - tell me something about yourself.

3. Avoid asking: When are you planning to have kids. Why? Hand or not having kids is a private matter and not one people may want to discuss. This implies you only value young adults for their future children, not as a peer adult, here and now. Rather you can ask - so what brought you here today.

They make other suggestions which you can see when the sermon gets posted to the website.

Recognizing the differences in our community, I would add the following guidelines for our community, bearing in mind that I myself have violated some of them:

1. **Shul business shouldn't be discussed on Shabbat.** Although many of us hold volunteer and professional positions in the shul, when we come shul on Shabbat, we do so as practicing Jews who want to fully embrace Shabbat. And that means refraining from engaging in business. Please, respect other people's right to

experience Shabbat. And if someone asks you a business question, feel empowered to respond that you are happy to deal with the issue after Shabbat.

2. **Don't ask if someone grew up Jewish?** People's religious journey are their own business and if/when they want to share, they can share - we don't hold the keys to unlock this conversation.

And perhaps my biggest pet peeve.

3. **Interrupting conversations already in progress.** I know that I have done this and I know it has been done to me. After sitting through all of shul - you finally see your friend Barry, who like you works with magnetic fields. He is the only one who really understands magnetic fields the way you do, and you want to tell him about your latest research project. During kiddush while you are talking with him, in comes Saul the Sportsguy who, naturally, only wants to talk about sports. He walks up to you and Barry and in an instant you've been transported from the magnetic field to the football field.

I've spent a lot of time working on this interrupting issue. And I haven't found the ideal solution. When I join the group, I try to catch on with the topic. But I have noticed a much better way of dealing with the issue. When I see someone on the periphery who wants to have a word, I simply invite them into the ongoing conversation. Saul - do you know Barry, we are talking about Magnetic fields and then I continue the conversation. And while Saul might not be attracted to the conversation, he can at least become a part of it - and eventually change the topic, in a less forceful manner.

The Mishnah in Pirke Avot Chapter 1:15 reads

וְהוֹי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסִכָּר פְּנִים יְפוֹת:

One should greet every person with a pleasant countenance.

Kiddush is an opportunity to really connect not only with our guests, but with our own congregational brothers and sisters. I challenge us to actively look around while in kiddush for people who are standing by themselves and invite them to join into conversation. Respect conversations that are already taking place and when meeting new people, or getting to know congregants who have been coming for years, make sure to ask questions in the most inviting way possible. The aforementioned document puts it succinctly:

1. Introduce Yourself
2. Make friends
3. Be interested
4. Reach out
5. Respect Boundaries.

I look forward to seeing you at kiddush

Shabbat Shalom