



Above the doorway at Temple Beth El, the words read *Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof* – “Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue.” Yet Rabbi Rachel Cohen wondered if the varied efforts in pursuit of justice at the large New Jersey synagogue were central enough to the life of the congregation and if they were making a real impact. Never was this more evident to the assistant rabbi than in the Mitzvah Projects tied to the B’nai Mitzvah program. Cohen described many of the efforts as “lame”: often, kids placed collection boxes at the synagogue with a hastily scrawled sign reading “book donations” or “food donations”; others organized bake sales to benefit a randomly-selected charity. Often, with tutoring, soccer, and learning the Torah portion, the hours that were supposed to be dedicated to social action simply never happened. Cohen explained, “There is no accountability. It isn’t like there won’t be a Bar Mitzvah if you don’t prove you’ve completed the 10 hours of service required.” Mitzvah projects didn’t seem to be a priority for kids, parents, or clergy. Cohen was frustrated but also saw an opportunity: with so little thought or investment given to the Mitzvah Projects, she thought, “They should be easy to change.”¹

Rabbi Rachel Cohen and Temple Beth El

Cohen smiles broadly and laughs easily, yet she also possesses an intensity and seriousness well beyond her 28 years. Although her path to a Reform Temple in the affluent New Jersey suburbs included Ivy League colleges, prestigious fellowships, and high-profile internships, Cohen is more eager to discuss the grassroots social action work that has engaged her since her late teens. She vividly remembered a discussion at her elite private high school that proved to be a turning point: when most of her classmates argued that poor people should “help themselves” rather than access government assistance, the teacher responded that some are not born into privilege and do not have the same choices and opportunities. Cohen described being “shattered” by the realization: “This world is inherently unfair.”

She was drawn to social justice and the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi; she observed that Jews were often active as partners but had the sense that justice work didn’t grow out of her own tradition. In college, she was inspired by the activism of Reform rabbis and recognized that justice was “part of our purpose... that the world is not yet complete, and we as Jews must be part of repairing the world.” She thought: “Now I have a language, a community.” She continued: “the tradition can say out loud, ‘Do justice.’ It can welcome people back in.” Raised in a traditional, Conservative Jewish home, Cohen reconnected with her faith in a new, deeper way and went on to be ordained as a Reform rabbi. Today, she identifies as a “young social justice rabbi.”

Part of what drew Cohen to Temple Beth El was its identification as a social justice congregation, with a sixty-year history of vibrant social action. Efforts included improving inner-city public education, forming an Environmental Concerns Committee and an Israel Action Committee, advocating for affordable housing, creating a synagogue pairing program with a congregation in the Global South, and maintaining interfaith dialogue groups in the Tri-State Area. The Temple participated in community-wide “day of service” events,

sponsored teams to walk for AIDS, hunger, breast cancer, and Darfur, and partnered with a range of local non-profit organizations, such as food banks, retirement homes, and women's shelters.

As Cohen began her work as assistant rabbi, she observed that the social action efforts at Temple Beth El were diffuse, and grew concerned: "Are we actually impactful?" For Cohen, to do the work better would mean "to go deep instead of broad." She was buoyed by one critical achievement, made after three years at the synagogue. During the congregation's strategic planning meeting -- which included clergy and some of the Temple's "power players" -- she was able to push through a plan to focus their social justice work on five core areas: hunger, homelessness, education, the environment, and international justice, with an emphasis on Darfur. "We were doing well, but with these five areas we can really have an impact." Yet she acknowledged that, after many months, these five focus areas had not yet been institutionalized, and it was unlikely an average congregant could identify them. "The goal would be to continue to teach that out to the community." The shift was more subtle, as resources from the Temple would no longer go towards social justice projects outside the goal areas: "We're not going to form a team to do a breast cancer walk."

Cohen observed that the clergy at Temple Beth El tended to accommodate congregants rather than challenge them: "[Their] connection with Judaism is already tenuous ... Accommodation, I think, comes from certainly a place of deep insecurity, that one, people will leave us if we push too hard." The second insecurity, Cohen explained, is "that we haven't trained the kids well enough." She continued, "In some ways, we have led them to this place, and so we just accommodate as to not upset us, or the parents, or the community." Children and youth are critical to Temple Beth El: "It's a huge piece of income, keeping people in the religious school enrolled, and full membership, and happy." She added, "If you do not pay attention to the Bar and Bat Mitzvah program, you lose them to another synagogue." She emphasized, "A less pragmatic approach would say, these are the future leaders, and if we don't start with them, they are going to understand this way too late, or be shaped by other forces."

Temple Guidebook: "The Beth El Bar/Bat Mitzvah"

The senior staff at Temple Beth El created a forty-page guide, "The Beth El Bar/Bat Mitzvah," with detailed and accessible text on "Choosing My Torah Portion," "Haftarah," and "My Hebrew Name." Updated yearly, it included additional resources for caterers, photographers, and musicians and DJs. It featured a handy checklist:

- Learn all your prayers and blessings from the prayer book
- Learn your Torah Portion and Haftarah
- Attend eight Shabbat services: four on Friday and four on Saturday
- Lead your family in the blessings one Friday night
- Prepare your D'var Torah
- Complete all work one month before your Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Complete your Mitzvah Project
- Come to your lessons on time; contact us if you have to change or cancel
- Greet at Shabbat services one week before your Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Work with a madrich for five months, and check-in with the rabbi and cantor
- Lead the V'ahavta, the Kiddush and HaMotzi on the Friday night before your Bar/Bat Mitzvah
- Relax. Enjoy. Smile!

There were issues the guide intentionally did not address. If a family wanted a limo and a party at the Ritz after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, this was not a matter of rabbinic concern; they would focus on the preparation for the rite. The decision of how the celebration would be an expression of their values was left to the family. The guide did include a section on “Green” approaches, with a link to an organization that provided fruit baskets rather than flowers for the altar and function tables; after the event, these would be given to a local soup kitchen. Cohen noticed that fruit baskets were now the expected decoration for Temple Beth El. “I think we’ve hit a tipping point of families opting for fruit, so now it seems like that’s just what we do. So there’s a cultural shift.”

The guide described the Mitzvah Project as “10 hours of your time dedicated to service work,” and offered examples such as preparing food at a soup kitchen, teaching people to read or collecting donations of food, sporting equipment, or books. Students were encouraged to work with friends and family or do it on their own; and to connect with one of the Temple’s partner organizations or choose a new non-profit whose work is of interest. It offered a sample Mitzvah Project, growing out of the interests of the child:

Josh loves sports and animals. Each day, he plays soccer and enjoys taking his Terrier for walks. He researched on the Internet and found an organization, Kick!, that provides soccer gear for underprivileged kids. He spoke to the rabbi and learned about an animal shelter in New York City. For his ten hours, he volunteered at the animal shelter and planned a collection of sporting equipment at the Temple. For centerpieces at his party, he chose to decorate with soccer balls that could be donated to Kick!

As she read the guide, Cohen regretted not making more changes to the text when she had the opportunity. Yet she also wanted “to meet the congregation where they were.” They needed practical advice about how to get started and consider what might motivate them to engage in Mitzvah Projects.

“What is important?”

Cohen remembered her own preparation for becoming a Bat Mitzvah. She didn’t recall a Mitzvah Project being part of it, but she did remember that none of it was a matter of choice. “It was very clear that Judaism was not a choice. I didn’t have what our students have today, take it or leave it. It was part of tradition, that’s what you did, that’s what everybody around me did.” She recalled coming to her own Bat Mitzvah lessons having barely memorized one verse; the cantor’s response was stern enough that, for the next lesson, she’d learned six. Cohen’s D’var Torah took an approach she now describes as “bookish-feminist-school report.” She remembered, with a hint of sadness, the embarrassment she felt when the rabbi referred to it afterwards as “encyclopedic” and joked with the congregation: “There’s going to be a test on that information.”

Cohen explained, “The Bar or Bat Mitzvah is, to some degree, about doing something challenging”: learning an ancient language, leading the congregation in prayer and Torah study, and culminating in the D’var Torah, which Cohen described as a young person stepping forward to announce: “I have something important to say.” Cohen acknowledged that many middle school kids are over-programmed with school, sports, an instrument, homework, and tutoring. Taking on additional commitments would be difficult; but perhaps, Cohen thought, it was an appropriate expectation. After all, this was a rite of passage to adulthood, which did not promise to be easy. Yet Cohen also understood, “There are genuinely students who learn differently, and we want to be a place that sincerely cares about children, and students.” No one wants to see a child struggle at

the *bimah*, she noted. “We want to be this place where it is fun and engaging and warm and loving, and that the Judaism they experience is not scarring.”

Accordingly, like many synagogues, they had “loose standards” regarding learning the Torah: on paper, students are required to learn 20 verses; yet, if they have only learned 12, they’ll stop three weeks before and work on the Haftarah. She continued, “And if they can’t get their Haftarah in Hebrew, they’ll read it in English or they’ll skip it all together. And the D’var Torah may not be great, two pages instead of five, and it never mentions a rabbinic source.” She sighed, “OK, fine.” As she thought of all of the exceptions, Cohen observed: “The Torah piece is important but seemingly not that important if we’re willing to drop it down to 10 or 12 verses; and we’re sort of half-assed with our D’var Torah. Then I thought, ‘So what is important?’” Cohen reflected:

Maybe what is important is exposure to what is happening in the world. ...As important as Torah is, more so is your understanding of becoming a Jewish leader. In [Temple Beth El], a place founded on social justice, we need to start speaking in a really clear language about justice. It’s not just about memorizing Torah verses, and parroting back what my tutor said to me about what might be interesting, but ‘Did I actually encounter the world in my capacity as a twelve or thirteen year old?’ ‘Did I challenge myself to make sense of it all?’

In Principle and Practice

When it came to Mitzvah Projects, Cohen realized, “People just don’t care that much.” Of the many competing priorities outlined in the Bar Mitzvah guide, in practice, Mitzvah Projects seemed to be the lowest. For many of the youth and their families, she observed, these projects were an afterthought. “Most kids, I say what’s your Mitzvah Project and they say, ‘Oh, um, I’m going to collect sports equipment just like my friend Jimmy did.’ ‘Where are you going to give it?’ They look at their parents, and their parents are like, ‘Same place that Jimmy did. Same place.’”

Cohen heard murmurs of criticism about her emphasis on social justice, along the lines of “You can do community service at the local high school, but not Torah study.” At one Temple leadership meeting, a parent explained that her son did twenty hours of required community service at school, and then came to synagogue and was asked to do 10 more. The parent recalled her son’s complaint: “I already did this, Mom. Why am I doing this again?” Cohen responded, “I thought that was a great pushback. We’re not being clear enough about how this is a little bit different.” She explained that a canned food drive at the Temple isn’t fundamentally different from one at the school, but that it is more “integrated.” She emphasized:

...when you study about *tikkun olam* as a concept and then you pray for a world that’s full of peace and justice, and then you act in a way that brings that about and enacts that partnership with God, and then you come back and you study again. And you filter that experience through your study; I think that’s what the synagogue can offer, and that’s how I think it can be different.

She explained, “Part of it is understanding Judaism as a religion not only of thought and conversation and study ... but it is also about action. Our study has to lead to action.” Without action, Cohen argued, “I think we’ve missed a really key part of what it means to be Jewish.”

Cohen recalled a phone call from a parent to the clergy office, received just a few days before a Bar Mitzvah.

“My child has helped a friend who is homeless live in our house. Can that count as his Mitzvah Project?” Cohen said, “I don’t even know where to start. How do you decide three days before the Bar Mitzvah that this might be an acceptable question to ask? We said the project has to be something you designed from the beginning with the intention of being a Mitzvah project. It’s not something you’re already doing and cash in on.” She recalled that the four clergy later laughed about the question: “So there is this moment of ridiculousness: What have we done with this project?”

“Enough Already”

“Enough already,” she thought. After more than three years of watching, and getting to know the congregation, Cohen considered taking the first step: banning cupcakes and collections. These were, in some ways, the default approaches: having a bake sale or taking a collection of food, sporting goods or supplies, without much thought given to where it was going and how it might be helpful. It was a small change, but before she wrote the memo Cohen asked herself, “Was this a chip I want to cash in?”

Her memo emphasized the Temple’s social justice identity and history and explained that collections played an important role in connecting words with actions. She described a new centralized bin system to channel all donations to selected partner organizations on a rotating basis; students were no longer able to set up their own collections at the Temple. If they wanted to participate, they would be required to assist with the existing system and would staff a table in front of the bins to discuss their collection with other congregants. She explained the system as a means towards “deepening our connections” to partner non-profits, and to “maximize the impact of our giving.” And, she stated clearly that bake sales would no longer be permitted at the Temple.

Next, she would begin working on “reining in choice” for the Mitzvah Projects. Her goal would be to limit Mitzvah Projects to the Temple’s five core areas of social action laid out in the strategic plan: hunger, homelessness, education, the environment, and international justice.

A Difficult Conversation

When Cohen explored the possibility of focusing the Mitzvah Projects on the five core areas with the other senior staff, they did not share her enthusiasm. “Why place limitations?” they asked. She responded, “We can’t just let kids just choose whatever makes them feel good, we really want them to think of the larger picture of justice, about the work that we’re doing, and I didn’t want them collecting dog food, and didn’t want them working with animals.” She thought: “I’m tired of blankets for kittens.”

One colleague, who was an animal lover, strongly disagreed. He responded that it is a Jewish value not to hurt animals – *tsa’ar ba’alei chayim* – and noted that this was a value they taught at the Temple. He noted that many non-profits require participants to be 16 years or older to volunteer, so if young people really want to be hands-on, animals are the only population they can work with directly. He felt that 12 or 13-year-olds often focus their compassion on animals rather than other people, and this provided them a means to build on this compassion. He added, “We should be letting them choose.” There was a part of Cohen that wanted to respond, “I trump you. Mitzvah projects are my territory, and I’m glad to have your feedback but I’m not doing that.” Instead, Cohen sat quietly, and thought about his arguments.

She understood each one of the points he made, yet still disagreed. She felt her frustration rising, but wanted to be careful with her words, as she thought: “Poor children versus poor animals?” It reminded her of comments made by some participants on social justice trips to the Global South. “How sad they are to see hungry-looking dogs wandering through the community. In the midst of this community where kids can’t go to school, they don’t have food on the table, and most people don’t have health care! To comment on the animals, there’s something that doesn’t fit about that.” She added, “But that’s my judgment.”

Even if she agreed that working with animals was of equal merit to projects that helped people, she noted, “I still don’t think they’re creating compassion for animals by collecting dog food.” Yet she hesitated to say these words to her colleague, recognizing that “He is someone who clearly stakes a Jewish value, and does the Blessing of Animals for Parshat Noach; I understand why he would come at this from such a very strong place.” Moreover, she noted, “He has seen 20 years of Mitzvah Projects; maybe he knows something I don’t?”

An “Example Beyond Example”

As Cohen worked with students, she recognized that only a small percentage of kids were self-directed and motivated enough to develop a Mitzvah Project with impact. Cohen was particularly proud of a recent project that could have ended up as another bake sale. Becca’s mom initiated the contact, and Becca met with Cohen to discuss her interests. She loved baking, and thought about having a bake sale, but was also curious about spending time with the elderly. After 45 minutes of conversation, Becca decided to contact an assisted living retirement home with a close relationship to the Temple to ask if there were ways that she might be of assistance. Cohen recalled, “She loved the idea that she could come in and help with the baking, and the bingo, and now she is on 20 or 30 hours. It is her favorite project to talk about. She goes every other week, she calls out the bingo numbers; she talks with residents.”

Recently, Becca came by to check in with Cohen and told her “‘I’m in a position sometimes when people are really sad because they realize they won’t be leaving. And I don’t know what to say to them.’ So here I am in a situation where I’m teaching a teenager about chaplaincy.” Cohen believed there were many elements that contributed to this “example beyond example” – including their relationship, the parents being “on top of it,” and Becca’s excitement and commitment. “She’s in an incredible place.”

Opening Up the Process

Working with a group of like-minded members of the social action committee, and highly motivated teens, was one matter; after more than three years at Temple Beth El, Cohen recognized that much of the change work was with those “who didn’t get it.” She explained, “Some of what I’m realizing 3 ½ years later is that it is much easier to work with less people -- in order to push change through -- except that the whole idea of creating a congregation of caring activists is that they have to be exposed to the process.” Cohen continued: “I like being in the inner circle of congregants who ‘get it.’ But there are all these other people in the congregation who need exposure and need training and are not in the same place.”

For Cohen, responding to repeated questions about “Why can’t we allow the kids to have a bake sale?” was exhausting. She understood that many parents liked to see their kids “excited about something Jewish and Mitzvah-ish.” Cohen laughed, “What kid doesn’t light up at the idea of selling sweets to friends? It’s a really energized scene...and it’s related to the Temple and to Judaism.” She continued, “Parents, I think, see that as a ‘positive’ experience in their child’s Jewish development -- as compared to complaining about religious school

and kicking and screaming all the way to Shabbat services. Whereas I see it as an easy way out.” Talking this through required patience, she noted, “to meet them where they are at, and also bring them along.”

Cohen added, “The same goes with senior staff. It’s very hard to stay in the mix. Part of the challenge of trying to drive through change is if I take the time to open up the change process to other senior staff, it is possible that it will take a lot longer.” Cohen reported, “Conversations come to a standstill, because we’re coming at it from two different perspectives. I would rather just pull back and say ‘Let’s go work on other projects.’” She considered whether she might use “non-hierarchical power,” and what she described as “relationships and persuasion.” Or, she might approach the Senior Rabbi directly to say: “You once asked me what I needed to be more successful. In order to be more successful in social justice, I need more power.”

As she considered her options, Cohen was struck by the fact that, although no one seemed to care about the Mitzvah Projects, everyone seemed to have a stake in it. Perhaps, Cohen thought, it was because the B’nai Mitzvah program involved all four senior staff: no one clergy person was in charge of the Mitzvah projects, as each clergy person worked with 20 or 30 of the nearly 90 kids who came through the program each year. The B’nai Mitzvah program was of keen interest to the “power players” at the synagogue, and to the board. She now understood that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah was like a “prism” through which individuals understood their Jewish values; and, for her, the priority was justice. She thought about the priorities of her colleagues: for the Senior Rabbi, the B’nai Mitzvah process was primarily a “transformative moment” and an opportunity to engage in spirituality. For the Cantor, “Torah was the center.” For the other Assistant Rabbi, it was an opportunity for the whole family “to connect with an ancient tradition.” It seemed that the Director of the Religious School downplayed the importance of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah; his goal was “lifelong learning.”

When it came to the Mitzvah Projects, she wanted to say to her colleagues: “I understand that this is important to you, but I get to make this decision.” As the rabbi who most closely identified with social justice work in the synagogue, Cohen was motivated by the potential of her students: “We’re missing an opportunity. That’s what’s driving me to say I want to see the change. But that goes up against the ‘If it is not broken too much, we don’t fix it.’” As Rabbi Rachel Cohen considered her next steps, she thought about the children of Temple Beth El:

I want them to have these formative experiences of understanding that the world is not equal, and the world is not fair, and that they have a voice that can be used not only to talk about what Abraham did back then, but also what might have Abraham done today, and challenging them about God and the nature of the world. And I feel like it’s not only important for building future activists, but it’s also important for the Temple to see the integrity of the place of social justice.

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from interviews conducted by the author Elinor Pierce with "Rabbi Rachel Cohen" (pseudonym) in December 2010.