

Rosh Hashanah Eve 5777/2016: "To be a Jewish is to be a Dreamer"

Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan, Ph.D.

A rebbe and his hassid, his devoted disciple, were on a journey.

Night was falling as they passed a forest, so they had to stop, make camp, and set up a tent for the night. After they got their tent all set up, both men fell sound asleep.

Some hours later, the student woke the rabbi and said,
"Rabbi, look towards sky. What you see?"

The rabbi replied, 'I see millions of stars.'

'What does that tell you?' asked the student.

The rabbi pondered for a minute then stroked his beard and said,

"Astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies.

Time wise, it's a quarter past three in the morning.

Theologically, Hashem is all powerful, and we are small
and insignificant.

Meteorologically, it seems we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

And turning dreamily toward his pupil, the rabbi asked, and what does it tell you, my son?"

“Shmendrick! Yells the hassid, “It tells me that somebody stole our tent!”

To be a Jew is to be a dreamer. Maybe to overlook the harsh realities of the moment and see past them to the stars. To keep proclaiming, “next year in Jerusalem” at the end of every Yom Kippur and Passover Seder, no matter how dire the circumstances. To sing, “Hatikvah,” the hope, as the Israeli national anthem.

To be a Jew is to be a dreamer. After the first Zionist Congress in Basle Switzerland in 1897, Theodore Herzl, the founder of Modern Zionism, wrote in his diary, “Were I to sum up the Basle Congress in a word- which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly- it would be this: ‘At Basle, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. If not in 5 years, certainly in 50, everyone will know it.’” Almost exactly 50 years to the day of that entry, give or take a few months, the State of Israel was born. In Herzl’s words, “*Im tirtzu, ein zo aggadah*, if you will it, it is not just a legend, the dream can become a reality.

It is not only the nation builders who have dreamed; it is every individual who envisions a better future. I take myself back to a scene at the turn of the 20th century. A plucky young girl named Rochel, just

twelve years old, stands on the deck of a packed, rocking ship as the State of Liberty emerged into view. She is tremendously grateful to be leaving behind the poverty and danger of life for Jews on the Russian-Polish border. She is sorry, though, that she had to leave school and become a seamstress to help support her family. She gazes out at the shore, dreaming of a better life for herself and her family on the packed streets of New York's Lower East Side, where she will now be known as Rose. I wonder how far her imagination could take her. Could she have dreamed at that moment that all of her children would go to college? Could she have imagined as the ship drew into harbor that in her great-granddaughter's day women would be counted in a minyan in the synagogue, make an *aliyah* to the Torah? If you had told her that her great-great granddaughter would become a rabbi, she might have just laughed her delightful chuckle and thought was a crazy, wonderful dream. But she was always looking forward and never back.

I am my Great-grandmother Rose's dream come true. And you are somebody else's dream. Have you ever thought about how your life is a fulfillment of opportunities of which your ancestors could only dream? And our ancestors dreamed their dreams in the most challenging of circumstances. Can we who live in much greater comfort and ease, with so many advantages of education and technology, afford to be cynical and make our dreams smaller?

Over two decades ago, a small group of Jews in Pleasantville began to dream. To envision a local Jewish community that would be inclusive, relevant, and meaningful. Out of their dreams and vision grew Pleasantville Community Synagogue. Thanks to their vision, generous contributions and countless hours of hard work, over 20 years later we enjoy a beautiful, serene shul, a caring staff and a congregation that is a magnet to those who are looking for a welcoming, diverse, and authentic community and an experience of joyful Judaism.

Nothing great can be achieved without starting as a vision or dream. Jewish mysticism teaches that a dream is like a blueprint. For the mystics, creation of anything new begins in *Beriah*, the world of ideas. From there it filters through the world of *Yetzirah*, planning and formation of the details, and then into the world of *Assiyah*, hard work and actual accomplishment. By the time we begin to get our hands dirty in the real world of budgets and building repairs, we can sometimes forget the vision that brought us here. As the Midrash says that even at the great moment when the Red Sea parted, two Israelites, Reuven and Shimon, never looked up from the mud at their feet.

Every miracle, every dream realized has its share of challenges and imperfection. That doesn't negate the realization of a dream, it just means that it's time to pause and rededicate ourselves to our vision.

In the words of Max Weber, “Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth - that humanity would not have attained the possible unless time and again we had reached out for the impossible.”

Shortly before I came to PCS, our PCS vision committee, chaired by Laurie Hirsch Shulz, dedicated many hours of reflection and hard work to survey the congregation, to find out what brought you here and where you want us to go in the years ahead. Members described PCS as “a welcoming Jewish community connecting people of diverse traditions and backgrounds who want to share a joyous spiritual and cultural home.” You identified Spirituality, Community and Education as the three pillars of our community. Six current priorities were affirmed: music, welcoming new members, a teen youth group, social action, a caring committee for member support, and adult education. Just a year later, even with limited staff and funds, several of those areas are coming steadily to fruition, while others need more support. We have also added a focus on new programs for our youngest families.

From the day I arrived a year ago, I immediately sensed that PCS is the essence of the traditional Jewish ideal of “Mikdash Me’at,” a small holy sanctuary. When I say that PCS is for me, every day, a holy place where I go to do holy things with holy people, do not be put off by my choice of words. Holy doesn’t have to mean pious and ultra-religious. **Holiness means those people, times, and places, where we feel most alive, most connected, most aware of the sacredness of life.**

So dream with me about the years to come: Let us envision what it will look like and feel like as PCS goes from strength to strength as a true spiritual home, a hub of Jewish life where you want to be, where members and visitors are welcomed, loved and valued so that all may feel a deep sense of belonging and live our values. As I describe our connection to our people, activities, and space, consider which of these resonates with you personally, and where you want to make *your* unique contribution to realizing our communal vision.

When I say Holy People, I mean that people will always come first at PCS. PCS will continue to be a warm, welcoming, and diverse community, weaving close social and personal ties among its members. Openness and welcome will continue to be our hallmark. Members of all Jewish backgrounds, Jews-by-choice, spiritual seekers, family members of all faiths, and interfaith guests will always be welcome and valued in our community. We will build caring relationships and increase our support for one another in times of need as well as times of joy. One of our top priorities is to start a caring committee to support members in time of need and we really need a chairperson—could it be you?

When I say Holy Actions, it reminds me that activities at PCS are much more than programs; they are meaningful deeds and *mitzvot* in which we engage as a community. Our programs will continue to include great spiritual, intellectual, and social gatherings, and more

actions that connect us to *tzedakah*, *tikkun olam* and the natural world. Which of these programs is the one that you will attend and support?

When I say Holy Space, I think of our historic house of worship in the village of Pleasantville, already beloved for its serene, sacred, and gentle atmosphere. Over the next few years, let us envision and carry out the needed upgrades that will make our facility maximally comfortable, aesthetically pleasing and accessible to people of *all* physical abilities. Will you be one to help make this vision a reality?

In Jewish tradition, the fullest expression of holiness is found with others, in community. As rabbi, one of my blessed jobs is to hold a mirror to the community and reflect back to you who you truly are, to the depths of your souls. On this day of Remembrance, my words can help us to renew our vision, to remember our shared dreams. To bring our dreams to reality will take each one of us here finding our own unique place of connection, our personal way of contribution. As Reb Zalman said, "The only way we can get it together is together."

In the coming year, may we dream together and make our dreams a reality: May our synagogue become a vibrant hub of Jewish life, where we love to gather often to celebrate, serve, and mark our sacred times together. May we support one another through life as we work for *Tikkun HaLev* and *Tikkun Olam*, healing our hearts and repairing our world. May we start this Rosh Hashanah. And let us say, Amen