

5787 High Holy Day Appeal

- *Lisa Hutter*

Last year, when I stood here on Kol Nidre, I talked to you about my family.

I talked about why I chose Judaism, why our family chose Agudas, and what it meant to find a place where we felt connected.

And normally, I would have been standing here last night.

But this year, my older daughter is a freshman at the University of Iowa, and this weekend was our very first Family Weekend.

She's doing well by the way, introducing her diving teammates to our high holy days and feeling like she belongs.

In any case, I knew I was planning to be back in Austin in time for Erev Yom Kippur and Kol Nidre. But I also knew that airlines don't always care about the carefully constructed schedules of synagogue presidents.

And I wasn't willing to miss Family Weekend.

I also wasn't willing to risk missing this.

So I asked: could we just move my speech to Yom Kippur day this year?

And the answer was basically:

Of course.

Easy peasy.

We moved it.

And actually, that tiny thing says something about Agudas

We make room for people's lives.

We make room for families.

We figure things out.

Which is fitting, because last year I talked to you about my family.

This year, I want to talk about our family. The Agudas family.

Because after another year as your president—and another year of experiencing Agudas not just as its president, but as a congregant, a mother, a daughter and a friend—I have been thinking a lot about what actually makes this place so special.

Every synagogue has Shabbat services.

Every synagogue celebrates B'nai Mitzvah.

Every synagogue teaches children.

Every synagogue has clergy and lifecycle events and holiday traditions.

So that isn't what makes Agudas different.

What makes Agudas special isn't just what we do. It's how we do it.

And sometimes you discover that in the strangest ways.

Last High Holy Days, I was sitting here with my husband and I leaned over and whispered something about the slope of the bimah.

I was probably complaining a little.

I said that when you are one of a large group of people up here, it's hard to see this step down.

And from behind me I hear something like:

"It wasn't supposed to be that way. We had no choice."

So I turned around.

And the people sitting behind us started explaining the design of the bimah. Why it was built this way. What happened during construction.

And I'm sitting there listening to them, a little bit in awe, because I know who they are—but suddenly I realized:

They were also part of the history of this building.

Think about that.

How many places can you sit in a sanctuary, make some random comment about the architecture, and discover that the person sitting behind you can explain it because **they were actually there when it was built?**

This campus was built in 1999, and in March 2001 our congregation moved here from Bull Creek.

And we didn't just hire movers and show up.

Hundreds of Agudas congregants walked four miles carrying our Torahs from the old synagogue to this campus, accompanied by klezmer music and the sounds of shofarot.

And some of the people who built this place, who made that walk, who carried those Torahs, are still sitting right here among us.

Agudas' history isn't something hanging on a wall.

It's sitting in the pews.

And we're still creating it.

Sometimes in ways that probably make absolutely no sense to anyone who isn't part of this family.

Take the hats.

If you're relatively new here, you may have noticed that while some people wear kippot, quite a few people wear hats.

But these are not just hats.

There are rules.

In the warmer months, straw. In the cooler months, felt.

And there is an actual day when the change occurs.

At Pesach, we move to straw. At Shemini Atzeret, back to felt.

Because apparently seasons are not adequately marked by the Jewish calendar alone.

We also require millinery.

And all of us who come to shabbat services know it.

It's ours.

Just like every family has traditions that make complete sense to the people inside the family and absolutely no sense to anyone else.

Like having a resident meteorologist whose title changes every week. Whether he is hot Bob or frigid Bob, he shares his weather reports like clockwork and he is the most accurate weatherperson I know! (seriously, he is always right)...

Not many synagogues out there have a resident meteorologist!

We also have our own Adon Olam-ologist.

I'm fairly certain most synagogues don't have one of those either.

We do.

Her name is Gail Tosto.

Once a month, Gail finds a song whose melody works with Adon Olam. She tells us the story behind the song. There may be props. We sing the song together.

And then somehow the entire congregation ends up singing Adon Olam to that melody.

And the Meteorologist and the Adon Olam-ologist both tell you something important about this place.

Someone has an idea.

Someone brings something they love to Agudas.

And eventually it becomes something **we** love.

That's how traditions are created.

That's how community is created.

You see it everywhere here.

In our gabbaim—every one of them different. They chant differently. They welcome differently. They each bring their own personality to the bimah.

And if you want to know their favorite Torah portion, just ask them.

Trust me. They'll tell you.

And something remarkable happens here. Agudas seems to produce gabbaim and cantors at a rate that I am pretty sure is nowhere near the national average.

People learn here. They become confident here. They discover gifts here—and then they take those gifts out into the Jewish world.

You see it in our young families.

Parents finding one another. Families raising their children alongside one another. Friendships beginning because children happen to land in the same class or at the same Shabbat service.

You see it at Kiddush.

There is a table I love to watch, filled with some of our younger generations.

They sit together long after lunch has been served.

They talk. They laugh. They connect.

And there is always room.

If someone wants to sit down, they make room. You don't have to be invited into the group. You sit down and you're part of the conversation.

Then they bench together.

And, because apparently benching alone isn't enough of a ritual, there is the Jewish joke of the week.

That's Agudas. That's us.

Judaism happening around a table.

Friendship happening around a table.

You see it in people like Dana Weiner—a past president, one of many past presidents who never really stop serving Agudas just because their term ends.

Dana has done so many things here, big and small.

And every Agudas president now learns one other very specific thing: when you're supposed to leave one room and go give your speech in another room, Dana will come find you.

Because that is now also her unofficial duty.

Or Ian Spechler.

Most organizations have announcements.

We have Ian.

Give Ian an announcement and somehow it becomes a song, or a movie, or a full theatrical production.

Every announcement is basically an Academy Award campaign.

These things sound small.

But families are built out of small things.

And behind so much of what we experience here is our staff.

Most of us see the finished product.

We walk into a program. We arrive for services. We drop our kids off at religious school. A room is ready. A family celebrates a lifecycle event. A child has what they need. An email goes out. A problem gets solved.

What we don't see are the hundreds of things that happened beforehand to make that moment possible.

Our staff carries so much of that invisible work.

And they don't do it for some anonymous institution.

They know our families. They know our children. They know our quirks. They know this community. They are often also congregants and their children are as well.

They are part of how Agudas does Agudas.

And sometimes all of those things come together in one moment.

For me, that happened this year at my daughter's Bat Mitzvah.

I sat down in that front row.

If you've been here for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, you know the row.

The B'nai Mitzvah family row.

I've watched so many other families sit there.

And suddenly it was our turn.

My daughter was on this bimah.

We were the family sitting in that row.

And I remember looking around this sanctuary and thinking about all the families who had sat there before us—and all the families who will sit there after us.

For that one service, this whole community was helping us mark one of the most important moments in our family's Jewish life.

My daughter shared the service with a young man whose family is Canadian. Many of his relatives had come down from Canada to celebrate with him.

And at one point during the service, Rabbi Blumofe surprised everyone by using the melody of *O Canada* for one of the prayers.

Nobody had asked for it.

It wasn't on a checklist.

It was simply this little moment of recognition that said to an entire family:

We see you. We're glad you're here. You are part of this.

Afterward, my family, hailing from NY, Florida and CA, and my friends, many of whom are not Jewish, couldn't stop talking about the service.

They talked about how warm it was. How welcoming. How comfortable everyone seemed to be.

But mostly, they talked about our rabbis.

They couldn't believe the way Rabbi Blumofe connected with everyone in that room. How completely at ease he made people feel. How he and Rabbi Swedroe seemed to move together as one, each knowing where the other was going.

And they kept saying to me:

"Do you know how special he is? Do people here understand what you have in your rabbis?"

And I kept saying:

"Yes. We know."

But it was actually good for me to hear it from people who don't sit in this sanctuary every week.

Because sometimes when something extraordinary becomes familiar, **we forget that it's extraordinary.**

There really is no Rabbi Blumofe anywhere else.

Just like there is no Agudas anywhere else.

And my daughter's Bat Mitzvah brought something else full circle for me.

Her tutor was Sam.

Ahhh, Sam.

Sam had also taught my older daughter when we first moved to Austin.

Sam has always believed in bringing Jewish education to where the kids are.

But Sam has another gift.

He calls some of our kids **"neurospicy."**

He understands children whose brains work differently.

Kids who may not always learn the way we expect them to learn.

Kids who can sometimes be challenging to reach.

Sam reaches them and meets them where they are.

And when that moment finally happens—when a child gets it, when the Hebrew clicks, when they stand on this bimah and do something that perhaps at one point they weren't sure they could do—Sam looks like the proudest papa in the room.

And he does something else.

He connects kids to one another.

He somehow knows which children are meant to find each other, and he fosters those friendships.

If you're lucky enough to have Sam in sixth grade, you may come away with more than Hebrew.

You may come away with relationships you will have for the rest of your life.

That's Jewish education at Agudas.

And it is only possible because of the overarching program itself. Because of Tammy's leadership and her tireless hours spent creating events like Shabbaton where our children are gifted with memories and friendships that will last a lifetime.

Again:

It's not simply what we do. It's how we do it.

But family isn't only the people you celebrate with.

Family is who you call when things aren't okay.

When my dad became sick last year, Rabbi Blumofe was among the first people I called.

I needed my rabbi.

And within one of the first of quite a few conversations with Rabbi Blumofe that awful week last August when my Dad's disease was first discovered, Rabbi said to me, "What's your dad's mother's name?"

I said, "Mary."

And Rabbi said, "Okay. Frank ben Mary."

Because he was adding my dad's name to our weekly Mi Shebeirach.

And just like that, my dad—a non-Jewish, Italian, retired police officer and funeral director from Brooklyn—had a Hebrew name.

Frank ben Mary.

My dad loves this.

He is absolutely tickled by it.

Now, he does have many long time Jewish friends, and after a lifetime as a funeral director, he actually knows a surprising number of our prayers. But he isn't Jewish.

That didn't matter.

People in this congregation started praying for him—people who don't know him. People who have never met him.

They said his name in prayer, every day and every week.

And they're still praying for him.

My dad loves knowing that somewhere in Austin, there is a synagogue full of people he has never met who know the name **Frank ben Mary** and are praying for him.

And every time I see those people, they ask me how he's doing.

Not because they're being polite.

They really want to know.

They care about him because they care about me.

My Board did the same for me. They stepped in around me. They gave me strength. They supported me and gave me room when I needed it.

And by the way – my Dad is still fighting the good fight and hanging in there— no doubt in part because of the prayers of our Agudas family.

And somehow, without ever walking through these doors, **my dad became part of our Agudas family too.**

That is what it means when I say Agudas is family.

And that brings me to why I am standing here today asking you to support this family.

Last year, we lost someone who meant a great deal to this congregation—and to me personally.

I knew Gloria Evans as a friend before I really knew her as a congregant.

And I was fortunate to be among the people who got to listen to Gloria talk about what she wanted for Agudas.

Gloria was a philanthropist throughout her life. She supported Jewish organizations, the arts, education and this community.

But Gloria didn't just ask:

How much should I give?

She knew **why** she wanted to give.

Gloria cared deeply about education. She had been a teacher herself.

She cared passionately about Judaism.

And she was deeply concerned about antisemitism and believed that education and knowledge were among our most powerful tools for fighting it.

We even tried to convince her to teach a class here herself.

Before she died, Gloria and her children made an extraordinary commitment to CAA:

A \$1 million bequest.

But what I love about Gloria and the Evans' family gift is not its size.

It is its purpose.

Gloria specifically directed that this gift be used to continue Judaism through education and to combat antisemitism through knowledge, awareness and thoughtful educational initiatives.

Gloria wasn't simply making a gift.

She was designing a legacy.

Gloria knew what lit her up.

This was also the case when I talked to our first anchor donor this year, Clifford Zeifman.

Ask Clifford why he gives year after year and he will tell you all the reasons, not least among them many of the reasons I've already named. He cares about this congregation and supporting its legacy for years to come.

So today I want to ask you:

What lights you up?

Is it our children?

Security?

Learning?

Accessibility?

Something I haven't even named?

What do you wish we had?

What would you love to see happen here?

And if you want it, there's a pretty good chance somebody else sitting in this sanctuary wants it too.

Maybe you can help us make it happen.

Because here's something I want you to understand from someone who has now spent quite a bit of time inside the sausage-making of running a synagogue:

When Agudas doesn't have something, most of the time it isn't because the Rabbi doesn't want it.

It isn't because the staff doesn't want it.

And it isn't because your Board doesn't think it's a good idea.

A lot of the time, **we simply don't have the money to do it.**

We work very hard to keep Agudas financially accessible.

Yes, we could raise dues dramatically.

But then we risk becoming a congregation that fewer people can afford to belong to.

And that's not the Agudas I want us to be.

So there are choices we make every year.

We have doors that need replacing.

We have wood around this sanctuary that needs repair.

We want to continue improving security throughout our shul.

We want to make our spaces more beautiful, more comfortable and more reflective of who we are today.

We could use additional staff capacity—people who can share some of the load and give us the ability to do more of the beautiful things we imagine. We are growing and may very well want or need more clergy someday in the future.

Heck, I'd really like a new conference table for our board meetings in the History Room.

Some of these things are big.

Some are small.

Some are glamorous.

Most aren't.

But every one of them contributes to **how we do Agudas**.

And here's where I want you to think differently about giving.

If there's something you wish Agudas had, don't just wish for it.

Come talk to us.

Find the other people who want it too.

Maybe you and three friends fund it.

Maybe several families make a multi-year commitment together.

Maybe you create something that becomes a permanent part of Agudas.

Maybe your gift isn't cash at all.

Maybe it's part of a retirement plan.

Maybe it's part of your estate plan.

Maybe it is something that you commit to every year-- you find something that is meaningful to you and you fund it over time.

Maybe, like our repeat anchor donors, it's how you give back.

Maybe, like the families and people who have programs and spaces named for them, you decide there is something you care deeply about and you want to make sure it continues long after you are gone.

There are so many ways to give.

And sometimes the most meaningful gift begins not with a check—

but with a conversation.

Which is one reason we're doing something a little different this year.

We're calling this the **High Holy Day Appeal**.

It began here on Rosh Hashanah, but it will continue through the end of High Holy days, as Sukkot comes to a close.

That gives you time to make your pledge and shape your commitment.

If you gave last year, and you can increase your gift this year, please do.

If you've never participated before, start today.

Whatever the amount, participate.

But I also want today to be the beginning of a larger conversation.

Because for some of you, the right gift is exactly the gift you write on that card.

For others, today may be the beginning of something bigger.

A multi-year commitment.

Families coming together.

Something that becomes a permanent part of this congregation and one day bears your family's name.

Those gifts take conversations.

They take planning.

And we want to give you time to have those conversations with us.

So **start today.**

Make your High Holy Day Appeal commitment.

And if there is something more you want to explore, tell us that too.

And I have one more hope.

Let's break the record.

Let's make this the biggest year of giving that Agudas has ever had.

Not so we can say we raised the most money this year.

But so we can say we gave this community **more possibilities than we have ever had before.**

Because this is **your** Agudas – it belongs to you.

Not only does Agudas need you but you have the ability to shape what this congregation becomes.

Because Agudas doesn't simply provide Judaism.

Agudas provides a particular way of living Judaism.

A way of welcoming.

Of Teaching and of Celebrating and Of Comforting.

A way of sitting in a sanctuary, making an innocent observation about the bimah, and discovering that the people behind you helped build it.

Twenty-five years from now, I want someone else sitting in these seats to have that experience.

Maybe they'll make some innocent observation about something we've done.

Actually, I'm fairly certain they'll have *some* observations about what we've done.

And someone sitting behind them will lean forward and say:

"Well, let me tell you why we did it that way."

And they'll discover that the person sitting behind them was part of the generation that built what came next.

That's us.

We are that generation now.

So today, as you consider your High Holy Day Appeal gift, don't only ask yourself:

How much should I give?

Ask yourself:

What lights me up?

What do I want Agudas to become?

And what can I help build?

Because this is our family.

And what we build now will become someone else's Agudas story.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.