

Judaism at Oseh as Conscious Culture Creation

By Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

I was a cultural anthropology major in college. And I was pretty serious about it. I spent almost a year in North India on a study abroad program, most of that time living in a city called Varanasi, which is the most famous Hindu pilgrimage city on the Ganges River. I spent a lot of time doing an undergraduate fieldwork project studying what was called a paan stall, which is a small shop that men go to to eat paan, which is betel nut wrapped in a special leaf, often with tobacco mixed in.

It's kind of like a neighborhood bar. You can picture Cheers (if anyone remembers that show), except it's smaller and it's all outside. Next door was a chai stall, and you would often drink chai to wash down your paan.

One of the things that most impressed me about Indian culture was its ancientness and deep rootedness. One of my friends who helped me a lot in my research was an upper-caste Brahmin who lived next door to and was caretaker of a sacred pond that was mentioned in the Mahabharata, which dates to around 500 BCE.

People in Varanasi had time. They weren't rushing around; there was always a spacious quality to being together. The guys saw each other all the time at the paan stall. They had deep social ties that were simply a matter of fact, nothing special. These ties were often strengthened through telling dirty jokes, but they were strong nonetheless.

While I truly loved the time I spent in North India, when I came back to the US and resumed my studies in anthropology, I realized that I wanted to study cultures that were closer to home. So instead of continuing to study South Asia, I pivoted to focus on cultures of the United States, and also to study Jewish culture, which I had never given any intellectual interest to, and was only just beginning to become more engaged with in my own life.

One of the things I realized was that no matter how much I studied or how good my Hindi got, I was never going to become North Indian— I was always going to be an outsider. Interestingly, Rabbi Daria had this same realization about Japan and Japanese culture, and it was important for her in eventually shifting to a rabbinic path.

As I began to study more about Jewish culture, I saw there was all this richness and depth – I particularly became aware of its expressions beyond the Ashkenazi world that I had had absolutely no conception of growing up— and that this was a culture I could become a true participant in and even a shaper of.

Now, becoming a conscious shaper of Judaism and Jewish culture was not why I went into the rabbinate. I went into the rabbinate because I was passionate about Judaism as a spiritual practice and as a force for social and ecological healing in our world. But, over the years, this idea of becoming a conscious shaper of Jewish culture has become

an important, meaningful element of my rabbinic work, although it was only a couple years ago that I started to be able to give language to it.

For years, I had thought that my background and deep engagement with cultural anthropology was something that I had basically left behind or at least dramatically pivoted from in becoming a rabbi. But I realized that it was not the case.

As my years in the congregational rabbinate have grown, I've learned it is exciting and meaningful to create vibrant community, to create culture. And so, on this holy day of new beginnings, where we attune ourselves to the pregnant possibilities of this new year, what I want to invite you into is the idea of becoming a conscious shaper of Jewish culture and Judaism at Oseh Shalom.

You don't have to study cultural anthropology, but I want to offer this idea as a way to think about what we do at Oseh Shalom, to name it as an important part of the value proposition of being part of our community. When you engage here, you are not a consumer, you are creating something of value—even if you are not part of the visioning and planning of an event.

Just by showing up and engaging with your full self, you are helping to create a vibrant experience for others. You're not just consuming a show on Netflix (as fun as that can be) it's not just entertainment. It's an opportunity to co-create, make things happen that are meaningful to you, helpful for others and helpful for the evolution of Judaism.

This emphasis on community is a central feature of Reconstructionism, as many of you know. You cannot create a full and meaningful life as a Jew without community; too much of the experience of Judaism depends on relationship, group ritual, shared life and meaning with others, caring for and supporting others.

For Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, "it is in community that individuals both make sense of the world and are enabled to bring Godly qualities of love and justice to fulfillment in this world."¹

So, if you're not engaged with creating community and Jewish culture at Oseh, I want to consciously invite you into that. And I want to do that not from a place of saying we need volunteers for X,Y or Z. Because how we think about this, our attitudinal orientation, makes all the difference.

I want to invite you in to give you an opportunity to create something of value, to create something that affects other people who may even be one or two or three generations removed from you, that affects our broader community beyond these walls. We all want to feel like we are creating something of value with our lives, and I want us to take really seriously the idea of our community here as a place where we can all contribute to do that.

¹ https://www.dorsheitzedek.org/divrei-torah/rabbi-toba-spitzer?post_id=356845

If you already are engaged in creating Jewish culture and community here at Oseh, thank you! So I want to speak to you to offer this different framing as a way of stepping back to reflect about what we do together here.

As we come out of Covid, we find ourselves needing to relearn the elements of creating community and Jewish culture at Oseh. The muscles have atrophied a little bit. One prominent way this manifests is the double-edged sword quality of Zoom. On the one hand, we are so glad to be able to provide access to those who are immunocompromised or have other difficulties leaving the house, as well as to our members in Texas, Michigan, and Delaware.

However, the convenience of Zoom is also, frankly, having a negative effect on our ability to create vibrant Jewish culture. If you are immunocompromised or driving at night is really difficult for you or you just live too far away, I get it. Zoom is the best option.

But if you do live nearby, I'd like you to consider that when we have 12 to 15 people in the sanctuary on Friday night versus our pre-Covid 25 to 40, it really makes a difference. *Sometimes what feels like a personal decision – I'd much rather just stay home and not drive to the synagogue for services or for X event – really impacts the experience of the other people who are here in person.* When you're not here singing with us, or even just being in our space with your full presence, we miss you!

I speak on behalf of the Oseh clergy team, for myself, Rabbi Daria, Cantor Caitlin, when I say that. When you're not here in person, we miss your voice, we miss your presence, we miss all of that simple, basic social connecting time that happens at the oneg after services, where we get to hear about what's been going on in your life. We just can't do that over Zoom.

So, if you're on the fence about coming in person at a given time, just come. Know that your decision affects other people, affects our community, affects our experience of creating Jewish culture here. You'll also probably find, as so many do that: Wow! It's really wonderful to be in our sanctuary full of song, hearing the voices of our Oseh chevre blending together.

I want to turn now to exploring 3 of the core building blocks of vibrant community here at Oseh. There are more than 3, but I just want to give a few examples. One of the marks of a healthy culture is that it is multi-generational. This is also, as we've mentioned before, one of the great benefits of being part of a synagogue, because otherwise it's very hard to be part of multi-generational community in our country beyond one's family.

One of the experiences that most comes to mind for me of vibrant multi-generational community culture here was Purim last year. It was our first large-scale multi-generational event since we had shifted from Zoom-only during the Omicron wave, so there was a lot of energy. We had over 80 people here. I think I made the mistake of letting the groggers get handed out a little bit early, so there was a bit of added noise and chaos. There is something I have particularly come to value about the boisterous,

hard to control, somewhat chaotic energy of multi-generational community with a hefty number of people under the age of 10 present. There was a lot of joy, a lot of life, and even a bit of magic that evening. A true *mechaya*.

A lot of how we learn in a culture has to do with modeling. So when adults show up on Purim and they are engaged, and maybe even doing a zany, memorable Megillah reading, they are modeling; they are teaching by their presence. They are affecting kids a couple of generations below them, teaching and transmitting what it is to be joyous, what it is to be *simchadik* on Purim. Maybe all this is obvious, but I don't think it is and I think it's important to unpack it a little bit. This is what I mean by conscious culture creation. Not just showing up, but understanding what goes into *how* we show up or work together.

The 2nd example is the special kind of Jewish culture creation that can happen during more immersive experiences, like the annual Oseh Retreat, and now the annual Oseh camping trip. One of the great things about these experiences is their spacious quality, like I experienced at the paan stall in India. People can just hang out and allow a conversation to unfold without having to worry about putting away the trays of cookies from the oneg and who's going to be the last one out of the building.

The amazing thing about the retreat is that it is almost entirely lay-led. It's not dominated by those pesky professional Jews who keep showing up to lead services! So as a community member you really can deeply shape the entire cultural experience for everyone there.

At the Oseh camping trip last spring we were able to experience what you could call the village element of culture-- having others around for support in close proximity. None of us live in the traditional Jewish communities of Kemp Mill or Pikesville, so this village experience is rare for many of us. Let me give you an example of this: one parent said they loved being at the retreat because, "I could go to the bathroom without my kid." This perhaps sounds trivial, but it's really a huge thing. The camping trip helped re-create something of this village structure – there were additional people watching out for the kids other than their parents, holding the community, creating a loving container to help the children thrive.

What this does for parents at a more subtle level is that it allows us to relax (so we can actually be better parents!), so we don't have to do everything by ourselves—which we were never supposed to do; that's not how healthy human societies function. It's worth holding the question: is there some aspect of this village element we can bring into our building as well?

The last element I want to name is how we support each other. This element of community was particularly central for Kaplan. He wrote that "A community might be defined as that form of social organization in which the welfare of each is the concern of

all, and the life of the whole is the concern of each.”² *Kol yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh*/All of Israel are bound up together, are responsible for each other, the Talmud says.³

It has been very exciting and gratifying to see the functionality of our Caring and Support Committee grow in recent years. I want to say “thank you” to the core members of that committee: Shari Argue, Susan Levine, and Nikki Lincoln. What’s really great is when I reach out to a congregant after a loss or some kind of significant life event and I hear from them that “Oh yeah so and so from Caring and Support already called me.”

I always find it very satisfying as a rabbi to hear from someone about how they felt supported by Oseh community during their shiva and mourning process.

Rabbi Daria and I know of a long-time congregant couple with some health challenges that lives near another long-time congregant couple. They actually didn’t know each other well before the pandemic, but the healthy couple has been extraordinarily helpful to the other couple throughout the pandemic. There is so much more we could do with this kind of proximity-based connecting, but it does take a little bit of work to organize. Reach out to Rabbi Daria or myself if you are interested in helping make this kind of Zip code based connecting happen.

Here’s a general tip by the way: learning more Torah increases your capacity to become a thoughtful, informed shaper of Jewish culture. This is another way to think about why to attend a class, to come to Torah learning on a Shabbat morning, or read some thoughtful Jewish books (we are always happy to provide recommendations; there are such amazing Jewish books out there!) The kind of culture creation I’m talking about is like jazz, in order to improvise, you have to know the basic melody.

I have often found resonant the line in the Rosh Hashanah Amidah that we just davened on p. 112, that imagines all of creation coming together as an *agudah echat*, as one bundle, as the prayer says: to enact the Divine will with a whole and peaceful heart. I imagine us all together as one bundle, on these days when so many of us are in shul, standing before the Divine gaze.

May our continued growth in consciously creating Jewish culture here at Oseh allow the Divine will to express Itself through us, for the sake of wholeness, nourishment, and blessing.

² *Future of the American Jew*, p. 325.

³ B. Talmud Shevuot 39a.