

May 2015 Message from Rabbi Zamore

Tearing Down the Invisible Wall

Recently, we had a guest speaker at the Jewish Center and before her presentation I invited her to sit on the bima. She looked like a deer in headlights. Her discomfort with the bima was clear and every time there was a transition in the program, she kept asking if it was time to move and sit in the congregation. While it was clear that she was an experienced and engaging speaker, it was equally clear that she shared the view that the bima is the sole realm of rabbis and cantors. Knowing that many Jews are raised with this attitude, I have worked throughout my rabbinate to tear down the invisible wall which seems to exist between the congregation and the bima.

One of the things that I love and respect about Judaism is that we are all equal. There is no king or queen, no high priest. No one has more access to our tradition or community than another. Rabbis, cantors, educators and other Jewish professionals are just Jews who have studied and dedicated their work and personal lives to Judaism and the Jewish community. Therefore, every Jew is encouraged to learn what we have had the privilege to learn and to lead in the manner in which we are honored to lead. Ridding ourselves of the invisible barrier that stands between the congregation and bima starts that process of empowering all Jews in their ownership and participation in Judaism.

To create an open bima I have instituted several practices over the last two years. First, for my sermon, I leave the bima and speak from the center aisle, walking around while talking. I purposely use the informal voice, while addressing our sacred text, in order to make it more accessible to all. I leave the bima in order to extend the bima, blurring the boundary between congregation and bima. I have shared my philosophy with Student Cantor Lilah and challenged her to reconstitute our choir and to invite individuals to sing with her during services. The results have been wonderful. I have encouraged our b'nai mitzvah families to invite more of their relatives to join in the candle lighting on Friday nights. I added English readings to the High Holiday honors to allow more members to participate from the bima. Helping train them, I have encouraged members to read or chant Torah, because the Torah is available and accessible to all of us (with some learning). At the b'nai mitzvah services I publicly answer a question raised by the young man or woman of the day.

Again, I am hoping to teach with this ritual that every Jew has the honor of asking challenging questions and working to seek satisfying answers. The concept that Judaism belongs to all of us starts with the bima.

I hope each member of our congregation will feel a little closer to the bima and, therefore, to Judaism as a result of these efforts. May you each find a way to connect to our rich tradition.

L'Shalom,
Rabbi Mary L. Zamore

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