

Shabbat Parashat Achrei Mot 5786
How Do We Measure Success?
Rabbi David Englander

This Shabbat, I want to share a version of an idea that I touched on briefly at the wonderful Love Impact Awards here at Beth El, honoring among others Beth El's own Alison Platt Tarnapol and Jason Wolf, and named in honor of Don Love of blessed memory, husband of our own shining role model Judy Love. It struck me then, and it has stayed with me since, that the theme actually belongs very naturally here on Shabbat as well, especially as we make our way through the book of Vayikra.

Vayikra is a book full of detail. It is a book of offerings and rituals, of sacred responsibilities, of holiness expressed not only in great ideas but in careful actions. Again and again, the Torah gives measurements. A meal offering is to be prepared in a particular proportion. Oil is added in a specific way. Wine is poured in a commanded amount. The Torah speaks in fractions and quantities, in precise instructions, in ordered acts of devotion. Sometimes it is an isaron, a tenth measure of flour. Sometimes a revi'it of wine. Sometimes a log of oil. It was all measured precisely, and offered as instructed. There was comfort and connection in knowing that this was done just right by the priests, on behalf of all the people.

And that brings us to one of the more striking rabbinic discussions in Masechet Menachot. The rabbis are discussing the Temple offerings and get hung up on what sounds, at first, like a very technical question. When the Torah required different amounts for different offerings, how exactly did the priests measure them? Did they use one vessel marked with different lines for different quantities? Or did they use separate vessels, each designated for a particular amount?

It is such a concrete question. You can picture it. One measuring cup with markings, or a whole set of separate measuring cups, the ones that nest inside of each other and usually are the reason your kitchen drawer does not close. The rabbis debate it seriously.

What I love is that they do not fully resolve it.

There is something beautiful about that. First, because it shows how deeply they cared about preserving Torah, even down to the smallest details. By the time of that discussion, the Temple had already been destroyed for generations. And still they wanted to know. Still they argued. Still they recorded. Because they believed that no part of Jewish memory should simply be allowed to disappear. They saw themselves as guardians of a tradition that had to be carried forward with care.

But there is something else there too. Sometimes an unresolved rabbinic debate opens up a larger question, one the rabbis may not have stated directly but that emerges from the conversation. In this case, the larger question is not only how the priests measured flour or oil or wine.

It is this: how do we measure what matters? How do we measure success?

That is a question every person has to ask themselves at one point or another. But it is also a question every community has to ask. Every synagogue has to ask it. And that feels especially relevant in Vayikra, because Vayikra reminds us that Judaism does not shy away from measurement. The Torah measures things all the time. Length, volume, quantity, time, responsibility, even the use of words and actions. The question is never whether measurement matters. The question is whether we are measuring the right things.

Now, the easiest things to measure are usually the most visible ones. Numbers. Attendance. Budgets. Dollars raised. Program participation (or as Hazzan might say, tushees in the seats). Those things matter a lot. Synagogues do not run on good intentions. As one of our benefactors likes to say, hope is not a strategy. Buildings need upkeep. Staff need support. Schools need resources. Security needs funding. Caring for a community in a serious way requires serious material support. There is nothing unspiritual about that. In Torah, holiness is never detached from real-world responsibility.

But if those are the only things we measure, then we are measuring inadequately.

Because a synagogue is not only successful because it balances a budget, important as that is. A synagogue is successful if it helps people feel less alone. If children are learning not only how to decode Hebrew or recite a prayer, but how to feel that Jewish life belongs to them. If adults keep growing, keep learning, keep asking serious questions. If people in joy have a place to celebrate, and people in sorrow have a place to be held.

A synagogue is successful when you meet someone at services, hear they are going through something difficult, and choose to call the following week. When the mourner feels supported in saying Kaddish. When the person who is sick gets checked in on, yes by a rabbi but also by others who have committed to making those connections. When the older member who can no longer drive feels affirmed by our Livestream and Zoom or has a ride arranged to get here. When a family with a child who needs extra support feels not like an exception to be accommodated, but part of the community to be embraced. When someone new walks in, whether they are new to Judaism, new to synagogue life, new to the area, part of an interfaith family, a Jew by choice, someone with little background, or someone with a great deal of background, and they feel not just welcomed politely but genuinely brought in. Those things are harder to measure, but we know their impact is part of the reason we work so hard on that successful and balanced budget.

How does a synagogue measure success?

Not only by how many people come, but by whether those who come feel known. Not only by whether the sanctuary is full on the biggest days, but by whether the synagogue shows up for people on the ordinary and difficult days. Not only by whether we preserve tradition, but by whether we hand it forward in a way that can be lived. Not only by whether we speak about values, but by whether people can actually feel those values in the way the community conducts itself.

A synagogue is made of budgets and buildings and committees and calendars and staff hours and meetings and logistics. Those are our necessary metrics. But what makes it sacred is whether all of that becomes a place where holiness can dwell, where Torah is taught, where people sing out in prayer, where kindness is practiced, where Jewish memory is honored, and where the Jewish future is nurtured.

So perhaps that discussion in Menachot, some 1500 years old, still has something to teach us. The rabbis asked how the sacred measures were meted out. We, in our time, have to ask how our collective sacred work is measured.

Yes, by financial strength, because it is hard to envision a day when that will not be important. .
Yes, by participation and those tushees, because that will also always be a measure of our potential impact on many lives.
But also by compassion, dignity, trust, and presence. By whether people can find God, Torah, friendship, comfort, challenge, and purpose here.

Those are harder things to measure and to put into a chart or report. But they may be the truest measures of all. And so may all that we pour into the growth and health of our sacred community, both that which can be measured immediately and that whose full effect may only be known generations from now, help bring the presence of God a little more fully into our lives, into our congregation, and into the world.

Shabbat shalom.