

*In daylights, in sunsets
In midnights, in cups of coffee
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife
In five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes
How do you measure a year in the life?*

While this year, the musical "Hamilton" broke the record for Tony nominations, when I was a teenager, the musical that stole our hearts and changed our lives was "Rent."

The song I just quoted, "Seasons of Love," asks us: How do you measure a year?

We could measure in dues paid, donations given, and building projects completed. We could measure in programs, attendance, or the number of "click-throughs" on our emails.

Or we could measure our success in the people we've met, the lessons we've learned, the challenges we've taken on, and the lives that we've touched. So before we set ourselves to crunching numbers, it is my privilege to share with you: **"Seasons of Vassar Temple."**

These have been seasons of change.

Last year, a colleague warned me not to change anything this year, saying: "**You** are enough change for one year." But this community was hungry for change. The Ritual Committee made the bold decision to combine our evening High Holy Day services for the sake of fostering a greater sense of community (and not exhausting the new rabbi!). We introduced a *Sukkot* hike, a *Simchat Torah* Dance Lesson, and a *Tu BiShevat* Seder, in addition to repeats of our widely popular celebrations for *Hannukah*, *Purim*, and *Passover*.

Joe and Elisa and the Music Committee have been visionary in their experimentation with new musical styles. We now have not only a piano, but also a full percussion section, and we didn't even have to hire any additional musicians! Our music teacher Olivia has taught

herself guitar, and can now lead newly redesigned Family Shabbat Services. These services have also allowed us to re-introduce the concept of *Visual Tefillah*, and it has become a space where we hope our children will not only participate, but lead!

Our greatest change has been in the Seth A. Erlebacher Religious School: Even before I arrived at Vassar Temple, there was a mandate from the leadership to focus my first year on determining the best course of action moving forward with our school. With the unflagging support of the Board of Trustees and the Religious School Committee, we made the difficult decision to seek out a new director. After conducting a national search, we found a talented Jewish educator in our own backyard, Julie Stein-Makowsky, who has taught in our school and tutored a few of our children, comes on board July 1st, and is already hard at work preparing to transform our Hebrew and Judaics curricula.

We have forged an alliance with our neighbors by joining the Gesher High School program with Temple Beth El and Shir Chadash. This alliance will give our young people access to a wider variety of educational experiences, including art and service learning, and an opportunity to engage with a larger number of Jewish teens.

Change is never easy, but this community has been stellar in its ability to roll with the punches, to troubleshoot, and to course correct. This is something we are only going to get better at.

As a part of our seasons of change, there have been seasons of learning:

Of course **I've** been learning a lot on all fronts, and I am grateful to all of you for your patience as I adapt to my surroundings. The congregation has made learning and self-improvement a priority as well.

Rabbi Golomb established his legacy in this congregation by cultivating a core of people so devoted to Jewish learning that they

never want to sleep in on Shabbat morning. They offer thoughtful insights to our learning, and follow me on tangents and down rabbit holes of rabbinic thinking. Like our regular Friday night worshipers, they have truly made Vassar Temple the center of their lives.

We have also expanded our learning beyond the walls of this building. Our Torah-To-Go Program has now been warmly received at the First Congregational United Church of Christ, First Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Poughkeepsie Public Library, with which we are developing a beautiful partnership.

Executive Director Tom Lawrence has sought us out for the purpose of bringing Jewish learning to the library, and has offered his state-of-the-art facilities, and both moral and technical support, as we made those programs happen: the screenings of the films "Regina" and "Complicit," the "Dueling Rabbis" series during the *Omer*, and a session on "Tevye the Dairyman" in anticipation of our trip to see "Fiddler on the Roof." We are working now on a three-part program on the CCAR's "Challenge and Change" trilogy, which includes *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, in which I have an essay.

Partnerships like these allow us to expand our reach and increase our visibility in the greater community. This will bring more people through our doors, and help us to meet more people where they are.

Our seasons of learning, in many cases, have led to seasons of activism:

Service to our community is an essential part of what makes Vassar Temple tick, and we engaged in both learning and action on issues of hunger and homelessness, racial inequality, interfaith solidarity, and BDS. We partnered with Reform Jewish Voice of New York State to form an Advocacy Interest Group, for those in our community who wish to pursue justice in Poughkeepsie and beyond.

And as a people well-versed in fleeing oppressive regimes, there were many of us who felt that we could not stand idly by as we watched human beings desperate to escape persecution. Andi Ciminello, Jen Dahnert, and Marian Schwartz, under the guidance of Dr. Maria Hoehn, have partnered with Vassar College to develop a Refugee Resettlement Project, which we hope will enable refugee families to build new lives here in Poughkeepsie. This project, though still in its infancy, is already inspiring those in our community to step up and speak out about our need to preserve America's core value of being a haven for refugees and immigrants.

These have been our seasons of activism, learning, and change. And there is more to come on all three fronts. Here is just a taste of what we are looking forward to in year two (or year 169, depending on who's counting):

We have worked with the Finance and Music Committees to set aside a small allowance to bring in a Student Cantor from my Alma-mater, HUC-JIR. We are excited to engage with a musical leader whose fingers are on the pulse of trends in Jewish music and meaningful worship.

We are working tirelessly with the Federation to develop other programs and initiatives that will reach young families and unaffiliated Jews throughout the Hudson Valley. This is an area where we, as a synagogue, still need to grow, and we are looking for ways to reach more Jewish families where they are.

Our discovery sessions revealed our greatest asset is that we are a multigenerational community, and that our members feel that they are a part of the Jewish family. There is work to be done in making Vassar Temple the strongest and most welcoming community that it can be, and also in sharing our message that being part of a synagogue can add richness and meaning to a 21st century life.

And just as those not yet in this community might find themselves changed by joining us, we are going to be changed by meeting them.

This is a new world in terms of membership and affiliation, and we may need to re-imagine how we define “belonging” in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when we can measure ourselves by only our official membership rolls. Instead, we might begin to view ourselves as a resource center, providing valuable services, learning, and engagement to the greater community of Jews and spiritual seekers in the Hudson Valley, many of whom have been willing to support us in other ways. We will need to take this paradigm shift into account as we continue our conversations about support and sustainability.

The good news is that, even though we live in a world that was completely unimaginable to the people who built this synagogue, we are still needed and valued in this community, for many of the same reasons as back then, and for many new reasons we couldn't have anticipated!

Alas, it wouldn't be an annual meeting without spitting out **some** numbers, so I went through our records to bring you these stats on Vassar Temple's reach this year:

- Eight new households have joined our synagogue, and they run the gamut from retirees to young parents.
- We had 47 students enrolled in our Religious School programs, bursting joyfully into our building on Sundays and Wednesdays to engage with their heritage and imagine the Jewish future.
- There were 11 *b'nai mitzvah*, and each of them rose to the challenge of connecting with a new rabbi and adjusting to a system in flux. They jumped at the chance to lead the majority of the Shabbat morning service on their own. Their *divrei Torah* were thoughtful, and their *tzedaka* projects inspired us all: collecting books, birthday gifts, and baseballs; reading to the visually impaired, stuffing envelopes, and cleaning animal cages. We even had, for the first time to my knowledge, a *b'not mitzvah* benefit concert, where three of our theater-minded students raised over \$2000 for three local charities. Now we've just got to get them on our development committee!

- On a sombre note, I officiated at six funerals. We lost two longtime members and beloved pillars of the Poughkeepsie community: Dr. Irving Dreishpoon and Naomi Goldberg. We also provided memorial services to four unaffiliated families, who were grateful, even though they had drifted away from the organized Jewish community and sometimes Judaism itself, that we were there for them in their time of need.

There are also many simchas on the horizon!

- Five couples, all of them interfaith, are working with me to prepare for their marriage. Our synagogue provides unaffiliated couples with an alternative to the “rent-a-rabbis,” who get paid thousands of dollars just to show up. I engage couples in real conversations about what it means to build a Jewish home together, especially in the broader context of an interfaith family system. This may not always yield a new member family, but it is an investment in our Jewish future nonetheless.
- Two students are working with me for conversion, while several other individuals have sought out our synagogue as they explore newly discovered Jewish heritage or pursue a new-found interest in the Jewish faith.

And...

- We had three babies this year, as well as many new grandchildren! Naming Miles, Henry, and Itai, the children of our young members, as well as Luna Scarlett and Nigella Sicilia, brought us immeasurable joy, and signaled a new hope for the Jewish future.
- Really, what more could I say about the congregation's future than to tell you that there is now a market for these -
http://www.cafepress.com/mf/104558446/_bodysuit?productId=1790435402 ?

In closing, I want to say **thank you** to everyone who has worked tirelessly to make this year a success. I have never met a group of people more devoted to their synagogue, or more willing to roll up their sleeves to do what needs to be done to keep it afloat. May we go from strength to strength.