

## Marc's Journal Entry #6

### Empowerment

I've got a fundamental question that I am posing to a lot of people at Kol Shalom these days: what are we?

Seems like an easy straightforward question, right?

Of course part of the answer is: we are a congregation. We are Kol Shalom. We are a building at 9110 Darnestown Road in Rockville, although for three High Holiday services we meet in a hotel ballroom on Rockville Pike.

But of course this is only part of the answer. I don't think many of us would devote our time and resources to the above description. What are we, that would make someone (me?) want to be part of Kol Shalom?

Why be part of a congregation? Why attend services? Why connect with Jewish heritage, and what role does Kol Shalom play in making this connection? Is there anything special about Kol Shalom that makes someone (me?) want to be part of it, to participate, to devote time and money, to think about it?

Many of us had the opportunity over the summer to participate in the discussion sessions related to our search for our next rabbi. I attended two of the sessions, mostly listening and taking it in. I was struck how by how much our people care about our congregation. We were gathering to talk primarily about the characteristics of our next rabbi, but participants spent a lot of time talking about the characteristics of our congregation.

It makes sense. We have an amazing rabbi who enriches our lives and the life of our congregation. I heard in these sessions that our congregation, in the future, needs to look a bit different from our congregation now, and we want our next rabbi to lead us to the congregation's next state of being.

I heard many ideas, thoughts, and emotions expressed in these sessions. The word that came to me from these sessions is: "empowerment." I felt that the participants were expressing a sense of ownership over what Kol Shalom is. I heard congregants share thoughts about all of us, each of us, being in control of our future. Whatever we, as a congregation, want to do as Kol Shalom, we can do. Nothing can stop us.

One of my favorite business writers, Seth Godin, tells a wonderful story about empowerment. He of course is writing in a business context, but I often find his thinking to be directly applicable to the non-profit world (including Kol Shalom), and to me personally in my roles as a husband, father, brother, and friend. Godin writes:

*Yesterday, I visited a shop that only sells children's books. The store was empty and I asked the clerk, "Do you know where I can find Yertle the Turtle?"*

*He walked over to the computer, typed a few keystrokes and said, "I don't think we have it, do you know who the author is?"*

*Stunned silence.*

*[I found the section myself—they had three copies]*

*It's possible that he thinks his job is to be a clerk, to keep people from stealing things, to type letters into a computer and to read the results out loud as he stands at the cash register.*

*If that's the case, this store, like all stores staffed by clerks who are taught to be merely clerks, is doomed.*

*On the other hand, it's possible that his job is to take it personally, to be interested, to notice, to care, to add more value than a website can.*

*Who gets hired, how are they trained, where is the magic?*

*What happens when the boss cares enough to only hire, train and work with people who take it personally?*

I bet that each of us has had a similar experience in a business. An example in my life is of small hardware stores versus big box hardware stores.

The employee in the story above clearly did not feel ownership, and may not have felt empowered. If he did feel ownership/empowerment, one can imagine a dozen or more actions he or his boss might have taken. Like reading the books in the store. Training employees on which books and authors are great. Putting little book reviews around the store. Having a children's book club. And on and on.

When one feels ownership, when one feels empowered, one begins to be proactive, to think about challenges and take steps to address them.

Kol Shalom is not a retail business and it's not a children's book store. We will continue to thrive, however, when anyone who brushes up against Kol Shalom has a great experience. The experience can be friendly, compelling, spiritual, meaningful, life-changing, fun, creative, it's not the same experience every time. But it's a really good experience.

These experiences are what draws us to Kol Shalom, and what will keep us thriving in the years to come. We want to create these experiences every time. So this means empowering every Kol Shalom member to take it personally, to be interested, to notice, to care.

Businesses do this through training and through careful attention to process. Disney devotes lots of attention into its experiences of parking, selling a ticket, and entering an amusement park. Hotels are devoting more attention to employees calling guests by their name and remembering what type of pillow I prefer.

How can our members similarly continue to create an atmosphere of warmth, and to speak and act in a way that marks us as a *kehillah k'dosha*, a sacred community?

I want to be in dialogue with you. You can click [here](#) to send me a message, or you can email me at [mplieber@ymail.com](mailto:mplieber@ymail.com). I am thrilled to hear from you, to get to know you better, and to hear your suggestions on continuing Kol Shalom's growth and value to you.

Thank you for your help and for your part in our *kehillah k'dosha*, our sacred community!

Marc Lieber, President