

Kelly Whitehead's Vision Statement- 5784

Before I started attending Jewish camp at age 14, I spent nine summers in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's "City Farmers" Program, a camp for inner city kids to learn about the importance of gardening, environmental science, and getting your hands in the dirt. From ages five to 13, I spent my summers weeding, cultivating, and eventually, harvesting the fruits (and vegetables) of my labor. While I eventually traded in my trowels and gardening gloves for swimming goggles and prayer books at URJ Camp Harlam, I carry the lessons from garden camp with me to this day.

Working in a communal garden requires patience, commitment, and love. At camp, I learned that those who work to cultivate vegetables, herbs, and trees care as much for their plants as they do for the people who work alongside them.

When I think of the importance of trees as an aspiring rabbi, I am reminded of the phrase usually carved above the holy ark in reference to the Torah: "*Etz Hayim Hi*" — this is the tree of life. I believe this phrase belongs on the entryways of all Jewish institutions in reference to the people who walk through our doors. Regardless of identity or origin, people embody Torah. Like the sacred scroll, those who enter our spaces carry with them the narrative of Jewish history and peoplehood. They also reflect back on it as they search for tools to help them grow and develop as Jews in the 21st century.

Each person, in their own way, helps make this communal garden of Judaism make sense. The people I have met in the years since garden camp — my classmates in rabbinical school, my colleagues in my fellowships, my students and teens at Temple Sinai(s), my campers and counselors in training, my patients in my chaplaincy program, my mentors, and my congregants each taught me new tools that help them — and me — approach Judaism. My campers helped me see how much fun text study can be when you open your imagination. My Teen Jews of Color Fellows taught me there is no one way to approach self-discovery. My

congregants helped me see the beauty of co-creating with God. Each person I have met is as unique as the letters of the sefer Torah, the *Etz Hayim*.

As a rabbi, I will form relationships with as many people as is feasible- taking them out to coffee, inviting them into my office, and meeting them when they are in order to collect stories and reflect on their personal narratives. Through these 1:1 conversations and “house meetings,” I will deduce themes and connect through lines, highlighting areas of success and dereliction, using the results as seeds that together we will sow back into the grounds of the community.

Synagogues are not meant to be farm stands, where you take what you need and leave. They are ecosystems of people engaged in covenantal partnerships, getting their hands dirty to work toward a shared vision. Like an environmental ecosystem, the fruits of this labor benefit everyone, those who are involved in the endeavor and those who are not, the next generation, and generations to come.

As a racial equity, diversity, and inclusion facilitator, I often teach the importance of welcoming versus belonging in Jewish spaces. “Welcoming” is letting someone into your home by greeting them at the door — treating them with *hachnasat orchim* (the religious obligation to offer hospitality), helping them feel like a comfortable guest. “Belonging” is welcoming someone into your home and letting them rearrange the furniture — because it is their home, too. Belonging is sharing the tools to cultivate one’s own space.

Midrash Kohelet Rabbah teaches: “When God created the first man, God took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said, ‘Everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy my world —for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.’” In the Torah, the first task given to Adam and to the people of Israel when they settle in a new land is to plant trees. Trees transform the earth from a barren and lifeless mass

into an environment capable of supporting all other forms of life. As a rabbi, I want to help people take care of and cultivate what we already have and to foster new growth.

As an ecosystem, I like to think the Jewish people can work together to support one another, especially during times of change and challenge. We have proven our ability to do so throughout history and in recent years. We were, for example, able to hold space for one another during the global pandemic and especially now, during the war in Israel.

Like the wood of the trees, may we continue to be malleable yet strong, deepening our roots as we grow into new heights.