

## Rabbi Kelly Whitehead's Vision Statement 5786

Before Jewish camp, my summers were spent in a garden. From ages five to thirteen, I got my hands dirty at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's "City Farmers" Program, a camp for inner city kids to learn about gardening, environmental science and the joy of harvesting the fruits (and vegetables) of our labor.

Gardens require patience, care, and commitment. They flourish through shared responsibility and collective effort. Those who tend a garden come to care not only for the plants but also for the people working beside them. The work is communal, the growth gradual, and the harvest belongs to everyone. Years later, when I traded my trowel and gardening gloves for swimming goggles and prayer books at URJ Camp Harlam, I realized that those early summers had quietly shaped how I understand Jewish community.

When I think about the work of a rabbi, I return to the phrase carved above many synagogue arks: "***Etz Hayim Hi***" — **It is the tree of life**. The Torah is described as a living tree, rooted in the past and continually growing toward the future. I believe this idea applies not only to the Torah scroll itself but also to the people who enter our Jewish spaces. Each person reflects the narrative of Jewish history and peoplehood while adding new perspectives as we search for meaning and direction in the 21st century.

Throughout my rabbinic journey so far, the people I encountered have shaped how I approach Jewish life and leadership. Students, campers, colleagues, congregants, patients, and mentors each expand my understanding of what Torah can offer. My campers showed me how joyful and imaginative Torah study can become when curiosity and creativity are encouraged. The Teen Jews of Color Fellows taught me that Jewish identity is not singular but richly layered and underscored that communities grow stronger when people feel empowered to bring their full selves into Jewish life. My patients during chaplaincy reminded me that Jewish wisdom speaks powerfully in moments of vulnerability. Congregants and community members, again and again, show me that Jewish life is not something a rabbi builds alone, but something people co-create together. Each person I have met is as unique as the letters of the Sefer Torah and each conversation adds another voice to the ongoing narrative of our tradition.

I try to build relationships across the community, meeting people where they are and listening closely to their stories. In moments of celebration and in moments of grief,

or uncertainty, these conversations reveal what people are carrying and what matters most. They also help me notice what is beginning to grow, where ideas are budding, where new energy is emerging, and where a little care might allow something to take root. Tending to those possibilities helps guide the growth of the community and the leadership potential already within it.

Synagogues are not meant to be farm stands, where you take what you need and leave. They are whole ecosystems of people engaged in covenantal partnerships, getting their hands dirty to work toward a shared vision. The work of sustaining them belongs to all of us actively involved, and its benefits extend to the wider community and to future generations.

As an educator, I often speak about the difference between welcoming and 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 comfortable as a guest. “Belonging” is welcoming someone into your home and letting them rearrange the furniture because it is their home, too. Belonging is sharing ownership of the community and trusting that every person has something meaningful to contribute. Creating that sense of belonging is critical to creating a thriving and sustainable ecosystem.

Jewish tradition teaches us that caring for community is both a privilege and a responsibility. Midrash Kohelet Rabbah explains: “When God created the first human, 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 ground into an environment capable of sustaining life.

I believe the Jewish people are capable of sustaining one another, especially during times of uncertainty and change. In recent years we have faced deep divisions, rising antisemitism, and a world that often feels unstable. Yet Jewish communities continue to show remarkable resilience, supporting one another and drawing on our shared traditions for strength. I hope to help communities care for what they already have while fostering growth.

Like the gardens we tend, may we thrive through collaboration and care, deepening our roots as we grow into new heights.