

Growth through Serving

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Last Tuesday was our congregation's annual business meeting and, one of the matters raised was the congregation's vision for future growth, and the finances that will be needed to support it. One of the resources that will be needed to support growth is a larger and more adequate building, and preferably one that we own. It was pointed out that there are time-honored and appropriate means to raise money for projects as a building but that, in the recent years, we have given little or no attention to such planning or to other ways of growing our congregation. That is clearly true, and I am convicted by the challenge, to renew Ohev's old vision for it beginning now.

For the time being, our sanctuary is adequate, but our classroom space is not, and our social hall is often over-taxed. Our only current funds to support growth are the tithes and offerings of our members, and certainly growth will come from the occasional Jew who finds Yeshua and the occasional Christian who discovers his or her Jewish roots. However, that rate of growth will be slow, and that kind of laissez faire passivity is not how God would have us be, for the people of Israel (that includes us) are to be a priestly nation and a light to the other nations of the world. That light is not only the light of knowing Yeshua, but also the light of the *Sh'ma* and the commandment that Yeshua said was second to it – to love our neighbor as ourself.

Loving our neighbor means being involved with our neighbor and seeking to serve our neighbor's needs. We have already embarked on some components of this vision, such as providing Shabbat education, providing training for biblical counselors. Also, the initiative I introduced several weeks ago – for some of us to become trained and certified in trauma stress ministry, so that we can be dispatched, when needed, to serve others.

Indeed, we are blessed to be a congregation of doers, and many of us participate in congregational life. I do not have to plan and execute the worship. I do not have to plan and execute that *Torah* Service. I do not have to manage the congregation's finances, lead youth activities, plan our festival celebrations, teach all of our classes, or lead the *Torah* Study. You do all that and more! And believe me; you do it better and more consistently than in most congregations. The talent, ability, and potential at Ohev are enormous.

But notice that all of those things I mentioned occur on our premises and, for the most part, serve only those of us who are already members of the Ohev family. Perhaps our Purim party and *Pesach seder* are exceptions because they are outreach events and outsiders are invited, but even they require that people come to us; we have no activities of which I am aware, where we go outside of our protected environment in order to serve people who have not come to us. This, I believe, is a severe lack, and is part of the reason why our growth has been as slow as it has.

There are two of our members who should be looked at as role models for outreach, although they are currently half-a-world away; they are Chris and Katie Murphy, who are serving their country in the Peace Corps in Azerbaijan. They are doing outreach both for the United States and for Yeshua by bringing American and biblical values to a place in the world where many

people will never get to know other Americans, or possess a Bible of their own. Similarly, Al McCarn, Doug Musheno, and Ben Zapien are doing outreach for the United States through their service in the military, and they are also doing outreach for Yeshua through who they are as believers. The hope of the United States is that Chris' Katies' Al's, Doug's, and Ben's efforts will enhance American influence and goodwill around the world, and the expectation of God is that these, His ambassadors, will be instrumental in expanding the Kingdom of Yeshua. Yet the Murphys' primary reason for joining the Peace Corps was not to enhance American influence or even grow the Kingdom of God. Their reason for joining was to serve people, which they knew was a godly thing to do. American influence and Kingdom growth will likely result, but they were not their primary reason for joining. And one thing that all of these people who are serving have in common, is that they willingly left the comfort and safety of their home behind and moved out in faith, confident that they were in the will of God.

It seems to me that it is similar with us. God calls us to serve our fellow man. He does not primarily call us to grow the size of our congregation (though that will likely result), and He does not call us to home-fire comfort. It is natural for us to want to grow our congregation because, if we were larger, we could do so much more. Yet our attention should not be on that, but on looking outside of our congregation for who we can bless, and how much we can bless.

Notice I am emphasizing "looking outside of our congregation." People with needs will usually not come looking for us; we have to look for them. I think the principle is expressed in Mark 16:15 where Yeshua says to His disciples:

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

Yeshua does not tell us to establish a Messianic synagogue and invite the world to come in to hear the gospel. That would have been easier on His disciples, but apparently Yeshua knew that would not happen. So he told his disciples: "Go!"

Consider the parable He told His disciples in Luke 14:16-24:

"A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, 'Come, for all things are now ready.'"

So there is an invitation to come in to someone's house and receive a blessing. Let's see what happens as we continue with verses 18-20:

"But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'"

What happens in this parable is that those who are offered the blessing are preoccupied with other things and do not come into the house, so the invitation extended to them is ineffective. As we read on, the servant reports these responses to his master the host, who then instructs the servant:

“Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.” And the servant said, ‘Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.’”

So, in the end, those who ended up with the blessing were not those who received an invitation; they were those who were physically brought in by servants who went out into the highways and byways to get them and bring them in. That, I believe, is a lesson for us. We may know that we have blessings to offer, but merely announcing or advertising them is not sufficient, because those for whom the blessings are meant will give excuses for why they will not or cannot come, just as in the parable. We have to do more than extend invitations – we have to go out of our congregational building to show the outside world what God and we, representing God, have to offer, and only then will the people come of their own accord.

Simple you say? Then why haven’t we been doing it? Well, perhaps we haven’t thought of it. But you know, I don’t think that’s it. Venturing outside of our congregation to serve a wider community is uncomfortable, sometimes scary, and takes effort and commitment. Perhaps we have put limits on ourselves as to how much inconvenience and discomfort we are willing to endure, and that explains why we are not more creative and proactive in our outreach. I could be wrong about that, but I am raising a serious question that only each of us can answer for ourselves. I believe that not until Ohev escapes its physical bounds and is representing God by serving its neighbors with love, will it be released in the heavens to grow to its full destiny.

Now outreach ought not to be thought of as only preaching the gospel. In that regard I have always been impressed by [James 2:15-16](#) that says:

“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?”

So when I suggest building the Kingdom and our congregation through outreach, I am not primarily talking about preaching, but about meeting needs in the name of Yeshua, out in the community of Jews, of Hispanics, of African Americans, of atheists, of addicts, of the sick, of the needy, of the imprisoned, of the orphaned – just anywhere and everywhere where there are people with needs that we can help meet. We should always look first for opportunities to serve in our surrounding local Jewish community, but any service we do for anyone is Jewish outreach because we are doing it as part of our Messianic Jewish calling to be a light to the nations. Of course where we have an opportunity to preach the Gospel of Yeshua we should do it, but I am banking on there being more opportunities to preach the Gospel as we become truly concerned about and fully involved in the general welfare of our neighbors.

I doubt that many of you will disagree with what I have just said, so that only leaves how to do it. There, I confess that I don’t have the answer, but you do, because God has already put the answer in your heart for yourself – that is, how God would have you serve your neighbor; you

only need to discover it, and proceed to do it. No congregation develops exciting, energetic, and lasting outreaches as a result of programs dreamed up by its pastors or its elders. Outreaches with power and survivability result from you, the congregants, sensing God's calling, re-prioritizing your available time, coming to terms with endure a certain amount of inconvenience and discomfort, calling upon others of like mind to join you, and then sallying forth to do God's will. When you think you know God's plan for you, please tell me or one of the elders; we will pray with you and, if we discern it is, indeed God's will, we will do our best to help you fulfill it.

Just one more thing. When I began, I made reference to our need for creative ways for the congregation to raise or earn money beyond its tithes and offerings. That is a subject that should be pursued, so anyone who has an idea for what might be done in that regard is invited to share it with the elders.