

## **Rosh Hashanah, 2011. Comments by Janet Axelrod**

Good morning.

I probably don't have to convince you that lifelong learning is a good thing. It's one of those values, like enjoying good food, and fresh air, art, music, and the laughter of small children that you have to be a real curmudgeon to not like. Learning of all kinds is a core Jewish value, as Judaism reveres the written word and learning for its own sake. The word "Talmud" itself means instruction, or learning, after all. Rabbi Hillel is reputed to have said that he (and, one assumes, she) who refuses to learn deserves extinction. Kind of harsh, but we get his drift. Which is to say that learning of all kinds is important to Jews.

Early in life, we learn most of what we know from our family, and then, if we are lucky enough to live in a country which provides universal education, we go to school for the next ten or 15 years, depending on our class, abilities, luck and expectations. Some people get college and advanced degrees; lots of people in this

room have them. And then, what? You're kind of on your own for the rest of your life to learn what you develop a curiosity about, whenever you are able. And we do learn, in workplaces, movements and organizations, retreats, museums, the internet and other media, schools and universities, and through travel, which is, famously, broadening. And in unexpected places, sometimes from those, like our children, who are much less expert than we are in most ways. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The important thing is not to stop questioning".

The Southern African Development Community , (aka the Frontline States) articulates the value of lifelong learning as follows: " A key purpose of lifelong learning is democratic citizenship, connecting individuals and groups to the structures of social, political and economic activity in both local and global contexts. " South Africa's National Policy on Adult Learning was published in 2003. Its first aim is to create a "learning nation", emphasizing that the population needs to be " active learners if

we are to achieve our vision of liberation from poverty, hunger, ignorance and disease”.

We begin learning in the womb and keep on learning until the moment of death. Our brains have a capacity for learning that is virtually limitless. Since people can learn new things at any time of life, if one actually likes being a beginner, the whole world opens up. Eartha Kitt once said “ I’m learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma”. Organizations have to learn, too, in order to keep swimming in the stream of life. New technologies have demanded much new learning from all kinds of organizations over the past 25 years. The Workmen’s Circle is building a new Center for Jewish Culture and Social Justice, which necessitates that our membership as well as leadership learn something about both building design and the fundraising necessary to make it happen.

There is much more to be said about the importance of lifelong learning, but some of these lessons speak most clearly when they tell a personal story. So I want to tell you about my latest learning experience, and give you a taste of it that I hope you will enjoy.

All my life, I've wanted to be in a band, sing backup (and sometimes lead) and play an instrument. Finally I'm doing it, since I have become part of Sheboom, a group of 8 stellar women who subtitle ourselves "a postmenopausal women's drum group". Brazilian drummer Marcus Santos is our "counselor" – he calls himself that instead of teacher, thereby beautifully and simply emphasizing the mutuality of our work. He is the one and only he-boom. Though we initially intended to meet for just a few lessons, for the past year and a half Marcus has been teaching us rhythms from his vast repertoire. We riff on and use them to create our own songs, usually with political or socially meaningful themes.

Typically, Marcus will play us an arrangement of notes, which reminds us of events or other pieces of music that have been important in our past. We share those memories, impressions and interpretations with Marcus and one another, and out of this musical conversation our mashup, an entirely new composition, is born. Since Marcus is about half our age and an immigrant to the US, he is learning about American popular culture and history since the 1950s by playing with us.

We in Sheboom share a lifelong love of music and rhythms, as well as an interest in collaboration. In the weaving of our music we know that the whole we produce is way greater than the sum of its parts. We work as a team, but all learn differently; some count the beats, some see them visually in the mind's eye, while others simply feel the beat and stay in place through the vibe.

We help each other to learn and conquer the many pieces that are difficult. It was hard for all of us to learn to sing one part while playing another at the same time, but we kept at it, and now we can do it, sort of.

There is a kind of bliss in being a beginner again, after having reached a level of expertise in our jobs and other everyday activities. We laugh hysterically at some of our joint memories, let go of our inhibitions and have nothing to lose in this creative learning process. It's also humbling to abandon our expertness, but the goofing around is so exhilarating and so liberating that the effort feels like child's play. We can actually feel those new grooves being carved in the pathways of our brains, so although some of us still like crossword puzzles, we don't need them so much anymore to keep our memories in shape.

As women, drumming is a way for us to make art and noise. To be making this art that calls down ancient rhythms, ultimately from a shared past, feels to me like finding my place in universal human endeavor, in the great wheel that keeps all of us turning. If we all keep playing where our part fits in, the booming result is beautiful, and alive! In some way, it's the closest thing to a

religious experience that I have ever had. Drumming is joyful and life-giving. Although it requires deep thought and concentration, it's a different modality of learning from the more analytical and cerebral ways we normally function.

Now that we're thinking in terms of rhythms, we've given words to some of our beats to help us remember them, so (Clap oh no I lost my keys) becomes Oh no, I lost my keys! And (clap nuts, I want nuts, give me some nuts) became nuts, I want nuts, give me some nuts! Before Sheboom came together, I knew only a few of its members. But now we are bonded in a way I have come to understand bands do, and our lives are certainly enriched with these relationships and the connections we feel towards one another, forged in our weekly classes. So to keep learning throughout our lives is a very good thing, and sometimes a life-altering experience. During Rosh Hashanah, when we are looking back on the past year and planning changes for the New Year, I hope that my d'var will serve to remind you about the joy of

lifelong learning and how it can be done by anyone, at any age.

I'm going to try painting next.

Ok, enough talking about it. Let's get to the drumming, because Sheboom is here, including Marcus, waiting to play for you.

We're going to play two of our compositions – they are short, so we'll have the time.

Our first piece is called New Orleans. It was written as an homage to that city because of what it's been through and how it has survived. The drum, the beat, the rhythm of blues, jazz, and Americana, live there. See if you recognize the opening and closing elements, which will be familiar to everyone here.

The second piece, BP, was composed in response to the terrible British Petroleum oil spill that flowed in the Gulf of Mexico for 3 months in 2010. Calling it an oil spill somehow doesn't feel like enough – it should be oil avalanche or oil tsunami, given the damage the natural and human world sustained there. We felt



such outrage about that event, and we brought that feeling to our weekly classes; creating this piece was the result. It begins with what we call our “angry drums”. This time, rather than writing letters to the editor, or doing any of the other protest work we’ve always done, the piece became our way of saying that BP should be held responsible for the danger to which they exposed our planet. We’re gonna bang out our anger, and frustration about that and a warning about the new Keystone XL pipeline that seems to be on the horizon. We appreciate having you as an audience. Here comes Sheboom!