

Adat Shalom Haiti Project-10 Year Celebration

May 1, 2022

Remarks by Rabbi Sid

Welcome to the 10-year anniversary celebration of Adat Shalom's Haiti Project. The Project got its start on the heels of a visit that Sandy and I took to Haiti in January of 2011, about a year after an earthquake devastated the country. We were invited to come to Haiti by Tevel b'Tzedek, an Israeli NGO that had sent a team to Haiti to work with Haitians to help rebuild their lives.

It was during that visit that I met Pastor Johnny Felix, who served as my interpreter for a talk I gave to about 40 Haitian community activists. I learned about the K-6 school (NICL) that Pastor Johnny had recently started in Leogane. At an Adat Shalom service that I led about a month after my return, I proposed that Adat Shalom partner with Pastor Johnny and the NICL and provide financial assistance since the tuition revenue was not enough to cover all the expenses of the school. We invited Adat Shalom members to become partners @\$100 for 5 years to support the NICL School.

Not long after that service, Pam Sommers approached me and proposed that we consider organizing a service mission to Haiti. Intrigued by the idea, I told Pam that if she found a "*minyan*" of people to travel to Haiti, I would be happy to lead the mission. Sure enough, Pam found more than a *minyan*. Ten years later, Adat Shalom has sponsored five separate service missions to Haiti, each lasting about 8 days during winter break. We have had over 75 participants in all, some as old as 75 and some as young as 14.

We have accomplished a lot with both our fundraising and our "sweat equity". We added a whole new building to the campus, which now houses both a computer lab and a dining room/assembly place; we created a vegetable garden called *Gan haMazon*, Garden of Plenty; we build a playground and a basketball court; we added two classrooms (7th and 8th graded) to the 2nd story of the new building and, with the money we raised in conjunction with tonight's event, we will now build a 9th grade classroom. Most importantly, our Haiti Project provides annual financial support for the school's operating budget and food baskets for some 200 families who are part of the NICL student body. Over the past 10 years, the NICL student body had doubled, from 175 to 360.

The Adat Shalom Haiti Project has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my entire rabbinate. It has had an impact on three levels:

- **In Haiti:** Our "micro-philanthropy" and service work in one small corner of the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere has changed the lives of hundreds of children who, without the NICL School, would have little hope for a better future. And our every interaction with our partner, Pastor Johnny (including his two visits to Adat Shalom) continues to inspire us with his deep faith and commitment to make a difference for the children of his country. Time and again, Pastor Johnny will say: "God sent Adat Shalom to me!"
- **At Adat Shalom:** Many synagogues pay lip service to *tikkun olam*. The Haiti Project is one of many examples of how our community "walks the talk of prophetic Judaism". I will always treasure a note I got from an AS member who wrote to me: "I will never join you on a service-mission to Haiti. I am just not equal to the challenge physically. But I am so proud to belong to a synagogue that sponsors a project as noble as what we do for the children of Leogane."
- **For Service-Mission Participants:** There is nothing as bonding as spending 8 days in 90+ degree heat, in a country with virtually no infrastructure or anything approaching the comforts of home, working together, eating together, praying together in the language of several faiths and laughing together, all in service to an altruistic mission. Those who have been with us in Haiti, can simply look at others who they may not have even known before the service-mission, and they share something very, very deep. For sure, parents who brought their children know that they provided

one of the most meaningful life-lessons that any parents can provide to their kids. Each mission has been memorable in so many different ways.

On the macro-level, the Haiti Project demonstrates the true power of a spiritual community, at its best. This evening is an example of that power. Our goal for this campaign was \$31,000: \$25K for a new, 9th grade classroom and \$6K for food baskets for about 200 households. As of today, we have raised \$45K and money is still coming in!

Let me thank the many people who have helped this small miracle to happen over the past 10 years.

- Pam Sommers has been my partner, not in crime but in *mitzvah* work, from the very start. She has attended to a thousand details on every one of our service missions and she is our own version of Mother Theresa when on the ground in Haiti.
- Marta Beresin and Greg Schofer are the current chairs of the Haiti Project. A match made on the ground in Haiti, their dedication has made our entire Project more successful.
- I also want to thank all the past chairs of the Haiti Project Committee. They include: Myrna Seidman; Marsha Teichman; Bill Halpern, Debbie Siegel and Bob Lubran.
- To all of those who have travelled with us to Haiti and to all of you who contributed so generously, we sincerely thank you.