

Finding Community, Finding Oneself:

Day 2 Rosh Hashanah 5770

This evening I'd like to tell you a story. Although it's a very personal story, I'd like to think that my story is not so different from yours. So here it is: how I came to be a rabbi and, for that matter your rabbi. It is a story about community, faith, and finding a home. It's about a spiritual journey that I began over forty years ago and continues to be the central part of my religious life today. A few of you have heard parts of it, especially Board members, who may remember it from 3+ years ago... but many of you here don't know it, and even now you're only hearing the "chapter headings." I think and hope you will agree that it's relevant to the "purpose" of this sermon.

Three and a half years ago, I was a rabbi in search of a congregation. After serving as a rabbi in Norwich and doing OK there, a number of things happened in my life. My only sibling, my sister Ilene, died after two hard years of battling ovarian cancer. My mother's health was declining. My father had died young of a heart attack, and both Iris and I felt that, if there is something reasonable you really wanted to do in life, you should do it. We wanted to try living in Florida and decided to do it while we could.

So we moved to Gulfport, next to St. Petersburg, and reestablished ourselves there. It was nice being a congregant, sitting with Iris at services, and even davenning at home when I wanted. As a mohel, I was remaining involved with Jewish life, and I also ended up being HHD hazzan at a shul I had been at before in Erie, Pa. But then grandson Jacob was born and,

after a year of frequent flying back and forth, we came to realize that a grandchild trumps palm trees! But moving back north meant I needed to try to find a position close enough to New Hampshire so that we could be in a close connection.

So I was looking for a new community to serve. But a job search for a rabbi is unlike just about any other type of professional search. As much as we are being interviewed, we are also interviewing the people that we will serve. A congregation is not just the place from which we get a pay check; it has to be our community and our home/ family's home as well. In many ways matching a rabbi with a congregation is a lot like making a '*Shidduch*,' it has all the complexities of finding a life partner. The Talmud says that making a marital match is as hard as splitting the Red Sea; that's no less true for rabbis and congregations.

So in the spring of 2006 I made, along with Iris, my first trek to Bloomfield to check out this congregation. I was pleased with what I had already learned. I sensed that BHS was a community with a great spirit and lots of energy. It was strongly committed to Conservative Judaism, maintained a daily minyan, and the members were actively involved in a wide variety of communal, social and congregational activities. There were people who were hungry for adult education.

But more importantly, when Iris and I spent Shabbat in Bloomfield we experienced a real sense of *haimishness*. We were warmly welcomed by the community and enthusiastically approached by young of age and young of heart alike. Of course I knew that BHS had had somewhat of a 'rocky'

previous few years; but something told me that this was a community I could serve and which could become my spiritual home as well.

But the more important truth is that this was not the first time I engaged in a search for community. My search began more than forty years ago. After an indifferent college experience, I found myself in 1966 in the USAF down in Texas, having to adjust to a totally different life..... and desperately needing guidance and support. I found that in the Jewish chapel, I found that in the Jewish community, I found that in the Jewish religion.... And the Jewish part of me was the part that I had always taken for granted before.

The members of the Shepard AFB and Wichita Falls Jewish community became my support at a difficult moment in my life. I was not alone. As I was searching, I found something precious: community. Through community and caring, I discovered my faith.

And that became an invitation and a life pattern for me -- the search for a community of faith led me to synagogue and eventually to the Jewish Theological Seminary. It was in these communities that I truly grew up and came to know myself. I encountered my faith and my people. It was in this setting that I deepened my commitment to Jewish life. Judaism was something I could then share with others. It was an opportunity to learn and to teach, to give and to take. Of course, my faith is deeply personal but it becomes most real when I share it with others through study, prayer and community service.

It's not surprising that linguists suggest that the word 'religion' comes from the Latin word, *ligare*, 'to bind or connect.' Religion is that which binds us or connects us not only to God but to one another as well.

I met and was most fortunate to study with great rabbis who shaped me and framed my religious commitments. I've mentioned two of them often: Rabbis Seymour Seigel and Abraham Joshua Heschel. But others influenced me as well. Once I met Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. For those who may not be familiar with his name, Mordechai Kaplan was the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement and the author of the classic, Judaism as a Civilization. Rabbi Kaplan touched every corner of American Jewish life.

One of my friends at that time asked him: "We'd like to know – what would be the most important thing for us to study as Seminary students?" I think my friend expected Rabbi Kaplan to say 'the Bible' or 'the Talmud' or 'Maimonides' or to mention some obscure theological tome. To our surprise, he said, "Read the writings of Emile Durkheim!"

Durkheim was a French sociologist who studied primitive religions. True, he was the son of a rabbi, but he was hardly what one would call a religious man. So why was his work so important to him? What could we possibly learn about Judaism from a man who was more interested in primitive cultures than his own tradition? Kaplan understood, as Durkheim did before him, that religion is not so much about bringing people to God as it is a way of bringing people together, to protect themselves from an often lonely and hostile world. It is only in that context that we truly come to understand what God wants of us or how to live in the presence of God.

As American Jews, this is both the essence of religion and its greatest dilemma: While American culture values faith (at least that's what our coins say), it also celebrates individualism, independence and competitiveness above all else. We bristle at the suggestion that we have responsibilities or obligations to others. We are so focused on the self that we have forgotten how to be a part of something larger than the self. As a result we find ourselves struggling with clashing cultural and religious values. We are at war with ourselves: we want religion to be a part of our lives but we want it on our own terms. Our own desires and whims always seem to trump tradition and communal values.

I remember awhile ago hearing a feature story on TV. It was about a man who spent an obscene amount of money on a Bar Mitzvah for his dog. Oh, excuse me: it wasn't a Bar Mitzvah; it was a Bark Mitzvah! The man loved his dog, Elvis, and decided to make the dog a coming of age party. His hundred or so guests (including Dr Ruth) were treated to a video of Elvis dressed up in a tallit and yarmulke, a bar mitzvah cake, and an elaborate party at Sammy's Romanian Restaurant on the Lower East Side.

Now I could accept all of this. Elvis' Bark Mitzvah didn't really bother me that much. It was just an excuse for a party. What disturbed me was something Mr. XXX said when he was interviewed on television. When the reporter commented that making a bar mitzvah for a dog didn't seem very Jewish, Mr. XXX said: "That's what the rabbi said when I asked him to bless Elvis – so I fired the rabbi! Who's he to say what's 'up there'?"

The individual trumps religion. If you disagree with the rabbi, you can fire him or just quit because religion isn't about the community; it's about what I

want, what satisfies me rather than who we are and what we represent as a community. Of course, rabbis aren't always right and no one says you have to agree with your rabbi all the time. But it seems to me that religion should be more than simply demanding that the community or those we call our teachers satisfy our individual whims and desires. To be a part of the community one must be willing to live within the definitions of community. Sometimes that means placing one's individual desires and choices second.

This is not a uniquely Jewish problem. A colleague, Rabbi Mark Gellman, has an advice column in a newspaper named Newsday. He wrote that, "a Christian couple wrote of their dilemma: they wanted to be married in a church but they could not find a minister who would marry them without their commitment to join his congregation. They were incensed: they wanted to be married in the eyes of God but they wanted nothing to do with membership." I was surprised to read this, but that's not the point. Rabbi Gellman wrote back that rabbis and ministers are not gumball machines in which you put in a few pennies and get the desired product. Our job is to build community, to help people to find themselves and come together in the presence of God, to grow spiritually and to celebrate with one another. Clergy are not hired guns – we build communities of faith because that is where people can best encounter the spiritual riches of religion.

I confront this dilemma all the time. Sometimes I feel as though I have more former members than I have members. In a consumer driven economy people tend to equate the synagogue with the services they receive there rather than the relationships they nurture and develop. When they have received what they want, they feel no qualms about simply walking away.

Somehow we have failed to make that person feel that he/she are a part of a larger community.

I believe that a synagogue is more than a service station. It is a sacred community; we are connected by dreams, values and the desire to grow Jewishly together. We come to forge connections with others who share similar values and who have come to find solace and strength in their daily lives. We come to tell our personal stories and to learn from other peoples' stories. We come in search of the divine however we choose to define God.

We want to believe that life has a deeper meaning and a greater purpose, and that there is a sacred dimension to existence. Synagogues and houses of worship are best equipped to help us find these gifts. You can't buy membership in such a community; you earn it by becoming engaged in the life of the community. This is our greatest challenge. How do we become such a community? And what type of community should we be? And with the dramatic changes in the American Jewish community, how do we open wider the flaps of the tent – to the intermarried, the searcher, the doubter?

Especially this year, with the economy struggling, and many questioning their need of being members of a synagogue, this question has a special relevance and immediacy. And that is why I have shared my faith journey, my realization of the need for a community with you this morning. In previous summers, we have had congregants talk about their spiritual journeys. I think next summer I should ask congregants to share about what belonging to Beth Hillel Synagogue has meant to them. What would you say.....

For I think we all sense that in most synagogues there are at least two groups of people: those who feel connected and see themselves as part of a “family” -- and many others who have only a marginal sense of connection to the congregation. They come for the High Holy Days, they might show up to say an occasional Kaddish, but they don’t have a strong sense of belonging. I am pulled in many directions, and there are many demands on my time – but it is still a source of frustration that there are congregants who I do not know after three years here!

So as I stand here today I want you all to know: the synagogue belongs to all of us. It is as much yours as it is mine!! And as a community, we must find ways to address both groups – make the regulars even more involved and proud of belonging, and help those who are marginal become more engaged in congregational life, so that they feel that BHS can indeed be their spiritual home.

Our grandparents knew why they belonged to a synagogue. They grew up in Orthodox or Eastern European homes and they knew that shul was just something that you were supposed to do. The synagogue made them feel ‘at home. Their primary social connections were with other Jews: the synagogue was the natural place to socialize and feel at home.

But that world has changed, and the old reasons for membership no longer work. We live in a much larger, more expansive and cosmopolitan society. We are no longer mainly defined by ethnic identity – the old reasons for belonging to a synagogue no longer apply. But the need for community, for a sense of history, for a place where we share values and ideals still does apply! Synagogues are places where we can learn and grow, where we

can celebrate the sacred dimension of life. Too often the cost of individualism and independence is loneliness. We are so busy pushing ourselves to succeed economically and professionally that we have forgotten how important it is simply to belong. And that is why our shul's motivating statement this year is "WE ARE FAMILY."

Open the Machzor and look at the words. Virtually every prayer in the High Holy Day liturgy is written in the plural. We pray as a 'we' and not a 'me.' But sharing is only possible if we are prepared to give up some of our independence; it is only possible if we are ready to work for the good of others and not just ourselves.

I firmly believe that this message is the real meaning of these HHDs....

Both RH and YK. Now, you've heard me say before that YK, the Day of Atonement, is also is the day of At-one-ment, the day when we find ourselves in a community. This is a day when we are asked to set aside some of our self-interest and become part of, one with, something larger than our self. In our ability to become part of a community we truly find ourselves. It is in community that we become truly human.

On this day of **AT-ONE-MENT**, we come to synagogue not only to shed our individual failures; we come home in search of community...community that is family. *Lo Tov Heyot Adam Livado*, God said after creating the world: "It's not good for human beings to be alone."

It is in community that we truly live. It is here that we can find our spiritual and moral center and it is here that we learn what it means to be part of Klal Yisrael, the people of Israel.

Alone we are vulnerable; together we are strong.

Alone we are lost; together we are directed.

Alone we have fears; together we have dreams.

This community will become what we make of it; it will grow to the extent that we give of ourselves; to the extent that we reach out to others, and to the extent that we open our hearts to what others have to offer as well.

Community..... Together We Are Family.... Together we are Beth Hillel Synagogue.

Shana Tova.....