

Sermon 3/18/22

Although I have often been accused of being a control freak, especially when it comes to our services, I think that I am a fairly easy-going person. My glass is half full, and refillable. I prefer to laugh things off whenever possible. And I like people.

Here's an example. About a month into my stint as interim Executive Director of the Federation here in Sarasota, a delegation of senior staff came marching into my office. They closed the door and said, "We need to talk to you. We need you to never hire anyone without letting one of us also interview the person."

The whole thing was so startling that all I could do was blurt out one word. "Why?"

"Because, said the spokesperson, "You like everyone! You believe what they tell you, and you honestly think they're nice! But not all of them are."

I sheepishly agreed. You have to work really hard to make me not like you.

This aligns with the commandment *ahavat ya'rayacha c'mocha*, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (*Leviticus 19:18*). The Torah asks that we be predisposed to like each other. This includes mutual respect, and concern for each other's welfare.

Although I do have to tell you that I read a little poem this week:

"The Torah says, Love your neighbor as yourself.
The Buddha says there is no self.
So, maybe we're off the hook."

But I don't think so.

In the same chapter, the Torah commands, "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind." (*Lev 19:14*).

We understand both of these commandments both literally and metaphorically. Cursing the deaf can also mean speaking about someone behind their back. Neither is acceptable. Sooner or later the other person hears about it, and then things go terribly awry. Especially if you're misquoted.

And the stumbling block? In many ways, all of us are blind. There are things that we just don't know. There are privileges that we have that we don't realize. Each can be a stumbling block to understanding.

Covid has been an enormous stumbling block for all of us. Exactly 2 years ago when everything shut down, we had no inkling of what lay before us. We were so sure it was temporary.

The UJA just published a survey that says 27% of American Jews decreased their synagogue participation during the pandemic.

It also said that people who are involved Jewishly are doing better than those who aren't. To quote the study, "Jewish involvement correlated with better emotional well-being. Thirteen percent of synagogue members, for example, reported feeling symptoms of anxiety or depression. The number rose to 26% among non-members.

"The more frequently one attended Jewish programs, the less likely one was to experience social isolation, dropping from 63% among those who never attend to 28% among those who attend once a week or more."

This means that we as a community, especially those of us who are here today physically and those of you who are on zoom, have a job to do.

We need to get the word out to the rest of our congregation, and to our neighbors and friends, that Judaism is alive and well in Sarasota and at KH.

My teacher, Reb Zalman of blessed memory, who founded the rabbinical school that I attended, used to say, "The only way to get it together is together." It was true then, and I think even more so now.

This is not to say that we don't have work to do individually. Today's Torah portion has a different directive for us. It says, "A fire must always burn on the altar; it may not go out." (*Lev. 6:6*).

Our tradition has an additional understanding of that fire, that it is also a spiritual fire within. Like the fire on the altar that Aaron and his sons were responsible for, this too must be carefully tended.

Fire needs fuel, and that fuel can be provided by individual Jewish practice, such as the many home rituals, and by participating in communal religious rituals. Such as simply showing up, as you did today.

The new reality of living within the confines of a pandemic forced us to look within, to uncover the yearnings of our own souls, on our own. Now that the world is beginning to open up, tentatively and slowly, but hopefully for a long, long time, we can continue to look within both on our own and in the company of others.

This brings me to the individual Amidah. Why is a silent, individual prayer, plopped down in the middle of the communal prayer service? We come together to pray, we say prayers that can't be said alone, and then we take a little break in the middle.

A hint can be found in the Zohar, the mystical book that was "discovered" in the 13th century. "When people pray and weep so intensely that they are unable to find words to express

themselves, theirs is the perfect prayer, for it is in their heart, and this will never return to them empty.”

In other words, the mystical view of prayer is that it is essentially a personal enterprise, a crying out to God. It is inarticulate, internal, and individual.

And yet, there is an important place in our tradition for communal prayer. Prayer may begin in a personal cry out to God, but we have a prepared liturgy as an institutionalized vehicle for articulating that cry. These prayers strive to express the needs that people carry within them.

Rabbi Dvora Weisberg writes that:

Each of us struggles to achieve a balance between the private and public aspects of our Judaism. At times, we feel the need to be alone, to experience Judaism on a personal level, through prayer, study or contemplation. Such moments may strengthen us. But we must always be aware that the community is waiting for us.

I find the last phrase of her quote very moving: “the community is waiting for us.” The UJA just published a survey that says 27% of American Jews decreased their synagogue participation during the pandemic.

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Shabbat shalom.