

## Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2018/5779

There's a great guru who lives upon a mountaintop and he lives in complete silence. This guru also has a circle of disciples who live in the village below and they hardly see him because he lives alone on the mountaintop. Once per year, however, there is an annual pilgrimage of which they make the climb up the forbidden mountain path and are received by the guru, each is permitted to ask him a question as to how to conduct their lives. Then, they return down to the village until the magic moment of the next year, when they can speak again to the guru.

One day just before the annual pilgrimage, an older woman shows up to the village – Mrs. Schwartz – and she says to the local villager that she wants to see the guru: “I want to see the guru!”

“Listen lady,” the villagers say, “it's a really tough climb. We'll be happy to take your question up and tell you what the guru says, but we don't think this kind of thing is for you.” “No,” she says, “I want to see the guru.”

The next morning they wake up early for the climb – like some of us have woken up early to climb Masada – and they ascend the rugged Tibetan trail, up and up slowly. And finally, as they reach the top, they arrive at the sacred grove of the guru. He is a simple, pleasant man, sitting in silent meditation. As the guru senses their total attendance and attention, he begins to open his eyes. He scans across the devotees with their packs and hiking sandals, and his eyes meets Mrs. Schwartz with her sweat suit and shoulder bag, and he says: “Mom?!”

“Sheldon,” she counters, “when is it enough already? It's time to come home!”

Now that's like joke #28 in the classic book of Jewish humor. But why is this a Jewish joke? It's a joke because the idea of a nice Jewish boy isolating himself on a mountaintop and sequestering himself to years of silence is somehow out of sync what we know he should be doing. It's true that many Jewish young people, especially Israelis, run off to India and Tibet and elsewhere seeking spiritual ecstasy, but none of us expect them to stay there! In the Bible, when the prophets, such as Moses and Elijah, ascend the mountain to commune with God, they still come down. This is because, at the end of the day, Judaism is a spiritual tradition of the streets, of the *shuk*, of the market place, and of the synagogue – *viz a viz*, it's literal meaning from the Greek as a “house of communal gathering.” Judaism is not only about the lofty, ethereal ideals found alone in one's heart, but also found in the un-luxurious grit of real people in real life.

Of course, personal spiritual practices, including meditation, silent introspection, exercise, Yoga, hiking, and artistic expression each have a place within a healthy Jewish life. But if spirituality both begins within the individual and also ends within the individual, then it is merely half a prayer. Judaism embraces more than the individual self – it is a set of rituals that revolve around the cycles of the year and life; a body of moral virtues that we are meant to practice in all of our affairs; and a full-throated commitment to a community.

This is only my second Rosh Hashanah in Marin and I have been noticing this personal, individual expression of spirituality. That's okay, but I am concerned that what is happening across America is also happening to us here, namely a decline in a sense of community. In America, our public spaces, neighborhoods, community centers, men's fellowships and women's leagues & sisterhoods, have slowly declined, only to be replaced by shopping malls. We're being "malled" to death here in America. Certainly, the Internet and social media, has led to people connecting online, but as much as some folks are connecting to others online, an even larger percentage are isolating online.

Of course, individualism in and of itself, is not a necessarily bad thing. After all, America has long pronounced the merits of individualism. Individualism, however, becomes more problematic in society when it is combined with overt secularism, and the western world has become more and more secular over the past several hundred years. And, again, secularism is not an inherently bad thing – I appreciate many of the benefits of secularism, but this combination has put America today in a very strange place in history, wherein we are experiencing massive cultural change.

This cultural change affects us in three profound areas of life: family, community, and society. Today, I want to specifically focus on community.

To get to community, however, I want to take a step back and begin from the place of science and religion, and say that there are many Jews I know that believe that God is an old man with a white beard whose name is Charles Darwin. Charles Darwin has become the patron saint of atheism. And that's fine – I love my atheist brothers and sisters. That said, it's ironic because if Charles Darwin were alive today, he might actually be one of the most enthusiastic advocates of religion. Why? Because for Darwin and natural selection, the test of adaptive fitness is reproductive success – you pass on your genes to the next generation. That was the mark of fitness, but, as an interesting side note, the most secular societies in the world are having fewer

and fewer children, while the more religious societies have the most children. So, basically, what I'm saying is that if Darwin were alive now, he'd probably be in *shul* today too ☺

I mention this as really a lead-in to say that later in Darwin's life, he realized that there was a problem with his theory of natural selection, which was: if it's all just about reproduction and surviving, why should people be altruistic and self-sacrificing? And not only that, but altruism and altruistic people throughout history, tend to be admired in society? Why is that? Why do we hold altruistic, self-sacrificing, good people in high regard when through their self-sacrifice they may not be as fit to reproduce as an individualistic survivalist?

And what he said in his later book, *The Descent of Man*, was basically this: we pass on our reproductive material as individuals, but we only survive as members of groups. And for a group to survive, we have to have altruists, who put the interests of the group above their own personal interests.

Now, this is a fascinating issue, so altruism in groups has been studied a lot this past century with researchers looking for groups that have a high level of altruists. Scholars in different fields call it different things. Biologists call it reciprocal altruism, sociologists call it trust, and economists call it social capital. When society is filled with altruists – people who help each other out – it is “rich” in social capital. When it's filled with individualists who care only for themselves, it's “poor” in social capital.

The classic work on social capital, by the way, was published in our time in just 2001 by a great, Harvard sociologist named Robert Putnam. Putnam used bowling as his symbolic example of what is happening in America, which is that more people are going bowling than ever in America, but fewer than ever are joining teams and leagues. So he called his book *Bowling Alone*, which details how our society is rich in individual life, but poor in social capital, or poor in altruism.

However, Robert Putnam, like Darwin, is a self-reflective scholar who challenges his own ideas, and he published another really amazing book in 2010, called *American Grace*. In this book, he says, you know what, there is a lot of social capital in America. And do you where it is – it's in synagogues and churches and houses of worship. There you can find communities of altruism and care for others and trust.

By the way, he also points out in this book that there are studies with measurable health benefits for going to synagogue. There are corroborating studies that show that you live longer just by going to *shul* – even if you don't pray or believe in it, you can be a staunch atheist, but just showing up, just going – you live an average of seven years longer. Now I know that for many who would agree with my teenage daughters, when you go to *shul* it just seems like its seven years longer, but it's true!

Social capital is not about just having friends, like Facebook friends. Did you know, the average Facebook user has about 300 Facebook friends. However, when asked in a study, how many of those friends would you trust in an emergency, the average answer was 2. A quarter replied 1, and an eighth replied none. It just goes to show that no matter how fantastic and convenient social media is, it simply does not replace nor is as useful to us as human beings, as in-person, face to face contact with people we connect with.

What sociologists, including Robert Putnam, continue to show is that America is a deeply divided country with one half that have encouraging, supportive communities of trust, and one half without.

I raise all of this today, because the Jewish spiritual path is founded on one primary concept: covenant or *brit*. When, by birth or by choice, someone becomes a Jew– the first thing we acknowledge is that they are brought into the covenant. And that covenant is not between the individual and God alone, but it's with each other, it's between all of us – it's the expression for how we are bound together in community, in history, in shared destiny, and through common values. Covenant is the word for saying that we are here together, for one another, and we commit to that.

Covenant is why I became a rabbi and educator – I felt a calling to live a life of meaning that couldn't be accomplished with learning from and teaching others. Covenant is the “why” to what we mostly do, for without covenant, all we'd be left with is the social contract. A social contract is something very different. That's what you have with your dentist, or mechanic, or governmental services – it's transactional, it's consumeristic – you pay and you receive. That's not mutual responsibility, that's not in the vein of the Jewish maxim *kol yisrael areiveim zeh la-zeh*, all of the Jewish people are responsible for one another. A social contract on the other hand, is a deal that you make with winners and losers, and where half of parties involved are left feeling alone, like strangers in a strange land. That's not how Jewish community is made; it's not in the spirit of covenant.

The synagogue, the Hebrew school, and all their parts, the Jewish community are not set up to succeed by social contract alone. And whatever their problems, they won't be solved by marketing and discounts. They only work when we embrace our covenant with one another. That means we have to deal with each other, we have to work together, sometimes argue and then compromise, pitch in, take responsibility. It means that we get to share in each other's victories and blessings, but sometimes it means that we have to clean up each other's messes. That's how we make manifest our covenant in community.

In the 1960's, sociologist Robert Bellah actually referred to the term "covenant" as "the civil religion of America," emblazoned in the first three spoken words of the nation: "*We the people.*" But today, that American covenant is currently under duress. As Jews, though, we can't fall for this temporary divide because covenant is the core of our culture, our common identity, and the very soul of our people. Our common bond in covenant, the help we afford each other by showing up and trusting each other, is our greatest strength.

A boy and his father were taking a hike in the hills. Along the path they encountered a large rock in their way. The father said, "Go ahead, you can move it." The boy approached the rock and pushed, but to no avail. "I can't move it." "You can move it," the father said, "if you use all of your strength." The boy hunkered down and pressed using his back and legs. The rock hardly budged. "You were wrong," said the boy, "I used all of my strength and I still couldn't move it." The father looked at his son and said gently, "But, you didn't use all of your strength. You didn't ask me for help."

Trust, respect, loyal responsibility, compromise for the sake of peace, and the humble willingness to help and be helped by others are the connective spiritual tissue that emerges from the midst of our covenant. Each one of you, each one of us is a part of the story of our people, the story of this community, the story of this synagogue – Kol Shofar – each of you are a part of my story and I am a part of yours. We're in covenant. And yes, we all need take the trip to the mountaintop to see "the guru," or convene with God, like Moses and Elijah, but just know, that when you get back, we're here for you and we need you.

Shanah Tovah u'metukah.