

***Drash Vayakhel – 2019 – Cradle to Grave***  
Rabbi Paul Steinberg – Congregation Kol Shofar

In 1973, Ernest Becker published a book that won the Pulitzer Prize – possibly one of the most important books ever written, certainly for me. The book is called *The Denial of Death* and in it, Becker essentially makes the point that much of our lives – and much of our world – is constructed in a way so that we can continue to live our lives without constantly being reminded of our own mortality. We deny death, as the title suggests. And we do all the time and we do it unconsciously.

So, for example, he talks about bodily functions and the sounds and the fluids that come out of our bodies ---- I know, it's awkward and gross to even begin mentioning them, right! Some might say it's inappropriate. And that's his point! Why does everything that comes out of our bodies gross us out – mucus, bile .... I won't go down the list, as I'm sure you get the point. The mere sight of blood even makes some people pass out. Why does all of the stuff from our bodies gross us out – I mean its all from *our* bodies!

Notice, by the way that babies and really little kids don't get so grossed out – they can be even fascinated by it all.

Becker says that the reason all of this is so repulsive to us as adults is because we know, perhaps what babies don't yet know, that we are going to die. That is, stuff from our bodies subconsciously puts it in right our faces that we have bodies, and the waking consciousness that we have bodies is directly related to our mortality and that we die. And that is overwhelming. Our consciousness simply can't handle that awareness at all times, so we have these psychological mechanisms that help us to put it in the back of our minds and deny it for the moment. And one of those mechanisms is that we respond to bodily functions with disgust – we don't want to look at it, touch it, smell it, or even think about it. Actually, our reaction is either disgust or humor, we laugh it off - - some people have indeed made careers on potty humor, and Becker explains why.

Just to slightly extend this point, this is why we don't like to think about where our meat comes from and prefer it in nice little packages under a hidden name such as beef or fowl or venison, rather than calling it what it is: cow or animal muscle. Bodies remind us of our bodies. This is even why we now eat with a fork and knife so we again distance ourselves from our animal/bodily nature. --- We deny the fact of the conditions of our existence all the time – the fact that we are born into this world is not under our control and the fact that we will die is neither.

It's heavy – I get it.

I have to confess that – and I've analyzed myself around this – that this is why I have an aversion to getting my picture taken. In case you didn't know this about me – I don't like it. I don't like looking at old pictures of myself or really any pictures of

myself. It makes me uncomfortable. And I think it's about this issue. I mean when I see pictures of myself as a kid or baby, I get a little emotional – it's right in front of me that life is short – the distance between crib and coffin is brief, as one author put it, and that life is but a "crack of light between two darkneses." ---

And it makes you think, what have I done with my light? What have I done with the time after I've come into this world and before I've left it?

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And what strikes me about everything that goes on here, in this synagogue, is that at its best, it reflects the idea of the Jewish people, which is that whatever it is that you do, it has to be greater than you. As the great American philosopher, William James said: "The great purpose of life is to live it on something that will outlast it."

That since we have this beautiful, great, wonderful space here at Kol Shofar, we have to use it to remind people of why they are here, too. And everything that goes on here at Kol Shofar, from the Hebrew School, to the film series, to *Rosh Hodesh* groups, to the Shabbat morning service is an attempt to impress upon the world something greater than any of us as individuals could do. Something that we can do as a community.

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This morning's *parshah* is *Vayakhel* – "and he gathered them" – Moses gathered all the people together around the tabernacle, the "Synagogue," which is the Greek word that literally means what the Hebrew *Beit K'nesset* means – a place of gathering. We don't call this place a *Beit Tefilah*, we don't call it a House of Prayer – because it's just not – prayer is merely one of the things we do here. This is a *Beit K'nesset*, it's a house of coming together, of connection, of gathering, of collective strength and consciousness.

*Vayakhel* – Moses called everyone together. And why does he need to call everyone together – because no one can do it alone. There is a collective power that transcends; it transcends any one life because it is more intense, more focused, more lasting than any individual contribution whether that contribution is of any single rabbi, no matter how dynamic they are, or any board president, or any single person, period.

*Vayakhel* – we celebrate collective power and collective commitment and contribution.

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As you may know, our community goes and does a monthly feeding at Mill Street Homeless Shelter, usually the first Sunday of the month. Why? Why is it important that we promote that in our community? Our community goes to Drake Terrace Senior Living once a month and runs a Friday night service for the folks there – why? What's so important about it? Why do we sponsor a community wide Rosh

Hashanah picnic for young families on Erev Rosh Hashanah, right when we rabbis are busy and ready to start the high holidays – why? Why do we take the time and spend the money? Why did Kol Shofar put its resources into hosting a massive community vigil after the shootings and massacre in Pittsburgh – why, what’s the point; why was that important that our synagogue presidents, present and past, show up to this stuff?

It’s not that it’s important they in particular go, but because it’s our community – it’s our community that goes. It’s not that the president or the rabbi goes, it’s because we all go – our community goes. This is our brief crack of light and we want to do something with it that will outlast it.

That’s why we honor people. Last year we honored Sandy Stadtler and Esther - if anyone is deserving of being honored, it’s Sandy. And I personally think we should honor people more, frankly. And we don’t honor people in private or individually, we bring the community together because of what they have done for Jewish education, for Jewish culture, for Israel, and for this synagogue – we honor them because we know that, although the spark begins within the individual, in order to get the light, you need more than one, more than two, and ideally more than ten.

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I don’t bring this up because I want you to be aware of all of the programs that we have in this place and what they’re potential can be. I mean, of course yes, I want you to attend adult education, I want you to participate in *tikkun olam* and helping those in need, I want you to join the *chevra kaddishah* and *chesed* committee to help those closed in and hurting, as well as those who have passed and deserve honor and respect. I want us all to get engaged in what this synagogue and community offers and what it potentially can offer.

I raise it because first, because this is the *parshah*, this is Torah of our synagogue and of all synagogues. The power of gathering and community is drastically too important in today’s time. This is the Torah that teaches that each and every person in this congregation matters beyond what I can express. This is the Torah for 2019 and beyond. Today is the Torah that teaches that this is your place, but not just for you but also what you can potentially offer that is much bigger than you. Only the synagogue – the synagogue is the only Jewish institution that takes each and every one of us from cradle to grave, and it is the only Jewish institution that gives us opportunities to go beyond Jewish education and prayer and social action – only the synagogue is both personal, familial and global. The world matters in the synagogue, history matters in the synagogue and you matter in the synagogue!

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Second, I raise it because I’m working on advancing some of the synagogue programming. I’m trying to create opportunities for families – for young families with family camp retreats; I’m trying to bring Jewish trips back to our teenagers,

such as trips to Israel or at the least, trips to vibrant Jewish communities around the country such as LA or New York. I want to see more social advocacy around moral issues that Judaism cares about, including homelessness, women's issues, the environment, mental health, addiction and the opioid epidemic. I want to see the power of each of our lights in our time here, grow brighter and more powerful by connecting to the other lights and to say to the world – here we are and we matter; by myself, I may not have been able to do this, but together we are here. Sure, yoga, meditation, hikes in nature, self help literature is a great start to spiritual growth, but none of them touch the spiritual power of *Kehillah* – community engagement.

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We all need courage to face life and its challenges. Nothing helps better to give us courage than encouragement, encouragement from others, from the community – because *K'lal Ysrael* the value of the community of the Jewish people is stronger than any one of us. And because we take to heart what we have always lived as a people, what the great anthropologist Margaret Mead expressed when she said: “Never doubt that a small group of determined people can change the world because, in fact, that is the only thing that ever has.” A small group of people can change the world. What we do here can change the world for an individual or for a family or for much more.

And third I raise this because of a story. *Yud Lamed Peretz* or known in English as I.L Peretz, the wonderful 19<sup>th</sup> century Yiddish writer wrote a story about a musician's death. He was in his life, a head of band in his family – the head of a family band – like the Partridges. And in his life, he could be a bit of a tyrant with his family band – he always controlled the music they played, but now he was dying. And he called together his family into his room for his last moments. And in his last moments he said to them, “everybody, go get your instruments,” and all of his children gathered their instruments and brought them back to their father's room. And his words, as he lay dying were, “now play.” And the last line of the story was, “the tiny house was filled with music.”

And when I watch each week, the Beit Binah students and their families come together in this room – over a hundred of them saying the prayers and smiling and enjoying, as our teens lead the family service. When I see them, I often think of this story and this line – the tiny house was filled with music.

Fill us, fill this place with music – that's what we want to do as a synagogue – fill us with music of the tradition, of our history and heritage, of our moral virtues, of our texts, of the land of *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel ... the music that ties us all together, where we can sing together with other Jews around the world, in the same language, with the same songs that we have sung for thousands of years. These are the songs we sing in the synagogue – the songs of birth and graduation and marriage, but also, as one poet put it, “the still, sad songs of humanity” – the final songs and moments of a person as they pass from this world to the next.

We want to hear all of those songs, because that what it means to be an *Am Kadosh* – a holy people – that is to fill our lives with sanctity from the moment that we come into this world until the moment that we pass away and come under the care of God.

The synagogue is the bastion, the safe haven for where we *Vayakhel* – where we come together as a *Kehillah* – where we bring together our mere cracks of light between the darkneses – and like the *havdalah* braided torch, bring our wicks of light and love together to make an everlasting *ner tamid* – an eternal light, which hangs above our heads in this place symbolically – as an emblem to what we together are able to accomplish in this world. The synagogue, the *Beit Kneset*, the *shul* – this is where our spirits come together to grow, to be challenged, to reach their potential and to make a difference beyond our own, individual moments in time. It's the place where we don't need to deny death, but instead, where we live everlasting.

Shabbat Shalom.