

Worthy of the Divine

A sermon delivered by
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For the first time in over a year, I walked up the back steps, entered the sanctuary from the side door and sat down in the seat I had occupied for nearly thirty years. Throughout all of those years, as Shabbat and Holy Days approached, I knew that I would enter this sanctuary, go to my seat, and all would be safe and secure. In a world of rapid change, this place would be the sole, safe haven from the whirling winds and tidal waves shifting the very foundations of our world.

But during the last year the seats on the bimah were placed in storage, the pews removed for restoration, the sanctuary was demolished and rebuilt; we never knew where services would be held. We went from the back of the sanctuary to Reitman Hall to New Brunswick High School and again to the back of the sanctuary, only to return to Reitman Hall and then to the new social hall and downstairs to the amphitheatre. On any given day I wasn't sure how long we would be able to withstand the dust in our lungs as each moment more destruction and construction occupied this edifice as it was transformed from a twentieth century building into a twenty first century complex.

Swirling around us were the daily news reports of American soldiers dying in Iraq, suicide bombers imploding on crowded streets, in subway cars and on buses. We never knew from one moment to the next whether loved ones and friends in Israel were safe or in the wrong place at the wrong time. Each day we were losing more and more faith in government, both in Washington and in Trenton. The actions on both sides of the political aisle were making us more and more cynical about elected officials. Added to this were seasons of hurricanes and tsunami bringing with them terrible and incomprehensible destruction. And so much more!

Some days I felt that the only thing that would get us through was a sense of humor. I recalled the cartoon in which an affluent matron, well groomed, wearing an expensive fur stole, is walking up and down the street, and carrying a placard. Written on the placard are these words: "Will Somebody Please Explain What's Going On?"

That we are able to arrive at this moment in time, after all of the terrible events of the past, after the witnessing of frightening and deadly storms that have shaken the very foundations of our nation – to be able to be here and declare a Shannah Tovah, a new year filled with hope and promise – is nothing short of remarkable.

I don't think any of us could possibly have imagined what it would be like to work and live and celebrate Jewish life in this building while demolition and construction and renovation occurred, all at the very same time. That we managed to carry on a full program here at the Temple is a testimony, not only to our staff, but to all of you, the members and families of this precious community we call Anshe Emeth.

I cannot fully express how wonderful it is for you and me to sit here in this old and now so very vibrant and beautiful sanctuary. I don't believe that I can accurately describe in words the feelings that you and I should have at this moment as we walk through and look around this building, as we gaze upon the intimate and precious beauty of this *Beit Mikdash*, this sanctuary of holiness that holds such power and place in our lives.

I

My dear congregation, as I prepared my words for this day, as I looked out upon the landscape of civilization, as I considered the state of our world and reflected upon its meaning and the challenges before us, I want you to know that it was only our faith that enabled me to have hope. And this place, our congregation, became the embodiment of that hope.

This is a terrible time in the world. It is a horrific moment in the history of humanity. At a time filled with the potential for great progress and discovery, ours has become a world ruled by terror. At a time when we have within our grasp the possibility for healing and cure of so many diseases and ailments, our nation, along with so many other nations of the world, is spending its energies building or destroying weapons of destruction, creating or dismantling juntas of terror and totalitarianism. At the same time, a radical form of fundamental Islam is shaking the foundation of Europe and threatens to spread to every corner of the world.

Our leaders, and the world's leaders, have led us into a dark period, a new medieval time, in which human beings have lost their trust in one another, people have given up faith in science and have turned instead to fleeting spiritual cures. There is, today, a malaise of malevolent madness. It stretches from the highest seats of power to the most common paths upon which we tread. We are told that the streets are not safe, that mass transit is vulnerable, our schools are not safe and sound, and our homes have become places of dread. The television promotes survival and desperation. It communicates a message of non-stop alarm and fear in which the only means of survival is reliance on self. And all the while, Katie Curik, Matt Lauer and Al Roker giggle their way through the daily report.

If not for these High Holy Days we would all probably want to be like squirrels that gather up all of the acorns for self preservation, hide and sleep through the cold and destruction of winter, hoping to survive so that when spring returns we can start all over again. But that is not how it is for Jews; that is not what our faith is all about. Rosh Hashannah is a statement of belief in a good future. These days that we call Yamim Noraim, Days of Awe, represent the testimony of a people who believe in creating God's

kingdom on earth, in establishing a society and civilization in which all human life has value. Rosh Hashannah is the antidote to the notion of survival of the fittest, for it attests to human beings, individual human beings, living in community, sacred community, caring for one another, bringing safety and security to one another even when the whirling winds of terror whip about wildly. Our being here in this sacred place, this restored and magnificent house of worship is a proud and noble statement that *Lamrot Hakol*, despite everything, we believe in the notion that a human kingdom worthy of the divine is the kind of world we intend to build and that nothing short of our own human failings will keep us from doing so.

II

A few days ago, one of my greatest teachers passed away. I never had the privilege to meet M. Scott Peck, but I have read just about everything he has ever written. Most of you may know him from his best seller entitled, *The Road Less Traveled*. It is a fine book. When first published it barely sold a few thousand copies. But word spread of its value and it remained on the best seller list for years. I think it is so well known because Peck's basic philosophy in the book is that sacred living doesn't come easy; living with meaning comes about only with hard work. It is a philosophy that I have followed all of my life.

In one of Peck's other works, he offers some important advice to all of us. In his book *The Different Drum*, Peck tells us: "In and through community lies the salvation of the world. Nothing is more important." He is absolutely right. Our world has become a place that has put its sole focus on the individual. With the secularization of civilization the individual has become the be all and end all of meaning and significance. I would describe this trend as the privatization of human life at the expense of the human community. The focus on self has become so pervasive that it is leading to the destruction of community. Here is a sad example of what I mean: In a recent Hagar the Horrible cartoon, Hagar is evidently singing a cheerful drinking tune as he lies in front of a keg of wine cradling a bag of money to his chest. The words of the song go like this:

Oh, words of love – Oh, words divine,
The silver thought, the golden line,
Of all men's words, there's none so fine,
As these three words ... "I got mine."

Or the final words at graduation delivered by the Dean of the College when he complains aloud, "I know we face a world of crisis...crucial shortages and a radical change in lifestyles. Even so, I still think your senior class could come up with a better motto than, 'Get yours while there is still some left!'"

Peck reminds us of the words of deTocqueville who in 1835 wrote his work *Democracy in America*. He was most impressed by our individualism. But he clearly warned, "That unless our individualism was continually and strongly balanced by other habits, it would inevitably lead to fragmentation of American society and social isolation of its citizens."

He was right and so is Peck. I know, because after thirty one years of serving as your rabbi and living in this community I have seen all too many who have chosen to take and not to give, who have thought only about self without regard for others; and I have also seen the incredible power of a community that can transform death and destruction into seeds of holiness, a community that sustains the neediest whether they are wealthy or poor, a community that brings messianic wonder to places that are broken, lifting the spirit of individuals in such a way as to make them whole once again.

Our ancestors understood the importance and value of community. The Torah makes it perfectly clear. “*Lo Toochal lihitale*m, You may not permit yourself to be indifferent.” Such are the words of Deuteronomy. “*Al Tifrosh min Hatsibur*: Do not separate yourself from the community,” declares Rabbi Tsadok in *Pirke Avot*. We describe our own synagogue and synagogues everywhere as *Kehilah Kedoshah*, sacred community.

III

And what is community? Well, truth be told, community is not so easy to define. But you know community when you feel its power and its presence. Community is like electricity. It does incredible work and makes things happen. It can also be terribly destructive if it is not cared for and used properly. And, like electricity, it is mysterious, miraculous, and unfathomable. Community is more than the sum of its parts.

Peck tells us that community is like a gem. “The seeds of community reside in humanity – a social species – just as a gem originally resides in the earth. But it is not yet a gem, only a potential one. So it is that geologists refer to a gem in the rough simply as a stone. A group becomes a community in somewhat the same way that a stone becomes a gem – through a process of cutting and polishing. Once cut and polished, it is something beautiful. But to describe its beauty, the best we can do is to describe its facets.

He goes on to tell us that “The gem of community is so exquisitely beautiful it may seem unreal to you, like a dream you once had when you were a child, so beautiful it may seem unattainable... The problem is that the lack of community is so much the norm in our society, one without experience would be tempted to think, ‘How could we possibly get there from here?’ [But] ...Remember that to the uninitiated eye it would seem impossible for a stone ever to become a gem.”

Look at our Temple, this place on the hill since 1929. What a gem it has become. We have transformed the stones and polished them. We have taken rooms that were old and musty and turned them into welcoming centers for Jewish living. This sanctuary has gone from a place filled with awe to an awesome and intimate space whose dignity has been restored to a gracefulness that beckons people to enter and invites them into community.

What is community? Community is more than the beautifully polished stones that house it. It is the collective heart of a people that is open and beating and welcoming. It is the collective arms of a people who comfort and encourage and give strength to those who become weary along with those who are strong. A community is a people with a spirit, a

vision of a certain kind of world, and the people are so committed to that vision that they are willing to stake the very meaning of their lives on it in order to achieve it.

My friends, what we have built together is a beautiful gem, giving us the foundation upon which to build our community. This place that we call Anshe Emeth is a community of people whose heart should be open and beating and welcoming. Let me give you an example. In this place we welcome the homeless, the person with special needs, people of color, and the financially impoverished. What an honor it is to do so. Now it is also time for us to truly welcome those who wish to be among us.

Today I want to acknowledge with gratitude all those Jews by Choice who have become one with us. They have freely chosen to accept our faith and we are grateful to each and every one of them. What blessings you bring to us! You affirm our faith; we thank you for casting your lot among us.

And today I want to express our gratitude to all those who are not of our faith but who have chosen together with their Jewish spouses to bring their children here to learn about the glory of the Jewish faith and to become a part of it. To each of you we are incredibly grateful for sharing your families with us and we hope that we have made you feel welcome and a part of our community. We respect you for who you are and we are grateful to you for having respect for our faith and honoring us by your presence here.

To those who are gay and feel that in so many places they have been disenfranchised or unwelcome because they don't fit the mold, we welcome you here. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to live at a time when religious leaders want to deny your existence, when leaders of our nation encourage homophobia. We are a Jewish community, based on core Jewish values. But the primary value is that every single one of God's creations is a sacred vessel worthy of dignity and integrity. Come into this sacred space and be honored by our community! We cannot be all things to all people but we will always be respectful and heartfelt in our welcome and in our care for you as individuals seeking meaning in a meaningless world.

To those who feel disenfranchised, who believe that the Jewish community holds no place for them – come here – to this sacred place. The tent pegs of this congregation are stretched wide and are intended to make room for all who wish to feel the sheltering presence of the divine.

My dear congregation, what is community? Community for us Jews is a place where people see tomorrow when others see only today, where membership is not represented by carrying a card or belonging to an exclusive club. Membership is a privilege that denotes a commitment to Jewish life, a sacred obligation to carry out a four thousand year old vision that is ever young, and to build a future beyond ourselves because we understand that without community we will die. Community for us means to be challenged by our faith, by Torah, by centuries of learning; it means to be learned and to strive to achieve wisdom.

IV

I must tell you that something very powerful is already occurring here on Shabbat morning. You cannot imagine how exciting and exhilarating it is to see the numbers who come here to learn and study Torah. When I first arrived here in 1974, adults did not study Torah in our congregation. A few years later I invited you to join me on Shabbat mornings. Some of you did; well, four of you did. There were days when I asked myself, “Why don’t you give this up and go out into the school and be with the kids?” But I persisted. Today, on Shabbat mornings that group continues, only now the room is full, studying with Rabi Fellman. And another group meets with me. It is a group of new members of the Temple. They are so excited about learning and becoming a part of this congregation. And in the room next door is a third group, led by Debbie Cohn, who is teaching a Bible course. To see so many adults here, along with all of the children, is truly a wonder. I have begun to ask, maybe we didn’t build enough? (Just kidding).

Now, it’s not the study alone that is so exciting. It is what the study represents. For you see, Jews grow through the study of Torah which leads to the doing of mitzvot. Each time we gather and study a text it is an opportunity to grow as individuals and as a community. From where do you think emerged the idea of a program to give out medical equipment? Where do you think the concept of visiting the sick in the hospital came from, or taking care of the elderly, or feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless? These ideas all came from the study of our texts. The action came from members who, after their study, felt compelled to act.

To be a Jew means to hear the challenge of the text and respond. Imagine what kind of community we will become if so many more of our members joined in learning and growing? I can tell you this: our beautiful building would be a reflection of a gem unknown before in our community – a *Kehilah Kedoshah*, a sacred community that truly touches lives in such ways that all of the members are known as *K’lay Kodesh*, vessels of holiness.

I don’t know about you, but I want each of us to consider that we have the power to transform the world, just as we have transformed our building. I want you and you and you to consider yourself as one of God’s ministering angels. We all have the capacity to do so. I have yet to meet someone whose generosity caused them to be impoverished. I have not yet met a person whose giving of time and energy and financial support has forced his or her family to go hungry. But I have met many people, children, and adults and families, who cannot afford clothing for school, tuition for camp or religious school. Every year I have met people who languish in hospitals without anyone to visit, who reside alone in nursing homes and no family member stops by to bring them cheer, or who are shut ins at home and no one comes to visit. I think everyone of us here should feel that it is our privilege to be the hands and eyes of the messianic age. If we wait for government to do it, the evidence is in. Government only responds when it has to. If we wait for good economic times they probably never will come. And if we wait for a different spirit in America, a time of peace, where terror and fear come to an end – well,

we will wait forever – and our time will have passed to build a human community worthy of the divine presence.

I don't know if we can change the world. But on this Rosh Hashannah, this New Year, this day when we contemplate the kind of world we want to live in, I can tell you that you and I can build a community one step at time. I can tell you that we can change hearts and minds through the study of Torah and implement the challenges of our study, just as we implemented the dreams that this place could be transformed from stones to a gem. And I can tell you that as your Rabbi I invite you to join me in the next stage of our sacred task, building a community worthy of our name, Anshe Emeth, the people of truth, of wisdom, of action; a people guided by centuries of tradition, by the gift of Torah; a people who will leave a legacy to the future – a legacy of building a kingdom worthy of God's name.

V

Now, let me return to my teacher, to Peck, who tells a story called, *The Rabbi's gift*.

The story is about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. It had once been part of a great order but with religious persecution in the eighteenth century, and with the rise of secularism in the nineteenth century, all of its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that only five monks remained left in the monastery; there were only the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in the hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again" they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They

embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?”

“No, I am sorry,” the rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well, what did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving – it was something cryptic – was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi’s words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the messiah. Of course the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the

Messiah. They began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

VI

To all of you who are here, remember: when we set about our work to transform our Temple we said that we wanted to create a legacy for the generations to come, we wanted to give a gift to the future and the gift would be the transformation of our building into a wondrous place for Jewish living and for Jewish life.

What we have done here is not the rabbi's gift. I didn't build it. We all did. It is our treasure and our gift to give. We now have the building. Come; let us create the community, the sacred community, a place that will be known as the center of light and spirituality in the realm. If we do so, we will give safety and security to all those who cross its threshold and we will be known as the generation that built a kingdom worthy of the divine!