

A Great Synagogue

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The traditional Torah reading for tomorrow morning contains the first ever mention of Yom Kippur.

Leviticus chapter sixteen states:

Ve'hayta lachem le-chukkat olam – this shall be to you a law for all time;

Bachodesh ha'shevii, be'assor lachodesh te'anu et nafshechem...ki vayom hazeh yichapper aleichem le-taher etchem mikol chatotechem...

In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self denial...For on this day atonement shall be made...to cleanse you of all your transgressions.

The Torah ordains an annual day of reflection. It cannot be all work all the time; all self all the time; all pleasure all the time; all consumption all the time; all routine all the time. It is necessary to make a complete stop, disconnect from the work-a-day, day-to-day – and – *ba'yom ha'zeh* - on this day – ponder the essentials of life.

So on this, our annual day of reflection ordained for us three thousand years ago – we should ask: how are we doing? How are you doing?

At the synagogue, we ask these questions all the time. Our senior staff – a group of talented professionals and good Jews - is consumed by how to define our purpose; how to fulfill our purpose; how to improve.

Our board of trustees – a group of extraordinary people who bring to us world-class talents from corporate life – has raised our level of performance to unprecedented heights. We are now a lean, mean machine.

We have professional accountants, bankers and investment specialists who examine our budgets in the minutest detail and these are reviewed annually by a licensed auditor. We produce fancy-looking power point presentations that illustrate how we are doing on any given day of the year. It is a thing of beauty.

We now produce slick brochures. We stay current on the latest gadgets of social media. We have specialists who advise us how to make the most of 21st century technology.

We are sweet with the tweet. We are agog with the blog. We are quicker with Flickr. We will stick with Wiki. We stay apace in MySpace. We are proud of our cloud. We have a blast with Podcast. We Skype, not type.

They used to give medicine for viruses – no one wanted them - but at Stephen Wise we are now going viral.

We stream our services and archive sermons – and we followed the advice of experts who told us – invest in high-definition cameras because it is easier on the eyes. Otherwise, no one will sit through a sermon online (as if they can easily sit through a sermon offline).

We yearn for more space – and more attractive space – and more sacred space. We no longer have enough classrooms – we are renting from neighbors; and we are running out of room even in the sanctuary.

We consult with interior designers and real estate experts. Electricians are a constant presence in our building, repairing sixty-year old wires that have not been touched since the building was constructed in 1950. We spend a lot of time figuring out how to get more juice to the top floors. I wish we could be as successful figuring out how to get more Jews to the top floors.

We analyze trends and mega-trends. We are experts in Jewish communal life. We pore over every study of the American Jewish community. We note with pleasure the expansion of Orthodox Judaism and worry about the rapid contraction of non-Orthodox communities.

We consider every new proposal of every Jewish group that advises the Jewish community how to create better institutions. “Branding” has become a term of art in the Jewish community. People who know how to sell toothpaste advise us on how to sell Judaism.

And all these things are important. We cannot run a large, complex and growing institution without these. I chuckle when people tell me that they are spiritual but not religious, by which, they mean they do not like organized religion. There is no idea that can make a difference in the world if it is not organized. An idea that is not organized is like a tree falling in the forest. If no one heard it fall, it doesn't matter.

And therefore – like any other successful endeavor - there is a profound need to be run well. We insist that our professionals be highly skilled in administration and organization; and we are enormously fortunate to have such world-class lay talent that masterfully governs this synagogue.

But I was thinking: In the end – is anyone drawn to Judaism because of a flyer? Even you young people – you social media mavens who wear technology on your sleeves as if it is attached to your body – well – in many cases it is – literally – attached to your body:

Has there ever been a Jew who joined a synagogue – and stayed with that synagogue – because of a tweet, or a like or a hit or a virtual friend on the synagogue Facebook page?

And what about the rest of you: Did you come here because we have the most beautiful power point presentations in the synagogue world? Or is it perhaps that you fell in love with our indescribable bathrooms?

The liberal Jewish world is rapidly contracting. Are our people leaving Judaism because we haven't branded it well enough – and those marketing geniuses who brought us Kardashian might also be able to brand us? Or is there something else going on; something deeper? In the end – why are we here?

We exist for the very reasons we read about in the Torah - written three thousand years ago – before technology and before medicine and before glittering cities and before mass communication and before all of the splendid gifts of modernity:

We exist to bring personal and communal meaning to life. We exist to heal; to comfort; to ease the challenge of life and to challenge the ease of life.

How could it be, in a city of eight million people, that we are so lonely; and that we are so isolated emotionally? We have thousands of virtual friends and yet we lack intimacy. We spend hours updating Facebook followers what we had for breakfast this morning; we spend days in chat rooms, talking sense and nonsense, and yet, we feel that no one is listening. We are rejected time and again.

We live in the most brilliant metropolis in history. Many of us would have it no other way.

In summer my wife and I briefly escape the intensity; the noise, the heat – and we go up to some European mountain and just sit in the sun and bask in the supreme glory of nature. It is the anti-New York. We go to towns that are winter havens, but in the summer are so quiet. Ah, the quiet; the peace and quiet; you don't hear anything but the blessed benediction of babbling brooks barreling by beautiful bubbling bends beckoning a benign, benumbing and becalming balm.

And we think – we are in heaven – up there on some Alpine mountain. “The feeling of health, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun. Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.” (Whitman)

But when you speak with the locals – and you suggest to them that they are living in heaven – and they hear that we live in New York City – their eyes light up like the mid day sun on an alpine peak:

New York City! The magnet of the world: the playground of the world; the fleshpot of the world. After a week, there's nothing to do on the mountain. It gets boring in heaven. They all want to get to New York City! Just the word "Manhattan" mesmerizes and entices.

But we who call this island home - know that side-by-side the fleshpots of New York, is the impoverishment of New York: the isolation; the hours we spend alone on computers or on the heaving streets so heavy with human beings that one untrained tourist blocks the whole sidewalk.

At one in the same, it seems to us that the world has never been more open, more accessible, more unified - and yet, more fragmented. The big city makes us feel small. The smallness causes isolation. We came here to be surrounded by people, and we find that we are mostly alone.

We came because we are ambitious. This is where ambitious people come to interact with other ambitious people. But this very ambition creates a feeling of perpetual dissatisfaction. We become obsessed with career and promotion and status - and this focus on ourselves - without which we cannot maximize our potential in this town - often degenerates into self-obsession. We are desensitized to the common good.

And even the most successful of us knows that our success is often purchased at a high cost: the cost of our relationships; the cost of disenchantment, disillusion, cynicism, confusion - or simply the depletion of our energy that could be used or stored for other vital activities.

We are on information overload. It has been estimated that we are exposed to more information in one day than the contemporaries of Shakespeare had in an entire lifetime.

But to what end? Are we wiser? Are we more fulfilled? Are we more content? So we know more about some Housewives in Beverly Hills: so what? If anything - information causes dejection. We now know for sure that the outrages of the world have exceeded our capacity for empathy. We simply cannot keep up. And this depresses us because we expect more of ourselves.

We feel more empowered than ever - and more vulnerable than ever. We worry about everything: wars, weapons that can end humanity, incurable diseases, and even the very climate of the earth that makes life possible. Or - we worry about nothing; nothing matters to us because we can't make a difference anyway.

We live in an era when for us at least - all of the physical wants of life are secured. I ask our teenagers where avocados come from - and their response is "Fairway." For so much of human history even to put food on the table was a struggle. Now we have everything we need, but we are still so needy.

Our affluence has given us much more leisure time. You know – our parents and grandparents – peddlers, owners of small businesses and middle class entrepreneurs - could barely take a day off. Rabbi Wise had to hold Shabbat services on Sunday because our grandparents worked on Shabbat.

We – their descendants – are bored. We don't know what to do with our spare time. Perhaps we'll surf the web for a couple of hours or check out what our virtual friend had for breakfast. Even vacation becomes an office away from the office. We check in from the beach, and never really check out.

No wonder so many of us are in crisis. In this context it is hard to sustain faith. We doubt everything and everybody. We have lost trust in the main institutions of our lives. We know too much about politicians, judges, juries, lawyers, teachers, generals, clergy, banks, large companies, care givers, doctors, hospitals...and even stay-at-home parents – what we call today in political correctness – “domestic engineers”- are not what they used to be. We just know too much about these domestic engineers of Beverly Hills, New York, New Jersey, Miami, Atlanta, and Orange County.

We now have specialists who write hundreds of books and give thousands of lectures a year that analyze what state we are in: All kinds of self-help gurus – who themselves – are the product of the very disorders and confusions of our day they seek to cure.

And so – they might say to us – what Leviticus said: cleanse yourself. But what they mean – is – literally - take a cleanse: Juice for a week – detox. Get the poisons out of your system – as if this sort of purification will address the existential angst we feel.

The affliction in the Jewish world today is not physical; it is spiritual. The current condition of the Jews has never been as good in the whole history of the Jewish people. There are few Jews today who live under oppression and persecution. There is a Jewish state for the first time in two thousand years that is capable of defending itself.

The Jewish body has never been as healthy – and at the same time – has never been as sick. The Jewish body is suffering because the Jewish soul is riddled with impurities. And these impurities must be cleansed.

And they can only be cleansed through community: Not by marketing but by morals; not by power points but through powerful points of entrance; not by flow-charts but by flow-through into our community's embrace.

Human nature has not changed. We still need friends: Not only virtual friends; but virtuous friends; not only Facebook friends, but face-to-face friends. We still need community that values us as individuals with whatever imperfection or disfigurement we may have.

Our role; the community's role – the synagogue's reason for existing – is to assure you that you matter. Each of us is important in our own right. You are not alone. You are

not a cog in the wheel. You are not invisible. People care about you. The community cares about you. God cares about you.

The self and the Jewish self can only be maximized by and through community. There is no such thing as a Jew divorced from the Jewish community. We cannot be Jews on our own. Judaism is defined as life within the Jewish community.

This is what we mean when we call you a member: Not a member of a cum-country-club community that offers you elite status in some privileged setting where you get benefits proportional to what you pay – but membership in a larger, sacred whole.

We exist to remind you that Jewish life is good; it is something to be treasured – the only western civilization that survived from ancient days: and you are a member of that – a Great Society!

Although it may not always seem to you to be the case – and sometimes we fall short of our ambitions – we do not seek to create here a people-processing assembly line of bnai mitzvah, funerals, services and classes. If we have missed you when you came to services or when you were in need, it is not because we intend to avoid you: it is just that we, too, are imperfect.

For evident sociological reasons at least half of our congregation is comprised of one or two parent households raising children still at home. It goes without saying then, that we place enormous emphasis on children and their parents: early childhood and religious school education, bnai mitzvah – and we desperately need to figure out how to keep teenagers more involved.

But this is not all we are or aspire to be – and if, at times, we give a different impression, we do not intend it. There are entire categories of people we want to embrace – including a group of us who are new to humanity: elderly adults who are still active and intellectually alive – whose eyes are undimmed and whose vigor is unabated - well into their 80's and 90's – and who have all the needs of camaraderie and community as anyone else – and can give back to the community as much – or more – than anyone else.

We exist to listen to you. Perhaps our greatest fear in life is being ignored, no longer being able to contribute anything worthwhile to our families, friends or community. We exist to validate you, because to validate life, we ourselves, must be validated. There is purpose to our lives. We exist to inspire you to find your purpose.

There are seven billion people in the world – but - *Ba-yom h-zeh* – on this day – we remind you of the value of one person.

There is so much pain in our hearts. On this day – we remind you that we will stand by you. On this day – we remind you that you can be healed.

We are also aware that not everyone will heal; and there will come a time for all of us when there is no cure. But on this day – we pledge that we will be with you even when there is no cure: sometimes we must learn to live without a cure, and there is strength and purpose in persisting and enduring.

On this day – we remind you that to live means to doubt. Our lives are filled with unrest, uncertainty and ambiguity, so we must learn how to live even when we do not have all the answers.

But personal meaning and individual atonement are not our only concerns. Our role; the community's role; the synagogue's reason for existing is also to say to the world that we matter: Our community matters.

There are hundreds of nations in the world – and the Jewish people is a tiny fraction of them – less than 0.02% - a mere blip – a rounding error in the census of the world:

But on this day – we remind you how fair are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel; like gardens beside a river, like cedars by the water, their roots go deep.

On this day we remind you that you can be better than you are now. On this day – we remind you to be true to your highest self consistent with the values of honesty, integrity, and empathy.

On this day – we urge you to lead your lives with a moral compass pointing you towards the North Star of justice and righteousness for all.

This is the synagogue we have labored to build for the past decade. Hundreds of you have been involved, either in governance or in volunteering to help people – or both. All of us should do something in the upcoming year for other people so that this community can reach its highest potential.

We are celebrating an historic milestone: the 30th anniversary of our synagogue's shelter. The shelter is testament to our conviction that while we cannot remake the whole world; we can repair part of it. We cannot heal every person but we can heal some. We cannot bring about full justice, but neither can we desist from pursuing justice. We cannot finish the task, but we are not permitted to abstain.

This is the way forward. There is no other way. It is the old new way. It is the innovative way. It is what society needs in these cynical times; and what the Jewish people needs in these challenging days.

Our work is not done; we have hardly even begun. We still fall short in so many areas. We have much to atone for; many past misdeeds and failures of omission and commission.

But on this Day of Judgment I also look to the future. We can do so much more good. I hope that one day – say by mid century – long after I have gone - our successors will look back at our efforts and judge us to have been a great synagogue. We had good material and good technology and good public relations and good charts and plenty of beautiful space – and even the bathrooms were nice.

But what made us great were not these. We were great because:

When I was suffering – you comforted me
When I was lonely – you embraced me
When I was vulnerable – you prayed with me

When I was empty – you inspired me
When I was hopeless – you dreamed with me
When I was weary – you invigorated me
When I was sad – you cried with me
When I was happy – you rejoiced with me

When I was curious – you taught me
When I was searching – you found me
When I was conflicted – you soothed me
When I was impure – you purified me
When I was outcast – you took me back

When my people was threatened – you protected me
When my people was attacked – you defended me
When my people was weak – you strengthened me
When my people was absent – you summoned me
When my people was disengaged – you challenged me
When my people was unconcerned – you concerned me
When my people was ungenerous – you asked me to give

When the doors were closed – you opened your home
You shared your bread with the hungry
You housed the homeless
You unlocked the fetters of wickedness
You untied the cords of the yoke
You let the oppressed go free.

You did not pick your vineyard bare
You did not gather all of the low-hanging fruit
You shared your riches with the poor and the stranger

When greed was rampant – you spoke out
When injustice prevailed – you fought back
When wrong was perpetrated – you did right

When intolerance was widespread – you held out your hand
When hate was spoken – you preached love.

Ki va-yom hazeh – on this day – *yichapper aleichem* – on this day - atonement shall be made for you.

On this day you shall be cleansed of all your sins; and you shall be clean before the Almighty God.

On this day your light shall shine in darkness. On this day you shall be called “repairer of the breach,” restorer of all that is good.

On this day – I will set you astride the heights of the earth; and let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob – now – and forevermore!