

The Miracle of Coming Together as a Community
Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon
October 2, 2016
Rabbi Barbara Goldman-Wartell

We celebrate tonight the actions you have taken as individuals to come together as a congregation to join in prayer for Rosh Hashanah.

Each of you has made an intentional act, to put aside your regular activities and schedule to come to Temple Concord tonight.

Tonight, we come together to raise our voices in prayer and song to welcome a new year.

We are individuals with own needs. We could go on with our individual paths, but put that aside to join together, to become part of a greater whole.

Why do we do it? We can gather strength from one another as part of the Jewish community, from our relationships.

Every one of you has come forward to be counted to create our community of pray-ers tonight. We raise our voices together in prayer, in spoken words, in song and chant. It is the collective that we create which provides the foundation and backdrop for our individual explorations and stances as Jews. Every time I lead the congregation in prayer, I feel a rush when you respond in prayer, when our voices come together so much greater collectively than individually. And off the bimah, I treasure the relationships we have developed as well.

Our relationships with each other are the treasures of life. Our connections support and sustain us. They give our lives meaning. So too does our shared calendar, our shared history and experiences, the Jewish holidays, the greetings, the prayers, the rituals, the foods.

While our relationships give our lives meaning, it seems inevitable that there will be times when we treat each other harshly. It is inevitable that sometimes we will turn away from sustaining connections. This isn't because we are bad people. So much can get in the way of acting at our best. Our own inner stories and the busyness and the challenges we encounter can keep us from connecting with each other and caring for our relationships.

And so we need to practice the way we want to treat others and be treated ourselves. The teachings this time of year are clear: Practice Love, Kindness, Forgiveness and Generosity. Focus your attention on these qualities and practice returning to them again and again. Love, kindness, forgiveness and generosity.

We are a community of faith, of shared beliefs, of customs, rituals, of covenant with God. Matters of faith are personal, yet also communal. Our prayers on the High Holidays are in the first person plural, WE ask for forgiveness, WE confess our mistakes and shortcoming, WE make up our congregation of living breathing people, WE affirm our belief in a better future and WE pledge to do our part to make our congregation, our community and the world a better place.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: Faith is more like music than like science. Science analyzes; music integrates. And, as music connects note to note, so faith connects episode to episode, life to life, age to age in a timeless melody that breaks into time. God is the composer and librettist. We are each called on to be voices in the choir, singers of God's song. Faith teaches us to hear the music beneath the noise.

There is a lot of noise out there. It has become more and more challenging to hear the music, to create music, to hold a note, listen for those of others and either match their notes or harmonize.

Many of us have been together for 8 years now. This is my 9th Rosh Hashanah here at Temple Concord. So you know many of my core convictions. I truly believe in practicing love, kindness, forgiveness and generosity. I also believe in pursuing peace. Prayers for peace are one part, but pursuing peace and justice with compassion goes beyond our prayers. The challenge is how to speak about matters which we care about with others who might not agree with us. I believe we are a stronger congregation when we can support one another in expressing our opinions and beliefs, including when we don't share them. This is the challenge of a caring community.

This past month, in the pursuit of peacemaking, I ended up in the middle of a public controversy which challenged my peace making mantra in a major way. In my studies of Jewish peace making texts, I have been challenged to find the ways all perspectives have merit. In putting forth my perspective on the wording of the Owego 9/11 memorial plaque, I put forth my argument for changing the wording of the plaque, while being respectful of those who had other perspectives. The town meeting included an extensive exchange about the points on both sides of the controversy. We were respectful of one another, and that was what I was hoping would be the case. It was

always up to the people of Owego and their elected officials to decide what would happen with the memorial. Those I was with were exercising our freedom of speech as citizens to voice our concerns and perspective in our democratic system of government. Unfortunately, the media blew the disagreement out of proportion. I am speaking about this tonight because I believe we need to find ways to speak about things we may not agree on in ways which are respectful of one another and their perspectives, and not let them get blown out of proportion.

We come together as a congregation, committed to be part of this congregation. So we choose to give room for others who may hold opinions and beliefs we do not share. How do we stay connected? Do we avoid talking about anything we might disagree about? Or do we find ways to listen and speak so we can hear each other's perspectives and learn from them?

So why take the risk? Why stick our necks out? That is what I have reflected on a great deal after the last few weeks. What can we gain? We can be true to ourselves and learn from others being challenged to hear other voices and perspectives. I will be exploring this more on Yom Kippur.

We come together as a community, from many different places and life experiences. When we come together, we are not alone. Together we can move mountains, start small with pooling our resources, joint goals, working towards them.

That is why it is such a privilege to be a Reform Jew and to be a member of Temple Concord. I know you share my pride in our congregation. When you are active, come forward and lend your voice and your hand, we are like a symphony orchestra. Everyone plays a slightly different instrument. We are inclusive of all! When it's all put together, beautiful music can be made. That is the potential of our community!

I want to close with a story:

THE PENCIL MAKER

There once lived a wise pencil maker. He had an amazing ability to actually speak with his pencils. One day, just before putting one into the box for delivery, he took it aside.

"There are five things you need to know before I send you out into the world," the pencil maker told the pencil. "Always remember them and never forget, and you will become the best pencil you can be.

"First, you will be able to do many great things but only if you allow yourself to be held in someone else's hand.

“Second, you will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, but you will need it to become a better pencil.

“Third, you will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.

“Fourth, the most important part of you will always be what's inside.

“And finally, little pencil, you must leave your mark on every surface on which you are used. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write.”

The pencil understood and promised to remember, and it went into the box with purpose in its heart. For that reason, pencils are so useful that most planners and designers like to use them instead of pens.

MORAL

Like the pencil, we must remember that we will be able to do many great things - but only if we allow other human beings to access the many gifts we possess and reveal the different talents that are hidden within our best selves.

(From “A Piece of Peace” by a woman named Sharoq Almalki.)

I hope you will share your gifts and talents with us here and we can bring our best selves forward together.

Shanah Tovah Tikateivu

May you be inscribed for blessing in the new year!