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Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
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Treating Each Other with Extraordinary Respect: A Story of Five Monks, the Messiah, and the Lamedvovniks

This evening, I'm going to tell a story called "The Rabbi's Gift" adapted from a piece by Scott Peck.

It's a story about a monastery. This monastery had fallen on hard times. All its branch houses were lost. The main house was crumbling and decaying, it was just a shadow of what it once had been. Only five old monks still lived in the monastery. The order was dying.

Now the monastery was surrounded by a beautiful forest. And in the forest was a little hut. A rabbi from a nearby town occasionally spent time in this hut, so that he could think about the world away from his own community. One monk – the Abbot – along with the four other monks, always seemed to know when the rabbi had come to visit. They would whisper to each other, "The rabbi is in the woods! The rabbi is in the woods!"

One day, when the Abbot sensed the rabbi was near, he decided to pay him a visit. Maybe the rabbi would have some advice for him and his fellow monks as they agonized over the imminent death of the order.

The rabbi welcomed the Abbot into his hut. He began to explain the purpose of his visit: "Our monastery is dying," he explained. "There are only five of us left. I wonder if you have some wisdom for us, to help us save our monastery—" The rabbi could only shake his head and commiserate with the Abbot. "I understand. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore. The spirit has left the people.

The old Abbot and the old Rabbi shared stories. They studied together. When the visit neared its end, they embraced each other and wept. "How wonderful that we could spend these hours together," said the Abbot. "But I have failed in my purpose of coming here. Can't you give me some wisdom? Or some piece of advice that will save my order?"

“I am sorry,” responded the Rabbi as he shook his head. “I have no advice for you.” But as the Abbot took his leave, the Rabbi added, “The only thing I can tell you, is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, the other monks gathered around him. “What did the Rabbi say?” they asked. The Abbot shook his head sadly. “He couldn’t help. We just shared stories and studied together and comforted each other. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—” the Abbot paused.

“It was sort of strange. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I do not know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the monks pondered the rabbi’s message: “The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one of us? Did he mean the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he must have meant father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.”

“But maybe he meant brother Thomas. Everyone knows that Thomas is a holy man.”

“Or brother Elred?! Elred gets crotchety at times, but even so, he’s almost always right. Maybe the Rabbi meant brother Elred.”

“Surely not brother Philip. Philip is so passive, he’s a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He’s always at your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.”

And then each monk thought to himself: “Of course, the Rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. But what if he did? What if I am the Messiah?”

The monks went round and round and round – “What did the Rabbi mean? Who among us is the Messiah?” And as they did, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, because you know, one among them might be the Messiah.

Some people did occasionally come to visit the monastery in the beautiful forest. They would picnic outside its walls, wander along its paths, and meditate in its chapel. As they did, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect. It enveloped

the five monks, radiated out from them, and permeated the monastery. They sensed that this was a holy place, and the energy there beckoned them to return to the monastery, to bring their friends, and to be in the presence of the old monks.

Soon many people began to visit the monastery. They began to talk with the monks. They formed a sacred community that held a deep appreciation for one another. Some decided to join the order. Within a few years the monastery began to thrive – all because they believed that any one of them might just be the Messiah.

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As we begin these holy days together, we consider the *possibility* that some hidden person among us might be the Messiah. If the person sitting to our left, or the person sitting to our right, is the Messiah, we might *act better* – because this person, in Jewish tradition, is the one who will usher in a world of peace, a world without poverty and war, a utopian society rooted in justice and compassion.

Imagine if the person we run into as we hurry across the street with our head buried in our phone is the Messiah. Or that old friend or sibling we became estranged from. Or the child we gave up on. Or the parent we refuse to call. What would we do? How would we treat them?

This story, the "Rabbi's Gift," was originally written by Father Francis Dorff, but it reminds me of a Yiddish legend, which has its root in Talmudic teachings: The Rabbis teach that the world has no fewer than 36 righteous people at all times. The fate of the world is in their hands; *they* are the ones who will save the world from destruction.

The number 36 is made up of two letters, a lamed and a vov. In this Yiddish legend, the lamed and the vov are combined to create the lamedvovniks, a crew of 36 righteous people who are scattered throughout the world. No one knows who they are, and they do not know each other, and they may not even know that they are one of the 36. What's more, one of them is the Messiah. You or I or the person who joined us for the first time this evening might be a lamedvovnik, or even the Messiah.

And as we begin our holidays together, I invite you to consider what would happen if we assumed that one of us is the Messiah. Like the monks, we would

begin to act differently. Individually and collectively, we would change. We would develop personal and communal expectations that we should reach out to someone in need. That we should bring a meal to a newcomer who is ill, give an elder a ride to synagogue, sit with a widower when he is in mourning. We would be quick to welcome the stranger and slow to criticize our neighbor.

We would foster real connections with each other, cultivate deeper friendships, and become more open, more vulnerable, and more trusting. We would prioritize a sense of mutuality and cooperation.

From this place – of respect and love for others – we could immerse ourselves in social justice work. Our organizing and activism would be based on a religious belief that every human being should be treated with dignity, experience real freedom, live in a society that is just and compassionate, drink clean water and breathe clean air, have good health care and shelter and food to eat.

Imagine the possibility that any human being among the billions who walk this earth *might* be a lamedvovnik. We would not tolerate hunger or war. We would not tolerate the vast, inexplicable disparities in our world. We would instead see each person as a precious individual, deserving of our love and care. Because they might be a lamedvovnik. They may even be the Messiah, the one to usher in a world of peace.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us begin to greet our neighbor, or our family member, or our friend, or the new person sitting alone, or the stranger among us as if they are the Messiah. Because maybe, just maybe, they are.

Wishing you a shanah tovah, a healthy and sweet new year.