Social Infrastructure
Rosh Hashanah • September 2019
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Before I begin my remarks, please take a moment and turn to the person sitting next
to you on your left and say to them, “Gut yom tov. You look wonderful today.” Now please
do that to the person sitting on your right. Feels good, doesn’t it?

Let me begin this sermon with a question. How many of you know that St. John’s
Lutheran Church in Ambler closed this past year? It is a tiny little neighborhood church that
has been a community anchor for over 100 years. I have been in that church many times,
most recently to stand with the pastor as she stood up to White nationalist who threatened
them for resisting racism in America. Their pastor stood with us following the shooting in
Pittsburgh and has demonstrated wisdom, inclusion and a progressive understanding of
Christian doctrine. Now the church is closed and its assets will be sold off. The membership,
if they are mobile enough, will scatter to the remaining Lutheran churches in the area.

Did you know that one of New York’s oldest Reform synagogues sold it’s building last
month? The Syracuse shul, Concord Temple was founded in 1839 but its membership only
has 350 families, a decline from over 800 in the 1970s and 80s. So the magnificent building
with its stain glass windows and carved mahogany will become luxury apartments for
Syracuse University students. I find this tremendously sad.

We are witnessing, all across this country, before our very eyes a shift in culture. All
across Philadelphia and beyond, with Beth Or a unique exception, we are witnessing a
staggering number of synagogue and church mergers and closings. Reform, Conservative
Orthodox, mainline Protestants and evangelical houses of worship are all contracting.
Ironically, as the Middle East is becoming increasingly religious, we are seeing a marked
decline in our civic and religious communities in the West. Some will tell you that its only
liberal houses of worship that are in decline and that more fundamentalist institutions are
growing, but this is not the case. We are all witnessing a dramatic decline in membership and engagement. I wish it were not true, but it is.

Churches and synagogues are not just places of faith, but rather of social capital and community. Here, we meet each other. Here we debate each other. Here we tear down the walls of loneliness and build what is essential for our world. Here we turn to one another, to our right and to our left and build community.

I have often thought that we can never all agree on our values and principles. I am well aware that there are Blue Jews and Red Jews, those that on the Fourth of July would have gone to the steps of the Library of Congress for the Carol King Concert and there are others who would have gone down the street to the Lincoln Memorial for the "Salute to America" parade. We will never all speak with one voice. And that’s fine. But we do need to get together and find places where we can share our life’s struggles and values. We need places of common ground where we can talk to each other and learn from one another.

So this morning I want to talk about the importance of a term I call, “Social Infrastructure.” I learned it this summer at Chautauqua from an NYU professor, Eric Klinenberg. He argues quite convincingly that our day and age is being transformed from a society where we used to have social networking to a world where everyone is essentially alone and civic life is rapidly becoming a phenomenon of the past.

Of course, we need physical infrastructure to function. We need good roads and bridges and we are rightly concerned that our bridges are decaying. Our roads are filled with potholes and our transportation system is so antiquated and in need of expansion that it is costing commuters billions of dollars in lost business opportunities. Well, we need to worry about our crumbling social infrastructure too. In fact, I sometimes think that this is more important. Social infrastructure is our oldest and most powerful resource for turning disconnected "I"s into a collective “we”. It’s the alchemy that turns selfish genes into selfless people, egoists into altruists, self-interested striving into empathy, “just me” into sympathy and compassion for others.

From this pulpit I see, what you already know to be true. Public engagement is down in favor of a more self-centered life. We are shifting from a world of faith and communal involvement to a life that is defined by our jobs our posts and our Linkdin profile.
We are taking more selfies than photos of others. A life of service is being replaced by one of entitlement. For generations our social fabric was built on public institutions like churches, synagogues, community centers and libraries. Now they are disappearing and we are becoming increasingly lonely.

In 1950 22% of Americans were single. 4 million people lived alone, which accounted for 9% of all households. Today, 50% of all Americans are single. 31 million souls live alone, which accounts for 28% of all households. One in four homes in America have only one person living in them. Now many people become single following a unique path. Some suffer the death of a loved one, or a divorce. Some are single just having graduated from college and are making their way, and others choose to be single, rather than settling for any partner. But the truth is, this is a profound change in the landscape of our country.

Public spaces are closing and apps are opening. We are looking up less into the face of each other and increasingly looking down into our cell phones. Take a look at people walking down the concourse at the airport or walking down the streets of Philly. So many are just walking like Zombies starring into their screens. So much looking down has resulted in an evolutionary change to our skeletons. Recent studies have observed that in the bodies of the young, we are growing a bone spur at the back of our necks, because of continuous downward gazing. It's not just our culture that is changing, it's our very evolution, our posture, our outlook. We are congregating less in communal places where we engage our neighbor and are moving to places of isolation. Our public places of civic engagement are being replaced by Amazon stores, Starbucks coffee shops, charter and cyber schools and for a while, until they started closing, malls.

I live in a neighborhood of 81 homes. This past month, the HOA organized a picnic for the families. Laurie and I thought, it is good to know your neighbors and build some relationships with the newer families that have moved in. So we went. It was a crazy day for us. I had Sunday school in the morning, and unveiling in the afternoon, and the Confirmation class over to our home at 5. But we thought this neighborhood gathering was important. Ten families showed up. You may so, “so what?” What does it matter if or where people congregate? Societies change and we should adapt to that evolution of culture.
Well it does matter. At the malls people talk about merchandise. At the coffee shops people speak about their job prospects and resumes. They stare in isolation into their computer monitors or phones, rather than engage with each other. In charter schools, rather than public schools, the values taught might be devoted to a particular religious practice, ethnic culture that can run contrary to our American unity and civic priorities. In Libraries we discuss the arts, sciences and literary ideas. At places of worship, we discuss matters of politics, and civic engagement and yes, occasionally even God.

My synagogue in Miami Beach helped shape me into the man I am today. My Rabbi, Cantor and teachers gave me many of the values I hold to this day. Fortunately, my childhood shul is still strong but that is not the case for many others. How many still have their childhood synagogue still open?

I also went to a public school, as did my children. And in my public school, I learned to get along with all sorts of people who were not like me. That is a critical value today and we are losing that institution, especially in Center City. In no time, we will see our Philadelphia public schools collapse and the children in them fail, not because the schools and teachings are inferior but because the most troubled and disadvantaged students will end up going to there, with more privileged children going to private, cyber and charter schools. Public schools must survive because it is in the melting pot of these schools that we build up our communities.

Raise your hands if you went to public school when you were a child. It worked then for you and me. I am not so sure that is happening for most of the children of Philadelphia.

Drive down Franklin Parkway and tell me what do you see? You will see the great civic institutions that were built by last century’s leaders: an art museum, a science museum, a natural history museum, a cathedral, a public fountain and a Free library. Tell me what new great public institutions are we building in Philadelphia today: I can think of two: Sporting stadiums where we go to compete, yell obscenities and support professional gladiators and Casinos, where mostly the elderly go to smoke, drink and play the slots. I find it rather sad, that the great civic buildings of today are modern coliseums to compete and the loneliest places imaginable, casinos. Have you ever looked at the faces of people playing the slots?
They do not look engaged with others and they most certainly do not look happy, despite the ads on T.V.

As a child, I remember my mother making coffee in a large percolator. She would invite neighbors over for a cup. She kept a frozen Entenman’s coffee cake in the freezer just in case company would stop by? I was told to never touch that coffee cake just in case, she would open her doors to a neighbor just stopping by. Now, no one just stops by. And if you do, you have to call from the driveway to make sure you don’t get shot walking up the driveway. I’m exaggerating, I know. But it has changed. Today, should someone just stop by our home, we hide and pretend that we are away. We crouch low and crawl in our kitchens so that the person standing outside doesn’t see that anyone through the window. Instead of coffee cake, we have a ring doorbell that communicates with the intruder from wherever we may be without having to actually be there. How our social contract has changed.

Our national mantra is no longer “We’re all in this together”, but rather “I’m free to be myself.” Even the tourist motto of our great commonwealth has been changed from “You got a friend in Pennsylvania,” or “America starts here,” or even, “Pennsylvania Memories last a lifetime,” to, now I can’t make this up, “Pursue your own Happiness.” I find this marketing lingo that celebrates me and me alone on my singular quest for joy, terrible and a far cry from our previous slogans lifting up friendship, Independence and family memories. Unwittingly we are destroying ourselves.

While so many are rightly focusing on the opioid crisis, I want to bemoan another often ignored problem, that results ,in many cases, from loss of social infrastructure. Almost a quarter of 14-year-old girls have self-harmed in the course of a year? This is a deeply disturbing trend. A fascinating book, iGen, is a thoroughly researched study of American children born in or after 1995: the first generation to have grown up with smartphones. Jean Twenge, its author, observes that rates of life satisfaction among American teenagers has plummeted since 2012, while depression and suicide has rocketed upward.

It’s no surprise, but the author notes what we intuitively know; social media and smartphone addiction has played a significant part in this pathology. Young people are spending between seven and nine hours a day on their phones. The result has been a loss of social skills, shortened attention spans and sleep deprivation, but above all, anxiety. There is a
new fear among teenagers today. It’s called, (FOMO), which stands for “Fear of Missing Out.” Kids are constantly comparing themselves with the glossy images of their contemporaries, they are constantly posting pictures of themselves doing fun things often staged, to create the impression that they are on the “in circle.” And it is making them according to Twenge, “scared, maybe even terrified.” They are “both the physically safest generation and the most mentally fragile.”

Alone we are so …… alone. Without a shared history or community, we are left as anxious individuals, lonely, vulnerable and depressed, struggling to survive in a world that is changing faster than we can bear and becoming more unstable by the day.

We need to get to know each other and build up the social connectivity of each other and we need to start in our own community. A few months ago, 32 Beth Or Members went to see Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish. Not only were we moved by the production, but we built relationships with each other as we travelled together. Meals that matter, Sisterhood and Brotherhood gatherings, Israel trips, like we had this summer, board retreats, Shabbat services with open dialogue after the sermon and so much more, all build up our social infrastructure. I ask you if you have not engaged with us, please do. Look at the calendar, find something and participate. It’s good for us and it’s great for you.

Elie Wiesel once asked: “What does it mean to be a congregation? It means to care about each other. Pray? We can pray at home. We come together as a congregation in order to share in each other’s lives and in order to share in the life of the Jewish people — past, present and future.” We come together to listen to each other and respect each other’s differences.

Once the Gerer Rebbe decided to question one of his disciples: ‘How is Moshe Yaakov doing?’ The disciple didn’t know. ‘What!’ shouted the Rebbe, ‘You don’t know? You pray under the same roof? You study the same book? You serve the same God? — Yet you tell me that you don’t know how Moshe Yaakov is, whether he needs help or advice or comforting? How can that be?’

The truth is that people may join Beth Or because of our wonderful programs and our offerings, but you will stay because of the relationships and friendships that you make here. I need to tell you something about the importance of this community. A young boy of ten
years old in Beth Or suffers from cancer. He has had numerous surgeries, chemo treatments and doctors’ visits. I visit him regularly and stand with his parents who are beside themselves with worry. Then one day, they tell me that they are flying to Boston to get a second opinion as they confront some tough choices. You see, he may need another more serious surgery. I ask, casually, “On what airline are you flying?” They tell me, “Jet Blue.” “But how can he sit in a coach seat, with much of his body in stitches, and with braces on his legs?” I ask. They tell me, forcing a smile, that they have bulkhead seats. But I can’t imagine this boy, who has never been on an airplane, by the way, flying to Boston, all scrunched up in coach. I get in my car and I call a member of our community. I tell them the story. And in ten seconds they offer to fly him up in a private jet to Boston. Their only concern is whether or not he can climb the eight metal steps up to the plane. I call the family...they say he can. And it is done. So a young boy with so much tzurers and his parents, with so much heartache, flew in comfort and style, for this little boy’s first airplane ride. Rather than dreading the trip to see more doctors, he looked forward to it. And it’s all because of a member’s generosity and huge heart. This wouldn’t have happened outside of a community like ours. We need social infrastructure. It’s what keeps us whole.

That is why so many of us are members. That is why we belong. Not so we can receive, but so we can have the mitzvah of giving.

The great British author, Henry James called America a “hotel culture.” A hotel is where you eat and sleep, but never fully unpack and move in. You never set down roots. You never really own the place. You can mess up your room knowing that while you’re out, someone else will come and straighten up. You care nothing for the people who live next door for soon you’ll be checking out and moving on. Sovereignty matters; not responsibility. The customer has no attachments, only a series of limited-liability partnerships... In a moment of crisis, he’ll call for Emergency Roadside Judaism. Otherwise, he keeps his distance.

As a country, as individuals, as citizens...we needs to reject the hotel culture in favor of the “shul culture.” We need to reject the hotel culture in favor of the Beth Or culture, where we care about each other. Help each other. Talk to each other. Cry with each other and fight with each other. We need Jews who are more than just a consumer of services who
check in and check out. We need congregants who come together and value, create and support the foundation of our civilization and build a lasting social infrastructure.

This is our place of social infrastructure. It is not only vital to this shul’s future; it is the bedrock of America, the foundation of society. It will keep our children happier if they are a part of the community. They may not know it, but they need it. My friends, together, in shul, we are stronger, safer, healthier and, believe it or not, we are better off we have an Entemanns frozen in the freezer just in case.