

Rabbi Rochelle Tulik
Kol Nidrei 5784
Holy Community

Two weeks ago, I had this great plan. I'd start Rosh Hashana talking about how we are all holy, how we are sparks of the divine and that it is our job on earth to recognize the good in ourselves and others and work to bring out the holiness all around us. Then I'd come back tonight and talk about how we are all part of a holy community. That the holiness we have inside and strive for can only reach its full potential when we join together. That true holiness can only be felt, experienced, and shared in community. That was my plan. Go from the individual to the communal. Shed light on this amazing community and highlight how because of the sparks of holiness in each individual, TBK is a true kehillah kedosha - a shining holy congregation with a b'rit kodesh - a holy covenant, holy commitment to spreading our light, our love, our holiness throughout the greater community and the world. That was my plan. It was a good plan. And then, it wasn't.

Then three minutes into our Erev Rosh Hashana service, a strange voice rang out in our sanctuary. A voice trying to darken our light, steal our sparks of holiness. A voice quickly controlled and removed. But echoing still in our halls and our hearts. It was more than a disruption. It was a shockwave and a reminder. A reminder that no space is ever free from darkness. No matter how bright our light, there is darkness in this world. And no matter how hard we try, sometimes the darkness can pierce the light.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner teaches that

there are two ways to understand our relationship with God: God can be above us or we can be within God. In the first, it is possible for us to have a relationship *with* God. There are two discrete parties who can each behave freely and independently. And since God is *other* than the world, there must be some things which are *not* God: A devil, an evil instinct, the “dark side of the force.” Evil has its own independent existence. It is in business for itself.

In the second model, [Rabbi Kushner continues], we are *within* God; we are one with God. God is everywhere and everything. All being derives its reality from God. According to this paradigm, if God is within all creation, then what *appears* as evil can only be a distant, albeit distorted, expression of the divine. This doesn’t make it “good.” But nothing can be entirely separate from or independent of God. Everything, therefore, is the way it is “supposed” to be.

Last week I assured you that you are holy - by virtue of being and through your actions in the world. And you are. You are as holy as you make yourself; whether you see it in yourself or need help recognizing it.

Some would argue that the most important part of being holy is embedded in community. And that to truly be holy, or to be fully holy, we must be part of a community. That true holiness can only exist in community because our sparks are the same sparks of God. Our goodness came from the same place.

And the way to bring holiness to the world is to bring those sparks together.
To gather together in prayer, in love, in acts of service and acts of compassion.

You are holy and our collective holiness creates this holy community. Another teaching from Rabbi Kushner reminds us of this. He writes:

(Jigsaw)

There must have been a time when you entered a room and met someone, and after a while you understood that unknown to either of you there was a reason you had met. You had changed the other and [they] had changed you. By some word or deed or just by your presence the errand had been completed. Then perhaps you were a little bewildered or humbled and grateful. And it was over.

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
For some there are more pieces.
For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.
Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.
And so it goes.
Souls going this way and that.
Trying to assemble the myriad parts.
But know this. No one has within themselves
All the pieces to their puzzle.
Like before the days when they used to seal
jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that
All the pieces were there.
Everyone carries with them at least one and probably
Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.
Sometimes they know it.
Sometimes they don't.
And when you present your piece
Which is worthless to you,

To another, whether you know it or not,
Whether they know it or not,
You are a messenger from the Most High

Being holy is being connected. Helping someone complete their life's puzzle. Accepting a puzzle piece from a stranger - even when we don't know we need it; even when we don't know we found it. Being holy isn't just about following this mitzvah or that mitzvah. We are holy because God is holy. And God is holy because God is in each of us. The sparks of life and love. The puzzle pieces we need from friends and strangers alike. And the ones we share with friends and strangers alike.

When we come together we say to fear, you have no home here. We say to the darkness, you will not dim my light. When we come together, we are a holy community. We carry the light of hope and love and hold each other up and accountable. We complete each other. When one of us is weak, another is strong. When one is scared, another is calm.

Everything is the way it's supposed to be. Even the scary things. And that can be hard to hold on to. That's why there are so many people who struggle with God. How can a god that is supposed to be good, allow evil? Allow pain? Allow that man to stand up in our sanctuary and pierce our joyous singing with words of hate. Allow that man to darken our light, push us to fear. How can I find a place for a God like that in my world?

But it's not just my world. And I don't understand it. I don't understand how sometimes broken bodies heal themselves, and sometimes they don't. I don't

understand why some babies are born healthy and some aren't. Why sometimes we listen to our hearts instead of our heads, often to the detriment of both. Why we do things we know are bad for our health, our environment, our world. I don't understand complex math problems or health insurance forms. I don't understand a lot in this world.

I do understand and fully believe that there is holiness in each of us. Including the man who interrupted our service. I believe in the story I told that evening - I believe that sparks of the divine are inside every aspect of this world. In you and me. And that when we come together the sparks grow brighter. Bright enough to drive out the darkness. Bright enough to conquer the fear.

Because I believe we have to. When we let fear control our lives, the darkness has won. There will be times when the darkness finds its way into the light. It is how we respond to that darkness that matters most. The holiness within us, the sparks of the divine that shine throughout this community, when gathered together, can not be dimmed. The man whose goal was to strike fear into our hearts was defeated. He was subdued within three seconds, removed in less than one minute. And we carried on, welcoming the new year with song, prayer, love, and light. Sparks of the divine. A holy community.

I hope National Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman wouldn't take offense to this slight adaptation of her poem New Day's Lyric:

*May this be the day
We come together.
Mourning, we come to mend,
Withered, we come to weather,
Torn, we come to tend,
Battered, we come to better.
Tethered by this year of yearning,
We are learning
That though we weren't ready for this,
We have been readied by it.
We steadily vow that no matter
How we are weighed down,
We must always pave a way forward.*

*This hope is our door, our portal.
Even if we never get back to normal,
Someday we can venture beyond it,
To leave the known and take the first steps.
So let us not return to what was normal,
But reach toward what is next.*

...

*Come, look up with kindness yet,
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,
But to take on tomorrow.*

*We heed this old spirit,
In a new day's lyric,
In our hearts, we hear it:*

...

*For when you honor yesterday,
Tomorrow ye will find.*

*Know what we've fought
Need not be forgot nor for none.
It defines us, binds us as one,
Come over, join this day just begun.
For wherever we come together,
We will forever overcome.*

Kedoshim t'hiyu ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem.

You will be holy because I, Adonai your God, am holy.

This phrase is written in the plural - it is speaking to the collective, to the community. You all will be holy - this community is holy - because I, Adonai your God, am holy. Because God is in each of us and shines most brightly when we come together, share our sparks, our puzzle pieces, our strength and our love. We are holy when our collective light drives out darkness and fear and we stand strong and proud together.