

**Liminal Space**  
***Rosh Hashanah 5784***  
**September 16, 2023**  
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**Temple Aliyah, Needham MA**

Tomorrow's sermon topic is bad Jew/Good Jew. *Those* are some loaded words  
But I'll unpack them tomorrow

Today's topic is community – compelling, thriving, energized community.

We stand today in an extraordinary moment. Look where we are: still coming back from too many years away from each other AND poised to welcome a new permanent rabbi. This is the definition of liminal moment– between what was and what will be. Liminal is from the Latin word 'limen', meaning *threshold*. A liminal moment is the time between 'what was' and 'next.' It is a place of transition, a time of waiting and not knowing the future.

The author and priest Richard Rohr describes liminal space as, “between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That’s a good space,” he writes, where genuine newness can begin.” I agree. It *is* a good space, but I also know that inhabiting liminal space induces some anxiety– there’s a lot of uncertainty about what comes next and about who we are going to be when we cross that threshold.

I don't know what comes next.

But I do know who we are and who we can be.

I know many but not everyone in this room. So by way of introduction, I have been a part of Temple Aliyah since the birth of our third child. My family came here as I was planning to take a *few* years away from full time congregational work. My good friend Carl Perkins suggested we might be happy in this community where perhaps I could engage in some part time work. That was 26 years ago, and I have been devoted to Temple Aliyah ever since.



I know this community as a congregant – *that's* where I sit for services when I'm not on the bima. As interim rabbi for the fifth time, I know the inner workings of this community and its leadership. And I've seen the workings of other congregations, too. I have served as interim twice in another local shul. I have been a guest scholar and visitor at congregations across the country. I've seen highly successful and less successful synagogues. Having seen a lot of synagogues, here's what I know about Temple Aliyah.

We have good bones. Very good bones. We have leadership that is hardworking, creative, unusually generous with their time and their commitment. A rabbi emeritus who established a standard of learning and of *menschlikeit*. Guest darshanim, congregants who give a d'var Torah every Shabbat in the summer. We have a Hesed committee that will bring soup and a dose of compassion to any family beset by illness or a death or any heartache. I invite you to visit Sukkat Shalom, our beautiful new outdoor area. We built a gender-free bathroom because of our commitment to inclusion. My friends, we have a killer kiddush lunch. Joan Perlman is energizing the Merkaz Aliyah students and their parents. Under the loving leadership of Aileen Landau, our preschool Gan Aliyah has a reputation throughout the area as a nurturing school that celebrates each of our students. We have singers and dancers and storytellers whom you will see and hear at Cabaret night this spring. Serious learners and impressive bench of teachers (in addition to Rabbis Perkins and Splanky we boast scholars David Bernat and Harvey Shapiro). We have volunteers who are warriors for social justice. Through their efforts Temple Aliyah has adopted Afghan refugees who have become family members and just this week were approved for asylum! These social action leaders are planning a Civil Rights Journey to the American South for all adults in the congregation. We have generous donors – probably more than many of us know about because they keep their giving anonymous. We have secret weapons in Robin Metzger and Arnie Harris who bring their wisdom and generosity to bear in their nearly daily contributions to our community, and Naomi Litrownik who oversees the Shavuot sermon slam, Tisha b'Av services and leads Shabbat meditation. We have a cantor who will teach anyone to lead any service, or polish a Torah reading. And so we have every reason to set our sights on the greatness that lies ahead.

We are in a great place. We are starting from strength. But needs change and communities evolve; we are not the same as we were years ago and the world around us is not the same. We are in a liminal moment, so let's consider what we might become. What will it mean to be a thriving, compelling community in this

decade and in decades to come? You may not be surprised to know that I have some ideas.

I have an idea that we can be more a respected Needham institution. think The Hebrew word for what we can be is *kehila*. A *k'hila* is a gathering that is uniquely human and purposeful No other animals create a *kehillah*. And no transactional fee-for-services entity is a *kehillah*. It is a true community, what we might call a tribe.

I know we use the word *tribe* in a facile way: his last name is Miller do you think he's a member of the tribe. That is patently not what I mean. Author Sebastian Junger wrote a masterful exploration of homecoming and belonging called simply *Tribe*. He opens with a historical curiosity: In America's growth from colony to world power it was butted up against three thousand miles of howling wilderness populated by Native Peoples. The proximity of these two cultures presented both with a stark choice about how to live.

And in numerous historical accounts we read of Americans, mostly men who joined Indian society, married Indian women and lived their lives completely outside Western civilization. "The opposite almost never happened...frontier emigration always seemed to go from civilized to the tribal." There was something about the tribal world that attracted others and promoted loyalty and respect. In a tribe everyone shares. Everyone participates. Everyone is needed.

Let's call a community *tribal* if it creates a sense of belonging that is irresistible. I believe we have the elements of a tribe. If we nurture them, we will create a *kehilla*, a tribe with this *irresistible* sense of belonging. This is our task. *Now* is the moment. It's not something we hope our new rabbi will do for us. Before we even meet our new rabbi, we must know what we want our *kehillah* to be.

This opportunity to define ourselves comes at a moment in history in which tribes are particularly needed and especially hard to find. Church attendance has been declining across generations for decades. Since the pandemic, sociologists who study religion see a parallel to the quiet quitting phenomenon in the workplace. People have not stopped believing in God, or identifying with their religion, but church and shul membership are not providing the same structure and meaning that they once automatically did.

The challenge is broader than congregational affiliation. In his final book, *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes a deep move from the structures of

togetherness to the solitary self, the assertive “I”. This, he suggests, is a *cultural climate change* throughout the western world: “Divisive politics, inequitable economics, the loss of openness in universities and the growth of depression and drug abuse are not unrelated,” he writes. “They are the long-term consequences of an experiment embarked on throughout the west a half-century ago: the move from **we** to **I**.”

We live in a time of the elevation of the self – self-determination, self-realization, self-esteem, self-actualization and self-help. What might it mean about our society when the single most common cultural expression is the selfie?

One thing it means is a worldwide epidemic of loneliness. In many areas of life what people used to do together they now do alone. It’s not just shuls and churches that see declining membership. It’s clubs, teams, affiliations of all types. Increasingly we prefer to communicate electronically rather than face-to-face. Listening to music is no longer a shared activity – just me and my earbuds.

There are real health implications to this untangling of communal threads. The Surgeon General found that one in four adults in the US say they often or always feel lonely or socially isolated. “Quite simply,” he writes, “human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water. Hundreds of studies correlate loneliness with greater risk of coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, dementia, depression and anxiety. The impact of loneliness on life span is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is greater than the risk associated with obesity or excess alcohol consumption.

And there are health implications societally as well. The focus on **I** rather than **we** feeds and encourages political ugliness, mistrust of civic leaders, disinterest in viewpoints we do not already hold. Rabbi Sacks describes the need to think and act in the first-person plural: “The human condition is overwhelmingly about relationships – ...it is about consecrating the bonds between us.”

This is our moment to consecrate those bonds between us. We stand in a liminal space at just the right time. This is our moment to fashion a tribe. In a tribe everyone shares. Everyone participates. Everyone is needed.

We already have the bones needed for a tribe. How will we create those irresistible bonds? I don’t have a blueprint, but I do I have four modest suggestions for practices that will help us.

1 We will say hello to every single person we see in this building and on the grounds. Not just the official greeters or board members. We will **all** say hello to old friends and to new friends and especially to about-to-be friends. This is our

home, not an anonymous office building. Let there not be any friendless strangers within the walls of our home.

It seems small, it seems insignificant, but it is existential to our identity as a tribe and we have data that suggests we may not do it as consistently as we think we do.

2 With no exaggeration, the following words have been the difference between joining and leaving our shul: *would you like to sit with us at Kiddush* In a tribe we share our resources, the food at our kiddush, but we will also share something more valuable: our social capital, our network of friends. We will create an opening to becoming an insider, to belonging, to feeling needed.

3 We will consider the structure and flow of our Shabbat services, and not just for the enjoyment of those who already love our services. I have spoken about this before, so I ask your indulgence if you've heard this. We have long been responsive to needs of members who have physical barriers to full participation in congregational life. (Ramps, large print siddurim, audio aids, livestream for homebound predates COVID). And since the inception of the Mental Health Initiative, we have made explicit our commitment to welcoming congregants whose social emotional needs have kept them on the edges of full communal life.

But what about those members who are kept back not because of physical or social emotional need, but because they simply do not know how to participate in services? -I want to consider members of our community who can't keep up with the service, who might feel an attachment to prayer or an interest in Torah learning but who don't read or understand Hebrew. I am concerned about those members of our community who feel embarrassment or even terror when offered an honor, who just don't feel at home in our sanctuary.

What ramp, what handrails can we create for *these* members of our tribe? We can explore the idea of a service that is inherently less intimidating. Maybe it's shorter, maybe it includes more teaching, maybe it has less Hebrew. Happy to report we've taken a first step with transliterations available for all Shabbat and weekday services. I'd like to suggest we approach this topic deliberately, with voices representing those who would like to see change as well as those Shabbat regulars who love services just as they are: Those to whom the Hebrew is beautiful and familiar. Because many of our regulars do not want interruptions and explanations during the davening and they assuredly do not want any dilution to a traditional service. So this exploration will not be easy or obvious.

Say explicitly that not everyone is interested in TA for Shabbat and holiday services. We join a community or feel bound to a tribe for a wide range of reasons,

not just Shabbat services. Any entry point to our community is legitimate. This particular goal is not intended to hold Shabbat worship up as the only or most important reason to be part of the kehilla, but to address those feel stymied in their approach to services.

My final recommendation for building a tribe is (gulp) to disagree. I believe we can afford to disagree more. Most of us disagree respectfully and politely. But sometimes we demur. We don't want to be argumentative so we self-censor. The unfortunate result of that self-censorship is often disengagement. We just walk away.

Disagreeing is so so much better than disengaging. If we're looking for a role model for disagreeing, consider the sages Hillel and Shammai. They disagreed on everything. Everything. Nevertheless we read, "the men of Beit Shammai married women from the house of Hillel and the men of Hillel married women from the house of Shammai. They behaved with friendship and camaraderie toward one another, to fulfill that which is stated, "Truth and Peace they loved." Truth and peace they loved but they argued about everything.

We're going to figure out a lot about ourselves in the coming months, and we are not going to agree on every issue. **Tribe** does not equal **conformity** and our goal cannot be to stifle any thought or preference that diverges from a majority opinion.

Disagreeing does not mean changing someone's mind. Have you ever changed someone's mind in an argument? Disagreeing done right means deep listening, the kind of listening that helps us understand the other. And remember, in any disagreement the person who is doing the most talking is doing the least listening.

If we have the courage to disagree **respectfully** we will learn much about one another and we will discover the depth and richness and variation in our community. We will convey our willingness to hear the voice of every member.

We can be more than an institution. We can be a tribe, place with irresistible bonds of belonging.

As we become a tribe we will have to up our welcome game. We will have to pay careful attention to the ritual needs of our members, and we will have to be willing to endure some disagreements on our way to getting there. I believe we

**can** get there, because I know us. I have seen our capacity for kindness for learning and for growth.

There is a story of three workers who are employed cutting blocks of stone. When asked what they are doing, one says, “Cutting stone”. The second says, “earning a living”. The third says, “building a palace.”

We have some work ahead of us. Let’s build a palace.