

We're All In This Together: Community and Personal Transformation
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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5779 * September 9, 2018

Shanah Tovah. Happy 5779!

In 2014 the travel writer Tim Cahill had a near-death experience. On a rafting trip through the Grand Canyon he was suddenly tossed out of the boat mid-rapid. An expert swimmer, Cahill, at the time 71, was miraculously able to swim down river toward the banks of Tequila Beach where rafts finish their trips. Near shore, his friends caught up to him and hauled him out of the river where after a few sips of celebratory beer, Cahill promptly died.

Or, at least, he did for approximately four to ten minutes.

During that time a NOLS guide performed CPR on him as the remainder of Cahill's boatmates prayed for his survival. When Cahill told me this story at dinner about a month ago he kept repeating:

"the thing was,
that experience was so much easier for me than the team...
it was so much harder for the team!

When I came to I looked up into a sea of crying faces," he said.
"Where I just thought I'd taken a little swim and passed out."¹

I was struck by Tim's emphasis and concern for the team. It reminded me of a midrash from Vayikra Rabbah that many of you may know.² Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: There was a group of men on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling underneath him. The others said to him: What on earth are you doing?! He replied: What do you care?! Is this not

¹ Tim Cahill. "My Drowning and Other Inconveniences" in *Outside Magazine*, Sept. 5, 2017. Accessed Sept. 3, 2018. <https://www.outsideonline.com/2237326/my-drowning-and-other-inconveniences> & personal conversation at Book Passage August 2018.

² Vayikra Rabbah 4:6

underneath my area that I am drilling?! They said to him: But the water will rise and flood us all on this ship!

These parables are two sides of the same coin. In both Cahill's story and the Midrash we are reminded that an individual's actions always have an impact on the community. But in Tim Cahill's experience the rapid response he received from his community also had a profound, transformational impact on him. It literally saved his life. Something a good community can do for us all.

As I look out over our community gathered tonight I wonder at the myriad ways our interconnected lives have had an impact on one another in the past year. In many ways I want to be down there with you. To look into each of your eyes and to say, *Shanah Tovah*—how are you? No, but really how are you? What have been your joys and sorrows over these last twelve months? Tell me. And let me share mine with you.

And I hope that whether it is tonight or sometime throughout these ten days you'll have the chance to turn to your neighbor, or someone behind you or someone new and ask them the question: How are you? and make space for whatever response is given.

That is the beauty of these ten days.

A chance to reconnect with ourselves.

A chance to reconnect with community.

A chance to reconnect with the universe.

For me, and I believe for all of us--Rabbi Stacy, Cantor David, and Rabbi Lara--the sacred journey we will take together over the next ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur begins when we walk through the doors of the Civic Center, our annual homecoming, and the full force and beauty of our community is reunited.

We're here for different reasons I'm sure—some of us to feel a connection to family, some of us out of spiritual thirst, others because we just want to support the existence of synagogue life in Marin County—and maybe a few of you—I hope not too many!--because of some old-fashioned Jewish guilt. But no matter our reasons for gathering tonight our common prayer and united song compels us to reflect on our individual and interrelated lives. During the next ten days we are called upon to undertake the most difficult task of our year—

To conduct a *cheshbon hanefesh*—a soul-accounting—

We enter into a process of *teshuvah*—engaging in acts of apology and forgiveness with strained relationships in our lives...

And we even participate in **our own** near-death experience...

We contemplate the possibility that we may not be entered into the *sefer hachayyim*, the book of life, again this year

We feel viscerally our human frailty and the depths of life's immediacy.

It is no accident that we gather in community to do this most vulnerable of soul work.

We need each other as sacred witnesses to this monumental task.

A reminder that we are held and seen

Even if not fully in every moment.

A reminder that we are not alone.

A reminder that there are universals in human experience

And there are hopes and needs and yearnings and grief that unite us

In spite of the opinions and temperaments and different relationships to Judaism that may at times divide us.

For many months now I have felt inspired to speak about community this Erev Rosh Hashanah.

Because I believe in our community at Rodef Sholom and I believe in the Jewish community.

Because I believe strongly in the power of community to bring about personal transformation and the power of the individual in bringing about communal transformation.

And lastly, because I believe community, of all kinds, is a profoundly misunderstood, misused, and undervalued resource in 2018.

I think of this sermon as both a celebration and an invitation.

A celebration of all we in this room already know about the power of community, and an invitation to continue to grow and challenge ourselves through engagement in community.

Through the practice of community we can answer some of the most profound questions of our current moment:

1. Is civil discourse still possible?
2. How can we address the epidemics of our age—social isolation, the opioid crisis, the rising suicide rate and the rising cost of living?
3. How can we take care of ourselves and our families in such a fast-paced world?
4. How do we save the world and the environment from destruction?

It all begins with us. In our local communities. In our homes. At school. At the supermarket, in our synagogue, on our streets and in our neighborhoods. And we need to stop pointing fingers elsewhere at easy targets for a moment, at least a moment, if we are to engage in the true work of *teshuvah*. Structural inequalities stemming from those in positions of power are pervasive and real, but if we only shout the language of blame and righteousness, we will never be silent long enough to notice our own moments of complicity. One job of community is to shine a light on the

shadow parts of ourselves—our individual job is not to turn away when the light gets too bright.

I want to tell you that I have to laugh at myself a little as I speak these words because I was not always such a believer in community. In fact, I often avoided it. I came by that naturally. Raised by baby boomers to view individual expression and personal growth as a panacea, I am very much a product of generational trends we all know well. My mother pulled me out of no less than five different Hebrew schools because she thought none of the synagogues aligned with our spiritual needs.

I was the captain of the cross-country team who hated pep rallies. I had such little school spirit that I barely showed up to my college graduation.

I was the introvert who preferred the solace of a library, and while I always had plenty of friends I frequently turned down invitations to social events in favor of time with books.

An astrologer said to me many years ago—you have lived many lifetimes in the ivory tower (cue romantic image of myself as Sir Isaac Newton)...this is the lifetime where you need to come down and get a bit messy.

Man was she right.

I never could have imagined then the way being intimately a part of community, and remaining in community even through tough times, or even when I felt overexposed, would shape and transform me. And frankly, contribute to my personal growth in ways that just working with my own mind never could. It has been one of the most surprising and gratifying parts of my rabbinate. And I thank you all for the amount I have learnt about myself—the good, the bad, and the ugly--because of being in community with you. I don't have enough time to tell you the whole story right now, but I can

tell you it has been a profound experience for me. Maybe you know the feeling?

In this week's Torah Portion *Vayeilech* God speaks to Moses:

V'atah kitvu lachem et hashirah hazot v'lamda et b'nei yisrael shima b'p'hihem

Write down this song and teach it to the people of Israel, put it in their mouths. And Moses charges Joshua and the priests: *chazak v'amatz* be strong and resolute as you cross over to the promised land, and bring with you this song, and set it next to the Teaching beside the ark of the covenant so that it may guide you. The people Moses speaks to here is not the same generation that first left Egypt. In asking this generation to keep this song in their mouths Moses is asking the Israelites to forge a new identity. Finally, as they stand together overlooking the Promised Land, they are able to articulate the kind of society they intend to build.

And what kind of community did Moses have in mind?

A community that shuns idolatry.

A community that follows the commandments.

A community devoted to ethical monotheism through which a new notion of peoplehood would be forged.

From these early accounts of Jewish community we learn that membership in Jewish community has always demanded a sense of shared destiny, manifested in the obligation to care deeply for others through right speech and right action. The emphasis on community was so central that the Talmud says if one fulfills and is fulfilled by the needs of community one does not even need to pray.

We have been told by scholars and the mainstream media that this version of community with words like obligation and idolatry is no longer compelling to us today. Sociologists from Robert Bellah to Charles Taylor note the trend beginning in the 1960s away from authoritarian models of community in favor of the life of the individual spiritual seeker. This trend continues to flourish today and yet we know from scholars like Robert Putnam and Wade Clark Roof that people are feeling more isolated than ever, yearning for a sense of belonging, and often unsure where to find it. According to the Association of Psychological Science this is no longer just an American phenomenon. The trend towards individualist practices that value independence over interdependence is increasing globally.³ But again, if we look at the news over the past year the social isolation individualism can spawn does not seem to be making us happy. Building more walls is not working for us. Community may be an old trope, but its individual mode and method can be newly composed. It neither needs to be hierarchical nor univocal. Moses's words from *Vayeilech* are as relevant today as ever. It's time for us to learn to sing a new song. Because we all want to return to a sense of belonging without sacrificing our hard-won uniqueness. It is our task today to compose this community.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons why Hannah Gadsby's comedy special *Nanette* became the cultural phenomenon of the summer. If you haven't seen it yet, you need to. Gadsby ends her amazing sermon on social isolation, rape culture, shame, patriarchy, homophobia, and joke-telling at other people's expense by reminding us of the thing that ultimately saved Vincent Van Gough's life. "Do you know why we have the sunflowers" she

³ <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/individualistic-practices-and-values-increasing-around-the-world.html>.

says, “it’s not because he suffered. It’s because he had a brother who loved him through all the pain he had a tether and connection to the world. And that is the focus of the story we need. Connection.” More than anything we need to reclaim connection.⁴

I know that community can disappoint. And it often does. I know that appeals to community can be a skill for maintaining a harmful status quo. Communities can be bastions of call-out culture and shaming, Communities can unwittingly perpetuate cliques of insiders and outsiders. The Jewish community is no less guilty of this than any other in myriad ways that I don’t have time to outline here but of which we should all take note. Our Reform movement has been engaged in the practice of welcoming and inclusion now for decades and yet many individuals still feel like they don’t belong. Interfaith families and couples, singles, individuals post-divorce, empty-nesters, Jews of color, people who don’t believe in God, people who do believe in God, people who vocally support Israel, people who feel alienated by Israel, people who can’t read Hebrew or feel embarrassed by their level of Judaic knowledge...the list goes on and on. I can tell people and tell you until I’m blue in the face that I believe the Judaism of the 21st century is made more vibrant and far better by our diversity and that there is a place for everyone. But I’m only one person. That needs to be the message we all sing together in order to create the community we’re longing for. And while the structure of community is sometimes to blame, as individuals we also can’t give up so easily when we feel alienated or rejected. When we do we often miss an opportunity to learn more about ourselves or contribute to a communal transformation well within our reach.

⁴ Hannah Gadsby Netflix Special “Nanette” & “Seriously, We Really Need to Talk About Nanette” in *Wired*. July 7, 2018. Accessed August 25, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/hannah-gadsby-nanette-discussion/>.

Sadly, individualism vs. community is too often the binary we are offered. But I believe there is in fact a third way of looking at it.

I propose:

1. That we approach the possibility of community as interconnection that feeds and transforms us as individuals

And

2. The possibility that we think about our individual involvement as necessary to creating the community we long to be a part of.

Peter Block famously wrote: “we need to shift the focus from the problem of community to the possibility of community.”

So I’d like to take these last minutes to outline the possibility of Jewish community for transforming our lives and to celebrate some of the ways this is happening right here at Rodef Sholom.

1. Through community we break through the trance of our times.⁵

As a part of Rodef Sholom’s Real: Mental Health Initiative we hosted Serenity Shabbat last April. Members of our community spoke eloquently about addiction and repeated the phrase: “the opposite of addiction isn’t sobriety, it’s connection.” Addiction, to one thing or another, be it cell phone, social media, or substance abuse is a central trance of our times. As a member of our synagogue as sanctuary team put it: “involvement in our immigrant rights work provides an opportunity to make a positive impact on real people and ourselves. This empowers and steadies me through the constant barrage of negative news and events swirling around us on a daily basis, much of which I have no control over.” This discovery, that engagement in community can curb our anxieties, is profound. Wow. The opposite of addiction is connection and community.

⁵ Borrowed language from Mark Nepo *More Together Than Alone*.

2. Through community we learn to appreciate the other and hold tension and difference creatively Albert Einstein established that no one point of view holds the entire truth and the primacy of a community that holds one point of view is damaging. Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas affirm this through their philosophies of valuing and truly seeing and experiencing the other. In my experience, I marvel at how easy this is in the abstract and how difficult it can be in intimate community. We can rally on behalf of refugees from the Former Soviet Union or the Sudan, but we often forget that the “other” we may most need to honor is the person sitting right next to us.

I am most inspired by the possibilities engaging in conversation with one another right here on Israel-Palestine can have for our personal transformation and our growth as a Jewish community. It is the best practice I know for remembering to honor one another as a “thou” even as we disagree. The strength of our Jewish community and I believe our very souls depend on our ability to learn this lesson. In order to engage this lesson we must move away from statements like: “If you don’t support Israel you’re out of our tent.” Or, “unless you call Israel an Apartheid state you’re a part of the problem.” I’m sorry. Threats and shaming are not relational and they do nothing to strengthen Jewish community or human rights work. And if you feel resistance to what I’ve just said then we have a fantastic opportunity before us for real dialogue and authentic meeting. Possibility, not problem.

3. Through community we learn to resolve conflict and express our feelings constructively

Rabbi Hillel teaches us in Pirkei Avot: *Al tifrosh min hatzibbur*.⁶ Do not separate yourself from the community. Interestingly, in their philosophies

⁶ Pirkei Avot 2:5

Soren Kierkegard and Paul Tillich both define sin (or *cheit* as we call it on the High Holy Days) as estrangement from community.

Al Tifrosh min hatzibbur. But, this is easier said than done, particularly in a society that does not teach us how to engage in meaningful conflict-transformation. But some of the most rewarding aspects of community come from working through conflict together and expressing disappointment. Members of the Wise Aging group here at Rodef Sholom which began as an accompaniment group to walk alongside one another through the universal process of aging, also discussed the transformative work of conflict: “When conflicts came up in the group, we worked through them together. It’s the process of rupture and repair. When we got through them together we were stronger, closer, and trusted each other more as a result.”

I know there are times when as your rabbi I disappoint you (and if I haven’t yet I will). I know there are times when Judaism and Jewish community may disappoint you. I know there are times when Jewish community or my rabbis disappoint me. What are the possibilities for growing closer if we realize that our rupture may be a pathway to building something deeper with one another?

4. Through community we discover super powers we didn’t know we had.

I’m reminded of the powerful example of partisan community during World War II who in order to survive as a community in the forest and save thousands of Jews took on a complex system of new tasks and skills. But we don’t need to be living through times of hardship in order to learn our strength. One member of the sanctuary committee that co-creates and co-leads High Holiday services in the synagogue expressed that “working with the sanctuary committee has helped me uncover talents and skills in myself that now see the light of day thanks to the encouragement of

others.” Members of our *chevrah kaddishah* have learned to care for the dead in our community through the sacred work of *taharah* and *shmirah*—the guarding and washing of bodies. This intimacy with death has forced me to confront mortality in a way that has transformed my relationship to my family, my friends, and my own health in innumerable ways. A gift I know I only would have received from diving deeply into an intergenerational Jewish community.

5. Through Community we expand our hearts of compassion

Pirkei Avot warns us against the stance: “*Sheli, sheli; v’shelakh, shelakh.*” What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours.⁷ Rabbi David Ingber says that the mark of participation in spiritual community is that “who we are when we leave is different from who we are when we came in. We leave more open-hearted, more loving, more compassionate, and more connected with each other.”⁸ About a year ago I received phone calls from my friends throughout the Bay Area. How can we help the fires in Sonoma? I don’t know how to connect? These friends are not members of Rodef, but they knew we would be mobilizing a response. And sure enough, there is a list Moji made that is twenty-two bullet points long of all the ways all of you reached out to those in need through our community networks. This list is so astounding As a member of the board reflected—“when I went to volunteer at the shelter everywhere I looked there was someone else from Rodef Sholom!” Without being connected to a community like Rodef Sholom I know I would have just been another person on the phone wondering what to do like the rest of my friends.

6. And finally, through community we remember

⁷ Pirkei Avot 5:10

⁸ Rabbi David Ingber in conversation with Reb Zalman Schachter and Rabbi Dennis Prager June 12, 2011. Accessed Sept. 6, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lsRIJku_ak.

A couple of weeks ago I heard an episode about Alzheimers on KQED. A man recounted the story of his father who had not spoken or recognized anyone for at least three years. As the family gathered together around the Seder table and recited the blessings the man noticed his father's eyes lighting up. When the table arrived at the singing of Dayeinu the man heard a noise from deep within his father and all of a sudden, after three years of silence, he began to sing.

That is the power of community.

I feel so lucky to be a part of Jewish community and my gratitude grows with each New Year. When we say Kaddish together I feel my grandparents standing beside me. When I light candles with the Junior Jews I connect with the little girl inside me who also loved to sing bim-bam. When we study Torah together I feel all the rabbis of generations past arguing with us and I know what a privilege it is to live in a time when those opinionated voices include women, rabbis of color, queer and feminist rabbis and scholars and all the voices of *Am Yisrael* among them.

I have always loved Judaism, but Jewish community is a different story. I never could have imagined that actively choosing Jewish community—because it is an ongoing choice for all of us—could bring me as much joy and meaning as it has. Where I was once skeptical, I now know that the possibilities for personal transformation through Jewish community are tremendous.

If you listened to this sermon and are still looking that feeling of belonging we want to hear your voice.

And if you listened to this sermon and swelled with pride for our community Then I say simply, how wonderful it is to have encountered one another in this lifetime, right here, right now.

The *midrash* tells us, we're all on this ship together and every single one of us matters. So if you're feeling a leak or you've been tossed out of the boat let's find that life jacket together and swim to shore.

May 5779 bring us all a sense of rebirth, renewal, belonging & home.

And may that sense of belonging transform ourselves and the world.

Shanah Tovah

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