

A Community of Practice

Yom Kippur 5766

We gather during these Aseret Yamei Teshuvah, these ten days stretching from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, with a focus on renewal. We celebrated the birthday of the world last week, and now today we seek a similar kind of new beginning for ourselves. That is the promise of these days: that change is possible, that we can take new insight, new energy, new commitment into the new year. But if Yom Kippur, the Days of Awe, give us a kind of jumpstart in this effort, it's also true that this is something we need to be attending to throughout the year. Where do we find, how do we do, the work of continually renewing, challenging, deepening ourselves?

This past year I encountered two different images, two different responses, to that question, that I thought I'd share with you:

Here, on this V05 shampoo bottle, is one. It says: "Nourishing Oasis: Restore your hair and spirit." So here is one way that we can, theoretically, renew ourselves in an ongoing way. Every time I wash my hair, I can replenish my spirit.

Now, on the face of it, this sounds slightly ridiculous. "Restore your hair and spirit." But advertising folks are smart; this speaks to some deep desire in us. We want our spirits to be refreshed, but our lives are busy, we have much to attend to. We would like to believe that we could buy a bottle of soul rejuvenation, that we could experience some sense of renewal just by washing our hair.

The other example is something I encountered at a marvelous exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts this summer--The Quilts of Gee's Bend. It was a display of quilts made by women from the tiny community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, all of them descendants of slaves, carrying on a quilting tradition handed down via the women of the community for hundreds of years.

The quilts themselves have incredible beauty and power, there is wonderful complexity and freedom in the designs. They are works of art and they are also entirely functional, made by extremely poor women to keep themselves and their families warm at night. Made from cloth at hand—old work clothes, blankets, flour sacks.

As powerful as seeing the quilts was seeing a film about the women who'd made them, hearing them talk about their lives. They would work on these quilts after 10-hour days working in the fields, after cooking dinner for children and cleaning. Working on the designs individually, the women would come together to do the quilting, singing as they stitched.

My sense was that they did this, spent the wee hours of each night quilting, not only because they had to—because while they certainly needed blankets for their families, they didn't need to create works of art. They did this because it was something that nourished and replenished their souls. As such, it wasn't something they could achieve in the normal course of the day. It was something that had to be learned—daughters learning from mothers and grandmothers, learning

from other women in the community. And quilting connected them to something Godly—to their own powers of creativity, to others in the community. In this way, their quilting was, is, a spiritual practice. And the women of Gee's Bend formed, in this way, a community of practice.

I want to talk to you today about what it means to be a community of practice, to create such a community, and why we might want to. In one of my talks last year, I used the metaphor of creating a “Jewish house” in which to live, and I suggested some different activities and practices that might contribute to creating such a metaphorical dwelling. I’m thinking about this now at a different level, in a somewhat different way.

I’ve gained a lot in my thinking from reading a book called *After Heaven: Spirituality in American Since the 1950s*, by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow. Wuthnow’s analysis has helped me gain a handle on where we are today, as American Jews, what some of the challenges are as we attempt to find a meaningful Judaism for ourselves and our children.

Wuthnow begins by describing two different kinds of approaches to encountering and connecting to the sacred. The first he calls a “spirituality of dwelling,” and it is this spirituality that he suggests dominated American religious life through most of its early history, reaching both its peak and the beginning of its demise in the 1950s. In a spirituality of dwelling, the goal is to inhabit sacred space, a place where God somehow dwells. In a spirituality of dwelling, the sacred is experienced in an almost mundane way—it imbues the location where one lives, the community one grows up in. The home and the congregation are usually very central to experiencing one’s spirituality in this way.

We got a sense of this “spirituality of dwelling” in the two personal journeys that we heard about this year. On Rosh Hashanah, Stan invoked for us the all-pervasive Jewishness of his neighborhood in Brooklyn in the 1940s and 1950s, a place where even non-religious Jews kept a kosher home. This morning, Betsy described a sense of the sacred that she encountered at her grandparents’ house on Shabbat. In both cases, Judaism was not so much about personal connection to God as it was about community, family, and a link to ancient traditions. Wuthnow notes that our desire for dwelling causes us to associate God with churches and synagogues, allows us to have powerful feelings connected to memories of the homes in which we were raised, motivates us to seek attachment to new sacred places when we leave our communities of origin.

In the 1950s, according to Wuthnow, there was an increasing connection between relating to God and belonging to a house of worship. With so many people leaving small towns in rural America and ethnic enclaves in big cities and moving to the suburbs in the years following World War II, folks were seeking a new place to root themselves, and there was a boom in church and synagogue affiliation. Wuthnow gives this interesting statistic: in the 19th century, less than half the American population was affiliated with a local congregation. By the 1950s, affiliation was between 75-80%. As various trends caused Americans to be less rooted in one location, less deeply connected to a specific geographical space, people joined religious communities as one way to re-establish that sense of sacredness in dwelling.

Wuthnow then traces how, in the 1960s, the younger generation began rejecting much or all of what they associated with the communities and homes in which they grew up. Instead of a spirituality of dwelling, they engaged in a spirituality of *seeking*. Wuthnow distinguishes the two types of spirituality in this way:

“A spirituality of dwelling emphasizes *habitation*: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes *negotiation*: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they may have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality.” (pp. 3-4)

Again, we can see this pattern in many of the personal stories that our members have told at High Holydays over the years: stories that tell how leaving home and one’s community of origin also entails a rejection of beliefs and religious experiences from one’s childhood. Adulthood becomes a journey to find a different, more personally meaningful form of spiritual connection, whether that means trying out other religious practices, rejecting religion altogether, or finding a Reconstructionist congregation. Primary in a spirituality of seeking is a sense of freedom—of wanting to be able to choose one’s spiritual affiliation (or lack thereof), and wanting freedom of conscience when it comes to accepting or rejecting beliefs and practices.

What is interesting in Wuthnow’s analysis is that, for different reasons, both the spirituality of dwelling of the 1950s and the spirituality of seeking that’s predominated since the 1960s and ‘70s have tended to be fairly shallow. When religion was equated with belonging to a religious community, when being attached to a “house of God” implied that one was automatically in God’s presence, there was no real perceived need for introspection, for deeply wrestling with one’s beliefs. This explains the vacuousness that many people here may have felt growing up in synagogues in the 1950s and ‘60s (or even more recently). A spirituality of seeking, in contrast, emphasizes introspection and the importance of personal meaning. But its focus on personal choice makes it closely related to a general American consumer mentality. As Wuthnow observes about the 1960s and 1970s: “Spirituality, like hamburgers, was increasingly something one could get quickly and in a variety of places.” (p. 67) This shampoo bottle is a good example of how Madison Avenue has incorporated the language of a spirituality of seeking right into its sales pitch!

A spirituality of dwelling is no longer tenable in America, argues Wuthnow, because it assumes stability, homogeneity, and a kind of security which we simply no longer experience in our post-modern world. I would agree that a spirituality of dwelling is also no longer possible when it comes to meaningful Jewish life. Physical Jewish space just no longer means what it once did. Newton is a great example—here’s a town that’s at least one-third Jewish in population, that houses most of the major Jewish cultural institutions and a good percentage of the synagogues of the Greater Boston area, and yet walking around the streets, there’s no particular Jewish “flavor” here, like you might find in parts of New York. Jews in America have done a great job of assimilating, in many ways, with one result being that just having Jews living in the same

geographic area is no longer enough to give us a sense of Jewish space, of Jewish cultural territory.

And at the other end, a spirituality of seeking, as Wuthnow describes it, cannot sustain and nurture us in an deep or meaningful way. While folks seek new sacred ground, no real spiritual home can be found if one is free to pick and choose whatever suits a particular mood or feeling at a given time. In contrast to a spirituality of dwelling—which emphasizes an ongoing, stable sense of the sacred—a spirituality of seeking makes an assumption that we can only achieve fleeting glimpses of the divine. We experience Godliness, in Wuthnow’s words, as “relatively fluid, personalized, ephemeral, and amorphous.” Such a spirituality does not tend to demand much of us or to raise an expectation that the sacred can be encountered in an ongoing, transformative way.

As an alternative to both the “dwelling” and the “seeking” models, Wuthnow suggests that we need a return to something central to all religious traditions: **a spirituality of practice**. He defines spiritual practice as “a cluster of intentional activities concerned with relating to the sacred,” and notes that most of these sorts of practices are “imbedded in ordinary life.” (p. 170)

This definition could also be a description of traditional Jewish observance at its best. Wuthnow talks about spiritual practice as being about developing our capacity for discernment—our ability to discern what actions are appropriate when; our capacity for regular and intentional reflection on how we act on our values and refine those values. In traditional Jewish parlance, this is called “tikkun middot,” the repair of qualities. Jewish practice can provide a way of cultivating qualities of truth, compassion, humility, strength, wisdom, generosity, so that they manifest more fully and wholesomely in our lives. It’s a path of fostering a mindset of wonder and gratitude, of coming to understand our lives as a gift and a blessing.

Developing a Jewish practice is also about re-locating our personal narrative, our individual narrative of dwelling and seeking, within the “master narrative” of the Jewish story. In this way we can place ourselves within a story that stretches back thousands of years and that at the same time looks forward to a world transformed. Our tradition encourages us to see ourselves as direct descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah and Rivka, Rachel and Leah.

We are encouraged—demanded, even—to see ourselves as if we personally came out of Egypt, as if we personally received Torah at Sinai, as if we personally experienced the journeying in the wilderness towards a promised land. This invitation into our mythic history is a call to ground ourselves as spiritual beings; to understand our daily struggles and challenges and joys as part of a much bigger story.

What distinguishes spiritual practice from spiritual seeking is the basic assumption that practice has the potential to change our lives in significant ways. When we take on a practice, we are not looking for a frame to explain and give meaning to the life we are already living. We are not seeking merely to affirm the sacred aspects of our lives today, but to look for something beyond what is currently within our grasp. We need some kind of spiritual practice if we want to develop a deeper sense of meaning in our lives, something that can sustain us in hard times and

give us an abiding sense of joy; something that can help us live our lives more fully and with more wisdom.

Because the reality is that the world is not such an easy place. Instability, insecurity, uneasiness permeate our culture, dominate the headlines. Yet this is the world we live in, the only one we have to live in. The reactionary response to this reality is to worship a fantasy of the past, a world in which every family is intact, in which everyone knows their place, in which gender roles and sexuality and relations between parents and kids and between the races are clear and easy and familiar. In such a world we know exactly where God dwells—right here in America, of course—and we know exactly what God wants.

But however popular this approach might be in this historical moment, worshipping fantasies of some patriarchal yesterday is not really a very good strategy for living a Godly life in the here and now.

Judaism has something quite different to offer: a treasure trove of over two thousand years of practices intended to bring a sense of the sacred, of that which is Godly, into lives which are marked by instability, by unease, by anxiety. For surely, we are an anxious people! We know in our *kishkes* the inherent instability of the world, the reality of exile, the uneasiness of losing one's home. Whatever our nostalgia for Anatevka and the Lower East Side, we also know that ultimately we can't find stability by looking to the past. Rather, we need to seek our spiritual home in this moment, in this place where we find ourselves.

And this place, Dorshei Tzedek, is the Jewish home in which we now find ourselves. I know that our members join this congregation for many reasons: to educate children, to find a community of like-minded people, to mourn a parent, to find a meaningful Jewish spiritual home. Some folks may not be entirely sure why they've joined, beyond a sense that a Jew should belong to a synagogue.

All of these are perfectly good reasons for joining this synagogue or any synagogue. But what I am interested in is this: regardless of why you join this congregation, what is going to sustain your involvement? What is going to make your membership here a meaningful, potentially transformative aspect of your life? And beyond each of your personal experiences, what is going to make Dorshei Tzedek a meaningful force in the world, a community that exists for more than just the satisfaction of its own members?

Answers to those questions will, hopefully, begin to emerge in the process of planning and visioning that we are undertaking this year; answers to questions about why this congregation exists and what your involvement in it is about, or could be about.

Another way of approaching those questions is to ask this: what would it mean for Dorshei Tzedek to become, among other things, a community of practice?

In suggesting that, I am assuming a few things. The first is this: that Jewish practice has an enormous amount to offer us, if we seek to live lives that are more grounded, more wholesome, and more effective in terms of truly living our values. Whether it's making Shabbat a real

component of our week, or grappling seriously with the role of money in our lives, or awakening in ourselves our capacity for gratitude, for wonder, for generosity, or whether it's deepening our relationship to God—Judaism has insights, techniques, texts and traditions to help us and to challenge us. A serious Jewish practice is about wrestling seriously with what the universe asks of us. It's about becoming open to the way that Godliness manifests in our lives, and how we find and stay on a path that asks us and enables us to become our fullest selves.

The second assumption I am making is that taking on a real Jewish practice is not possible as a solitary individual. A community of practice is essential on such a path. The Buddhists call it *sanga*; in Judaism we talk about *minyan*, *kehillah*, *hevrutah*. Judaism cannot imagine a solo practitioner. We need ten people to davven, to pray with; we need a community to practice chesed, lovingkindness, in; we need family and friends to celebrate Shabbat and holidays with; we need a *hevrutah*, a partner, to help us wrestle with holy texts.

Like anything else in life, a meaningful activity that enriches our lives can't be bought in a store, can't be found in a book or achieved in ten minutes. If you want to be good at tennis, you have to play tennis, you have to find people who can teach you techniques for playing tennis, you have to find partners to practice with. Same for playing an instrument, or becoming a great cook, or learning to climb mountains. Unlike a bottle of shampoo, and much more like the work of creating beautiful quilts, a spiritual practice demands something of us. It demands a certain level of commitment, and of discipline. And as I saw, watching the women of Gee's Bend gathering together around the quilting frame, it's not just about the end product. The practice is both the path and its own reward, a means that is also an end in itself.

Many people who are searching for a synagogue join Dorshei Tzedek because of its relatively intimate size and it's strong sense of community and connection. For that reason, there is often anxiety expressed around growth—everybody seems to want Dorshei Tzedek to stay exactly the same size as it was when they joined. But to my mind, this anxiety is misdirected. Instead of worrying about Dorshei Tzedek getting too big , I think we would do better to think about how we can create a strong community of practice. Because a congregation cannot be solely based on ties of friendship or on neighborhood connections—although of course friendship and geographical proximity help deepen our connections to one another. What will make Dorshei Tzedek a strong community, a meaningful community, a close community, is to become a community of practice.

For example, people who practice Shabbat need other people to do it with. We need one another to experience the flow of Shabbat time from Friday evening through Saturday night, to have meals together, go for Shabbat afternoon walks together, to support one another in hard decisions around kids' activities, turning off the television, not going in to work.

Dorshei Tzedek can be a place where we bring our ethical dilemmas, our questions about God and spirit. It can be a place where together we figure out how to educate our children into being *menschen*, ethical citizens of the world. It could be a place where we wrestle together about giving tzedakah in an effective way, where we challenge one another about living lives and taking actions that promote sustainability, justice, peace.

Chesed is a practice, and we have opportunities to explore together the practice of fulfilling the commitment to care for people in our families, in our community, in need. Dealing with loss in our lives—the loss experienced in divorce, around death, the loss of a job, the instability experienced around serious illness—this is also an area for practice, an area where we can share guidance and support. Not just to express our feelings, but together to work on developing the qualities, the habits of heart and mind, that can help us deal with some of the difficult things that life hands us. When we fail to do so, we can become reactive, fearful, angry—we can compound our suffering and hurt both ourselves and other people in our lives.

A spiritual journey should not, does not, need to be a lonely experience. Even as each of us is unique and has our own challenges and questions to answer, we can learn so much from one another, we can support one another in ways we have only begun to explore.

I know that one thing that emerged during this past year, while I was on my sabbatical, was the extent to which Dorshei Tzedek depends on me and is centered in certain ways around me. I had an interesting conversation this past winter with my colleague and teacher Rabbi Sheila Weinberg about the role of the congregational rabbi. Sheila noted that in non-Orthodox Jewish communities, where the rabbi is often one of the few people engaged in an ongoing and intentional way with Jewish spiritual practice, it is inevitable that the rabbi will become the energy center of the community. When congregants are not actively engaged in their own Jewish practice in a serious way, the rabbi—and the other Jewish professionals in the community—become the main locus of Jewish energy and commitment, the source which everyone else needs to be nourished and energized by.

Sheila suggested to me that this is ultimately untenable for the rabbi—it makes us burn out. And it's also not so great for the community. How much more energy and creativity and spiritual power would be available to all of us, if this were a congregation organized around the practice of its members, not just that of its rabbi?

In such a community of practice, my role would be that of teacher and guide, perhaps occasionally of inspiration. Yet you would also be those things to one another, and to me.

I don't mean to suggest in any way that no one in this room has a serious Jewish practice, or a serious spiritual practice, already. I know many of you do. What I am looking forward to exploring with you this year is the ways in which we can come together in supporting and encouraging one another in our practices, in learning new practices and reinforcing things that we are already doing. I am defining "practice" broadly here. It includes meditation and prayer; it includes mindful use of everything from speech to money; it includes ethical practice and the practice of creativity. Perhaps one goal for our strategic planning process will be to define what exactly falls within our definition of Jewish practice, and what we seek to gain from engaging in such practices.

Marianne Williamson famously remarked that it's not that we expect too much of ourselves, it's that we don't expect enough. We don't take seriously our potential as human beings. Perhaps the same thing could be said of Judaism and Jewish community: it's not that we're asking too much, but that we're not asking enough. Why can't a Jewish practice be one which nourishes

you, grounds you, gives you both roots and wings? Why couldn't Dorshei Tzedek be a place where we grapple together with what it means to live a Godly life, individually and collectively? Why can't we ask of ourselves and of each other that we take seriously the work of understanding what it is we're here for, how we're meant to serve, how we're meant to walk this path?

Those are big questions, scary questions. And that's why we should ask them together, and seek the answers together, and practice together. Because there's no one right answer, no one right way. The word "practice" implies that we'll never get it "right," that we're always on the road of trying. So may this year be one of trying new things together, going down some new paths, and finding new meaning together in building our Jewish community.

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