**KOL NIDRE 2017**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

Gut Yontif—and good to see you all once again.//

It has been an honor to journey with you

thru these Days of Awe,

and tonight, with Kol Nidre,

we begin the final chapter of this holy day period.//

In rabbinic literature,

Yom Kippur is referred to metaphorically

as *Shabbat Shabbatot*, the “Sabbath of Sabbaths.”//

It is a time of holiness & restoration,

a period from sunset to sunset

when a gateway opens between heaven & earth.//

When Yom Kippur *literally* falls on Shabbat,

as it does this year,

it is an especially sacred time.//

And while it might mean a few extra prayers,

it also means that our Days of Awe experience

gets magnified,

& our opportunity for renewal & transformation

becomes that much more palpable.//

Kol Nidre is a time to take stock of our souls,

an opportunity to focus on who we are,

where we have been,

& what direction we are headed—

both individually & as a community.//

Last week on Rosh Hashanah,

I spoke about *humility*,

about the role that integrity & character play

in authentic leadership

and in our own lives.//

Tonight, I want to shift gears;

rather than focusing on inner development

and personal growth,

I want to talk instead about the Jewish people

and the Jewish faith.//

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The Torah passage that will be read

tomorrow morning

is taken from a section called *Nitzavim*.//

It is an important passage,

& it conveys, as you will hear,

the idea that Judaism is not a distant

& esoteric religion,

high in the heavens or far across the seas,

but rather an accessible and a *doable* one,

a spiritual way of life

that is “in your mouth and in your heart.”//

There is another section, however, that occurs

later in the Torah portion,

one that is less famous yet equally important.//

As Moses and the people of Israel

stand at the threshold of the Promised Land,

as they prepare to leave behind

their nomadic wandering in the desert

for a more sedentary & settled existence,

Moses offers them a vision of religious practice

that looks very different

from the Judaism we know today.//

Every seventh year, Moses instructs the Israelites,

during the weeklong festival of Sukkot,

the Torah is to be read,

publicly & in its entirety,

before all the men, women, & children

in the community.//

There is no mention of reading the Torah

on a weekly basis, as is the custom today;

no breaking down the Torah

into 52-week reading cycles;

no organized Shabbat worship.//

instead, the entire Torah,

from Genesis thru Deuteronomy,

was read all at once, over a number of days,

before the whole household of Israel.//

And this occurred only once every 7 years,

a special, communal event—

woven into Sukkot—

that seemed to transcend all other sacred days.//

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As some of you probably know,

biblical Judaism was focused far more on *festivals*

than on the Days of Awe.//

The three pilgrimage festivals—

Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot—

each lasted a week,

& each was marked by joy & celebration.//

Jewish religiosity in antiquity was more *episodic*

in nature than habitual—

the community came together,

not daily or even weekly,

but only once every few months for these grand,

public celebrations.//

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Things changed dramatically 2,000 years ago.//

When the Romans destroyed the Second Temple

& conquered the land of Israel,

they also obliterated a spiritual way of life

that had grounded the Jewish community

for many centuries.//

With the Temple gone, pilgrimage festivals

in Jerusalem were no longer possible;

the priesthood had been wiped out;

all of the classic expressions of Jewish religiosity

were now dead.//

Out of necessity,

& in a courageous attempt to reconstruct Judaism

& keep it alive,

the leaders of the time created something new—

the *post*-biblical Judaism that we recognize today.//

The synagogue replaced the Temple

as the key place for Jewish worship & assembly;

prayers & liturgy

supplanted incense & animal sacrifice;

the rabbinate, a new class of scholars & educators,

took the place of the hereditary priesthood.//

It was Judaism all right,

but one that bore little resemblance to the Judaism

we read about in the Torah.//

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With no more pilgrimages to the sacred Temple,

no more dramatic, public spectacles

that involved powerful visual imagery,

the thrust of Jewish spirituality turned *inward*,

and the focus of Jewish life centered on the *soul*.//

It was in this transformed religious environment

that Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur

took on new, & much greater prominence.//

Unlike the pilgrimage festivals,

the Days of Awe could take place in a synagogue

(no priests or livestock were necessary).//

The hallmark rituals of this 10-day period

were prayers, songs, & sermons—

*verbal*, rather than visual expressions

of the Jewish spirit.//

There were other rituals as well:

the blast of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah

and the fast on Yom Kippur.//

Taken together, the Days of Awe

introduced a *different* sort of pilgrimage:

a pilgrimage of the *soul*,

an *inner* journey from repentance to renewal.//

And this transformation, this turn inward, stuck.//

Jews have observed this 10-day period in the fall,

in more or less the same way,

for 2,000 years.//

It continues to be practiced in synagogues

around the world, from Napa to New Zealand,

with its focus on personal contrition

rather than public celebration.//

But it has also made the Jewish calendar

feel top heavy & front loaded;

this is the time of year when Jews fill pews,

when members of the tribe “get religion”

for a few days out of the year.//

There’s a lot of pressure on rabbis & cantors

during this period;

there is pressure on *all* of us,

as we strive to get our Jewish fix,

to clean our slates,

to be inscribed in the mythical Book of Life

before it is too late.//

All that pressure is not necessarily a good thing.//

While so much focus on the High Holy Days

brings people out of the woodwork

& helps us to reconnect with our community,

it has led to an *imbalance* in the Jewish calendar

& the more episodic, *natural* rhythm

of Jewish communal life

that had once animated & inspired our ancestors.//

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This imbalance is not just structural—

it’s also *cultural*.//

We have become imbalanced,

not only in our approach to the holidays,

but in our *mindset*.//

By design,

the Days of Awe are meant to make us look inward,

to focus on our mistakes & misdeeds,

to repair them,

and then to recommit to becoming better people

in the year ahead.//

But this idea of focusing on what is *wrong* with us,

both as individuals & as a community,

has seeped into our collective *consciousness* as well,

and not necessarily in a healthy or productive way.//

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Jews have been preoccupied with our own demise

for many centuries.//

Whether it was the destruction

of the First & Second Temples,

the Crusades, Pogroms, or the Holocaust,

we have regularly worried about our extinction.//

Historically, we blamed that threat

on an *external* force, anti-Semitism—

and that force, tragically, was very real.//

But these days, more often than not,

we blame it on *ourselves*, on *internal* forces—

specifically, on assimilation & intermarriage.//

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In response to the lack of commitment & affiliation

among today’s Jews,

as well as the rise of interfaith unions,

many Jewish leaders, & some of us,

have begun beating up on our community for failing

to preserve a “pure” Judaism

& promote an “undiluted” bloodline.//

These are not new concerns.//

In the 18th and 19th centuries in Eastern Europe,

many rabbinic leaders railed

against the lack of religious literacy & commitment

of the people in their communities,

& they warned against the corrosive effects

of outside cultural influences.//

Likewise, during the Middle Ages,

Jewish merchants from Spain & Portugal

often brought back non-Jewish wives

from the exotic places they had visited,

such as India & Asia.//

We have written accounts of just how worried

the rabbis were about the dire impact of intermarriage

on their societies.//

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The Jewish people have faced the challenges

of assimilation & intermarriage for millennia—

and we have always survived.//

We have done that because our people & our faith

have been able to adapt to new circumstances

with ingenuity & courage.//

Rather than focusing on what is *wrong* with us—

rather than circling the wagons

and creating a reactionary, *disfigured* Judaism

more concerned with purity

than with advancement—

we should be focused on returning

to a sense of *balance*, an approach to Jewish life

that honors our traditions

yet, simultaneously, embraces innovation & change.//

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We should stop worrying about our shortcomings

& our survival;

instead, let us return to our *roots*,

let us reclaim the passion, confidence,

& fortitude of our forbears;

let us create a religion & a community

grounded in joy & celebration

rather than insecurity, anxiety, & fear.//

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How do we bring about this Jewish paradigm shift,

this communal transformation?//

Do we start by *de*-emphasizing the Days of Awe

and *re*-emphasizing the pilgrimage festivals?//

Do we somehow return to a more episodic

& organic model for how we practice our Judaism

throughout the year?//

I think it is about more than that—

it is about changing our cultural sensibility,

the way we *perceive* ourselves,

the comfort & confidence we feel in our own skin.//

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Let me be very clear: I am *not* advocating

that we return to the “good old days”

of animal sacrifice;

what I *am* arguing for is a more thoughtful

and creative approach to Jewish life & identity,

just as our ancestors followed 2,000 years ago

during another period of transition & uncertainty.//

As a result of their audacity & innovative spirit,

their sense of joy & affirmation

despite all odds,

we are here tonight.//

And if we can follow the lead of our forbears,

if we, too, can overcome our fears & insecurities

we will find a sense of balance once more,

and we will *thrive* as never before.//

I welcome the opportunity as your new rabbi

to explore a vision of Jewish life

that is inclusive, bold, & relevant,

that challenges us to think

but that also elevates our hearts & souls

in ways that inspire us,

not only to transform ourselves,

but also to change the world around us.//

As our sages say,

“It is not up to us to complete the task,

but neither are we free to desist from it.”//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s Will