**KOL NIDRE 2022**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

There is a parable in the Midrash that goes as follows:

Several people were on a boat. One of them took a drill and started drilling beneath him. The others said to him, “What are you doing?” He replied, “What do *you* care? I’m making a hole under my seat, not yours.” They said to him, “But the water will rise and flood all of us on this boat.”//

When I first heard this rabbinic story many years ago,

it struck me as stating the obvious.//

But today, in our contemporary world,

it is a lesson that resonates with me, not as a simplistic

teaching, but as an urgent & vital source of wisdom.//

That’s because when I first learned this midrash,

American culture was sailing in different waters,

waters in which it was obvious to most people

that the shared destiny of us all was clearly dependent

on each person’s actions.//

Today, by contrast, we navigate very different waters,

sailing in a culture & time of radical individualism,

a society in which too many have lost sight

of the common good because their sole focus

is only on what is good for them, personally.//

The blaring voice of this militant individualism

is drowning out the softer voices of community,

those who advocate unity & a shared responsibility

for one another.//

-----

I shared with you a rabbinic parable; now let me share a personal story.//

Several years ago,

I traveled through a remote part of Mongolia

with my brother.//

Within the first few days of our journey,

we came across a celebration.//

A young man was about to be married,

& relatives & neighbors from the surrounding area

had gathered in a collective effort to build him a ger—a circular, tent-like yurt—as their wedding present.//

When we arrived there, we were invited to participate

in the construction of the ger,

which was about half-finished.//

I tried my best to do my part, but mostly I schmoozed

through a translator with the groom’s father

and uncles, & took photos of the children.//

Later that afternoon, we all feasted on candy

& homemade cheese curds,

followed by shots of vodka & fermented mare’s milk.//

Never before had I felt so welcomed,

even as a total stranger, into somebody else’s world; *their* party had become *our* party.//

This powerful communitarian sensibility is related

as much to necessity as it is to morality.//

No one in that world could have survived

without the active help & support of others.//

What I saw was a form of humanitarian aid

that wasn’t institutional or solicited,

but commonplace & expected.//

What I bore witness to was the culture of the nomad.//

-----

One of the most famous nomads in the Jewish tradition

is Abraham.//

And there’s a narrative in the book of Genesis

that is often used to illustrate Abraham’s character

& to serve as a model for how we ourselves

should behave toward others.//

Three mysterious strangers unexpectedly appear

in the desert & approach the tent, the yurt,

of Abraham & Sarah.//

Rather than reaching for a weapon, the patriarch

rushes out to greet them & invites them into his home for food & shelter.//

It’s clear that Abraham & his wife had an “open tent” policy, one that, in a nomadic & tribal culture,

was related not just to an ethical code but to survival.//

What I saw in Mongolia

afforded me an unforgettable glimpse into that world

of Abraham and Sarah, the world of the nomad.//

And while that kind of society isn’t a perfect one,

it does inculcate a culture of the open tent,

of respectfulness & interdependence.//

What tribal culture does, & does so effectively,

is wash away the illusion of self-reliance,

the myth of independence & individualism

that so many of us Americans have bought into

for so many years—more now than ever before.//

It also shows us the lunacy of trying to go it alone,

and the truth that we don’t have to.//

The tribal culture I witnessed

was one of selflessness & interdependence.//

It was one that held the values of community

& commitment above all else—

it was *countercultural*.//

But ours is a culture of narcissism,

of extreme & excessive individualism,

of the radical pursuit of our own needs

& personal interests over our collective ideals.//

Self-worship is our generation’s sin.//

-----

Judaism has underscored the primacy of community,

of collective destiny & shared responsibility,

from its earliest beginnings.//

It’s conveyed these ideas through the words & deeds

of our ancestors, like Abraham & Sarah.//

Yet today, where will our people—*all* people—

see those examples, those role models,

who prioritize their community over themselves?//

These values are not being modeled by celebrities,

and definitely not by political leaders.//

Nor can they be found in the obsessive focus on “Me”

that suffuses most of social media.//

The rabbinic parable with which I began my sermon

resounds with greater resonance today

than ever before—

it is one of the most urgent messages of faith

that needs attention in our world.//

As our forbearers showed us,

Judaism is a countercultural religion,

in that it dares to call out cultural trends & to declare:

this is not the way, this is not the truth,

this will not lead us to holiness.//

There are other examples, other Jewish role models,

who have boldly challenged the status quo

& acted in countercultural ways.//

Moses defied Pharoah & called out the injustice

of his culture & the enslavement of the Israelites.//

David challenged Goliath, & defeated the giant

through his courage & creativity.//

The prophet Isaiah castigated his people

for falling short of the goal of a just & peaceful society

 that God had urged them to construct.//

-----

What American culture may permit, Judaism rejects.//

We insist on our children feeling valued;

we hold fast to the sense of security

that our children should feel at school;

we believe that all people have autonomy

over their own bodies.//

And in the rising waters of climate change

and environmental stewardship,

we utterly reject the selfishness of those who drill

a hole under their own seats.//

-----

With most of the external aspects of tribalism gone,

how can we reclaim, & regain, its *internal* ones,

its core values & virtues?//

If we fail to overcome, or even face,

this existential struggle,

then we will have failed in our humanity—

we will have taken the gift that is our birthright,

the gift of Abraham & Sarah’s open tent,

and sealed its entrance shut.//

And when we seal the entrance to that sacred tent,

we seal the entrance to our hearts.//

As Jews, we come from a nation of nomads,

of free spirits—

ours is a tribal religion with tribal roots.//

Most of the answers to society’s current problems—our fears, our selfishness, our polarization—

can be found in our own, sometimes primal,

spiritual heritage.//

Judaism (and other religions) offer correctives,

pathways that allow us to regain the elemental values

our culture so desperately needs

and the anchors of authentic community

that, underneath the surface, we all ultimately crave.//

-----

There are many rites & rituals that can help us

to improve our moral characters

& to cultivate a more harmonious,

truly compassionate, community, society & world.//

But for this to happen, we must accept

one of the first rules of tribal life—

that the motivation for our behavior be grounded,

not necessarily in what we *want* to do,

but in what we *ought*to do.//

Today, that’s a brazenly countercultural idea.//

Tradition states that Abraham’s tent was exposed

to every direction—

it was welcoming, but it made him vulnerable.//

And that’s precisely the point:

it is only through vulnerability

that we can vanquish narcissism,

that genuine community can emerge,

that commitment & compassion

are intertwined, interdependent & inseparable.//

That requires a risk on our part,

a move beyond most of our comfort zones,

but it is a risk with a life-transforming reward.//

-----

Today, the cultural waters in which we row

present us with a strong & powerful current.//

It is not easy for any one person

to row against the tide.//

As Jews, it is incumbent on us to take the lead,

to provide others with the strength,

the spirit, & the vision to progress forward,

traversing the narrow confines of “me”

and directing us toward meaning

beyond the hollow emptiness of individualism.//

*We* must be the voice that urges others

to put down the drill,

declaring to the world

that we all sail in the same boat

upon the shared waters of responsibility

and mutual respect.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon