

RH I 5779 - Holding up the world

Yitgaber K'Ari baboker la'avodat boro - In the morning, one should awaken like a lion to serve their creator. So at 6am, when the alarm goes off in our bedroom, Emily and I stretch, sit up and say *Modeh ani lefanecha*, in harmony. We are grateful before You, living and existing King, We spring out of bed, and while one of us makes the perfect cup of coffee, with accompanying breakfast, the other one of us goes upstairs and awakens our four children. It's amazing, they get up the same way we do. We eat breakfast as a family, and discuss the day ahead. At 7:05, on most mornings, the kids pile happily into Emily's van, and I head over to minyan.

(Pause, then strike my chest and chant) *Al Chet Sh'chatati*. For the sin that I have sinned before you in lying to my congregation.

In reality, our mornings are far from the perfect t.v. family of the 1960s. We've got a great deal of feet dragging, and our fair share of kicking and screaming to go from the morning alarm to the kids fed and out the door by 7:15. I still try to make it to minyan when I can, though I'm generally late. But each day, I always start with a passage that I've missed. After the chaos of the morning routine, I find it comforting and challenging to allow the liturgy to direct me to look inward and ask these existential questions.

מה אנחנו מה חיינו מה חסדנו מה צדקנו מה ישענו מה כחנו מה גבורתנו

What are we? What are our lives for? What is our capacity for loving kindness? What is our contribution to justice? What is our ability to save, our strength, our ability to overcome?

מה נאמר לפניך ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו הלא כל הגבורים כאין לפניך

What is possible to say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors. Even the greatest among us are like nothing before You.

After our chaotic morning routine with the kids, it's actually a huge relief to know that we're not the first ones to struggle with the huge gap between the real and the ideal.

Over these High Holidays, I am asking each of you to ask these questions of yourselves, to examine your lives, to find your highest purpose from the place of your greatest humility.

מה אנחנו מה חיינו

What are we? What are our lives for?

I'm asking you to examine your purpose, and commit to the ideal life God wishes for each of us.

And just as I am asking that you explore these questions as individuals, I want us to also explore these questions as a collective. What are we as Shearith Israel? What is the life of this congregation, this community for? What is our capacity for loving kindness and justice? What

is our ability to save, what is our strength, what is our ability to overcome? In essence--what is our purpose--why are we here?

As a beginning to answer this question, I've invited a few "visual aides." *Invite the babies of the congregation on the bima*



So the truth is, I don't have to say anything more. When we see these babies, we can feel a sense of purpose. We know in our hearts that creating a communal context for them to grow, to learn, to be supported is an answer to all these questions. מה אנחנו מה חיינו What are we? What is our life for?

All we have to do is hold these babies up, and we feel like that we've got the whole world before us. There is a circle of life that we imbue with tradition and meaning. We're going to create a meaningful world for these babies to grow up in, and in return, they give our lives a world of meaning.

Shearith Israel exists to hold up the world.

Send the babies down

As the youngest among us grow together in this extended family, they'll learn the most by watching how we learn, feel, and do. We've got to be not only answering the question for our children, but for all of us here today. How do we hold up the world for ourselves?

¹ Not our synagogue or our babies - but we don't take pictures on Rosh Hashanah. It kind of looked like this.

When we talk about holding up the world, clearly we are not referring to the gravitational force that holds the Earth in an orbit around our sun. Rather we are talking about the world of human meaning making.

We can experience the process of meaning-making in three distinct ways; through our minds, through our souls, and through our bodies. In other words, some humans find meaning more easily through thinking and learning, some humans find meaning more through relationships, feelings, and emotions, and some humans find meaning more through direct action and the moving of their bodies. In truth, we all find meaning in all three of these ways, though we each have a preference towards one of these modes or another in how we make meaning in the world.

There is a Jewish text that captures this idea, and it's found at the beginning of Pirkei Avot, a tractate of the Mishna uniquely devoted to wisdom aphorisms of our ancestors.

על שלשה דברים העולם עומד

On three (things/matters/concepts/pillars/words) the world stands

על התורה

On Torah

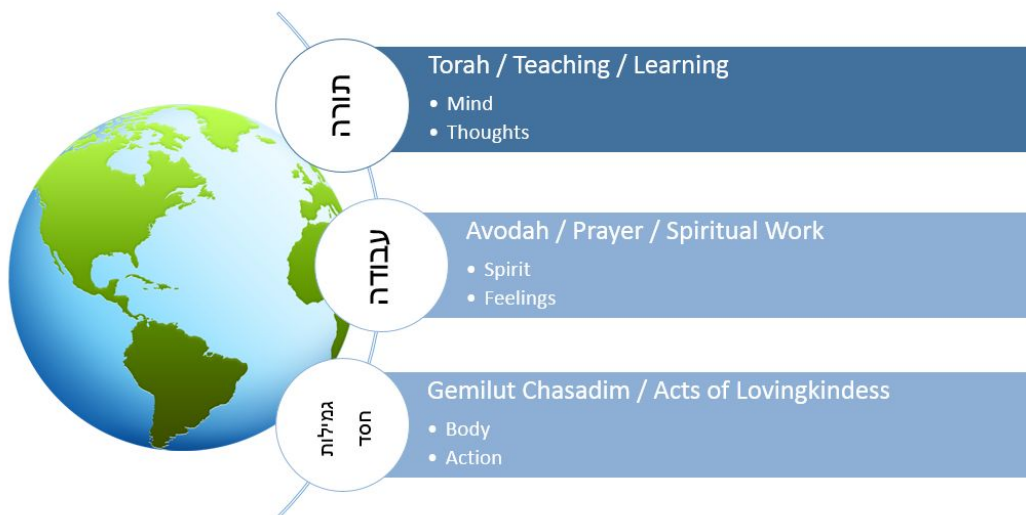
ועל העבודה

On sacred service to God

ועל גמילות חסדים

And on acts of selfless love.

This *Mishna* provides a roadmap for the way we can hold up the world at Shearith, the way we give our children and ourselves greater purpose and meaning.



On Torah

Torah is primarily a venue for the intellect. Picture every portrait of an old Eastern European Rabbi with a big beard hunched over a book with his hand on his forehead. If you were to look at him, and ask is he thinking, feeling, or doing? The answer is clear. When we come together through the pursuit of deep contemplation of Torah we are creating meaning through the modality of the mind.

ועל העבודה

On sacred service to God

Avodah, as understood by our tradition is service of the heart--prayer. Now imagine a person praying. She has her eyes closed, she is swaying back and forth. You can tell that she is deep in a meditative state. When we create authentic and inspiring services we create meaning through the modality of spirit and deep feelings.

ועל גמילות חסדים

And on acts of selfless love.

Now imagine a whole group of people from Shearith Israel marching together at the hunger walk. They are joining with thousands of other groups walking together to make a dent in the intractable problem of hunger. Gemilut Chasadim asks that we give of ourselves in a tangible way that we DO something in this world. When we show our unshakeable commitment to care for one another selflessly, we create meaning through the modality of our body and actions.

Of course, these broad categories do not, cannot exist in isolation from one another. For example, studying Torah ideally should evoke an emotional response. One could coolly and rationally think about the story we read today of Abraham sending away Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, but the moment a person enters the story and becomes the mother leaving her son alone in the wilderness, how could one not shed tears? The moment that the child in the wilderness becomes your child, as you drive away from her freshman dorm in college, thinking becomes feeling, and feeling becomes doing. Torah begins with the **mind**, moves through the **spirit**, and ends with the **body**.

Avodah represents our prayer life, our connection with God. God knows we put a lot of our time toward praying on these High Holidays! There are a whole lot of words in these prayer books, there are a whole lot of songs we sing together, and my hope is that there is a whole lot of real feeling behind those words and those songs. We've got work to do as a community in really opening up our hearts, and experiencing the music and the prayers with deep feeling, work to do in allowing ourselves to become vulnerable. Thinking might help us get there by learning more about the words and the melodies to the songs, but it is possible to simply start with the feeling. If we start with letting our feelings lead, then the words that we say will lead to commitment for action. If we start with feeling, then the song will move our bodies to dance.

The last year or so, I've taken to regular exercise most days. Sometimes I wonder what an authentic physical practice would be for Judaism, in a similar way that yoga is to Hinduism. Something that crosses the boundaries of the body, spirit and mind. But exercise is far from the only entry point to begin with our bodies. The paradigm of Gemilut Chesed offers an entry point that is low barrier and high reward. Gemilut Chesed doesn't require the mind, nor the spirit to be effective. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa would say, anyone whose good deeds are greater than their wisdom, their wisdom endures, but anyone whose wisdom are greater than their good deeds, their wisdom will not endure. It doesn't take wisdom or training to visit the sick and homebound in our community. It doesn't take feeling to volunteer and contribute to Rebecca's Tent. It's not a high barrier to teach English to the refugee family we're supporting from Ethiopia. It just takes our bodies, and time. And when we visit the sick and homebound, when we take care of the grieving, and the hurting, our spirits are nourished. When we put our bodies toward a cause we care about, supported by Jewish values, our minds expand with the experience.

I believe in a Shearith Israel that connects us through Mind, Spirit and Body. I believe that our community can be not only be a place we can learn the deep wisdom of our tradition, but can also be the place that opens our hearts to the deepest love we can imagine, and together we'll join our bodies and our hands together to make this world a place that God would want to live.

We'll be doing nothing less than holding the world up with Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Chesed.

Right now we are acting to bring this vision to reality. You may have heard that we've embarked on a strategic planning process.

Almost half of you filled out a survey to give us a better sense of how we're doing on this mission to hold up the world.

We found that, in fact, we're doing pretty well! In the areas of Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chasidim, we learned that though we're mostly satisfied there is room to improve. We'll be publishing a fuller report of what we learned in the coming weeks as the strategic planning committee diligently analyzes the results, and you'll be hearing from our incredible co-chairs, Pia Koslow and Bruce Stiffler at the Kol Nidre service.

Every year, we'll intentionally develop along at least one of these three modalities.

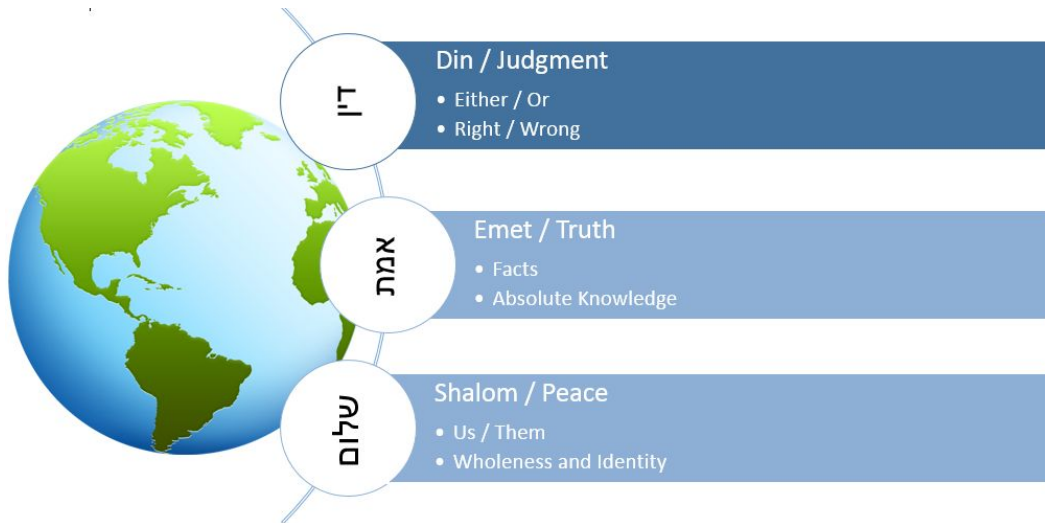
Two years ago, we focused on Avodah. I shared some words of Torah at Yom Kippur about what a vision for prayer at Shearith Israel could look like. We experimented with our services, and we had a big conversation about the role of musical instruments in prayer in general and on Shabbat.

Last year, we focused on Gemilut Chesed. We organized over 70 volunteers who contributed their money, stuff, and countless hours to welcoming a refugee family. We came together to dance and celebrate the new chapter of our community with my Rabbi Brad Artson, we brought our bodies to Ramah Darom for a congregational retreat, and we sang for hours at the Big Tisch.

This coming year, Torah will be a big focus for us. Our supplementary school, from Kindergarten through 9th grade has 120 students, and a new Shabbat option through 7th grade. We have three new educational series lined up and Rabbi Jonathan Crane will be facilitating regular Torah study on Shabbatot.

We still have a lot to learn about where we are going as a congregation. We've got to hear from you, not only from a survey, but we've got to hear your stories about what inspires you, what motivates you, what your dreams are for the work ahead we will do together. Holding up the world is the work of the whole community. That's why we're launching a series of opportunities to share your stories in intimate settings, with trained facilitators and note takers. Over the next few weeks, it's my hope that every person here finds a time to gather in a home or here at Shearith in a guided session to learn from one another, create connections and community, and dream about how we're going to hold up the world together. Our strategic planning committee will draw lessons from this big conversation, as we engage the whole community in this meaningful work of Torah, Avodah and Gemilut Chesed.

At the end of the same chapter of Pirkei Avot, we find another formulation of Al Shlosha Devarim. According to Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, the world is actually held up by three different qualities. *Al Shlosha Devarim Ha-Olam Omed - Al HaDin, Al HaEmet, V'Al HaShalom*. The world stands on judgment, on truth, and on peace. Each of these concepts will be the focus of the next three High Holiday sermons, and each relate directly to a project of Shearith Israel that has already begun in planning stages, and will be rolled out over the course of the year.



Rabbi Joseph Karo, a Kabbalist from the 15th century understood the first formulation of Torah, Avodah Gemilut Chasidim, *create* a culture. But *Din*, *Emet*, and *Shalom* sustain it. As a Conservative Congregation, we're charged with both sustaining our tradition as we renew ourselves in every generation. In this way, as Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel once said, הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש - the old will become new, and the new will become holy.

I'd like to bring us back to the image of the babies we held up.

מה אנחנו מה חיינו מה חסדנו מה צדקנו מה ישענו מה כחנו מה גבורתנו

What are we? What are our lives for? What is our piety or righteousness, what is our ability to save, our strength, our ability to overcome?

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What is possible to say before You, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors. Even the greatest among us are like nothing before You.

Just this past Shabbat we had the opportunity to name one of the newest daughters of our congregation right here. When we bless our children as they are named here at Shearith we offer them the blessing of Torah, Chuppah and Ma'asim Tovim. It's another formulation of Mind, spirit and body. It's how we raise our children and how our children cause us to rise.

May we all be blessed to expand our minds, have open spirits and deep relationships, and create opportunities to hold up the world, grounded in the values of Judgment,

Truth, and Peace. If we are successful in these endeavors, we'll hold up the world, and do the work of closing the gap between the real and the ideal.

Shanah Tovah