

Yom Kippur - Day - Shearith Israel in our moment of Creation

There is a deep rhythm to the universe. A cycle that pervades everything, constantly churning us, calling us into the future, sending us into the depths but bringing us back out again. The cycle begins at the very beginning, with the act of **creation**. *Breishit Barah Elohim*, in the Beginning God created. Creation is pervasive in our universe. When God created human beings, God made us in his image, *b'tzelem elohim*. That means that in each and every one of us, there is a creative power unlike any other animal on this planet. When we exercise our creative power, we are activating the most Godly part of ourselves. But creation is messy, it's experimental and disorienting. In the stage of creation, we don't know what's good and what's not.

When God creates the universe, each day God declares, it's good. After God creates us God says, *V'hinei Tov M'od*, behold it is very Good. But, as we discussed last night, we aren't always good. We are self-interested, and that unmitigated self-interest corrupted creation. Eventually, creation always becomes corrupted. The way out of that corruption is the second step in the deep rhythm of the universe. The tradition calls it, "**revelation**." When all of the world was corrupted, God revealed to Noah a plan to start over, an ark. When God wanted to guide us with lessons to live in the world, God revealed himself to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. To Isaac and Ishmael. To Jacob and Esau. To Joseph and his brothers. To Moses, Aaron and Miriam. To all of us through Torah revealed at Sinai and throughout the ages.

If we hear the revelation, then we should be able to repair the corruption. The third step in the deep rhythm of the universe is called **redemption**. Small redemptions happen all the time. When God made a covenant with Noah to never destroy earth again because of Human selfishness, that was redemption. When God brought us out Egypt, that was redemption. When we crossed the Jordan River into the promised land, that was redemption. When we built the Temple, that was redemption. When the ancient Rabbis created the Rabbinic system that carries us to this day without a Temple, that was redemption too.

With every small redemption, something new emerges - a reality that is different than the one before. Once the new reality takes hold, the cycle begins again. The small redemption leads to a new creation, which leads to revelation, and ends in redemption. Creation, Revelation, Redemption.

This cycle of creation, revelation, and redemption occurs not only in the religious literature, but in our own lives. In a small way, we go through this cycle every single year. Yom Kippur is the moment of redemption. When the gates close this evening, we'll be spiritually clean, ready for a new year. We are created anew. It won't take long for us to begin to meet new challenges, or rather, old challenges for our newly redeemed selves. Perhaps we'll get a few hours, or maybe a few days to be new again, to be in the glow of the renewal that comes with the redemption of Yom Kippur. Inevitably, we'll descend, in the cycle of life, reading Kohelet on Sukkot, who says, *Hevel Hevel, HaKol Hevelim - it's all vanity*. But we will grow, and we will change for the better, and we will

stumble and fall and make mistakes and get back up again, moving through the year of revelation. We'll end up here again next year, perhaps a little wiser, but ready for redemption, and renewal. We'll be ready to be new again in the stage of creation.

This cycle is also true with societies, families, businesses and institutions. We're no different at Shearith Israel. We've been through our own cycles of creation, revelation, and redemption.

One of our redemption stories at Shearith Israel is connected to the very place we are sitting. This entire neighborhood was supposed to be Lanier University, named for Sidney Lanier, the renowned poet and author who served as a private in the Confederate Army. That's why the shul is on University Drive near Lanier Boulevard, and why that intersection is so strange. The university was founded in 1917 as an "All Southern" Baptist University. They built the original building of the neighborhood, our Education building, as a replica of the Custis-Lee House in 1919. But in 1920, a combination of declining enrollment and the Great Depression caused the future of Lanier University to be in question. So, in 1921 the Ku Klux Klan acquired Lanier University. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the grandson of the founder of the KKK was the secretary and business manager. 100% Americanism would be the focus of the institution. But they couldn't inspire enough enrollment to build much more than what was built before. In 1922, Lanier University filed for bankruptcy. Just over 25 years later, in 1949, Shearith Israel bought the property because we were outgrowing our location on Washington Street.

We redeemed this property, gave it a new life. And, in the past 60 years we've gone through a few cycles of creating ourselves anew, experiencing revelations that come with the new challenges, and ultimately redemptions.

We've grown and we've changed. Over the past year, I've come to know the story of our congregation intimately. I know that as your Rabbi, I've got an important role in co-writing our next chapter together. To make sure that the great honor of serving this community is a story about redemption and creation, so that when the time comes for us to face challenges, we'll be ready together.

Besides hearing that we're a new Shearith Israel, looking at the numbers tell that story too.

Some of you have a memory of the height of Synagogue memberships in America, a time when there were, I hear, 800 families affiliated with Shearith Israel. In 2014, that number was down to 292 families. In 2015, we gained 24, in 2016 we gained 33, and so far in 2017 41 new families and individuals have chosen Shearith Israel as their spiritual home, with plenty of time left in the year for further growth. 60% of our new members are in their 40s or younger. Our numbers have grown 30% in the last three years at a time when the vast majority of congregations are static or shrinking. We've somehow managed to do this without running a deficit since 2013.

We're a new Shearith Israel, and I want to share some of the ways we're new and why we're going to be around for a very long time to come.

The first way we have found a renewal, is in how we connect to God through prayer and education. Last year at Rosh Hashanah, we launched an initiative to explore the prayer culture at Shearith Israel. We experimented with meditation, movement, language, and music. We went deep into the history and law of instruments in Jewish prayer. We discovered that some can't imagine it, and others can't wait to try it out. We determined that no matter what, the culture at Shearith Israel will be about facilitating participation in prayer, never performance as prayer. In a few minutes, when we sing, *Ki Anu Amecha, V'atah Eloheinu*- For we are Your people and You are our God, *Anu Vanecha v'ata Avinu* - We are Your children, and You are our Parent, I want us to feel those words in our hearts and souls, to realize that we all share the same story, we're all children of the same God.

Prayer at Shearith is a communal experience that traditionally has had a high bar of knowledge and experience of Hebrew prayer and music to participate well. To help with that challenge, our Religious Life Chair Robbie Medwed will be offering skill and knowledge classes on Sunday mornings, starting soon!

A second challenge is that traditional prayer simply does not speak to everyone. We will create a pathway to grow in knowledge of traditional prayer, but we've got to build other pathways too if we're going to encourage the highest level of participation. We're starting a new family service called Minyan Mercaz that will meet every week. It will be led by talented musicians such as Sunmoon Pie, Sammy Rosenbaum, and our own Adam Klein. If your family is like my family, every week chaos grows throughout the week, and has the potential to throw us off balance. The spiritual technology of prayer on Shabbat has the ability to bring us back to center. That's what Minyan Mercaz will be all about, it's what the name means. You'll leave spiritually and emotionally refreshed, with more friends, and the spirit of Shabbat to carry you into the next chaotic week.

The second way we are planting seeds of renewal is through our incredible congregational leadership, constantly striving to create exciting, fun, and stimulating programs to bring us together. But none of the excellent opportunities in programming substitute for authentic engagement and relationship. We're going to grow in our ability to celebrate the joys and sorrows of life together so that nobody connected to the Shearith Israel community feels alone. There is no program, class, prayer, or fun activity that matters as much as the relationships we form with one another. We should be inviting each other to our homes for Shabbat dinners, for double dates and concerts, for picnics in the park. Our success will not be how many programs we have or how well attended they are, our success will be when your celebration is also their celebration, when your loss is their loss too. When our lives are bound up with one another so that we are family.

That kind of success doesn't happen overnight, with one successful holiday, or one Shabbat simcha, or attendance at one program. That kind of success happens with regular engagement. That kind of success happens not only in the walls of this building,

but in our homes and in our community. That kind of success requires intensive and intentional community building. That's why every year I intend for us to have an opportunity for an intensive community building experience. This year, we're going to Camp Ramah together the weekend of April 27th. This retreat has an amazing committee already working hard to create the atmosphere that we'll bond with experiences that just can't happen over Kiddush lunch. Next year, in the late Spring/Early Summer of 2019, we're going to travel to Israel together on the first ever Shearith Israel trip.

The third way we've renewed ourselves this past year is through hour collaborations. This past summer our campus transformed in our partnership with In The City Camp. The sound of joyful children filled our spaces all summer long. The life and vitality they brought was wonderful. This past Sunday we gathered with several other Congregations and organizations in Piedmont Park for a community Tashlich. Continuing on this path will indeed bring many awesome opportunities, and also create challenges to our infrastructure, our sense of self, and our purpose.

Whenever we are bound in the cycle of Creation, Revelation and Redemption, the period of Creation is all about rediscovering purpose.

In our new beginning, we're going to think big about who we are. Because our Jewish community *is* diverse. We're Democrats and Republicans, Conservatives, and Liberals who all pray to the same God, share our history, and our history and are working to create a bright future for our community. We are straight and gay, lesbians, bisexual, asexual and transexual, all of us looking for love and celebrating it. The color of our skin is white, black, and brown. We come from all countries and cultures. Some of us have considerable means and ability to give charitably, and others need help just to make ends meet. Our Jewish community includes those who are *Shomer Shabbat*, and others for whom gardening is their Shabbat practice. Our Jewish community includes those who exercise their souls and connect with regular Hebrew prayer, and those who find their practice in regular Yoga and meditation. Our Jewish community includes the non-Jewish spouses working to raise Jewish children. Our Jewish community includes the Jewish souls who were born into another religion, but they are seeking their path home. Our Jewish community includes the non-Jewish souls who simply want to be here and be part of the great *Erev Rav*, the mixed multitude of those who went out from Egypt, finding wisdom, guidance and growth on the journey to redemption.

But to really rediscover our purpose, you're going to be imposed upon a lot more than attendance at one awesome event. Judaism sets a high bar, one we have to continually strive for. We're not going to spoon feed Judaism here, we're going to work together for the hard but real growth that is possible in all of us. We're not going to simply meet you where you are. We're going to challenge you to grow. We're going to grapple with difficult ideas and come out stronger for it. We're going to push ourselves to acquire new skills that allow us to see the world clearly. We're going to tap the tradition for its eternal flow of wisdom. The time, energy and money it will take will be worth it, because we'll all share a sense of our story and our purpose.

We're at a new beginning, a moment of creation here at Shearith Israel, and probably in the whole world. We're going to need help from God and you(!), in order to meet the challenges we will face. We have every reason to be hopeful for our future, fulfilling our purpose, and strengthening our community.