

Room for All
Kol Nidre 5781 / September 27, 2020
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We begin the Kol Nidrei service by invoking Courts:

Bi shiva shel mallah u'-vi-shiva shal mattah / By the authority of the Court on High and by the authority of this human Court below...

Today is a day of judgement: judgement from above by God's heavenly court, and judgement here, the courts by which we examine and assess our own lives. As we began with a reference to Courts, I mention to you my sense of loss and sadness at the passing of justice Ruth Bader Ginzberg, z"l, of the highest court of this land. I extend condolences to all who mourn her passing. But tonight I begin my comments tonight with a reference to Israel's Supreme Court.

Several years ago, the following case came before Israel's Supreme Court:

Facts: The Minister of Transportation ordered the closure of Bar-Ilan Street in Jerusalem, to motor traffic on Shabbat and Holidays **during prayer times**. The petitioners were secular residents of the area and representatives of the population of Jerusalem, who claimed that the decision of the Minister infringed on their right of freedom of movement. One petitioner-The Association for the Rights of the Religious Community in Israel counter-petitioned that Bar-Ilan Street should be closed to motor traffic for **all** hours of Shabbat and Holidays. [Horev v. Minister of Transportation. (Bar-Ilan Blvd. Case)]. How would you, given these facts, rule on this case, if you were a member of the Supreme Court? What did the Supreme court decide?

Their response was interesting. The court has had a tense relationship, at best, with the Religious Community, the Haredi community, in particular. The Haredi/Ultra-Orthodox in Israel have placed demands on every Prime Minister in every coalition since the founding of the State. And the demands continue to grow. And many, to be blunt, are fed up. And so, when the secular residents of that area of Jerusalem brought their case to the Supreme Court, they were confident that they would prevail and the street in question would remain open. But that is not what happened.

In the end, the court ruled that there must be a compromise. The original ruling would stand, with some revisions. The street would remain closed at the times when prayers were being recited and the Hasidim would be in the streets walking and socializing. But, at other times, the street would be open to through traffic only. That was the compromise.

The Supreme Court, in its ruling, went beyond or, perhaps, transcended the law. In effect the Court said:

You folks need to get along. We have a diverse and varied population living in a very small area, which provides us more places to clash, disagree and object, than most other societies. But it is because we are so diverse that we each need to learn, not to submit our problems to be solved by a court of law. We need to find ways, on our own, to compromise. Compromise answers this question: What do you have that you are willing to give up in order for this to work?

What you cherish is for you to decide. But how can we preserve what is most important to you, if the exact opposite is important to someone else? Figure out what you can give. Don't ask: What are they giving up? Ask: What can I give up? Where can I compromise? What can I do for the larger community to make this a better society?

This is what living in Israel looks like today. Some look at this and see, again, a partial victory for Orthodox domination in Israel. Others see this as a desecration of Shabbat which has been sanctioned by the State of Israel itself. I, on the other hand, see this differently.

For me, this is what it looks like to live together. This is often how things look in our homes, where we work, learn, and pray. This is what a community must do, if its members are to live together, thrive and grow together, and, who knows, become assets to each other. When we come to give, there is room for us all. But when we have nothing to share, our synagogue may not be big enough. Allow me to explain.

Just a few weeks ago, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, z"l, passed away. During his lifetime, which began in a secular home, he became religious, began studying in Yeshiva and, for the last half century was considered by some, one of the greatest Talmudists of our age. He is, perhaps, best known for translating into Hebrew, and ultimately to

English, the entire Talmud together with primary commentaries. For any student of Talmud, the scope, volume, and depth of this work defies comprehension. With the possible exception of Maimonides, there has never been a Talmudic scholar of such great erudition and productivity. But I share, to honor his memory, a particular insight on a single word from the Torah.

On the Shabbat following the passing of Rabbi Steinsaltz,z”l, the word *tamim*, appears in the *parasha*. Rabbi Steinsaltz translates the word, *tamim* as open, accepting and embracing. But there, the first letter of the word *tamim*, *taf*, is written large. And, as we know, no letter, word or mark in the Torah is devoid of meaning.

Here is Rabbi Steinsaltz: A *taf*, you see, is like a house. This *taf* is written large, at the beginning of the word *tamim* to remind us that there is room for every person in the House of Israel. The Torah is big but there is room for everyone who comes *b’timimut*, with a whole heart: A heart open and accepting. A heart willing to share with others.

When the Children of Israel stood at Sinai, when they said: *na’ase v’nishma*, we shall do and understand (later), it means that they received the Torah, not with full understanding but with open and accepting hearts. When we come to a new year to recite the words, to sing the tunes, and to hear the sounds of the shofar, we must do so *b’timimut*, with a heart that is open, inviting and accepting.

And I suggest a further point. When one enters the *taf*, when one comes in the house with arrogance, with an air of superiority, with a desire to take but not give, a desire to impose one’s will upon others, this is the opposite of *timimut*. Such a person uses up more room than they deserve. They force out someone else. Somehow, when such a person takes, we all have less.

In our house, this house, we try to make room for everyone. This year, of course, the virtual room has a nearly unlimited size. But in our synagogue, at TBHBE, we approach our mission, in humility, in ways that enable us to make room for everyone. That is, I believe, the primary ingredient and goal of a worthy synagogue community. It is a place which makes room for all.

And we do not simply make room. We work hard each day, to create the programs and classes, zoom conversations and meetings which will convey that message of being honest, accessible, open, and humble. And what do we ask in return? We ask

you to help enlarge the house. We ask you to invite more people. We ask you to come with *timimut*, a whole and open heart. And, we ask you to bring with you what you can and to share that with us.

One lesson I have learned over the years is the secret of how members can become not only active in, but ambassadors of the congregation. How can one, entering for the first feel at home? How can a longtime member feel excited when they return to us every year? Here is the secret: Do something. Share something. Meet someone halfway.

I had a conversation with a member of our congregation, a long-time supporter, who confessed, when we spoke, that he really doesn't come around much. He was uncertain about renewing his membership. More or less, this is the conversation:

Cong: I am thinking of dropping my membership unless, of course, you can convince me otherwise. My kids are grown, and we no longer have the needs we once had. I had been involved for some time, but now, I am on to other things.

Me: I am sorry you feel that way. Allow me to ask, if you don't mind, what it was like when you felt involved and important. How did you get involved?

Cong: When we first joined, we had services in the mansion's greenhouse. It was a rather unpleasant place, hot in the summer, cold in the winter. But my best memory was there. I, and a bunch of other guys went to a movie theatre which was closing its doors and had agreed to let us have the seats from the theatre. And so, we went, 6 or 8, guys, early on a Sunday morning. We unbolted each row of seats, loaded them into a rented truck and delivered them. The next week, the day before Rosh HaShana, we installed the final row, in time for services to begin.

Me: You know, it is interesting you should say this because, as it happens, we need to replace the seating in our sanctuary.

Cong: Really?! Asked our congregant in disbelief.

Me: No. Not really. But you have confirmed something I have seen many times. A synagogue can be there to do many things for its congregants. But,

when it comes to evaluating a synagogue, most ask the wrong question. Most are asking: “What can this synagogue do for me?”

It is an important question and one which needs to be answered directly. But the more meaningful question, the first question, which most do not ask, is the JFK question: “What can I do for this community? What can I bring?” You see, the most important and deepest connections you create, the friendships formed, and the experiences created, will be the result, not of what we give to you, but of what you give to us.

I believe that Yom Kippur, in part, is a day to ask questions and meditate on the answers. We ask ourselves, nearly every day, as synagogue professionals, what more can we do?

I think you know that we have been deeply and intensively involved and engaged this year, in direct and personal ways, with hundreds of our members.

I think you know that we value, above all else, the connections we form with each other. We have called you, planned programs for you, reached out to individuals and to families.

We have had programs and drive-throughs for families and for others.

Some of us, in an attempt to engage, connect and even entertain congregants have even embarrassed themselves publicly in online talent shows (because they were told that it wouldn't be right not to perform!). This, by the way, proves that one can give even if what they to give is something which is neither appreciated by nor useful to anyone!

We shall continue to do more and more. Our Director of Community Engagement, Hallie Chandler, has plans and programs that go, one after the other, without a break. We will have this year a senior rabbinical student from JTS, Noam Kornsgold, who will add depth, insight, and youth to our community, which grows younger by the day.

I want to mention one initiative which has been through the years a source of both effort and great satisfaction. Over the past number of years, we have focused our attention on the segment of our members who have special needs. Our outreach to young people with special needs has been a source of pride and pleasure for us.

One young man, who attends Shabbat morning services every week, is our most enthusiastic participant. When the spirit moves him, he jumps to his feet, clapping his hands and calling out. Unconcerned about the rest of the congregation, when the spirit is there, he doesn't hold back....and no one in the congregation blinks. What others may find intrusive, we find uplifting and inspiring as pure unfiltered joy.

When you see a young woman struggling to get up the stairs to close the ark on Shabbat, think of three things:

1. The incredible effort and the joy which is the result of receiving this honor during services.
2. The fact that, with all the adjustments and renovations we have orchestrated over the years, our sanctuary is still not fully handicap accessible.
3. Who else is there in this community who would join us and participate with us if they know there was a way that could make that happen, if they knew that they were wanted and welcomed?

When we are joined by a person with special physical or cognitive challenges, I think about how much that person brings to us. I think of how their presence reminds us of just how much room we have, how there is room for everyone. How we have room for each person to share with us their special gifts. I feel, at times, that we have the unique opportunity, to provide the setting in which a person's gifts can blossom and be shared. These congregants have been models for us all of spirit, of affection for our community and models of those who want nothing more than to share their gifts to show that they are a part of our community. I, on the other hand, think about the gift of their presence and how we will always have room here.

This, as you may know, is a Presidential election year. In 40 or so days we will go to the polls to vote for the President and a number of other candidates for office. This is the 8th time I have been on this pulpit for the High Holidays prior to a presidential election. Some presidential elections have been won by candidates for whom I voted, other times my candidate did not win. But in all of these elections I feel as if we won in a different way.

With each election, I have felt great pride and satisfaction that we have been able to make room in our synagogue for people of all political perspectives. Even when our congregants of overwhelmingly aligned with one candidate over another, we have

made room in our synagogue. We make room for people whose views range from far left to far right. This is no small feat. Other congregations, I hear there is no place for those who hold dissenting view. In some congregations those on the right feel alienated. In other communities it is the left which is alienated. I am proud to say that, during my tenure at TBHBE, I have successfully alienated people on either side equally!

Remember the “*taf*”? We should be proud of the fact that we have expanded that *taf* in all directions to make room for all. I am proud of just how large that *taf* is for our synagogue community. You should be proud that we welcome people of all political persuasions, even if they are wrong! But seriously, here, the only people who may not find a home are those who want to shrink the “*taf*” rather than expand it, those who prefer to castigate or denigrate or deny one’s right to think or vote differently. Here there is, there must be, room for all.

The question today, therefore, is less about what we do for you and more about you:

What will you give?

What will you share?

What, of your talent and interests, your time, your resources will you share with us?

These are not questions I ask rhetorically. These are question for you to answer, because the answer you provide will be the key to your affiliation and to a membership that has meaning and value to you, to your family and to our community.

If one tells me: I am here for the ride until we no longer need you. Then we’re out”. I don’t have much to say.

But, if you say, I am looking for a way in, my question is what can you share with us?

There is a classic children’s story which I am sure many of you know, if not from your childhood then from being parents of young children. It is a story, told with a number of variations. It is a story about making something from nothing. But this is how I tell the story. It is called, “Stone Soup”.

Three soldiers come to an impoverished village, tired and hungry and using the power of suggestion and imagination, they persuade the stingy villagers to help them build a glorious soup from a very simple “stock”, a secret ingredient which they will now share with the villagers. The secret ingredient, of course, are, of course, the stones. This is the best stock ever which, we must admit, would be improved only with a few carrots. Or a big cabbage or some beans. As the pot continues to boil, each of the villagers find a little more something to make the soup even better.

The moral of the story is that even in times of scarcity, even when we think that we have nothing to give, a rich feast is still possible, so long as we each bring something to the table.

There is room in this house for as many people who would like to come. But, frankly, we’re not so good at convincing people to stay and be part of the community if they have no desire or inclination to give. But, if you can think about what you can give, we can do some amazing things together. And so, the question tonight is: what do you have that you might be willing to share with us?

Here, I don’t mean money. Money is appreciated. Money, you see, helps us meet some of our needs. But our needs are greater than that which can be bought as part of a financial transaction. We need you, physically (or, these days, virtually) to be here, to take your place in a large, dynamic, and diverse community.

These past months have given to us time to assess where we are as a community, and where we are as individuals. For me, this year has generated deep and difficult questions about the meaning of life and the roles we play in the world in which we live. And, despite the feelings of anxiety and isolation, despite the painful separations from loved ones, I have come to realize just how much we have to give.

On this, the Holiest night of the year, we come together as one, strong and unified community. In a society currently polarized with views and personalities which contribute to extreme positions, rigidity, and unflinching certainty about how right they are and how wrong you are, we can be a model.

Community does not mean uniformity. It means that we live together. It means that we appreciate each other. It means we bring what we have to share with each other. It means that we understand compromise is a requirement of diversity. Different

people have different needs. A strong community can give support and legitimacy to opinions which may be diametrically opposed to each other. And, when this pandemic is in our rear-view mirror, we will be reminded that, in this community there is room for everyone.