

Yom Kippur Talk – 5770
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Kol HaLev – Cleveland’s Reconstructionist Community

Twenty-one years ago, in the fall of 1988, I was beginning a second year of living in Israel following upon my first, which I had spent studying at a liberal, co-educational yeshivah, and I was simultaneously in the midst of wrestling with the decision of whether or not to apply to rabbinical school for the upcoming year. Around that time, I came across a book in one of those used book stores in downtown Jerusalem that turned out to have a significant impact on my decision to go forward with the rabbinical school application process. Interestingly, or perhaps ironically, this book was not in any obvious way a Jewish book, except for the fact that it began with a story somewhat misleadingly entitled, “The Rabbi’s Gift.” It’s a story I’d like to share with you today.

Once there was a monastery that had been, in its day, a great center of learning and spirituality, but had since fallen on hard times so that now, only five monks remained, and it was clear that their order was dying. Now it so happened that in the deep woods surrounding the monastery, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town would use as a retreat from time to time.

The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the treetops. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their faiths.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. “It has been a wonderful visit,” said the Abbot, “but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?”
“The only thing I can tell you,” said the Rabbi, “is that the Messiah is among you.”

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, “What did the Rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the Abbot answered. “The only thing he did say, as I was leaving, was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean.”

In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi’s words: The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm. –

The title of the book in which this story appeared was *The Different Drum* by M. Scott Peck of *The Road less travelled* fame. In this book he explored on many levels and from many angles, the power of community to transform individuals and to bring them into open and caring relationships with one another. I found his vision of community both challenging and inspiring.

Toward the end of the book, Peck writes about the importance of creating the structures that could serve as the basis for the development of these kinds of communities and I remember very clearly at the moment of finishing the book, having the thought: We don't need to develop anything new. We already have that infrastructure in place. They're called synagogues.

Even though I had never seen a congregation truly functioning as a community in the way he described, or even heard of such a thing for that matter, I began to perceive that this is what congregations had the potential to become. They could be centers of light and spirituality within their communities. They could be places where the very fabric of relationship creates a magnetic energy that nurtures everyone who comes into contact with it. They could be places where people could bring the deeper parts of themselves without fear of judgment or rejection. The more I thought about this, the more the idea of pursuing a career in which helping to build this kind of community is the ultimate goal began to really excite my imagination. This excitement was transformed into passion once I realized that there was an entire movement of Judaism that was already very much thinking along these lines.

Our movement of Reconstructionist Judaism has, for the last two generations, put the goal of building sacred community at the center of its collective vision and identity. There has been great clarity that synagogues should be mostly about people. About relationships. About the journey of moving through life. About the fundamental questions of human existence. About creating, as Rabbi David Teutsch says, radiant centers of meaning and connection.

This is a vision that our Reconstructionist community here in Cleveland has from its beginning, passionately embraced and endorsed. From our years of existence as the wandering Jews of the Reconstructionist Havurah to our current more rooted identity as Kol HaLev. Not long ago, we set out to articulate who we felt we were at our essence, who we were when we were at our best and where we were striving to go in the future. We came up with the following lines:

Kol HaLev is a sacred Jewish community that celebrates the Divine, builds meaningful human connections and repairs the world. We have since elaborated upon and embellished this vision statement with others that articulate our mission and our core values as well as how we plan to express our ideals through our programming over the next several years. There is no question that we aspire to be, in the language of the medieval Jewish world, a *kehillah kedoshah*, a holy or sacred community.

The last few years have been an exciting time for us. We have moved into a beautiful new building. We have established a successful youth education program that is continuing to grow and develop. We have grown more sophisticated in our understanding of governance and decision making. We have created more opportunities for members to connect with one another and with the community as a whole. We have streamlined and polished the processes we use to generate our core activities of prayer and study. To

borrow a term from last week's sermon, these are all areas of strength for us. Strengths on which we will continue to build as we moved forward together.

However, what I believe is most special and compelling about who we are collectively, what is at the heart of why we all have been drawn into this community, is the quality of human caring and interest that we frequently display toward one another. As our community grows in size and complexity, we face the challenge of maintaining and deepening that core strength. It has been observed on many occasions, that what was once intuitive and organic for us now requires intention and awareness. This challenge has a structural dimension, (as in, what processes and experiences do we provide to maximize the likelihood that our members will feel a sense of belonging and affirmation?) But it also has a cultural dimension that revolves around the content of day to day interactions that take place between members of Kol HaLev.

I believe we are at a critical juncture in our collective development. Our list of tasks and our list of members have increased in scope. It is no longer a given that each member will know basic details about the life of every other member, where they live, what kind of work they do, where their children (or grandchildren) go to school, which melody they prefer for Oseh Shalom. And yet, even in this larger, more complex communal environment, it's clear to me that we need to find ways of re-grounding ourselves in that fundamental commitment to meaning and connection, to respect and appreciation.

In the description of the Biblical version of Yom Kippur that we read from the Torah just a short while ago, there are three concentric circles of responsibility that are identified. The process of atonement has to begin with Aaron the high priest as an individual. It is only after he purifies himself that he can move on to his family, and then finally the entire Israelite community. While we may not be too excited about the metaphysics or the leadership structure depicted in this text, I think it does teach us something quite powerful about the relationship between the individual and the community. It is the idea that there is a profound reciprocal influence between the quality of the overall group experience, and the quality of the individual attitudes and perspectives that are present in the group. In the biblical example, there is one individual in particular, namely the high priest, whose personal state of being impacts on the rest of the community. However, the implication, in our reconstructed context, is that each one of us has an essential role to play in generating the quality of our communal character. This is an awesome responsibility, but it also presents a tremendous opportunity.

The fabric of this character is woven with the simplest of threads: We weave strands by the way in which we make authentic eye contact with each other at Kiddush as we say Shabbat Shalom, and it's in the way we notice and pro-actively appreciate a community member who has invested a lot of time and energy in an important project. It's in the way we argue with another about important questions of value or direction without allowing ourselves to forget that our antagonist embodies the very same measure of human dignity that we feel inside ourselves. And it is expressed when we step forward to support one another in times of challenge, offering to run an errand, or cook a meal, or to simply be a compassionate ear. It is this recognition of our common humanity and our shared aspiration to reach for what is most life-affirming within us that is our most precious communal resource.

As important as it is that we have engaging programming, successful fundraising and a well organized decision making structure, their value pales in comparison to the ongoing practice and cultivation of core community values: mutual caring, mutual connection, mutual respect, mutual responsibility. And let us be clear that this is no easy task we have set for ourselves. It goes against the grain of much of the prevailing larger culture. We have certainly not always lived up to these aspirations in the past and there is no doubt that there will be moments when we will fail in the future.

But the good news is that we are in a much better position than the Abbot and the monks of the monastery. We don't have to be lured into thinking well of another. We already know where we're trying to go and we are getting clearer year by year on the best paths to take us there.

One of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the last century was a man by the name of Martin Buber who is most well known for his deep exploration of human relationships in the book I and Thou. Among his many powerful teachings is one that I think captures very well the essence of our communal vision: "Every person born into the world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique....If there had been someone like her in the world, there would have been no need for her to be born."

I have tremendous confidence in our collective ability to live our way more deeply into this teaching, even as our structure and membership evolve and grow. And as we do this, I will not be surprised if visitors are drawn to the aura of our community as they sense our intention to be a vibrant center of light and spirituality here in our realm of Northeast Ohio.

Good Yuntif and Shannah tovah!