

Making Connections
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5769;
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A story is told of the Emperor Napoleon who, on conquering a town, was used to being greeted by the surrendering forces with a canon salute. One town, however, neglected the customary gesture of acquiescence. Furious, the Emperor hauled the town's mayor before his assembled entourage, demanding an explanation for the omission. The frightened mayor broke into a sweat. He looked around to see if there was any escape. He trembled, he stuttered, he shifted his feet. Finally, he found his tongue. "Oh great Emperor, conqueror of the continent," he began. "There are four reasons why we did not greet you this day with the canon salute you so richly deserve. Of the four reasons, the first is that we do not have a canon." Napoleon immediately interrupted the mayor and said: "Friend. You can skip the other three."

We have a tendency to boil things down, to try to reduce great truths to, well, as I noted last night... to bumper stickers. We strive to capture the spirit, the essence of an idea, but the tricky thing is that in telling you what they think the heart of the matter is... everyone will give a different answer.

We find this reduction to core ideas in Jewish life as early as the Talmud in the following passage, attributed to a Rav Simlai:

Six hundred thirteen commandments were given to Moses...

David came and reduced them to eleven [principles, given in Psalm 15.]

Then Isaiah came and reduced them to six, as it is written: “One who walks in righteousness, speaks uprightly, spurns profit from fraudulent dealings, waves away a bribe... stops ears against... infamy, shuts eyes against looking at evil.” (Isaiah 33:15)

Micah came and reduced them to three, as it is written: “It has been told thee, O Man, what is good, and what the Adonai thy God demands of thee: only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with thy God.” (Micah 6:8)

Isaiah then reduced them to two, as it is written: “Thus says Adonai: observe what is right, and do what is right.” (Isaiah 56:1)

Finally came Habakuk, who reduced them to one, as it is written: “The righteous shall live by [their] faith.” (Habakuk 2:4).

[Babylonian Talmud, *Makkot* 23b-24a]

Now, to take a four thousand year old tradition and summarize it in a couple of sentences is quite an accomplishment. But we live in a demanding world. It is an age of instant gratification, attention spans the length of sound bites. What if we could go one further? After all, even a single sentence can get garbled when passed between people. Ever play the game of Telephone? What if we could boil down the entirety of our tradition, ages of wisdom and insight, knowledge gained from the struggle to survive in the face of oppression, isolation and exile, generations of dedication, devotion and ongoing discussion of what it is that God wants of us, what if we could cut it all down... to a single word?

That's what I faced a couple of years ago, meeting with a young woman troubled by differences between religions, questions of distinctions and boundaries in religious life. "If *religion is love*," she asked with great sincerity, "if religion is love, why is this happening?"

To be honest, that's a great question. I know what she meant by it. And so do you. She meant that religion is supposed to be about harmony, sweetness and nice things, bringing people together, unity. Doing good, being good, even feeling good. And at a very important level, she is right. It is a good question to ask.

But somewhere inside, I also remember thinking: "Where is she *getting* this stuff?" Who told her "religion was love"? And that... that's the only thing you need to know. But we know the answer to that as well. In this country, in this environment, we've all been trained to think this way. This Jewish woman thinks *religion is love*, because she lives in a place which proclaims, in simplistic terms, that *Christianity is love*.

Love *is* a value in our tradition. Of course it is. But it is not the only value. Nor even, perhaps, the most important one. At the very least, love is not enough. It is not *all* you need to know.

Just look at the Torah portion we read on this morning of Rosh Hashanah. *Akedat Yitzhak*, the Binding of Isaac, is clearly a story about love. What is not clear is: love for whom? Not for Isaac. Or maybe it is. Love of God? Love of family? Or is it about the competition between the two?

If we are to boil an entire tradition down to a single word, perhaps it *is* true to say of Christianity that faith is love. Although the word *I* might choose for Christianity would be “salvation.” And it is probably true to say that you can distill all of Islam into a single word as well. For Muslims, the word is “duty.” Or “obedience.” For Islam itself *means* “submission.” A Muslim is “one who submits.”

Close your eyes for a moment. Think about everything you know, everything you have learned about Judaism. If you were to pick *one word* to describe our faith, what word would it be?

If I had to stand on one foot, if I had one shot to tell Napoleon what we were all about, if I were given but a single word I think I would say that Judaism is about... “connections.”

Flowing from our sense of harmony at the heart of life, the unity of the universe and our proclamation of the Oneness of God, opening our eyes to the connections around us, that is what I think Judaism is about. That which seems so separate is only superficially distinct. We are connected with each other, with the world, with all of creation.

Making connections: it’s not just the slogan of a synagogue. It is an intellectual truth, a spiritual awakening... and a sense of existential empowerment.

An intellectual truth. Could there be any more compelling case made for the connections between everything than what we have witnessed, in just the past few months – indeed, the past few weeks and days? Easy Street ends, Main Street shudders, and Wall Street goes... well, we are still not sure where Wall Street goes, except that its reactive link and utter dependence on everything around it is laid bare for all to see. Who shall be rich, and who shall be poor? Who shall be secure, and who shall be exposed? Who shall rush in, and who shall consider? Who shall debate, and who shall default? Who shall fail, and who shall bail? Who shall lend a hand, and who hold tight. The value of your home affects the value of mine. The wisdom of one loan impacts all loans.

There is even, here, a connection in time. For we have come face to face with a credit crisis before, we Jews. At the time when our ancient economy moved from agrarian to mercantile, and the regulation of the sh'mitah year, the automatic forgiveness of debt mandated by the Torah, when the year loomed near, those with means grew reluctant to lend, to those in need. The whole system of social support was in danger of crashing down. So Hillel, acting on the power of his own authority, instituted a *prozbul*, an edict, an outside the box solution whereby debts owed during the seventh year were socialized, as it were, were seen as held in common, and collected, not by the individual lender, but by the court, on behalf of the lender. A creative response, in theory preserving an ancient custom – and in practice simply nullifying a clear commandment in the Torah!

In ancient days or in modern ones, the public and private sectors have always been more connected than some would say. But now it is more obvious than ever, and the line is disappearing altogether, with Republicans and Democrats reversing roles so profoundly that we may stand on the precipice of a post-ideological era.

The intimate interaction of banking and housing and food and fuel and war and peace come to the fore as a cascading effect, with clear causal connections but no fixed final destination at the moment. Oil prices peak, biofuel beckons, corn fields are converted in Iowa – and suddenly there are food riots in Indonesia. Even the aggressive behavior of our adversaries is enabled, emboldened by the price of oil. Flush with cash, you can flex your muscles. Russia and Georgia clash, claiming a conflict over language and land, but a pipeline looms in the background. We did what our leaders wanted in Iraq and discover, as a direct consequence, how limited are our choices in Iran. We try to push back against our actual attackers in Afghanistan, and watch Pakistan plunge into tumult as a result. A hurricane hits areas of production, and suddenly we are acutely aware of the whole system of distribution, in ways we never gave much thought to before. I remember, a number of years ago already, when we renovated this Sanctuary, we discovered a support beam which needed to be replaced. But a day or two expected delay stretched into weeks; a shortage of steel in Maryland, because of building projects in China. Consumption causes global warming, patterns of

weather change all over the world, and all our lives are forever affected. Food and fuel, energy and lifestyle, insight and innovation, necessity and invention, where we live and what we do, clearer, now, than it has ever been... we are all part of a tapestry of life. Pull a thread in one place and something unexpected tightens far away. A butterfly flaps its wings in Asia; a windstorm is born across the sea.

A spiritual awakening. We are connected with all of creation. With the entire cosmos, the universe as a whole.

I return, at the moment, to that gateway to awareness, that bedrock foundation of personal spirituality – the humble blessing.

You are up when you should be asleep. You are awake in the middle of the night. You fumble around for a snack, stumble over to the fridge, grab a hunk of cheese and a fresh-picked apple. But then you're stumped for a moment. You stare at the items in your hand, and you know you have to choose. You wouldn't just... bite it like a barbarian, would you? No, you're a Jew, or you're married to a Jew, or you are someone who asks Jewish questions. So the Jewish question here is: what *beracha*, what blessing do you recite? With no bread to make this an "official" meal – that's what saying *Motzi* does, it means you don't have to remember the specific blessing for all the items of food in front of you... so with no bread here, you can't take the easy way out, and just mumble the *Motzi*, that base line blessing which trumps and exempts all other prayers. No, the tradition

of blessings over food, other than the *motzi*, requires us to determine how something grows, and how it is produced. The apple is closer to its natural state, so *it* is the one which gets the blessing. “*Barukh atta Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, Borei P’ri Ha’Etz*; Blessed are You... Creator of the Fruit of the Tree.”

And maybe you will think about the meaning of the words. How did the apple grow? How did it come to us? You think about the botanical delivery system, the rhythm of time, the cycle of nature. Maybe in the middle of the night you will take a moment to be aware of our dependence on the world, our relationship with nature, the interconnectedness of all of life.

Every creature on the planet, every object on Earth, indeed, every particle in the universe is locked in a delicate dance of connection, pulled towards one another in eternal attraction. We are all cells in the organism of the universe, parts of a Cosmic breath of life, apart and a part, all at one all at once.

And if the words we say are really right, if the *Shema’s* promise of unity within diversity is anything more than a delusion, if the mystics of Israel who envisioned God as *En Sof*, the Unending Nothingness, the One beyond description, the Oneness beyond distinction, if their imagery reflects reality at all, a whisper of a dream of the truth, then all things are no things, and in the end all differences disappear into infinity. We are all just accidentally and temporarily different manifestations of the energy of life. And everything... everything is connected. We

think of “making a connection” as catching a plane. Perhaps we should think of it as catching a glimpse... of another plane of existence, the possibility of purpose... beneath the chaos of our lives.

What is Judaism? It is the stubborn faith, against all odds and first impressions, that there is a purpose and a pattern, that history and nature alike have meaning and structure and order. Even if in ways we will never fully know.

A sense... of existential empowerment.

My friends, the very first rabbi of this congregation, Ed Friedman, went on from here to other places, and eventually to work in a different field. He became a therapist, and then, in 1985, published a book which combined his clerical background, and his clinical insight. *Generation to Generation* has become almost required reading in some circles. It takes the concepts of systemic family therapy, and applies them to the emotional life of churches and synagogues.

But system theory is not just a tool in terms of organizations and institutions. It is a form of enlightenment, and empowerment, for us all.

Think about pipes, and plumbing. Think of a family as interconnected. Think of your own family, and the interlocking lives it represents.

And think of other families you know, families who may be struggling, coping with loss, sagging under the weight of problems, juggling, on the edge, stretched. Picture a family as a system in stress. Trouble with the plumbing. Pressure, internalized, hidden, silent... and suddenly water bursts forth, a leak erupts.

But here is what we know, and if we learn this lesson well it will give us great leverage in life. We know that the place the leak breaks out, that is not the spot where the pressure is building up. We know that the identified patient, the one who shows the symptoms, is not always the first cause of the problem. And we also know this: that relief to the system... even if it is not in the place where the problem comes from... relief anywhere, can ease the pressure everywhere.

We spend so much time pointing fingers at others. But we are all connected. Heal thyself, and look what can follow!

If only... If *only* you are able to change, the whole system follows suit. And even if only *you* are able to change, still everything around you is affected.

It's not a magic wand. It may not lead to an outcome you want, all the time or right away. But it changes the weave of the pattern, the tapestry of the whole.

It is so daunting, the task before us. So many problems, such complex challenges. So much to mend, in this broken world of ours. The charge of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world... impossible! Overwhelming! So easy to despair, to declare it cannot be done, to retreat into the smallness of ourselves.

But start small. Begin at home. Begin in your own heart.

Change, and the whole world changes with you. How? Why? Because that which is tied to you, that which is part of you, that which works through you... it will respond... to the choices you make, the steps you take. Grow, and those around you *have to* adjust! We are bound together.

And remember: "*lo alecha ham'lacha lig'mor,*" we learn in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Ancestors. "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. *V'lo atta ben chorin l'hivateil mimenu.* But neither are you free to desist from it."

Or, more recently, from the Torah of our own times, a popular folk song in Israel. "*Ani v'attah... nishaneh et ha'olam...* You and I... will change the world."

Think of the power that you have! Everything is connected. And that changes everything.

And love and salvation, submission and duty, awareness and connection...even these, we may someday see... are pathways to the same place, in ways we cannot imagine today.

A story, which I have told before. In a small town, the telephone operator used to receive a somewhat annoying but very regular phone call. In mid-afternoon, a male voice would ask for the time. The telephone company had the only fine clock in town, and so it was the place to which one would turn to get the exact time. After many weeks of this, the operator asked the man: "why do you call with such regularity? I don't mind giving you the time, but why do you do that?"

And the man said: "Well, you see I work at the factory at the edge of town, and one of my responsibilities is to blow the five o'clock whistle, and I want to do it exactly right. I want to do a good job."

There was silence at the other end. Then the woman replied to the man: "Well I don't want you to misunderstand what I'm saying, and I really don't mind giving you the time at all... but I do think that there's something that you ought to know. We set our clock... by your whistle."

L'shanah tovah.