

Feeling Connected
Yom Kippur Morning 5771
September 18, 2010

Whether it was from summer winds or winter storms, do you remember how you felt... when the lights went out? It happens so much here, any season of the year -- sometimes it seems all it takes is a bit of breeze -- that surely you have your own stories. And certainly you remember what it feels like, to be without electricity.

Let's picture the scene, in the middle of an extended outage. Files on the computer: there for a later day if we were lucky and saved them, lost forever if not. Land line phones might work, but some of us gave those up – and eventually the cell phone runs out of juice. No internet. No phone. How do we stay in touch? No movies to watch or electronic games to play; what do we do with our time?

Let's assume it's winter. The roads are impassable. The plows are delayed; side streets come last. The radio runs out of batteries. Soon other worries: what do we do with the food? What do we do to stay warm at night?

But then, something starts to happen. One house has a gas range, or someone manages to tunnel onto the deck and get at the grill. Coffee and hot chocolate appear and are passed around. Another house has extra shovels, and extra hands. Driveways are cleared together, and pathways to each others' homes. Someone has wood, and a working fireplace. Our eyes adjust to the candles at night. Expertise and rations alike are pooled, and a new spirit takes

over, as well as a new appreciation for the ease of our ordinary lives. We move from frustration and isolation... to a remembrance of things past, connection of a different kind. And we remember that what we have lost is only electricity. We support each other and we realize that it is a misnomer to assert... that just because the lights go out, we are out of power.

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem; rosheichem, shivteichem, zikneichem, v’shotreichem – kol ish Yisrael... tapchem, n’sheichem, v’gercha asher b’kerev machanecha, meichoteiv eitzecha ad so’eiv meymecha... You stand here this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God – your tribal heads, your elders and officials, all the men of Israel, and children and women, even the stranger within your camp, from the chopper of wood to the drawer of water...”

I spoke last week, and last night, of a collective spirit, a sense of unity and coming together. Again, in the Torah portion Reform Jews read on the morning of Yom Kippur, is this sense that the shared experience of a sacred past generates a “reading in,” creates a bond of common destiny.

As you have seen on logos and letterheads, at this congregation our “motto,” our two-line summary of our core mission, is this: “Temple Shalom: Making Connections: Through Community, Learning and Prayer.”

The reality is, though, that... not everyone feels that way. Not everyone feels that way about Judaism. And not everyone feels that way... about their spiritual community.

People struggle and find fault with synagogues for reasons as varied and diverse as they are drawn to them in the first place, but the statement I sometimes hear that challenges me the most is this: “I just don’t feel connected.”

My friends, this morning I want to explore with you what belonging and connection might mean for us, here and now, in this community. And I want to do this in somewhat more practical terms than the abstract approaches of my previous remarks.

One comment before I get more specific. It is a potentially obvious observation that feeling a bond with others around you... it doesn’t happen by magic. It is not universal, and sometimes it is not even easy. No community can just make it happen “for you.” *Neither* a sense of spirituality at services *nor* feeling connected to a community work like going to a full-service gas station, where you drive in and are simply filled up. It takes... effort.

This is kind of sad, in a way. Many of us remember how quick, how easy it was to make friends at college. The intensity of common living naturally led not just to a communal spirit, but also to lasting connections, at least, I imagine, for most of us. Now we are pulled in so many directions, many different modalities of identification in our lives: families and neighborhoods, school communities and professional ones, hobbies and interests. An intentional community takes work and effort, and for that to emerge anywhere... it is not automatic.

For those who do want more of a sense of connection, a deeper bond, an engaged communal life, even, indeed, for those of you open to the challenge of spiritual growth and life-long learning, here... here are some things we do, and some things I think we can do, to bring about that community we can be, that experience we occasionally find when we are at...our very best.

The first form of connection... comes in how we care for one another. I am grateful to my predecessor, our Rabbi Emeritus, Rabbi Bruce Kahn, and the many members of this community who were instrumental in the creation of our Mitzvah Corps. I realize, at the same time, that not all of our newer members know about Mitzvah Corps, what it was set up for, what it does, and can yet do. Originally envisioned as an extension of the reach of the Senior Rabbi, Mitzvah Corps is there to address and assist with the pastoral and practical needs of congregants. Its functions include bringing meals to those recovering from an illness, arranging rides for those who need help shopping or to get to an important appointment, providing resources for those who need to arrange for aides in the home. It is Mitzvah Corps which sends capable and caring congregants to lead shivah minyan services in the homes of those who have lost a loved one on those evenings when the clergy have conflicting duties and are not able to be there. Ranking among the highest commandments of our tradition, and not the task of professionals alone: that we should visit the sick, comfort the mourner, care for the needy.

But to meet your needs we need your involvement – not only in knowing that Mitzvah Corps is there, being able to articulate your own needs, but also in viewing yourself as part of this outreach, and being available to be there for others. Aply led by Wilma Braun and Beryl Tretter, Mitzvah Corps should, in theory, include in its ranks... every single member of the congregation.

We need more volunteers to make meals, provide rides, and be available for the variety of needs that arise. **We also plan on returning to the original vision of Mitzvah Corps, and training congregants to make home and hospital visits; the first of these opportunities will take place on Tuesday night, November 9, from 7-9pm.** I invite you to step into this challenging and rewarding role, and – whether it is for visits or to help in other ways – to be in touch with Wilma, Beryl or me to let us know of your availability.

A second form of connection can come... in working for a common cause. Being there for others involves not only personal care, but also making the world more fair, working towards Tikkun Olam. Our congregation has a long history of involvement in both social action – addressing the needs of those around us, and social justice – dealing with root causes of deep problems. We need each other: to cook casseroles once a month for SOME – So Others Might Eat, to serve at Shephard's Table, to work in the community on Mitzvah Day, to bring bags – as many of us did today – for the Manna Food Bank. We carry forth our banner and work on a range of issues including poverty, gun control, hunger and homelessness, interreligious dialogue, global

warming and environmental consciousness, sex education and reproductive rights, women's equality and same-sex marriage, Darfur and African relief, human rights and humane values everywhere. **This coming month, on October 8, we continue our conversation on core values, with a Tikkun Olam Pot Luck Shabbat Dinner prior to services, inviting our entire community to explore the direction and discuss the issues which move us the most, which we should focus on in the future.** Please come, so that the work we do is, indeed, a shared mission, and grows out of a communal vision.

A third form of connection comes... in deep, meaningful shared experience. There is nothing that promotes togetherness more -- it almost forces the point -- than spending two weeks on a bus together. Four Temple Shalom trips to Israel in the past eight years... for a mid-sized congregation of relatively moderate means... I am as proud of that as any other aspect of what we do. Other than working with those exploring Judaism there may be *nothing I do* that is more important to deepen Jewish life and strengthen Jewish identity than bringing those to Israel who have never been there before. **Our "master plan" in this regard has been to offer such a trip every two years, and so we would go again in the summer of 2012. But we have heard that there is already interest in a trip next summer;** please see me about this soon because, if this works well for enough people we might be able to arrange this. And there is also some discussion about a mid-winter, off-season Israel 201 type-trip, open to all but designed especially for those who have already been.

Finally, connection can come... from groups we create... intentionally, and with the primary goal of fostering bonds that will deepen and enrich our lives. We have a number of *chavurot* already within the congregation, small fellowship circles of those with common interests or who came here at a similar time, who celebrate holidays together and share in each other's life-cycle events. But there is room -- especially in Washington where so many people move here from out of town, whose extended families are far away -- there is room for more such groups. Ideally I would like to see *chavurot* that emerge organically, organized by and out of families with children in a particular grade, to cite just one example. I hope that we are able to help, to facilitate such groups and foster such connections among our families.

[These are just a few of the ways we are, or can be, there for each other. There are other community building opportunities here, of course: our downstairs Shabbat morning worship and study service, our Wednesday morning minyan, our auxiliaries and Renaissance Group.]

How can we feel more connected? What we know from recent research about religious communities is that congregations which mean the most in the lives of those who participate in them are *not* those that make no demands and have no expectations of their members. They are not those that offer only comfort – but never challenge, that sanctify what “is” but never push for what might or even “ought” to be. No, the spiritual communities that are on the firmest foundation today... are those who have real expectations of each

other, where there is a sense that being there *matters*, where membership is considered not a commodity but a covenant.

One of the most important components of a covenant... is that it is mutual. It is a two-way street. Beyond all the items I have mentioned, then, are the energy and ideas which will come from you, new ventures of depth and meaning we have not even dreamed of.

Several years ago I heard a phrase which summed up, so well, this vision of an active, engaged congregation. I first heard the phrase in Hebrew, and I loved it, so I went looking for the source in the Torah, in the Talmud, to no avail. Finally someone told me that the words were actually originally in... um... Chinese...and that the source... well, it wasn't the ancient rabbis at all. It was Chairman Mao, in the Little Red Book. But the phrase, the phrase is one I think if especially appropriate for a place where excitement flows in all directions, from all who are stakeholders in our spiritual lives. What I heard in Hebrew first – I have *no idea* how this sounds in Mandarin is this: “*Vayifrach elef p'rachim*. Let a thousand flowers bloom.”

In the esoteric tradition of Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah, we learn that there is a hidden but intimate connection between heaven and earth, between the physical world of our lives and some metaphysical reality underneath the surface of the ordinary and the every day.

During the Days of Awe this year, I have asked what it means to be alright, whether such a state is completely internal, and what others can do to help. I have explored with you the balance between the “me” and the “we,” the individual and the communal, even citing President Kennedy’s exhortation to service and the question of what we get out of the experience of being there for other people. I have spoken about an expanding circle of inclusion. What I have been trying to convey, in all of this, is that I, too, believe that there is a connection between heart and soul, between what we bring and what we take, between what we give – which is known to us -- and what we get, which is often amorphous, and mysterious, and, sometimes, only evident over the course and flow of time. With the mystics I assert, at last, the power that can flow... from personal intent... to cosmic impact.

An optimist, we are told, is one who believes that this is the best of all possible worlds. A pessimist... a pessimist is one who agrees.

My friends, we will get... the community we create. Let us, then, greet each other as we would want to be greeted, treat each other as we would want to be treated. That is the power that we bring, the warmth of our being and the light of our lives that never goes out.

Feeling connected comes from somewhere deep inside. It is not, ultimately, created by a committee, produced by a program, made manifest by any particular event. What I have outlined here is an invitation, an opportunity... it is something that may till the soil, prepare the ground. What grows from it... the power to make that happen... that depends... on each one of us.

Atem Nitzvavim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem... We stand this day, all of us, before the Eternal our God, bound to God, and bound to one another, to enter into a covenant for all seasons... connected to society and the sacred alike... if we but see ourselves as part of the picture... if we but read ourselves in.

L'shanah Tovah.