

Sermon for Kol Nidre – 2018 – Finding Holiness in Connection

I have always been a fan of the writing of Rabbi Naomi Levy. Last year she put out a new book called **Einstein and the Rabbi**. It is an exploration of what it means to have a soul and how we can benefit by being more in touch with our spiritual selves. In one passage she mentions a famous verse from Psalms (118:5) that appears many times in our liturgy for these holidays, “*Min Hametzar Karati Yah, Aneini baMerchav Yah.*” The verse is usually translated, “Out of my distress I called out to you O God, and God answered me expansively.”

Rabbi Levy points out that the word for distress is, *tzar*, like *tzures*, [like “Ach do I have *tzures*”] but it actually has another more literal meaning – *tzar* is narrowness, like the *Gesher yzar me’od*, the very narrow bridge. When we look at it like that the verse reads, “From my narrowness I called out to God, and God answered me in expansiveness.” In other words, the time of our distress is when we lock ourselves into a narrow space as if we are siloed off from everything and everyone else, and the time of holy salvation is when we recognize how we are interconnected with everything, and more importantly *everyone*, else.

As a matter of fact, the Hebrew name of Egypt in the Torah, the place of our bondage and our suffering, the place where we lacked freedom and were literally penned into narrow places, is Mitzraim – literally the place of narrowness. Too often we find ourselves back there, dwelling in an Egypt of our own making and it is not a pleasant place to be. It’s a place without empathy, without regard for the feelings of others, a place of self-interest, self-absorption and selfishness. But this evening begins Yom Kippur, the time we step out from our guilt and cleanse ourselves. Our mission this Yom Kippur is to go beyond our narrow place and recognize that redemption lays in the *Merchav Yah*, the recognition that we are all interconnected as part of God’s creation, as part of God. Yom Kippur invites us to take our first steps on a personal and communal exodus out of the narrow places we dwell, and hope that others will follow and engage.

The path there is paved with empathy, with the question “What is it like to be you?” I was reminded of the power of this question in March when I traveled to Israel on an Interfaith Partners for Peace mission with Pastor Jack Howell, the minister from Trinity Presbyterian Church around the corner. It was amazing really – traveling in the Holy Land with Jack, seeing places I would not usually have seen and encountering people I would not normally have visited; it actually forced me to abandon some of *my* narrow places and occupy a broader place. I did not think I could love Israel any more than I already did or believe it was a holier place than I’d experienced on many previous visits, but sure enough that’s what happened. And it happened because I was consistently forced to ask the question, “What’s it like to be you?”

One of the highlights of the trip was standing at the top of Mt. Scopus – we had just come into the City of Jerusalem for the first time on this trip and coincidentally, it is the place I got *my* first view of the Old City 25 years ago on my first trip to Israel as a teenager. I still remember the awe of sacredness and the weight of history I felt looking at the wall surrounding the ancient city, the beauty and majesty of the buildings and the buzz of activity on the streets.

It is a privilege to take people to Israel for the first time and to witness their reactions when they see that view, but I'd never escorted a Christian clergyman on the journey. So there I stood with Pastor Jack twenty-five years after my first glimpse of that view and I was so excited for him to see what I had seen so many years ago. I looked at him looking at the view and he had this kind of a funny look on his face and he asked, "So that's the Mt. of Olives there?" and I said, "yeah."

"What's that gold topped church down in the valley?"

"Ummm, I think they call that Bethany. I don't really know what it is though." He looked at me kind of like I just told him that I don't really know what the Lincoln Memorial is all about.

Next he asked, "So how long would it take to walk from the Mt. of Olives, down through Bethany and up to the Temple Mount?"

"I don't know, you can't really walk that directly. It would probably be best just to take a taxi." By the look on his face you'd think I'd told him to ride a camel backwards to get there. We were clearly not having the same conversation.

"What?!? No. Two thousand years ago, how long would it have taken?" And then it hit me. He wasn't looking at these hills and buildings and seeing the weight of history and the beauty of the architecture as I had 25 years before. He was looking at them and seeing the path his savior walked in his last week according to the Gospels. It was a perspective I had obviously never had.

There were tears in Jack's eyes and wonder in his voice and I asked myself in that moment, "What is it like to be him?" Then I looked at the hills and the valley through his eyes for just a moment and saw what made them holy to him and how different that was from what made them holy to me and the combined perspectives not only gave me such a profound respect and even admiration for Jack's faith and Christianity's connection to the land, but it made the land itself and the City of Jerusalem even more sacred and beautiful for me. I quickly realized that Jack *was not* necessarily seeing what I'd seen 25 years earlier, but because I was seeing through *his* eyes, neither was I - I was seeing more. I'd gone from a narrow view of Israel to a more expansive one. It was beautiful, life changing and life-affirming and the gateway was empathy.

Even more impressive was that the trip had the same effect on Pastor Jack. After the trip he wrote me, "When we would explore the historic Christian sites I felt an almost tribal affiliation for other Christians and that often left the surrounding Jews on the outside of my affections or care. I began to be awakened from this myopia one Shabbas evening at the Western Wall. I had never before witnessed the joy, the fervor, the sheer, unadulterated delight of Jewish worship as I did that evening. As I recognized the dynamism and power of worship of the God of the Scriptures, I began to see just how small, ugly, defensive, and arrogant my own heart was. I had sat in judgment of any competitor to, or even intruder upon, Christian hegemony and prerogatives. I had dismissed the 'other' and so miscategorized them and demeaned their own stories, needs, and even their worship. And, the one with the disdainful, smug, critical heart was a pastor! And a pastor walking on the very soil that Jesus had walked."

He continued, “I had lived with stereotypes and easy tropes taught and reinforced by politically conservative evangelicals. I had not lived with a meekness that put others’ needs before my own or their worship and beliefs as valuable as mine. I needed Israel generally not to grow more cosmopolitan or broadly conversant. I needed Israel and Shabbas at the Western Wall specifically to confront my own sinfulness and smallness.” Talk about leaping head first into the *merchav ya*, the broad place – and he was so grateful for the change that came with that perspective! It is better, freer to exit our silos and dwell in the broadness of empathetic community.

And it wasn’t just my interactions with Pastor Jack that highlighted the benefits of moving beyond our small, narrow perspectives and encountering others with empathy. The trip was basically a string of such experiences. One highlight for me was a visit to an organization called Shorashim. Shorashim, or Roots, is a farming cooperative made up of Palestinian locals and Nationalist Jewish settlers in the Gush Etzion region of the West Bank, a notoriously violent area administered by the IDF.

On our visit to Shorashim our speakers were two of the founders, one a settler, Rabbi Shaul Judelman and the other a Palestinian named Noor A’wad. They could not have been more different. Shaul with his long unkempt beard and peis down to here came from America to the Gush to reestablish the Jewish historical right to the Land where Abraham sojourned. Noor, who you would not have looked at twice if you saw him working in a tech company’s office downtown, had moved there from a bit further North after he finished a jail sentence – Palestinian police had arrested him on his way to a checkpoint to attack Israeli soldiers. He was 15-years old and his 14-year old best friend had just been killed by an Israeli soldier’s rubber bullet that struck his head just wrong. After his release a few years later, he headed to the Gush where his father had been born. How did these two end up on a cooperative farm together?

Well after witnessing attacks and deaths among their neighbors, that’s on both sides of the conflict, they recognized that maybe there is a better way. So, they got together and they started listening to each other’s narratives and beliefs. Not accepting them as their own, but recognizing that they existed and could not be changed by force or violence. Then they each decided to accept that these are your beliefs and these are my beliefs and we can have them and not kill each other and that’s better. Now there are about ten activists on the cooperative. They go into local schools and villages and tell their story. People think they are crazy. Quite frankly, I thought they were crazy – but this kind of crazy, crazy with a kind of empathy that accepts the story of the human being in front of you without seeing it as a threat to your own identity – well the world could use more of that kind of crazy.

The holy day that starts tonight is all about moving from our narrow place, siloed in self-interest, to the broad recognition of interconnectedness. It is why we come together as a full community on the day that should be the most private, painful and perhaps shameful audience before God. No says the liturgy of Yom Kippur. No – it is nearly impossible to do *teshuva*, nearly impossible to find your way back to your proper path without recognizing that you are part of a greater whole, without being part of a community. Being part of a community is recognizing your interconnection to and interdependence on others. Connecting with God is part and parcel of connecting with the people all around

you, your friends and neighbors and even strangers, and creating a communal purpose. In that web of understanding, holiness becomes quickly apparent.

Let us pray as we begin this day of reflection and reconciliation that we can move *min hametzar karati yah* – from our narrow places to call out to God and through empathetic perspectives be answered from God’s broadness freeing us from our narrow spaces. We do it by asking ourselves again and again, with regard to our family, with regard to our neighbors, with regard to those we encounter but do not know, “What is it like to be you?” May the light of empathy inspire us all over these next 25 hours and this next year and through it may we all merit the holiness, the serenity and the beauty of recognizing our interconnectedness as part of God’s sacred project of Creation. Amen.