

Kol Nidre Sermon

While sitting at the gate waiting to board a plane once, I noticed a man walking from person to person, looking them up and down. It seemed to me he might be Jewish and I wondered if he was looking to get a group of ten people together for a minyan to say Kaddish. He had a few other people with him when he came closer to me. Maybe he noticed my kipah or maybe I just had a look about me, but he asked me a question, Have you davened Ma'ariv yet today? Since I had not yet said my evening prayers, I said that I would be happy to join his group to help make a minyan. As he walked away I heard him say to the other men with him, in a nice Israeli accent, "*Yadati shehu shelalu* - I knew he was one of us."

Those words and this encounter touched me so deeply. The more I thought about it, the more I realized it was a two-way encounter. I helped this man so he could say Kaddish, and he helped me feel a connection, a sense of belonging.

Shelalu, he is ours – she belongs to us. One of us. It is one of the reasons we are all here tonight – we are one of us – we want to feel connected, to be one of the group. To do what our ancestors have done for centuries and to pray that our descendants will always feel the connection we feel. I feel it at other times but admit to you, the feeling of togetherness and community and connection is unique on Kol Nidre night. As I stand here looking out at all of you, I see many individuals, but I feel the power of the community.

A group of Jewish leaders was traveling together a few decades ago with a teacher who guided them. As this group studied more, they went deeper in their exploration of Judaism and confronted some difficult truths about our faith; they began to question some of their most deeply held beliefs. "Is it all true?" they asked. "Is this what God really wants of us? If it is not God's plan and not what we are supposed to be doing -- why should we even stay Jewish?"

One day, in the midst of their anguished debate, their teacher turned to them and said: "We all have to love our story!"

Think about what it means to love our story. It may be among the most important aspects of contemporary Judaism. The Jewish people have a great story and it is critical that we all embrace it: where we come from and where we are going - who we are - what connects.

In the years I have been your Rabbi, I have tried my best to inspire you to love our story – our history, our role as God's partner in Creation, the unique obligations we have, and how we can strengthen our ties to God and each other. As I have listened to you and sat with you at some challenging moments, as you have invited me into your lives for celebrations and sorrows, I have been inspired. In so many ways, you helped me love your stories. Together we now need to love our collective story.

The Jewish people have been gathering together on Yom Kippur for the past three millennia, we have been listening to Cantors chant *Kol Nidre* for hundreds of years just like Cantor Warschauer did for us this evening, we have been reading Biblical accounts of the rituals of this holiday and listening to the blasts of the Shofar for centuries, and for generations we have been saying prayers of Yizkor like we will tomorrow morning. Our story is an old story and it is now on us to renew it each day, with respect and integrity and love.

We renew our story every time we name our children at a brit milah or on the bimah on Shabbat morning. We renew our story every time a 13-year-old child accepts his or her obligation as a Bat or Bar Mitzvah surrounded by family, friends and community. We renew our story every time we stand with the bride and groom under the chupah - and we renew it every time we gather in this sacred space for communal prayer like we do tonight. This is why we are here, to reengage in that story, to pass it on to the next generation and to help all of us make it our own.

It is why we have refused to let go of our people and religion, despite the tragedies of our history. Despite threats, despite living as an oppressed minority *lomrot haKol*, despite it all, we are still here. In truth, our story is also filled with great moments, accomplishments, tales of independence and achievement and acceptance and prosperity. Our story is precious to us as it is full of love.

It has endless chapters. Some of us love the Yiddish chapter, others the Biblical, the Golden Age in Spain, the heroes of Masada, the achievements of the 20th Century, the achievements of the modern State of Israel and the Jewish imperative of moral ethical living. We love our story by learning it, discussing it, reliving it and celebrating it - by making it ours, and to keep it alive in our hearts.

We Jews love our books because they help us tell our story. I discovered a book this summer that reminded me of this feeling of *Shelanu* – that we all belong together. The book is ‘La Familia Y’Aguilar’ about a family of Spanish Conversos, Spanish Jews who were forced to convert when the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492. They kept their faith in secret; they kept their love for our story private as they continued to participate in it. Holding Yom Kippur services in the basement, salting their meat, lighting candles, teaching their children - all in private. Doing whatever they could, even as the eyes of the Inquisition were looking on.

One of the most chilling parts of the book is the description of Kol Nidre night, chanting the powerful prayers and going through the experience of recalling the mistakes of the past year and looking ahead to the opportunities to make amends in the New Year. The Kol Nidre prayer was very important for the Jews of Spain in the Middle Ages. In fact, some people believe that the prayer, written in the 15th Century, may have been specifically created for the Conversos. Kol Nidre allowed them to annul the vows of conversion they were forced to make, and the declaration at the beginning of the prayer:

“Bi yeshiva shel Ma’aleah – uv’yishiva shel mata - In the tribunal of heaven and the tribunal of earth, by the permission of God—blessed be God—and by the permission of this holy congregation, we hold it lawful to pray with the transgressors.”

Notice, this is a public declaration about every Jew, no matter their transgressions or mistakes: everyone is still part of our story - still ‘*shelanu*’.

The same could be said for the book we hold in our hands tonight, the High Holiday Machzor. Every edition of the machzor builds on the sense of *Shelanu* that came before. The Hebrew prayers that have inspired our people for centuries are nearly all written in the plural to remind us of this sense of *Shelanu*. The translations may be more contemporary and the essays and Midrashim that make this machzor unique speak to us unlike any other. As we turn the pages and allow the prayers and essays to inspire us and touch our hearts, we must remember that the words of Torah are how God speaks to us - while the words of the prayers are how we speak to God.

We believe that our story holds valuable wisdom that will guide us in the New Year. We want to participate in our story and want it to continue to live and flourish. It is why so many of us are worried about the assimilation happening in the American Jewish community. We feel that so many are not loving our story strongly enough anymore.

To the younger generation that may need more inspiration and reasons to join, who seem to be living at a pace that requires everything to happen more quickly, we welcome you and encourage you to be a participant, at your pace and in your time. Be part of shaping our future. Add your voice and words and passion to its unfolding. Bring your contemporary challenges and new ways of asking ancient questions and see how Judaism can inform our contemporary lives. Be one of us. Be *shelanu*!

Our people tell a story that is about uplifting our people, and about uplifting the world. It is about finding sisterhood and brotherhood, being a light unto the nations, a light to ourselves and to all of humankind. It is about living out the words of the prophet to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Our story inspires us to help those in need, to be kind to all of God’s creatures, to protect our planet and all who live on it.

The irony is that our story is more powerful and more needed today than it has been in centuries. What extraordinary events have shaped the last century for our people?

The unthinkable suffering of the Holocaust was arguably the most profound tragedy in our history. The return to Israel was perhaps the greatest redemptive chapter of our story in the last two thousand years. And for the past 70 years, some of us struggle with our relationship to Israel, holding it to high standards of decency and respect and honor and love. At times we are grateful and at times we are frustrated.

We need to get to know our story better and learn to teach it better – with more love, passion and power. That is why Jewish education has always been viewed as a life-long process. Whether we are in a classroom or reading on our own, we can always learn, we can always connect, and we can always feel a part of the process of Shulanu.

There are so many great ways for Jews to connect through learning, online and in conversation. And so many of these programs are based on the most basic Jewish passions – story telling, Jewish continuity, community and love. We have always believed in Jewish Education but a program like the PJ Library does so with parents and young children coming to read books and share stories and learn from one another. It is why our Jewish Federation devotes so many resources to this amazing program and why parents and grandparents in this community and others are part of PJ Library.

The motivation to get to know our story better is also part of the mission of The Jewish Center's Adult Education program. For many years, we have created opportunities for serious adult learning as we capitalize on the resources we have in the greater Princeton area. From our Adult Salon and Authors Among Us to our new Synagogue and Science programs, we have received national recognition including a special grant to expand our Synagogue and Science Adult Learning opportunities. One example of what we can do together is when David Spergel, a theoretical astrophysicist and world-renown expert on the Big Bang Theory, will join me in an evening of exploring how science and Torah view the creation of the world. We will explore with you how the Big Bang and Genesis are more closely connected than some may realize.

With all due respect to other great Jewish organizations, it is the synagogue that has always been the most important one. This is where we come together to pray and learn, to celebrate and challenge, to express our sorrow and to express our love. This is where we Jews come together to tell our story and we have a great story to tell. It is the place we Jews enhance our feeling of Shulanu – of being one of us.

On Passover night, we sit with our family and friends around the table and tell the story of our people. On Kol Nidre night, we gather in our synagogues to stand witness to our love for our story, to embrace our Torah, and to renew our love for the Eternal One who has given this precious and glorious story to us. Our story is both ancient and contemporary and, in many ways, the best parts of the story may still be to come. Let's continue to tell the story together.

Shanah Tovah