

SERMON - Yom Kippur Morning 5779 (2018)

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TESHUVA, TEFILA, TZEDAKA - A recipe for a thriving synagogue

On Rosh haShanah, I talked about my longtime difficulty, with many of the High Holy Day prayers, and especially Avinu Malkeinu, Our Father our King. But there are few prayers more jarring to many of us than the Unetaneh Tokef that we read during the High Holy Day Amidah.

We read, “***Unetane Tokef Kedushat Hayom***” Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day.

It then describes God as “Judge and Jury,” “Witness and Advisor”

I don’t know about you, but that is not a legal system I want to be part of. Too Kafka.

Then the prayer begins the part we are so familiar with: I want to ask you to turn to page 210

On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is Sealed –

How many of us really believe that our fate for the next year is determined in these 10 days? While I am a rabbi, and I think the opportunity once a year for us *as a community* to gather and reflect and confess our shortcomings is deeply valuable and moving, I don’t think it is likely that God has a tax day where all his accounting need to be done and sent in. Sent in to whom? It’s God. Perhaps it should say that God is both tax payer and IRS?

And then we get to that gruesome section that suggests that today it is decided:

- who will die by fire, and who by water
- Who by sword and who by wild beast?
- Who by famine and who by droughts?
- Who by earthquake and who by plague?
- Or who will die by stoning and who by strangulation?

Knowing what we know as modern people, can we really in good conscious say that who lives and who dies is somehow a result of whether we've been good or bad? That is in some way tied to our individual acts?

- After the Holocaust that is very difficult to support.
- After AIDS that is very difficult to support.
- After – fill in the blank modern genocide – that is impossible to support.

How many people with AIDS and Cancer became convinced by New Age preachers that somehow, if they could just find the root of the emotional problem deep within them, they would be cured? People like Louise Hay will always occupy a special corner of my heart reserved for such people.

And yet, we also know that more and more, our ***collective human decisions are determining patterns of flood and droughts, plague, fire, and with fracking, even earthquakes.***

Like Avinu Maleinu, this prayer carries a message of humility, that we don't control everything, and that much – like life and death- are most often beyond our control. But it mixes in this sense of karma that is deeply troubling, and yet also, at some level for us as a nation and a species – true.

Actions to have consequences, and so our actions do impact large patterns of consequence,

- whether it is radicalism as a result of brutal colonialism,
- or a financial crisis and near-depression that has resulted in a serious erosion of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian leaders, both here and in Europe, just as the Great Depression did.
- Or in Israel, while we can argue about who is most to blame in a situation that has plenty of blame to go around, it is clear that when the leadership of both sides make decisions that perpetuate conflict, distrust and violence, that violence is going to continue to the next generation.

Collectively, we are part of such life and death decisions every day,

But that is not the part of the prayer I want to concentrate on today. Instead, I want to look at the next few lines:

- “Who will rest and who will wander;

- Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled;
- Who will be calm and who tormented...

The prayer moves from physical deaths to more internal emotional punishments, one that the Jews of the middle ages saw quite literally, but we can also see quite psychologically.

- “Who will rest and who will wander;
- Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled;
- Who will be calm and who tormented...

Once again, for those of us that suffer will mental illness, this seems every bit as cruel as the previous list, as if we are blaming the victims,

But for those who are not suffering from a debilitating mental condition, we also know what it is to feel unmoored, troubled and even tormented by our sense of alienation, loneliness, disconnection, and meaninglessness.

Indeed, while the Jewish national story goes repeatedly from exile to homecoming, it would seem that as individuals, our abiding condition is exile.

We know from the time we are young that we are mortal and that these beautiful lives are fragile and short.

We know we want love desperately, but we are so contained within the walls of these minds, that as much as we want to merge with others, ,we are always at some level alone – and we know that.

And in communities, we sometimes feel this sense of exile most strongly, because our hope for the community is so often so distant from the reality. And so we withdraw, or put up walls, or shut down.

And as a community, Temple Sinai has known some lack of tranquility itself. People have gotten hurt, angry, stepped away, stormed away, or stuck to it I despite a sense of disquiet and resentment.

And Temple Sinai is in good company. So many synagogues and churches and civic organization are suffering right now, in part due to self-inflicted wounds, in part due to the national trend of secularism, and in part due to our increased focus on our screens and not on one another.

Indeed, my own disappointment seeing communities I loved and worked so hard for descend into petty squabbles, financial stress, and schisms has made me very wary myself. I thought a lot about this before applying here at Sinai.

But as I was preparing for Yom Kippur and reading the Machzor and thinking about these prayers, something in this prayer hit me differently for the first time and I wanted to share it;

(Turn to the top of page 214.)

Ut'shuva, ut'fila utz'dakah ma'avirin et roa hag'zerah.

Our Machzor translates this as “But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree.”

I think in those three words are an excellent formula for personal and communal healing and to help us build a flourishing community that at least helps us stave off the sense of exile and alienation that so often envelopes us.

The three key words are: “T’shuvah” “T’efila” “Tzedakah”

Renewal, Prayer and Acts of Justice would be my translation.

How might these provide a good road map for our larger world and for Temple Sinai?

T’shuvah means ‘repentance, return and renewal’. It means that people need to take stock of our actions, honestly and unflinchingly. It is very easy to blame others, to blame the rabbi, the cantor, “those people” for what goes wrong in a synagogue community, but in my experience, things are usually more complex issues than that. It takes a village to implode a village. We all play our role, and until we take stock of who we are this community, what it is we want from a community, and *how we can help that become a reality*, all the leadership in the world can’t fix the exile at the root of the issue.

Hillel said: Al Tifrosh Min haTzibbur” and he also said, “B’Makon she ein Anashim l’hishtadel lihyot ish”. Don’t separate yourself from community, and in a place where no one steps up, you step up.

Temple Sinai wants so deeply to get back on the right path; I felt that so strongly during my interviews and reading the results of the assessment process you did so well. And I think the next two words in the list give us a way out.

T'EFILAH – Prayer. And TZEDAKAH - just acts

TEFILA-

Ok, so we are not all into praying, but I think that to have a healthy synagogue community, to push back against the sense of exile, we need to move in two directions at once.

One direction is inward. So many synagogues have TONS of programming, but no spiritual core at the center. Since alienation and exile happen deep within each of us, from our mortality, from imperfect or even abusive parents or teachers, from being teased and bullied – just from being teenagers and stressed adults – we can't fix that by only looking outward. We have to find ways to love our wounded selves, to knit connections with our bruised spirits, and with whatever it is we call sacred and divine. I call that God.

I know we live in a secular society, and as Reform Jews we are understandably wary of religious nuts, but I believe a daily spiritual practice and a real communal spiritual experience is so important in relieving that personal sense of exile. To enter prayer is to leave, for a few moments, the exile of the human condition, and like Sabbath, it gives us a taste of what connection is so that we can strive for it and value it when our busy lives and ambitions and our frustrations and anger take us away.

And it is not only important for us personally, it has become very clear that for a synagogue community to thrive, it must have a strong beating spiritual heart where we, together, have moments of transcendence, or what Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence.”

One of my chief responsibilities and goals is the creation of a vibrant spiritual praying community that is not ashamed of its spirituality, but proud of its flourishing sense of spirit. I ask for those of you who are pulled this direction to seriously consider stepping onto our Spirituality Committee so that we together can create the vibrant, spiritual home we long for.

TZEDAKAH

But prayer alone is not enough. Not for us as individuals, nor as a community.

We need that third word “T’zedakah”. So often translated as charity, it means something far more profound: It means acts of justice, acts where we take the injustice around us and in specific concrete ways, tried to make the society around us a bit more just.

As individuals, too much inward focus can cause us to lose perspective, to forget the bigger picture around us. To counter the modern sense of exile and alienation, we need to reach both inward to spirit and outward to justice and connection with people in struggle. In helping others we help ourselves. In healing others we heal ourselves.

And this is true for community. A community that only focuses on prayer is navel gazing and self-absorbed, and frankly a bit creepy, but if we add to that journey inward, a simultaneous reaching outward to help others in direct, face-to-face ways, I believe that it a powerful combination.

And while I think coat drives and food drives are great, that is not what I mean. I mean stretching ourselves. Here is what today’s Haftarah from Isaiah that we will read letter demands:

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, The Presence of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

I believe that here at Temple Sinai we must take that call seriously. We need to up our TIKKUN OLAM game, to be a presence and force in the local community. Temple Sinai can’t be a country club. We don’t have a golf course or pool so who would join? We need to demonstrate in the local community our commitment to

justice, to feeding the hungry, to housing the homeless, to helping addicts, to supporting struggling veterans.

Tim and I were members of a synagogue in Atlanta that had a homeless shelter in the school one day a week. I know in the past Temple Sinai sponsored refugees. These are large undertakings, and it is easy to say, ‘we are not ready,’ but I believe that Temple Sinai will become the community it dreams of being only when we reach – at the same time- inward to prayer and outward to justice Those of you who are called to help Temple Sinai do that, I want to urge you to step forward onto our **Social Action** committee so that we can find those areas of need that we are best able to fulfill, and to do so in a way that is direct, and entails meeting and building relationships with the people who have been on the wrong end of justice. I don’t yet know what forms that will take, and even if I did, it is more important that we as a community find our way. .

To create the narrow bridge from exile to connection, from alienation to thriving community, we need to reach in, to spirit, to prayer, to the sacred, AND we need to reach outward to justice and helping those in need.

That is how we turn ourselves around, and more importantly, how we make our lives and the lives of our community more full, more joyous, more connected, more meaningful, and more just.

If we each reflect on the gift we can bring through “T’shuvah,” we reach inward with T’filah, even as we reach out with T’zedakah, we will be renewed, and we will make sure that a meaningful, rich and spiritual form of Judaism and community is passed on to the next generation. We can, together, give a gift that we weren’t given.

And because we are Reform, I would add one more: T’hila. Joyful devotional singing. I am so pleased with how much this community likes to sing and is slowly loosening up and singing with their full voice, not their ‘little voice’ we use at synagogue so we don’t stand out when we miss a word. I want to build on what many of you have been doing, and with Mark, with Dahg, with Saragail, with Bruce and many others, work to create a vibrant inspiring music and singing culture here.

T'shuvah T'fila Tz'daka T'hila.

These, I believe can help each of us as individuals heal some of the exile of the human condition and the modern world that each of us carry, and here at Temple Sinai, I believe these offer us a path to create a progressive creative spiritual Jewish home, our promised land.

KEN YEHI RATZON