

Kol Nidrei Yom Kippur 5783
Temple Emanu-El
Cantor Vera Broekhuysen

LEAVING LONELINESS, COMING INTO COMMUNITY

We gather here tonight for our Kol Nidrei service, in community to do this work of t'shuvah, return, and t'fillah, prayer, to get our feet moving towards tzedakah, just action. To gather, in Hebrew, is "l'hikaheil." Our act of gathering creates our identity as a community—a kahal or a k'hillah. Our whole is greater than the sum of our parts. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik spoke to a Jewish organization in Boston, in 1978, saying, "The community is not just an assembly of people who work together for their mutual benefit, but a metaphysical entity, an individuality; I might say, a living whole."¹

We gather together to create that living wholeness in a year that has sorely strained our sense of cohesion. On Kol Nidrei we can do in community what alone, we cannot achieve. We speak our prayers and our confessions in the "we" voice of a group. We're not all the same, and sometimes there's conflict. Our introduction to the Kol Nidrei prayer lays it out. Anu matirin l'hitpalleil im ha'avaryanim: we are permitted to pray with people who have crossed important lines. Those people, those transgressors, are all of us. We've all crossed the line this year. We've insulted, we've lied, we've been careless and thoughtless. The lists go on, and we repeat them over and over, in the acrostic short confessional "Ashamnu," and in the longer "Al cheit."

And yet we gather. Imperfect, torn, tender, we gather. We gather because unless we gather, we're alone.

We don't want to stay alone. Torah teaches us that right off the bat, as the second human is created—lo tov heyot ha'adam l'vado (B'reishit 2:18). It's not good for a person to be alone.

Each one of us has worth and value as an individual. Alone, without outside influences, we make and think according to our own original impulses and reasoning. Each one of us carries and tends the Divine spark. Each one of us is unique.

But we don't need to stay wrapped up in our singularity, alone and remote from one another, in order to create and to make an important difference. On the contrary, we are asked to come together, to share care and creativity, to bend our strengths to our communal identity and a common task. Rav Soloveitchik again: "Each individual has a unique message to communicate, a special color to add to the

communal spectrum. Hence, when lonely man joins the community, he adds a new dimension to the community awareness. He contributes something which no one else could have contributed. He enriches the community existentially; he is irreplaceable.”²

Yehoshua ben P’rachya teaches us in the Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 1:6): *asei l’cha rav*, make yourself a teacher, *uknei l’cha chaveir*, and acquire for yourself a friend. *V’heyvei dan l’chol ha’adam l’chaf z’chut*. Judge each person by their good deeds. Give them the benefit of the doubt.

Giving the benefit of the doubt is what makes that *chaveirut*, that friendship, that comradeship, possible.³ It's what allows us to not be alone. If we assumed only bad intentions, how could we join together for study or for any other worthwhile project? Imagine I learn that my friend has told someone else something I asked them to keep secret. I can worry over what made my friend feel that my wishes weren't important, or worse, why they wanted to embarrass or hurt me. That will make me step back from my friend; I might not be as honest, or as compassionate, with them in the future. I might not call them up next week to build a *sukkah* together, the way we'd planned. Or I can remember that my friend is human with many responsibilities on their mind, and I can decide that they probably just forgot that I had spoken confidentially. Another example: a colleague uses your idea without giving you credit. Are they jealously trying to undercut you and minimize your work, or did they think they came up with it? Assuming the worst derails relationships and the joint projects we undertake in those relationships. Assuming best intentions allows us to stay together and to continue to pursue worthy goals.

Ten days ago, on Erev Rosh HaShanah, our *shaliach tzibbur*, Phil Platcow, led us in a rich discussion on what paths might lead to overcoming differences and moving forward together, in all the communities of which we're part. You folks shared your wisdom generously with each other that night, even as you acknowledged what a difficult problem it is to solve. One person said, “We need better and more objective facts and information sources, and to trust them together.” Another person said, “What we need most is to listen to each other, even when the rocks in your head don't fill the holes in mine.” A third said, “We need a great community project, something that people get excited to come together and do.”

To be in community does not mean to be in homogenous agreement with every community member. On the contrary. Two Jews, eighteen opinions, *nu?* What building improvements should we take up next? What issues are too political for shul, and what's important to take a public stand on as a Jewish

community? How long should Shabbat morning services be? Okay, I've never had someone say, "Cantor, that service was too short!"

Inevitably, we encounter ideas and actions that we dislike. But these too are essential parts of the communal endeavor. Rabbi Sarah Mack shared gardening Torah with me, during the summer's driest days, that reframes how we might think about disagreement: Weeds are "native annuals," and even poison ivy feeds the birds. Sometimes, perhaps always, it's best to let them grow in your garden. Don't rip them out—you never know what they're nourishing. You never know what someone else's opinion might be nourishing.

In our country, we're struggling with this idea of giving others the benefit of the doubt and assuming best intentions. Politics continue to be hugely polarizing, and our personal reserves of tolerance, patience, and trust are badly depleted. We snap at one another, we rush to judgment, and we assume the worst.

We've had an extraordinarily difficult two and a half years. I think that we are just starting to process the trauma of this time. It's marginally safer, now, to grapple with what we felt during the worst of COVID: loss, anger, betrayal, and profound loneliness. Many high-risk and disabled folk continue, indeed, to experience that anger and loneliness, as much of the world lurches back towards a "new normal." Our temple is committed to continuing to offer hybrid Zoom options for most services and programs. We are also investigating whether we should offer one or two all-masked services each month. Please let me or our Temple president Jenn Lampron know, before Simchat Torah, if mask-required services would make a difference for you.

Our wells have dipped low, with emergency after emergency forcing us to draw on them, and not enough of the pleasures of life and community refilling them. There's a real temptation to give up on relationships and institutions when something happens that upsets us: to say, "Enough, if this isn't going how I want, I'm done. I don't have the energy, or the time. I've done enough."

But our communities are worth that energy and that time. To join in community requires giving up something: the ability to have it all our own way, and some precious alone time. But without joining together in community, we isolate ourselves from opportunities to recognize each other's worth and to build something, to build holiness, together.

The Chatam Sofer commented that

לא קדושה של התבדדות ונזירות דורשת התורה, אלא, אדרבא קדושים
בהקהל נאמרה—היו קדושים בהיותכם בתוך קהל ועדה ומעורבים עם
הבריות.

The Torah seeks not the holiness of solitary worship or Nazarite self-denial, rather the opposite, be holy in community—be holy when you are part of a congregation and a community and involved with God’s creations.⁴

To dig our hands into the difficult work of care for other living beings, as a group effort, is our purpose. Not to agree about everything. Not to be angels nor to be comrades with angels. To be chavirim: partners with one another, human together, making mistakes, but also making something worthwhile.

This year, our community has three big series of conversations already planned, to which I want to invite you tonight. We need you and want you and all of your opinions in these conversations, especially when there's disagreement. Our Spirited Aging Together group, sponsored by the Chesed Committee, is going to talk about what it's like getting older, communicating important things with our families, and personal stories and values we want to share. Our Dayenu Circle is going to help us be hopefully and actively involved in building our world's resilience to climate change. In Israel Chavurah, established many years ago by our rabbi emeritus Ira Korinow, we'll share our own connections to and feelings about the Holy Land and respond together to what happens in it. Our opinions will differ on aging, on climate action, and on Israel and Palestine. Our experiences will differ. Inevitably, we'll disagree. But each original thought shared will build our community's awareness. Each of your acts of participation, your unique and irreplaceable sparks, will open up conversations and actions that could never be possible without you.

There is a beautiful story in masechet Ta'anit of the Talmud.⁵ The Jewish community is in the middle of a prolonged drought. Food stores are low. Desperation is high. After the first rain, the prophet among them tells the Jews “tz’u v’zir’u, go out and sow your crops!” The people are concerned that in the drought, the seeds won't grow. They ask the prophet: “Someone who has a little wheat or barley left, should that person eat them and live, or sow them and die?”

Can you imagine that choice? Can you imagine that town meeting? People deciding whether to fill their starving bellies now but give up the potential for a future harvest, or to throw the dice for communal survival that will fail if the rains don't show?

What would you do?

The prophet said to them, “Af al pi chein. Even though. Even though there is no rain, and we don't know when it will come. Even though you have barely anything to eat. Even though our world is precarious and resources are unequally held, ts'u v'zir'u, go out and sow.”

And they did.

The prophet's grammar in this story is significant. The community asked him, what should an especially needy individual do? Should that person opt out of the group effort and make a lonely bid for personal survival? No. The prophet's words don't change in his response. He continues to address the entire community in the plural, including the needy individual as part of it. Ts'u v'zir'u. Stay together and sow your crops together, he commands. Nobody should starve or feast alone.

What's the end of our story? Na'asah lahem neis, a miracle was made for this community. After they sowed their last seeds, more caches of seeds were revealed to them in the walls of their buildings, hidden in antholes.

When a community sow seeds together with hope, life is called out of the very walls.

That's what we're asked to do, on Kol Nidrei, and every day of the year. Af al pi chein—even though it may feel risky—let us sow seeds together, work together, harvest together, affirm together, hope together, build together. As individuals who step forward out of loneliness to become part of a living whole—as a community—we can create miracles.

G'mar chatimah tovah.

1. Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik, “The Community,” (lecture, 78th annual meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Boston, MA, May 31, 1976), 9.

2. Soleveitchik, 10

3. I am indebted to Rabbi Rim Meirowitz for lifting up this theological move.

4. Chatam Sofer on Vayikra 19:2, “Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.”

5. Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 5a, my translation/summation