

The Legacy we leave...a Treasure to Find

A sermon delivered by
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Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple, New Brunswick, NJ
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The words that I am about to share with you this morning began to formulate in my soul fifty years ago this very day. I was a student rabbi, co-leading Yom Kippur services with Rabbi Marc Lee Raphael, my colleague, who would become my precious friend and one of my mentors. During a silent pause in the service he came over to me and whispered in my ear that Egypt had attacked Israel and caught the IDF off its guard. A shiver ran down my spine; it was the first time I fully understood the meaning of an existential threat to Israel and the Jewish People.

While I did not know the outcome of what would be called the Yom Kippur war, I became keenly aware of the fact that the Jewish people and the State of Israel would never again be viewed by the world as a David fighting against Goliath, but rather we would learn that other nations would come to view Israel as a colonial power who like all other such powers in history would come to an end, unless the people of Israel and the Jewish people together were determined to change the course of history and effectuate a future that fulfilled the Divine message of *כי מציון תצה תורה* “from Zion shall go forth the Torah of Adonai,” that our people’s mission to be *אור לגוים* “a light unto the nations” would be carried out and fulfilled for the benefit of all humanity.

I hope you will forgive me this dramatic reflection of that moment. But that very Yom Kippur morning, sitting in the synagogue with prayerbook in hand, just as we all do this morning, I realized that my life as a rabbi would be dedicated to a strong and vibrant future for our beloved Jewish State of Israel and that I hoped my leadership over time would reflect a legacy of kindness and justice, to help repair a broken world so desperately in need.

Yes, that was a point in time that I will never forget. Since my birth, there was always a Jewish national home called Israel; antisemitism was largely a thing of the past, something I had never personally experienced; and Judaism in America was one of the three great faiths of the world. Soon thereafter Joan and I would move here to New Brunswick and begin to share our lives with you, Anshe Emeth, this very precious and historic congregation with roots that run deep into the fabric of this community, a congregation that declared itself at its beginning to be *Anshe Emet, the People of Truth*, a synagogue community dedicated to loving the State of Israel as the Jewish people’s national home, and a Jewish community respected by its neighbors and truly a source and beacon of justice and loving kindness to all. That is what you were when I arrived, what you and I have continued to be over the years, and what you and Rabbi Bazeley continue to build into the future. I am forever grateful to all of you, for all that you have meant to me, and for your steadfast devotion to be the inheritors of a legacy established by those who came before us, a precious legacy from the generations of the past and for the generations to come.

Coincidentally, just a few weeks ago, Joan and I, together with our daughter Ellie and granddaughter Meg, stood at an ancient Roman site in the historic city of Bath, England. From a vantage point overlooking the site, we saw the hot springs of Bath built for Romans. It was a place where the elite of Rome in England could come and do what the Romans did — celebrate the glory and the meaning of life through the physical pleasures of the body.

Ironically, as I stood looking down upon the hot springs and all that the Romans had built to celebrate it, coming from behind me was a musical sound, the melody so very familiar. It was an instrumental version of a biblical poem, Psalm 150, the melody composed by a modern-day Davidic prophet, Leonard Cohen. You all know it: “Haleluyah, Hallelujah.” A Psalm not celebrating the body but rejoicing over the meaning of the soul. כל הנשמה תהלל יה. Just like fifty years before, I was struck by a moment not of my making but of my realization that life and living were not about me, Bennett Miller, but about being a Jew, part of a historic people, the Jewish people, in an ongoing encounter with the Divine, called upon to be an instrument of holiness to the entire world. And that is what I spent my life teaching my students over the course of the years: You and I are part of a people of destiny entwined in a historic encounter with God to be the Divine instrument of justice and kindness to the world.

I

It's Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year, a day for תפילה, צדקה, ותשובה; this day intended for deep reflection guided by the liturgy of our people, a day designed to urge us to be a People, both collectively and individually, celebrated and even envied for our commitment to, pursuing justice and peace, generosity and kindness each day of our lives in the new year that has begun; and a day to focus, not on the physical, the body, but on the most important part of our being, our souls, what makes us human imbued with the Divine spirit.

As you and I consider the meaning of this day I hope you will allow me to share a few take aways. Truth be told, there is so much power and significance to this day that it can be overwhelming; that is why I want to focus on just these few themes.

The sages of our tradition taught: או חברותא או מתותא. Without community you have death. My dear friend of blessed memory, Rev. John Talbot, expressed it this way: “people need community or else they die.” He was so right! We are living in a time where people are living alone. Thinker and commentator David Brooks describes it this way: “We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein.”

We are living in an era in which narcissism at the highest level of society, selfishness carried out through political aspiration regardless of the rule of law, has become the order of the day; hatred of the other, antisemitism, racism – all have become instruments of the selfish, for personal gain and pleasure at the expense of the common good.

או הבקותא או מתותא. Yes, people need community or else they die. This community, this congregation, we the Jewish people, are the antidote to such a societal norm. That is why we have played the role we have throughout the ages. I was reared in a Jewish community of

kindness and decency, a congregation that cared for one another, for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, too. And, for last fifty years I have seen the power of community again. Right here. You celebrate, you embrace, you comfort each other. You hold the widow and orphan and stranger in loving arms. And you sustain each other in life affirming ways. It is the strength of Anshe Emeth. As you contemplate the days to come, I urge you to open your arms even wider, allow yourselves to walk through the doors of this community as never before. And encourage others -- strangers, poor, weak, sick, all in need -- to walk into these precious halls and feel the strength of your kindness, the embrace of this community's loving arms.

We don't live around the corner of Livingston Avenue anymore, but our neighbors know who we are and what we mean to them. I truly believe that is why we have never seen graffiti on our walls, nor antisemitic threats, although unfortunately there is never a guarantee of such evil. Our neighbors know what we mean to them: the diapers, the health equipment, the clothing, the food, the kindness, and so much more. Here is an example of what I mean. About seven years ago, in the cold of late December I traveled to Rochester for my mother's ninetieth birthday. She was born on December 26. That day, out of the blue, I received a call on my cellphone. "Rabbi Miller, you don't know me. I live around the corner from the Temple, and I am not a Jew. I have noticed that a white van has been parked across the street on Livingston Ave for the past few days with out-of-state plates. I am concerned that it could be a danger to the Temple. You all are too important to us to be threatened, and I thought you should know what I have observed." I thanked her and promptly called my friend, New Brunswick's then Police Director, Tony Caputo. He told me, "Rabbi, we are on it. You are all safe. You don't know this, but we have our eyes on Anshe Emeth 24/7. Rest assured that you and the Temple are in safe hands." My friends, it is not because of our political power, nor our financial influence, nor the beauty of our Temple building ... it is because of what we represent, who we are in the presence of our community, and what we mean to so many, our members and so many others. או חֲבֵרֵינוּ אוּ מְתוּמָנוּ. People need this community, Anshe Emeth, this people of faith and truth and kindness and generosity, or else they and we will all surely perish.

II

Last week, one of my mentors, Rabbi Matthew Simon, passed away at the age of 90. I first met him in Jerusalem in 1972 when I was studying there. At the time, he was working for United Jewish Appeal, and he asked to meet with the rabbinic students at Hebrew Union College. I will never forget that meeting. From that moment on, Rabbi Simon guided me in a journey of visiting Jewish communities throughout the world, advocating for Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry, insisting on an Israel whose very existence is enshrined in its Declaration of Independence to be a Jewish and democratic and caring nation based on the highest values of our People over the course of four thousand years.

I trust you all know that Anshe Emeth begins its High Holy Day worship unlike any other congregation in the world. It begins with the singing of לִי פִתְחוּ, "Open the gates of Righteousness;" that is what we declare as the congregation rises and the Torah scrolls are carried in by our Past Presidents and Youth leaders.

Rabbi Simon once shared a Talmudic commentary on these very words, לִי פִתְחוּ.... He taught that, "at the time of judgment, in the future, everyone will be asked, 'what was your

occupation?’ If a person answers, ‘I used to feed hungry people,’ they will say to that person, “This is God’s gate, you, who fed hungry people, you may enter.”... “I used to give water to thirsty people,” they will say to that person, “This is God’s gate, you, who gave water to those who were thirsty come in and enter;” “I used to give clothing to those who needed clothing,” they will say to that person, “This is God’s gate, you, who gave clothing to those who needed clothing, you, too, may enter;” and, similarly, those who raised orphans, and who performed the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, and who performed acts of caring, loving kindness (Midrash on Psalms, 118:17). To you Anshe Emeth, this year, and every year, when the choir sings לַפְתִּיחוּ, as the Gates of Righteousness are opened, I pray that we will be invited in because of our deeds, because we touched other lives, because we are known as a most special community that truly does God’s work in so many incredible ways.

III

And finally, a personal thought that I ask of you and share with you. Later today, during the last moments of our worship we will close “the gates of righteousness” and our lives will be sealed for the new year. For me, this *yontif* represents the closing of my gates, the conclusion of a half century of our being together. Fifty years is both a short time and a long time. With most of you, we have shared this time together. As the gates close, I ask this of you: how shall we be remembered? Not, how will I be recalled, but more significantly, what will be the legacy of this precious community? What will the generations of tomorrow say of us?

Will we be remembered as a community that faced enormous challenges and found ways to overcome them, or that we were always the light that radiated truth and goodness in the dark moments of time? Will we be the generation that passively observed Israel from a distance while our brothers and sisters devoured one another, or be the faithful who did and continue to do everything in our power to ensure that Israel remains a light unto the nations? Will we be recalled as a once great community or as a community that continuously inherits and refreshes and renews its legacy of truly being *Anshe Emet*, the people who give of themselves and who train their young to live in a world defined by the highest values of our faith each and every day?

Yes, it all began fifty years ago this day, even before I met any of you. And it continues again today. I pray that the true meaning of our time will be that we were touched by the spirit of holiness given to us here in this place, and that angels carried us on their wings and showed us a glimpse of paradise so that we could model our lives and our world on what they brought us to see.

IV

A number of years ago I watched a little girl stand in the center aisle of our sanctuary. Blond hair, big eyes, taking it all in, hardly saying a word. That little girl observed us and watched all that we did. Today, she is a budding poet who will soon graduate from High School. She recently published her first book of poetry. There is one piece that I believe was inspired by her time here, standing right there, listening, and watching with awe as her congregation showed her the meaning of life, of living, and of love.

I share with you now, her words, Milena Kogan's words, daughter of cherished friends Anna Sverdlik and Rabbi Claudio, the words of a poet, whose very thoughts, I hope and pray, embody the meaning of our time together since first we met; the meaning of these days, a time we shall never forget.

Legacy of Love

a legacy of love, that's what we leave,
 when our time on this earth we finally cleave,
 it's not the wealth or fame we've gained, but the love we shared, the hearts we've pained.
 for love is the thread that binds us all,
 a force that can lift us when we fall,
 it's the light that shines in the darkest night,
 a beacon of hope, a guiding light.
 our legacy of love is what we impart,
 to the ones we leave, to the world at heart,
 it's the memories we've made, the moments shared,
 the love we've given, the love we've dared.
 it's in the gentle touch, the warm embrace,
 the words of comfort, the smile on our face,
 the selfless acts, the kind gestures we've shown.
 the love we've given, the seeds we've sown.
 our legacy of love is the mark we make,
 a life well-lived, a heart that won't break.
 the legacy we leave for the ones behind,
 a love that endures, a treasure to find.

גמר חתימה טובה

May we all be sealed in the book of life.