



HIGH HOLIDAYS 2021/5782

“Come Together”

Yom Kippur Sermon, September 16th, 2021

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I want to take you back to the moment in the Torah just before the ten commandments are uttered. At this moment the Israelites are gathered at the foot of Mt. Sinai. A thick cloud descends upon the mountain. The mountain is quaking, and smoke rises from its core. The people are terrified. And the text states: **the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.** (Ex. 20:18)

On this phrase Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav says : a thick cloud has the property of an obstacle for it obscures what is in front of us. At Mt. Sinai the people stood at a distance, fearful of the cloud, fearful of the darkness. But Moses, who represents ultimate awareness, he approached the thick cloud, where God was. He went even closer to the obstacle and entered the cloud. He went to the very place in which God was hidden.

In this image we see that God is in the darkness. God is within the obstacle itself. What Moses brings to this moment is the willingness to enter the cloud, to enter the dark space and to do so with complete and open awareness. It is in **this** place, that he receives Torah- our great teaching, often referred to as ‘light’ and which he can then bring back to the people. The response of the Israelites is natural. They distance themselves from what appears at first to be threatening. But Moses enters into the obstacle itself, enters into the darkness of the unknown. He discovers that God dwells there too, within the obstacle and then he is able to return with a great light.

Let us take strength from this story. We are surely living through threatening times and have been confronted by an endless array of obstacles. The natural response is to turn away, to seek diversions and distance ourselves. But what Rebbe Nachman reminds us, is that by facing the darkness, meeting the obstacle with a kind of open mindedness, we might discover how to find and bring back the light.

What a year we have lived through. Barukh Hashem - with gratitude we acknowledge the gift of life, but truly, it is with some trepidation we face the coming year. Tragically, this past year, we have been down a dark path in our country and in the world.

We have all seen how painfully polarized our country has become; divided over what appear to be irreconcilable differences. Sharply differing views on issues of public health, national politics as well as the State of Israel. Tragically, for many in our land, it has become increasingly difficult

to speak with those who hold differing views. Our nation is dangerously polarized and for many of us, the lines of communication have broken down even amongst family members. On Yom Kippur, as we grapple with teshuvah- repentance- turning back to our core values, we must ask ourselves: how can we contribute to the healing of these fractures which threaten the very fabric of our society? The teachings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook may offer direction for confronting these challenges. Interestingly, Rav Kook wrote a series of teachings under the title *Orot*, which means Lights.

Rav Kook was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the land of Israel, then under the British Mandate, from 1921 until his death in 1935. He was one of the founders of religious Zionism. He wrote about Jewish identity and Jewish destiny at a time when Jewish leaders were extremely divided about the best path forward for the Jewish people between the two World Wars. Rav Kook was radically inclusive in his politics and his religious vision. He saw great value in the diversity of Jewish expression emerging in the Land of Israel. Rather than criticize those who were not religious, he honored and held up the secular halutzim, the pioneers, for their unique contributions to the new society.

He taught that each person is imbued with the essence of universal good but also the capacity for universal evil. He taught that we are each a microcosm of what we see externalized in the world around us. Therefore, as he states, it is “impossible to describe how powerful is the action of each human being on the polishing and cleansing of the world.” In other words, we are each a tool for transformation and redemption.

Our actions matter. And beneath our actions lies our awareness. Today, Yom Kippur is our time to reach for and find our better selves, to expand our awareness of who we are and who we can become.

We all have many identities. I am a woman, I am a daughter, a mother, a wife, I am a Jew, I am a Rabba, I am a New Englander, I am an American, I am a human being, I am an earthling, I am a bit of cosmic dust.

Much of my life I have struggled with what felt like conflicting identities - a loyal Jew with a very particular Jewish mission but also a sense of myself as a member of the greater human family, a universalist with allegiance to the good of the whole. At times it felt as if I had to choose between these values. Throughout my teens and early twenties, I experienced Judaism as primarily a tribal enterprise, concerned mostly with its own survival. In the yeshiva world of my youth the non-Jewish world was often described in disparaging terms and I found this particularly painful. I chose to walk away from Judaism as organized religion in my early twenties. Over the following two decades I created a Jewish home for my children by seeking and finding the universal values embedded within our unique traditions. It has been my life’s work to learn the spiritual language of our texts and traditions and reveal the universal spiritual and practical wisdom embedded in our sources.

Throughout my life journey I have met countless Jews who have walked away from Judaism because they felt at odds with the particularism and sense of separateness expressed in Jewish teachings. Feeling most at home with contemporary universal values, the tribal aspects of Judaism were off-putting. Without access to the real depth of Jewish teachings, these responses are most understandable.

Over time I have been blessed to discover that neither the particularistic aspects of Judaism nor our contemporary universal values are mutually exclusive. In fact, from a Jewish perspective, they are mutually interdependent and give meaning, strength and beauty to one another. Judaism is the particular path that I received as my spiritual inheritance, and it not only supports but informs my universalist motivations.

Rav Kook wrote the following piece entitled, *The Fourfold Song*, as an expression of the way in which, when all perspectives, tribal and universal are connected there is beauty, joy and holiness. Here is: **The Fourfold Song**

There is one who sings the song of their own life, and in oneself, finds everything, their full spiritual satisfaction.

There is another who sings the song of her people. She leaves the circle of her own individual self, because she finds it without sufficient breadth, without an idealistic basis. She aspires towards the heights, and attaches, with a gentle love to the whole community of Israel. Together with the Jewish people, she sings her songs. She feels grieved the afflictions of the Jewish people and delights in her hopes.

There is another who reaches toward more distant realms and goes beyond the boundary of Israel to sing the song of humanity. His spirit extends to the wider vistas of the majesty and nobility of human beings in general. This one aspires towards humanity's general goals and looks forward to its higher perfection.

Then there are those who rise toward wider horizons, linking themselves with all existence, with all God's creatures, with all worlds, and they sing a song with all of them.

And then there is one who rises with all these songs in one ensemble, and they all join voices. Together they sing their songs with beauty, each one lends vitality and life to the other. They are sounds of joy and gladness, sounds of jubilation and celebration, sounds of ecstasy and holiness. The song of the self, the song of the people, the song of humanity, the song of the world all merge in this one, at all times, in every hour.

What Rav Kook describes here is a chorus of motivations and aspirations, moving from the personal to the communal to the universal. Each singer expresses a part of the song and together all enhance one another.

In our synagogue community we have a wide diversity of members. For some of us, we find our connection through the social dimensions of community. Some of us find our connection through prayer in the sanctuary. Some find connection through relationship with the past, through a feeling of being connected to a tribe, part of a legacy of tradition. And some of us find our connection in the call for tikkun olam, for charitable work and social justice initiatives. The beauty of this community lies in its diversity and the many ways that we might discover and create holiness together.

Our challenge is to be able to hold competing ideas and to communicate our needs with respect for our differences. The Rabbinic enterprise of the past 2000 years, one that still supports Judaism today, is based on the value of pluralism. Our Talmud is filled with divergent opinions and perspectives. But no matter how different the points of view, the aim and outcome of the Talmudic discussions is to create peace and preserve the dignity of each individual voice.

I invite you to join me this year as we plant and cultivate a new garden of possibilities in our Temple community. I see us learning together, singing, practicing mindful movement, making art and music, sharing meals and building connections between members of all ages. Along the way we will agree and we will surely disagree – but we will do so together, as we learn more about one another and grow in community. May our synagogue, with its wonderfully varied membership become the microcosm of healing we so wish to see in our world.

In memory and honor of all our loved ones, standing on their shoulders, supported by their love and dedication, let us come together as a truly sacred community, to build light within and share that light with ever expanding circles of connection.