

## **Rosh Hashanah 5771 - First Day Sermon**

### ***The Shortcut Home is the Long Way***

Contrary to what the Torah tells us, I've long suspected that the real reason the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years was because Moses -- like most men -- didn't want to ask directions. If so, then I'm in good company because I don't like to, either. Rolling down my window in a strange neighborhood to ask a dog-walker about how to get to a certain street is humiliating; pulling into a gas station for help tantamount an admission of personal failure. Yet unlike some men -- and Susan can attest to this -- I'm generally pretty good at finding my way around. Of course, there *was* the time we got lost on the back roads of northern Mexico because of my stubborn streak, and thought for awhile we'd have to spend the rest of our lives wandering south of the border, but that's a story for another time . . .

Several decades before GPS became standard in many vehicles, the Automobile Association of America advertised Triptiks, custom highlighted maps directing drivers from point A to point B. Of course, long before Triptiks, there were just plain old maps; indeed, the study and practice of cartography is more than 35 centuries old. As history has unfolded, technology has greatly improved the accuracy of map-making: compasses and sextants have given way to computers and satellite imagery. Click on to Google and you can zoom from a map of the continent to a picture of your own front door. Never has it been so easy to know with pin-point accuracy a person's whereabouts.

Yet how do you figure out where an entire synagogue is at? The question isn't one of location or address, but state of mind. What does it mean to be a community, to share a relationship with hundreds of others who belong to the same congregation? Above all, does connection to community really matter?

Our cars may verbalize travel directions and our smart phones locate our position, but I suspect many of us still feel lost, disconnected from God, unplugged from community. And no, it isn't a matter of apathy, for within the people whose paths I cross there's a yearning for

direction and meaning, a longing to know why God put them on this earth, and where they should be heading in life. They're thirsty and hungry for meaningful fellowship with others who have the same questions.

I can speak with some authority because I'm one of these people. Over the past year I've struggled with my own feelings of spiritual disconnect. Shocked at my confession? Don't be. Rabbis are like other human beings . . . only more so. Imagine a book you love, a story whose narrative resonates deep within your soul. But if you hold its pages too close to your face, the letters become blurred, the text illegible. Living and breathing synagogue life 14 or 15 hours a day, six or seven days a week, it's easy to get caught up in the everyday minutiae of synagogue business. I know I'm not alone in this. I've heard other rabbis make the same observation . . . I've also heard over-worked physicians, teachers and social workers complain that that they become so absorbed in the day-to-day that they forget the sense of mission that once animated their work as a calling.

But if I've learned one thing over the past 47 years, it's that no one simply stays connected to anyone or anything. If they are genuinely meaningful, relationships require renewal at given intervals. We all know that married couples have to rekindle that romantic spark from time to time, while parents frustrated with the unruliness of their children's behavior need to step back periodically and remind themselves why they wanted kids in the first place. If something is worth knowing, it's worth relearning time and again.

Several months ago I decided to rediscover my own relationship to Jewish community . . . by getting away from this building and all the people connected to it -- people whom I dearly love and whose relationships I cherish. I hear the words of poet Walt Whitman calling: "Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, healthy, free, the world before me, the long brown path before me leading wherever I choose . . ." This morning let's you and I hit the open road. I promise I won't get us lost, and you'll be back in plenty of time for lunch with the family!

When I was in high school back in the late seventies, there was a top-forty hit from the band *Supertramp*, which received a lot of air-play at the time: (sing) "So you think you're a

Romeo/playing a part in a picture-show . . . Take the long way home/Take the long way home . . .” Musician Roger Hodgson, who wrote the song, explained that the lyrics were about the convoluted journeys we take in life which, if we’re fortunate, eventually lead us “home” to the spiritual and emotional place we inhabit inside ourselves. Often the long way around ends up as the short cut to understanding the value of getting back home.

Of course, Jews have known this for thousands of years. Consider God’s first words to the world’s first Jew found in the book of *Genesis*: “וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָם לֵךְ-לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ־ךָ וּמִמּוֹלְדוֹתֶיךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶרְאֶךָ -- And the Lord said to Abram: Go forth from your land, from the place of your birth, from the house of your father, to the land that I shall show you” (*Genesis* 12:1). Most of the verse is about departing familiar territory. For Abraham to connect with something larger than himself, he needed to journey beyond the boundaries of self.

We won’t need to travel quite as far as our ancestor. In fact, the first stop on our journey to connection with Jewish community is on the 600-block of East Adams Street in downtown Jacksonville. We pull into a small parking lot next to a low-slung complex of nondescript building and trailers beside the Hart Bridge Expressway. This is the home of the Sulzbacher Center for the homeless, the temporary residence of more than 350 men, women and children, including numerous families. Sulzbacher offers far more than a roof and a meal; its mission is to help residents get back on their feet, to find jobs, housing and recover their self-respect and dignity as productive members of society.

The folks who run Sulzbacher aren’t Jewish, but their *modus operandi* is straight out of Maimonides and the classic Jewish ideal that the highest rung of *tzedakah* is to help those in need become self-supporting. The staff here has never heard of Maimonides or the Hebrew word *tzedakah*, yet they’re doing Jewish work; Torah *is* happening at 611 East Adams Street.

After we meet the folks at the Sulzbacher Center, we head south on I-95 to rendezvous near Palatka with a volunteer party from the environmental group, St. Johns Riverkeeper. Each

Sunday afternoon throughout the year, caring individuals spend several hours canoeing the tributaries of the river, picking up the trash which degrades the waterway running through our community. These folks who are so passionate about the St. Johns don't know anything about Judaism's innate environmentalism, which celebrates the rhythms of the seasons and the blessings of earth and water, but their voluntarism does reflect the Torah's teaching that we are God's partners in protecting the gift of this world and the marvels of creation.

We travel all over the city. We sit in on a planning forum for OneJax, an interfaith organization that promotes respect and tolerance among different religions, races and cultures. We stop by Touchstone Village, a residential center for youth at risk, and pay a visit to Oceanside Organics, a family-operated buyers group engaged in Community Supported Agriculture. None of these are Jewish organizations, but they are all engaged in different dimensions of God's work -- their values reflect the imperative of Jewish tradition that our task is *l'taken olam b'malkhut Shaddai* -- to repair the world of God's sovereignty.

"That's just lovely, rabbi," someone might say, "But how, exactly, does this relate to creating a more meaningful synagogue community?" I will tell you how: the dedicated volunteers in all these organizations know they are making a difference in the life of their neighbors -- and that, my friends, is both the reason for being connected as well as its reward. A wise man observed, "Sometimes the heaviest burden is having no one to carry." There is healthy gratification in knowing that you've had a positive impact on someone else's life -- it feels good and connects you to something far larger and more enduring. An agenda of loving-kindness possesses the power to move a community to the highest ground of our noble tradition, and in so doing, ends up strengthening the relationship between people engaged in sharing the holiness of *mitzvah* work with one another.

But equally important, a connection to the greater Jacksonville in which we live has the potential to dramatically transform the spiritual character of what goes on in this building. Let's swing back on to Crown Point Road, and turn into the Center's main gate. We park the car and go inside for services. Maybe it's the first day of Rosh Hashanah, though it could just as easily be a weekday evening *minyan* in the Witten Chapel. Maybe it's Shabbat morning, or perhaps

every day of the year rolled into one. But with the images of what we've witnessed today still fresh in our minds, the words of the *siddur* are more than just one-dimensional words on a page. Instead, they've become keys to open life's treasure chest of meaning, animated by the spirit of everything we've seen in our journey of re-connection.

The sentiments of the Psalmist dance off the page of the daily service: “עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט” -- God brings justice to the oppressed, providing food for the hungry, and freeing the bound” (*Psalm* 146:7). Well, that's exactly what we witnessed today -- for we saw prayer transformed into action as human beings became instruments of the divine. More words from the *siddur* leap out at us: “מִהֲרַבְּנִי” -- How great are Your works, O Lord, you fashioned them all with wisdom, the world is filled with Your creations” (*Psalm* 104:24). Wasn't it this reverence for God's world that guided the hands and hearts of those cleaning our river?

Everything contained in the Torah scrolls we house in the ark attests to a vibrant community of eternal values . . . but to feel them we need to see them, to embrace them we must experience them. And that, my friends, we can't do in this room. To truly sense the sanctity of this space we have to express its values by living them together in the real world beyond the exit doors. Did you know that Jewish Law requires synagogues to have windows? To pray to God as a community presupposes our collective ability to gaze through the windows of the sanctuary at the world in which we live with each other. And if we really get it right, our prayers themselves became the panes of glass in the window, the means by which we relate to the joy and sorrow, the beauty and hardness of the world around us.

Forty-five years ago, the distinguished Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel, traveled from Manhattan's Jewish Theological Seminary to march the 51-mile distance from Selma to Montgomery alongside the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. When questioned why he chose to abandon his Ivory Tower in New York City, Heschel's reply was profound: “When I

marched in Selma, my feet were praying.”

In the coming year, as a community we need to begin to pray with our feet, with our hands, with our backs, our eyes, and our ears. We need to take the words of the *Siddur* at face value, when the liturgy exclaims: “כָּל עֲצְמוֹתַי | תִּאֲמַרְנָהּ ה' מִי כָמוֹד מִצִּיל עֲנִי מִחַזָּק” -- All my bones exclaim: Lord, who is like You, saving the weak from the powerful, the needy from those who would prey on them?” (*Psalm 35:10*). What is it to pray with all our bones? It is to leave this room . . .not by turning our backs on the ark, not by closing our *siddurim*, but by carrying the message of Torah into the larger world as a Jewish community, having faith that together we *can* make a difference, and in so doing, give deepest expression to the Jewish values that connect us to our ancestors and the dreams of a decent tomorrow that link us to our children.

The journey is already beginning. On the eve of Sukkot our USYers will host a group of families from Sulzbacher for dinner in the Sukkah. The following morning Neil Armingeon, the St. Johns Riverkeeper, will join me on the pulpit as together we weave the environmental *motif* of Sukkot into a lesson of communal empowerment about how our congregation can protect the vital river that runs through our city. This year for the first time we will participate in a communal interfaith Thanksgiving service sponsored by OneJax, and Audrey Moran, the Executive Director of the Sulzbacher Center, has already accepted my invitation to speak to us at Shabbat services in November about what we as a synagogue can do to combat homelessness in Jacksonville. In the coming months you will encounter more representatives from the non-Jewish community joining us for worship on Shabbat and holidays, and you will hear me encourage our engagement in fellowship, prayer, and social action outside of this building -- not because we seek an alternative to this sacred space, but rather to return to it with new eyes and perspective.

But let's be clear. This is not about jump-starting a social action committee. Above and beyond the realm of committees and calendar, we are talking about a paradigm shift, one in which Jewish values shape our congregational agenda in the larger world, while the concerns and needs of the larger community shapes what we experience as Jews here in the synagogue.

This isn't about programming, but rather cultural transformation, being a different kind of *shul*, embracing a new way of thinking that is as old as Sinai yet as new as the unanticipated challenges of tomorrow. It's about returning to the roots of our tradition, but traveling to uncharted realms. It's about taking the long way home because it's the shortest distance between where we are and where we need to be.

More than two centuries ago, the great Bratzlaver Rebbe told the following story: Once a poor shoemaker in Cracow named Avrum dreamt about a great treasure buried under a bridge next to a palace in Vienna. After experiencing the same vivid dream night after night, the shoemaker finally resolved to go to the Austrian capital. He traveled on foot for many weeks, finally reaching Vienna and locating the very spot of which he dreamt -- everything was exactly as he had envisioned it. Yet despite having reached his goal, the shoemaker was uncertain about what to do next. He did not dare dig on place property -- to do so would invite unwanted attention and most likely his arrest.

Just then an officer of the royal guard passed by and asked suspiciously, "What are you doing standing here?" Taken by surprise, the shoemaker blurted out the truth of how and why he came to Vienna, expecting to be clapped into irons at any moment.

To his astonishment, however, the officer burst into laughter. "Leave it to a Jew to be obsessed with such foolish dreams of hidden treasure! Listen, my friend, I, too, recently had a dream about great riches hidden in the miserable cellar of a hovel owned by a Jewish shoemaker in Cracow named Avrum. Why, half the Jews in Cracow are probably named Avrum; as for the shoemakers among them, no doubt most of them live in hovels! You don't see *me* chasing after some foolish fantasy. There is no treasure here, Jew; go home, I say, go home."

In relating his dream, the officer of the royal guard accurately described the shoemaker's house. And so with a racing heart, Avrum returned home as quickly as he could, dug under his cellar, and found the treasure. He said, "Now I know that I had the treasure all along. Yet to find it, I had to first travel to Vienna."

And so it is with us. We are in Cracow, but need to travel to Vienna . . . to get back to Cracow. If ours were truly a journey abroad, I'd suggest we go visit the Lewis Ansbacher Map Collection downtown at the main branch of the public library. But for the spiritual journey we must make, we have our own map room right here, for there is a Triptik in the *Aron Kodesh*, a map in every *mahzor*, and a GPS of *menschlichkeit* embedded in our souls. We will travel this road together, and find fellowship and connection in the community we build outside this room as well as within. And no, we won't stop to ask for directions, for on this trip it will be impossible to get lost. Because wherever and whenever we are together doing God's work, praying with our feet and our hands, praying with our hearts and our minds, praying with our souls, and praying with all our bones, at that moment in space, at that place in time we will be at home, for nothing could ever be more permanent and more portable than a sanctuary of connection to God, the world, and each other.