

We are family...Toward a Renewed Vision of Community at Har Shalom
Rosh Hashana, Day 1 (Burke Sanctuary); Kol Nidrei (Stempler Social Hall) 5772
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It is exhilarating and wonderful to see all of you on this holy day. It has been an exciting beginning to my career here at Har Shalom and our new lives here in Maryland. In the short time we have been here, there's been an earthquake, a hurricane, torrential rains and flooding, my dog was bitten by a clearly anti-Semitic German Shepherd, we had a case of head lice in our house...I won't tell you which of my three kids had it (*they all did*). We developed this ritual at breakfast where we would dip our fingers into the milk our cereal bowls and say, earthquake, lice, storms...It was like Passover in August. Seriously though, while it has been interesting around these parts, our transition has been wonderful. That is in large part because of the extraordinary warmth so many from the congregation have shown me and my family, the remarkable professional staff here at Har Shalom, and the excitement that we all feel about the possibilities that lie ahead for our community.

Just before a Jewish bride and groom walk down the aisle to the chuppah, there is a beautiful tradition called the *bedeken*. *Bedeken* is the Yiddish word that means covering, and it is at that moment that the groom covers the face of his bride with a veil. They won't see each other again without the veil separating them until they are in fact husband and wife at the end of the wedding ceremony. Truth is, I remember the *bedeken* at my wedding more than the ceremony itself. There I stood, 23 years young—just a baby, as my radiant, beautiful bride Sari sat before me in regal splendor. To one side sat her mother, to the other, my mother. Gathered around us were all of our 200-some wedding guests. My hands were shaky, my palms were sweaty, my knees were jiggly as I carefully lifted the lace veil, trying not to disturb Sari's perfectly coiffed hair, and ever so gently lowered it over her face. I gave her a traditional blessing, and she presented me with this tallit. It was as dramatic and holy a moment as anything that took place under the chuppah. Now I know some of you may think that this *bedeken* custom derives from that famous story of Jacob being tricked into marrying the older sister Leah, rather than the younger sister Rachel, the one he actually intended to marry. But let's face it, with the exception of reality TV, there isn't a whole lot of wife swapping going on at most

weddings. What's really going on in that act of *bedeken* is that you're telling the bride that I don't know everything there is to know about you yet! There are still aspects of you that are concealed, that you haven't yet revealed to me...but you know what, I love you anyway! The reason you feel so anxious at a *bedeken* is because you are making a commitment of immense proportions while acknowledging that you don't entirely know the person you are committing to! What an act of courage it is, however, to say I love you and what little I do know about you is enough! Now let's get married...¹

I really wanted the Religious Activities Committee the RAC to buy veils for all of you so that I could do a mass *bedeken* today—like a Moonie *bedeken*. I want you to know that even though still I don't know many of you, and many of you don't know me, that I love you anyway. The little I do know about you...is enough. And while you all look very beautiful and handsome today, all *farputzed* in your *yontiff* clothes, that's not why I love you. A few weeks ago someone paid me the most wonderful compliment. He came into my office, sat himself down and said, "What's your secret? How is it that you've only been here a few months and it seems like you've been here forever?" Truly, I can't think of a nicer, kinder piece of feedback than that...My answer was, "because you're my family. You're my *mishpacha*, and when you're among family, you're never a stranger."

I want you to consider something that you might find quite surprising...There is not one single word in the Bible for religion. Not a single Hebrew word that means theology. You know how you say theology in Hebrew? *Teologia*! Not so Hebraically authentic...

But there are numerous, countless words for family, for community, for people, for nation: think about it: *Am*, *Eidah*, *kahal*, *mishpacha*, *tzibbur*, these are only a few of the many examples! Not only that, long before Judaism was a world religion, or a systematic faith, or a worldview, or a philosophy, or a lifestyle it was what? It was a family. Literally a family! Where does Judaism begin? Not in Genesis 1! Adam and Eve are not Jews. Neither are Cain and Abel, nor that guy who was made famous by Porgy and Bess, Methusaleh who lived 969 years (*it ain't necessarily so*)—he wasn't Jewish and neither was Noah or Mrs. Noah, for that matter. None of them are Jews or Israelites or probably

¹ I first heard this metaphor and explanation in a Torah Lights broadcast by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin.

even monotheists. The first Jew, so to speak, doesn't show up until the 12th chapter of Genesis, and that Jew is first and foremost identified in connection to his family. And the very first promise God makes to Abraham is “*ve'e-eseh lecha goy gadol!*” I will make you a great nation. A great family among the *mishpechot ha'amim*, among all the other families of the earth. And it is that sense of family that defines us all the way through the Torah...think of how we are referred to in that book: *B'nai Yisrael, Beit Yisrael, Am Yisrael*...again the emphasis is always on community, on home, on family. And that's why I love you...because we are all related, we are part of this great Jewish family, the Har Shalom branch to be sure, but a magnificent, ancient, multi-national, multi-lingual, multi-dimensional family. No matter how many mitzvot you do or what your personal beliefs are or how religious you consider yourself...when we view each other as members of the same family, all the rest is commentary.

And by the way, I'm sure I don't have to tell you that to be a member of a family does not mean you have to agree with all the other family members all the time! Even when the Jewish people were one little family back in Genesis, they had plenty of disagreements, plenty of rivalries. We just read about one this morning. Some say that just as the Jewish people introduced the idea of one God to the world that we also are history's first dysfunctional family. What a distinction...*Nebuch!* That doesn't mean, however, that you don't love each other or care for each other..even when you don't agree with each other. When I speak to couples who are preparing to get married I don't ask them if they fight, I ask them how they fight. Whenever you live close to someone else you are bound to have a disagreement, but the question is do you disagree lovingly or disparagingly. Do you fight constructively or destructively. And at the end of the day are you still committed to each other, are you still loyal to each other? When you go to bed at night are you still bound by a covenant of love for one another?

Remember that story when Abraham gives his *shmendrik* of a nephew Lot the choice of what part of the land he would settle and take for himself in Eretz Yisrael in Genesis 13? And Lot takes all the good grazing land, all the well watered land and leaves the rest for Abraham. What a *schnorer!* After all that Abraham did for him...But when Lot gets in trouble with the neighborhood kings, when Lot's life was threatened, Abraham is there the next day to fight for him, to rescue him. That's what it means to be

in a family. It means to feel joy when your family feels joy and to feel pain when someone in your family is in pain. There is a wonderful midrash about King Solomon who is approached by a two headed man. When the man's father died, the two headed man claimed he should get twice the inheritance of his siblings because he had two heads. But the siblings argued, you may have two heads, but you only have one body—so you deserve the same inheritance as the rest of us. The wise King Solomon solved the dispute in the following way...Pour boiling water over one of the man's two heads, the king said. If the second head screams in pain then we will know he is one person. If not, then we will have determined that the two headed person is in fact two separate individuals.² That's the way it is with the Jewish people. We are one body, many heads perhaps, but one body...that's why when a Jew in Ethiopia or Uganda or Bulgaria or Cuba or Israel needs our help, cries out in pain, or is threatened in some way the rest of the body of the Jewish people reacts! It doesn't matter the language spoken, the citizenship, the skin color, the degree of religiosity...We are one body, one people, one family.

In fact, nothing will illustrate this better than the Passover Haggadah...I know it was six months ago, but try to remember. Of the four sons in Haggadah, one of them is called a *rasha*, an evil child. As a father, I shudder at the thought of calling any child wicked, but this is the category. What makes that child wicked according to the haggadah? Does he, God forbid, eat bread on Passover? Does he fall asleep at the seder table? Does he fail to compliment the chef? No! He has the chutzpah to ask: *Mah ha'avodah hazot lachem*...What does all this seder stuff all these rituals all this minutia mean to YOU, not to us, not to me; he separates himself from the family, he takes himself out of the community. And then the haggadah says *kafar b'ikar*, by doing this he is a heretic! A heretic! Note that in Judaism, being a heretic is not a sin of theology or professing some scandalous belief...like I suppose in Christianity or Islam. It's not about faith or ritual, it's communal transgression! To distance yourself from community, that's, for Judaism, a heresy. Murder, stealing, adultery, that's all bad...they're sins...but becoming estranged from your Jewish family...? We can handle all kinds of

² Weiss, Rabbi Avraham. *Spiritual Activism, A Jewish Guide to Leadership and Repairing the World*. Jewish Lights, 2008. Page xiii

diversity of practice of ideology or observance...but to abandon the family is the most devastating defiance.

And the reason that this is such a significant issue to the Jewish people again goes back to that episode between God and Abraham. Prior to Genesis 12, the world was a very narcissistic place. Why are Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and not someplace else? Why are they specifically in this idyllic, luxurious place...It's like Club Med there...all the food you can eat, the surroundings are pristine, and you don't even have to wear clothes. What's it all for...The answer is, it's all for them...It's all for their own personal and private enjoyment. The idea of being concerned with anything beyond their own desires just doesn't exist! Noah and Mrs. Noah go into the ark, for what? To save themselves...meanwhile whole swaths of plants, animals, and humans are washed away. Noah isn't instructed to try to change their minds or change the behavior of his neighbors like Jonah is...just save himself, his family, and a tiny fraction of the animal kingdom. But when God speaks to Abraham he gives him a job...a responsibility. First of all, you are not the center of the universe. You are not the only person who is worthy of being saved or spared or loved. One of the key messages of God to Abraham is that you have no choice but to care about others. You have to be a bracha to all the other nations of the earth. To stand for something, to believe in something, to model a value system. That's why Abraham's first heroic act is to welcome total strangers into his tent; to feed them; to bring them water; to make them comfortable. That's what it is to be a descendant of Abraham. A lot of people when they talk about Jewish community or Jewish continuity play the numbers game, how many Jewish babies do we need to have to replace our current population. I'm all for having more Jewish babies in the world, but not just for the sake of numbers,..I think Jewish continuity is a bit more sublime than that. We exist in order to make a difference in the world. Indeed to make the world different...and you can't do that very effectively alone. You have to do that as part of a collective as part of a people. We need to be a strong, vital, closely connected community order to be effective in our God-given mission to bless the world with Torah and mitzvot, to stand up for the intrinsic holiness of life, and to demand justice for all people. It's a lot more powerful and a lot more effective when the whole body politic is standing up for these ideas. That's why God didn't only conscript Abraham, he conscripted Abraham's family.

In the musaf service, which we'll recite in a few minutes—and by the way, our people already had one exodus, so we don't need another one right before Musaf...stay a little longer, sing some more with us, hear more blasts of the shofar...you'll still be home in time for lunch. Anyway, in the Musaf Amidah we say the words: *U'mipnei chata'einu galinu mei'artzeinu*...which means, 'Because of our sins, we were forced out of our land...But the mahzor doesn't specify the infraction that resulted in the exile from our land. But I'll tell you what it was...It was *sinat chinam*, it was a bitter hatred that festered in and among the Jewish people; It was a lack of respect—a lack of love of one Jew for another. The Jewish community of *Eretz Yisrael* dissolved because of petty rivalries, divisive factions, and the demonization of those who had different beliefs and diverse opinions. When we were faced with an external enemy we just lacked the inner strength, the basic cohesiveness to withstand it. And you see this is a total undoing of God's plan. If we had to be united to do God's will effectively, then disunity has got to be the inversion of the plan, indeed a sin of national proportions. The punishment for the sin of disunity was the loss of our sovereignty, our home, and for a time, our sense of family.

God knows that here are Har Shalom we have had our share of family feuds. And the painful reverberations of some of that feuding has indeed resulted in the spiritual if not physical exile of some of the members of our family. But my dear friends, with this New Year, I believe we are ushering in a new agenda for our community. By hiring me, you hired an inveterate lover of the Jewish people. I am intoxicated by Jewish peoplehood. And my message to you today and every day from now on, and God-willing our relationship will last a good long time, is that it's time for everyone who inhabits this place to treat each other like the loving family members we are. It's time to stop feuding and start fostering a community of respect, of *derekh eretz*—common decency, appreciation, and loving kindness.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, one of the greatest modern Jewish activists, writes that “an instructive model for the synagogue is a hospital. Just as a hospital is dedicated to healing physically, so the purpose of a synagogue is to heal spiritually... The goal of the synagogue is to admit not only those who are healthy but those who are not; not only to accept the parts within us that are whole, but also those aspects within each of us that are

broken. Yet another model for synagogue is bayit. As a bayit, a home, is a place of welcome and love, so too should the most basic message of a beit Knesset be one of welcome and love. Indeed, a bayit conjures up the image of family. In functional families, members love one another no matter the path they have chosen. Similarly a beit Knesset, a synagogue, should be a place where we unconditionally love others regardless of their levels of learning, observance, physical, or mental well being.” And what better name for such a synagogue community than Har Shalom...a mountain, a high place, an oasis of shalom...which means both peace and wholeness. Again, as Rabbi Weiss writes, “The test of spirituality in synagogue is not how the community receives the most powerful, but how it welcomes the most vulnerable.”³ This ought to be our collective New Year’s resolution in 5772.

About 200 years ago in Slobodka, a small Lithuanian town, Rabbi Nathan Finkel was the *rav ha’makom*, the local rabbinic authority. It is said that on cold, dark winter mornings the rabbi would wake early and cross over the bridge into town. He would stop off at all the little *shteibelach*, the little houses of prayer and study, one after the other. At each one he would light a fire in the oven and stoke the flames before he left. His students and friends wondered why he went to such trouble each morning, building and lighting these fires throughout town. Is this any job for the rabbi of the community? Rabbi Nathan would say in response: If all the prayer houses and study halls are warm early in the morning, then coachmen, and porters, and poor people of all kinds will come in and get warm. When inside, they will realize they are in a holy place.

Rabbi Nathan teaches us not only what a good rabbi should do, but what a good community should do. Our synagogue must be a place where people can enter and take refuge from the grind of life, the harshness of the world, the cruelty of the streets; A synagogue must be a place where people can come and feel the warmth and safety of a caring community, where they are not judged by the clothes they wear or the salary they make, but are welcomed with open arms and open hearts into the family of the Jewish

³ Weiss, Rabbi Avraham. Bringing Spirituality Into the Synagogue, *Millin Havivin*, July, 19, 2006. Pages 15-24.

people with whom they share that mystical DNA going all the way back to Abraham, to Mt. Sinai, to the original matriarchs and patriarchs of our Jewish family.

The great Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who was one of the architects of Religious Zionism in the late 19th Century wrote: *Ahavat Yisrael hi ha'gedola she'bamitzvot ha'musariyot ve'chovot ha'Torah*: Loving our fellow Jews is the greatest of the mitzvot that have been transmitted and commanded by the Torah. Don't get me wrong we have to love the other inhabitants of the world too. We have a sincere responsibility to the non-Jewish world as well. But in order to love and care for them, we have to first love and care for each other. And so I am asking you to join me in a congregational effort of loving kindness; In an annual theme, if you will, of *mishpachat Yisrael*, reconnecting with the family of the Jewish people, the Har Shalom family members who inhabit this place. There's been enough disunity; enough disillusionment; enough disappointment. Those days are in the past...It's time now to look with optimism and hope to the future! And so I ask you to strike a match, build a fire, stoke some flames and help me to make this place even warmer and more inviting than ever before for everyone who comes through our doors.

L'shana Tova.