

Central Reform Synagogue

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5785: 2024

Tenting

This new year of 5785 tragically begins in anxiety and fear. The events in the Middle East in the last 24 hours have overshadowed the celebration that should mark this new year of hope and renewal. We pray for the safety of all those in the region and hope that restraint and negotiation will bring about the desired objectives of returning the hostages to their homes and waiting families, the work of a new beginning for the people of Gaza and rebuilding the devastation there, returning Israelis and Lebanese along the Northern border to their homes in safety and standing down the reservists in Israel to go back to home and school and work. It is hard to begin a penitential season when we are asked to reflect on our own character inside, when the problems outside are deafening and catastrophic. Rosh Hashana is known in the Torah as *Yom HaZicaron* and *Yom teruah* – the day of remembering and the day of blowing the shofar. Something on the inside and something on the outside. Perhaps there was always the idea that the work of reflection-of *heshbon hanefesh*-accounting for ourselves, is in tension with a world that is full of loud blasts, like the sound and fury of war. We have to live in both worlds and yet find a time and place where for a brief time, we can get the opportunity for remembrance, reflection and restoration of our soul.

The way we do that in Judaism is by tenting – a moveable, temporary dwelling for one that can be dismantled and re-erected easily and that gives us a small still space as our own individual sanctuary.

Our people have always lived in tents, whether literally or figuratively. The tents of ancient times were not the ones we think of today but were more like the tents of the Bedouin in the desert, extensive and many roomed. They provided space for Abraham, Sarah and their whole family with their servants. They had sleeping rooms cooking rooms, living rooms. Their flaps were always open to the outside for passing strangers on the dusty paths as Abraham and Sarah welcomed God's messengers, foretelling the birth of Isaac. As Abraham's family moved from Haran to Canaan and thence to Egypt and back again, these tents were pitched and struck many times. They were rolled up on the backs of camels and probably handed down from generation to generation as treasured possessions. Lot, Abraham's brother-in-law combined his tents with Abraham's when there was not enough land for both tribes. Isaac took Rebecca into his tent as his wife. Jacob pitched his tent at the sacred sites that God had marked for him. In the wilderness, the children of Israel pitched their tents in tribal formation around the Tent of meeting, housing the ark of the Covenant where God's presence rested. It was made of fine linen of blue purple and crimson yarns with a design of cherubim worked into them. It was covered with goat's hair and dolphin skins. The people gathered in front of the door of the tent as Moses imparted God's words and Commandments. The

sight of the Israelites pitched in the Jericho valley so inspired the prophet Balaam that he uttered those now famous words in our prayerbook, "How lovely are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel. The tent is so ubiquitous in Jewish life that we get married under a tent open on all sides called a Chuppah.

Today, our tents are figurative sanctuaries against the troubling winds outside. We gather in Jewish communities providing protection, comfort and fellowship. In the prayer book we read, "spread over us a canopy of peace – *ufros alenyu sukkat shlomecha*". Shalom means peace but it also means completeness from the root word *shalem*. The canopy of completeness under which we can examine our true and best selves is right here in our community.

The canopy is the structure of a Jewish congregation. It conveys the vision of God's presence which is the force that galvanizes isolated individuals into our harmonious community - a holy community *kehilla kedosha* with a sense of purpose and peoplehood. Worship under the canopy becomes an occasion for all our wishes, hopes and dreams to coalesce and become complete. We pin down the *shechina* - God's presence and fasten it to the earth under the canopy for us to dwell within.

Some have found their religious home under the canopy of community, but others continue to search restlessly as they make their way through life. Sociologists offer a typology for these two categories of people. They identify two distinct groups - dwellers and seekers. Dwellers are content with the religious offerings that they find in their community. They enjoy the services. They are happy to learn everything that they are offered, and they have found a home and a place of spiritual rest for their Jewish and religious experiences. Seekers however are restless and unfulfilled. They continue to search for something more which remains elusive to them or seek answers to questions that continue to absorb them. They search by seeking communities or teachers that will allow them to engage and challenge but they remain religiously restless and still on their journey somewhere.

Let's take a straw poll of you all. Put up your hand if you feel you fall into the category of religious dweller. Now those who tend to being towards a religious seeker. We all sit next to each other, but our motivations may be different from our neighbors.

Understanding our presence here on the High Holy days is important to understand as a dweller or a seeker. All of us want to find something in religious experience and have made a choice to be here. This is as true for us in this room as it is in all synagogues and indeed churches. There is no value judgment here. One is not better than the other. We are all on the journey of faith and yet the place we call spiritual home is very different for each one of us. It changes with each stage of our life. Today we may be a seeker and yet tomorrow a dweller and vice versa as we change and grow in life and our understanding of faith, God, prayer and belief changes.

We usually think of faith as belief in God or about God's existence or God's ability to intervene in human affairs. However, the religious psychologist James Fowler in his

book *Stages of Faith* goes so far as to say that faith is the human ability to make meaning of one's life and purpose. Faith is the human ability to make meaning of one's life and purpose. It is the core activity of every human being, and it is what makes us human. The activity of making meaning suggests that something we do actively is a way to be faith full.

We constantly make decisions, big and little, that enhance meaning making in our lives. Perhaps we made a decision to spend our lives with one other person. Perhaps we changed jobs to do something more consonant with our sense of values. Perhaps we went back to school to learn more about what we wanted to do in life. Perhaps we decided to retire from work in order to take time for family or for oneself and our partner. Perhaps we moved in order to be closer to those we love and those who will take care of us.

And there are smaller acts of faith that give us meaning and purpose. I was reminded of this when visiting an elderly lady in her nursing home who had been paralyzed after a stroke. She told me of her joy in now being able to comb her hair. To her, the simple act of combing her hair is an activity of making meaning and a path to healing. This is what is meant in Judaism by the Hebrew word for faith -*Emunah*. *Emunah* is trust or confidence; trust in oneself, trust in others, confidence in the way the world works and ultimately trust in God. For Judaism, faith is expressed by everyday activities of trust. Faithfulness it is not some other worldly activity but rather an everyday sacred task to stimulate each relationship and each moment in time as a way to make meaning. That is why we have so many blessings – *brachot* to recite; blessings for food, for getting up in the morning, blessings for rain, blessings for happy moments. They provide a pause in time as we appreciate and celebrate those everyday things that give us meaning. As Martin Buber wrote, “to make each moment and each encounter holy and eternal.”

We may or may not have a conception of God and God's role in our lives, but we all have the capacity to express faith – the activity of making meaning in ourselves, our relationships, our world. Jewish thinkers can tell us a lot about the ways in which God is perceived and yet there are many opinions about what God is. But the definitions or characteristics of God may not necessarily help us. Rather, these definitions are the outcome of our searching, of our seeking. The tools that we use to begin the work of faith is our work of discernment. In Hebrew, we call this *Heshbon Hanefesh* – accounting of the soul. Though our meditations and prayers and our attentiveness to all around us and our relationships bring a sense of the holy close to us. That is why we sit here during this penitential season under our *sukkat shlomecha* – our tent of completeness so that we can work on being that whole full self, able to make wise and discerning faithful decisions about our life.

One of our medieval philosophers called these *Hovot Halevavot* - the duties of the heart resulting in a practice of growth and transformation we call *musar*. *Musar* is one of the learning courses that we will offer in our community this year for all dwellers and seekers.

The questions of faith are for all of us, whether we are dwellers or seekers and are the work of this High Holy day season. Where are you on your journey in life? Are you dwelling where you should or seeking something else? In what do you invest your time and energy? In what or whom do you place your ultimate trust? What gives you meaning in times of darkness and pain? We may know some of the answers to these questions, but our answers change throughout our lives for making meaning is not static. It is not obtained and held forever. The activity of faith changes as we change and as we grow and experience and wonder at the world. Judaism teaches us that by doing this work we may be able to glimpse God's meaning for us and so work towards *tikkun* - repair of this fractured world and bring blessings to all, dwelling or seeking, as we enter the gates of a new year.

We who seek to build a Jewish congregation are in the tenting business for it is we who spread the canopy over the people and fasten it securely. We provide the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah as a gathering place in the desert. We provide the shelter and completeness that those isolated are seeking. We are here to secure a strong community; one that is warm and welcoming, supportive all who come seeking and one that is sheltering. It must look outward as well as inward, working hard for justice and tolerance amongst all people and communities.

The vision of a blessed community is described in the self- same prayer as for the *sukkat shlomecha* – the canopy of peace: “May God who blessed our ancestors bless his holy community with all other holy communities; them, their families and all they have. May God bless those who come together to maintain synagogues for prayer, those who come to pray in them, those who light Shabbat candles, and those who make *kiddush* and *havdalah*. May God bless those who share their food with strangers and perform *tzedaka* for the poor and devote themselves to the needs of society in a true spirit.

What is the House of God? a Chassidic Master once asked, “it is, he replied, nothing more and nothing less than any place you are welcome when you come and missed where you are gone”. May we work towards securing a tent of hospitality, of community, of prayer and of learning so that God may spread over us the blessings of completeness and peace in this new year of 5785