

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

In his book, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastain Junger shares this story:

“That’s how I wound up outside Gillette, Wyoming, one morning in late October 1986, with my pack leaning against the guardrail and an interstate map in my back pocket. Semis rattled over the bridge spacers and hurtled on toward the Rockies a hundred miles away. Pickup trucks passed with men in them who turned to stare as they went by. A few unrolled their window and threw beer bottles at me that exploded harmlessly against the asphalt.

In my pack I had a tent and sleeping bag, a set of aluminum cookpots, and a Swedish-made camping stove that ran on gasoline and had to be pressurized with a thumb pump. That and a week’s worth of food was all I had with me outside Gillette, Wyoming, that morning, when I saw a man walking toward me up the on-ramp from town.

From a distance I could see that he wore a quilted old canvas union suit and carried a black lunch box. I took my hands out of my pockets and turned to face him. He walked up and stood there studying me. His hair was wild and matted and his union suit was shiny with filth and grease at the thighs. He didn’t look unkindly but I was young and alone and I watched him like a hawk. He asked me where I was headed.

“California,” I said. He nodded.

“How much food do you got?” he asked.

I thought about this. I had plenty of food—along with all the rest of my gear—and he obviously didn’t have much. I’d give food to anyone who said he was hungry, but I didn’t want to get robbed, and that’s what seemed was about to happen.

“Oh, I just got a little cheese,” I lied. I stood there, ready, but he just shook his head.

“You can’t get to California on just a little cheese,” he said. “You need more than that.”

The man said that he lived in a broken-down car and that every morning he walked three miles to a coal mine outside of town to see if they needed fill-in work. Some days they did, some days they didn’t, and this was one of the days that they didn’t. “So I won’t be needing this,” he said, opening his black lunch box. “I saw you from town and just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

The lunch box contained a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of potato chips. The food had probably come from a local church. I had no choice but to take it. I thanked him and put the food in my pack for later and wished him luck. Then he turned and made his way back down the on-ramp toward Gillette.

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

I thought about that man for the rest of my trip. I thought about him for the rest of my life. He'd been generous, yes, but lots of people are generous; what made him different was the fact that he'd taken responsibility for me. He'd spotted me from town and walked half a mile out a highway to make sure I was okay. Robert Frost famously wrote that home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. The word "tribe" is far harder to define, but a start might be the people you feel compelled to share the last of your food with. For reasons I'll never know, the man in Gillette decided to treat me like a member of his tribe."

In the book's postscript, Junger adds:

"While I was researching this book, I read an illuminating work by the anthropologist Christopher Boehm called *Moral Origins*. On page 219, he cites another anthropologist, Eleanor Leacock, who had spent a lot of time with the Cree Indians of northern Canada. Leacock relates a story about how she went on a hunting trip with a Cree named Thomas. Deep in the bush they encountered two men, strangers, who had run out of food and were extremely hungry. Thomas gave them all of his flour and lard, despite the fact that he would have to cut his own trip short as a result. Leacock probed Thomas as to why he did this, and finally he lost patience with her.

"Suppose, now, not to give them flour, lard." he explained. "Just dead inside."

There, finally, was my answer for why the homeless guy outside Gillette gave me his lunch thirty years ago: just dead inside. It was the one thing that, poor as he was, he absolutely refused to be. "

How can we become that man outside Gillette, Wyoming or Thomas? How do we learn to reach outside of ourselves into the world and be "not dead" inside?"

Step 1- We read

If you come into my office at Micah, you will find books piled everywhere. (You will find them in my home office, my basement and a corner of my bedroom as well) In my office, there is one particular table with an ever growing pile. This pile is "The I always need to know where this book is pile," to distinguish it from other piles. Onto this pile, go the books that have really touched me or informed the way I think. I think of their authors as my teachers. Avishai Margalit, an Israeli scholar and one of the great philosophers in the world today is, of course, in this pile and as I think about the stories I just shared with you from Junger's experience, I think of Margalit's writing. He says:

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

"The trouble with the ...project of transforming humanity into a community of love is not that it has been tried and found wanting but that it has never been tried." (Margalit p 74)

With these words, Margalit, in his own way, poses the question: Why are the two experiences of which Junger writes -- his own on the highway and that of the anthropologist he learned about during his research -- so exceptional? The human qualities of care and generosity shown in these two stories are breathtaking. These stories touch us deeply inside of our own souls somewhere where our very humanity lives--yet we ourselves don't, on the whole, live that way. As Margalit notes, the project of a worldwide community of love and sharing has never been tried. These exceptional acts are just that--exceptional.

Margalit believes that universal brotherhood is too thin a platform for that level of commitment. Giving of yourself for a stranger is simply just too much to expect. Great ethical acts and sacrifice--giving of the self- comes more easily in close-knit groups, such as family, extended family, and clan. For Margalit, it can come in a group with whom you have shared memories --it doesn't have to be someone you know personally. Shared memories elicit a sense of connection.

This leads to step two in our quest to be "not dead" inside.

We become part of a community.

Sebastian Junger calls this "tribe"-- the word he selects as the title for his book. For Margalit "shared memory" yields "thick relations." Historian Benedict Anderson uses the term "imagined communities"--people to whom we feel a connection, but with whom we do not meet or know personally, as in the community of Americans or the Jewish People. We can only really learn this sort of connection or thickness by experiencing it personally in a tribe, say Junger and Margalit-- and then and only then-- we practice it first within the tribe and then beyond. Junger's two moving stories take the lessons of tribe thickness out to the farthest beyond in the world--to unknown happenstance strangers.

All of us here this Rosh Hashanah morning are already familiar with this notion of tribe and connection -- it comes to us in our own Jewish story.

As we all know, if we were to unroll our Torah scroll back just a few columns to a slightly earlier section, we read the tale of Abraham, our hero of this morning's Torah portion and his migration from Southern Mesopotamia Ur and Haran. Abraham does not travel only with his wife, Sarah. The Torah tells us that he took with him "ha-nefesh asher asu--the people he had gathered around him." Abraham traveled to his land of promise with his tribe.

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

From the beginning, the Jewish story is about a group, a clan ---a people and the world. From the very beginning, our Jewish tribe had a distinctive feature. Abraham's journey it says in the Torah, from the start is a journey about righteousness and justice." (Genesis 18:19).

From the outset, we Jews are a tribe grappling with justice for all. I believe that when we lose the sense of tribe, the values eventually dissipate. In other words, transforming humanity into a community of love begins very locally and that a tribe is a tribe when its rituals and stories inspire deep feeling and passion. Our tribe is a tribe bound together by a covenant. We all once stood at Sinai where we pledged together what our lives would be about. Our ritual life should always point us towards that covenantal story.

To be a Jew is to be not an autonomous self floating in the world. To be a Jew is to stand with a people bound by an eternal shared covenant.

We follow the footsteps of our patriarchs such as Abraham the original idol smasher--call it counter-cultural a more contemporary term. Remember, it was Abraham himself who invited the three wandering desert strangers into his tent and invited them to share his food.

The lesson of Gillette, Wyoming is as old as our own story.

If we live in an era of self absorption, and the cult of the individual self--the synagogue is truly the place where we can learn and absorb another message--a different value--the value of group interest over self interest--covenant over me\my\ mine. We now come to

Step 3

We take the covenant of our community into the world.

The question is--how?

I have a dream--

I dream that the experience of being part of Micah should be an experience that is unlike any other in our lives. Just as walking into our personal living space brings with it a sense of familiarity, comfort --that sense of home-- so entering Micah should bring with it a feeling of home--a home where we touch the values that make our lives noble and our deeds enduring.

Here we should encounter symbols and ritual that touch our souls such that through the Jewish experience that Micah embodies and carries we somehow come to know that good deeds count for something deeply important and that the way we are in the world matters in a sacred and holy way.

We should always see Temple Micah as a place that brings us from Underwear Month in this season to Micah House for formerly homeless women every single day and night of the year.

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

We are called to live the covenant in the world, because without this we are not following Abraham's path. Our Jewish agenda is huge--universal--as it were. Our covenant commands us to love the stranger because we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We are each called to be Thomas on our journey through life. Thomas said "Just dead inside." We say "L'chaim--to life!" Thomas' call echoes our own. The very heart of our covenant calls us to sacrifice everything to save a life because every life is a reflection of God.

How do we learn this call – actually more than just learn it, but feel it in our being? How does it become "us?"

As we consider this, let's return to Sebastian Junger, who begins his book by asking two searing questions, "How do you become an adult in a society that doesn't ask for sacrifice? How do you become a man (or woman) in a world that doesn't require courage?" (Junger p xiv)

Those questions feel paramount.

For us that means--how do we become counter cultural? How do we become breakers of idols?

The challenge of modernity is that we lack good answers to these questions.

Charles Taylor--another one of my favorite contemporary philosophers is raising almost the same question when he writes: "Questions ...(of purpose or achievement DGZ) can arise for people in any culture. Someone in a warrior society might ask whether his tale of courageous deeds lives up to the promise of his lineage or the demands of his station. People in a religious culture often ask whether the demands of conventional piety are sufficient for them or whether they don't feel called to some purer, more dedicated vocation. ...in each of these cases some framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure... their fullness or emptiness....It is now commonplace about the modern world that it has made these frameworks problematic... None forms the horizon of the whole society of the modern West...."

Now, I know as you do that much of these old frameworks had to go--there was no place for women and gays. They carried prejudice and social stratification. The question is--did we throw the baby out with the bathwater.

These old frameworks meant that in Jewish language our lives were once embedded in a culture of mitzvot and we performed certain acts for no other reason--it was a MITZVAH. There were invisible assumptions by which we lived--these were, for Jews, the norms and structures of which Taylor writes. How many of you carry memories or memories of stories of Shabbat candle lighting at home accompanied by putting coins in Tzedakah boxes of all sorts. Every two months or so, the coins would be emptied and the money given to causes ranging from trees in Israel to the local public library--with everything in between.

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

In loosening the tether from these norms and their accompanying rituals we not only lose the sense of community, we lose the sense of covenant and how we see ourselves as part of a covenanted people standing before God. We become instead, autonomous individuals disconnected from a larger defining whole. We thus lose for example, the weekly pattern of living the weekly ritual with our children and the implicit lessons that are reflected in them.

Regarding this condition Taylor continues--

"The...worry is individualism....Modern freedom was won by ... breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order....these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life... "

Think of Shabbat dinner with family and friends.

Taylor continues0

"We suffer from the loss of a heroic dimension of life. People no longer have a sense of higher purpose, of something worth dying for. Alexis de Tocqueville sometimes talked like this...referring to the "petty, vulgar pleasures" that people tend to seek in the democratic age....

The loss of purpose was linked to a narrowing. People lost the broader vision because they focused on individual lives...

The sense that lives have been flattened and narrowed, and that is connected to...self absorption..."

Taylor describes our lives-

"Self absorption" seems to describe so much of our world--the simple expressions -"My turn..." "I'm next" --"This one is mine." Or--for a more contemporary example-- tweeting – in 140 characters or less – every detail of our daily lives?" Every moment of life is a "selfie" moment to broadcast to the world.

Do these behaviors form covenantal connections that point to a higher calling?

At first glance, the answer is an obvious "no." How do we turn that around?

The rise of the individual autonomous self and the breaking down of traditional communal norms has created a world where our behaviors and actions are governed by new processes:

Writes Taylor--

"The disenchantment of the world is connected to another massively important phenomenon ...the primacy of "instrumental reason"...the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

the most economical application of means to a given end... sweeping away the old orders has immensely widened the scope of instrumental reason. Once society no longer has a sacred structure, once social arrangements and modes of action are no longer grounded in the order of things..they are up for grabs..."

Our lives....

We come to live from trend to trend. Crowds of people wait in line to purchase the latest I-phone.

We have become what Robert Wuthnow calls "a mutable self" who "makes decisions based on what feels right at the moment." My teacher Rabbi Larry Hoffman writes, "Mutable selves lack character; the social order that sustains them lacks direction. There seems no moral compass, nothing worth believing in, no gravitas to make life matter."

Our culture of self-absorption makes us long for connection --a moral ground of being and believing that then points us to a higher calling in the world.

What then is the role of the synagogue in all this?

Synagogues are the places where we can catch a glimpse of a better world. We use religious language to express this with words like "redemption and paradise." The synagogue enables us, for example, to experience Shabbat, a taste of the world to come -- and come to know the aspirations of what I have come to call the Human Project --to work towards a world where everyone has a set table, everyone has a supportive group of friends, everyone has the benefit of rest and leisure, everyone has a secure home--no one is afraid of the person next door.

In order to achieve this, we seek to forge Temple Micah as the place where we experience the thickness of tribe and the nobility and sense of life mission that comes with a covenantal calling. We come to Micah to engage with the counter-cultural and face off against the cult of the individual autonomous self.

At Micah, we claim a Covenant which binds us and guides us.

Every week in our Shabbat worship we unknowingly read the story of Thomas the Cree Indian who gave his food away to strangers so that he would be "Not Dead inside."

We read----

"Wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt

that there is a better place, a promised land;

RABBI DANIEL G. ZEMEL
TEMPLE MICAH
WASHINGTON, DC
ROSH HASHANNAH 5777\2016
THE JEWISH WAY: BE "NOT DEAD" INSIDE

that the way to that promise

passes through the wilderness.

That there is no way to get from here to there

except by joining hands, marching

together. (Michael Walzer-Mishkan Tefilah)

We also travel Torah's unredeemed world. Each of us is simultaneously the person that Thomas met in the wild with the potential to be Thomas also within us. The very purpose of Torah, the purpose of Micah is to find hands to hold.

We, like Thomas are bearers of sustenance as the inheritors of a covenant--partners for eternity with the One God who saved us at the Sea and with whom we stood at Sinai. This God leads us through the wilderness by a pillar of fire which we behold in the synagogue whenever we gaze upon the ner tamid --our eternal light.

Rosh Hashannah is the season of return--

This year, reclaim our old vision and embrace your ever new covenant.

This year, ask God to write your name in the Book of Life and respond to God's call for you to be a source of life for others.

This year, live your life within our Micah home.

This year join us as we join hands with people of faith everywhere.

This year enter the new year renewed.

Shannah Tovah!