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WASHINGTON, DC

YOM KIPPUR-2017, 5758 (8PNR)

THE AMERICAN SYNAGOGUE: IN SEARCH OF PROFUNDITY

A Midrashic Teaching----

“Why do we say, “Our God and God of our ancestors?” There are two kinds of people who believe in God. Some believe because they have taken over the faith of their ancestors. The others have arrived at faith through thinking for themselves.

The difference between them is this: The advantage of the first is that, no matter what arguments may be brought against it, the faith cannot be shaken; the faith is firm because it was taken over from one’s ancestors. But there is one flaw in it; one has faith only in response to the command of people. It has been acquired without studying and thinking for oneself.

The advantage of the second is that, because one found God through much thinking; one has arrived at a faith of one’s own. But, here too, there is a flaw: It is easy to shake the faith by refuting it through evidence.

But a person who unites both kinds of faith is invincible. And so we say “Our God,” with reference to our studies, and “God of our ancestors” with an eye to tradition.

The same interpretation has been given to our saying, “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, God of Leah,” for this indicates that Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah did not merely take over the tradition of Abraham and Sarah; they themselves searched for God.”

I think of this text and its wisdom and insight often—even as I manage to dismiss that within it with which I am disturbed. I both like and dislike the inheritance part. Here I mean, that there is no one that I know personally whose Jewish faith and commitments exceeds many of those who have discovered Judaism on their

own as adults—the Jews by choice amongst us. The strength of commitment of those who have taken on the mantle of Jewish life not through the accident of birth is rather remarkable. I frankly shudder to think where we would be without them. In fact, the conversion custom tries to compensate at least symbolically for this lack of Jewish inheritance for people who enter our faith as Jews by choice by symbolically calling them sons or daughters of Abraham and Sarah. The tradition tries to create a sense of *la dor va dor* into the conversion process. But that is an aside.

I find wisdom in this text because so much of Jewish life is about *l’dor va dor*—giving it to the next generation—what used to be called continuity. Just to give a personal example—one so tangible. This evening I wear my father’s tallis—a practice I adopted for Yom Kippur soon after his death. It means the world to me.

My friend and teacher Riv-Ellen Prell of the University of Minnesota once taught me that the single word that most stirringly captures the identity of American Jews is transmission. She said that the value that “faith” holds for Christians is held by “transmission” for Jews. There is something in us that wants to transmit who we are to a future generation. We care about Jewish survival. This is part of the great motivating power of *bar\bat mitzvah*. Jewish life will not end on my watch. The story will continue. The next generation will also hold a Torah. The power of the day is so vividly captured by the Torah passing—grandparents and parents passing the scroll to a thirteen year old. I don’t ever underestimate that moment and as a parent and now a grandparent, I appreciate ever more greatly its symbolic aura. There is something powerful even mystical in the Jewish inheritance.

But as my teaching admonishes, as adults, we are urged to think about our God, not only the God of our ancestors. We might each ask ourselves how we fare in that search and in the broader religious search in general.

What is the adult religious life to be about in our era and what, if any, is the role of the synagogue?

Yom Kippur is a time of great introspection. We are commanded to take stock of our lives, our souls, our very selves. There should be no question that is deemed to be off the table—out of bounds—too risky to ask.

These days pose searing questions of us. I invite us to ask ourselves:

How do I continue to grow spiritually throughout my life?

I think about this question not only for my own personal life. I think about it in the context of Temple Micah and the American synagogue.

What are we doing?

Why?

What should we be doing?

What should we be thinking about? How might we challenge ourselves as we seek to create a deep and provocative Jewish life?

If these days are devoted to the consideration of the soul, I want to take this moment to consider the soul of the American synagogue writ large and the soul of Micah for us.

What are we about?

Why?

Please note—I prefer to say “thinking about” rather than “doing”

-as in,

“what should we be thinking about?” rather than

“what should we be doing?”

I sometimes think that synagogues do or try to do too much. We seem so filled with activities—activities of all sort. I am grateful and in awe of our vibrancy. We are alive—brimming with possibility. Even as I am grateful, I have a kind of unusual concern.

I strongly think that one critical role for the synagogue is as a place to think. I wonder—does activity drown out thought? Do we offer a framework within which to consider our lives? I believe that synagogues should be places that invite us to think about ourselves and the world and the relationship between the two. If the synagogue is not the space where we consider this, where in our lives is this space? What does it offer? With whom do we ask these questions?

I ask myself--What is the structure of a synagogue that is a thinking place of discovery?

Approximately sixty years ago, Marshall Sklare, among the first sociologists to study American Jewish life (and my Grandpa Goldman helped to fund his graduate

studies at the University of Chicago), described the American synagogue as an ethnic church. As the term implies, synagogues were thick with Jewish ethnicity. More kugel than theology, more davening than poetry, more Yiddishkeit than reflection, more Hava Nagilah and hora than Rashi and Buber.

By the 1990s, my own mentor and teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman declared that the challenge facing the American synagogue was to transform itself from an "Ethnic fortress to a spiritual center." What Rabbi Hoffman meant, building on Sklare's idea, was that the synagogue had evolved from an ethnic church into a kind of fortress to protect what was inside. The synagogue was there to guard Judaism and protect it from the dangers of assimilation that were out there in the world. Assimilation and intermarriage were the enemy. Jewish continuity was the watchword. The synagogue was the guardian fortress.

This yielded a Judaism that was remote from people's lives. It was a visited Judaism. Going to synagogue was akin to receiving an inoculation protecting against foreign interference.

Rabbi Hoffman's metaphor sought to reshape the synagogue as a center where one engaged with Jewish spirituality and -----Jewish spirituality involved embracing the modes and forms of the surrounding culture. A living spirituality had to breathe deeply from the zeitgeist of the times. The synagogue doors and windows had to be open to the world so the ideas, aesthetics and concerns of the world became the very stuff of Jewish spirituality. Jewish learning required cultural translation to make sense and be relevant. When it is at its best, this is what the synagogue of today is learning how to do. This has been a defining project of Temple Micah. This has been a defining feature of my rabbinate for over twenty years. How do we create a spiritual center that speaks to people's lives? How do we create a place that responds to those unknown and only vaguely articulated desires of the heart?

When we are well fed, well educated, well entertained—what does the synagogue offer? What can it offer?

In sum--What are the soul needs of today and what is the role of the synagogue?

I believe the American synagogue needs to become a place where we can openly discuss and consider both an evolving purpose and a way to forge our own identities—to discover who we are.

In the last year, I have read two audacious and brilliant books by the Israeli scholar, Yuval Noah Harari-

Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind –466 pages

Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow- 397 pages

Imagine—in 863 pages you get the entire human past and future. Isn't this a great country? Or as someone said to me—only an Israeli scholar could be so audacious.

I highly recommend both books. We are reading the first one in our downtown study group this year. See the Micah web site for more information. In the *Homo Deus* book, Harari captures what I am thinking about here in a few stunning sentences:

“Modernity is a deal....a surprisingly simple deal. The entire contract can be summarized in a single phrase: humans agree to give up meaning in exchange for power.” (p 199)

“Up until modern times, most cultures believed that humans play a part in some great cosmic plan...The cosmic plan gave meaning to human life...it gave humans psychological protection against disasters...we all play(ed) a role in some great cosmic drama.”

This was the human past—whatever your culture--we lived our lives by a cosmic script. The Jewish script was called mitzvot.

This is the world of classic rabbinic Judaism. We are here to perform God's sacred mitzvot of Sinai. No one else can do it for you.

Human life on Earth was once lived through a cosmic plan.

As Harari notes, “Modern culture rejects this belief in a great cosmic plan. We are not actors in any larger-than-life drama. Life has no script, no playwright, no director...We can do anything we want—provided we can find a way. We are constrained by nothing except our own ignorance...” (199-200)

Everything in our lives is voluntary with no sense of command and only intermittent senses of obligation. We are free.

Harari captures our age in stunning brevity. Remember the bargain:

We have power.

But--

We moderns yearn for meaning.

We have so much--- access to all human knowledge in our pockets— the world's treasure trove of accumulated knowledge in the palm of our hands—our phones are smart. /////

But—we can ask--Are we wise?

We live in a world where each one of us now has to forge our own identity in a world that modernity has stripped of its implicit meaning—its invisible purpose—what Charles Taylor termed enchantment. We live in an era of painful self-awareness. The great thinkers of early modernity saw all this—Freud, Durkheim, Marx.

This very notion is the subject of great films, novels and plays—THE GRADUATE, ALFIE, 2001, NO EXIT, WAITING FOR GODOT, Harold Pinter, Saul Bellow, John Updike.

We all understand the underpinning of these artistic creations. We implicitly connect to the struggle of finding meaning. What we sometimes fail to recognize is how this is the very defining structure of modernity and hence the possibility – even the necessity for a new meaning for synagogue.

We have powerful emotional attachment for the Faith of our fathers and mothers—we need a new key to unlock the same powerful faith for our own lives.

It may even be the reason that these holy days have such hold on our American Jewish imagination. In our radical secularization, we are very committed on these days. We procure the necessary tickets and worry about the adequacy of parking. Are we hoping to find meaning? Is the mere act of being here somehow meaningful? Contrast this with the Judaism even of the recent past. I recollect my Yiddish speaking Grandpa Zemel. I am not at all certain whether prayer for him was a question of meaning. I don't think the thought ever entered his head. I am certain that he would not have ever stopped going because he did not find it

meaningful and I am equally certain that he was as skeptical an agnostic as anyone present this evening.

You see—Modernity does not quit—it too is an ongoing project. It just gets more modern—so to speak.

Philosopher Charles Taylor offers further insight into our condition-

“Questions (about meaning) 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 demand 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, as it were, their fullness or emptiness....

It is now commonplace about the modern world that it has made these frameworks problematic.... ...The forms of revealed religion are very much alive, but also highly contested.”

This is our world. There is no unquestioned framework through which we judge and measure our lives. We are free agents in a system poor world.

We perhaps see it easily in ourselves and our own Jewish proclivities where we might express interest in a Jewish teaching on an ethical question while we dine over biblically prohibited foods. We migrate easily—we pick and choose.

When the framework within which we live our life is up for grabs, the gauge through which we measure who we are is gone.

Thus is created the excitement and challenge of an expansive freedom.

It is the freedom of multiple choice identity with each one of us driving our own personal self-formation from a dizzying array of choices. What might be called syncretistic identity is the norm.

I want to be clear here—I love freedom and I would not trade this time for any other period in Jewish history. I simply want us to be aware of our world –the bargain that Harari explains to us that we have been handed. It is a world of exciting possibilities beckoning us to be honest and bold.

I am not one who mourns for that old time religion. I am not one who wishes to be seduced by the comfort and regimen offered by any fundamentalism or orthodoxy.

I want to suggest that an emerging role of the American synagogue can be to become a place that offers a coherent vision of life that resonates with those of us who call ourselves modern.

The synagogue can strive to be a place where we can structure our thinking— and create a framework for considering the most profound questions of our lives.

Michael Satlow of Brown University suggests that Judaism can offer us “conceptual maps of creative tensions.”

This is why I want the Micah experience to resemble a conversation—a place where we encounter Satlow’s conceptual maps drawing from both our ancient Jewish past as well as contemporary thinking ---that together frame our world. We can be a place of probing questions and dynamic thought but also strong stakes in the ground, bold red lines. It is at the synagogue after all that we encounter the Torah and its eternal values.

My teacher Larry Hoffman puts it like this:

“life is not without meaning. It is not devoid of transcendent purpose.... Ethics cannot be relative... Enslavement, torture, and mass murder are immoral, absolutely. It cannot be true that life demands nothing from us, leaving us free to search out pleasure at whatever costs to others...” (p13- Re-Thinking Synagogues)

The God of our past reinforces our ethical core.

The second role for the American synagogue is that it can then become the place where we each discover our fullest and deepest self and where we become our best self.

Micah can be a place that touches our deepest identity our “Moral space” to use Charles Taylor’s term.

The American synagogue should speak to what Rabbi Hoffman calls

“our bedrock sense of who and what we are... what matters to us, what our fondest aspirations ought to be, who we are at our core.”

Without addressing that concern, identity produces what Robert Wuthnow calls “a mutable self” who “makes decisions based on what feels right at the moment.” Our lives then unfold in chapters that we choose to write but with no overall compelling plot.

Rabbi Hoffman asks—

“The ...challenge to the (American) synagogue... is this: can it provide a vision of the self in moral space? Can it speak for the individual drive to plot a life that (matters)...” (Larry Hoffman-The Role of the Synagogue)

The American synagogue, I believe, can become the place where we engage life in its fullest. We bring the past to the present, both “Our God” and “the God of our Ancestors,” in order to create a rooted life of transcendent meaning with a clear moral vision.

We then create the strongest kind of faith — uniting the faith of our ancestors with faith arrived at through our own life experience and wisdom.

Micah aspires to be a place of transmission

And

We yearn to be a place where one can discover a rooted and framed vision of oneself in moral space.

After all, what else is Judaism about?

This is my Micah dream—this is what this day is about—to put before ourselves the most profound questions and challenges of our time.

We seek as did our ancestors to both inherit and renew.

Diana Butler Bass, in her recent work *Grounded: Finding God in the World A Spiritual Revolution*, writes:

"God is closer than ever before... feel your feet on the ground, take a walk or hike, plant a garden, clean up a watershed, act on behalf of the earth, find your roots, honor your family and home, love your neighbor as yourself, and live the Golden Rule as you engage the commons. Pay attention. Play. Sing new songs, recite poetry, write new prayers and liturgies, learn sacred texts... celebrate the cycles of the seasons, and embrace ancient wisdom. Trust that living things grow and that transformation need not be feared. The spiritual revolution, finding God in the world, is a call to a new birth most especially for religion...

You can hear it as the earth groans for salvation, as poets and philosophers tell its stories, as scientists search the soil and cosmos for life, as the oppressed, poor, and marginalized push for dignity and economic justice. It is time ... to wake up. There is nothing worse than sleeping through a revolution."

We enter 5778 with renewed vision—a commitment to revolution.

Micah as a place for our souls to find mooring and meaning.

Ideas to push us as we sit in this mysterious moment of Yom Kippur suspended ritual time.

Help us make Micah a place of moral vision.

Help us make Micah a place of profundity.

Help us make Micah a place of revolution.

Help us make Micah your spiritual home.

GMAR CHATIMAH TOVAH

MAY YOU ALL BE INSCRIBED AND SEALED FOR A YEAR OF HEALTH—A YEAR OF ADVENTURE.