

Rosh HaShanah 5779
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In the history of western culture, who has had the worst job you have ever heard. Was it Ed Norton cleaning sewers on the Honeymooners? Or Oliver Twist in the sweatshop? How about Hercules' fifth labor, in the Augean (oh-GENE) stables, sweeping up thirty years' worth of dung from 3,000 oxen?

My nominee? The son of Amram and Yocheved, a man named Moses. Husband of Miriam. Moses who was commanded by God to leave his family and his comfortable life, and spend forty years in the desert leading a band of whining, complaining, obstinate, recalcitrant, Jews.

Cleaning sewers doesn't sound so bad, does it?

On the other hand. The Honeymooners is scarcely in reruns. Dickens, the great Greek Mythologies, turned into pop entertainment.

But Moses. Moses endures.

What was Moses' job? What exactly was it that God wanted him to do? Confront Pharaoh. Free the people. Guide them for four decades to the Promised Land. But was that all?

We recall that Moses tells the people he cannot go with them into the Promised Land because he is not strong enough for the challenges ahead. He is old and frail.

Yet the final words of the Torah tell us that "his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated." He knew the people were attached to him. After forty years they literally could not imagine life with him. They thought they needed him. But he knew they really didn't. So he lied to them. They would proceed alone. But as he spends the entire book of Deuteronomy telling them, you'll be okay. It'll be all right.

It was okay. They were all right. For today, here we are.

Freeing the slaves, receiving the Ten Commandments, leading our ancestors in the desert...essential to our story. But Moses' principle task, the most sacred responsibility he had, was to set the people up for the future. To ensure that the Israelites would move forward, *l'dor vador*, from generation to generation, to fulfill the task that God had for them in the world.

How did he do it?

Two mornings ago, we read the opening of Parashat Nitzavim. Moses speaks:

(Hebrew) "You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp – to enter into the covenant which the Lord your God concludes with you this day, to establish you this day as His people and He as your God."

We cannot overstate the drama of the moment, forty years in the making. Until now, Moses had led the people. After him, Joshua, but it wouldn't be the same. There would never be another Moses. But there could be something as good as Moses, something that would enable them to prosper as a people and fulfill God's mission for them in the world.

Moses...succeeded. Over forty years of grinding effort, unimaginable frustration, frequent feelings of helplessness and futility, Moses succeeded in teaching the people the most important lesson they would ever learn.

A new word entered their vocabulary. They stopped saying "I." They began to say "we."

Our ancestors, we, were slaves in Egypt for four hundred years. The life of a slave. At every moment we worried if we would have enough to eat. At every moment we were scared that an Egyptian whip would come down upon our backs. At every moment Pharaoh could have a whim, no one could now what came next. We were wretched, in constant fear, exhausted, hungry, not knowing what the next moment would bring, for generation, after generation, after generation.

Our rabbis wrote lovely midrashim describe how our ancestors helped one another in secret, tending to one another's wounds, sharing food, picking up one another's burdens. But there is no evidence of that in the Torah. It sounds nice. But it doesn't sound real. Century after century of life under horrible cruelty. It is easier to imagine every person, every family, for themselves.

After 400 years "I" was written in our DNA because it was the only way we could survive.

But now, ready to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land, this was perhaps the greatest moment of transition in our transition-filled history. If we remembered the proper word, we would be "whole." We were children. Our parent raised us, educated us, and was now sending out into the world. He gave us that word, the tool we would need to succeed in the world.

Moses' forty year task was to delete the "I" from our vocabulary and replace it with "we." It was essential. Because now, free, only if we began to think of ourselves as "we," would we survive.

We had to become a community where, sometimes, the needs of the community came before our own. "We" meant that, sometimes, someone else would benefit more than "I" would. When we finally stood on the banks of the Jordan, ready to cross, "we," this new community, were ready.

Salo Baron's 18 volume *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* is single greatest work of Jewish history, bar none. In 1929 Columbia named Baron to a chair in Jewish History, the first such chair at an American university, where he remained for over half a century.

Baron spent over thirty years writing his history, and he chose the title deliberately. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*. His research showed him that the reason Jews have a history, the reason, thousands of years later, we are still here, is because we have always been a community. It is our common behavior as a people, our social history, and the practice of our rituals, our religious history that not only defined us, Baron believed, but they also sustained us. Ensured we continued.

Over thousands of years, the externals of the Jewish community have changed. Our vernacular language went from Hebrew to Aramaic to Ladino and Yiddish and on to the languages of the many lands where we live. Our rituals have evolved, the role of women transformed, the impact of technology, enormous.

But the fundamentals have never changed. We come together to build synagogues in which to pray, schools in which to learn. We dedicate cemeteries, sacred spaces in which to lay our dead. From of old we create associations through which to care for the needy among us; the poor, the homeless, the elderly, the orphan.

Some may remember a High Holy Day sermon I delivered twenty years ago. I discussed someone I considered a role model as "a good Jew." That sermon was a mistake. I was new at this game. I did not craft my message as carefully as I should have. But the idea has continued to intrigue me. My thoughts, as they say, have evolved.

A Jew, is someone born of a Jewish parent or who chooses Judaism. A good Jew, is a Jew who lives according to Jewish values. A serious Jew, is a Jew who lives according to Jewish values, and is part of the Jewish community. A serious Jew says "we."

Sometimes, it feels like the serious Jew is in danger.

Eight of the scariest words I have ever heard: "Don't worry rabbi. He'll have a bar mitzvah."

A parent tells me they are resigning from the Temple because they are pulling their child out of Hebrew school. Is it financial, I ask, ready with assurance that we will work with whatever someone's situation is.

No, it's not really, that, and I really like the Temple and the clergy, but, well, my son is just very busy. Soccer practice, tutoring, and just, well life. Kids are very busy. And we never really liked the date we were assigned, so we are going to have him prepared privately but, don't worry. Being Jewish is important to us. He'll have a Bar Mitzvah!

I bite my lip. I keep my mouth shut. I can't say what I'm thinking: "I don't care. I don't care if your son becomes a Bar Mitzvah. That's not what it's about."

As a father, I sympathize with the complicated challenges involved in being a parent. As a rabbi...I don't get it. Being a Jew is being part of a community.

"Don't worry, rabbi. He'll have a Bar Mitzvah!" What's wrong with this picture? It's not about "we." It's about "I."

In our congregation, occasionally families determine that the Saturday morning service does not work for them, so they choose an alternative. We educate and train their children, we help arrange for a service, and we celebrate those B'nai Mitzvah every bit as much as those that take place within this building. Because it is not about becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah; it is about being part of a community.

It is about being a serious Jew. One who says "we."

Though Temple B'nai Abraham is in good shape, synagogue membership overall is in decline, along with membership in pretty much every kind of Jewish institution. The serious Jew is endangered these days.

It has much to do with this particular American moment, when "joining," in general, is out of vogue. Synagogue membership is down. Church membership, down. Service organization membership, down. Boy scout membership, down. Girl scout membership, down...though we are buying more cookies than ever. (Must be a sermon there somewhere.)

A Virginia rabbi wrote recently in an Israeli that "synagogues...purport to be communities. Communities are made up of people committed to supporting each other. A member of an organization is primarily interested in what he or she is receiving for him or herself. A participant in a community, does not necessarily sacrifice his or her own needs, but is simultaneously interested in the welfare of his or her neighbors and in the success of the community as a whole."

So far so good. But then he add, "Synagogues...can transform themselves so long as they reframe what it means to be a part of the community...For starters, they can employ a term other than "membership," something that connotes

covenantal responsibility rather than consumer transaction. For example, a pastor friend of mine uses the term 'teammates' instead of 'members.'"

Teammates. Labels are not the issue.

"We live in an age of the individual."

Thus says, Oracle, the software company, which recently published a white paper proclaiming, "Welcome to Era I, the Age of the Individual. Forget about Millennials and Generation Z. It's all Era I. Organizations must be ready and able to turn on a dime and deliver content, experiences, services, and technology to individuals however and wherever they desire."

I get the business perspective. A company is in business to make money. Running a successful company means matching the product line to the desires of the consumer. If the consumers want big cars, Ford emphasizes SUV's over compacts. If the consumer wants cheap fares, United cuts down on business class and adds more economy seats.

This kind of thinking is good in a synagogue as well. If people feel more comfortable dressing casually, why not? If a bit more English makes a service more accessible, what's the big deal? A synagogue should be run like a business, responsibly and prudently. But it is not a business. We are here because we think what we find here is important. We are here, because we want what we find here to endure.

We are here, because we don't want to be "I." We want to be "we."

This challenge is not new. Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Hillel wrote, *al tifrosh min hatzibur*, "do not separate yourself from the community." We cannot know what was taking place in ancient Jerusalem that prompted him to write these words, but it must have scared him. His meaning is clear. To cut oneself off from the community, is to abandon Jewish life.

One hundred years ago, HaRav Kook, Israel's first chief rabbi, said, "the soul of the individual is drawn from the community. The community bestows the soul upon the individual. To be a Jew, community is a necessary condition."

Both these men were what we would call Orthodox rabbis. No doubt keeping kashrut, observing the Sabbath, the rituals were important. But even to these great, great rabbis, the rituals take second place to being within the community.

It is not about me, or you. It's about us.

There is one more comment on Rabbi Hillel's words that I'd like to share. Five hundred years ago, Italian Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura wrote that one who separates himself from the public cannot share in the troubles of others, and thus cannot console them.

Shiva, is an obligation of the community. I like that. If you separate yourself from the community, you are not in a position to console those in need. That is tragic.

Clearly, there are those who find their Jewishness of little significance and their absence in Jewish life reflects that. They have no desire to be a serious Jew. They make me sad...but I respect them. Their ways are consistent.

My concern today is rather with the many who say being Jewish is important to them, but whose actions do not reflect that. Upon relinquishing their household's membership some years ago, one individual told me, we realized, a year's dues can be a really nice long weekend. Just to come twice a year? I mean we can afford it, but really?

I've learned that once someone starts thinking about ROI, Return on Investment, the cause is lost. Because there is something fundamental they just don't get.

Did I fail as a rabbi? Was this something no one could have prevented? I don't know. As Moses showed us, the transformation from "I" to "we" is an arduous journey.

Thirty-five -years ago I was ordained a rabbi. I spent fifteen years travelling the world, working with Jewish communities in some twenty countries. It was exciting and it was gratifying. I felt like I was doing something important, helping establish congregations where none existed. I felt like was doing Rabbi Hillel's bidding, connecting Jews with community.

But I really didn't understand what Rabbi Hillel meant, or what Moses taught, until I came here twenty years ago, and with you as my teachers, had the chance to live as part of a community.

Saturday morning was typical. Ellie Rimatzki became a Bat Mitzvah, Jordan and Irena Levy's second daughter was named, I saw one member observing shloshim, several observing yartzheits...it was Saturday morning in our community, as a community, doing what we do.

If someone is in mourning, we try to comfort.

If financial difficulties are present, we help.

If employment is a challenge, we do our best to step in.

When someone has a joy to celebrate, we celebrate with them.

If someone faces tragedy, we are there.

If someone is new, we say welcome.

If someone is unsteady, we extend a hand.

We are not perfect. No community is. And since we're Jews, when we're not perfect, it gets mentioned! But we try our best. And I think we do pretty well.

And us here. We're the extended family. We're in the game. Patterns vary how we do it, but us here, our actions, not our words, but our actions, show that we support, we commit, we believe, in what this people is about.

One more reference. On page 39a of Tractate Shevuot of the Talmud we read, *kol yisrael arevim ze bze*. All Jews are responsible for one another. It is a lovely, meaningful phrase many of us recognize.

There is just one problem. The translation isn't right. It should be, "all Jews are guarantors for one another," and the text continues, "and they are all a single body. It is like a guarantor who repays the debt of his friend."

If I am responsible for you, I care for you. If I am your guarantor, we are so close, that at times it might be hard to know where I end and where you begin. We are "we."

Long, long ago, Moses took on the hardest task of perhaps anyone the world has known. And it wasn't the putting up with this people for four decades, though that we know was no party.

The greatest challenge he had, was to teach us not to say "I," but to say "we." He succeeded. For we are here today as "we." The temptation of "I" is strong; with God's strength, may we only, and ever, say "we."

Shana Tova.