

### What's Love Got to Do with It?

Elul is a popular month for weddings. It came early this year, usually spilling over into mid September. I remember the warm end of summer weather of my own Elul wedding. Fran and I had a brief honeymoon in an Inn in rural Pennsylvania, en route to my first student High Holiday pulpit. When we weren't rowing lazily on a lake, or enjoying the fireplace in our cabin, Fran was writing thank you notes, and I was writing sermons... If that sounds a bit task oriented for a honeymoon, understand that we were leaving for Israel immediately after Yom Kippur to spend a year of study as part of my rabbinical program. Now, 34 years and five children later, it is our youngest, Sara Miriam, who just left for Israel, beginning her adventure as an independent young adult, working in Jerusalem and building a life away from home. And as coincidence would have it, she moved in yesterday morning to an apartment on Tschernikovsky Street, only several doorways down from the building in which Fran and I first lived, all those years ago.

So much in our lives has changed since then- for all of us. We grow, imperceptibly, incrementally, inexorably, day by day; it sometimes takes our breath away when we realize just how much we've changed. Yet, whenever I officiate at a wedding, especially one in Elul, I remember who Fran and I were 34 years ago, and I return to the promise of that moment, and the young love that we felt.

Elul is a month for remembering both the commitments- the covenants- that we once made, and the youthful love that we still remember. The Haftarat that we read on Shabbat mornings in Elul use marriage, and the love of bride and groom, as the ultimate metaphor for God's loving relationship with the Jewish people. The Rabbis even read the word ELUL as an

acronym for the verse from the Song of Songs, “Ani L’ dodi V’ dodi Li: I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” It is the phrase most-often chosen by Jewish brides to declare their commitment to their betrothed under the Huppah- perhaps some of you said these words at your own wedding. And it’s the Biblical verse most typically used by Jewish artists to decorate the Ketubah- the Jewish marriage contract. It expresses the mutual commitment of love between bride and groom, and by analogy, between God and the Jewish people.

Elul is also the month of Heshbon HaNefesh, of self-examination and reflection in preparation for the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe. Its connection to love may not seem self-evident, but I think that the Rabbis were teaching us that we are not alone in this work of Teshuva- Repentance. We are held- each of us- by God’s love, and so we don’t have to do this work of repairing ourselves alone.

Knowing that we are loved, that we are in relationship with something greater than ourselves, gives us the strength to reach beyond our comfort zone, the courage to look at ourselves honestly, and to change where change is necessary.

Knowing that we are loved inspires us to be the best version of ourselves.

If you find it challenging to talk about being loved by God, or even about having a relationship with God, then allow me to frame what I am saying more concretely, in terms of our human relationships. Think of the relationships in your life that are most important to you. The people who, when you think about them, make you smile, make you breathe more fully and deeply, who evoke the emotions of open heartedness and perhaps of love.

These are the relationships that bring out the best in us. For example, a pregnant wife turns to her husband past 11:00pm on a cold wintry night and says, “Gee, I am really craving chocolate chocolate chip ice cream right now.” Chances are that guy will get out of bed, put on

his overcoat and brave the elements in search of the only convenience store still open, and not only will he do it without resentment, but he will do it with joy, grateful for the chance to demonstrate his love.

Caring relationships often demand that we put the other's desires and needs above our own. Think of the parents of babies and toddlers. Anyone who has ever raised young children knows that parenting is a constant practice of self-restraint, patience, and selflessness, under conditions of complete sleep deprivation. And then, beyond all comprehension, they often choose to do it again! Why? Because the commitments we make, and keep, to be the best parents that we can be refine us; they make us better people.

Sometimes, love means letting go of our beloved, even when we don't want to. Days before boarding her plane to Israel, my daughter experiences a "cold feet" moment and says to me, "Daddy, maybe Mommy's right, maybe I should just stay home. Or at least delay the trip for a month and stay here for the holidays." And oh, how I want her to stay; I am aching for her to change her mind, and find a nice job in Boston or New York! But I smile, and answer, "Sara, this is the beginning of your adventure. You have to start your adventure!"

These are just examples of what Martin Buber calls "I-Thou" moments in our relationships, in which we recognize the other as a "thou," a bearer of God's image, who demands a response from the fullness of who we are. And it is there, in the connecting space between us and an other, that we feel in the presence of something beyond ourselves. I believe that whatever it is that calls us to transcend our self concern, that beckons us to be the best, most compassion version of ourselves, flows from an ultimate source of loving kindness, compassion and grace, that we call God. Yes, there are occasions when we might feel the awe of God's

presence on a mountaintop, or a beach at sunset, but more often, it is in relationship with others that God's presence is revealed.

Now, I-Thou relationships are not limited to our most intimate circle, nor do we have the presence of mind to live in that space all the time, but the potential to hear deeply and to respond to another is always present. Remember the Biblical story about Abraham, who encounters three desert travelers arriving at his tent? As the scene opens, Abraham is actually engaged in a conversation with God. And yet, he abruptly breaks off this divine encounter in order to attend to the needs of the three strangers, rushing to provide them with food and hospitality. The obvious question is why would Abraham choose to end something so sublime as a communion with God? But he didn't. By attending to the needs of people, he turned away from one level of God to experience a higher level of God. And we can approach that level whenever we hear and respond to the needs of another, even if she is a stranger.

Most of our relationships, however, are less "I-Thou," as Buber would put it, and more "I-It." That is, they are basically transactional, rather than relational. I want or need something from you so I act or behave appropriately in order to get it. Think of the person you pay at the check-out counter, or whom you hire to clean-up your yard, or many of the people you interact with regularly at work. "I-Thou" may be our goal, but during the course of our overly busy days, most of our encounters never have a chance to rise to that level. But when we only live on the transactional level, the "I-it," level, we wind up feeling disconnected, isolated, and in need of something more. We are drawn to transcend our isolation through establishing meaningful relationships.

A few years back, Harvard Professor, Robert Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone*. Essentially, he says that, as Americans pursue more and more individual activities in their leisure time, we are losing our social capital, our ability to rely on one another, and to reach out to networks of people in times of need. Americans spend increasingly less time in groups that engage us in face to face relationships, from neighborhood associations and book groups to civic organizations. He uses bowling as a metaphor: in a period in which the popularity of bowling leagues dropped precipitously, the number of actual bowlers increased.

This was written back in 2000, before the ubiquitous smart phone had even further distracted us from real-time person to person contact, even among our family and friends. Have you ever sat with friends in a restaurant while several among you simultaneously followed their personal email, or communicated at length electronically with someone who wasn't physically there? Or is there someone in your family, perhaps yourself, who needs to be reminded at the dinner table that texting someone is less important than engaging with the flesh and blood faces gathered round the table? Our smart phones have both made it difficult to separate out work time from personal time, and have allowed a constant stream of stimulation to distract us from hearing what we need to hear and seeing what needs to be seen.

I read recently about a teenage computer whiz who wistfully remarked, "Someday I'd really like to learn how to have a conversation... but not now."

Dr. Ron Wolfson, in a recent book, entitled, "Relational Judaism," reminds us that it is our nature to build sacred communities because we are essentially relational beings. For Jews, synagogues are one of the places that we can go in order to foster relationships that matter, relationships through which we feel connected to something greater than ourselves. Together, we experience the rhythm of Jewish holidays and seasons. Together, we come to study and grow

intellectually, to be nurtured spiritually, and to be challenged morally. We share the peak moments of our lives, and we comfort each other in the face of inevitable loss. And, underlying all of that, is the possibility that this can be a place where we *have* a place, where we can tell our stories, and feel heard.

My colleague, Rabbi Ed Feinstein, puts it this way: “What is the opposite of holiness? In Hebrew, the opposite of *Kadosh* is *Hol*. Translated as “profane,” or “ordinary,” *hol* literally means “sand.” Sand has no cohesion, no connection, no bonds. When you are in relationship, you share a bond with and Other. It’s this world of *hol*, sand- of atomized individuals; of sovereign, lonely, unconnected selves- that you come to community to escape. When you are tired of being a consumer, you seek intimacy, friendship, trust. When you weary of transactional relationships, you seek belonging. When Jewish institutions become places of sacred community, you discover *kadosh*.”

And so my friends, I want to pose a series of question for you to think about for a moment. When you come here, what do YOU discover? Do you feel connected to something greater than yourself- to a community of friends, to other Jews around the world, to God? Do you feel recognized and heard, or do you feel a little like an outsider? In services, do you feel open and welcome, or do you feel a little self-conscious? When you walk inside the building, do you enter as a *baal habayit*, a host, or as a guest?

These questions are not always easy to answer. Relationships are complicated; not just with people, but with institutions, too. However, if you recognize that there are weaknesses in your relationship to the synagogue, then ask yourself: What would it be like for it to be different,

and what would we, all of us, have to do to get there? How do we turn *Hol* – sand-into *Kodesh-Holy relationship*?

Traditionally, Jewish communities refer to themselves in Hebrew as *Kehillot*, or a *Kehillah Kedosha*, literally, a holy community. In its recent reorganization, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the parent body of Conservative synagogues, adopted this nomenclature for its constituents. Instead of synagogues, we are now called Kehilot. So that makes us officially Kehilat Temple Israel of Natick. We strive to live up to that title in all the usual ways:

We gather together here for prayer and study, we educate our children. We celebrate together and we support each other in times of need. And we do all of that pretty well.

--In the first half of the year alone, members of our caring Committee delivered over 30 meals to shut-ins, people recovering from illness, and families with new babies, and gave rides to the elderly or infirm to doctors appointments and to community events. I want to thank Rachelle Lerner, Randi Singer and Annette Ziegler, who are currently coordinating the committee, for all of the mitzvot which they and others so selflessly fulfill. They do more than drop off food or pick up passengers. They perform the holy work of listening when people are feeling vulnerable. I hope you'll come to our membership appreciation dinner this fall to thank them, and all of the volunteers and previous coordinators for the wonderful work that they do.

--Morning and evening, our minyan captains provide a welcoming daily community of prayer. They provide a place where mourners can slowly work through grief, where they feel held by the presence and constancy of an intimate group, and where, many times, individuals forge a deeper, renewed relationship with Judaism, and with the Jewish community. And this happens here, at Temple Israel, 365 days a year.

-- This was the year that also saw the creation of our first Hazak Group, a United Synagogue inspired social group for empty nesters that aspires to build relationships. Thanks to the efforts of Mike and Barbara Richmond, Joel and Marilyn Feinberg, and a great committee, hundreds of you attended the first events, renewed old friendships, and started new relationships.

--At the same time, a group of young Temple families and prospective members rebooted our Haverim Club. Many of you have told me through the years that Haverim is where you made your first friends in Natick, and found your entry way into the Temple community. Now a new cadre is developing life-long friendships here.

I could go on and on. But look at just two changes that we made for this High Holiday season: the new chairs in the Sanctuary, and a new service in the tent.

After 60 years, we pulled out the fixed theatre seats from the sanctuary this summer, and replaced them with moveable chairs. Why? You may think it was to provide a softer seat and better back support. But actually, it was to change the way we pray. Fixed seats in straight rows discourage active participation; they encourage you to sit back and watch, as if communal prayer were a spectator sport. It is not. But a funny thing happens when you arrange the chairs in concentric half circles, as we did for the last few Shabbat mornings. You see people praying and singing, instead of seeing the backs of their heads. You hear each other's voices and feel drawn to complement them with your own. You connect with one another, and somehow, you reach a higher place. A sense of Godliness emerges in the space in-between. Come next week after the High Holidays, and see for yourself what I am talking about.

And why, after nearly 30 years of beautifully orchestrated parallel services did we upset the apple cart this year, and ask most of you to give up fixed seating for the second day of Rosh Hashanah? Because we heard what so many of you said- that spending hours in shul in one

building with your children in another building was no longer serving your spiritual needs. So we decided to provide families, of all ages, with a shared experience of prayer and celebration, because there is a spiritual dimension to praying with your kids right next to you, where you can watch them and hold them. And because their experience of prayer is qualitatively better too when they share it with the people they love.

When we surveyed the congregation, a great many of you were skeptical of the logistical challenges and not happy about giving up your assigned seat for a day. And yet, you said to try it anyway, that you were willing to put up with the challenges and inconvenience for the sake of others. As a community, we should be so proud of that generous response, and grateful for the beautiful experience that it enabled us to create.

My friends, every synagogue has a smaller group of engaged members at its core, and a much larger group who feel less connected, on the outside, looking in. We want our members' connection to the synagogue to be less "I-It," and more "I-Thou," less transactional, and more relational. That's what I hope that we will achieve through our United Synagogue Strategic Planning process. I hope you saw that huge sign outside the sanctuary today, encouraging you to participate in the congregational survey. As of yesterday, nearly 200 of you already responded. Amazing. Let's double that by next week!

But surveys are only a first step. Real relationships don't emerge from surveys; they emerge from face to face conversations and from sharing our stories. I'm lucky. I get to stand up in front of you, as I did this morning, and tell you my story. You all know that two of my five children live in Israel; one is an active duty soldier on the Syrian border, while the other just moved in to her first apartment in Jerusalem yesterday. You get to hear my pride, as well as a

little of my anguish. And I'm glad to share that with you because you are my Temple Israel family.

But, how do you get heard? When was the last time anyone asked you to tell your story? I hope that part of what comes out of our strategic planning process is a listening campaign. I heard of one congregation where everyone gets asked, in an intimate setting, two questions: The first question is, "*What keeps you up at night?*" What are your deep concerns, what worries you about the future? And the second one is, "*What gets you up in the morning?*" What lights your fire, what are you passionate about that makes you look forward to a new day? Interesting questions to reflect upon as we start a new year together. Ask yourself those questions. Talk about them with your friends and family over lunch today.

I know a Rabbi who held hundreds of one- on- one conversations with congregants, usually in a local coffee shop. I don't know if those are the questions that he asked, but I know that his members felt heard. I want to be like that Rabbi. But don't wait for a formal campaign or a program to begin. If you have something on your mind, or you feel that you just want to renew your relationship with me or Cantor Richmond, call us. We'll be glad to get together. It doesn't have to be in the office, we can meet you at home or at Starbucks. I'll pick up the coffee!

Every now and again, I retell some of the stories about the Rosh Hashannah in 1944, when 18 Jewish families in Natick gathered to greet the New Year on the third floor of a Knights of Columbus building, under the glaring eye of a portrait of Monsignor Delaney. How, in the waning days of WWII, they determined that the Jews of Natick deserved a home of their own, and scraped up the money to purchase an old building on North Main Street. How they named it

Temple Israel- not after the patriarch in the Bible, or the land of the Jewish people, but after Israel Muscat, a gentleman who possessed a Torah scroll, and who held weekly Shabbat services in his Framingham home in earlier years.

I heard many of those stories from Bernie Sigalov, *alav hashalom*, who passed away just a couple of months ago at the age of 97. He was our last living link to those original 18 families. Those of you who remember Bernie know that he had a great heart, and that he was a gifted raconteur. The funny thing about those stories about Temple Israel's early days is that I feel like they are my own, even though they happened over a decade before I was born, and almost 50 years before I even arrived in Natick. Sharing who we are, telling our stories to one another binds, us, transforms us, creates relationships and communities. God's presence is found in that space.

Let me conclude this morning by sharing with you one of my favorite prayers about God's presence in our lives. It's called, *An Unending Love*, and was written by Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

“We are loved by an unending love.

We are embraced by arms that find us  
even when we are hidden from ourselves.  
We are touched by fingers that soothe us  
even when we are too proud for soothing.  
We are counseled by voices that guide us  
even when we are too embittered to hear.  
We are loved by an unending love.

We are supported by hands that uplift us  
even in the midst of a fall.  
We are urged on by eyes that meet us  
even when we are too weak for meeting.  
We are loved by an unending love.

Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled,  
Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;  
Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;  
We are loved by an unending love.”

My friends, may this be a year in which we feel God’s loving embrace, through the stories we tell, the relationships we renew, and the *kehillah kedoshah*, the holy community, that together we build.

L’Shannah Tovah