

Kol Nidre 5784

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Shana Tova and G'mar Chatimah Tova

Happy New Year, and may you be sealed in the Book of Life for good.

When my parents and I moved to Atlanta in 1999, most of our family lived between Richmond and Baltimore or between Tampa and Boca. We knew a handful of people, but I quickly learned that Atlanta was a city full of people like me, transplants from another part of the country. When we joined Temple Emanu-El later that year, we were welcomed into the congregation, and the congregation paired us with another family—the Silvermans. I didn't know it then, but we had become a chavurah of sorts.

For those unfamiliar, a chavurah is a group of Jews who become something like a chosen family. The chavurah gets together for holidays and milestones and supports one another in times of trouble. For many years, my best memories of Rosh HaShanah dinner, Yom Kippur break-fast, and Pesach seder all took place at the home of Bernie and Faye (z"l) Silverman. This was a shidduch, a match that has lasted to this day—most recently when my parents went on the Temple Emanu-El Israel trip with Laurie and Aaron Silverman—over twenty years since we first met and just a few weeks ago, I officiated at one of their son's weddings.

Thanks to our family's connection with the Silvermans, I feel like someone with deep roots, relationships, and pride in being a Jew from Atlanta. Nowadays, Atlanta is my home—my forever home—and I get to be the one welcoming transplants to the community. All of that is because of Temple Emanu-El.

Since then, I've had many life experiences similar to my family's with the Silvermans. I've lived in Maryland, Israel, and Ohio, and in each place, strangers

went out of their way to make me feel like I belonged. Those strangers quickly became chosen family, and our connection became sacred. There's something very biblical in that act of welcoming strangers. The folks in my life who have gone out of their way remind me a lot of our patriarch, Abraham.

God creates a covenant with Abraham and all his descendants in the Book of Genesis. The physical symbol of Abraham's covenant is through brit milah, circumcision. Immediately after his circumcision, Abraham sits at the front of his tent, and God appears beside him. However, simultaneously, three strangers approach Abraham from the wilderness. Defying all expectations, Abraham leaps up, ignoring God's presence, and greets the three strangers. There's no mention of lidocaine or Tylenol here, either. Abraham's actions are extraordinary on many levels: he deliberately ignores God, greets his guests despite his pain, and does all this for three complete strangers. Abraham puts God second to the care of needy strangers.

Only later do we learn that these strangers were angels sent by God to deliver Abraham and Sarah the news that they would conceive and have a baby boy. Without realizing it, Abraham was serving God by helping these three people. This is a radical scene; Abraham walks away from God to greet strangers! This is the true nature of being Jewish then and now. The very point of our lives, our being, is to help or connect with others. This is our sacred mission as Jews.

We can find this same idea in our siddur when we say Shema. Every Jew knows the shema, we are born hearing these words, and for many, they are the last words we utter. They are words we can hear or say before we go to bed at night when we wake up in the morning. Say it with me, "Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad."

Hear, Israel, Adonai is our God; Adonai is one. We say these words so often we might not notice how that phrase starts. The Shema is addressed to one another.

Yes, these words affirm our belief in one God, but we don't need to tell God that—we're talking to each other. When we say Yisrael in Shema, we are not talking about the land or the state; we are talking about the people of Israel, the descendants of our ancestor Jacob. Focusing on Israel—all Jewish people—is an essential pattern in Judaism. We put God second to connecting with one another – it's right there in the words of Shema.

The idea of putting God second comes from Rabbi Donniel Hartman. Rabbi Hartman expands on this theory that when Jews put God ahead of human beings, we ignore those who need us the most: family, friends, neighbors, or strangers within our midst. Instead, Rabbi Hartman believes that Judaism is best practiced when we prioritize the connection with our fellow human beings ahead of God.

The obligation to put our fellow human beings ahead of God is especially present on Yom Kippur. Tomorrow, we'll read a passage from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah looks around and sees people who pretend to be devout. Meanwhile, these same pious souls ignore the hungry and the naked, oppress their workers, and expect God to answer their prayers, nonetheless. Isaiah has had enough and tells God, "Cry with full throat, without restraint; קְרָא בְּגֵרוֹן אֶל-תְּהַשֵּׁן; Raise your voice like a ram's horn קוֹלָךְ הֲרִים! Declare to My people their transgression, To the House of Jacob their sin. They seek you daily, Eager to learn your ways. Like a nation that does what is right, a nation that has not abandoned the laws of its God. They are eager for the nearness of God." Isaiah sees right through the façade of false piety.

Isaiah spares nothing; he mocks how the Israelites moan and complain to God, "Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You not pay attention?" Isaiah is ruthless. Here comes the hammer, where Isaiah lays out the truth. Isaiah tells them that God doesn't hear them "because, on your fast day, you go about your business as normal and force your laborers to work as well!" Your fasting today is not to make your voice heard on high. Is that the fast God desires, a day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a

bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when GOD is favorable to your requests? No, this is the fast God desires: To free us from the wicked fetters, untie the cords of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and break off every chain. Share your bread with the hungry, and take the poor into your home; when you see the naked, clothe them, and do not ignore your kin. Only then shall your light burst through like the dawn.” Our mission is clear. Don’t bother fasting. Don’t bother continuing your prayers tonight or into tomorrow on Yom Kippur if you’re going to ignore the hungry, the homeless, and the naked.

If Isaiah’s words are the stick by which we should measure our service to God, we should examine how we’re doing as a synagogue. The Temple Emanu-El website has a page listing our mission and core values. When I read these, I noticed that God is not mentioned anywhere. Instead, we prioritize helping one another in a complex world, raising a generation of Jews who feel empowered to be Jewish, and, most importantly, taking our world from where it is to where it needs to be.

The purpose of our temple is to bring people together, to connect us on a deep and meaningful level. But “temple” doesn’t accurately describe who we are. Today, we use names like Temple to describe a place like Emanu-El. The word “Temple” certainly evokes a connection to God, but for thousands of years, we used two words: one Hebrew and one Greek, “synagogue” and beit Knesset. These words mean the same thing, and it is NOT a temple—instead, a synagogue and a beit Knesset both mean gathering house. At our core, our beit haknesset is not primarily a house of prayer. For most, a synagogue’s primary purpose is for Jews and Jewish families to connect with one another!

Temple Emanu-El has long fulfilled its purpose as a Beit Knesset, a gathering house for my family. When we were matched with the Silverman family, Emanu-El became the hub in my family's network. My closest friends are members here; the people in my chavurah today are members here. I want that feeling for every family at Emanu-El.

On a small scale, I see this occur spontaneously every Friday night. Whether a new member, someone shul shopping, or someone considering Judaism comes to services, I know that a group of congregants has a keen eye for welcoming those “strangers.” I won’t use the names of the welcomers because they don’t do it for the notoriety. They know who they are, and they’re likely blushing now anyway. If you were ever one of those lost souls walking into a Friday night service, you likely met them, too. These unique folks act like modern-day Abrahams and Isaiahs. They go out of their way to greet a guest. Like Isaiah, they know true devotion to God is caring for our fellow human beings. I’m convinced that the true sacred feeling at a Friday night service comes from the connections we make with one another.

In the year ahead, 5784, you’ll hear a lot more about how we can pursue this prophetic mission: to share our bread with the hungry, care for the poor, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked so that, as Isaiah said, our light will burst forth like the dawn and healing will spring up. Shema Yisrael, listen up, all of Israel, and then we will realize that we are one just like God is one.