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Temple Emanu-El

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Elul Sermon #2:

Restoring Holiness to Our Communities

This evening our purpose is to explore the ways we can restore holiness to our communities. The notion of the synagogue as an institution of holy purpose is one that is deeply familiar and dearly cherished by members of this congregation in particular. All of us are acquainted with a Jewish concept that is central to this idea: the concept of *tikkun olam*, acts of social justice undertaken when a motivated individual or an inspired group of like-minded souls get together to bring meaningful change to the places they live.

Doing religious repair work on our communities has been at the heart of Reform Judaism for decades, and it boasts the same inspiration that drove the grassroots success of other social movements in our country and around the world throughout history.

For us as Jews especially, the roots of spiritual revolution lie deep in the earliest layers of our biblical heritage. Our literature and legends are filled with tales of inspired people rising up to change and improve their world. The dramatic stories of Abraham smashing his household idols, of Moses defying Pharaoh and the cruelty of Egypt, of the Israelite prophets willing to stand up in the face of corrupt and shallow religious institutions, to point accusing fingers and condemn them for their flaws, at risk of censure and exile and even death: this is the legacy

of Jewish *tikkun olam*, of an individual's potential to personally bring needed change to the world.

But our topic tonight is slightly different. Tonight we are talking about another element of the relationship between self and community, another way of bringing repair and restoration to the places that are broken or neglected. And in contrast to *tikkun olam*, this is an area that is largely overlooked by much of progressive Judaism today. And it's too bad that that's the case, because this idea is just as critical to the way that community develops its sanctity, which is, of course, precisely what we are charged with exploring in this installment of our Elul sermon series.

I want to talk tonight about the moral pressure that a community can bring to bear on its members, rather than the other way around. We all know plenty of stories about heroic and memorable people bringing extraordinary change to the places they live, but what about the converse, what about the ways that the values and priorities of a holy community can push its members to become better human beings?

It might sound simple, but it is an idea that is sometimes hard for us to embrace, and I think that's true for a couple of reasons. First, we live in the United States of America – and in Texas. The culture of our nation and our state are solidly built on the myth of the rugged individual. Our heroes are cowboys, pioneers, solo entrepreneurs and visionaries. “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” was John Wayne and not Jimmy Stewart; we learn by the end of the movie that freedom is really won by the lone gunslinger, not by the politician.

But it's not just directors of western movies who favor the strength of the individual over the community; anyone who's worked in the Jewish community

has encountered this too. There's more than a small kernel of truth at the center of that old joke about two Jews and three opinions. We Jews, and especially we Reform Jews, often chafe against the idea that we should compromise our individual autonomy for the betterment of the community or the movement. After all, the whole basis of Reform Judaism, it can be argued, is the existence of the sovereign self, the rational individual governed by the gifts of his own mind and his soul. Being a Reform Jew means being able to stand up to any tyranny – of politicians or law – or rabbis, for that matter – and say no: I know better than you do what is right!

That is exactly why we are so skilled in the art of *tikkun olam*, of changing what is wrong in the world out there. But what we are significantly less good at is acknowledging the potential of our communities to change us. We are much less comfortable at the art of surrender, at the spiritual practice of allowing ourselves to be changed in substantive and long-lasting ways by the places we live and pray. But if we can do that, hard as it may be, we will have helped our communities achieve new heights of effectiveness and sanctity.

Any adolescent – and anyone who has parented or taught an adolescent, for that matter – can share plenty of stories about the power of peer pressure. The students in our schools are constantly under pressure from their classmates about academic performance, about who to socialize with, about what to do with their leisure time. They can tell you exactly how destructive – and also how irresistible – those forces can be, even if they are driving the student to behaviors and values he or she personally knows to be wrong. But they can also tell you that when kids form relationships with the right kinds of friends, with encouraging teachers, enriching sports or clubs, they will do anything they can to uphold the positive values and priorities that those communities promote. A student that moves in social circles where it's actually cool to be a leader or a scholar will develop self-

motivation toward leadership and learning much stronger than she would otherwise receive from her parents or teachers.

In the same way, when our religious communities exert social pressure on us to act in ways that are right and good, the result is not only that we do better things with our energy and our time, but that we absorb Judaism's time-tested values about what is right and wrong in the world. Eventually all of us, as members of the community, reinforce its social enticements and rewards for behaving in loving, nurturing, ethical Jewish ways.

We are taught by Jewish tradition that it is a mitzvah for us to accept from our community what is called *tochachah* – admonition or rebuke. This is a well-established but largely-ignored principle: that we are commanded to help the community carry out the obligation to correct its members when we see them going astray. When we see a friend or a colleague or a family member going down the wrong path, we have to gently and lovingly reprove them if their action threatens the community's ideals. We automatically have a stake in the well-being of the people we love and the people we share community with; we have an obligation to them. We have to help let them know when they are missing the mark so that we can all get back onto the right path together.

There is an intriguing commentary¹ on the *Shulchan Aruch* – the exhaustive 16th century collection of Jewish law – which addresses a fascinating legal inquiry. The question is asked: Is it sufficient for a Jew to follow the commandments simply because he sees his friends or his family doing them, and not because he believes that the tradition insists upon it? The commentary responds: No. Even if you are following the actions of righteous people who are doing everything

¹ *Emet Le-Ya'akov* by Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky; the passage in question is remarking on §122, regarding the laws applying to *Tisha B'Av* and whether or not one may wear new garments on the Shabbat immediately preceding it.

right, your obligation is not discharged until you acknowledge that the reason for acting Jewishly is that you are a part of a holy community, not that you are imitating holy people. Without knowing that mitzvot come for the purpose of serving God and strengthening the Jewish people, you might learn to value the individual over the community, which might in turn lead you to haughtiness and a disregard for Jewish values, to the sin of what Alan Morinis calls “spiritual mediocrity”.

Despite all the good that it can do, and all the good it has done, *tikkun olam* can be a narcissistic religion when practiced alone. If we conclude that our only Jewish calling is to change the world in ways we think are positive, then we may never learn to be self-reflective or open to spiritual growth. But working to cultivate the virtues of humility and modesty, on the other hand, acknowledging that there are ways the community can change us for the better – that is an entryway to Jewish enrichment and development.

This month of Elul is a time of our most earnest moral self-scrutiny. Next week at this time we’ll be learning together at our congregational observances of Selichot. Dr. Morinis will share with us the tools and the techniques of the Mussar movement, which were developed precisely for this reason – to help Jews recognize the traditions and resources outside of ourselves that can help make us better people. It is a deeply important subject for to spend time on as this reflective month of High Holy Day preparation draws to a close.

Judaism’s gifts of spiritual self-improvement can help prime us for the approach of the High Holy Days, but its regimen is not necessarily comfortable. The hard work of *teshuvah* – repentance and apology – does require some abdication of the ego, which always hurts a little. But in the end, the High Holy Days are not about *tikkun olam*; they are about *tikkun atzmi* – not repairing the world, but

repairing the human self with the guidance and support of our community. Allowing ourselves to be changed by our community and not the other way around is often uncomfortable, but it is always worth it.

There is a wonderful legend told about Rabbi Akiva, the wise ancient sage of the Talmudic world. As the story goes, Akiva – before he was Rabbi Akiva – had reached the age of 40 without ever having amassed a single piece of Jewish knowledge. One day, he was walking near a natural spring and he noticed that a slow drip of water had over time worn a hole through a large stone. At once, Akiva was enlightened. He said to himself, “If something as soft as water can bore its way through something as hard as stone, then the words of Torah can certainly penetrate my soft heart of flesh and blood.” He returned home and immediately committed himself to learning the traditions of his people.²

We are all free individuals, and we are all at liberty to live our Judaism in the ways that our own hearts and consciences compel us. That is at once the marvel and the challenge of Reform Judaism. We have to discover that our freedom does not override the obligations that come along with living in relationship with others. It is an art more than a science, but we can find ways for our sprawling spiritual liberty to be shaped by the wisdom and the goodness of our Jewish community.

We do this by learning about what our tradition teaches, what its texts really say, about justice and truth and morality. We do it by allowing ourselves to be swept up and embraced and yes, changed, by the marvelous traditions and the penetrating wisdom of Jewish life. By continuing to work toward strengthening relationships and connection with other human souls, by standing alongside them and helping lift them up with our presence and our love and by realizing

² *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, Chapter 6.

how it feels to have ourselves moved and improved by being a part of something this large.

And in that way we can cultivate the spiritual heart that Rabbi Akiva felt beating within him, the soft and pliable spirit that allows the goodness and the promise of Judaism to change us. That is the imperative of this month of Elul and of the entire Jewish year: to see and make real the vision of our selves as better than we are – loving, kind, spiritual beings, privileged to be a part of, and changed by, this beautiful Jewish community of faith.

May this be God's will. *Amen.*