

Yom Kippur Sermon – 5778

Holy Friends:

G'mar chatimah tova: May all of us, all of our families and friends, and all the world be completely sealed in the Book of Life for a good and sweet new year.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke of the deep need in our community for reconciliation. Naming the hurts of this past year – speaking of them honestly to each other as we did earlier this month – is an important part of the healing process. But Yom Kippur is not only about healing the wounds of the past year, it is about *teshuvah*, turning, so that we can make the year to come into a year of gladness and peace, a year of singing and rejoicing. Tonight/Today, I want to suggest how we move forward from this past year of hate, how we fix the brokenness of our hearts, how we come closer together as a community and as individuals to link our lives to the Most High. Tonight/Today, I want to hope and dream with you about the ways in which our journey together in this new year can become a journey of love.

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Now if you grew up like I did, going to temple only on the High Holidays, you had a pretty simple vision of Yom Kippur. For me growing up, Yom Kippur was all about putting on a suit and tie (not the most pleasant thing in the September heat of Los Angeles), wearing a mournful look on my face, and sitting through what seemed to be endless prayers in a language that I didn't understand. I understood that I was supposed to be sad, that I was supposed to repent of my shortcomings, but it really didn't mean that much to me.

But one year when I was a teenager, something happened that changed my perception of the High Holidays forever. It was Yom Kippur afternoon and we were about to say *Yitzkor*, the service where we remember all of our loved ones who have passed from this plane of existence. I went up to an elderly couple whom I knew and who were as beloved in that community as our Founders are here. I asked them, “May I sit with you during *Yitzkor*?” Now, I need to tell you that the two of them were survivors; they had both been imprisoned in Auschwitz and – thank G’d – both had survived. They said “yes.”

As we stood for *Yitzkor*, I watched them out of the corner of my eyes. They had been through so much, so much pain, so much grief. Their tears flowed freely. But at the same time, they shone with joy. There was a glowing light shining from their souls that illuminated their bodies in ways that are – literally – indescribable. And that moment was the moment – though it took me decades to realize it – when I understood that deep pain can give birth to deep joy. I understood – in a moment – the transformative power of these High Holidays. I don’t know what they were thinking or feeling; all I knew is that they were in a place far beyond the walls of our synagogue, a place where the vision of the prophet Isaiah had come true, a place where the lion was lying down with the lamb and none were afraid. Isaiah 11:6.

Yom Kippur is a day of both deep pain and deep joy. We come face to face with the truth about ourselves, about the ways in which we have missed the mark. But what I learned from that couple, Stanley and Marji Beckey, whose memories are for a blessing, was the way in which – despite the deepest pain in the world – they could look forward to the year ahead in joy. They could inhabit the past with all of its pain but also see the future: a world where the lion will lie down with the lamb and none shall be afraid. They could see the world with the eyes of their souls, the eyes of love and kindness, and know, in their heart of hearts, that a better world was coming.

The prophet Amos teaches us that: “In the days to come, there will be a hunger in the land but the hunger will not be for bread. Nor will the thirst be for water. But the hunger and the thirst will be for the words of G’d.” Amos 8:11. In retrospect, it seems to me, that was the world that the Beckeys were seeing on that Yom Kippur so long ago.

This past year has shown us, my holy friends, that there is a great hunger in our souls, a hunger that dwarfs the hunger that we are feeling in our stomachs today. There is a hunger for love when we have had to survive on a diet of hate. There is a thirst for joy when we have had to drink the waters of bitterness and division. That hunger and that thirst is not only here in Davis, which would be bad enough, but I am afraid that it has spread throughout our entire nation.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once taught that people who are hungry for bread hate one another. People who are hungry for something more than bread and circuses – he didn’t say precisely what, but Amos tells us clearly that he meant “the word of G’d” – love each other.

There is an interesting coincidence, if you want to call it that, between Reb Shlomo’s teaching and the prophecy of Amos. In Hebrew, the word for bread is *lechem*, and it is spelled lamed – chet – mem. The Hebrew word for dream – the days to come that Amos prophesizes about – is *chalom* – the root of which is spelled using the exact same letters, just re-arranged. There is an additional letter, however, in the word *chalom*, a vav. For those of you who know Hebrew, you will know that there are two obvious things about the letter vav. First, that it is pretty much a single straight up and down line. Second, that it is a prefix that means “and.”

How do we each find our inner vav’s that will allow us to make this transformation from hungering for *lechem* to hungering for *chalom*? As I said earlier, the Hebrew letter vav is a vertical straight line. The

mystical tradition teaches us that the vav is a direct connection between each of us and the Source of All Blessings. The first element to making our dream of a world of love come true is listening for that Divine connection. And there is no better day to establish that connection than Yom Kippur, when the gates of heaven are thrown wide open and the path of forgiveness, Isaiah tells us in the Haftorah we read tomorrow/just read, is as wide as Interstate 80.

The second element to making this transformation is to recognize that the prefix “vav” means “and.” We are not able to make this journey alone. We need to take this journey together – all of us – the folks whom we adore and those whom we don’t. We took the first step during our CBH community meeting on September 6. We need to continue that journey in this new year.

There is a third element, moreover, that is hidden in the letter vav. Many of you will remember that we commissioned a new Torah a few years ago for Bet Haverim’s fiftieth anniversary. Jen Taylor Friedman, our *soferet*, our scribe, wrote our new Torah and many of us participated in that effort by writing a letter or two. Jen taught that our writing that Torah together was a holy experience, for she said, Torah cannot survive only in the hearts of one or two people. Instead, it only survives when it is shared among the entire community. The letter vav, which starts each and every column in our new Torah, signifies that shared commitment on behalf of our entire community to live into the dream of Isaiah. In that way, we are one, our lives bound together in Torah.

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In this year to come, the *tikkun* – the healing or the fixing – that we need to make is the healing of love. The Beckeys’ example tells us that – no matter what has happened to us in our lives – there is a path forward. That path is the re-arranging of the letters of our lives so that we are able to turn from hate to love.

The prophetic tradition teaches us the same lesson. Amos teaches us that we need to be hungry for the word of G'd, which I take to mean – using the words of another prophet, Micah: “to do justice, to love kindness and mercy, and to walk humbly with G'd.” Reb Shlomo taught us to take the hunger for that which we cannot even name and turn it into love. And finally, the transformation of bread into a dream tells us that when we – like the vav – reach for a connection to the Divine, we must at the same time extend our hands to our sisters and brothers. At that moment, we can actually *become* the dream of Isaiah, for then the wolf can truly lie down with the lamb and none shall be afraid. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once said: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

The challenge of this new year, my holy friends, is to give voice to our dreams and then, each and every day, take one step – just one step – towards making them come true. As Theodore Hertzl, the visionary who proclaimed the need for Israel fifty years before she came into being said, “*Im tirtzu, ayn zo agadah*” – “If you will it, it is no dream.”

In this year to come, may we remember Hertzl's words and make our dreams – of a world without hate and violence, a world filled with joy and gladness, with peace and harmony – come to pass.

And may this truly be G'd's will.

כן יהי רצו