

RH Day

In contemporary American society, we are looking for, and seeking community - the kind of value-based community that feeds our entire being, our physical, social, spiritual and emotional needs. Value-based communities teach us moral aspects of living, connect us to something bigger than ourselves, and provide places for us to grow and mature, regardless of where we are on our spiritual journey. Unlike some other religions, Judaism is based on the concept of minyan and we hope value-based minyanim. A minyan, a quorum of 10 Jewish adults, is required for certain prayers to be said. Many of our mitzvot/commandments are structured for us to take care of those who need our help, fully aware that when we help others we help ourselves. We are commanded as a community to look after the needs of all human beings. There is a story about the 18th century Chassidic rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter who was discussing *kashrut* with his followers. He remarked to them that among the birds **we are** forbidden to eat is the stork, whose Hebrew name is חסידה. He quoted the Bible which stated that all these birds, including the stork, were detestable. The root of the word stork in Hebrew, חסידה is *chesid* or loving-kindness in English. In the Talmud, the stork was given the name חסידה because it brought food to the nests of its friends. But if the bird is so helpful and kind, why was it detestable? Rabbi Alter answered, “Because it feeds its friends only and not any outsiders.”

Columbia Jewish Congregation has worked hard to make sure that there is a place for anyone that wants to call us his/her religious community. And yet even with all of that, we are quite aware that it is very difficult to create one community and much easier to create a community of communities. After all, we naturally tend to hang out with those who do similar things to what we do.

Those with little kids know all the other families that attend tot holidays. Those who are retired know all the other people who have daytime flexibility. Those who like to bike know the others who ride on Sunday morning. And those who like to study know those who take adult education classes. You get the idea. We are all naturally drawn to different aspects of our one community. The lucky ones are those who not only benefit from what they like, but also from what others like, those who see the divine's reflection in the other's eyes. At our monthly staff meetings we are constantly looking for other ways to strengthen and enhance our whole community. This past winter Jerry Kiewe, our educational director, suggested that we try having a congregational theme. The board liked the idea and this year the staff picked the theme of *atz chaim*/a tree of life. In the future, you will be asked to pick the yearly theme. The idea being that even if we are not all experiencing this theme the same way, we are all talking about, thinking about, implementing the same mitzvot in different arenas-giving us something to talk about with congregants we do not yet know, new ways of thinking of this ancient idea and hopefully planting seeds for future years.

After all, the idea of *atz chaim*, is a very rich and fruitful metaphor, as Robin Rosenfeld, our congregation's administrator has illustrated for us many times. Who knew how much she liked metaphors and their many different permeations? In the coming year, we are going to look at the roots of the phrase/*atz chaim* in the Bible. Comparing the *atz chaim* found in the Garden of Eden that we are forbidden to eat from with the *atz chaim* found in the book of proverbs that we are commanded to grasp onto. We are going to talk about the tree of our community with its roots firmly buried deep in the ground by our founders, our current dedicated lay leaders who ground us in the trunk, the different expressions of Judaism as found in all the branches, the many different shapes, and colors that the leaf comes in, the sweet fruit/the product of all our hard labor and, of course, the seeds we plant for future generations.

We are going to explore the tree that lives within us regardless of how old we are, our roots that created us, the trunk that grounds us, the branches that explore the outside world, the fruit we create and the seeds we plant. We will share what we do when the wind gusts are so strong that our branches break off or the trunk that is so needy that the branches' growth is stunted. We will study how to graft new branches onto our tree, allowing new explorations to enhance the whole.

And then, at other times, we will focus on what the tree really is—a metaphor for the ability to live forever as suggested in the creation story, or the wisdom we all seek as described in *Proverbs 13* or the healing tongue as declared in *Proverbs 15*. At other times, it is the word *chaiim*/life that we will look at: what gives our life life, where are we going, what are we taking with us and what are we leaving behind. The biblical world was not the only world that had fun with this metaphor. We will examine what it means when the rabbis take a biblical verse out of context, place it in our service, and then give it new meaning as they did with the verse from proverb 13 עץ־חַיִּים הֵיא לַמַּחְזִיקִים causing the Torah to be a tree of life to all of us who grasp on to it.

How do we grasp on without being desperate? Which part are we holding onto—the branches, the trunk, the fruit or the seeds? We will think about Rav Nachman ben Yitzchak's words in the Talmud 7a where he compares the words of Torah to a tree. For as a small piece of wood kindles the large log, a small group of scholars teaches the next generation. Somewhere in the year we might look at how other traditions in Judaism understand this verse. For example, the Sephardic community does not sing *atz chaiim hi* when they return the Torah to the ark. During the winter, we will plan for how we take care of our tree - what water, land, and tender loving care does it need to grow so that it can continue to furnish us with fruit, paper, furniture, and, of course, oxygen. We will learn about Honi, the circle maker, and talk about how we can follow in his footsteps.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan reminded us that we live in at least two civilizations. And our secular world also loves the metaphor of a tree. As Rabbi Marc Stober described, “After all forests are places where magic occur. They are laden with mysteries. Think of all the wonderful stories that take place in the woods. Think of the breath taking majesty of walking into Yosemite or Muir woods in California, and standing next to redwoods that remind us of how tiny and insignificant we are. The youngest trees express their ages in decades, others, like the great oak trees, in centuries. The ages of others, like the redwoods and sequoias, are measured in millennia. ...Trees are a poignant combination of permanence and fragility. So many have existed far beyond our lifetime. Yet we can destroy them in a heartbeat.” Which kind of tree is Judaism? Do we take the time to live in the forest or visit for rejuvenation? We are going to think of the mitzvah *chiddur mitzvah*, where we are commanded to beautify all commandments through the arts and artistic expression. We will listen to the many different musical settings *atz chaiim* has been set to, write our own *midrashim*, poetry and prayers of what these verses mean to us, and maybe even put the theme to dance if our newly formed Israeli dancers are up to it.

There are so many different ways that this metaphor, *atz chaiim*/a tree of life can feed us in the coming year. Our imagination is our only limit. For you see, it is not really about this year’s metaphor but rather about our community/our *kehillah*. How do we grow and connect, develop and experiment with our limits and our new discoveries? How will we be stronger in the coming year –individually and communally? The fun part of this exploration is that we cannot know ahead of time the answers to all these questions. We can only know for sure that the exploration will transform those who are engaged in the discussion. For it is in the process of exploration that we discover the spiritual path we are on and where that path will lead us. After all, isn’t that the magic of beginnings?

True, there are those beginnings that have very clear goals, like school, where a degree at the end would be really nice; work, where a promotion or raise would be greatly appreciated. But there are those other beginnings that aren't about the goal at all, but rather about the way – our spiritual life, our religious journey, our connection with each other and Gd. Every Rosh Hashanah we begin again on this journey, not knowing where it will take us or how we will get there. But when we are lucky and pay close enough attention, we realize that it is the journey we are on that is the goal. As Alvin I. Fine described in the poem, Birth is a beginning. For the sake of time, I will not read the poem but only an excerpt:

Birth is a beginning
and death a destination.
And life is a journey:
From childhood to maturity
And youth to age;
From innocence to awareness
And ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
And then perhaps to wisdom....
From offense to forgiveness,
From loneliness to love,...
....Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
A sacred pilgrimage.

Where this theme or any future themes will take us, what programs, communities, or initiatives they will spawn, I do not know. How they will enhance or beautify our lives is beyond my comprehension. I do know, though, that I am very excited to find out –not to find out alone, but rather to find out with you. For it is in the presence of our whole community that each of our contributions are greater because we are joined as one.

עץ־חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים בָּהּ it is a tree of life to all who hold on to it.

I encourage you to climb our tree, hold on to it, sit in its shade, eat of its fruit, water and prune it, study and examine it, learn what it means to us as a community and what it means to you in your family or as an individual. For our community really is only as strong as those who participate in it. We all make up our community. We all determine what we do and how we do it. We all create the spiritual space and the sacred connections. CJC is our tree of life if only we choose to hold on to it. When you are ready to hold on, please rise as we open the ark.