

## Erev Rosh Hashanah

L'shanah Tovah/Happy New Year. Have you ever noticed how many good books there are to read? In fact, there has been no other time in Jewish history when so many Jewish books have been published and read, as there are currently. This past spring Cantor Morrison recommended I read *Relational Judaism* by Ron Wolfson, and I am so glad that she did. There are many aspects of this book that I will be sharing with you during this High Holy Day period. One interesting piece is the first three of nine *bayns* listed in the book.

*Bayn* is a clever Hebrew-English pun, because in Hebrew *bayn* means between— while in English *bayn* refers to being the bane of my existence. Each one of these *bayns* refers to a different sphere of influence in each of our lives. The first three are *bayn/between* me and myself, *bayn/between* me and my family and finally, *bayn/between* me and my friends.

These three are the building blocks - the foundation for how most of us construct our worlds, and at times for me, they truly are the bane of my existence. When we are young children, before consciousness and cerebral memory is solidified, we know the people we see; if in healthy situations, we trust those we live with; we remember which actions get which reactions. In fact, research now suggests that these foundational relationships are so important in the first year of life that what is learned then is lived out for the rest of our lives.

In many ways, this time of year centers on these basic building blocks. We are asked to go back to the basics, to reevaluate these relationships, to check their pulses and take their temperatures, to give them the attention they deserve, so they can be as strong as they need to be in order for us to live as healthy of a life as we can.

Ultimately, we are asked to set goals that allow us to fulfill the mitzvah of *tikkun atzmi* -- perfecting one's own soul. We are asked these questions: Am I the best I could be? Am I the best partner? Parent? Sibling? Child? Friend? Person?

Another book I read recently is *Risking Connection in Faith Communities*; it describes belief as foundational to healthy human relationships. It proposes six beliefs that one holds onto in order to enter into a healthy relationship; these are as follows: belief that what you see is believable and understandable; belief that others can help; belief that people can heal, change and grow; belief that work is valuable and valued; belief that love and goodness exist in the world and are as powerful as cruelty and evil; and finally, belief that respectful, compassionate relationships can make a difference.

However, underlying all of these is one foundational belief: "To connect effectively with others, you must first connect with your inner self" or *tikkun atzmi* --fixing yourself. In *Religion for Atheists*, Alain De Bolton wrote that the positive aspects of religion are to achieve self-knowledge, to remember forgiveness and love, and to stay sensitive to the pain suffered by our ever troubled species, and finally, to achieve self-knowledge. Do I know myself and do I really appreciate who I know?

As I get older, I am constantly amazed at how a person can live in one's own body and know so little about oneself. Do I meditate/pray/sit quietly and listen? Have I paid attention to the symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress; and have I gotten the help I need? Have I changed my diet, exercised regularly and gotten my yearly checkups? The Rabbis believed that our body was the temple that housed the most sacred gift we were given, the soul. In order to take care of our soul, we need to take care of our temple, our body. Do we take care of ourselves?

Let's consider my relationship with my family. Human nature dictates we let down our guard with those with whom we are most familiar; we remove our mouth guards, so to speak, when we are most tired; we make the most excuses for our actions to those whom we assume should understand us. Our children grow up so fast; what will they remember? Will they remember our playing games with us or only our going to work? Our partner knows us better than anyone; will s/he feel appreciated or taken advantage of? Our parents only have a limited time on earth; will they know we love them? Our siblings are engrossed in their own lives; will they know we want our bridges mended? I say family matters more than anything; Do I walk my talk?

Next let's reflect on our relationship with our friends. The Rabbis knew we needed social ties outside our intimate circles.

In their minds there was no greater friend than a chevruta study partner; after all, a *chevruta* partner was not only someone with whom you gather knowledge, but also the person with whom you explore how that knowledge could change your life. Do you have friends with whom you can share the most intimate questions, dilemmas, puzzles of existence? Have you nurtured these relationships or let time pass? Is there unfinished business with them that needs resolving or is there anger still lingering that needs confronting?

Boy, do I ask a lot of questions. Rabbi Manuel Gold tells the story of a grandson taking a walk down a road with his grandfather. The grandson looks up and asks, "Why is the sunshine so yellow?" The grandfather pauses, thinks and then responds, "What a good question; I really don't know." They walk a little farther. The grandson asks his grandfather,

“Why is the sky so blue?” His grandfather pauses before responding. “What a great question; I do not know the answer.” They walked a little farther, and the grandson looks up and asks, “Why is the grass green?” The grandfather looks perplexed and says, “I don’t know the answer to that good question.” The boy, now afraid that he has embarrassed his grandfather, apologizes and says, “Grandpa, I am sorry that I am asking such hard questions.” The grandfather looks surprised, smiles and says, “Don’t be silly. That is quite all right. If you do not ask, you will never learn.” What questions do you need to ask, contemplate, and turn upside down today? Not because you will get an answer, but because the meditation on these questions will transform how you understand yourself.

We all say that taking care of ourselves, family and friends are our bottom line, but how often do we dig deep enough to nurture that bottom line? Now today, tomorrow and during this coming couple of weeks is the time to think this through and make some changes. As the Baal Shem Tov said, “If you are the same after you pray as you were before, for what reason or purpose do you pray.” How often are you given four hours per/day for at least three days to sit and, if nothing else, feel and think? Why not use this time well? Get to know yourself again. After all, who else can you dialogue with and not disturb those around you?

For some of us, the changes will be major; for others, fine adjustments. Either way, we are taught in our secular world to keep track of our things, our finances and our investments. Judaism demands we keep track of our relationships with ourselves, our family and our friends because if these are not on solid footing, nothing else will be either.

As a teacher, I was taught that I should never teach something, anything, I was not willing to do myself. How are my three *bayns*? Have I taken my journey as a person, as a

partner, as a mother, as a sister, as a daughter, as a friend seriously? Where are the cracks in my foundation that need attention?

While reflecting on my last year, I remember fondly the wonderful celebration of my 13 years as your Rabbi. After the event last spring, one of you asked me what I had learned about myself because of this celebration. At the time, I still had not begun to absorb all that had happened, never mind what it meant to me. Sometimes I can be really slow to react. Sorry about that. As I have thought about May 5<sup>Th</sup> since then, I must admit though I have been initially disappointed in myself. You see only clichés keep coming to mind -- no new original sound bites. No explanation pours out; Just clichés. Short pithy expressions that have been said so many times before that we all know them; we rarely think about what they really mean. For me, the clichés are these: “Time flies.” “Where have all the years gone?” Or “Why does time go so slowly as a child and so quickly as an adult?” “Where did those 13 years go?”

At the Bat Mitzvah party, people said such kind and thoughtful things, laughed a lot, ate good food and enjoyed being part of this large multi-generational community. Thank you for all the thoughts and feelings shared publically and privately. They are safely stored in a memory box, which I will always cherish. When I review the last thirteen years, there are many things I hope I have consciously tried to teach you and there are things I taught you without knowing it. One of the things I don't remember ever teaching here, but I know I have always believed, is that ritual art is a substantial portion of Jewish art. Although there are traditional forms of Jewish art, much of it is used, every day, Shabbat, or holiday. Truly, one of the many affronts the Nazis attempted was to place our art in a museum. Jewish art never belonged behind a glass; it is meant to have grape juice stains on it, notes written in the margins, rips in the paper from being read so many times, and bent with the weight of a finger. Jewish art is a living and breathing

part of our lives. How did you know I believed that since I never stated these ideas? The two surprises you bestowed upon me were my beautiful tallit and the amazing composition of *Elohai Neshama*.

The tallit first. You picked symbols for my tallit that you understood to be the things that described who I am in our world: family, community, Israel, Judaism, shofar, and Torah. Each member of the board, Cantor Morrison and Ilyse, added the color and texture to fill in the artist's images. And then on the *atarah*, the collar, is a verse from *pesuke d'zimra*, "*al shloshah devarim ha olam omed*," "on three things the world stands." What an amazing piece of art, labor of love and gift of respect. Now you might ask -- since I love this tallit so much, why am I not wearing it during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Here's the answer: the color of Elul and Tishri is white. So you will have to come to services in Oct., Nov., Dec., Jan., Feb., March, April, May, June, July, even August next year to see it. I can't wait to show you!!!

And then there was the indescribable composition that Dr. Anna Rubin composed for *Elohai Neshama*, the prayer we say every single day. The first line of this prayer translates as, "My Gd, the soul you placed in me is pure." After my Bat Mitzvah, I had the opportunity to discuss this composition with Dr. Rubin, and she shared with me how she understood this prayer to reflect a personal, I-Thou relationship with Gd -- one that was mutual. As a musician, she focused on the sound of the words, the internal music to the prayer. The repetitious "ah" sound that can be heard far away is a breath sound, while the "I" sound is more intimate. After all, the word *neshama* means both breath and soul. As you will hear on Yom Kippur morning (I can't wait!), the composition climbs up and down repeatedly until it finally climaxes on the words *nifach-tah bee*, which means you have breathed this soul into me, or literally, you inflated me.

You, Gd, not only created the machine and the source of energy, but you turned the switch on. And then you gave me free will.

Long after all the gifts were bestowed, the thank you notes written, and the memories fixed, I was left to think who I was to myself in the last thirteen years? Although I got some answers, there were some unanswered questions that I reviewed. For example, when I first arrived here at CJC, I searched long and hard for a *chevruta*/study partner for myself. Some years I was more successful than others. In some ways a study partner is an inadequate translation for *chevruta* partner, because a *chevruta* partner not only learns facts and ideas with us but they also help us transform ourselves into better people because of what we have learned. Finding the right *chevruta* partner can be one of the most difficult things a person can do; maintaining and cherishing that relationship can be one of the most rewarding.

For a variety of reasons/excuses during the last 5 years, I have not had a *chevruta*/study partner, and

I missed studying a text in detail with a colleague. So at my last professional convention in March, when a colleague suggested we study *Mekilta*, a Midrash on Exodus together, I leapt at the idea, but I stumbled forward to implement it. We decided to study every other week. And then I found it harder and harder to justify taking the time from everything else that pressed on me. Sometimes when we met over the phone, I learned so much; other times, I cancelled at the last minute; and still other time, I just could not focus on the material at hand. I stumbled forward. But that's what a new mitzvah is, isn't it? It isn't perfect or even right the first time it is performed, but it is a conscious attempt to do something new.

Buber adapted a tale of Rabbi Chaim of Zans. It goes like this: “A group of *chasidim* found their *Rebbe* one day crying. They tried desperately to console him asking, why are you crying?” He responded, “When I was a young man, I tried to change the world, but I discovered the world is a very difficult place to change. When I turned 30, I tried to change my corner of the world, my community and my students. But my community and classes could not be made perfect. When I was 40, I tried to change my family. But I discovered that families could not be perfected. When I reached maturity, I set out to perfect me. Now I know, I am beyond my powers.” The students became frightened. If the *Rebbe* could not perfect himself, who could? They turned to console their *Rebbe*: “You are so holy, Rebbe, a just man. No one is perfect except Gd.” “No you do not understand,” said the *Rebbe* “I am weeping because Gd granted me a great blessing. Gd gave me the strength to try.” Gd gives each of us the strength to try.

What am I asking of you?

I am asking you to try, to ask impossible questions, to search for unanswerable answers, to stumble forward. You might leap perfectly into the exact place you always were meant to be, or you might stumble forward, taking a couple of side trips or even a step backwards first. The authors of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are asking you to take your life seriously enough to think about it. Time spent in *shul* only mindlessly saying nice prayers is time wasted. The nice prayers that are sung beautifully by Cantor Morrison, the choir and by you are meant to spur us all deeper into ourselves. Maybe it’s the words, maybe it’s the music, and maybe it is just the time to think. Whatever it is, use this time well, for it too will be over before you know it.

There is a Hasidic story that tells about Rabbi Zusiya who lay crying on his deathbed. When his followers witnessed his outpouring, they asked him, “Why are you so sad? You have lived a life filled with doing mitzvot and deeds of loving kindness. Don’t you know that you will

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receive a grand welcome when you enter the next world?” Rabbi Zusiya replied: I am afraid because when I enter the next world I know GOD is not going to ask me, “Why weren’t you more like Moses?” or “Why weren’t you more like King David?” I’m afraid that GOD will ask: “Zusiya, why weren’t you more like Zusiya?”

How can I be a better Sonya tomorrow than I was today? The mitzvah, *tikkun atzmi*, fixing oneself, is the mitzvah I have the most control over. After all, if I can’t improve myself, who can? I can try and improve you; but really if I don’t improve me, what have I accomplished. In a moment we will turn to pp. 1202 for the Aleynu, the prayer that begins with “*Aleynu*/it is up to us.” In the coming year *Aleynu*/it is up to us to make the first three *bayns* between myself, my family, my friends, the bain/center of my consciousness.

May we truly give the necessary tender loving care to ourselves and those we love for many years to come. And let us all say, “amen.”