

Erev Rosh Hashanah

First Sermonette

As we all know Rosh Hashanah is the New Year, the beginning of a new year, a time to start again. Like all beginnings, there are also some endings implicit in this celebration. Some of those endings are joyous; I don't know about you but I really am glad that certain aspects of my life are now over! And others are very sad. Regardless, Rosh Hashanah is a time to really understand what we have done and what has been done to us with the expressed goal of trying to figure out where to go in the future, a topic I will talk about in more depth tomorrow. For many years, I focused on the present and the future-what do we need to do today to get to where we are going tomorrow. But this year, for whatever reason that I will let the majority of therapists in the congregation figure out, I am more preoccupied in the past as lessons for how far we have come than how much more we have to do. Although Ilyse will tell you in no uncertain terms, in many ways I am a glass ½ empty personality; this year I feel very blessed to be alive in 2015 with all its many scary and confusing challenges. For as I look back at my life, it truly amazes me how many advances there have been. First technologically speaking, my first TV as a child was black and white with, if we were lucky, three stations. As most of you know, there were no computers, no play stations, no Wiis, no intendos, no video games, no cell phones, never mind smart ones; for that matter there were neither cds nor mp3s. We talked on the phone that was attached to a cord attached to the wall, pacing back and forth, hoping that we would not disconnect our call by pulling the phone off the wall. My first typewriter was manual with white-out splashes on it to correct all the mistakes I definitely made. And above all there really

was a time in my life when I hand wrote letters to other people and they took the time to write me back.

But the changes in our world are not only technological; I remember in first grade when my school district allowed girls to wear pants to school for the first time. Before that it was only dresses and skirts. It was in my lifetime that Title IX was passed, mandating that school districts financially support girls' sports as well as boys'. It was in my lifetime that Ceongress recognized that violence against women and children in one's home was still violence and illegal. It was in my lifetime that the government recognized that rape of a wife was just that- rape and a crime.

I remember being brought to marches as a child during the civil rights demonstrations of the 60s. It still never occurred to many of us we would live to see the first African American president, the first African American attorney general, the first African American Supreme Court judge, African American actors and actresses who have earned and been awarded Tonys, Emmys and Oscars, sports legends of every sport honored for their skill rather than their race. When I was a child it was illegal in some states, including Maryland, for Caucasian Americans to marry African Americans. I remember as a child taking a trip down south and stopping in gas stations with legal signs outside saying, "Bathrooms for Negroes are in the back."

I remember the first appearance of the gay cancer that was killing my friends. I remember the death of Rock Hudson, where it was announced he died of pneumonia instead of admitting he had AIDS. I remember when contracting HIV meant dying immediately of AIDS. When I was a child those women who loved women or those men who loved men lived with their friends because they couldn't find a good husband or wife to marry. They were pitied and feared, not celebrated and respected.

In my life time, there was no debate about whether or not to give a child a vaccine because people died or were seriously injured by measles, rubella fever, polio, meningitis, and hepatitis A and B, to name a few. When I was born people assumed you lived and died with the organs you were born with. The idea that a person who had died could give life to another person was unheard of.

In my life time, James Rouse imagined a community where people of different races, incomes, religions, not only lived and worked together, but also worshiped, played, and learned from each other.

There is so much good that has happened in my lifetime. And there is so much more to do. As we begin this High Holy Day period, searching for all the things yet to be done, thank Gd my parents' generations left mine something to accomplish, let us remember to acknowledge the gifts we have inherited as well as the challenges to be overcome.

The Barachu that we will recite in a minute on pp. 62 reminds us that we have the opportunity to bless others and the world. We have the ability to celebrate and acknowledge the good in our lives. Let us live in a world where the glass is filled to the rim with both the blessings and the challenges acknowledged and embraced as part of all we can become.

Please rise

Second Sermonette

Part of the goal of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is to evaluate who and what we are; to determine our strengths and challenges; to reorient ourselves into the coming year. This applies to us individually as we will discuss more on Yom Kippur, as well as communally as I will like to discuss a little tonight. In order to understand how to reorient ourselves, we first have to understand who we are, both in the big picture as well as in the details. How to do that without sounding like an infomercial for CJC is difficult but necessary. Recently a colleague of mine was describing some horrible labor practices that this colleague's synagogue was engaged in. As this rabbi talked, it occurred to me that the synagogue was very good at telling others how to live a spiritual life but did not apply those same standards to its own community. They were so busy talking about the world out there, they forgot to take care of business here at home. How can we here at CJC tell others, either individual members or the greater community, how to behave if we have not examined our own congregation?

Rosh Hashanah is a time to get together to celebrate the ability to begin. But how do we begin as a community without telling our story. Of course me telling the story about a time I wasn't present for, always presents certain problems. Which version will I tell, will I get the facts and not the intent, what about the missing pieces-do I just fill them in or do I leave them blank? Sound familiar? And yet I have learned from our ancient tradition that I have a responsibility to tell the story even if I get some of it wrong, forget something crucial, misinterpret the intent, because by not telling the story I do greater harm; I allow us to become the center of the story or worse the only part of the story instead of the chain in a much larger chain.

I love listening to stories of how the Jewish community and CJC began. For to me, as a proud recipient of this young community, the early stories ground our present reality in the general framework of Columbia as a development town and the Progressive American Jewish journey for meaning, purpose and sacred connections. The way I understand it, (I'm sure I will be corrected as soon as the service is over) CJC was born into a Jewish community that was very young, small and unsure of its destiny. As people struggled to give Jewish meaning to their lives, they differentiated and separated into autonomous Communities, each with its own story to tell. One of the aspects of Howard County's Jewish community that I really appreciate is that every one of our synagogues is really different with very different gifts to offer.

Originally CJC was going to be a lay-led congregation without professional help allowing its members to learn, experiment and fulfill the needs of their own community while keeping the cost of membership down. Not as easy as it sounds. And yet that desire to hold Judaism in one's own hands was what allowed CJC to eventually find its way into the Reconstructionist movement. To this day, our community is really run by you, its members. Many of our best ideas, innovative experiences, spiritual moments blossomed into being because of the amazing amount of time, resources and expertise donated by so many of you. Although common wisdom is that most of the work is done by 10% of the people, when one looks at the number of people who make not only Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur work but also every Shabbat, all the other holidays, adult education, cultural arts, travel groups, CJCS, youth groups, tikkun olam, tzeddakah fund....the list goes on. I promise you the number is so much higher than a meager 10%. For in many ways, the truth is that the glass is half full. But if you should choose to fill it to the brim in the coming year, I promise you no one would complain. Imagine what we could do if every one really took seriously the responsibility to give and receive from our community.

Although there have been many different staff members over the years at CJC, one of the reasons I came to CJC was because of the reputation CJC had as a community who understood that its staff were human beings growing and developing over time in relationship to the community. Over the years I have witnessed the lay leaders of CJC maximize staff members' strengths and support our challenges, allowing staff to change positions, develop new job descriptions and continue to stay dedicated to CJC/S. It is so exciting to be part of a community whose rabbi emeritus still teaches, whose doors are always open to new ideas like Kesher-a wonderful initiative brought to us by Rabbi Kramer, where most of the professional staff has been dedicated to CJC in one way or the other for at least 15 years if not many more. And yet there is so much more we could do if our financial resources matched the needs of the community.

Often when one thinks of a synagogue, one thinks of prayer services. CJC was created as a place where people could experiment with different spiritual means of expressing our Jewish identity and relationship with Gd. Some of these experiments were more successful than others. I am still looking for a recording of The Electric Prunes doing Kol Nidre. Any service that can birth three congregations in one evening was at the very least powerful if not conducive to community building. Suffice it to say there were those who either liked it or liked the idea of experimenting who stayed and created CJC and those who really did not. They left and formed Temple Isaiah and Beth Shalom. Our b'yachad and chavurah services celebrate that tradition in our community. That is the place where we can challenge our boundaries, experiment with different forms of expression and allow our soul to speak in the many different ways it has opened to it. "Chavurah" literally means friends/society. Our chavurah is the oldest and longest running continuous service CJC has, with the possible exception of the High Holy Day services.

This lay-led service has had many different forms over the years, all the time honoring the many different gifts our lay leaders have and allowing them to cut their teeth in a friendly environment. “B’yachad” literally means together and once a month our lay leaders and clergy co-lead a service with them allowing a place for praying in nature, meditation services, lunch and learns, and instrumentals. The second day of Rosh Hashanah, begins at 9:30am at OMI with each of us honoring our individual spiritual journeys with the option of art, storytelling, meditation or traditional pesuki d’zimra as a means of entering into sacred space. We come together in one place/one minyan at the call to worship, the Barachu. I am always looking for new lay leaders who are willing to help me continue to challenge and strengthen our understanding of opening ourselves up to the sacred in our midst.

Rabbi Siegel was brought to CJC for many reasons, one of which was because of his commitment to engaging the Jewish community in the concerns of the contemporary times. His desire to integrate a terribly divided world made him the perfect fit for a community created in a segregated Maryland committed to racial diversity. Throughout the years, CJC has continued this tradition of engaging with the issues of the contemporary world, whether it is through the curriculum at CJCS, the mitzvah projects of our teens, the activities of our youth groups, or the active and diverse tikkun olam/social action committee. We do so much, but in case you haven’t noticed, there are a lot of problems out there. We could do so much more with your help.

CJC has always been a place dedicated to Jewish learning regardless of how old one was. We begin with our Friday night tot Shabbat. CJCS/the Sunday school is a vibrant, exciting, engaging creative place where our children are educated and celebrated. The CJCS Thursday night class is filled with laughter, challenging questions and exciting opportunities to question

and engage in Jewish life. Our adult education brochure is filled with many different exciting ways to continue our Jewish learning. The mitzvah of Jewish learning has been implemented, developed and incorporated into almost all aspects of Jewish life. And now with the initiative of aging with grace, we are exploring new and exciting ways of enhancing our Jewish connection through intergenerational programming. For there is so much for us to learn and teach each other.

For the congregants who remained and eventually created CJC, music has been one of the central forms of spiritual connection with Gd and each other. Whether it be the various choirs that have sung over the years, the wonderful instrumentals that have allowed our souls to reach new depths, or our klezmer bands (and now a guitar and drumming experience), music has been one of the magnets that has brought our community together. All of it led by our creative, kind, and caring Cantor Morrison who has continually given her heart and soul to creating our sacred community.

In our CJC story it is written, “We form life-long friendships, share joys and come to each other’s aid and consolation in time of trouble or loss. We prize the intimacy afforded by our size, but seek to strengthen our foundation and nourish a living Judaism with new members, more children, and fresh voices.” We are a community that reaches out in support in times of sadness and celebrates with joy in times of gladness. We understand the commandment of “Gemilut Chasidim”, acts of loving kindness. And there is always so much more we could do.

Equally important to that has been CJC’s commitment from the beginning to be open to all members of our community regardless of their ability to pay. CJC has always been a place where all are welcome to participate to their full capacity regardless of their financial ability. The gift of this mitzvah is a community filled with dedicated and loving members. The challenge is the ability to continue to pay our bills. One of the most exciting initiatives that we

started last year is an initiative to reevaluate our dues structure. Throughout the fall there will be different parlor meetings throughout the congregation. All are open to all members. Please attend one and give the committee your feedback. It is your chance to walk your talk and create a method of sustaining our community while living out our mitzvot, our values as we say colloquially, “walking our talk.”

But more than anything else, CJC continues to be a living, breathing, growing, thriving, exciting, spiritual home for so many of us. May it continue to be for many more years to come.

