

Drosh one

Erev Tov. L'shanah Tovah. Last year we tried something new. We picked a theme that we attempted to incorporate into all aspects of our community. The theme was atz chaim; the tree of life. Like many new initiatives, we learned as much about having a theme as we did about atz chaim. We are hoping to apply the lessons we learned last year to this year's exploration of our new theme. This year, CJC's co-presidents, Steve Kramer and Fred Thomsen, chose our theme, kehillah kedosha, a sacred community. One of the differences between these two themes was the source for the phrases. Atz Chaim is an ancient phrase, found first in the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible, and manipulated by Jews throughout our history, giving us a rich tradition from which to learn. Kehillah kedosha are ancient words put together in our contemporary world by talented song writers. As I was preparing for this sermon, I actually found two different songs entitled kehillah kedosha, one by Rick Riecht and the other written by another contemporary singer/song writer, Dan Nichols.

Like many forms of art, Rick's definition of a sacred community is abstract. He wrote in the first stanza of kehillah kedosha; "Time passes by, we live our lives, when we love, when we believe, we all belong, we all become, one. As one we'll rise, as one we'll dream together, as one we'll heal, as one we'll be forever kehillah kedosha." This first stanza describes a sacred community that serves as a container for our lives, filled with loving, dreaming, healing, believing and belonging. When we live our lives together he suggests we become one harkening back, of course, to the Shema where we describe Gd as one. Many different rabbis have written that as Gd is one, we who were made in Gd's image are truly one as well. We may look, act and feel differently but, in reality, we are all one in our pursuit of the same one elusive

Creator. For being different is not the same as being separate. Our differences unite us in our pursuit of a sacred/meaningful life.

In the second stanza Rick adds the idea that “everybody has a moment, and everything has its place, L’dor vador, we’re bound together, we change our worlds with each step we take, As one we’ll rise, As one we’ll dream together, As one we’ll heal, As one we’ll be forever.” He continues in this stanza by connecting our kehillah kedosha to all Jews, L’dor vador, from one generation to the next throughout all time and connecting all sacred communities to our one world through the combination of teshuvah/repentance and the act of tikkun olam/fixing the world - again emphasizing our unity rather than our individualism.

As I stated earlier, Rick Riecht is not the only contemporary Jewish singer/song writer to have a song entitled Kehillah Kedosha. There is another one performed by Dan Nichols. In the first stanza of his song he writes, “Each one of us must play a part. Each one of us must heed the call. Each one of us must seek the truth. Each one of us is a part of it all. Each one of us must remember the pain. Each one of us must find the joy - each one of us.” In Dan Nichols song, he emphasizes that every one of us has a role in this sacred community. He repeats each one of us over and over again. A sacred community is only the sum total of its individual members. When any one of us seeks truth, we are more truthful; when any member of CJC finds joy, we as a community are more joyful. A Kehillah Kedosha becomes a community influenced and created by each and every one of its members regardless of how old they are, how long they have been members or how involved they are. Embedded in the second stanza Dan sings, “Each one of us must do the work.” There really is no sacred community if we are not willing to do the work of making our community sacred. It is truly the diametric opposite of a flash mob. It does not spontaneously just happen; rather it takes intention, effort, and time to create a kehillah kedosha.

Every summer, CJC's board has a board retreat, an opportunity for board members and staff to step back from the daily business of running a synagogue and look at the big picture, evaluate the previous year and set goals. This year at the retreat I gave a drosh on what *kehillah kedosha* might mean and then asked the different board members to share in just a few sentences what they thought. I was very impressed by the diversity, depth and thoughtfulness I read. Although all are worthy of being shared, for the sake of time, I have just picked out a few that I would like to share with you tonight. Maybe at another time we can look at all of them and add all of your definitions of a *kehillah kedosha* as well. For it is in the collage of our answers that the *kavannah/intention* of our sacred community will arise.

Dan Shernicoff, one of our new members on the board wrote "A sacred community is a group that cares for all its members, welcomes the stranger as a member, and strives to make the world a better place." When I read his definition, I was struck with the connection of each of us to each other as resonated in Rick Riecht's song and the building on that connection to the world as Dan Nichols shared with us. What does it mean to be part of something bigger than myself? How do I feel connected when we live in a world that strives daily to separate, categorize, and segregate us? What does *oneness* mean to us today? The other quote in this context that struck me was written by John Evans when he wrote that sacred community was "space and opportunity to: engage spiritual texts; to engage difficult texts; to wrestle with the relevance of the past to the present." The aspect of being part of a holy community that John lifted up for us was how we place ourselves as Jews in the time continuum of the Jewish community. How do we wrestle or engage with our inherited history to make a new present, *L'dor vador*?

In a moment we are going to recite the Barachu on pp. 62. The Barachu is traditionally named the call to worship because it calls us from our individual petitions requesting us to join in

with the minyan, our communal prayer. In this very short, responsive prayer, we declare our willingness to be part of tonight's minyan, tonight's kehillah kedosha, tonight's sacred community.

Although the metaphor of kehillah kedosha is contemporary, the individual words are not. In my next two drosches tonight, I will look at the words Kehillah and Kedosha separately to see what happens when we take them apart and then ultimately unite them again.

The barchu can be found on pp. 62. If you are able, please rise.

Drosh two

Although the metaphor Kehillah kedosha is contemporary, the individual words and concepts they represent are rather ancient. In order to fully understand what they might mean, one needs to know a little about Hebrew grammar. All Hebrew words have a root: that root, however, can be manipulated in many different ways. Although the different manipulations might mean different things, usually, not always, but usually they are related in some ways to one another through the root meaning. So the common example is *lilmod* which means to learn. The root is l.m.d. But if you place it in another form, *lilamed*, it means to teach.

The word Kedosh or kedosha, the feminine form of the same word acts exactly the same way. The root of kedosha is k.d.sh, meaning to separate, set apart. The tabernacle in the Bible was often called kodesh as a noun meaning the tabernacle or the inner holy of holies. In this case, it was an area set apart, kept distinct from all forms of uncleanness and impurities managed by the priesthood who were trained to keep it distinct and holy.

In the prayer, the chatzi Kaddish that we are about to do, the root of the word, kedosha appears two times - the first time translated as holy and the second as holiness. Both cases refer to Gd as the example par excellence of holiness.

If you look below the line on pp. 99, you see that Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan defined holiness as “the quality or value that things or persons have when they help people to become fully human.” (Read twice) Rabbi Kaplan is suggesting that when we help another person live up to his/her full potential, we are following in Gd’s footsteps, and creating kodesh, holiness. Rick Riecht and Dan Nichols, the contemporary song writers I mentioned earlier, each wrote different songs about kehillah kedosha. Rick Riecht connected us to Gd by referring to Gd’s oneness and implying our connection to Gd as one community. Dan Nichols took that idea a

step further by connecting us to Jewish communities throughout time and space. Rabbi Kaplan breaks down that connection to the individual level, suggesting that our community is only holy when we as individuals within it act in a holy manner, by helping another person. Instead of focusing on the biblical idea of setting a place apart, Rabbi Kaplan is focusing on a relationship between two people. How do we set apart our relationships, focusing on them, caring for them, and being responsible to one another? In the process of creating sacred relationships our community is filled with holiness.

At this summer's board retreat a couple of the members focused on the idea of holiness. Riley Sherwin, our teen representative on the board wrote, "A sacred community is a place where I feel loved and accepted. I have a support system I can rely on and I can be part of that system for others." Riley's definition personalized the theory behind Rabbi Kaplan's by reminding us of the power a sacred community has to provide a safe, loving, and supportive community for all our members. What would we have to do for all our members, regardless of how involved or uninvolved they are, to feel that support?

As part of our retreat, we had a CJC member, David Sann, who is not a current board member facilitate the meeting. David defined a sacred community as "a group of connected people committed to worship of Gd and justice in all its forms." David's definition of holiness reminded us that through our connection to each other we are connected to something bigger than ourselves, something more abstract, something some of us call Gd.

The chatzi kaddish can be found on pp. 100.

### Drosh 3

In the last drosh I began an exploration of what holiness might mean to us. In this last one, I would like to look at the word *kehillah*, often translated as community. The root of this word means assembly, congregation or community. *Kehillah* in this form appears in the Bible only twice: (In other forms like *kahal*, it appears many times.) - ~~The~~the first time in Dt. 33:4 and the second in Nechemia 5:7. Let me begin with the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is told he is to die soon in chapter 31 of Deuteronomy. He dies in chapter 34. Here in chapter 33, he is trying to both pass the baton on to Joshua, connect the Israelites to the 12 tribes of Jacob, and encourage them to follow the commandments which will allow them to stay connected to Gd. In verse 4 of Dt. 33, it is written:

תּוֹרַה צְוֵה־לְנוּ מֹשֶׁה מִוְרְשָׁה קְהֵלֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

When Moses commanded us with the Torah/the teaching, as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.

In this verse, Moses commands the people with the Torah/teaching which is the heritage of the *kehillah* of Jacob. The *Kehillah* becomes united in time to Jacob and in theology to Gd through the Torah.

The use of *kehillah* in Nechemia is very different. In this chapter, Nechemia is challenging the Jewish authorities who have been taking advantage of their community. He recites their economic and physical oppression, challenging the powers to act differently, in a more ethical manner. In this context, the *kehillah* is the community of protestors following Nechemia's lead who, in effect, spoke truth to power. In the first case, the *kehillah* was being

connected through time to something timeless - Gd; in the second case, they were connected by a common cause, the desire to live a just and fair life.

At the board retreat, another new member of the board, Nancy Cohen, defined a sacred community as “being part of a community that has similar beliefs. Take care of each other, challenge each other, and teach each other. Being able to question without fear.” I have always been intrigued, engaged, committed, and completely baffled by how the progressive community, on one hand, wants to be united by a similar belief system and, on the other hand, is completely open to people who believe differently. In effect, the system of belief that we all are committed to is respect, engagement and mutual learning from those who believe differently than we do - or at least that is what we emphasize. I contend we share even more common beliefs than that even if it is difficult to articulate exactly what they are. Maybe during the year we can see if some of those similar beliefs can be clarified while creating a safe place for those who feel differently.

Darrell Greenlee, the president of CJCS, defined a sacred community as “an idea of reaching out such that all are welcome to participate in some capacity.” I cannot emphasize enough how much I appreciate all that you offer to our community as you offer it. CJC would not exist as it does without all your contributions of time and resources. Thank you! Darrell’s definition reminded me of a short Chasidic story. The poor members of the community in this story spent the week days sitting in shul reciting psalms. As a result of their contribution to the community, they were paid enough on which to survive. Over time a wealthy businessman began to envy the pious connection these beggars had with Gd. He, too, wanted to spend the day reciting psalms getting closer to Gd. So one random workday he went into the shul and began reciting psalms. After a while the rabbi entered the sanctuary and pulled the wealthy



businessman aside and asked him, “What are you doing here?” He answered, shocked as if it were obvious, “Why I am reciting psalms of course.” The rabbi responded, “Don’t you understand we all have a role to play in this sacred community, and yours is to go out there and make a lot of money so these poor people can sit here and recite psalms?” We all have a role to play in creating CJC’s sacred community. For some of us, it is through the *tikkun olam* committee, for others creating our minyan on a regular basis, while others serve on different committees or sing in the choir. For others, it is by contributing more than the sustainability amount so others who have less financial resources can belong to our community. Some study in our Sunday school, teen classes or participate in adult education. Some of you share your talents with photography, facilitating, cooking, and graphic art to name a few. You are all so accomplished in your own right. And we are only the richer for your ability to create and support our sacred community, both financially as that wealthy businessman did, as well as through the gift of your time; for we truly would not exist without each of you.

What is a *kehillah kedosha*? Columbia Jewish Congregation is our *kehillah kedosha*, our community situated uniquely in this time and place, firmly rooted in our history, engaging actively in our present, determined to transform our future by our belief in our ability to create a sacred community in a very mundane world.

In a little while we will shake the *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot. When we do so we will shake it in all directions, up, down, front, back, right, left and close to us *keilu*, as if to enter deep inside us to remind us that Gd truly is everywhere. May our *kehillah kedosha* reach in all directions as well, up, down, front, back, right, left and deep inside us reminding us that we are Gd’s sacred hands here on earth; for as it is written in the Aleynu which begins on pp. 1202, it is up to us to praise Gd. It is up to us to create our sacred community. May each of us here today

and *B'ezrat Hashem*, with Gd's help for the rest of the year, enhance this amazing sacred community we are privileged to have inherited. If you are able please rise.