

2013 Rosh Hashanah

L'shanah Tovah. It is great to see all of you today. Thank you for choosing to help create our sacred space; it would not be the same without you!

Last night I introduced you to the book *Relational Judaism* by Dr. Ron Wolfson. Embedded in it are two questions Dr. Wolfson argues are the core questions that every single Jew should be asking: "What keeps me up at night?" and "What gets me up in the morning?" These two questions, he believes, define our central concerns and our greatest motivators. Now I would be lying if I said there was only one thing that kept me up at night; but one of the reoccurring themes that keeps me up has to do with the Jewish community and the place of the Jewish community in our highly individualistic American secular society.

And what is it that gets me up in the morning or, at best, gets me into my office? The answer is, "What can I do today to strengthen our Jewish community?" I recognize that the role of the community in a world of individuals is precarious, and the role of Jews in a Xian society is challenging. It may not be as challenging as it was in the past due to discrimination, but it continues to be very challenging because belonging and prioritizing the Jewish community in our already busy lives is like trying to swim upstream. It takes a lot of commitment, desire, strength and energy.

As some of you know, my sister is a social worker who works at identifying preschoolers in crisis and getting them the resources they need to be successful later in life. Recently when she and I were talking, she said, "Maybe we know too much." Maybe she is right, we know how important it is to exercise, use our imagination, dance, do art projects, read books, have family time, travel to different places, volunteer to help others, give tzeddakah, eat healthy food and the list goes on.... Oh and my favorite, to get a good night's sleep! And we

still have the same 24 hours/day in which to do it all. The difference between today and the past is that now we know what we aren't doing and how these omissions will hurt us in the future.

So budgeting time, multi-tasking and prioritizing all become the name of the game. We are constantly trying to determine which activity is more important and how we are going to get the most done. So why place the Jewish community in the over-filled mix?

Because belonging to community is so important in Judaism. It is almost impossible to truly benefit from what Judaism has to offer without some community to support you. Last night I described the first three of Dr. Wolfson's 9 levels of relationships to which every Jew has access. The three that I discussed were a relationship with ourselves, a relationship with our family and a relationship with our friends.

Today I would like to discuss two more: *bayn adam l'kehillah*, a relationship between me and my community, and *bayn adam l'yahadut*, a relationship between me and Jewish living and learning;

I want to start with *bayn adam l'kehillah*/between me and my community. Since I was born, I have belonged to one Jewish community or another. Although how my parents and family participated was different than how I choose to belong and participate today, not joining/not attending/not being part of the community was not an option to my parents. When I was a young adult and moved to a new place, the synagogue was one of those places to which I automatically turned. How specifically I chose to be active in the synagogue has ebbed and flowed throughout the years, but being a member and attending regularly has never been absent from my life.

For me, Jewish community is familiar, comfortable, challenging, interesting and fun. Yet I know for many American Jews, being a member of the Jewish community is difficult. It is written in the book, *Risking Connection in Faith Communities*, “Our Society is so oriented toward individualism that the need for community awareness, outreach, and support is often unmet.” Alain DE Bolton wrote in *Religion for Atheist*, “Religion understands that belonging to a community is both desirable and difficult.”

The Hebrew word for holy is *Kadosh*. The opposite of *Kadosh* is *Hol*, which is often translated as ordinary or mundane. No one can live in *Kadosh* all the time, we all move back and forth between the holy and sacred, between *Kadosh* and *Hol*. Interestingly, *Hol* does not only mean ordinary or mundane; literally *Hol* means sand. Rabbi Ed Feinstein wrote:

Sand has no cohesion, no bonds... (Individualism) It's the world of hol, sand-of atomized individuals; unconnected selves that you come to community to escape.

When you tire of being a consumer, you seek intimacy, friendship, trust. When you weary of transactional relationships, you seek belonging. When Jewish institutions become places of sacred community, you discover kadosh/holiness.

Although no one is arguing that holiness happens only in community, holiness takes on a different hue when it is found in community. As Dr. Ron Wolfson wrote:

When you do (find the right community) you find meaning-an understanding of the significance of life; you find purpose-an imperative to do what you are put on earth to do during your life; you find belonging – a community of people who will be there for you and with you; and you find blessing-a feeling of deep satisfaction and gratitude, a calendar and life cycle of opportunities to celebrate the gifts of life. It is all about relationships.

So why do people join and remain members of Jewish communities? For the vast majority, we join a synagogue because we know someone already there. We stay because our friends are there. How many of you joined CJC because you knew someone here? How many stay because you have friends here? As Rabbi Noah Farkas wrote, connection comes before brit/covenant. This is why Rabbi Richard Address argues that “there is a developing recognition and understanding ...that the primary means for the establishment and continuity of community is not an emphasis on programming, but a renewed dedication to creating sacred relationship within that community.” One might thus argue that this is not such a new idea. After all, how many of you have told me the joke that Mr. Cohen comes to shul to talk with Gd and Mr. Starofsky comes to talk to Mr. Cohen. Thank Gd they both come.

A fair question would be -- what is the difference between the communities that I have described and any social club or group of friends? CJC, like all religious communities, has certain values and ethics at its core. For some of you, those values are what attracted you to our community. For others, these values are what give our community deeper meaning. The irony is many communities have values that are hard to articulate;- they are almost like invisible fences for our dogs, we discover them only when we try to walk across them.

This is why the initiative led by Judy Vogel Glaser and the Marketing Task Force members, and staffed by Robin Rosenfeld and Cantor Jan Morrison, to make visible our essential congregational personality has been so valuable. Over the last two years, with your help in focus groups, one-on-one meetings and various dialogues, CJC now has a value statement that describes what we are to most of us. The whole statement is too long to read here. It is on our new and improved website, and I urge you to read it. In the context of my talk today, I would like to share some of the statement’s keywords that jumped out at me: Jewish, welcoming,

egalitarian, Reconstructionist, Torah values, strive, life-long friendships, laughter and tears, participating, diverse, traditional, interfaith, singles, same-sex couples, Jewish journey, curious, affordable, contributions of money and services, Tree of Life, progressive approach, living Judaism, vibrant, children, pioneers, experimental, broader community, worship, social justice, compassion, spiritual, healthy, sacred argument and fun.

So you see, CJC is not just any community; it is a unique Jewish community, our sacred Jewish space. Last Rosh Hashanah I reminded you that we only read one third of the Torah portion every year. As it says in the Palestinian Talmud, if your community does not have the patience to stay seated for the whole Torah portion each Shabbat, you are allowed to divide each week's portion into three parts, thereby really reading the whole Torah -every three years. Last year we read the first of the thirds; this Simchat Torah we begin again with the second of the thirds. I asked you last year to consider the following: by the time we, as a community, finish reading the new cycle of Torah in three years, what new rituals will you have incorporated into your lives? Wouldn't it be cool if now in two years, for Simchat Torah, we could decorate our walls with all the different rituals, all of us, have taken on in the last three years? Ploni ben Ploni, (a Jewish form of every person) started to light candles every Friday night. Ploni bat Ploni has learned how to read Hebrew. Congregant has started coming to services regularly. Someone else has placed *mezuzot* throughout her house. Another person built a sukkah this year for the first time. Someone else read a wonderful Jewish book. Another congregant has started doing *tikkun olam* projects in the synagogue's name. In two years how will your/my Jewish journey be transformed? So now I am wondering how many of you took me up on my suggestion; how many of you tried out a new ritual. If so, take ten minutes before Yom Kippur and email me what it was and how it felt to do it. And if you did not take on a new ritual, please

take ten minutes and write why you did not and where you got stuck? Consider how we at CJC can help. Wouldn't it be cool if I had too many emails to answer all at once?

In the Talmud, Sotah 21a, there is a story of two brothers Hillel and Shevina. Shevina was a successful business man. Hillel was a respected Torah scholar who barely had a spare coin in his pocket. One day Shevina came to Hillel and said, "Why should I be rich and you be poor? Let us be partners. We can share profits. I will give you money and you will give me the benefit of your learning." Hillel shook his head. He loved his brother and did not want to hurt his feelings, but in his heart he knew that the answer heaven would give to Shevina was –"You cannot buy Torah. You can give me all your wealth, but I cannot share with you a word of Torah. The only way for you to share in the world of Torah is to study it yourself. Come let us begin to study together."

So my message to you is this. Take an adult education class, read a Jewish book, come to services, go to the Jewish Museum, look up a Jewish commentator on the internet, try out a new ritual....The options are numerous. Jewish learning is more accessible than it ever was. The teachers, including but not limited to me and Cantor Jan Morrison are available and desire to teach; the mitzvah is yours to learn.

Rabbi Lawrence Jake Jackofsky tells the story of a mountain village in Europe many centuries ago. In this village was a nobleman who decided to leave a legacy for his people by building a synagogue. None of the people saw the plan until it was finished. When they entered for the first time, they marveled at the beauty and detail. Eventually someone asked, "Where are the lamps?" How can this inspirational synagogue be lit? The nobleman pointed to brackets, which were on every wall of the synagogue. Then he gave each family a lamp to bring each time they came to shul. "Each time you are not here, your place within the synagogue will be dark.

This will be a reminder that whenever you fail to attend, especially when the community needs you, some part of Gd's house will be dark.”

CJC's pioneers built us a magnificent synagogue. Decades of new members joined them and enhanced this community. Each and every one of you holds the lamp that you received when you joined CJC. How often you light it is totally up to you. Whatever you decide, we will appreciate the gift of your presence. Please know that your lamp, each of your lamps, regardless of how old or young you are, how wealthy or strapped you are, or even how much time you have to spare, is needed to light, activate, embellish, expand, discover, and create a piece of this shul. Please bring your lamp to the synagogue in the coming year so that we can continue to build on the solid foundation, develop new branches, discover new fruits, and expand our shade. May our community deepen our individual souls and strengthen our collective whole and may you continue to be the light that brightens our way.