

Erev Tov/Good evening. I know the sermon is usually given at the end of the service and not at the beginning. I promise there will not be another sermon later on. I wanted to share some thoughts about prayer, community and influence at the beginning of our service which, hopefully, will serve as a kavannah to set the mood for the rest of this evening's prayers.

For me, YK is all about learning, learning about oneself, one's community and one's life. Not the kind of lesson we do in school that requires memorization of facts, but rather the kind of learning that transforms one's life. In fact, one of the hardest lessons I have learned during my time here at CJC has been that there are so many different ways a lesson has to be learned before it becomes an integral part of oneself. What do I mean by that? I have learned throughout my lifetime many interesting facts, theories, and ideas. I even have believed, or known, many of them to be true. But before I can truly say I have mastered a thought or idea, I have not only to think about an idea, but also feel it, react to something based on it. It has to become part of my heart and soul, not only my mind.

Let me share an example that I recently remembered. A long time ago a friend of mine was working towards conversion to Judaism. About three months before he finalized his conversion, he told me about his recent visit to the post office during the Xmas season. He was so excited because without even thinking about it, he got angry at the person working at the post office for assuming he was Christian and giving him Christmas stamps. I remember him telling me it was the first time he did not need to think about being Jewish; he just automatically reacted as if he was already Jewish.

That kind of learning does not happen only in one's mind; it happens when one's learning is expanded into one's heart and soul as well. When I was in my Women's Studies classes in

college, I was introduced to, understood and accepted feminist theories that promoted how the universe and everything in it was completely interconnected.

Later on in seminary, I learned the Jewish way of saying a similar thing. Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheynu, Adonai echad. Hear O Israel, Gd is our Gd, Gd is one. Or at least I thought I learned the lesson. To be perfectly honest, it really was not until the last six months of this year that I really learned what it meant to be completely interconnected with people I do not know, who live far away and have no idea that I even exist. For the rabbis, monotheism was the first step to being connect with all of Gd's creations. To understand this leap one has to understand what it mean to say Gd is one. The rabbis were clear it meant there was no other Gd; that Adonai was responsible for all that we loved and all we despised. The rabbis were also clear that as Gd was one, so were all of Gd's creations. As Dr. Judith Plaskow wrote, "Monotheism is the capacity to glimpse the One in and through the changing forms of the many, to see the whole in and through infinite images. 'Hear, O Israel': despite the fractured, scattered and conflicted nature of our experience, there is a unity that embraces and contains our diversity and that connects all things to each other." Or, in other words as Dr. Albert Einstein wrote, "A human being is a part of the whole called by universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

It was not until this pandemic that I can say honestly that I felt that connection at the very depths of my soul, that when I recite the shema I got glimpses of the beauty, and responsibility embedded in that short and powerful prayer. Before COVID-19, I knew this in my mind. But I did not understand it in my heart and soul. A disease that began on the other side of the world has overtaken most of the world. A pandemic that might have started in animals has killed hundreds of thousands of human beings. A society that allows people to lack appropriate health care has spread this virus widely. A society that has ignored the ramifications of inadequate internet connectedness has watched large groups of children fall even further behind. A society that allows working people to live close to the poverty line has had to pay out trillions of dollars for those who live paycheck to paycheck. What happens at the beach, during protests or riots, on college campuses, in schools, at bars or house parties, affects the number of COVID cases in HC when people come home. And the most insidious aspect of this disease is that what one does unknowingly as an asymptomatic carrier can literally kill someone else or conversely save someone's life depending on what we as individuals and/or we as a society choose to do. As Dr. King wrote, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny. I can never be what I ought to be until you are allowed to be what you ought to be."

Ironically this pandemic has done some good as well. NASA satellites have documented significant reductions in air pollution—20-30% in many cases—especially in major cities around the world. Based on those declines, Marshall Burke, an environmental economist at Stanford University, predicted that two months' worth of improved air quality in China alone might save the lives of 4000 children under the age of 5 and 73 000 adults over the age of 70.

A report coauthored by Fraser Shilling, director of the Road Ecology Center at the University of California at Davis, found that highway accidents, including those involving an injury or fatality,

fell by half after California's shelter-in-place order on 19 March. Mother earth is also connected to our behavior and what we choose to do and not to do. Unfortunately, 6 months cannot undo centuries of abuse. Many scientists understand the horrific wild fires and numerous hurricanes to be the ongoing effects of climate change. Hopefully, it will not take another pandemic for us to pay attention to the needs of our planet.

The question becomes what we do with this lesson. How does it affect the way we live our lives? Rav Kook wrote in *Shemona Kevatzim*, "There is one who sings the song of his own self and in himself finds everything. Then there is the one who sings the song of his people and cleaves with a tender love to Israel. And there is one whose spirit is in all worlds, and with all of them does he join in his song. The song of the self, the song of one's people, the song of humanity, the song of this world; they merge within him continually. And this song in its completeness and fullness rises to become the song of holiness."

What is Rav Kook saying? It is our job not only to reach outside ourselves, but through ourselves to our community, through our community to all people, through all people to all the world and, I add, to all Gd's creations. We are to think about as many aspects of our life as possible and determine our role in this web. What if each household picked one aspect to spend the next year looking at-truly analyzing? For example, one household might study where their sneakers come from, the stores that sell them, the factories that make them, the trucks that ship them, the natural resources used to make them, determining the environmental conditions, economic side effects, employment practices, so that you can trace that pair of sneakers back to the earth out of which it came to your feet. Pick a topic that interests you. It does not matter if you prefer to research food, or cars, or education or prisons or Tasers or headlocks, or drug abuse, or racism.

If each household picks one topic to spend this year analyzing from beginning to end, not as an intellectual exercise but as one that transforms our behavior, enhances our whole being, then

imagine how much more we could do to treat our global world with decency and respect. And then imagine this spring as we count the omer and reach out to Shavuot, we share with CJC what we have learned and how that learning has changed who we are.

When we recite the shema, we physically cover our eyes. In the morning, some of us wrap our fingers with our tzitzit and then cover our eyes. By doing this we have no choice but to use all our senses, except maybe taste, to bring the shema into our being. Three times/day we remind ourselves of how interconnected our world truly is. Three times a day we remember we are all contained in the embrace of One. If only we could learn how to share those acts of love, justice and peace with each other.

As we begin this march tonight from the Barachu found on pp. 708 to the Shema, from the establishment of our minyan to the awareness of that minyan's effect on each of its members, let us take a moment in awe at the magnitude of what was given to us and how its inner workings make our lives possible. This prayer is from the Mishkan Tefillah

For the expanding grandeur of Creation,
Worlds known and unknown, galaxies beyond galaxies,
Filling us with awe and challenging our imaginations,
Modim anachnu lach.

For this fragile planet earth, its times and tides,
Its sunsets and seasons,
Modim anachnu lach.

For the joy of human life, its wonders and surprises,
Its hopes and achievements,
Modim anachnu lach.

For human community, our common past and future hope,
Our oneness transcending all separation, our capacity to work
For peace and justice in the midst of hostility and oppression,
Modim anachnu lach.

For high hopes and noble causes, for faith without fanaticism,
For understanding of views not shared,
Modim anachnu lach.

For all who have labored and suffered for a fairer world,
Who have lived so that others might live in dignity and freedom,
Modim anachnu lach.

For human liberties and sacred rites:
For opportunities to change and grow, to affirm and choose,
Modim anachnu lach.

We pray that we may live not by our fears but by our hopes,
Not by our words but by our deeds.
Blessed are You, Eternal One: Your name is Goodness, and You are
Worthy of thanksgiving.

May this coming year inform our actions, progressing us towards the sacred whole we are
privileged to be part of. Please rise in spirit or in body.