Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Eve 5780

29 September 2019 / “A New Year, A New Connection”

In general, it is hard to meet people during an opera performance—not much talking going on; sometimes you may strike up a conversation beforehand or at intermission. The Santa Fe Opera came up with a brilliant idea for connecting people who are interested in this kind of thing. In their parking lot, surrounded by the Sangre de Cristo mountains, you can tailgate before the opera begins; it is right before sunset, in the middle of summer, the weather is perfect and the views are out of this world!

Some people bring very fancy tablecloths, fine china, chandeliers … this, by the way, has been my only experience tailgating in America. And I like it! So, one of those times, when we had decided to join in the fun, we parked, for no particular reason, next to a Toyota Avalon. The Santa Fe Opera offers a boxed-dinner, so while Kris went to get it, I prepared the back of the SUV for dinner. I opened a bottle of bubbly and struck a conversation with the lady in the Avalon.

To make a long story short, in a few minutes, I found out that she and her husband are Jewish, living in Farmington, New Mexico; also, she told me she was from South Africa. At that time, I was serving a congregation in Fort Wayne, Indiana; and the lady who had headed the search committee and has become a dear friend, was from South Africa, too. After a few minutes, her husband and Kris joined us, and we talked through dinner. Ah, and she shared their desserts with us! But wait, there is more, I had taken only one book on this trip. During our conversation, she told me that her ex-husband had married a rabbi … Would you know that the book was written by that rabbi?! Now, wasn't that amazing!

I know what you are thinking: it was besher. Maybe it was, yet there are some lessons we can learn from my experience. First, the Jewish world is a small world! Second, it’s nice to get a free dessert. Third, the Santa Fe Opera created a space and time where these types of interactions and relationships could be born; they found a way to bring people with similar interests, together. Meeting Jews from Farmington, New Mexico, made our
experience at the opera so much more memorable! And I hope it made theirs too.

There is nothing like a personal encounter with another human being. Although, at times, it seems that we could learn everything we need to know about another human being by reading their social media feed. Right? No, there is no substitute for personal, one-on-one interactions.

I am a believer in doing everything with a personal touch. This past year, I had the opportunity to sit down one on one with over 100 of our members, many of whom are here tonight. We sat down at a local coffee house and I listened to your story: the arc of your Jewish journey, how you came to Beth Torah, and what you’d hope for the future of our congregation. I give credit to each of you for not turning our encounters into a laundry list of disappointments. “I can’t hear the rabbi,” “I can’t read the screen,” “It’s too cold or too warm.” No, there was no kvetching in sight; each individual took the time to be present in the moment. Each meeting was rewarding for me, and I thank you for taking me up on the offer —it’s a standing offer, by the way, I’m always available for a good cappuccino!

But before we talk about our interpersonal relationships, and since it is Rosh Hashanah, and we are in a synagogue, let’s think about our relationship with God. Ron Wolfson, who was our scholar-in-residence last year, talks about the “bayn” of our existence, based on how our Sages have used the Hebrew word for that space in-between, bein.

Our Sages teach that bein hash’mashot, the time when the sun and moon almost touch is a propitious time for prayerfully engaging in our sacred connection, bein adam la-makom, our relationship with the Divine. Whether we believe or disbelieve, many of us possess a willingness to wrestle with God. At the season when the old year and the new year touch, bein hashananim, at this precise cosmic moment, Jews all over the world flock to synagogues in search of a connection with the Divine.

On this, the first night of a new year, we come together to seek and grant forgiveness, FROM each other and FROM God. The Jewish idea of forgiveness is called in Hebrew, teshuvah. During the next ten days, we will
read and pray about *teshuvah*, but this Hebrew word eludes definition. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs writes,

“There is no precise English translation of *teshuva* which means both ‘return’: homecoming, physical act - and ‘repentance’: remorse, a change of heart and deed, a spiritual act.” (*The Koren Rosh Hashanah Mahzor*, p. xix).

As you see, *teshuvah* implies movement from somewhere else to THIS sacred space; it is homecoming both in the physical and spiritual sense. For those among us who do not attend services on a regular basis, the High Holy Days can feel like a homecoming; well, they should feel like that. We enter our sanctuary for services, and we should feel as IF we are coming home, to our Jewish home, where we are greeted with open arms by our staff, by fellow congregants, by Jews and non-Jews alike, and by God.

No matter what has kept you away, **this is** our Jewish home. And, if this is your first time here, we pray that it will become your home too. I pray that IN this sacred space, you will find the inspiration and strength to define, redefine, expand, and explore your own *bein adam la-makom*, your kinship with the Divine. But, how should you do that? You may wonder … Let me share a Chassidic story with you:

“It is told about Reb Yissachar Dov of Radoshitz that he once traveled to see his rebbe, in Lublin. Arriving at his rebbe’s study, he said, “Show me one general way that all of us might serve God.” “One way?” his teacher said. “What makes you think there is one way? Are people all the same that a single practice would suit them all?” “Then how am I to teach people to find God?” Rebbe Yissachar Dov asked. His teacher replied, “It is impossible to tell people how they should serve. For one, the way is the way of study; for another, the way is the way of prayer; for another, the way is the way of fasting or feasting; for another, the way is the way of service to one’s neighbor.” “Then what shall I tell those who ask me for guidance in this area?” “Tell them this,” his teacher answered. “Carefully observe the way of **your own** heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do **that bechol levav’cha u’vchol m’odecha**, with all your heart and all your might.”
It is true, no one can tell you how you should shape your relationship with God. Even if our relationship is one of wrestling with the Divine. Our own personal struggle with faith is real and it is human; it is based on our willingness to have a connection with God, through our tradition. The final product is different for each person; it is negotiated between you and God, *bein adam lamakom*. As a congregation, we provide the space, inspirational readings, uplifting music, so that a relationship can happen, but the work of building and nurturing a relationship with God is solely yours. I believe we all need that connection in our lives.

The next level of relationships that Ron Wolfson teaches is between individuals, *bein adam lachaver*. As I listened to you over coffee, dinner, lunch, and in my study, one topic rose to the surface: Relationships. Each person had a story about connecting with Beth Torah through another person, a staff member or a group of people; some still have that connection, others have lost it, but one thing is clear, it was their relationships that kept them connected. Maybe what they say is true, “they came to worship God and stayed for the friends.” Rabbi Edward Feinstein teaches:

“A family, a circle of friends, gathers about the Shabbat or holiday table to share a celebration. A cup of wine is raised. The wine is not sacred. It’s only Manischewitz. What is sacred, holy, are the bonds that gather us together to celebrate life. [...] When you tire of being a consumer, you seek intimacy, friendship, trust. When you weary of transactional relationships, you seek belonging.”

We can all agree, it is our families, friends and fellow congregants that created a deep sense of belonging to Beth Torah. It is all about relationships; one may add, it’s all about good, healthy relationships with God and with other human beings. Relationships are what make or break any organization, and synagogues are no exception. It is that space between each of us, the sacred realm of the in-between that keeps us engaged and feeds our passions.

Just like at home, what makes our worship space unique is not the architecture (and we are proud of our worship space), but the connections
we have with the people in this sanctuary: with our spouses and partners, with our children and grandchildren, with friends and fellow congregants. Ron Wolfson writes:

“[...] there are five ways we create relationships with friends: When you tell your story to each other. When you find commonalities—affinities, life stages, professions, interests. When you share experiences together—worship, sing, study, celebrate, travel. When you care for each other and are there for each other. When you act together—when you volunteer together [...]"

It is possible that some of us have enough friends and do not need Beth Torah to help us find them. I respect that, however, I want you to consider that our relationships with each other are what would make our congregation a *kehilah k’dosha*, a sacred community: without those connections, we would be but a provider of religious services, with no personal investment required on your part.

In our *beit bakenesset*, our house of assembly, we come together to create a sacred *kabal*, a community, where we connect with other fellow Jews and non-Jews who form our temple family. If we all decided not to invest any personal relational time in our synagogue, it will become more and more distant, and one day, it will not feel like your home anymore. We need to be willing to have some meat in the game. Just look at our singers and musicians tonight? Their passion and dedication to our congregation are outstanding. This year nearly all of them are members of our congregation. They are your fellow congregants, your friends, your family members; they are US. They have made a connection through worship music. It is but one of the many ways in which our lives can be intertwined.

Tomorrow, after our morning service, we will create another way. We will bring together, under one roof, all the opportunities to connect to each other in 5780. We call it **ConneC Torah**. The *ulam* will have tables with all the opportunities, and table-leaders to help you learn and engage. We invite you to sit at one of those tables and learn more about ways to connect with your congregation and with each other. In addition, in the triangle, you can learn about the new “Pick a Party” offerings. If you are not joining us for
lunch, please, take a few minutes to visit the tables, you will be glad you did.

Indeed, we do so many things in the relational Judaism department, and we do them well. Yet, we can do better. In the coming year, we will create NEW opportunities for you to tell your story to each other, to find commonalities, and to share experiences of learning, worshipping and volunteering together.

We will tap into the power of small groups, a way of going about building relationships which have been used successfully in other synagogues around the country. The main inspiration comes from community organizing, empowering each group leader to take an active role in connecting the people in their group. It is harder to say “no” to a friend or a fellow congregant than to a mass email, isn’t it? It is about using the power of relationships to transform our congregation.

Listening to your stories over the past three years has convinced me that connections can flourish at a Beth Torah because they have. Yet, in the past, it has happened as a by-product of some other program or activity. Maybe you sat in the ulam waiting for school to let out and you made a connection with another parent. Maybe you attended an adult learning class or a music program, and discover other like-minded members. Or perhaps you have attended Friday night services, and developed a friendship with other “regulars.” It is also possible that you found yourself with other volunteers helping those in need or on a committee, and you became friends. It is all good.

Moving forward, however, we will not HOPE that you make a connection, but we will be intentional about focusing on relationships. The goal of a small group will be to develop connections with other Beth Torah members. We will create, promote and help facilitate small groups as part of the fabric of our congregation.

We often talk about our “Beth Torah family,” which is a lovely analogy. I would like us NOT to be a “dysfunctional family,” but a family with healthy relationships that constantly tries new ways of improving relationships, of making new memories. At both of our homes, here at
your Jewish home and in our respective homes, we need to find a way to build new, deeper, more meaningful connections, so that our homes will be stronger in the year that has just begun.

Tomorrow at lunch, one table will be dedicated to Small Groups. We have many ideas of what we may do, but it is not about me choosing this or that small group. What will bring each group together will emerge in the next month or so. In other words, we need your help. Tell us what small groups YOU would like to join. IF you have an idea about a small group, please, fill in the form at the table or visit our webpage, and click on ConnecTorah—or email me or send us a Facebook message.

Small groups will create relationships. A small group targets affinity and purpose—people who like to do the same thing or have the same interests. For instance, car guys who come to our parking lot once a month to help people needing work on their cars, or social justice teams which will connect with a local organization and help them out. Some groups are built around a shared identity: preschool parents or LGBTQ congregants getting together for coffee or a fun dinner, health care professionals offering free health clinics in underprivileged areas of the Metro, lawyers offering their services to immigrant families. Yet other groups could target specific transition moments in life: members who become single later in life because of a divorce or a death, members who are empty nesters. One of my favorites groups I’ve found: “What’s for Dinner? Reservations.” My vision is that from the moment a person joins Beth Torah as a member, we will do everything in our power to connect her or him to a small group as soon as possible. We are not there yet, but we need to start somewhere!

So, here is your task: Think about what you would like to do, who you want to do it with, and what your goal will be. Think affinity and purpose. Our staff and volunteers will help you shape it and let you know what you will need to have ready to launch. Then, before Thanksgiving we will have a Small Groups launching event, over lunch—another free lunch, yeah!

You may wonder: Will everyone in our congregation be expected to join a small group this year? Of course not!! Also, a small group is NOT a chavurah; you will make a commitment for a small group that may meet
once a month, 6 to 8 times, and you are done—in 5781, you may want to try another small group. It is about trying something different, so that those who wish to make new friends, to find a sense of belonging in our Beth Torah family, will have ways to do so. A congregational leader once put it this way, “We thought Shabbat would be a doorway to relationships. We learned that relationships are a doorway to Shabbat.”

One thing is clear: Our own Jewish journeys will not happen in isolation, we need our members to be a community. We are better together, we can accomplish more together than as isolated individuals. Reb Chaim Halberstam of Zanz used to share this story right before the New Year:

“Once a woman became lost in a dense forest. She wandered this way and that, in the hope of stumbling on a way out, but she only got more lost as the hours went by. Then she chanced upon another person walking in the woods. Hoping that he might know the way out, she said, ‘Can you tell which path leads out of this forest?’ ‘I am sorry, but I cannot,’ the man said. ‘I am quite lost myself.’ ‘You have wandered in one part of the woods,’ the woman said, ‘while I have been lost in another. Together we may not know the way out, but we know quite a few paths that lead nowhere. Let us share what we know of the paths that fail, and then together we may find the one that succeeds.’ [...]

What do we learn from this story? …. Men don’t ask for directions! Seriously, it is a very simple teaching: together we make each other better; together we can set higher goals, finding a way out of the forest and transforming our congregation into an interconnected sacred community.

We often talk about Tikkun Olam, lit. repairing the world, meaning, the work of social justice, which is a worthy goal, because improving the world around us benefits us, directly and indirectly.

But what about repairing our relationships? How much time and effort are we willing to put into the tikkun of our relationships here at our synagogue? During the High Holy Days, we are asked to do teshuvah, which, as we have learned, can also mean homecoming, to our Jewish home, to your Jewish home here at Beth Torah. Teshuvah offers us a way to return
and repair our relationships with God, *bein adam lamakom*, and the relationships with each other, *bein adam lachaver*.

May the year 5780 bring us the blessings of many connections, old and new. I pray that our connections with each other may blossom. May we find our own, unique, relationship with the Divine, and many deeper connections with each other. Together, may we all find a way out of the forest, and come home.