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HOW DO WE RETURN?

Kol Nidre—Our most sacred evening. Our most serious moment of the year. Teshuvah. This moment begins the 24 hour period with which we most fully engage with ourselves, our souls, our very beings and to be sure, examine how we act in and toward our loved ones, friends, colleagues and the very posture we take toward the wider world.

This year, on this Yom Kippur, we are in some sense in the midst of an additional turning point. Teshuvah, after all, means turn as in return. Last year at this time, we were huddled in our homes literally afraid to go out. This year, vaccinated but keeping vigilant and cautious, we are all slowly turning, groping towards and searching for our new reality.

A year ago, as we all sat around our computer screens on this Kol Nidre evening, I described Kol Nidre as the evening of the year where we ask ourselves how we live when “all bets are off,” when all that we had once relied upon could no longer be taken for granted. That is what the COVID pandemic induced. I sought to remind us that this was a question that many of our ancestors had been forced to ask themselves previously. What do you take with you when you are leaving home for the last time? American Express says, “Don’t leave home without it!” When you are leaving home for the last time, when you are leaving the pogroms and antisemitism enveloping you, what did your ancestors carry with them? Last year, I pointed to our Shabbat candlesticks, which Louise’s great-grandparents had carried from Russia across Europe and across an ocean to this New World. When your world is turned upside down, you take that which roots you—and gives you a sense of who you are.

This above all else is what we, at Micah, have sought to do for the last year and a half. Each and every Shabbat, we have sought to seal our Judaism into our communal soul and to root our response to the world-turning events in the solid mooring of our Jewish inheritance. One of you, said to me less than three weeks ago something like this, “I have not missed a Friday evening service in the last eighteen months. Our Shabbat gatherings have sustained me.” I would like to believe that this is true for many of us.

Many of us can ask ourselves if in the last year, we have not marked time from Shabbat to Shabbat like never before in our lives.

How many of us have been a bit like Tevye —clinging to “Tradition” in order to keep our balance?

I ask therefore, what exactly is Tradition?

How do we understand it? How do we live or not live it?

In his masterful work, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, Robert Seltzer writes:

“A tradition, like a personality, is a complex unity: a flow of elements received from previous generations, assimilated, and passed on; adapted to and combined with elements of other cultures; repeatedly filtered, censored, and refashioned; subjected to shifts of emphasis and the working out of new corollaries; preserved for long stretches in a state of apparent changelessness, yet periodically reformed according to new perspectives; always retaining a core of sameness on which it depends for potency, sustenance, and vigor.”

And Jaroslav Pelikan in his much quoted work in these parts writes:

“Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.”

This year, Jaroslav Pelikan especially was our teacher as COVID led us to reconsider the way we embrace Shabbat allowing us to take what some consider to be extraordinary steps with our communal Shabbat services.

Both Seltzer and Pelikan are, I believe, onto something.

Judaism can appear to be unchanging—we can look at old books, ancient scrolls, inherited prayers, familiar melodies and feel like they have been with us forever.

And then —we see periods of what Seltzer calls-the “periodic reforming” initiated by “new perspectives.”

In the great North American diaspora, our inherited “periodic reforming” was the European Enlightenment Judaism that gave rise to the Jewish religious revolution that reshaped our Judaism forever.

The very ways of thinking of Kepler, Newton, Darwin and so many others crept into the synagogue and Jewish school-the shtibel and the cheder. Jewish texts, from the prayerbook to the Torah, including everything between were no longer seen as having come directly from God’s heaven to Earthly bound Jews. There were now understood as fully human.

Jewish scholarship began to ask new questions.

Who wrote these texts?

Why are there different versions of them?

Why are there words missing here? (Genesis 4:8)

Why does a full verse appear to be missing there? (Psalm 145 the “Nun” verse)

Why is the midrashic version of this text different than the mishnaic version of seemingly the same text?

If there are really 613 commandments, why is everyone’s list different?

Jewish study was revolutionized as new questions yielded new understandings.

Archaeology became necessary in order to more fully understand the world of both the Bible and the rabbis.

Hebrew? What about Akkadian and Ugaritic?

Why are their ancient texts both so similar and yet so different?

How can it be that the archaeological evidence does not cohere with the written texts?

Can it really be that in the ancient world there were many different versions of Judaism all practiced simultaneously?

Additionally, the European Enlightenment made us as human beings more aware of who we are and our place in the world, solar system and universe itself.

To peek ahead—as the Enlightenment has unfolded—we have become painfully self-aware.

Our place in the Cosmos is so very small.

What it means to be human seems endlessly complex.

What was once seen as hard and fast, true and certain, we now sometimes see is mere opinion, bias or tradition.

But—I am jumping ahead of myself.

The adventure of analyzing the origins of Jewish tradition led to an understanding of religion as a human endeavor that like everything else evolves through time.

The reformers in Europe and then in America embraced this with gusto. This is the Judaism that the vast, vast majority of us grew up in.

My personal example:

As I am very proud to say, I grew up in a bastion of Conservative Movement Judaism in Chicago whose sanctuary has to this day stained glass windows of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the Statue of Liberty.

Talk about Robert Seltzer's phrase—“**periodically reformed according to new perspectives.**” That alone is single stunning example.

There is more—

We absorbed that the so called rules—which we call mitzvot-- were not revealed by God—but were human in origin and had evolved over time.

We asked:

Which must we keep?

Which can we discard or adapt?

Is Judaism essentially a system of rules?

Some claim that Judaism is a system of rules and to change the rules is to change Judaism so that it is no longer Judaism.

Not so fast say others.

Judaism is more akin to a game with pieces.

I can use the same pieces and play a different game.

The game has an almost infinite number of pieces-

Prayer, Zionism, Torah, Shabbat, Hanukkah, challah, Talmud, Tzedakah, Hebrew, prophets, bar mitzvah, bat mitzvah, social justice, chupah. My list goes on and on.

My teachers range from Rashi to Hoffman with everyone in between—including such luminaries as Pelikan and Taylor—who are not Jewish!

This is the exciting tension that informs who we are at Temple Micah.

I call it the exciting high wire balancing act of historical fidelity vs contemporary meaning.

What are the limits? Can we do anything and call it Jewish?

I think not, but it is an important question that I put aside for now and simply note that it is usually asked in order to prevent a change.

I believe this—Our Judaism has to make sense to us.

And

History is always the judge of what endures from generation to generation.

Judaism is filled with Jewish sects and groups who practiced their Judaism with fervor who history was not kind to.

In other words—there are no Saducees or Essenses today.

From late antiquity, the only Judaism that has come to us is that of the Pharisees.

Our own Reform Judaism is an example of that. In the late 19th and early 20th century, Reform Judaism once effectively eliminated Zionism and Hebrew from our version of the Jewish game. By the middle of the 20th century, we had acknowledged our deep error and struggled to regain their centrality.

For now—let **us** return to our Micah situation and survey the crossroads at which we sit.

Eighteen months ago, COVID forced us to close the Micah sanctuary. I thought of Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

2 There on the poplars
we hung our harps...

4 How can we sing the songs of ADONAI
in a foreign land?

My worries were the same as our Psalmist.

How could we communally sing God's song and embrace Shabbat if we were exiled from our sanctuary and from each other?

How could we at Micah continue to practice a hopeful and inclusive Judaism?

I had never even heard of Zoom.

But, as you all know, we quickly pivoted to the new technology.

Zoom offered us Seltzer's "new perspective." How did we reform?

We leaned toward “tradition” as in Pelikan’s “living faith of the dead,” in order to not be caught with his “traditionalism,” the “dead faith of the living.”

But beyond the technology, this evening, I am even more interested in our liturgy and the thinking, including the theology, that drove it.

In some ways, Micah has never been so alive.

We embraced three principles:

Principle 1 is driven by American pragmatism- The investment will inform the response.

If someone makes the investment to come to Micah or any synagogue for Shabbat services, what we do in the sanctuary has to be downright offensive for a person to get up, leave and go home. The person who is not connecting with what we are doing in our worship will by and large be patient and endure the experience.

When one is simply turning on the computer to come to services, there is minimal investment—and it is so easy to leave. We were aware of that and leaned in to the challenge from Day 1. We sought to partner with each one of you in the moment and called it co-creating.

Principle 2 is driven by the Pharisees

In a post temple Judaism (but even in a Temple Judaism—but let’s not complicate the matter), the Pharisees made the **table** the central ritual element of Jewish life. While we were all in our homes, we made the simple decision to learn from the Pharisees and center our Friday evening, Shabbat worship around the Shabbat table. The Shabbat table blessings thus became the center of our Friday evening and since singing—zmirot—is a feature of any Shabbat table, we added music, prayers for healing and brokenness, recognition of the world we were in and we were thus most of the way there.

Again--seeking to co-create our shared Jewish experience —even as we were all apart.

Principle #3 is driven by looking outward

Prayer is powerful if it is responding to a shared experience—and striving to speak personally to it—if what is happening inside the prayer space speaks to what is happening outside. In COVID, we know that we all needed healing, and that the

angel of death is at everyone's door. The social upheaval that has reigned for the last year and a half and its regular traumas simply needed to underpin our prayer life. If we are not striving to be ruthlessly relevant, why bother?

There was something revelatory about COVID, something revealing about seeing the world from the safety of our homes for those who were so blessed and able. The distorted world revealed incessantly more than we could hope to absorb. Shabbat became a form of communal support as we paid homage to the unfolding upheaval both around us and within us.

In retrospect, even with the pandemic far from over but at the point where we have started with this Holy Day season and will continue to return to a modified form of in-person worship, I am pausing to consider where we go next.

The distance of Pandemic has revealed for me anyhow, an American synagogue Judaism that in a sense had become too tame, that leaned too far toward traditionalism. And I am here being denomination blind—if you will.

Liturgically speaking, our historic literary prayerbook structure had become so well studied and analyzed that it had, in a sense become confining. We had gained an expertise in form but not in creativity. The inherited order of prayer screamed for liberation. Grandpa Goldman was so right in 1951. It took this pandemic for me to understand what he meant.

I understood in a new way what people meant when saying to me—what is best about services are the asides. I have always sought to minimize them so as not to inhibit the flow. (Liz Lerman used to ask me why I cared so much about flow.) We created a Friday evening form of asides—so to speak. We even put into an outline—planned spontaneity. I kid you not.

During this time of teshuvah, in going back, what comes next for our return?

We are committed to creating a high quality multi-access service. We will learn and improve the technical part over time. Be patient.

We are also committed to keeping our theological liturgical muscle well exercised. We are going forward—not backward. We are all committed to forging a Jewish prayer life for the 21st century inter-connected world that will strive to be vibrant, co-creating, relevant--beautiful. Stay with us as we enter the next stage. I believe that the potential for Jewish prayer has never been so great.

The task is great but the reward will be enormous.

I would hope that Pelikan can be our guide. The work from which I quoted earlier about traditionalism is titled *The Vindication of Tradition* and the work is overall a defender of tradition. Pelikan compares a living tradition to a ladder which the wrong type of reformer seeks to kick away once they have reached the vantage point from which they see their particular new truth. They lose their mooring, their connection to inherited wisdom, he says, and what ensues is dogma or chaos.

For us historical fidelity, tradition, is as necessary as the insights of innovation and the energy of creativity. Again Pelikan, “It is ...from tradition that artistic creativity learns to know the liberation that can come only through ...a recognition of boundaries.”

We fully honor our tradition boundaries as we gather on and for Shabbat.

Our table elements are our inheritance of candles, challah and the fruit of the vine.

We honor the memories of those who brought all of this to us.

We will remember all of this as we return to our sanctuary but the return will not be a simple return to the old ways.

We have learned too much.

We have travelled too far.

Our reach extends around the globe and we are strengthened by our extended Shabbat community.

We are returning to a world that has been turned upside down and we know that there is so much to repair. We intend to do our share of the work.

Pelikan ends his work with the words of Goethe:

“What you have as heritage,

Take now as task;

For thus you will make it your own!”

In other words, we seek a prayer life that undergirds, supports and helps us discover who we want to be in the world. It is that simple—or that hard.

Join us as we re-enter

We will sing and laugh and create together.

We will make it our own!

HAVE AN EASY FAST-

MAY YOU BE INSCRIBED FOR A YEAR OF HEALTH AND LOVE.