

Yom Kippur 5768

Temple Shir Tikva Rabbi Greg Litcofsky

“Sacred Relationships and Redemption”¹

We read in the book of Exodus...*And the Children of Israel went into the middle of the sea upon the dry ground* (Exodus 14:22). The rabbis ask; how is this possible? If they went into the sea, then why does it say *upon dry ground*? And if they went *upon dry ground*, then why does it say *into the middle of the sea*? This is to teach us that the sea split only after Israel had stepped into the water and it reached their noses, only then did it become dry land.

Close your eyes for a moment and picture the scene at the RED SEA... Pharaoh and his chariots are getting closer, faster and faster as they make their way over the horizon towards the rear of the Israelite camp. There, the entire Israelite nation 600,000 plus people stand - the sea in front and the approaching army in back. Together as one they enter the raging sea, with a strong faith in God, and an even stronger faith in one another, they choose to take action...first toes, then ankles, then knees, then hands, then elbows until finally the cold rough water reaches their noses...and then the sea splits! As a result of what they did together, as a result of the 600,000 plus people moving as one...the waters split and they move themselves and the world one step closer towards redemption!

¹ I was blessed to have had several friends and colleagues agree to comment on drafts of this sermon. I am grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Blake of Westchester Reform Temple, my friend and mentor, his insight and comments were invaluable to me as I finished the final drafts. Thank you to Rabbi Dara Frimmer of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles without whom I would have been able to move past “the quote.” Thank you as well to Rabbi Stephanie Kolin of Temple Israel Boston...you make the invisible visible!

What a powerful *midrash* the rabbis have given us. The waters split not as a result of one person or as a result of Moses raising his arms or even the breath of God....rather the sea split only once the people of Israel ACTED together as one! This *midrash* teaches us that we can not accomplish the work of redemption alone and that we can not just sit around and hope our prayers are answered. Rather it is our task to build meaningful relationships which in turn creates a strong community, which then leads us to act powerfully!

Rabbi Gold on Rosh Hashanah taught us about how social and physical isolation leads to the erosion of not only one's personal and spiritual health but to the erosion of the community's health as well. Rabbi Gold challenged each and every one of us to raise our own voice and "imagine the chorus that we will create together." Our *Tekiah* campaign of which Rabbi Gold spoke, is based upon the principles of community organizing the cornerstone of which is building meaningful relationship.

In his book *Roots for Radicals*, the social activist Ed Chambers writes that "telling stories opens a window into the passions of the other..." When we tell our stories to one another, when we allow our voices to be heard and when we hear the other person's voice, we reveal our souls to one another. What Ed Chambers wrote about and what Rabbi Gold challenged us all to do is build and maintain meaningful relationships.

Sacred relationships are not built upon superficial conversation or a quick hello as we drop our children off for school or stand in line together at the market. Rather meaningful relationships are a two way street, built upon sharing stories, sharing fears, sharing

passions, and sharing vulnerability. We know that we have built a meaningful relationship "when we connect with another person in a way that transcends ordinary talk."

How was all of Israel able to act with such power and cause the Sea to part...didn't they know about the joke, "if you want three opinions, just ask two Jews?" Maybe it went like this. Chava leapt in because she saw Ya'el marching forward. Solomon saw that Aaron was trembling. He took his hand and they moved together. Lily and Michal were sisters. They didn't know what awaited them in the water. They couldn't see the other shore. They did not know if they would ever see Egypt again. But they knew that for their elderly parents, toward the Sea was the only direction in which to go.

Friends, I believe that the 600,000 moved as one because of their relationships with one another. Faced with such a terrifying situation, we would have done it for each other's sake, too. When is asked why they continues to fight, a soldier does not talk philosophy or politics. They say, "I do it for my buddies. They have my back and I have theirs."

When people stood arm-in-arm in the segregated south, marching against oppression and racism, it might have been their vision of redemption that drew them together...but it was the bonds of community that gave them strength to march forward as one. Martin Buber was right when he said that God's presence is understood only in the context of relationships.

The way in which we here at Shir Tikva will move the world closer towards redemption just as the Israelites did, will be through building and maintaining meaningful relationships. The reason the children of Israel could move together as one is because they knew and felt each other's fears and pain, they knew and understood each other's desires and passions. When we are in sacred relationship with each other our community is stronger...we hear the other and they hear us! At Shir Tikva we can be very proud of the fact that we have already begun the process of building meaningful relationships when we gathered together at house meetings as part of our Tekiah campaign.

Since joining the Shir Tikva community I have been blessed to begin building relationships with so many of you and I look forward to so much more! During my conversations I have been asked thoughtful and challenging questions that have helped me better understand my own story of who I am. I have also been able to get to know many of you in deep and meaningful ways. Our encounters have transcended ordinary chatter! On a few occasions I have been asked what draws me to the work of redemption and in particular community organizing. Each time I share the following story. When I was just about 5 years old my father, whom I am blessed to have here with my Mom and entire family, took me to the picket lines. He and his colleagues of the Philadelphia federation of teachers were on strike. There I saw my father a dedicated and brilliant teacher striking for the right to earn a proper and decent living as a public school teacher! Why do I tell this story?...because its part of who I am... it effects how I view the world and how I understand my role in bringing redemption closer. How many formative stories like this one do we know about our neighbors? How many of our stories do they know about us?

When we are in relationship with other people, real and sacred relationship it is impossible to be invisible...when we tell our story and when we listen to someone else's story we are seen, we are heard...they are seen, they are heard. Real community is formed not by holding hands during the *motzi* or singing songs together...No community is formed when the invisible become visible and when our stories are woven together to form one shared narrative! What are your passions? What are your desires? What's your story? What's your neighbor's story? What's your Torah? When we ask and answer these questions we are able to bring our real and authentic self to the community. Through sharing our stories we become clear on who we are as individuals and as a people. We are prepared to walk into the rough waters...together!

Back to our Midrash...the people of Israel now stood together as one. Each with their own unique story...linked together to form a unified - strong chain. Now, with one common goal in mind they use their God given ability to ACT! As one they made their way into the Sea and moved themselves and the world closer to redemption.

Ever since the birth of my daughter Noa I have done my best to take better care of myself physically...my own health has taken on new meaning with this new relationship in my life. However, I can't just get healthy overnight...I have to take one step at time...I have eat a more healthy diet, then I have to exercise more, then I have to get more sleep, then I have to drink more water...one step at time...and with each success I move myself God willing closer to my ultimate goal of a long healthy life. It's a journey and a process...I wish I could say that I am doing for myself but the reality that it's because of my relationship with Noa and my family that I am moved to action! I'm sure it's the same

with you. You find yourself doing things you never dreamed about doing, because all of a sudden there's a relationship in your life that moves you to action.

Our goal as a people and as a community is redemption, just as it was for the Israelites who stood at the sea! What enabled them to take that first step was their relationships with one another. Just like the Israelites it is our relationships that drive us to take action. The problems and the challenges that we face are no longer abstract and anonymous, they are real, they are ours. The problems and challenges that our neighbors face are no longer just theirs, they are ours! With each successive step that they took they gained the confidence in themselves and the community! They moved themselves together one step at a time and so too must we!

This is the time of the year when we are to take stock of ourselves and of our community. Who are we now and who do we want to be in the year ahead? Our *cheshbon hanefesh*, our accounting of our souls, the difficult work of this Yom Kippur, is meaningless if done in isolation. We at Shir Tikva are standing together at the edge of the sea ready to take get our feet wet...we have only just begun to listen to our neighbors stories and we have only just begun to tell our own. How will we act as a community in the year to come as a result of our relationships? How are we going to work together in order to bring the world closer **to** redemption in the coming year? What Torah are we going to do together in the coming year?

I have spent this summer getting my feet wet here at Shir Tikva. But you have made me want to dive in, head first. There is so much we can accomplish together. And if any you doubt it, then let me be the first to assure you: "Come on in, the water's fine!"

My prayer is that we all work on building meaningful and holy relationships with one another in the year to come. I pray that we each continue to share our stories together and that we discover new things about our selves and one another. My prayer is that our relationships will strengthen our community and will cause us to act powerfully as ONE. I pray that we all together dip our toes into the sea, and then our knees, and then our arms... all the way up to where we draw breath...

Gamar Chatima Tova and have a I wish you a meaningful fast