

“A Palace on Fire”¹

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There is a story in our tradition about a fire² – a palace on fire to be exact. There once was a man who wandered from place to place - One day he noticed a palace off in the distance. As he drew closer and closer he saw that the palace was on fire. He stopped and wondered out loud “Is there no one who owns this palace – is there no one who will be responsible for putting out this fire?” Just then – a voice called out from a window and said “I – I am the owner!”

The wandering man – Abraham – the owner who leans out the window – God - the palace on fire – well that represents the world in which we all live. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief Rabbi of England writes the following about this story: “Judaism begins not in the wonder that the world **is** but in the protest that the world is not as it ought to be.”³ In other words Abraham stops – he notices the fire – and he shouts at the top of his lungs – this is not OK – this fire needs to be extinguished. Rabbi Sacks teaches us that these are the flames of injustice and that as Jews we can not be satisfied with the world as it is and that we must work towards building the world as it ought to be.

As a community rooted in social justice, like Abraham– we stop and we see the flames burning in places like Darfur – and we take action. We stop and see the flames burning in places like post Katrina New Orleans and we take action. We stop and see the flames burning as our brothers and sisters living in Israel suffer the pain of senseless acts of terror – and we take action.

Yes, we at temple Shir Tikva are indeed a community of action – like Abraham we lift up our eyes – notice the flames – and not content to let the palace burn we act. However, in some ways those are the safest fires to help fight – because they are far away from our own homes and our own neighborhoods. Yet, there are fires burning right here in our own community that deserve our attention as well. There are fires burning when we get bullied at schools and are too afraid to speak up – or when our pleas for help fall on deaf ears. There are fires burning when our friends and neighbors have lost their jobs and they sit and suffer in silence - because the shame is too much to bear alone. There are fires burning when we engage in self destructive behaviors to mask the pain our stressful, over programmed and complicated lives. There are fires burning when we lie awake at night wondering how we will care for our aging parents while at the same time caring for our

¹ I owe a special debt of thanks to Rabbi Dara Frimmer, Rabbi Asher Knight, Elana Kogan and Meir Leiken – all of whom helped me think about the messages in this sermon. I am also grateful to Jeannie Appleman for introducing me to the writings of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks – when I read his books and writings it's as if he is speaking directly to me.

² *Midrash Bereshit Rabbi 39:1*

³ Page 57 in *A Letter in the Scroll* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

growing children. There are flames burning when our local food pantries are running out of food because they are unable to keep up with the demand. There are fires burning when we struggle to raise healthy and well adjusted kids in a world that seems to fight us at every turn. There are fires burning all around us right here in our own community and there is too much at stake not to stop – and notice that our palace is on fire.

We must all have the courage like Abraham to see that the palace is on fire – not just hundreds of miles away but right here as well. Friends our palace – our world is on fire and that is not OK! Yes, at times when may we feel powerless to act – we feel we have no control over the world in which we live and that we are alone in our pain. We say to ourselves – this is just the way it is I am powerless to make change.

Abraham teaches us that we can no longer afford to pass by the palaces burning right in our own community – there is too much at stake. We are a people born out of the radicalism of Abraham⁴ - who saw the fire burning and in anger and discontent cried out! While the fires blazing out of control there is hope – there is always hope – and we need look no further than in one another – right here in this room – take a look around – take a look at the faces of the people in your community – in our community – our hope lies in one another. It may be too much for just one person to handle but as one powerful community together we can act to shape the world for the better and put out the flames one blaze at a time – and I know we can do it because our very own community has experience putting out fires – together!

There were flames burning in all of our towns from Wayland to Natick to Framingham to Weston to Sudbury to Ashland – as we witnessed our much needed services being cut as a result of the economy. We heard stories about teacher’s losing their jobs, classroom sizes going up, and health services being cut. We recognized the fire was too big for us to handle alone - so we called upon our friends and neighbors from all over Metrowest to help us extinguish the flames – and we did. On a Sunday afternoon last April over 250 of us came together across race, class and religion – from all over Metrowest and said in one loud voice “there is too much at stake in our own lives and our towns to let this fire continue to burn” – we called upon one another and our elected official to help us with our sacred duty – and they heard us and we heard one another. As a result of our hard work and others across the state - legislation was passed and this year millions of much needed funds will be coming into our towns to help save the very services that were threatened. We listened to one another’s stories and we acted together as one. What we couldn’t think of accomplishing as individuals – we accomplished as one powerful sacred community.⁵

Yes the palace is on fire – yes the flames are burning hot – but there is hope – there is always hope – and that hope lies in our potential to act - not as individuals but as one powerful community - together extinguishing the fires one blaze at a time.

⁴ Page 58-60 in A Letter in the Scroll by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

⁵ This action was planned and implemented under the auspices of MICAHA - Metropolitan Congregations Action for Hope – our local broad based organization. www.michama.org

It was thirty one years ago right here in Wayland, MA that a handful of individual families saw the palace ablaze in their own community. They knew they couldn't extinguish it alone - that they needed one another – so they placed a small simple ad in the Wayland Town Crier inviting people interested in forming a Jewish congregation to come together and to meet. Expecting a small crowd – nearly 70 families came that night. Our community – our Temple Shir Tikva was built by a group of people who no longer wanted to feel powerless and were no longer content with saying “that's just the way things are” – as one powerful community they saw the palace ablaze and together helped shape the world for the better. Thirty one years ago there was no Temple Shir Tikva – there was no established Jewish community and so the founding members of our Temple – many of whom are here with us today – came together – to listen to one another and to share their vision of the world as it should be.

That night they heard each other say “we want to raise our children with a Jewish education in our own town – we don't want to travel to another community to be Jewish – we want our own synagogue to be a place where we can come together in prayer and in Torah – we want to build a synagogue that is not our parents synagogue. And so they did — they listened to one another – they shared with one another – some people meeting for the first time – others who had known each other for a lifetime and they realized that they weren't alone in their mission - what they couldn't accomplish as individuals they could accomplish as a powerful community acting as one! Our Temple Shir Tikva is built upon the radical idea that we can not be satisfied with the world as it and that if we work together we can create the world as it should be.

Rachel and I just became parents for a second time – our son Ami is now just over 4 weeks old and Noa is just about three. I worry – I mean really worry about the world in which they will grow up. Since becoming a parent I have noticed more and more the blazes burning around us – and I have come to realize that I need you, I need my community to help make the world as it ought to be - not so much for me but for them.

The palace is on fire – yes – and we are obliged to stop and take notice and act...but have we? Have we stopped running from carpool to carpool, meeting to meeting to meeting, soccer game to soccer game long enough to take notice? Yes all of us live busy lives and now – this Day of Atonement is as good as any to stop and take notice. Two thousand years ago the great sage Hillel asked three simple questions that I think can help us on our journey.

If I am not for myself who will be? If I am only for myself then who am I? If not now when?⁶

Marshall Ganz⁷, the great social activists and Harvard professor writes that we are all “works in progress” created in God's image. That to be for ourselves is to honor the sources of our worth, our strengths and our limitations. It's to find the courage,

⁶ Pirke Avot 1:14

⁷ Hillel's Questions: A Call for Leadership by Marshall Ganz in Shema Magazine January 2007/Shevat 5767

commitment and hopefulness to face the challenges of our times. He writes the source of strength for all of us is turning inwards and learning who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. This first question is about self discovery – sitting down and thinking about who you are as an individual in this world and understanding and embracing our own unique story. I can think of no better time than now to ask ourselves If am not for myself who will be?

If I am only for myself what am I – this is about community and coming together – to help extinguish the flames burning around us. Marshall Ganz teaches that this is about relationships – deep and meaningful relationship – that we can only truly know ourselves by encountering those around us – and by recognizing the divine in the other. This requires us to speak and to listen – and to build sacred relationships with one another. This requires us to ask one another – face to face - where are the fires burning in your life – this is where we make our private pain public.⁸

If not when? This is action – we search ourselves, we listen to one another, we share our stories and our pain and we build relationships with one another – this is when we act! This is when we say to ourselves and to one another we are tired of feeling powerless – we are tired of the fires burning out of control – and we know that together we can put them out – we have no other choice! This is when we say in one clear voice the world as it is doesn't work for us – and together we will work towards shaping the world as it out to be.

So where does that leave us now on this Yom Kippur? Well, let's begin right here with one another! Now is the time for us to meet face to face– not online or over the phone – but face to face. Now is the time for us to share our stories with one another and build the community we know we can be – now is the time for us to stop and take notice of the fires burning right here in our community – and commit ourselves to putting them out together.

Now is the time for us to get to know one another – and discover our shared stories - to say to one another we no longer need to feel powerless about shaping the world in which we live. If I am only for myself what am I? Take thirty or forty minutes between now and the end of November to sit down with someone you know or if you feel brave someone you don't know... maybe it's some one in your class at religious school, maybe its another parent you always see on Sunday mornings, maybe its someone one you see at the temple but have never said hello to, or maybe it's a friend you have known for a long time but want to get to know better – or maybe it's a member of your own family....Sit down together – ask one another what keeps you up at night, who are the people that influenced you in your life, what are you proud of, who are you in the world,

⁸ Hillel's Questions: A Call for Leadership by Marshall Ganz in Shema Magazine Januray 2007/Shevat 5767

who would you like to be...get together and ask questions of one another listen to one another and tell your story.

Meet one another face to face – but don't just chit chat talk to one another – listen and share – stop to see the divine in the other and let them see the divine in you. I know we are all busy – there is always a carpool to be driven or an errand to be run or an email to answer – or a test to study for – but remember we can't extinguish the flames alone and there is too much at stake not to engage in this sacred work.

In the process of meeting one another face to face we will hear and share our unique stories with one another – and together we will reveal the palaces on fire among us – and once we do – we can leap into action as one sacred Jewish Community and extinguish the flames one at a time. Remember Abraham, the one who began the journey generations ago, – who like us lived in a world full of fires - well he wasn't alone – he had his wife Sarah – his nephew Lot – and his entire household - he had his community – and he had God.

Our world is complicated we are all very busy- and there are times when we may feel that the fires in our lives are too much for one person to put out so we instead of acting we learn to live with them. But we have to remember like Abraham we are not alone. We need one another - to make this journey and engage in the work of shaping the world as it ought to be – we need one another to extinguish flames together. So what are you waiting for – pick up the phone – or send an email – or even a text message and find that half hour or forty five minutes to sit down with your neighbor and get to know them – I think you will be amazed at what you discover.

May God grant us the courage to meet one another face to face, may God grant us the courage to recognize the palaces on fire here in our own community and may God grant us courage to act powerfully as one sacred community in the year ahead,