

### **A SACRED COMMUNITY**

A rabbi-friend of mine refers to his rabbi-friends,  
the people with whom he negotiates life's journey, as "fellow travelers."  
I like the phrase for a lot of reasons.  
First, if you have a "fellow traveler" it probably means that you have something  
of a destination, or at least a direction.  
Which is no small thing these days when simply remaining in motion  
is so often mistaken for having direction.  
At the same time, wherever we may be heading,  
it is good to have trustworthy companions along for the trip.

One nice thing about being a rabbi is that you meet a  
lot of fellow travelers. And they are not necessarily other rabbis.  
They may go with you for a short distance or a long one.  
But together we realize, for some time anyway,  
that we share both understanding and direction.  
I think we are all fellow travelers this morning.  
Today we share the understanding that life is meant to be more than ordinary.  
That it is meant to be more than concrete and material.  
That we are meant to do more than survive—  
though sometimes that is all we can do.  
That we are meant to be more than beautiful or fabulous;  
That life is meant to be, in significant measure, consecrated—if you will, holy.

Today we mark the beginning of a new year.  
We acknowledge that it is something of an arbitrary moment.  
"Hayom harat olam--the anniversary of the world's birth." Okay.  
But three days after Labor Day?  
With Chanukah this year on *Erev* Thanksgiving?  
Really? What were they thinking?  
What they were thinking is that the Torah says on the first day of  
the seventh month we should gather to hear the sound of the *shofar*.  
What they were thinking is that this selfsame day would be a good time for us to  
make mid-course corrections in our lives.  
What they were thinking is that for this day and the next ten,  
we should ask questions like, "What is my direction?"  
"Who am I traveling with?" and, as the sand continues to run out of the glass,  
"Where will I be and what will I have accomplished when it is all gone?"  
They were thinking that these would not be easy questions.  
They were thinking in fact that they would grab us by the lapels--  
if not the throat--and shake us.  
They were thinking we might be moved to pray.  
They were thinking that those prayers might remind us—even convince us—  
that our lives are at stake here.

Not at stake as in “Will I take my next breath or not?”

But at stake as in, “As I look in the mirror and realize that I’m not going to be here forever, can I say, to myself and to whatever Higher Power I answer, that I have not blown it?”

Can I say, “I have done all that I could with what I’ve been given?”

Can I say, “I have done something, somewhere, that has left someone or someplace even a little more blessed for my having been there?”

Have I moved any needle--even infinitesimally—in the right direction?

Can I answer any of these questions in the affirmative--even partially?

If not, or if the partial is not as great as it should be, the question is “How will I answer better next year?”—may we reach it in peace.

They were also thinking,

*Tefilah, Teshuvah u’tzedaka ma’avirin et roa ha-gezera--*

“Prayer, penitence and charity avert the evil decree.”

Which we might better render

*Tefilah*—Prayer, can lead to turning in a new direction—

*teshuvah*, which in turn leads us to do more that is right and just—*tzedaka*.

And these together can save us from *roa ha-gezera*—

a life of insufficient meaning, of existential angst, of too much emptiness.

If we have moved the needle--or even several of them,

*kol hakavod*—all to the good.

But that does not mean we are home free.

The Talmud may say if we save one life it is as if we’ve saved an entire world,

but if it is in our power to save ten, fifty or one hundred

and we’ve saved only one, we can hardly account ourselves as *tzaddikim*.

I’m not trying to lay down a guilt trip here.

(Though I may be doing it anyway.)

But either way, Judaism is not about guilt for guilt’s sake.

Judaism is about guilt for the sake of *teshuvah*

For the sake of getting us to turn the very sluggish battleships that are our lives around.

So, how do we break through all of the inertia?

That question may be tougher than all the preceding ones.

I want to suggest two ways to attack it.

One has to do with time, the other with fellow travelers.

Let’s start with time. Time, you know, the thing we take for granted.

The thing that’s always going too fast.

But--if we can look at it as something that is not only linear,

with one season following another,

with the kids or grandkids getting bigger and stronger and

the rest of us getting older and creakier with every passing moment;

it may not seem to be going quite as fast.

Likewise if we can look at time as something that is not only circular,

where like the earth, we return to the same place each year with another however many million more miles under our belts.

If instead we could look at time, as Einstein and his fellow physicists did/do, with the understanding that time is ever-present, that the past, the present and the future are not only all the same, they are all right now—we might do better.

As I understand it, this is what advanced physics teaches. To be honest, I'm not sure I get all the science--but I'm pretty sure I get the spirituality.

If time is ever present, it means that this moment, and every moment, is an opportunity to encounter the Eternal Now.

And this Eternal Now, which you can call God if you like, is ever here.

It is ever summoning us and

it is ever present with the potential to elevate us.

If you're of my generation you can say "far out."

Whatever our generation, the more we can live with this awareness, the less likely we are to feel that we have squandered our precious time.

We are incredibly fortunate to be here in the Keys, in this place of surpassing natural beauty.

With this beauty before us, if we can quiet what the yoga and meditation teachers call our "monkey minds," it can indeed seem as if time is standing still.

As if past, present and future have collapsed into one--as the scientists tell us it really is.

I know that many of us have experienced moments like that.

And when we do, we're there, in the Eternal Now, with the Eternal One;

with the physicists, poets, mystics and visionaries of every land, race and age.

And at such moments they too become our fellow travelers.

Again, far out.

It probably won't surprise you to hear that there is a *beracha* for such moments.

"*B,A,A,E,M,H oseh ma'aseh breshis.*" Praised is One who Created this all.

If you can't remember that, make up your own:

*B,A,A* and then whatever you want after that.

But say some kind of *beracha*. Even if it's just to yourself.

Because when we acknowledge that the Divine is part of a moment, any moment, that moment becomes holy.

And when it does, we are more aware of our actual, as opposed to our perceived, place in the universe.

That place is one of humility, which in turn leads to a sense of sacred obligation, which in turn leads to much more.

Being present in eternal time, as often as we can, can help us turn those battleships around.

(Btw, we're holding a group meditation session on YK afternoon.

Everyone is invited.)

Are you with me? Good. Because, my fellow travelers, we have a ways yet to go.

In addition to looking at time differently,  
 it is also helpful if we can manage our ego differently.  
 Because the ego distorts both time and purpose.  
 Our rabbis taught that at least from time to time  
 we need to turn the *Ani, I*, the ego--*aleph, nun, yud* into the  
*Ayin*—the Naught/Nothing-- *aleph, yud, nun*.  
 Whatever the alphabetic of it, placing too much emphasis on the ego—  
 the I, the *Ani*—can, among other things, make us overly cynical.  
 Now cynicism has its place.  
 We need a healthy measure of it to get through this world--  
 But it has its downside too.

But first let's admit, we are accomplished cynics.  
 We know the price of everything and the value of...  
 well, much less than we know the price of.  
 Not to say we haven't come by it legitimately.  
 Too many institutions we once trusted have either failed or disappointed us.  
 There's the Big Banks, Big Insurance, Big Food; Big Data, Big Medicine,  
 Big Sports; Big Agriculture, Big Military, Big Media.  
 How many of them have our best interests at heart?  
 Answer any way you like. But don't tell me you're not cynical.

And how do we respond to all this? (mime texting) We text!  
 And email, and tweet and Tumblr and Instagram and like on Facebook,  
 and all the others I can't keep up with.  
 I'm told there are even people who call one another on landline telephones!  
 It makes perfect sense when you think about it.  
 The appeal of social networking, the whole point of it really,  
 is that it enables us to build a community of people we trust--and vice versa.  
 In response to the corruption of the big institutions, we create our own—  
 with ourselves at the center and fellow travelers around us.

So where do these communities take us?  
 Sometimes nowhere special, they may just walk us in place.  
 Sometimes they take us to new places--  
 sometimes to places we shouldn't go.  
 But they can also take us to higher places. It's quite possible.  
 All we need is some direction and again, some fellow travelers.

Where do we find people like that?  
 Well, there is a room full of potential here this morning.  
 And in other rooms in which we spend time as well.  
 And who exactly might they be? It is fairly easy to tell.  
 They are people who might welcome a little more meaning in their lives.  
 If you are one, you will find others.  
 And if you are not yet one but would like to become one  
 we'll learn how in a moment.

But either way, they are not the ones with no direction known.

Which brings us to another issue.

We may need to let go, gently but firmly, with love if necessary, of the people in our lives who are not and are never going to be, in any sense of the term, fellow travelers.

There are business consultants who counsel their clients to let go of 5-10% of their customers every year.

The idea is to replace the ones who are least profitable, most high maintenance, etc. with better customers.

I am not a business consultant and I don't give such advice.

But I am a spiritual consultant and if there are people in our lives who are gossips, who are drains, who are narcissists, who are addicts, who are whatever--we've got the whole list in the *machzor*, do we really need to travel with them?

None of us is perfect but if a relationship is without higher worth, and it cannot be redirected or rebalanced to bring some into it, then why are we maintaining it?

Heaven forbid I'm advocating that anyone throw their aged mother out of the nursing home. We have a pretty serious commandment about that. And it doesn't mean that we shouldn't be compassionate to those who need our love, support and kindness--we must always be that.

But if there are people in our life, to whom we have no such obligation, who are not, and will not ever be, fellow travelers on a sacred journey, however broadly we define it, why do we keep the relationship?

On Rosh Hashanah it is time to ask. By Yom Kippur it is time to decide.

And not to worry. We won't be alone.

If we shed some relationships, we can make new ones.

In my previous community, where we lived for the last 30 years. there is a group of young women who gathered regularly for lunch. Each is an educated, accomplished professional and/or mother. When our daughter passed away, one of them, and I have to say this, inspired by Talia's legacy of dedication and service, decided that instead of just getting together for lunch, they should get together for lunch and *mitzvah*.

Every month each of them puts x number of dollars into a basket earmarked for *tzedaka*. Every month they choose a different recipient. That's it. How simple! How beautiful! How effective!

And while they were helping to heal the world in this way, something else happened.

Other people wanted in. And they were let in. The group grew. Existing friendships were elevated and new ones were created. And what was an ordinary community transformed itself into a sacred community.

Now they use their time, in addition to networking, schmoozing and building social capital,

for *tikkun olam*.

They have become much more than ladies who lunch.

They have become fellow travelers.

And they have blessed many lives, not least of them, their own.

What happened there could of course happen anywhere.

There is no shortage of *mitzvot* or *tikun olam* to do here in the Keys.

We have a reef that is endangered and a bay that is troubled.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are high—no pun intended.

There are elected officials who probably shouldn't be.

There are schools that under perform.

There is a social fabric that needs healing.

We could go on.

If we want to focus our energies a little further afield,

we have a state government that has become a national punch line.

We have a national government about which the less said the better

except that it is not sustainable as it has been going.

Overseas, there are needs in Israel, in Africa, we get the idea.

And in we head in any of these directions we will encounter fellow travelers.

They will be there waiting for us to add our strength to theirs.

We will do more than we have been doing.

We be more than we have been being.

We will move needles.

We will have better answers to the big questions next Rosh Hashanah.

There is also of course a sacred community right here: in this synagogue.

It is a social community, an educational community, a prayer community.

Not coincidentally, those are the three traditional roles of the synagogue:

*Beit Knesset, Beit Midrash, Beit Tefilah.*

This community, like all communities can also grow through *mitzvah*.

Last night the President of the congregation appealed for your participation.

I second that motion.

Service to higher causes, learning and growing in wisdom,

prayer to move us in the right direction--

that is pretty much what it means to live as a Jew.

Traveling though life in this way not only generates great blessing,

it may well be our best response to

the ever present time we have been granted,

and to whatever time we have left.

May we make the most of it in the new year.

*L'shana tovah.*