

Rabbi Richard Agler
Keys Jewish Community Center, Tavernier, FL

September 18, 2018 — 10 Tishrei, 5779

Kol Nidre

Our Values: Holding Onto Them

So, during these holydays we've been speaking about our values. Last week we looked at clarifying them. But we also need to find ways to **hold onto** them in a world that is not always supportive of them. Because again, the values we live by determine the people we become, in hand, heart, mind, and soul.

We are conversant enough with the hand, heart, and mind, but soul is not as concrete. So let's take a look at that for a moment or two.

I've often heard people say, "I'm not religious, I'm not spiritual, I'm just in the world and of the world." I've also heard people say "I am spiritual but not religious," and even, "religious but not spiritual." And I wonder about all of them, where is the **soul** in that?

To me, everyone has a soul and therefore, must be at least somewhat spiritual. Love and friendship are spiritual. And we all have a place in our lives for love and friendship. Music is spiritual, and everyone appreciates good music. Art is spiritual. Pursuing knowledge is spiritual. Finding the motivation to get out of bed in the morning is spiritual. Even rooting for a sports team is spiritual. (It's certainly not rational.)

The twentieth-century philosopher, Pierre Teilhard De Chardin is quoted as saying, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." And if he is right, it must be pretty hard to be "religious but not spiritual" or "spiritual but not religious," to say nothing of neither one.

Religion's purpose is to provide a structure for the spiritual. As a teacher of mine put it, you can no more be spiritual without following a particular religion than you can be verbal without speaking a particular language.

And I appreciate that sentiment, not only as a rabbi, but as a spiritual person. There is lots of spirituality out there that is not necessarily religious, and okay. But where does it lead and how deep does it run? If we intend to hold onto our values along our respective journeys, a structure that facilitates their expression and aids in their growth, development and deepening, would seem to be a must.

BTW and as a bit of an aside, whenever I attend a service, be it at a synagogue, church, mosque, or any other house of worship, the question I ask, and the criterion I use, is did it touch me spiritually? Not socially, not culturally, not even religiously, but spiritually. And I think most

visitors to most houses of worship ask the same question. Most of us are looking for something that touches our soul.

But we don't always experience it, and it may not be our fault. Many religious services contain plenty of religion, plenty of structure, plenty of vehicle; but if that structure does not house and that vehicle does not carry, the spirit within it, it will weaken our connection to our faith and its values, not strengthen it.

Okay, if we were going to make a shortlist of the most fundamental spiritual-religious values, what would be on it? Let's say "love your neighbor as yourself," "care for those who need it most," and "seek the divine at all times" would be in a lot of people's top five. But I wonder if **sacrifice** would make the consensus top ten. It is not high in people's consciousness, especially in these me-centered times. But there is not a single legitimate religious or spiritual tradition that does not place sacrifice at, or near, its very center.

In Judaism, we have accounts of sacrifice all through the Torah, including in the portion we'll read tomorrow morning. Since the destruction of the Temple, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice. And prayer remains central for us. In Christianity, the cross itself is a symbol of sacrifice. And the name Islam means submission, or sacrifice, of the individual's will to the will of the Highest.

But whether we think of ourselves as religious or not, we simply cannot live without sacrifice. Imagine trying to raise a family, being a partner in marriage, or any other committed relationship, without it. When we endure the indignities of making a living, raising children, or working to become a good role model; none of these would be possible if we didn't value sacrifice. If we didn't accept it as worthwhile, and noble, we'd go crazy.

But sacrifice runs counter to that part of us that says "Me first, last and always." And while we may be living in selfish times, human beings have been this way since... Well according to the Bible, since Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel. The stories about them are about putting self-interest before self-sacrifice. And they are the ancestors of all of us.

Those stories also teach that if "Me first, last and always," is the value we are going to live by, we will be thought of as immature, at best. Yet we all know people like that. And we realize pretty quickly that they have voids in their lives and holes in their souls. And most of us don't like being around them much. For the simple reason that they are selfish.

BTW, "Me first, last and always" is pretty much the philosophy that my 2 1/2 year old grandson embraces— and of course I love him dearly. But that's not remarkable. Those are the values of nearly every 2 1/2 year old. Fortunately, his family is teaching him that there are times when others come first. In toddler speak, we call it "sharing." But what it really is, is instilling in him appreciation for the value of sacrifice, which needs to be held onto if he is going to live a good and decent life.

We've all heard stories of police and fire fighters who've risked their lives to save total strangers. And of soldiers who have done the same for wounded comrades. And when we ask them what made you do such a thing, most of them give a variation of, "If I hadn't tried, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself." Translating that into spiritual-religious language, we get: "My life is grounded in values, and I am willing to make great, even ultimate, sacrifices for them."

In Hebrew we call acts like this *al kiddush HaShem*—sanctification of God's Name. In English we call them heroic. As well we should. You want to hold onto values? Be a hero. And to be one, we don't have to do anything life-threatening. Every act of sacrifice, however small, makes us a little bit more heroic.



Values can be complex and at times they seem to be in tension with one another. The Rabbis said that in such instances, we should think at them as two iron bars, each sharpening the other.

Yossi Klein Halevi is a contemporary Israeli author and scholar. You may have seen his recent books, *Like Dreamers* and *Letters to my Palestinian Neighbor*. Each has made a bit of a splash in the Jewish, and larger, world.

In a recent essay, he posed the question, "Are we "Passover Jews" or "Purim Jews?" What was he saying?

A core value of Pesach is that oppressing our fellow human beings is wrong. To quote the Torah, "You shall love the stranger-outsider as yourself. (Leviticus 19:19) "For you know the heart of the outsider, having been outsiders yourselves in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 23:9) Slaves, of course, are the ultimate outsiders.

The Torah repeats the essence of this commandment thirty-six times (Talmud, *Bava Metzia* 59b), saying, in as many ways, do not brutalize, do not bully, and do not take unfair advantage, of those who are weak and powerless: the outsiders.

Even when you think you can get away with it. Because it's inhumane. Which the Torah doesn't say — because it doesn't have to. What it does say is that since you have been disadvantaged outsiders yourselves, you know better than to try to lord it over to anyone else.

Passover also teaches *rachmanus*—compassion for victims, whomever they may be. According to the Midrash, when the Israelites are crossing the sea and the Egyptians are drowning, the angels start to celebrate. God silences them. "My creatures are dying and you are cheering?" No! All human lives are sacred, even, yes, those of our enemies. They, too, are every mother's son, and daughter.

Passover teaches us to value the sanctity of all human life and of all human dignity. Every day of the year.

What about Purim? There the message is different. Purim is a joyous holiday, but front and center is Haman, who wants to do away with us. Purim reminds us that there are bad people out there who, given half the chance, are life-threatening. Unfortunately, that is no fable. Such people are present and accounted for throughout history. Remembering that is a Jewish value too.

So back to Klein Halevi's question, are we Passover Jews or Purim Jews? Do we weep for our enemies or are we on guard against them?

A few years ago in Israel, my cousins invited me to a swearing-in ceremony for IDF Paratroopers at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. One of them was their eighteen-year-old son, also my cousin. During the ceremony, each new soldier was handed a rifle and a *Tenakh*, a Hebrew Bible. Every army in the world issues rifles. Only the Israeli Army issues Hebrew Bibles.

The officer in charge made the obvious point. You are not only swearing to defend the homeland. You are also swearing to defend the values of our people. Here is the book that is emblematic of them. Unfortunately, without the gun, the book is not enough. But for us, the gun without the book is not enough either.

Somehow, like Passover and Purim, we need to find a way to have one sharpen the other and hold onto both.

One more.

We know that one of the names of our people is *Yisrael*—Israel. It is the name of the modern state but its origin is in the Torah. It comes from a story of a wrestling match between our patriarch Jacob and a mysterious “man,” who turns out to be a divine messenger. At the conclusion of the match, the messenger tells Jacob that henceforth and forever he will also be known as *Yisrael* — Israel, because he has struggled—*yisra*, with God—*El*. (Genesis 32:29)

We are certainly a people who struggles with God. There is very little about the God of Israel that is easy to understand and every thinking Jew has his/her share of “God questions.” To be a member of the people Israel, and to profess the faith of Israel, is to realize that coming to terms with life and God is a struggle, one in which we need to do our best to prevail. It is challenging but it is a value we hold onto. It keeps us from chasing down easy sounding, shallow spiritual “solutions.”

Rabbi Shai Held is a contemporary scholar and he has written about another one of our names.

Jacob's wife Leah, we may remember, was not a happy woman. Inasmuch as her husband openly favored her younger sister Rachel, her life-long rival, we can understand why. But Leah had one great advantage. She was fertile, while Rachel, for many years, was barren.

When Leah gives birth to Jacob's firstborn son, she names him *Reuven*—Reuben. In the Torah Leah explains the name, saying, “God has seen my suffering and **now** my husband will love me.” We can feel that pain.

Things don't get better soon. When her second son is born she names him Simon, saying, "This is because the Lord heard I was **unloved**..." After the third son, Levi, "**This time** my husband will become attached to me." Clearly, Leah is hurting, alone, neglected, unloved by her husband, under the same roof with a younger sister who has everything she doesn't.

But with the birth of her fourth son, something changes. This time she says, "I will **praise** the Lord. And she named him *Yehudah*—Judah." (Genesis 30: 31–35) The name is derived from the word for thanks, or praise.

Rabbi Held points out that Leah came to realize that she cannot only value herself in relation to circumstances over which she has no control; in this case, the lack of attention from her husband. But over her own spiritual well-being, she has great control; for example here, when she chooses to embrace gratitude.

From Judah we get that other name for our people, the one that is not *Yisrael*—Israel. The one that is *Yehudim* in Hebrew— in English, the Jews. Literally, etymologically, and we pray spiritually, we are the people who are grateful.

We are the people, who, like our namesake, and despite all of life's difficulties, find a way to give thanks. Come what may, we *Yehudim* — we Jews, look to fill our spirits, our souls, with gratitude. That's quite a value to hold onto.

Sacrifice, treating outsiders as we would wish to be treated, recognizing enemies when they are real, grappling with life's meaning, being grateful through it all. These are just a few of our sacred values. And when we hold onto them, we have the best chance of becoming the people we have been commanded to become: the people of gentleness, justice, righteousness, and peace.

We will look at more tomorrow. *G'mar tov* and *shana tovah*.