

Rosh Hashanah 5765
Finding Our Sparks - Igniting a Flame
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I admit, for the most part, I'm a morning person. Why? Because I love that first light. I love the feeling of a new day and opportunity to dig into a new project or complete a laundry list of to-do items. I love the mornings when Dahvi will come in, jump in bed with us and then together with Yoni, Matt and me, start a tickle war. It's the spark of a new day that lifts my heart and reminds me that no matter what I have ahead of me, I have this little light glowing inside.

Sometimes however, there are those days that seem overcast and dim and I just don't feel like getting out of bed. There are those moments when it seems like there is just too much to do, too many things on the list, too many pebbles in a stream of boulders that have to be moved. Where is the light, where is the spark?

Rabbi Art Green shares this story:

Once when he was visiting Berkeley and he went by a new age bookstore and there was a big sign outside. The sign said. In great big letters: "Yoga doesn't Work." And below it in smaller letters the sign said, "Transcendental meditation doesn't work".

And below that in still smaller letters: the sign said, "Communism doesn't work," and below that one the sign said. " Christianity doesn't work," and below that sign, an even smaller sign that said "Psychoanalysis doesn't work." Then on the last line in great big letters, the sign said, "You have to work."

OK, so in order for me to find that spark, I have to work. I got it. And at this season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have work to do: deep inner work, soul work, heart work. We have to get out of our own way, put aside the excuses, stop focusing on the superficial and get deep down inside and look at who we are and who we've allowed ourselves to become. We have to strive toward Teshuvah - returning. And allow me to add another definition of Teshuvah - we have to find the spark of goodness in ourselves, in others and our community.

How many times have you stayed up late into the night trying to finish as many projects as possible? How many times have you told yourself, I need to do something for myself, but it's just going to have to wait because I have too many things to do for everyone else? How many times do we put ourselves last? Each time we do this, we lose part of our inner spark. And as we lose our spark, we find ourselves sinking lower and lower and feeling depressed, not able to elevate ourselves from this place. We might even begin to forget that which is good in our lives.

As is common with these types of situations, the first step to a solution is admitting that we have a problem. Sometimes finding that spark is by first admitting that we have too much on our plates and not being so critical of ourselves and forgetting about the good work we successfully complete.

We are a society of over achievers. We are told that in order to be successful we have to be everything to everyone. We are told that we should have enough time to do all our projects at work while maintaining quality family time. We find each free moment in our lives and schedule one more activity because we have that moment.

How many of us recall those summer evenings when neighbors sat together on front lawns talking as the kids played tag or games created just for that evening? Or what about being able to call a friend at the last minute and say, "would you like to get together for lunch today?" Our calendars are so packed that we have to schedule time with friends weeks in advance. Whatever happened to the spark of spontaneity?

In rekindling a spark within ourselves, we need to step back and reassess our goals. We need to ask ourselves, what is so important that I have to do it now and what can wait till after I spend time with my family or do something just for me? We need to figure out, will I be judged for everything I tried to get done and didn't finish or for those few things I successfully completed while keeping the spark burning brightly deep down inside me?

And then, once we reclaim our schedules, we need to be careful as how we pass judgment on ourselves. How often do we look at our work and say, "I can do better than that!" Or, "I really should rework this, I'm not trying hard enough." Who are we not trying hard enough for? Who is it that we are seeking to please? Sometimes our impression of ourselves is that we are not good enough. That people are always looking down at us? Are they? Maybe we need to step back and reexamine our first impression of who we are. In other words, we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves. The spark is there and just need to let it shine through.

And as we are more careful as how we pass judgment on ourselves, so too should we think about how frequently we pass judgment on others without fully knowing them or even searching for their spark?

Brooke was starting college and moved into her new dorm room at school. She was excited about the prospect of living away from home, studying at the university and most important, making new friends, especially with her new roommate. Brooke arrived before her new roommate and started unpacking. Later in the afternoon her roommate arrived. Dressed in black, carrying very little, she stood in the doorway. Brooke immediately went up to her, offered her hand and said, "I'm so glad you're here! I'm Brooke! It's great to meet you." The roommate said, "hi" walked past Brooke to one of the desks and started to pull things out of her bag. Brooke continued to talk to her new roommate trying to start some kind of conversation with her. She told her where she was from and asked her roommate about her family. The roommate said nothing. Brooke was shaken. She left the room and didn't come back for hours. All she could do was run away and cry, wondering what she was going to do with a roommate who obviously wanted nothing to do with her.

When Brooke returned to her room later that night, there was a note on her bed from her roommate. It read, "Brooke, it was great meeting you. I need you to know that I am deaf however, I read lips, so please make sure you let me know when you want to talk to me so I can be looking at you. I look forward to getting to know you and hope that we will be great friends."

Unfortunately, Brooke missed the spark in her new roommate when she assumed she didn't like her. But she got a second chance at igniting the spark of friendship that still exists to this day for both women.

Yes, we pass judgment quickly no matter how hard we try to reserve it until we know someone. I guess you can say it's human nature.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav said, we need to search in everyone to find that spark of goodness. 'Even if it seems hopeless, there is that one spark in which there is no wickedness and that person has the ability to return to teshuvah and ignite that spark.'

Take this Talmudic story: It came to Rabbi Abbahu in a dream that there was one person who was capable of praying on behalf of the whole community for rain. That one person was named Lev. It was said that Lev engaged in five sins a day - "I sweep the theater. I hire out prostitutes. I carry the prostitutes' garments to the baths. I clap and dance before them. And I clash the cymbals before them." Rabbi Abbahu asked him, "What good deed have you done that you merit the power of bringing the rain?" Lev replied: One day when I was sweeping the theater a certain woman came in. She stood behind a column posing as a prostitute and cried. I said to her, 'What's the matter?' She said, 'My husband has been jailed and I need to do whatever I can do to free him.' When I heard this, I sold my bed and bedding and gave her the money, and I said to her, 'This is for you. Free your husband and do not sin.'

Rabbi Abbahu saw that this man, Lev, who although engaged in the sins of prostitution realized that there was still a spark of goodness in him. To sell his bed and bedding, which at that time is a prized possession of any individual and give it to the woman so she would not have to sin herself, was a great mitzvah. There was a spark of goodness in him.

And while it was easy to judge Lev initially as one not worthy of bringing on the rains, Rabbi Abbahu learned that he had to look again. Lev still had a spark in him and with that spark he did something good for the community.

And then there was Yosele. Long ago, on the outskirts of a small town, a wealthy man named Yosele lived by himself in a huge mansion. Although he had more money than he could possibly spend, Yosele was known as a terrible miser. Whenever a poor person appeared at his doorstep begging for a few coins or for something to eat, Yosele turned him away. It didn't matter how heartbreaking someone's story might be, or how dire his or her need. Yosele never gave anything to anybody. His heart was closed.

When Yosele finally died, no tears were shed. He had no family or friends and nobody was going to miss him. In fact, just knowing that he was up there in his mansion had been oppressive to everyone, and when he was gone, the whole town breathed a sigh of relief.

But something very strange and unexpected happened. One after another, every needy family in town showed up at the home of the town's rabbi, all telling the same story. For many years, on Wednesday evenings, someone had secretly placed envelopes of money under their doors. The families had come to depend on this help every week. But suddenly it had stopped. The people

were frightened and confused. The rabbi of course, did everything he could to help. But as he listened to one family after another, an astonishing possibility began to dawn on him. Only one thing happened that could account for the sudden end to the charity that had helped so many people and that was the death of Yosele. Could the man who portrayed himself as a miser really have been something very different? When night fell, the rabbi retired to his study and prayed for an answer.

So heartfelt was the rabbi's prayer that his consciousness transcended time and space. He crossed even the boundary of death itself, and he saw the Garden of Eden to which the souls of the righteous return when they have left this world. And there, waiting for him in the Garden, he saw none other than Yosele himself, surrounded by the souls of the patriarchs and matriarchs and the great sages of history.

The rabbi said, "so it was you who hid those envelopes. How wonderful it must be to be in this beautiful place, surrounded by all these incredible people!" A slight smile crossed Yosele's face. " Yes," he said, looking deep into the rabbi's eyes, 'it is wonderful to be in the presence of the holy ones, but there is nothing, nothing that can compare with the joy I felt when I hid those envelopes every week. This is paradise, but that was the true meaning of joy."

It appeared that Yosele the Miser had no spark of goodness left inside him. Yet, deep down inside he was generous and wanted to help people yet he chose to do his work anonymously. He saw the despair and void of sparks in the lives of those in his small town and sought ways of bringing light into their lives by giving them a gift each week. But it was only Yosele who knew of its existence.

We too have the ability to not only find the spark within ourselves, seek out the spark in others, but also, ignite a flame within our own community. For many years TBS has benefited through the loving acts of our Caring Community. You might have once received a note from someone of the Caring Community when a loved one died. Or someone might have brought you a meal in a time of need. The Caring Community has been there to rekindle a spark for us. And with the beginning of a new year, it is the perfect time for us to make the spark grow. The Caring Community has been a connection to individuals in times of need and today we move beyond to build a connection that is not only to individuals but a connection to the entire household and from the house to the synagogue. And with a new idea comes a new name, Keshet LaBayit.

Keshet LaBayit is a helping hand when we need it from our temple family. It is a way for us as a community to pass the spark of hope on to those in need and push away the darkness that sometimes engulfs our lives. Keshet LaBayit is there during times of joy as a family prepares to welcome a baby into the covenant for a bris or naming only one week after he or she is born. Any family can use the help of the whole community to welcome a child into the covenant of the Jewish people and into our congregational family. And from personal experience, Matt and I could never have created the bris celebration for Yoni without the help of you our community. Every family should be know that they can call on their TBS family to celebrate with them.

And what about those times of need. You already know how we can be there for each other when a loved one dies. But what about those unexpected moments when we need help immediately!

There is the extreme side of the spectrum that happened to Rabbi Donnell and Wendy many years ago: A 12 year old girl from Rabbi Donnell's congregation called him because she needed help. Her mother had been experiencing debilitating migraines. Rabbi Donnell and Wendy went over to the house, helped the mom get to the hospital and then took care of the daughter. When they asked her if she had eaten dinner that night, the girl said "no, we don't really have anything around the house to eat." Turned out that when Rabbi Donnell and Wendy looked in the cupboards and fridge, there was no food. The mom had been sick for so long that she did not even have the strength to shop. Wendy went to the store, bought some groceries so the mom would have something in the house when she was better and then both Rabbi Donnell and Wendy made sure this family had help from the temple family.

And there are those not so extreme examples, such as a mom who needed help picking up her daughter from school because the school schedule and her work schedule did not sync. TBS was able to make a connection for her with others from the congregation who were able to pick up her daughter.

What makes a 12 year old know to call her rabbi and her synagogue? What makes a mother turn to the synagogue when she felt she couldn't balance both her and her daughter's schedules? How do any of us know who to call? Sure, we have friends and most of the time they can help us if we're in a bind. But there are those times we need another resource. How easy it is to forget that we can and should be able to turn to our congregation. To whom do we make that first call? The answer should be, Keshet LaBayit. And you can reach Keshet LaBayit by calling the temple office.

Imagine a Keshet LaBayit, connection to the home, whom you can call when you need a minyan for a shiva service.

Imagine a Keshet LaBayit, connection to the home, whom you can call because you just broke your leg.

And Keshet LaBayit is not just for those in need, it is for those who want to give. You might be looking for a way to help our community, a way to help one of your family members.

Imagine a Keshet LaBayit, connection to the home, whom you can call when you have some free time and want to visit with a homebound congregant.

Imagine a Keshet LaBayit, connection to the home, whom you can call when you have time to help a family who is spending time at the hospital caring for a loved one.

Imagine a Keshet LaBayit, connection to the home, who connects us to our family. Throughout this year you may get a call that asks you to be a Keshet LaBayit, a connection to someone's home. Or you might call us and say you need Keshet LaBayit to help make a connection.

At the same time, don't just wait for a call. If you need something, please call. We're not mind-readers and we don't have small cameras in everyone's homes to know what our congregational family needs. And at the same time, we don't always know what our family members can offer or

have the time to offer. Therefore, don't be afraid to ask and don't be afraid to call and just say, 'I'm here if you need me.' We are a congregation filled with a variety of talents, think about what you do and how you might be able to help someone else. So please, call me here at the temple and let me know how you can be a resource for our family members. Together, through Keshet LaBayit, the Connection to the Home, we can create a spark that is a beam of light from our congregation to our home and to the homes of the entire congregation. Imagine what that beam of light might look like!

Earlier I suggested a new definition for Teshuvah - the return of a spark. During these High Holy Days and the days that follow, we have the opportunity to ignite the spark within ourselves, find the spark that is in others and create a spark for our community. Bring these sparks together and we have the flame of creation, justice and righteousness. Seek out the sparks in your life and the lives of all those around you and let us light the flame of holiness and completeness together as we welcome a new year.

Shana Tovah