

Kol Nidrei 5765
Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Did you feel it? Did you get that sense of awe? Did you feel the power of the moment?

As we chanted Kol Nidre and the Torahs were held out as public testimony to our commitment to truly working toward t'shuvah, did you feel the moment breath? Each year as we enter into this most Holy of nights, there is a sense of awe, a realization that we do not stand here alone. A realization that we have stood here before. Tonight, on Kol Nidre we are reminded that we stand here not only with our own temple family but with generations past. Tonight we are connected to our history, we are not alone. We stand with the Jews of the Inquisition, we stand here with the Jews who entered into the Holy Sanctuary in Jerusalem to say to God, this year, this year will be different. This year I will do better. I will work toward being a better person for myself, my community and the Jewish people. We ask ourselves, what are the outside forces that cause us to stray from our personal identity and what are the inner forces that pull us toward being someone who we are not. Who are we, where did we come from and where are we going?

This year, we celebrate 350 years of American Jewry. In September 1654, twenty-three Jewish refugees left Recife, Brazil, fleeing the Catholic Inquisition. Although headed for Holland, they were blown off course and landed instead at New Amsterdam, now known as Manhattan Island. The Dutch governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, tried to expel them. Fortunately, the Jews were able to appeal to Stuyvesant's superiors at the Dutch West Indies Trading Company, who had many Jewish stockholders, and the Jews were granted permission to remain in the colony. Ever since that time there has been an organized Jewish community on the North American continent.

Despite Stuyvesant's initial protest in a world filled with anti-Semitism toward Jews, it has been here in America that we have found some of our first freedoms. In America, Jews achieved a level of social acceptance greater than in any other country. And it was President Lincoln who first stood behind the Jews whom General Ulysses Grant had accused of profiteering during the Civil War and reassured the Jewish community that anti-Semitism would not be tolerated by American political leaders.¹[1]

There have been no pogroms, no expulsions, no forced conversions; for the most part in America - we are free to be Jewish. However, this is not to say that we have not experienced Anti-Semitism on our shores. Jews were banned from joining the elite country clubs or organizations that were reserved only for the most wealthy and non-Jewish. Jewishness became a marker of social unacceptability. We should remember that American Jews experienced decades of being social outcasts and discrimination that essentially came to an end only in the 1960s. And today, anti-Semitism is frequently expressed in terms of extreme anti-Zionism and is becoming more acceptable than just a decade ago.

¹[1] "Celebrating the 350th Anniversary" Paula Hyman, American Jewish Committee.

We are very aware of anti-Semitic messages, especially when they end up as fliers or graffiti on our doorsteps, but what we are not as aware of is a greater weapon against the Jewish community, assimilation.

Israel Friedlander, a Russian-Polish immigrant who taught Semitics at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, suggests that we should be wary of the enemies that lie within the individual. While Jews enjoy the life and culture of the world around them, what would become of Jewish culture? What Friedlander suggests is that there is a downside to our ability to acculturate. There needs to be respect and a way for Jews to hold onto our ethnic cultural expressions while being in the great melting pot of America. He saw the value of multiculturalism yet he recognized the need for Jews to hold onto their own religious and ethnic identity. Jews would become their own greatest enemy if they fully assimilated themselves in the American culture. Today, rather than being a melting pot, we are more like a salad bowl in which all the different ingredients are still discernible. We are no longer blended into a homogenous culture, rather we can partake of and participate in and contribute to American life while maintaining our unique identity.

Once the wind and sun were arguing as to who was the strongest and who could create the most change. Both looked down and saw a man wearing a coat. They decided that whomever could get the man's coat off first would be named the strongest. The wind went first and blew from all directions trying to blow the man's jacket open so it would go flying off his body. It tried to blow him over so he would roll out of the coat. Nothing worked because no matter how hard the wind blew, the man just held on tighter to his coat. Then it was the sun's turn. The sun chose to gradually warm the air and as the man strolled along he started to get so comfortable with the weather that he casually took off his coat and carried it over his arm.

When the wind picks up and we are blown over by anti-Semitism or those who blatantly try to proselytize to us, we wrap ourselves up in our identity and labels. But when we start to get comfortable with our surroundings and take for granted the need to reexamine who we are and allow our true selves to stand out, we let our guard down.

The protagonists of our inner enemies are apathy and a lack of education of what it means to be Jewish and a part of the Jewish community. We get comfortable with a way of life and we do not challenge it nor do we challenge ourselves. We have an identity and we might think that this is enough. But is it? Identity is not simply a box on a survey on which we mark "Jewish."

A few weeks ago I was reading through the Intermountain Jewish News, a publication from Denver, Colorado, when I came across a letter to the editor that surprised me. The beginning of September, a conference for "Jews for Jesus" was being held in Denver and moving to other cities later in the fall such as San Francisco, the home of the Jews for Jesus movement. The agenda for the group is to reach out to the 70,000+ Jews in the Denver area and let them know that now was the time that they should accept Jesus as their messiah and that this would be the most Jewish thing they could do.

Simon Horowitz, a Denver resident wrote:

"In my early thirties I was a prime and successful target of the messianic movement. Even as I knew I was a Jew, I wallowed in total ignorance with absolutely no Jewish upbringing or education. I did not have the tools to know any better.

"Had I had the privilege and opportunity of a Jewish upbringing or education, I doubt they would have ever snagged me at all.

"Messianics prey on Jews who are usually already floundering, uncommitted and ignorant about Judaism. The prime candidate for messianic conversion is an unaffiliated, assimilated and non-observant Jew who is usually uncomfortable in or doesn't feel welcome at a synagogue.^{2[2]}

Messianics will try to provide "proof" texts based on the Bible, however, these texts are usually mistranslated, misquoted or misinterpreted. The Messianics are skilled debaters and to engage in an argument with them is a waste of time. But what is important is to have a strong connection to our own identity so that we have the strength to walk away.

We need to know what labels we wear and what these labels stand for. If you are a democrat or a republican, do you remember what that stands for? If you are a feminist or libertarian, do you remember what that label stands for? Just because we wear the label of "Jew" we should not feel so complacent or feel that we are not susceptible to someone's criticism or proselytizing. It's easy to get comfortable.

Jewish life in America involves Jewish living in a non-Jewish world. It is easy to blend in and not embrace that which makes us different. Therefore, we need to find ways of redefining who we are.

The Orange County community is poised on recreating who we are as a community. The primary place within our Jewish community is of course, the synagogue. It is here where we define our spiritual selves, study with fellow congregants, and find connections to God through Shabbat and festival worship along with marking life cycle events from birth to death. Our synagogue is our spiritual home and stepping-stone into the greater Jewish community.

From our synagogue we move into the realm of our new Jewish Community Campus. On August first, the doors opened to a Community Campus which includes such agencies as the Bureau for Jewish Education, the Jewish Federation, Hillel, Jewish Family Services, Tarbut V'Torah and the state of the art Jewish Community Center facility. It is through this Jewish Community Campus that Jews from preschool through college; from those who seek to educate to those who are in need of personal and familial assistance; to those who seek a new cultural connection; all find a community home. The synagogue coupled with the Jewish Community Campus creates a community committed to spiritual fulfillment, cultural growth and life-long education; all of which are necessary for our continually evolving Jewish identity.

^{2[2]} Intermountain Jewish News Letter to the Editor: "The ÔMessianic'; Temptation, by Simon Horowitz.

That which we learn from our teachers, rabbis, community leaders, friends and even our children mostly strongly influences our identity. Think, for a moment, about how learning affects your growth and personal connection to your community. Think about the time your child came home and said, "Look what I can read!" And handed you a piece of paper with a Hebrew prayer. And then he or she proceeded to ask if you could read it too! How many of us signed up for a Hebrew class because we didn't want to be out done by our nine year old? We are inspired to learn because of our children. We see what they are learning and how their life is affected by these lessons and we want a taste of it as well. This could be why our Family Learning Circle and Adult Education programs are so popular. Our children are learning and why should we be left behind?

Yet there are those who are Jewish but have no connection to the Jewish community. There are our coworkers who are Jewish but have no family nearby to celebrate the festivals with. There are our neighbors who are Jewish but haven't had a Shabbat family meal since they left home for college years ago. There are our friends who are Jewish who are nervous about attending a service because they don't want to sit alone in the back. There are hundreds of people out there who are Jewish and we need to reach out and say, "What are you waiting for? Join us for Sukkot! Come to Shabbat dinner! Come to Shabbat services with us!"; There are so many people who we need to reach out to.

Last week at Rosh Hashanah, I introduced us to Keshet LaBayit, the connection from the synagogue to the home and back again. Tonight, I want to broaden this connection with a challenge. This challenge is for each of us to participate in a simple mitzvah of reaching out.

You might have heard about a red thread that can ward off the evil eye and protect you. It is a part of the Kabbalah movement and teaching that has even been humorously quipped about on such shows as Will and Grace. Just last week three of the main characters sported the little red string and professed their allegiance to that guy or town Kabbalah. Of course, Kabbalah is not some guy or a town, it is the deep and esoteric mystical traditions of Judaism. And even cultural icons, like Madonna, or as she now calls herself, Esther, can't seem to get enough. Just this past week, she along with 2000 students from 22 countries and hosted by the Kabbalah center based in LA went to Israel to visit the tombs of revered Rabbinic sages. Because of this heightened interest in Kabbalah, especially with the endorsements of celebrities, the little red thread has become a cultural icon and now you too can buy it encased in a gold bracelet on Amazon for a mere \$95! I am not at all saying that superstition is a bad thing, I'm sure my grandmother would have a conniption if I ever walked under a ladder, put a hat on the bed, or forget to throw salt over my shoulder if I spilled the shaker. Or what about "a keyn a hora" or a glass at the wedding? Yes, superstition has its place in our lives. However, instead of the red thread, I'd like to propose the Blue Thread.

First, why a blue thread. The blue thread is representative of the tachelet, or blue chord that we are commanded to include in our tzitzit. It is also the color that is woven in the Flag of Israel. And now, tonight we take the blue thread to another place. By now you should all have a card with a blue thread attached to it. If not, if you don't get one tonight, they'll be here tomorrow and after Yom Kippur.

Tonight we start the Blue Thread Campaign. When you place it on your wrist you are committing to do three simple things:

1. Invite a friend or family to your house for a Shabbat meal or Festival Meal. Sukkot is just around the corner, when was the last time you built a sukkah in the back yard and had people over for dinner? And if you can't build a sukkah in your back yard, come eat in the sukkah right here at TBS.
2. Invite a friend or family to join you for Shabbat services. You might want to meet for dinner before. Then, when you bring your friend or family, sit close, introduce them to us and others in the congregation. Let them know that our home is their home.
3. Invite a friend to join you in some Jewish educational program. Sign up for one of the MANY adult education programs that are being offered here at TBS and throughout the community.
4. And finally, for our youth. Invite a friend to attend a youth group event with you. Show them that youth group is not that scary and we have a great time together. And yes, you can even prove that the rabbi does know how to play lasertag!

Join me in this Blue Thread Campaign and let's reach out to others. When you've completed all three tasks you can either take it off and know that you've successfully fulfilled your pledge. Or, you might just realize what a great time you had inviting someone to your home, sharing your synagogue with someone who might not have otherwise attended, and enriched your life and someone else's through learning and meeting other people.

Did you know that the oldest and most primitive human dates back about 7 million years, according to a skull found in Central Africa. What's interesting is, we don't look that different. However, maybe the first 6,994,235 years hardly matter. After all, as Jews we don't start counting till the first community was created after Adam and Eve. And our history over the past 5765 years has taught us that we must recognize that there are those who may seek to destroy us through anti-Semitic acts and there is the enemy from within that can destroy us if we don't take the time to stand up and say we are Jewish and know what this means. This is a time to make sure we are a part of the greater Jewish community and that there is a future to be had. We strengthen ourselves when we strengthen our Jewish community and together our Jewish identity flourishes.

May this next year be a year in which we are counted and may our community continue to grow, flourish, dream and achieve our highest goals. May we continue to build a connection from the synagogue to our home and from our homes to the synagogue and beyond. May this be our "keshet" connecting moment.

Amen
