

Yom Kippur 5764 – We All Stand Together

The man sat in his home and waited. As he waited he stared into the fireplace where a fire burned brightly. He was always fascinated by fire – providing the security of warmth and light while also offering the threat of danger. There was something magical about the fire – as all of its parts (the wood, air, spark) mysteriously come together to create it. He was waiting for his rabbi to arrive. The man was once an active and forceful part of his congregation – however over the last few years his involvement and interest waned. The congregation was changing, his kids had grown and he felt disconnected from this once special place. He was sure that the rabbi was coming to encourage him to come back and be involved, he was also sure that he did not know what he would say when his rabbi challenged him. The rabbi entered without a word, only to come and sit next to him. For a moment they stared at the fire together, the man wondering if the rabbi held a similar reverence for the fire.

The rabbi then stood up and removed the poker from its resting place and poked it into the fire and deftly drew out a small ember from the midst of the raging fire. The two exchanged glances and then the man examined the lone ember – as its flame danced and then began to fade. He thought how he felt like that ember in regard to his congregation – for so long such a part of the fire of the community – feeling its warmth and light. Now, thankful to be distanced from it, not to be burned and scarred anymore. As he identified with the apparent survival of the ember, its flame dwindled down to nothing – and only a smoking, black remnant stood idly by the raging fire. Watching, he first felt angry at the fire for relentlessly radiating that blazing heat, and then he felt even angrier at it for withholding that same heat. For a moment the isolation and disconnectedness of that little coal gripped the man's heart. The rabbi, on queue, sensing this anxiety in the man, took the poker and pushed the ember back from where it came– where once again it danced with the other the flames of the fire. And as the ember regained its warmth and its light the man realized the predicament before him – to be part of the fire risks being scarred and burned, to remain apart from it risks losing the warmth and light it generates.

Those are options when we consider any community of which we are a part: Do we risk being burned and blinded for warmth and enlightenment or do we accept the safety and desolation of isolation? To be a part of any community is to walk this balance between getting burned and getting warmed, between being blinded and being enlightened. Yom Kippur reminds us of this balance. On Yom Kippur we stand together and say 'WE' have sinned – not 'I', definitely not 'You', but 'WE'. Yom Kippur is a day that reminds us of the part of our human make-up that craves community. Yom Kippur is a day that reminds us of our responsibility and connectedness to each individual in this room.

Today we examine not only ourselves, but also our community – Temple Micah. We are a special community. Renee and I have been touched by its warmth and sincerity even before we officially arrived. Like any other community – the Micah community face challenges. This community has evolved into something special – with a well deserved reputation in the Denver community for its warmth and inclusive nature. People have worked hard to build the Micah we know today, and the work that they have done has attracted others who want to become a part of it. This growth brings new people with new ideas, ideas that promise to both add and detract from that initial essence of Micah. How do we embrace and keep both ... this essence of the Micah community and the advantages that accompanies such growth? This truth is certain ... we change, we grow, and we evolve. We grow older. Children grow older. Rabbis change. Our leaders change. The world changes. Even beyond the prospect of change, there is still challenge in

cultivating our community. We have lived different lives. We have learned different things. We think different thoughts. We act these beliefs out in different ways.

With all of these factors, it is not helpful to blame or seek the one answer that will make it like it is supposed to be. It is like it is supposed to be. It is no use to blame the fire itself, it is only of help to understand how we can be warmed without being burned.

That is the key, is it not? -- To be able to not lose the warmth and brilliance of what we need and cherish in the face of the constant change of our community and ourselves. Our Torah and our tradition have something to say about how the individuals in a community such as ours can feel and embrace all the fire has to offer. This morning, we read from Torah about one of our people's most perfect moments of community – the moment they all stood together before God at Sinai. The words Torah uses to begin to describe this moment are: 'Atem ntzavim hayom -- You are standing here this day.' These words that Moses spoke that holy convocation, speak to this holy convocation today.

These words can be read as a simple description or observation by Moses. Rabbi Abraham Twerski, reads Moses' words with a different twist. In his eyes Moses is chastising the people for standing still and saying: "Look how lax you are. You are all standing in a stationary position before God, instead of progressing. Everyone seems to have found a niche where he or she feels comfortable, and no one is making an effort to elevate himself or herself beyond the level of spirituality which has already been achieved." Rabbi Twerski would have Moses telling the people – don't stand still, keep growing and keep changing – definitely do not reject change, and do even more than accept it, but embrace it and cultivate it.

I think one of the most difficult things we have to face as human beings is the prospect of change. There is comfort for us when things stay the same. We find security in consistency. These feelings about change play out in our community – as they do in other aspects of life. Who wouldn't admit to feeling bit jarred when a new and unfamiliar melody crops up during the service? Who wouldn't admit to feeling sad or unsure by seeing unfamiliar faces in place that you once knew so well? Who wouldn't admit to be feeling intimidated upon hearing that something just cannot be done this way because we have always done it that way? Who wouldn't admit to feeling a overwhelmed at the prospect of letting go of a beloved rabbi and then and getting used to and breaking in another rabbi? These feelings are real and must be faced – we must not stand still. When these feelings blind us to the natural process of growth and change we feel the penetrating chill of isolation as we find ourselves estranged from the warmth of the fire.

The Baal Sham Tov had a very creative response when he would counsel people who were frightened or even paralysed by the prospect of change. One day it was a student who needed guidance. The student would not and thereby could not change his way of thinking in order to approach his problem from a different angle. Rabbi Israel he finally asked, "How can I do what you say and change my way of thinking and still be me?" The Baal Shem Tov pointed to the great willow tree in the field and said, "Look at it, it bends in the wind, droops in the rain. Yet it always remains itself, a tree." One day it was a man who swore that yes he wanted to be more active in the shul and wanted to study more, but there were so many other things that he could not give up – it would change his life too much. "Look at me", he said, "I can't change." The Baal Shem Tov pointed at the great Oak in the courtyard and say, "Look at it, it changes every season from green to brown to green again, from bud to flower to fallen leaf. Yet it always remains itself, a tree." One day it was a woman who has been hurt so much and given so much in her relationships that she had given too much of herself and does not have the will to change. "I can't love anymore." She cried. The Baal Shem Tov pointed to the Hickory tree in the garden and says, "With its love, it has given away all that it has. Look at it. There are birds in its branches, moss and ladybugs living on its bark. They may take what the tree has, but not what it is."

Each time after the Baal Shem Tov had each one consider the tree, he said to them, “Whether we know it or not, we are like the tree. Only our pride hangs on to a false sense of self, wanting to keep everything, refusing to follow advice or spiritual direction. What we do doesn't matter; how we do it is what counts. Change and growth is as natural as the sun coming up every morning and the setting of it every night. We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when people are afraid of the light.” Accepting the fact that our community does and will continue to change is a part of accepting and learning to manage the heat of the fire.

Sometimes, it is not the threat of the heat and being burned that causes us to withdraw from the fire. Sometimes, the fire may blind us with its light and we do not clearly see those who are a part of our community. When we cannot truly look at and see one another – our community suffers. We turn to what the Torah teaches us Moses saw during that holy moment. ‘Atem ntzavim hayom – You stand here this day.’ Baruch ben Jehiel, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, reads Moses first words to the people very differently than Rabbi Twerski. As he reads, ‘Atem ntzavim hayom – You stand here this day’ he sees the exact opposite: Moses is not chastising them, but lauding them for standing still. In his eyes Moses is saying, “No wonder you are standing today and not moving – there is nowhere else for you to move, for today you are on the highest possible spiritual level, closest to God.”

What has elevated the people to this level? I believe that it is the next few verses that clue us in, who stands this day: “ALL of you – your tribal heads, your elders, all the people of Israel, your children, your spouses, even the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who chops wood to the one who draws water.” It seems that what elevates Israel to this level is all of the people standing together – in true community before God. The Torah does not waste words, so we must seek some meaning in this descriptive list. Rashi, the 11th century French commentator, teaches that the woodchopper and water drawer represented those who were not born into the tribe and wished to become a part of the community. They were specifically noted because the Torah wanted to teach that they were a welcome part of this moment, of the covenant. Ovadiah Sforno, the 16th century Italian commentator, teaches that all are mentioned in this list to make note that position or status did not preclude anyone from this holy moment of communion with the Divine. No one in the community could be precluded from this moment – if any soul would have been – the moment would have never happened. They reached this high level of communion with God because ALL were there and a part of the covenant.

So we, we may ascend our highest levels when we are able to do the same. Whoa, it is hard to do. We all have different histories. We have different ideas and even some different beliefs. We have learned different things from different teachers. We have different levels of knowledge. It is easy at times as we hold a vision for our community to gaze around and judge who should be standing with us? The point is, that when we stop judging and accept everybody's place, then we will truly be standing in the way that Baruch ben Jehiel suggests. We reach this lofty position when we act in a way that we can all openly accept one another into our community – regardless of any titles, history or status. When we can accomplish this goal – we will realize a bit of the perfect moment of the encounter that we read this morning.

This is the point in the sermon where a rabbi or minister would look into her or his files or on the vast resources on the internet and find a story or anecdote that poignantly illustrates the point that a community comes closest to God when ALL participate and are fully respected and even cherished. As I stood here last week, as one is wont to do on Rosh Hashanah, I thought about all that had transpired to bring me here to Denver, to Temple Micah. I inwardly offered a sigh of relief and a prayer of gratefulness ... for simply being here. Then I turned my focus on you, and I reflected on all that had transpired to bring, you/us, Temple Micah to this moment. When I looked

out at you and prayed and sang together with you – I felt a sense of the standing, of realizing potential of which we are speaking.

Look around the room at who we are and get a sense of what we might become. When we look we see with our hearts a community of great strength and compassion. We see a community that grew, in partnership with its rabbi, from a small group, sensitive to its otherness into an active and dynamic forward thinking community. We see a community who when faced with the tragic loss of its rabbi – did not and would not give up on her or the community; a group of individuals who stepped up and would not let Micah slip backwards; a group of people who managed to maintain a vision for the future despite a challenging and trying present. We see a community that even though it clearly feels some of the pains of growth, senses that it is on the verge of even greater things.

This community consists of SO many diverse individuals and families: board members, former board members and people who have no desire to ever set foot in a board meeting; people born as Jews and people who chose to convert to Judaism; people who converted only in the last few years, and those who converted in the last few decades; people who have only recently found their way back into some connection to the Jewish community; people who are not Jews, but play crucial roles in creating their Jewish families and this community; people who studied with different teachers and know different things about Judaism. Look at this community with your hearts – and see who we are and what we can become. Look with your hearts and see the same thing that Moses saw as he saw a community complete before God, ‘Atem ntzavim hayom – You ALL stand here this day.’

Today of all days, may we stand in the warmth and light of our fire, our community. May we stand together, recite our confession, the Vidui and say . . . WE. WE stand together and seek warmth and enlightenment by the fire of our community. WE stand together and strive to embody what our Torah and tradition teaches about this fire. WE stand together and endeavour to embrace the change that is at the core of life itself. WE stand together and aspire to wholeheartedly accept each soul who is a part of us. ‘Atem Ntzavaim Hayom – You stand here this day.’ Yes, WE do.