

THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5765 (2004)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

HOME COMING IN THE HOMELAND

I spoke to you on Rosh Hashanah about *tribalism*, about my experiences in Mongolia this summer and what they taught me about the creation of authentic community. I also spoke about Abraham's open tent, and the parallel importance that our *own* tradition places on hospitality, on treating strangers as if they were old friends, on viewing other human beings as part of an interconnected, interdependent family.

I showed how Jews are, historically, a *tribal* people with *tribal* roots -- and that in order to create the kind of community that tribal values can best inculcate we must see ourselves as part of a larger whole, and also accept one of the cardinal rules of that primal, selfless sort of life. The impetus for our actions must be grounded, not in what we *want* to do, but in what we *ought* to do.

This evening, on this solemn and sacred Kol Nidre, I want to continue with the themes of *commitment* and *community* -- but I want to take them to another level, and I want to *push* us, as a congregation, even further past the boundaries of ourselves, and, for some in this hall, even beyond the borders of our own comfort zone.

* * *

Back in the 12th century, Maimonides taught that if one has to walk into a synagogue to pick up a child or to see a friend, one should *pause* for a few moments and study a few verses of Torah, and *then* go on with one's errand, so that, in Maimonides' words, "one will not have entered a house of worship for purely personal reasons."

Today, however, most of us join synagogues almost *exclusively* for personal reasons -- to find a venue for a bar or bat mitzvah, or to secure the services of a rabbi who will officiate at a private life-cycle event. Yet Maimonides' teaching reminds us that synagogues are not supposed to be *used*, particularly not in that way, as *instruments*, in order to satisfy our personal needs. Joining a shul should instead bring us *out* of our own persons, *out* of our narrow circle of self-concern and help to *open* us to the needs of other people.

* * *

I remember a fundraising meeting at another shul, early on in my rabbinic career. Things were going along smoothly until one of the members we were soliciting made a comment that took us all by surprise. He turned to the other congregants around him and said, "You know what? I bet none of us in this room have ever given till it hurts." The man paused for emphasis -- then he said, "We've never actually given to the point where we had to give up something we wanted to buy, or something we wanted to do. None of us, I'm sure, have ever given like *that*."

There was a brief silence -- people were caught off guard and they didn't know what to say in response. After a few awkward moments, somebody at the meeting made an unrelated comment, and the discussion returned to its usual course -- it became just another synagogue fundraising meeting.

* * *

Though the time and synagogue have changed, I want to pick up where that man left off -- I want to talk about giving till it hurts, or, what I'm going to call *sacrificial* giving. Not in the specific context of philanthropy, but in the broader context of our Jewish lives.

For *whom* do we engage in sacrificial giving -- the kind of giving that involves self-deprivation, the giving up of something of significant personal value? Many of you, I am certain, do this for your *children*. Especially here in New York City, some of you here have spent thousands of dollars on their education, thousands of *hours* raising and taking care of them, worrying about them, cooking, cleaning, and shopping for them -- and, of course, yet more hours schlepping them around the city to music lessons and ball games. You've done it *instinctively*, without ever wondering what you *could* be doing with all those extra dollars or those extra hours if you had no children at all.

* * *

Sacrificial giving -- giving of oneself in profound and meaningful ways, putting *another's* needs before your own -- sacrificial giving, when it is deep and genuine, is born out of *love*. It is the most serious and mature kind of giving -- it is easy in some ways and hard in others. It is also among the most elemental, fulfilling, and *spiritual* things that a Jewish person can do.

To understand the meaning of sacrificial giving in its fullest sense, we must understand the idea of sacrifice *itself*, or *korban*, in the Jewish context. A *korban*, according to its Hebrew etymology, is that which brings us close, or draws us near -- in religious terms, to God. A *korban* is a spiritual obligation, but it is also a *gift* that allows us to connect with the Divine, as well as with each other, through shared action and common commitment.

Although we no longer live in a time or a place in which sacrifices take the form of animals, grain, or incense, Jews today are *still* linked to their tribal forbears, those men and women who settled in Canaan, and bowed before the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. *That* linkage is historical and spiritual -- yet now, we Jews who live in the Diaspora have a *new* kind of linkage, the one that connects us to the Nation of Israel and to Israelis.

* * *

Since the founding of The New Shul 5 years ago, I have had the opportunity to preach to you on many matters, and I have *deliberately* avoided the usual topics rabbis often use as *scare* tactics to *coerce* their congregants into becoming more committed Jews -- subjects such as anti-Semitism, assimilation, intermarriage, the Holocaust. Instead, I have discussed religious practice, spirituality, and God -- subjects that speak to our *souls*, that excite and inspire us into drawing closer to Judaism, not out of fear, but out of love, joy, affirmation, and pride.

Israel was yet another subject that I believed you'd heard enough about from rabbis, and so rather than speaking about it from the pulpit, I have done so with many of you, privately. But the situation has changed, and I feel I would fall short of my responsibility as your rabbi not to bring up what must be said, and said *now*, in *this* context.

* * *

What I have to say is not about politics, but about *perspective*. As Jews, we live at an extraordinary moment in our history -- a narrow window in time when the Jewish people is creating something unseen for **2000** years -- a sovereign Jewish nation striving to embody our collective aspirations and ideals. This moment belongs to the generation of Jews now alive -- it is ours to seize, or to squander.

For decades, Israel provided *gratification* to us, even more to our parents and grandparents who witnessed its birth in 1948. It gave Jews in the Diaspora immense pride, and it filled us with hopes and dreams. Today, Israel gives us worry and pain, and now, in its time of struggle and need, Israel requires of *us* sacrificial acts of love.

But *will* we give Israel what it has given to us? Will we give till it hurts?

* * *

According to the most recent statistics from the National Jewish Population Survey, 68% of the members of Reform and other liberal congregations say they have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Yet only 44% of them have ever visited Israel, and only 27% say they are "very emotionally attached" to it. In this respect, we fall behind our more traditional Jewish brothers and sisters, who give, visit, and voice a deep connection to the Jewish State in a considerably higher proportion.

* * *

"I know that I should visit Israel," I was told by one of you not so very long ago, "but I'm afraid." *Of course* we're afraid -- we're nervous and anxious, we instinctively *recoil* from going to a place which we know is the target of terror attacks. But *mitzvah*, the tribal discipline of Jewish duty, is about *transcending* many of our instinctive and visceral drives, and stepping out of our circle of self-concern -- *even* when it causes us discomfort, or fear.

If we take time to consider the matter rationally, we *know* that the odds of dying in a car crash are far higher than any danger we might face in Israel. Visiting Israel these days is not, as some are feeling in their heart of hearts, reckless and suicidal -- it is a powerful act of giving based on *love*. It is mustering the courage to go even *without* feeling completely confident and unafraid, recognizing that every *day* we take risks with our lives, just by getting into a car or a plane, because we cannot live our lives consumed by the fear of hypothetical events.

* * *

I myself lived in Israel for 2 years, in Jerusalem, and they were two of the most transformative years of my life. I could share with you so many stories -- about visiting the mystical town of Tsfat, about praying at tiny Hasidic shuls, about picking carobs and cantaloupes on kibbutz, about hiking through the Negev desert. But what I want to share with you tonight is a far more *mundane* experience, yet one which illustrates, for me at least, the way in which our presence in the *physical* land of Israel can affect our identities and souls so profoundly.

I played the sport of rugby for several years, some in college and some in the time that followed. Aside from my university team, Penn, I also played for a team in Jerusalem, a squad made up of native-born Israelis as well as immigrants from rugby countries like South Africa, the UK, and Australia. Israel had, and still has, a national rugby league, and our team played squads from

across the country, in addition to international teams from Cyprus, Fiji, and other odd, assorted nations connected to the UN. I still remember our Jerusalem jerseys -- for reasons that escape me to this *day*, our team color was Kelly green. I always blamed that color on our star Irish forward. We had an important game one year against Tel Aviv, our arch-rival -- our rival, not only because we represented the two largest cities in Israel, but because their team was made up of career military officers -- and boy, did those guys play dirty. Picture a game between the Yankees and Red Sox -- then toss into the mix a bunch of angry men lashing out, subconsciously, at their smothering, overprotective Jewish mothers.

Not surprisingly, the match was grueling, fierce, and filled with scuffles and outright brawls. I think that Tel Aviv won the game by a few points. But what I remember most vividly are my feelings at halftime, as I rested on a bench and looked out over the field.

Every single player I observed, as well as those who were watching in the stands, was a Jew. Jewish colonels, Jewish construction workers, Jewish shop-owners, Jewish bus drivers, Jewish florists. I'd never experienced anything like it growing up in Chicago, or living in Philadelphia, LA, or Boston -- I was in virgin territory, awash in virgin emotions. It wasn't a feeling of nationalism per se -- it was a sensation in my *gut* and in my *soul* that I belonged to something larger than myself, something that *transcended* geography, language, even time.

I was a member of a *tribe*, a tribe that was ancient, strong, and interconnected, and though I didn't particularly *like* some of the people who were standing before me, I felt a deep *love* for them all. My feelings weren't parochial or triumphalistic -- all I experienced was a sense of belonging that was almost *mystical*, and one that has never been replicated since. Should all of us hop on planes and move to Israel? No, for a variety of reasons. But I *do* think that no Jew should go through life without being exposed to this kind of experience -- a *psychic* experience that no book, photo, or film can ever truly capture.

* * *

We should never underestimate Israel's power to affect our identities as Jews and our commitments toward Judaism and the Jewish community. Though I've experienced its effects firsthand, there have been many studies that show how even a *single* visit to Israel can dramatically transform a person's life. No one I know has ever returned untouched in some way, and, if you are *not* among the 27% who feel a strong emotional attachment to Israel, *know* that the attachment will come -- sometimes we must *do* before we are able to *feel*.

This is not about embracing Israeli policy -- it's about supporting the Jewish State, through *actions*, not just words or dollars, and embracing our brothers and sisters who live there and defend it. What Israel needs from us now is, perhaps, the most important, and often difficult, gift of all -- the gift of our flesh-and-blood *presence*.

* * *

On Rosh Hashanah, I challenged us all to open our metaphorical tents and to welcome others into them -- we will discuss what that assignment was like tomorrow morning. But now, on Yom Kippur, I have *another* challenge for this community, a challenge intended to support others as well as to better ourselves and our congregation -- let's make a *pledge* to go to Israel. In solidarity with our fellow Jews during their time of trial and need, and in recognition of the deep,

elemental bonds we all share, I propose that, within the next **18** months, The New Shul go on a communal trip to Israel. Why now? If not now, **when**?

Ours is a cosmopolitan, well-traveled community. We have members who've been to Afghanistan, Malaysia, Tibet, India, Nepal, the Galapagos -- why not Israel? Even **Madonna** -- sorry, I mean "Esther" -- went to visit Israel just last weekend. If we truly see ourselves as members of a tribe, as a people who belong to the House of Jacob, and not just to The New Shul or to the City of New York -- if we summon the courage to accept that we **share** the same struggles as well as the same blessings, the same destiny as well as the same Covenant, then our decision will be very easy. In fact, it will cease to be an option at all and instead become the most sacred of obligations.

As I said at the outset of this sermon tonight, authentic community isn't always about doing what we **want** to do, but often about doing what we **ought** to do. **Now** is the time for sacrificial giving, for giving till it hurts, for honoring our heritage by acting out of love. We are **needed** by others -- will we step forward and let ourselves be counted among the caring and the committed?

What an incredible statement we would make if, as a congregation, we were to show our brothers and sisters in Israel that they are not **alone**, that we support them in body and in spirit.

* * *

I will conclude with something an acquaintance shared with me, something that I think captures our challenge and our charge. He said to me, "When I went to Israel some years ago and served in the army, there was one line at the end of our unit commander's report which, I'm proud to say, usually summed up our unit's participation in an operation. Our commander would say, **B'shelanu amadnu**. The expression means, "We rose to the occasion."

This acquaintance of mine then said the following -- "**B'shelanu amadnu**: I want to be able to say that to my grandchildren, 20 years from now, when they ask me, 'Saba, when Israel was in trouble, what did you **do**?'"

Beloved members of our community, Israel **is** in trouble -- 20 years from now, what will you say that **you** did during this time of struggle and need?