

Rabbi Feldman's Erev Rosh HaShanah sermon, 5766

Shanah Tovah, good evening. As we enter the New Year together, I want to share with you a story. A few months ago one of our members had been looking forward to attending a college reunion, reconnecting with old friends and enjoying some time up North. Surgery, however, thwarted her long awaited plans. Instead of her trip, she was saddened that she needed to stay home to continue to heal. As she lay in bed in North Carolina on the first night of the reunion, she heard moaning from the person living above her in her apartment complex. A terrible sound, really, she said, just awful. Deciding that she had no choice, she called medical services. It turned out that her neighbor was having a massive heart attack. The EMTS arrived in time, and the next day she was told that her phone call had saved her neighbor's life.

Isn't it strange, she said to me later on, all of the events that led me to being home at that moment, to hearing him, when I had planned for so long to be out of town?

There are moments when our lives unexpectedly intersect with the lives of others. When people who are strangers at one moment can forever transform one another in the next.

In the tale of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph is told by his father to go find his siblings who are grazing the flock in the land of Shechem. Joseph wanders, apparently losing his way, until he comes upon a man in a field. The text never identifies this man. He is left to be an anonymous stranger. The Torah simply says that Joseph meets "ish," a man. When this man sends Joseph to his brothers, he sets in motion all of the events – the brothers throwing Joseph in a pit, Joseph going down to Egypt, becoming Chief Viceroy, reuniting with his brothers, and saving them from famine, leading ultimately to the Israelites' descent into Egypt, slavery, and then the Israelites ascent to Freedom, Sinai and the promised land. All impossible without one encounter. With one man. Who goes unnamed.

In the book of Ruth there is a similar tale of a nameless man who changes the course of history. Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth have met only misfortune in the land of Moab. Naomi's husband and all three of her sons die. Naomi has nothing left, except for the company of her daughter-in-law Ruth as she and Ruth return to the land of Israel.

Following the Torah's agricultural laws of supporting the poor, a kinsman named Boaz generously allows Ruth to glean in his fields to bring back precious grain for Naomi. Boaz and Ruth fall in love, but can not be married, for according to Israelite law, after the death of her husband Ruth would first be married to a closer relative of her deceased husband. There is one out, though. If Boaz can find that kinsman, and receive his permission, through an ancient ritual, Boaz can marry Ruth. Find him he does, and the story has a more than a happy ending. Boaz and Ruth marry and its said that from their progeny came King David, and from the line of King David in the future the Messiah – the one who will herald a time of peace and perfection -- will be born.

The Text refers to the kinsman who out of kindness allows Boaz to marry Ruth as, well, you can guess. Not nameless this time, but close. The first time Boaz sees him and calls out to him, he says, "Hey, come over and sit down here, *ploni*." The English of *ploni* is "what's his face," or, perhaps more accurately, "what's his name!"

There you have it. One man, who goes unnamed – who doesn't get anymore direct naming than "that guy", whose life intersects with others at just the right time. He changes the life of Ruth, of Boaz, and in the tradition, the destiny of the Jewish people, ultimately leading to the perfection of the world.

The biblical figures are anonymous, I believe, to drive home the point that they could be anyone. They could even be us. A gesture of kindness toward someone else, offering a sympathetic ear or a suggestion to solve a problem: These moments may seem insignificant to us -- barely even worth mentioning as we recount the daily busy-ness of our lives. I want to suggest, though, that these moments, like those found in the biblical stories, or the experience

of our congregant who listened to the voice of her neighbor and saved his life, are actually moments of revelation. In a flash, invisible lines of connection are revealed to us. In that moment we can see the unity, the wholeness of which we are all a part. Some name this infinite web of connection, this unity of all --God.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes:

*Look, I understand about coincidence and even what Jungians call synchronicity. But suppose there is something going on in the universe which is to ordinary, everyday reality as our unconscious is to our daily lives? Softly, but unmistakably guiding it. Pushing us here, pulling us there, tripping us up, guiding our steps, feeding us our lines. Most of the time, we are unaware of it. Yet every now and then, on account of some apparent "fluke," we are startled by the results of its presence, chastened by the forces it exerts on our own secret premeditations. We realize that we have been part of something with neither our consciousness nor consent. It is so sweet – and then it is gone.*

*You may say, "But I don't believe in God." And I respectfully ask, "What makes you think it matters to God?"*

A New Year unfolds for us, and it is up to us to realize its power and its beauty. How will we create opportunities for our lives to touch and be touched by others? I am not speaking now about the larger mission of doing *tikkun olam* in the world. That is vitally important, of course, and I will speak more about it tomorrow morning. Right now, though, I am speaking of the smaller, quieter ways we may be available for making a connection when the opportunity arises. Ask: how can I reach out, lend an ear, a hand? How can I learn to live life open instead of closed off? Drop the pebble in the pond when you can; you never know how far the ripples will spread. Cultivate awareness and gratitude for the moments when someone reaches out to you, even through a simple kindness. When we acknowledge others' good deeds and add a measure of goodness to the world with our own kind acts we open ourselves to the sacred in our lives.

May it be a year ripe with blessing. Of invisible lines of connection revealed. Of possibility, of hope and of increasing joy. Shanah tovah