

Kol Nidre Sermon Howard Glicksman, Kehillah President

Good evening and Gut Yuntiff everyone.

Why are we here? My guess is we did not come just to listen to a Yom Kippur appeal!

Instead, we are here to listen to the beautiful chanting of Kol Nidre. In our tradition, Yom Kippur is the holiest of Jewish holidays. We are here because we want to be part of a community and pray together for forgiveness from God, as we do *tzedakah* (charitable expressions of righteousness), and ask each other for forgiveness.

Last year was hard for the Kehillah and me, personally. I spent a lot of time on Kehillah personnel issues. As your synagogue president, and as an institution, we were faced with very difficult choices and no simple solutions. I recognize even though I had the best of intentions, I made mistakes that contributed to, or caused, confusion and strife within our community. I apologize for not finding a better way.

As individuals, and collectively as a religious institution, we have done a lot of soul-searching, learning and growing. We are reviewing and revising important policies, to be more inclusive and to make more transparent decisions. We are moving forward with greater awareness and strength.

My nine years as a member of the Kehillah board have been exciting and challenging. It is a great honor and adventure to be part of our young, dynamic, community. I am guided by a commitment to make it a better place - a place where everyone feels welcome, comfortable, honored, and respected, with great understanding of our being human—even when we make mistakes. Through each experience, even when the road is a bit bumpy, we continue to become a stronger and better community, learning from our experiences.

Our community spent many hours developing a strategic plan. We reaffirmed our commitment to our core values including Gemilut Chasadim (acts of loving kindness), Talmud Torah (life-long Jewish learning), Hishtatfut (engagement), Derech Eretz (respect), Tikkun Olam (repairing the world), Kedushah (holiness), and Kehillah (community). The mission of our Chapel Hill Kehillah, a Reconstructionist congregation, is to create an inclusive and engaged Jewish community that inspires people's lives and deepens Jewish involvement through Jewish celebration, worship, education, social action, and values.

Recently, I came across a sermon given by Rabbi Douglas Sagal last Yom Kippur. Rabbi Sagal is rabbi at a large reform synagogue in NJ. As an aside, he is the brother of Peter Sagal, an NPR radio personality who hosts "Wait Wait Don't Tell Me".

In Rabbi Sagal's sermon, he discussed the value of striving to become a deeply rooted synagogue. I was attracted to his image of a synagogue to nurture the deepest of roots among members, and entwine those roots around one another. The deeper the roots and more entangled they are, the stronger the synagogue: the stronger our community.

In a deeply rooted community, education is vital. Learning is a very powerful experience, especially when it's done as part of a group. In the deeply rooted synagogue, when children and adults truly learn, they grow deeper roots and are transformed for life.

I quote Rabbi Sagal:

“The deeply rooted congregation is a congregation that promotes healing. Isaiah said *shalom, shalom – peace, peace to the far and the near!* Now, no synagogue, no matter how deeply rooted, can protect us from the human condition known as broken-heartedness. Broken heartedness is something we all face in our lives at one time or another. Financial worries. The loss of a job. Illness. The pain of divorce or family trouble. Death.

But the deeply rooted synagogue says, come bring your broken heart to us. Broken hearts are always welcome here. We too, know sorrow and pain and, while we cannot prevent it, we can make sure you do not experience it alone. If you are bent over, we will help bear the burden. If you are driven to your knees, we will kneel alongside you. If you stand before the casket of a loved one, you will not stand alone – ever. In the deeply rooted community, you may find others who have experienced the same degree of broken-heartedness and have survived and gone on. And perhaps you will find the inspiration and hope to do the same.”

Building on this idea of a deeply-rooted community, I want to share with you the following words from Rabbi Shefa Gold's interpretative translation of tomorrow's Haftarah from Isaiah:

“The fast I want is one that will inspire you
to share your food with the hungry,
To redistribute the wealth of this land fairly,
To build affordable housing for the homeless,
And to welcome back the people you have thrown out of your hearts,
Even the ones in your own family.”

“From your inspiration people will reestablish
the values that have been desecrated,
And restore the foundations of decency
that have been laid by your ancestors,
And you shall be called “Repair of Brokenness”.”

The deeply rooted community seeks to ensure its own future. In the Haftarah tomorrow morning, Isaiah declares to his people, *mosdei dor vador tekomeh*. You will lay the foundations for ages to come. You, of the deeply rooted community, you will be the builders, restorers, foundation lay-ers. Isaiah's words spoke not only to the Jews of long ago, but to every Jewish community throughout history.

These words speak to us, too: we are the ones to lay the foundations of our future; to be the builders and foundation lay-ers. I ask all of you to take part in making the Kehillah a better place. By helping each other and allowing yourself to be helped, we strengthen our deeply rooted community. The deeply rooted synagogue sends the message that every person matters, every person is honored, and every person is significant.

Rabbi Sagal closed with the following story:

“A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, do you think if I use all my strength I can move this rock? His father answered, if you use all your strength, I’m sure you can do it. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, you were wrong, I can’t do it. His father placed his arm around the boy’s shoulders and said, no son, you didn’t use all your strength, you didn’t ask me to help.”

On this Day of Atonement, I ask all of you to consider the connections, the roots that bind us together as a community and how we can help each other by creating a strong, financially sound Kehillah. Please consider giving a little more to the Kehillah, to Jewish Family Services, to the IFC, to Mazon, and other charities. Today’s economy has cast long shadows on many, many people, and they need our help. If you can, join me in increasing your giving at this time of year. I pledge tonight, to increase my donation to the Kehillah 10% and to donate to Jewish Family Services, IFC and Mazon. I do this because I can, because I feel the obligation to help others who can’t, and because there is a real need within our Kehillah community and amongst the broader communities of Chapel Hill, the Triangle area, America, and the world.

There are white envelopes with letters in everyone’s machzor. Please consider giving to the Kehillah New Year appeal. We are committed to welcoming everyone into our deeply-rooted community, regardless of ability to pay. We provide aid to religious school education so all Jewish children may be educated Jewishly. Join me in giving more this new year.

May all of us be listened to, embraced, welcomed, supported, challenged, and successful in the coming year. And may it all be in the context of a world of increasing peace and justice.

G'mar chatimah tovah, “May you be sealed for a good year in the Book of Life.”

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