

Shanah Tovah. Good Yontiff. Welcome to everyone. It may seem shocking to say on Rosh Hashanah morning, and I don't mean to offend you, but lately I've started to think that spirituality is over-rated.

Let me explain what I mean.

When we talk about 'spirituality,' we're often talking about the experience of deep connection between ourselves and the Essence of All, or God, or Unity, or Ultimate Reality. It is intensely personal, internal, overwhelming and affecting. But these experiences and feelings, powerful as they are, on their own are not enough. From the Jewish perspective, they must serve as means to an end.

Rabbi Sandy Sasso explains:

When Moses ascended Mt. Sinai, he had a spiritual experience. For forty days and forty nights he lived in the constant presence of the Divine. It was an encounter of indescribable magnitude. The Biblical text tells us that when Moses descended from the mountain his face glowed. The container for Moses' vision was the Ten Commandments, the covenantal relationship between a people and God. Moses' forty days and nights on Sinai was a spiritual encounter; the decalogue was the embodiment of that spirit, in other words, religion.

Rabbi Sasso elaborates on the differences:

Spirituality... is a recognition of the transcendent, an apprehension of the interconnectedness of all life. The spiritual life is rooted in experience, encounters with the self, others and the world.

Religion is the container for this life of the spirit. It is the gravity that anchors spirit to earth, translating the vision of the soul into the responsibility of the individual.

In the best of all possible worlds, spirituality and religion are handmaidens. The soul's most profound experiences with a presence greater than the self are given form and articulation through liturgy, ritual and moral law. Religious forms, in turn, remain constantly open to the renewal of sacred moments.

Friends, think of Moses earlier in his life. When he turns aside to see the burning bush, God calls out to Moses by name and Moses responds Hineyni – here I am. I am fully present to

you. And God then reveals to Moses God's own name, God's very essence, the Hebrew tetragrammaton: Yud, Hey, Vav, Hey.

Where does this transcendent moment lead Moses? Not to sitting in isolation reflecting on the experience, but to confronting Pharaoh in order to end the suffering of the people. Moses, raised in the luxurious isolation of the king's palace, responds to God's command and casts his lot with the suffering of the multitude. This act – rooted in spirituality – is about confronting power to create justice. It is, of course, political, but it is more than that. It is moral. It is religious.

This morning, I would like to explore the ways in which Judaism insists that spiritual experience must lead us to action on behalf of others. Let's begin with a brief exploration of the tension between the particularist interests of Judaism and the Jewish call to the universal. We'll move on to a discussion of how responsibility for others is not only a religious mandate but a deeply spiritual experience. Finally, we'll conclude with what all this means to us here, now, this year as a Jewish community in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In his new book, Judaism and Justice: the Jewish Passion to Repair the World, Rabbi Sid Schwartz discusses Jewish consciousness on a continuum between what he terms "Exodus consciousness" and "Sinai consciousness." Exodus consciousness is typified by concern with the creation and maintenance of Jewish identity and Jewish survival. Its spiritual touchstone is the experience of escaping slavery, giving the disparate tribes who fled Egypt a common history and a sense of shared destiny.

In contrast, Sinai consciousness is about the call to be a Holy people, to have a sacred purpose. Whether we believe in Divine revelation at Sinai as factually true or as a myth that teaches deep truths, it transforms the *Israelites*, bound by common history, into *Jews*, bound by purpose.

On closer analysis, though, Exodus and Sinai are not opposites. Each contains elements of the other. We became bound as a people by our shared history of slavery and escape. And, from that experience also arises the ethical touchstone, repeated no less than 36 times in the Torah: Be kind to the stranger "for you know what it feels like, you were once a stranger in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). Remember you were once oppressed, so do not oppress the other. Remember you were once marginalized and abused so take care of the stranger, the weak and the vulnerable. From the particular experience of slavery and Exodus arises a universal concern.

Similarly, the covenant at Sinai would have been useless had there not been a distinct people to receive the covenant and to stay in existence to carry it forward. We have a universal

charge but we understand it through our specific sacred language, texts, history and traditions. We have the Passover *seder*, the giving of *tzedakah*, the understanding of *tikkun olam*. In short a Jewish sense of justice that would not exist without the survival of a Jewish way of doing and being. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks expresses it well in his book, To Heal a Fractured World: “Judaism is a particularist faith that recognizes the universality of the human condition.”

It is true that, in many places and times – confined to ghettos, or the Pale of Settlement, or worse – we have focused more on caring for and supporting each other than on working for the peace and welfare of the non-Jews around us.

In our semi-autonomous communities we maintained, out of necessity, our own judicial, political and social welfare systems. Yet even though we have lived in exile for the majority our history, often marginalized and despised, we also held up the value of *darchei shalom* (literally, the ways of peace), a mandate to be concerned for the common good, to reach out with compassion to those outside of our own community and to act on an awareness of our common humanity. As Rabbi Sacks points out, our tradition showed us the *way* even if our political and historical situation stopped us from fully realizing it. These words of the Rabbis, written in the first or second century after the destruction of the Second Temple form the cornerstone of *darchei shalom*:

Our Masters taught: for the sake of peace, the poor of the non-Jew should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the non-Jew should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the non-Jews should be [provided the financial resources for] a burial just as we provide a burial for the dead of Israel.

So then, you may be wondering, “Which is more important: my commitment to Jewish continuity, or my doing good in the broader community?” To which I say: they are both necessary for a vibrant Jewish life. In America we live in a time of unprecedented wealth and integration. We have the resources to follow both our Exodus impulse of Jewish survival and also our Sinai mandate to live a life of holiness. We build Jewish institutions such as the Kehillah not only to protect and transmit Judaism, but to serve as a base from which we can reach out and do Jewish in the world.

What is Judaism without the call to engage in acts of ultimate value, to create communities that encourage life, health and human dignity for all their citizens? If some form of ethnic “Jewishness” survives, but Jewish actions to repair the world don't, what's the point? There is a popular Israeli children's song, *Dundai*, that bears quoting here: *Eretz yisrael b'li Torah he k'guf bli n'shamah*, “Israel without the Torah is like a body without a soul.”

So there is the religious mandate. But where is the heart of the matter? What compels us to reach out to one another from the depths of our souls? How and why do we feel with immediacy this commitment to helping the other? How does our tradition name this calling?

Two Jewish philosophers who have wrestled with these questions are Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Buber discusses the “I-Thou” relationship – one built on mutuality and respect, and seeing other people in their fullness, rather than only in terms of ourselves and our own desires. When we experience others not merely as instruments for our own satisfaction, but open ourselves fully to them as full and separate beings, Buber says, such encounters bring us into relationship with the Source of All.

Levinas, however, goes further, and it is his philosophy that calls to me most strongly. My colleague, Rabbi Ira Stone of Philadelphia, summarizes this perspective beautifully in his book, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar*:

Levinas’s thought emphasizes not the primacy of the self, but the primacy of the other – that is, other human beings. He taught that the self comes into existence by virtue of the other; therefore, the self comes into being indebted to the other.... This other, the other person, is presented to the individual through a face-to-face encounter that commands a response in action. For Levinas, this face-to-face encounter shatters the self-containedness or insularity of the self...the Question “what is being” is asked only after we ask the question “What is my responsibility in being?”

To say that each of us exists because of our responsibility to others may seem like a statement solely about human relationships. But Levinas says the trace of God’s presence is to be found in the face of other people, too. He liked to quote Exodus 34:6, in which Moses asks to see God. Instead, he is permitted to see God’s “back,” and hears the Divine voice proclaiming, “The Eternal, the Everpresent is a compassionate and gracious God, patient, abounding in devotion and truth, assuring steadfast love for a thousand generations...” In other words, Moses experiences God indirectly, a “trace” of God. Similarly, says Levinas, we experience the trace of God on the faces of other people. In Rabbi Stone’s words, “The face of the other is not the face of God, but rather it is the place of the *trace* of God’s having passed by, thereby leaving **us** responsible.”

Claire Katz, scholar of Judaism and Levinas sums it up this way in her book *Judaism. Levinas and the Feminine*:

Levinas discusses our relationship to God in terms of our relationship to the other: to respond to the other is to respond to God. He [Levinas] reiterates

this view in his claim that to follow the “Most-High is also to know that nothing is greater than to approach one’s neighbor, than the concern for the lot of the ‘widow and orphan, the stranger and poor’ and that to approach them with empty hands is not to approach them at all...”

So, the encounter with the Divine takes place in the context of our encounters with other people. And our encounters with other people demand a response – demand that we take responsibility. How do we, as a Kehillah, respond when the presence of others calls to us, “Where are you?” What is our “Hineni/Here I am?”

Over the past few years, we have made a start. Thanks to the efforts of committed co-chairs Marion Robboy, Brenda Ginsberg and David Wohl, as well as all who volunteer, we have strengthened our Caring Committee so that systems are in place for people to support each other during times of illness or transition. And now we are enhancing our Social Action efforts as well under the leadership of Jackie Resnick and Irene Zipper, to meet our responsibility to those outside of the walls of our own Jewish community.

What is the next step? Levinas liked to say that the material needs of others are our spiritual needs. Here are some facts: The IFC reported that, in 2005, 5,500 Orange County households are spending 50% or more of their income on housing. The average monthly household income, over a three-month period, of those requesting food and other IFC services was \$690. Fifteen percent of Orange County residents have no health insurance. The report concluded, “In Orange County, with housing rent levels twice what they were in 1990, gas prices escalating and “living wage” jobs hard to come by, many families are just one crisis away from homelessness.”

We –and I of course include myself-- encounter people who clean our health clubs and our homes, take care of our children, handle our landscaping, and work the grills at our local restaurants all the time – but do we really see them? My husband, Ben pointed out to me that our almost four year-old son comments on the panhandlers at the exit ramps of I-40. I have learned to keep driving.

To address this -- to see and to know others in the County where we live so that we can respond as our tradition tells us we must – Kathy Kaufman of the Social Action Committee and I began our involvement, on behalf of the Kehillah, with a wonderful initiative called the IAF Orange County Sponsoring Committee. The group is creating new networks of relationship across economic, racial and religious boundaries, and seeks to use the power of these networks to create a more just, compassionate society in Orange County. We’ve been meeting with over 20

ministers from many denominations, as well as groups representing the Latino and African American communities.

This initiative is based on the model of the Industrial Areas Foundation – an organizing campaign started by Saul Alinsky in the 60's -- that has been very successful in seeding the grassroots, interfaith Durham CAN organization.

Here is how it works: Each participating congregation or organization meets on its own to identify what will make our County a better place for everyone to live. The diverse groups then come together to create a shared agenda for change and to commit to funding and staffing a formal grass-roots organization to address this agenda.

That's the beginning. So that you get a flavor of what can be achieved, here are just some of Durham CAN's accomplishments:

- Helped to motivate Durham government agencies and Duke University to implement Living Wage policies.
- Created a coalition of major health care providers and insurers to bring healthcare to underserved populations
- Created broad-based community coalitions that have tested over 2,000 children for lead poisoning, and removed lead from public housing and parks.
- Leveraged \$1.2 million in public and private funds to provide daycare to needy families.

It has been powerful for me to see so clearly that the foundation of large and positive social change is one-to-one relationships with other people. For example, recently through this program I got to sit down to lunch with Rosita, a mother of three whose husband is a manual laborer. She told me about her harrowing trip to the United States to be reunited with her husband, and how she and her toddler son almost lost their lives on the journey. As she recounted her story, she began to weep and told me that she had never before shared the details of her ordeal with anyone. She told me of her brother who died here because of inadequate access to medical care. And she told me of the work she was doing to help other young mothers in her community raise healthy children.

I walked away from that lunchtime conversation feeling connected to Rosita, concerned for her, and strongly motivated to correct the injustices that she had experienced.

These simple face-to-face meetings-- that leave us figuring out what we stand for, what to do, how to help, how to listen – are transformative, and the first step in transformative work.

Our IAF program is just in the beginning stages. We have had starts and stops. It takes time to build bridges of trust and understanding between groups that have not always worked together. Our success is hardly guaranteed. But in October we will have our first round of

meetings between different lay leaders from each member congregation and organization. These lay leaders will have opportunities to hear each other's stories, to see and know each other and to form new connections. Our weekly announcements will share with you how to contact Kathy Kaufman, our member who is captaining this effort. I urge you to learn more about how you can get involved in this effort, and to participate in the October trainings.

When we recognize the trace of God in the faces of other people, the experience is a deeply spiritual one. But that alone is not enough. We must respond as Judaism calls us to, with compassion and righteous action. When we do, we transform the spiritual moment into a religious one, and we, too, are transformed.

Hineyni. Here I am. Here we are. May this be for all of us a year of blessing, a year in which we see – and in which we respond. Shana Tova. **Return to the Musaf service, page 261 – the prayer hineyni!**