

## **“Reclaiming Covenant”**

*Rosh Hashanah 5768*

Emily and I love our vacation time. Getting away in the summer to Northern Vermont is, for us, not just a nice part of our year – it’s necessary. Two uninterrupted weeks amid the beauty of Stowe where – as a family – we shut off the television – and hike, bike, and swim.....we do puzzles, play games, read “Harry Potter” and eat probably more pizza than we should from a delicious place called “Pie in the Sky.”

Now, it’s not as though we – like most families – don’t do many of these things during the rest of the year. It’s just that we all know that this happens to be special time. For these few precious days we live Thoreau’s sage advice: “Simplify, simplify, simplify.”

There is still another part of this time together that has also become very important to both Em and me. During those times when it is just the two of us – over meals out, during our longer walks – we make sure to take the time to talk about our life together as a family. Separated by many miles from the pace and varying pulls of our everyday, in our conversations we take stock of and reflect upon all that has happened over the past year since our last time away. We recognize and celebrate and say ‘Thank G-d’ for all that is so good and so right. And, at the same time, we recognize and consider what we really should be doing to make our lives even better and more whole.

On the day that we were married, Em and I, like most couples at a Jewish wedding signed a beautiful marriage contract – a ketubah. We happened to write our own and it was then calligraphed and designed by the artist Jeanette Kuvin Oren – the same artist, by the way, who created Beth Shalom’s brightly colored Torah covers. In the ketubah, at the very start of our life’s journey together Em and I promised each other that together we would do all that we are able over the years to create a life of happiness, love, family, balance, and moments made holy by our Jewish tradition. For us, it is the expression of our ideal – our vision for our present and our future. When Em and I have our special summer conversations, in a way, part of what we are doing is returning to that ideal and thoughtfully reflecting upon how we are doing.

*Atem Nitzavim Kulchem HaYom.....*In a Torah portion that we read during this season, Moses speaks to the Children of Israel, telling them: “You stand here this day...ALL of you.....before the Lord Your G-d.....from the youngest to the oldest....men, women, and children.....from the woodchopper to the water drawer.....to affirm your commitment to the covenant that Adonai, Your G-d gave to you.” Standing on the border of the Promised Land – about to enter and begin a new life together as a people – Moses reminds the people that they too, in a way, signed a kind of ketubah. In their receiving the Torah from G-d, they agreed – both for themselves and for all of the generations to come - to the terms of a convenantal contract that expresses our highest ideals for life and living.

Eternal and sacred – our covenant with G-d – to this day - remains our peoples’ guide for determining what is good.....and true.....and right.

Here at Temple Beth Shalom – as is true in many congregational communities – just about everything that we do is in some way linked to our covenant. From the programs that we offer to the services that we create to the way that decide how to operate our building – our leadership, both clergy and lay work hard trying to ensure that everything we do is consistent with who we are – and who we hope to be - as a Jewish community. When, as just one example, First Parish Congregation first contacted us about possibly hosting them on Sunday mornings this coming year for worship, our leadership discussion immediately focused upon Abraham and Sarah’s unconditional hospitality to their neighbors who were in need. Indeed, welcoming First Parish was, for us, less an issue of convenience and space as much as it was an issue of being true to our covenantal values.

This past Sunday, our congregation hosted a welcome buffet breakfast for our friends and neighbors following their first service in our sanctuary. We are, of course, thrilled to have them with us and look forward to the many opportunities of shared learning, dialogue, and discussion that we will have.

Another example: In recent weeks, I know that many of us have been closely following the events surrounding the AntiDefamation League and the issue of the Armenian genocide. It is first very important to point out that the ADL – both regionally and nationally – is an important organization that has done and continues to do outstanding work not only on behalf of the Jewish people, but for **all** peoples. I am proud to be a member of the New England Regional Board and to serve with a number of dedicated local leaders – many of whom are from our own congregation. ....And, at the same time, I, like many, have been pained and saddened by the unfolding of the events around the issue of the Armenian genocide.

This summer, the New England Regional Board – along with its Director Andy Tarsy made the decision to speak out against what was seen as a glaring inconsistency between the ADL’s national position on the Armenian genocide and the Jewish covenantal values of justice, equality, and fair treatment for all that have been part of the ADL since its founding.

Though there is still much to be decided upon and done, what I believe is important to recognize is that the ADL has heard these concerns and questions and is responding in a very Jewish way. Recognizing its need to reflect the ideals layed out in their organizational charter, the ADL national office has agreed to engage in its own significant process of soul searching at its November National Convention. And then, as a result of that reflection the ADL has said that they will act.

In the same way that our Jewish community as a whole is asked to consider to what extent it is living up to the terms of the covenant, so too are we.

For each of us, Judaism’s covenant with G-d represents **our** own personal promise to live as honestly....as compassionately.....with as much understanding as we are able. We affirm our genuine commitment to using our words and our actions to help other

people.....and never to insult, diminish, or harm them ----- As well, it is through our people's covenant that we commit ourselves to doing all that we are able to make a positive difference in our communities and in our world. For Jews, these ideals are not merely good things to do. They are not merely nice things to do. They are holy. And while we may find ourselves living in a world which may value different things – it is these promises which ground us as a people.

Indeed, so essential are these values to who we are as Jews that every single year, the shofar calls us to remember this higher vision....and to seriously consider both how we are doing in terms of our own day to day.....and also what changes we might need to be making in our lives

Truth be told, we **know** that keeping up on a daily basis with the terms of our ketubah with G-d isn't always easy. Remember, those sacred promises that the Israelites made – as essential and important as they are – they were made in the relative quiet and calm of the desert mountains of Sinai. They weren't affirmed in the midst of Moses rushing to meet a deadline at work – or while Miriam was finishing off one carpool and just about to start her second. When it comes to living as our best selves, the reality is that our day to day lives challenge us --- sometimes even compromising our capacity to be and act as we know we should.

We have all seen it happen in others. It has happened to all of us.

Emily's dad, Jerry, is probably the most social and outgoing person I know. As he is never reluctant to strike up a conversation with anyone, I have a running bet with him that he can't walk into Sudbury Farms – pick up a jar of olives – pay for it – and walk out **WITHOUT** speaking with **SOMEONE**. It's just part of his make up. And – in all honesty - its part of what makes him so special.

Jerry tells the story of the time that he had taken Em's mom, Melanie to the doctor. Having to wait for her to finish, Jerry decided that he would run across the street to get a cup of coffee. As he was waiting in line, Jerry noticed – as did others who were also in the shop – that the man in front of him was grumbling and aggressive and that he was clearly upset. Now most people probably would have just left this man be – letting him do or say whatever he was going to do or say. But not Jerry. Calmly tapping the man on the shoulder, Jerry said, "Excuse me.....but you sound like you're having a bad day." Somewhat surprised by Jerry's approach, the man responded gruffly that, in fact, he was and that it wasn't getting any better. At which point Jerry said to him: 'I see. Now, I don't know if you know this but down the street there is a large hospital complex. And I happen to know that there are lots of people who are there who – in a heartbeat – would trade your day for theirs.'

Listening to Jerry's words, the man's demeanor immediately changed. And calming down, the man then thanked Jerry for helping him keep things in perspective.

As I'm sure is true for all of us, I know that as a rabbi, I have seen firsthand – and far too often – examples of how the stressors or strains of a given moment..... of a family dynamic.....or of a difficult relationship.....or of a hard financial situation.... or of a professional need.....can lead us to do things or to say things that under normal circumstances – we would NEVER do or say.

It is at moments such as these when I wish that, perhaps, Jerry, was around for all of us - willing to come and gently tap us on the shoulder. Or perhaps what would really be helpful during these less than best moments would be if G-d were to come down to us and just have us watch a video replay of ourselves.

I can almost hear the Holy One at such a moment: “Can you come over here for a moment.....Ah.....Can we roll the tape? ....Did you really say that?.....Is that really YOU?.... Now, I KNOW you...THAT's not you” ---- Someone once noted that what separates human beings from animals is that human beings have the capacity to blush. The point, however of this G-d inspired conversation would not really be to punish, but rather to help us to see.

The High Holy Days – often abbreviated as the HHD's – invite us to look upon our lives in a kind of HHD - Holy High Definition – and to use our Jewish tradition and the covenant that we share as a way to help us shape our lives so that what we **do** in life is, in fact, a reflection of what we **believe**.

There is still yet another factor that I believe challenges us as we strive to live as our best selves. For better or worse.....we also seem to find ourselves living in a fast paced world that is increasingly focused on the needs of the self. That which makes us happy, feel good and is convenient – for many – is sometimes not only a **single** concern – but a **sole** concern. And it's a problem. This past December, when Time Magazine announced its annual “Person of the Year,” I was saddened to learn that this past year's honoree was “You” – ‘people’ – or more specifically, each person. In all honesty, I don't want to be the “Person of the Year” – nor do I want to live in a community or society which places ourselves on the highest of pedestals – asking or expecting little of us other than what we may want to give.

Our tradition, as we recognize, comes to teach us just the opposite. This Rosh Hashanah all of us are asked to link ourselves to something greater than ourselves – to recall our people's ancient yet eternal covenantal promises – to be good....to be thoughtful....to be sensitive....And then in our day to day lives to make those promises real.

May it be for each of us in the year ahead that we be inspired by the depth of our people's wisdom and beauty.

May G-d help us as we strive – each in our own lives – not only to do better...but to be better.

And may it be that by re-embracing our covenantal ketubah – on this day – and throughout the year ahead – that we will grow not only closer to G-d...but closer to each other as well.

Amen.