

Yom Kippur Morning 5779

Ascending to Holiness

It had been a particular difficult and long day. It was about 10:30pm when my last meeting at the temple ended and I just needed a time out before going home. So I decided to do something I always thought about doing, but never did. I came here; here to this very sanctuary, sat in the last row in the dark of night and fixated on the shimmering glow of the *Ner Tamid*.

After a while, I closed my eyes and began to meditate, shut down the mental computer racing through my brain and in the quiet and spiritual comfort of this sanctuary, I indeed found the sanctuary I was seeking... Until as if out of nowhere, I was shaken by a cacophony of sound. At first it sounded like people having a conversation; I looked all around, but I was alone. All alone in the dark, yet the room began to shake with a rumbling roar of emotion. Then I realized these disembodied voices I was hearing were not talking they were arguing.

I looked up again towards these stained glass windows and realized the raucous sounds I was hearing were emanating from these works of art. It was as if they had come alive. Now I know you must think I was losing it, or had a bit too much of the Shabbos wine, but this was no joke. I began to question my sanity, think that this is a prank or I was in a reverie, but it was real. They were souls on fire. I decided to listen more intently to decipher what was going on. Let me take you back to that mysterious place in which I found myself and share what I heard.

“You are such a pane,” said one window to the other. “You think you are the essence of Judaism but in truth my window is the heart and soul of Jewish life.” “No, no,” said the third interrupting the other two, “you both are so mistaken, without me there is no Judaism.” And the fourth chimed in yelling over the others, claiming it opened a true window of the soul of the Jewish people. And so it went until the uproar was so great no one could hear the other.

I finally had enough. It was truly “paneful” to listen to their shrill voices. I yelled over the din, “Stop fighting! There is no place for this

kind of behavior in, of all places, a place of sanctuary.” I told them I was the Rabbi and in fact, I was their creator, having created these windows in my mind which gave birth to their existence in the first place. Startled that an unexpected visitor had intruded upon their conversation, the stained glass windows were stunned and an awkward silence ensued. I told them I would listen to each one in turn argue their point, and then I would determine who was right.

Like a master creator to a veritable golem he brought to life, I took control of this unfolding mystery and brought the windows to order. I told window number 1 to go first and commanded the others to listen carefully. Then the windows erupted in protest, asking why “prayer” got to go first. I indicated that she earned that right by being the most humble as she engaged in silent prayer.

Prayer awoke from her silence and humbly stated her case. Prayer said she is how we access the Divine in our spiritual practice of *t’fillah* or *avodah*. *T’fillah* comes from the Hebrew root which means to judge oneself. In other words, prayer is about looking inward to see how we

are measuring up to the best that we are capable of. It's about self-examination. As the philosopher Plato said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." But it is more than that. It is how we reach beyond the material world that feeds our worldly desires to realize that there is also much more than meets the eye. It's how we learn to express our deepest inmost thoughts, our hopes and our dreams, our fears and our anxieties. It's how we connect with the words our ancestors first uttered as recorded in the *siddur* and how we access the recesses of our own hearts as prompted by our private thoughts.

As my window dressing suggests, it's about our hands reaching upward, grasping Jacob's ladder with the words of *Shema Yisrael* written upon it. It's about the flames of a burning bush rising like the fires on the altars of old providing a pleasing scent of gratitude to the source of all our blessings. It's about beholding our beloved Kol Tikvah in the right hand corner, our *bet k'nesset*, our synagogue, our *k'hillah k'doshah*. *Avodah*, argued prayer is the work of consciously enabling the spirit of God's divine presence to suffuse our lives with perspective,

equilibrium, tranquility and transformation. As it has been said, “Prayer may not be able to water parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will. He or she who rises from prayer a better person, his or her prayer is fulfilled.”

Torah or window number 2, building upon the words of prayer, asked to go next. Torah spoke intelligently and in a scholarly voice, claiming everything is based upon the Torah as Rabbi ben Bag Bag said, “Turn it and turn it for everything is in it.” The Torah is our life blood as a people. It’s what binds us together, regardless how we each might interpret it. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox of every kind, even secular Jews, look to me for wisdom, understanding, our values, morals and ethics. I tell the early stories of our people’s quest to experience God and our long trek from slavery in Egypt, through the desert of pain and possibility, to the edge of the Promised Land. I provide countless opportunities for study and reflection, peering into each of my black letters written on white fire to reveal the newest and the oldest truths

about what it means to be a Jew and a worthy human being created in the Divine image. My window echoes in visual images the giving of the Torah by Moses, passing it onto the generations which follow, ancient roots giving way to a tree of life in the top left corner, with a *sefer torah* ascending upward inscribed with my first few words, “In the beginning God created!” You can see Jacob’s ladder on the right and books on the left reminding us that we are indeed *am ha-sefer*, the people of the book who prize education and learning above all else. In fact, when Jews interface with the immortal words written upon my skin, engaged in the study of Torah, one can truly know God’s presence. As it is written in the *Mishnah, tractate Peah*:

“These are the things that are limitless,
of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world,
while the principal remains in the world to come.

They are: honoring one’s father and mother,
engaging in deeds of compassion,

arriving early for study morning and evening,
dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,
providing for the wedding couple,
accompanying the dead for burial,
being devoted in prayer
and making peace among people.

But the study of Torah encompasses them all.”

Then the third pane of glass chimed in asking to be recognized in the most kindly manner. *G'milut Chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, Dear Rabbi as you know with all due respect to *Torah* and *avodah*, *g'milut chasadim* is without a doubt the essence of Jewish living.

Study and prayer are for sure the building blocks of an ethical life, but it is what we do which ultimately matters in the end. As is states in *Pirke Avot* 3:12, when deeds exceed learning, learning endures; but

when learning exceeds deeds, it does not endure. Intentional acts of kindness we perform which ease the burdens of others, whether feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, caring for animals, or giving *tzedakah* to a worthy cause, these are the deeds of compassion which save lives and improves their quality. Rejoicing with bride and groom, visiting the sick, accompanying the dead for burial, making peace and solving disputes, these are the behaviors which brings God's presence into the world.

A random act of kindness can begin a chain reaction which can literally lift the spirits of the downtrodden and restore belief in human decency. By actually living out the ideals enshrined in the Torah, we become Torah, we become the embodiment of Torah, capable of transforming the world as we know it, into the world we wish it to be.

When we stand up for justice, march for freedom, and rise up to confront the evils of our age, we leave our mark upon the world. Knowing that we stood for something, our life takes on meaning and purpose in significant ways.

My window at the center top, boldly depicts the prophetic pose of one whose hand is raised to the Heavens, demanding justice even from God, ala Abraham in Sodom and Gemorah, a *tzedakah* box, reminding us to give till it feels good and a *chuppah* and two hands intertwined, demonstrating the warmth of human love. *G'mulah Chassadim* concluded her speech by citing the Rabbinic maxim: *Beeshveel Chesed Ha-Olam Mitkayem*, kindness is the foundation that keeps the world turning, day by day, without which the world could not exist!

With that window number four *Tzion*, roared like a lion. My window, *Zion* proclaimed is the face of a lion, for *Ari* in Hebrew meaning lion is one of the names of Jerusalem in the bible – *Ari-el*- the lion of Judah. My lion is part orange and part blue, representing the contrasting shades of the Earthy and Heavenly Jerusalem. You can see my cedars and pine trees and the various gates leading to the Temple Mount, ascending, always ascending to the heights of Heaven. If we are speaking of ascent, making *Aliyah* means not only ascending to Holiness, it is ascending to *Eretz Yisrael*, making *aliyah* going up to

Jerusalem, the heart and soul of the Jewish people. The word *Zion* in fact in Hebrew, *Tzion*, connotes the idea of perfection. *Zion* continued saying that Israel represents the fulfillment of our highest hopes and dreams, including the return of our people to its ancient homeland after 2,000 years in exile, the ingathering of the exiles from the four corners of the earth, the rejuvenation of Jewish culture, including the Hebrew language, and the ability to defend ourselves and never be powerless again, vulnerable to those who wish to destroy us. Rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of the Holocaust, Israel represents the rebirth of 6 million of our brothers and sisters who perished in Auschwitz and Dauchau and Babi Yar. But Israel, *Tzion*, is much more than that. It is the limitless potential to build a just and compassionate society as imagined by the prophets of Israel and enshrined in the state's declaration of independence. Israel allows us to take the prayers we offer, the sacred texts we study and individual good deeds we practice, and build from these the ideal society, the perfect word as it is said, *Mi-Tzion Taytze Torah, U'd'var Adonai Mi-Yerushalayim*. – for from out of *Zion* shall go forth the *Torah*, and the word of *Adonai* from Jerusalem.

Then just as I was about to commend each of the windows for their lucid, enlightening and transparent remarks, the two newest windows, the ones on top, who were strangely silent until now, began to speak.

Window number five, *Shechinah*, spoke in a heavenly voice, the voice of inner peace and completion, a Holy integrated wholesomeness. She said when Jews and indeed all human beings, ascend in prayer through *avodah* and raise themselves up spiritually in study through words of Torah, then they are on a journey towards *Tikun Atzmi*, a personal quest for goodness and righteousness, in a word to live the life of a *mensch*. My window represents the summit of that journey, where all contradictions are harmonized, where honesty, personal integrity, and inner peace and tranquility are realized in one's life. As my window depicts, a sukkah of peace, a sukkat shalom, shelters you, the wings of the *Shechinah* lift you up, the cleansing waters of Aquarius purify your spirit even as the white star of perfection declares O' man and woman of flesh and blood, you have arrived and you have done well!

Finally the last of the windows took his turn. Echoing the words of the *Shechinah*, window number six, known as *k'dhoshah*, is about fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Tikun Olam*, repair of this fragile, often broken world. We accomplish this through deeds of kindness and acts of justice and in striving always to establish our community, our nation and our world as a model society, wherein as in the words of Isaiah, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation nor shall they learn war anymore, and where man and woman sits under his vine and fig tree with no one to make them afraid.”

My window reminds us that each time we pray, we should lift ourselves up on our toes as we say the words, “*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*”, “holy, holy, holy” – always string to go higher, yearning for moral and ethical perfection. On the right you can see the wicks of a *Havdalah* candle and the fire that rises from the flame and in the center, the World itself, held by human hands, reminding us that to be holy means to be God’s partners in the sacred work of *Tikun Olam*. And if you look closely at the bottom center, you can see, our beloved *Kol Tikvah* once

again, this time having succeeded in creating the *k'hillah k'doshah* – the holy, sacred community we work on building each and every day.

Finally I had had enough. These windows had spoken through me and while like children, who vied for my attention and tried to win preferential treatment; they each in their own way were part of a puzzle that told the story of Judaism, its core values, ideas and ideals which enshrines it as one of the world's great religions. But there was still one piece missing, the One that held all 6 windows in balance, the One that uniquely unites all disparate parts into one great unity, the one whose light is everlasting and whose shining presence silently speaks volumes without uttering a word. In fact, it is the reason I came into this sanctuary in the first place, to gaze upon the light eternal, our *Ner Tamid*.

The *Ner Tamid* is evidence of God's presence; it is the supreme source of our faith, our hopes, our dreams, our inspiration, the embodiment of our reach for the heavens, even as we ascend to holiness one window at a time.

And that was it. I left that night, newly awakened by a spirit that moved me to share this report with you, “panefully” aware, that you may think I’ve lost it altogether, but will look at these windows nevertheless, just a bit differently than you had before.

On this Erev Yom Kippur, as we begin our inner journey to fulfill our atonement, may we ascend to the heights of holiness and there, may we be blessed by the *Shechinah*, God’s loving presence and let us say...