

Emanu-El: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

A sermon delivered by
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Temple Emanu-El, Westfield, New Jersey
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It is a great honor to be here with all of you this morning. Just a year ago I was a rabbi who had retired from four decades of service to a congregation a few miles down the road in Middlesex County, one of New Jersey's oldest congregation, Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple in New Brunswick. This morning I am with all of you, so many of whom I have already come to know because you have reached out to me and welcomed me. Some of you are my former students, whose b'nai mitzvah and weddings and even baby namings we have shared together with your family. I thank you all for your kindness to me, to my fellow clergy, the Temple staff, the leaders of Temple Emanu-El. I am very grateful for your welcome.

Here we are, a Kehillah Kedosha, a sacred community in which each and every one us holds a special place in making this community what it is. Temple Emanu-El, a congregation in Westfield, New Jersey, a congregation nearly seventy years young, with a proud and historic past since the first days when it began, until now... and with a bright and wonderful future ahead of it, a future yet to be envisioned, a future yet to be created, a future yet to be cherished and celebrated.

As we sit here in Emanu-El's sanctuary, together with our loved ones at our sides; we do what Jews have done each year at this time. We contemplate the birth of the world, not the physical world, nor the world as it is; rather, we think about and consider the world as we wish it to be: *Yom Harat Olam*, a virtual conceiving experience filled with all of the awe that we experience at the birth of a child, only on a cosmic, spiritual level. No other people, no other faith, as I know it, contemplates such a moment in its calendar pondering questions of meaning and purpose and responsibility, as individuals and families, communities, people, and faith.

I

The great American writer, Mark Twain, understood what we do here and what we are as a people when he wrote an article in Harper's magazine, entitled, "Concerning the Jews." In that article the following passage appears: "All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but [the Jew] remains. What is the secret of the [Jew's] immortality?"

One might say that the answer to Twain's query is this: The Torah, for everything is inscribed within it. Or, perhaps the answer lies in our prayers, in the words of the psalmist, the liturgical poet. After all, last night and again this morning, did we not hear and sing and recite the words of our prayers, the beautiful melodies that touch our hearts, and the words of Torah that make demands on our souls?

I would suggest to you another answer: what sustains us is this place, this Temple, the very unique Jewish institution that we call synagogue, where our sacred texts are studied, the magnificent words and melodies of our prayers, the countless telling and retelling of our people, the Jewish People, and its historic encounter with the Divine – it is all that and more, encompassed in the very notion of synagogue, from within its walls and pushing out beyond its walls, that Jews have been able to achieve an immortality like no other people.

II

A story: a young family moves to a community. In that community a small group of Jews gather to begin discussions about establishing a congregation. They are few in numbers but they sense that more Jewish families will move in; they want to create a place where they can teach their children about their faith, where they can gather for worship, and where they can become a force for well-being, to engage with their neighbors, to promote a greater good for all. And so, they begin: some of them become teachers for their children, with little training but lots of passion; others become service leaders; and they all find ways to gather for prayer and celebration, everything being portable because they don't yet have a home, a building to call their own, a Temple, a synagogue.

In this story, I see this same group a couple of years later. They now have a building of their own, what once had been the rectory of a church. Bedrooms are turned into classrooms, the basement is turned into a social hall, and the main floor is transformed into a sanctuary. The fathers are beating nails into the floorboards, the kids are handing the parents the nails, and everyone is filled with enthusiasm and joy as they build "God's house." And of course, there is lots of food at each and every gathering. Sacred work, a Kehillah Kedosha, a sacred community in the making. And they hire their first rabbi, a rabbi who will teach them Torah, guide them, and share the sacredness of life with them.

And then, a powerful event takes place, an event that the congregation knew would someday occur, but an event for which no one was ready. One of the young founders, Eli, age 31, dies. His wife Helen, and their five-year old son, suddenly become mourners. They are bereft, their lives turned upside down, Eli's death changed them forever. And that congregation of young people, along with its new rabbi – they gather around and embrace Helen and her son, they comfort them, and pledge to hold them precious with a commitment to care for them throughout their lives. And they do. I know, because Helen's son was a little five-year old boy named Bennett, me. I was the kid who with my mother was embraced by that congregation. They welcomed me each and every shabbat, they cared for me in our religious school where I was a member of the first kindergarten and continued until graduating in the first confirmation class and the first twelfth grade graduation class. I was the kid who was loved by a community of adults who were my relatives and my adult mentors, who provided me and all of my friends with opportunities to learn, opportunities to grow, and opportunities to discover what it means to be a Jew in contemporary times. It was my congregation that sent me to boy scout camp, that sent me to a national leadership institute for young people from Reform congregations, who taught me Torah and made sure that I had rabbis who loved kids and loved teaching kids, and who cared deeply about kids.

And that congregation made sure that regardless of Helen's financial ability, she and her son would be welcomed at the door. She paid dues because she insisted, even if the dues were vastly reduced. And she sang in the choir and became an officer on the Board of Trustees, and offered to do whatever the congregation needed. My mother and I will always be grateful to Temple Emanuel of Rochester, New York. It was not the building that embraced us; it was the people inside, the congregants, the members of the congregation. They were committed to building and sustaining a community that could weather the storms of life, that could hold one another precious, and that could create a sacred space for themselves, their children, and all who are in need. Their rabbis would come and go; some were better than others. And from time to time they would even face financial stress, like when the roof leaked, or the boiler needed repair, or the largest donor of the congregation passed away or moved to Florida. But their devotion to their fellow congregants, to the young and old, to the haves and to the have nots – that devotion never diminished nor deterred them from carrying out their mandate of being Emanuel, living with the Presence of the Divine.

I tell you this story because as I look around, this is what I see. You and I are a generation that has been asked to dance in a hurricane. The world as we know it is no more. Change has become the operative tool of the day. In our nation's capital we are witnessing an assault on our constitution, on the very notion of democracy itself. And the winds of the assault are battering our foundations as never before. Jewish institutions, including synagogues, are experiencing new challenges that are shaking the very foundations upon which they have been built. Jewish communities are experiencing open antisemitism that we once thought was eliminated in the same way we thought measles or polio had been eliminated. Our beloved State of Israel is bracing a similar assault on its democratic and Jewish nature, and that assault is coming from inside Israel and from outside -- the only Jewish nation in the world.

One of my teachers, Peter Steinke, in his most recent book entitled *Uproar*, has described our time in this way:

Western society is experiencing a shift from one historic period to another. No parallel exists in history with the current rate of change. What shaped past centuries is yielding to a fresh set of ideas and perspectives. For thousands of years, civilizations focused on continuity. The overriding and new fact of history is living with constant, radical change. Rapid transformation is becoming a normal way of life. ⁱ

Or perhaps poet, singer, song writer Leonard Cohen, has said it most profoundly: The blizzard of the world has overturned the order of the soul. ⁱⁱ

It's true, life is changing more rapidly than ever before. The institutions that have guided and supported and led us through life are being shaken to their core. We are a world in a sea-change unlike any we have encountered before. How shall we respond?

Along comes Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah reminds us to take a breath, look back on the year that has come to an end, and consider what kind of new year do we wish for ourselves, for our family, for our community. The Shofar blasts serve as clarion calls to hearken to the sounds of change, to choose to be alive in the midst of a world where the constant news of impending doom strives to dull our senses, our feelings, our emotions, and our will to do all in our power to create a better world.

What shall we hear on this first Day of Awe, the beginning of these ten days for reflection and change and renewal? I, for one, believe that we should recognize the power and strength of the very synagogue which I described, yours and mine. I have witnessed the story I shared and similar stories throughout my career. I have seen Rabbis and Cantors and educators and congregations do extraordinary things to embrace their families in need, to create a safe place for their children, to provide opportunities for their members to learn and grow and become remarkable people in society, transforming the lives of so many for good. I have seen and witnessed congregations at their very best.

Sadly, I have also seen them at their worst, when they have turned sacred communities into anxious and fearful places. This morning, this Rosh Hashanah, you and I are called upon to contemplate the kind of community you want to build, not for yesterday, but for tomorrow. The blast of the shofar this morning is intended as a loud call of hope and promise that Temple Emanu-El of today will carry on the fundamental faith values of its founders and forge and shape a future that will transform the lives of its members, provide them with safety and security, and enable their children and grandchildren to feel the presence of the Divine in their lives. This will not be an easy task. Building a tabernacle where God's presence can dwell in a stormy sea or in a parched desert, or even in the midst of a whirlwind, will demand maturity, wisdom, a willingness and daring to take risks by creating new models, new ventures, too. It will require all those dedicated to excellence to roll up their sleeves, invite others into a conversation and discussion based on trust and dignity, and then begin to fashion and shape a future.

IV

A week ago, I spoke with one of the members of our congregation. His father had just died. I asked him to tell me about his father. "He was an immigrant. We came here in 1979." Where was your family from?" I asked. He said, "Ukraine." "Ukraine? My family also comes from Ukraine. Where in Ukraine? And he told me "Kiev." "I've been to Kiev. Do you have any memories of Kiev?" And then he told me, "I was very young when we left, but I do remember standing outside of the synagogue. My grandmother went in and came out with some Matzahs" I asked, "Was it the Podol synagogue?" "Yes, he told me." I said, "I was there, I spent a Shabbes in the Podol synagogue. February in Kiev Coldest two days of my life." And he then said, "I never got to be inside. Only old people were allowed inside. My mother and father, my brother and me, we just stood outside until my grandmother came out with the matzahs. I didn't really enter a synagogue until I came to Westfield with my family, and there I discovered the power and pride of being a Jew."

Since he shared those powerful words with me, I have held that image of his grandmother with the very symbol of freedom in her hands, walking out to her family who were forbidden to

enter. How truly fortunate you and I and our children and grandchildren are to behold the Temple from within and to be touched by the power emanating from the beating hearts and souls of its members, you, this congregation in Westfield, called Emanu-El, God is with us. May we never forget what our name means, regardless of whatever challenges we face, God is nigh!

That image continues to haunt me for it begs the following question of us. Will you and I, take hold of the hands of our children and walk with them into the glory of the Jewish story, a story of freedom in the midst of tyranny? Or, will we leave them outside while we go in and return to them with a relic, the very symbol of our people's past.

It is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of a new year, a new day, a new era. Temple Emanu-El of Westfield: the image of what our congregation will be is yet to be envisioned and created. I urge you this very day to begin to dream and forge and shape the image of the Temple for the future; an image so clear and powerful that it becomes the guiding principle for the future, where grandparents and parents and children take each other by the hand and, together in a loving embrace, walk into the synagogue that will transform their lives forever.

ⁱ Steinke, Peter L. *Uproar: Calm Leadership in Anxious Times*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Cohen, Leonard. *The Future*