

Temple Emanu-El:**Moral Compass of the Jewish Community and Beyond**

Sermon by Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff,

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This is the first time in many years that Terry and I have spent most of the Holydays at Temple Emanu-El. Since retirement, I have led services in Phoenix, Cleveland, and Manhattan. Last year, I taught in Scarsdale in memory of Rabbi Aaron Panken, *zichrono livracha*.

So let me tell you straight out: it is good to be home today. Good to be with my long time friend, Rabbi Bennett Miller, who, at considerable personal sacrifice, has stepped up to lead us with wisdom, compassion, and authenticity; with Rabbi Ethan Prosnit, who is -- simply put -- one of the most respected rabbis of his generation and **we** know why. Good to be with Cantor Martha Novick, our rock who always comes through for us; for 33 years, she has steadied the ship and inspired us musically; with Cantor Michelle Rubel, whose cantorial gifts enrich us again and again; with Student Rabbi, Becky Jaye who has quickly endeared herself to us; with our president, Marc

Epstein, and temple leadership. And it is good to be here with each of you, my friends, at this time of transition and healing.

Many years ago, a member of the temple made an appointment to see me. When he arrived in my study, he quickly turned to the reason he had come. I saw tears fill his eyes as he recalled that -- many years before -- he had had a disagreement with me. He went on to say that, whenever he encountered me, he remembered that argument and assumed that **when I saw him, I too** remembered it. As a result, whenever we would meet, he **imagined** that I was **thinking ill** of him.

I was devastated that – for all those years -- he felt estranged from me. I was stunned that this was about an incident that -- for the life of me – I could not recall. I searched my memory. Nothing surfaced. Whatever had occurred – and I must assume that something did -- I had stopped carrying that memory around a long time ago, but he had continued to shlep it and...shlep it for many years.

So what happened that day in my study? As soon as he realized that I had long since moved on, his body relaxed and he broke out into a big smile. It was as if a one-ton weight had

been lifted off his back. Can you imagine how grateful I was that he came to see me because – from that moment of mutual enlightenment -- we grew closer and remained close until his death.

Every one of us carries heavy emotional baggage which weighs us down. It might be memories of a business dealing with a former partner; or a friendship that has turned sour; or an altercation with a neighbor that persists; or tension with a son or daughter that remains unabated.

The longer we carry it -- the heavier it feels and the more emotionally compromised we become.

It takes a toll – less on the other person -- he or she may not even be aware. The toll is on us. It saps our energy; it distorts our vision of reality.

An 83-year old friend who lives in the Midwest tells me – every time I see her – that her childhood rabbi was so stern that she distanced herself from the synagogue for 60 years and now realizes how much she lost. I've hear similar stories every year.

These are examples of how a single experience, **not processed**, can distort our relationship with Judaism.

This year we experienced a shock to our synagogue system that knocked us for a congregational loop.

Now we recognize that – as individuals, and as a synagogue -- we were vulnerable.

We recognize that individuals and congregations are imperfect.

We make mistakes.

We have a choice. We can carry this hurt around with us for years or we can work our way through it – as individuals and as a synagogue -- and become stronger and more focused than ever before.

Most of us – I hope all of us -- are choosing to move forward together.

The poet Marge Piercy reminds us of our choice at this time of year:

The New Year is a great door

- **that stands across the evening and Yom**

- **Kippur is the second door. Between them**

- **are song and silence, stone and clay pot**

to be filled from within myself.

**I will find there both ripeness and rot,
what I have done and undone,
what I must let go with the waning days
and what I must take in. With the last tomatoes,
We harvest the fruit of our lives.**

So what now is our task?

Our task is to communicate our feelings, to process recent events in a healthy way, to renew our commitment to this, our Jewish family, and to be a part of the solution going forward.

To help us, I want to offer this spiritual glide path for a safe Jewish landing.

A leader in our temple community wrote me this email two weeks ago.

“I have always appreciated the words affixed to the front of our building from the prophet Micah: **Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with Your God.** She continued: “If we keep that message front and center -- as individuals and as a synagogue -- we’re going to be fine.”

A few days later, a non-Jewish neighbor of the temple, told me that he runs by the front of our building each day and never fails to take in the words of Micah.

Two days later – I’m not making this up – a woman, also not Jewish, who led multiple Westfield civic organizations, wrote me these words:

“When I lived in Westfield I regularly passed Temple Emanu-El. The verse from Micah grounded me and helped to get me on track. It told me **where to focus.**”

Suddenly, I realized: Temple Emanu-El and what we stand for is our **moral compass** and it is also the **moral grounding** for vast numbers of people -- of all faiths -- who live in our region.

In our classrooms and on this bima, in the Lavy House and in our gardens, in our marches down East Broad Street and our trips to New Orleans, in our support for Israel, women’s rights, and the LGBTQ community, in food banks, Reichman feeding program and the schools of Plainfield, in welcoming the homeless and programs for recent immigrants – it is here, in this place, and in our outreach beyond, that we live the words of Micah on our façade and of the words of Isaiah, the Haftarah this morning:

“Is not this the fast that I expect of you: to unlock the shackles of injustice, undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free and break every cruel chain; to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house. If you satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light will shine in the darkness.”

When we DO JUSTLY, we shine light in the darkness.

To love mercy. We are a spiritual community standing with the victims of Columbine, Newtown and Parkland, Pittsburgh, Poway, and Williamsburg, demanding that assault weapons are not for civilians and that firearms be controlled. And we show mercy for humanity when we stand with 16-year-old Greta Thunburg in defense of our planet. Our grandchildren have only one planet. They have no “Plan....B”.

When we LOVE MERCY we shine light in the darkness.

Walk Humbly With Your God. We are a spiritual community that believes in humility. We are not about ostentation or status. We are not the beginning nor the end of things.

We are created in the image of God and have a small, but indispensable role in making our world a better place. We cannot begin to

comprehend God's way, but we are pretty sure that God needs us to do God's work in this world.

When we walk humbly with God, we shine light in the darkness.

Temple Emanu-El is a precious part of an adventure entitled "Judaism in America". That adventure began with 23 Sephardic immigrants in 1654 about 20 miles from here at the entrance of New York Harbor.

That adventure continued in 1950 when 33 families from Westfield, Cranford, Scotch Plains, and Mountainside gathered to establish Temple Emanu-El. That adventure continues today and tomorrow.

When we complete the reading of a book of Torah, the congregation declares: Chazak, Chazak, v'Nitchazek.

Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another.

Temple Emanu-El —Chazak; Be strong, for the future is in your hands;

Temple Emanuel-El, Chazak: Be strong, and be strengthened by and for each other as we build our tomorrow;

Temple Emanuel-El: V'nitchazek: learn from the courage of our founders and be courageous as you fashion a bright and a proud tomorrow.