

Installation Sermon

November 21, 2014

So, I guess I'm staying. It's hard to know what to say at this point because I used up all the really good stuff for my first sermon here back in July. I will say that had you asked me ten years ago where I imagined myself living now, New Mexico would not have ever been mentioned. So, why am I here? Partly because, in my opinion, the Rabbinic Search Committee made an exceedingly good choice and I thank them for it. Partly it's because even on paper this community really sold itself well. It showed dynamism, warmth and spirituality and it made me want to apply. Partly it's because when I interviewed, when I actually started speaking to members of the community, I was really put through my paces, because the community clearly understood the role of a Rabbi professionally and personally and was willing to search far and wide for the right fit. Partly it's because you guys seem to laugh at my jokes, and I've spent many years of my life trying to find people who might do that. Partly it's because this community from the very beginning showed me that it was interested not just in its own members but in making the world a better place, in helping the less fortunate. That's no small thing. As I rapidly approach my 40th birthday and a looming mid-life crisis, I find myself thinking that I haven't done enough for the world. I can easily see a very powerful partnership with this community in terms of helping make the world a better place. Partly I'm here because last winter Bournemouth had over three months of non-stop rain and I can't do that again.

But the main reason I'm here is because Judaism is changing. The entire Jewish world is shifting dramatically. No-one could have predicted the role that the Internet would have had on Jewish communities but I believe that it has been profound. I also believe that most people completely underestimate its impact. The free flow of information around the world has radically changed the notion of education – now instead of asking a teacher or a Rabbi, people are much more likely to ask Google and to search page after page until they find the answer that they most like. The free flow of information has also radically changed the notion of belonging. When I was at university, I belonged to my synagogue back home and I also belonged to an online synagogue. That was twenty years ago. Already there were communities entirely online. I eventually left, thinking it was because it was

Orthodox and not responding to my spiritual needs. But that wasn't it at all. What it lacked was connection, real human interaction. What it lacked was love.

I've experienced many Jewish communities around the world. I've taught in some, I've prayed in some, I've been a Student Rabbi and then a Rabbi in some. I've seen communities bound together by tradition, by pride, by opposition to another community. I've seen communities bound together by hope, by a determination not to close, bound together by the memory of the Holocaust. I've seen communities bound by all these things and as much as these things all can have an important part to play in communal life, they're not enough. There are very few communities – if any - that I have seen that are like this one, that are bound together with something more essential than anything else, and that thing is love. This community is bound together by love. Of course, like in every community, there are moments when that love isn't always apparent. That's because we're human. But the overriding feeling I get from this community is a feeling of love. That's actually why I'm here.

And I'll share a story with you. It was Yom Kippur. The service was ending. The sun had set long ago, the service had overrun – I know, my fault - and at least half the members of the community were itching to run out of the door to go home and break the fast. I finished the service and we went straight into Havdalah. The lights dimmed, we started singing and as far as I could see everyone present, nearly four hundred people, put their arms around each other and started singing and swaying. More important than rushing home to eat was the need to hold someone else and sing and share in another special moment. I had never in my life seen anything like it. And while we sang I turned to Meredith and the words just fell out of my mouth. I said to her, "I really love this community."

And I do. And the reason I do is because this community is held together by love. Because my experience of this community is that it openly shows love. It shows love of Torah in the weekly study sessions or in the session we had on Yom Kippur, the largest synagogue-based study session I have ever led in my life. It shows love of prayer through our services. It shows love of the stranger through our social action. It shows love of the next generation through the extraordinary dedication of the teaching staff here. It shows love of members of the community through the care and attention by the admin staff and through the support that members give each other. It shows love of the Rabbi through open offers of support in being a father, a husband and a

Rabbi. It shows love of God through all these things and more. Why am I here? Ultimately, it's because I, like everyone else, need to love and need to be loved and I need my Rabbinate to be about love. For the first ten years of my Rabbinate, I thought it was about fighting the good fight, about the struggle to make the world a better place. I thought it was about being on the front line, battling for Jewish souls. But it's not.... at least, not here.

I'm here because the world is rapidly changing and the Jewish community is rapidly changing and this community is the kind of community that is the future of Judaism. Because the rise of the internet was meant to bring stronger global connections. It did so for business but it didn't achieve what we thought it might in the personal realm, because our ability to connect online is limited. An online connection is only as good as the Wi-Fi signal that carries it. It's not real connection. I have connected with people online – people who Facebook considers to be friends – even though I've never actually met them. That's connection but it's not bound by love. It might be bound by a shared interest, or by mutual friends, but it's not love. The future of Judaism is in communities that love. Communities that show love to anyone who walks through the door, not for conforming to our model of being but purely because they exist and are a human being. And the future of Judaism is in demonstrating what and whom we love. That demonstration of love is through our teaching, through our communication, through our prayer services, through our every interaction. We won't always get it right, because we're human beings, but we hopefully will continue this community of love which necessarily means a community of forgiveness for those moments when we don't get it right.

It was very powerful for me to have Rabbi Schwab suggest a *brit*, a covenant, between us tonight, because a *brit* is a contract of love. It was even more powerful for him to quote the exact same line from Pirke Avot that I had intended to quote. I would like to think that this is because he and I think very similarly. I must admit, though, that I have a sneaking suspicion that it's because both he and I actually have a very limited knowledge of Jewish texts and that we had previously been able to bluff our way through. *Aseh l'cha rav ukoneh l'cha chaver* – find yourself a teacher and get yourself, acquire for yourself, a friend. I had always translated that verse from Pirke Avot in this way. But *aseh l'cha rav* doesn't strictly mean find yourself a Rav, a teacher, it means make a Rav. Only now do I understand this verse anew.

As much as the Rabbi helps make the community, the community helps

make the Rabbi. Who I am as a Rabbi, who I will be in the future as a Rabbi, is determined by every single interaction with members of this community. You make me the Rabbi as much as I do. *Koneh l'cha chaver* – acquire for yourself a friend. I have moved a long way away from some of my dearest friends. I really feel that very deeply. Some of them are watching online now at some ridiculous time in the morning. Some apparently value sleep more than me and are therefore recording this service. It's the thought that counts, though. But knowing how far I have moved from my friends and family, I must say the warmth and friendship shown to me and my family by members of this community has been profound. Both *aseh l'cha rav ukoneh l'cha chaver* – make for yourself a teacher and acquire a friend – involve love. And the final part of the phrase – *vehyeh dan et kol ha'adam l'chaf z'chut* – and judge everyone favourably. That too involves love.

Thinking of the phrase *aseh l'cha rav ukoneh l'cha chaver*, there are four teachers and friends of mine whom I would like to specifically mention at this time. The first is Rabbi Simon Franses of blessed memory, who dragged me over coals and tested me constantly in order to prepare me for the Rabbinate. I only knew I could be a Rabbi because I saw it in his eyes, despite the fact that he often urged me to flee from the idea for my own sake. The second teacher and friend I want to mention is Student Rabbi Andreas Hinz, of blessed memory. Andy taught me what it was to love someone for who they are, not despite who they are. He was a mensch and a scholar and still every day I remember him and am inspired by him to be a better Rabbi. The third is Rabbi Sheila Shulman, of blessed memory. Sheila taught me to follow my intellectual passion, she taught me to love words, and she taught me to be myself even when others wished I would be someone else. The fourth is my wife, Jenny. Jenny has taught me not to be such an ass.... or, at least, she has tried. Joking aside, she has taught me more than anyone else in ways I can't describe and I'm only here in front of this community because she helped me become who I am today.

In Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 31a, someone comes to Shammai and asks to learn Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai beats him for his stupid question. So he goes to Hillel and asks the same thing. Hillel answers the questions with love and with an answer about love, saying, "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour – that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary, now go and study." Similarly, my hope for this community is that when someone comes to us and says "Tell me about your community in one word" we can say to them, "Love – that is our community. The rest is commentary, now come in and be welcome." The future of Judaism is in

love, the kind of love that has been shown to me and my family, the kind of love I am trying to show and will hope to show for many years to come to this community.

So may God help us all maintain this community of love, may God guide us in love and with love, may we find the honesty to share love and to welcome love, that we may all continue on our journey through life together for many years to come. May such be God's will, and let us say, Amen.