

Why Are We Here And Not In A Social Club or a Field?

Kol Nidre Sermon 2015 (5776)

The question “Why Are We Here?” presumes that we could be somewhere else. And of course, we recognise that we could, that there are hundreds of other places we could be. So, why did we choose to be here? I already said on Rosh Hashanah that the main reason we are here is to change the world and explained how we do that by creating a new social narrative, a new way of thinking and living, and we do that by changing ourselves. But how? And why are we **here** engaging in that process of change as opposed to in a social club chatting to friends about our life or in a field engaged in deep contemplation and meditation?

Let’s take each of these in turn. If we want self-improvement, why not just ask our friends? Why not ask our friends, and perhaps even our enemies if we have them, what we need to do to improve ourselves? Why isn’t their input sufficient? The answer is that this isn’t really about us as individuals, but about us as a community. We have all year to explore our own self but this is one rare time when we come together and explore our *collective* self. As I said on Rosh Hashanah morning, there is a dynamic in our liturgy between personal and communal exploration. We can, of course, sit in a group of people and discuss our collective identity. Of course we can. So, what’s different about being here?

To answer that, we need to question the other extreme – instead of surrounding ourselves by conversation with others, what about silent meditation out in a field somewhere? Why are we not doing that? There are many people, especially in Santa Fe, who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” The irony with such people is that I believe that they are religious, they just don’t like set liturgy. Being religious is, after all, about connecting with that which is greater than ourselves,

and changing our behaviour in response to that connection. People who come to Temple and people who sit and meditate in fields both can sense the same and respond accordingly.

So, why are we here? If we can discuss our lives personally and communally, and if we can connect to that which is greater than ourselves, all without being in Temple, why come to Temple? I believe that the answer is actually the liturgy, and it's of profound importance. What many people don't realise is that liturgy is art. The prayer books we use, their layout, their composition, their translation, is all art. In some sense it's like a painting, and in some sense it's like music. The best art is not always visually appealing. I immediately think of Edvard Munch's extraordinary image *The Scream*, for example, which is a profoundly disturbing image. But it is great art because it moves us, it makes us think. It has been designed to provoke thought and emotion. It guides us on a journey. The same can be said for all good music, which definitely takes us on a clear journey. Smetana's *Ma Vlast*, for example, includes the wondrous piece known as *Vltava*, which describes the ever-changing river as it grows and changes. It is written to guide us on a journey, and liturgy is the same.

A conversation with other people is not guided and a meditation in a field is not guided. At least, they're not guided in the same way as liturgy. Jewish liturgy traditionally contains two elements – *keva* and *kavannah*. *Keva* is the fixed element. That's the way we know that Bar'chu precedes Sh'ma, which in turn is eventually followed by Amidah and then eventually by Aleinu. And that set structure is extremely important because it allows us a continual framework around to which base our *kavannah*, our fluid element. *Keva* is the constant refrain, the reminder, the dominant theme of the service. *Kavannah* is what flows in between and how we respond to that dominant theme. It's the spontaneous response each of

us has to the fixed prayer. *Keva* sets the limits but *kavannah* allows us to explore, question and then, if need be, transcend those limits. *Keva* asserts but *kavannah* questions. *Keva* is an invitation, *kavannah* is an answer.

It's very easy to see liturgy as just a collection of words, but that would be like seeing a painting as a collection of brush strokes or a piece of music as a collection of notes. Liturgy is more than the sum of its parts because it is art. The difficulty over the High Holy Days is to see it for the art that it is because there's so much of it. So, I would like to suggest that the High Holy Day liturgy is perhaps less like a painting and more like a gallery... less like a piece of music and more like a symphony. There will be parts where you are moved, where you linger, where you are transfixed, where you are challenged. And there will be parts that don't impress at all, that don't move you, that seem very similar to other elements. And that's okay. That's the point. Liturgy is the art of the soul. Liturgy is a complex and wonderful blend of devices, reminders, prompts and readings designed to move us, to challenge us, to take us on a journey. It's a guided journey. It's the most guided journey of the soul that I know. It's the most guided journey of the communal soul that I know. And that's what makes it unique. That's why we're here. We're here to engage in a unique, shared, guided communal journey.

And it's not just the shared, guided communal journey that has value. Liturgy achieves something that nothing else I know can – it connects past, present and future. It uses words that are thousands of years old to stimulate reflection about today and contemplation of the future. A conversation with friends or a meditation in a field, as valuable as both can be, cannot achieve that. To say the exact same words as our ancestors did over two thousand years ago means to forge a connection that transcends time. The words become imbued with history in a way that no other words can. When we say Sh'ma, we say it as Jews in the Temple said

it, as Akiva said it when the Romans combed the flesh off his body, as Jews challenged of their faith in the Middle Ages said it, as Jews emerging into a new world of the Enlightenment said it, as millions going into gas chambers said it, as Jews who grappled with a new globalised world said it. It connects us. And I have to share, extraordinarily, as I literally wrote this point in my sermon, Reverend Ben Larzelere came into my office and gave me a wonderful, thought-provoking letter, in which he so perceptively noticed that the reason Jews often talk of “going to services” (phrase in the plural) as opposed to the “service” is because, and I quote “Jews consider any event of worship as more than just that event of worship but as connected through time (in both directions) to all other events of worship... thus *services*, the collective-noun, is what expresses what happens (because all worship is indeed a verb, not a noun).” That is exactly the point. Our liturgy doesn’t just connect us with the past but it also openly and unashamedly constructs a vision of the future and challenges us to implement it. It helps the self transcend, by which I mean it helps the individual self and the communal self transcend our own limited perception and holds us to a timescale and a developing theology that cannot be matched anywhere else.

So, why are we here? We’re here to go on a journey. A journey through time, a journey of the individual and the community. A journey that has been carefully crafted to stimulate and to challenge, to question and to empower. A journey that has beauty of form, that uses set structures to liberate us into free thinking. A journey that draws us together with a common goal achieved through individualised responses. We are here to explore our liturgy. May it comfort us and challenge us, may it relax us and refresh us, may it guide us and free us, may it ground us and move us. May such be God’s will, and let us say, Amen.