

Kol Nidre, the evening service for Yom Kippur is a time for each of us to think about our actions of the past. We sing Kol Nidre, cancelling the promises and oaths that we have made; Ashamnu, pounding our chests while admitting our sins; and Al Chat, recognizing our missteps in life. For many Jews around the world, Yom Kippur is a time of pain, heart-ache, and shame.

Why do we put ourselves through this? For many of us, Yom Kippur is a day to admit guilt and ask forgiveness, a time for self-reflection and a moment when we accept our deepest faults and failures. This view of Yom Kippur is not correct. During the days of Awe, our goal is return to, or finding our path to God. It is easy to follow the wrong road and get lost on our sacred journey; that is why we talk about sin. However, our purpose today is reconnecting to our covenant, our personal and communal relationship with God.

The core term covenant, or *brit*, is associated with the identity of the Jewish people. Neil Gillman, a leading theologian explains that the Jewish community uses the concept of *brit* to “promote our ability to identify with the community, disclose unsuspected layers of meaning in our historical experience, generate rituals, and it grips us emotionally, when presented in the form of a comprehensive theology.” We, meaning those who believe in this concept, find purpose and connection to the term “covenant.” We commonly understand the *brit* to mean that we, the Jewish people, are God’s *Chosen People*.

Tonight, I would like us to look at the covenant of *brit* in a different way. Instead of setting us apart from others, as being members of “*The Brit*,” perhaps we should view ourselves among the many members of “*a brit*.” A parent who loves his or her children has a special relationship with each of them. Similarly, it is likely that God loves all of us and has a special relationship us Jews; in turn, we have a special responsibility.

In actuality, we understand there are two covenants described in the Torah: the Covenant of Noah and the Covenant of Abraham. Tonight, I will focus on the covenant of Abraham and how it can help us on our journey of *teshuvah* (repentance) and growth. The Brit of Abraham is a special covenant that reminds us we have a sacred obligation to God, ourselves, and humanity. Associated with this covenant, are the *mitzvot* of 613

commandments commonly seen as our responsibilities for upholding our relationship with God. Tomorrow, I will continue this sermon with the Covenant of Noah and how all people, especially the non-Jews in our community, have a special relationship with God and purpose in our communal life. Tomorrow's sermon will include how we, as a synagogue, have a responsibility to help the non-Jewish members of our congregation on their spiritual journeys.

A congregant at Rosh Hashanah dinner asked, "Why is it important if our children build Jewish lives?" I then thought that, in many ways, formal Jewish learning and communal life have failed the Jewish world. Too often the ritual foundation of Jewish life has enveloped and over-taken the soul of what it means to be Jewish, of having a personal relationship with God. For Example, I believe one of our Kol Nidre prayers (page 278) explains what Yom Kippur is truly about:

*"Our God, God of all generations, may the sense of your presence never leave us; may it keep us ever faithful to Your covenant. Make us responsive to Your Teachings, that we may walk in Your ways. Fill our souls with awe, and our hearts with love, that we may return to You in truth, and with all of our being."*

I believe, this prayer is saying: God, I love you. You have always been in my life and the life of my loved ones and my ancestors. Let me be able to slow down and recognize your presence in all aspects of my life. My relationship with you is strong and personal; help me connect with your stabilizing presence in my life. I will know when this is achieved because I will not be filled with fear, rather filled with awe of your greatness, leading my heart to be overflowing with love. When this happens, I will know that I have returned to my journey, a life that is holy, worthy of living.

Contemplating this prayer and my mission of life, I am reminded how blessed I am to serve you and this holy community; for this, I thank each of you. Beth Chaverim, has helped me find God. When I look around, I see God smiling, loving, and filling the earth with Eternal presence. During the remainder of my sermon, I will share with you how I believe we are strengthening God's presence in our lives and how we are bolstering our covenant with God, stabilizing and strengthening our *Kehillah Kedoshah*, our holy community.

The values of our congregation reinforce this sacred mission. Beth Chaverim is a truly welcoming home. Our congregation looks at the souls of people entering our building and welcomes them. No one is turned away and each person is viewed as a soul with special gifts for our community. It would be easy to see what others lack, but rather we seek and appreciate the holiness that you bring to our midst. A great example of this was Lisa Kimbel's letter to the editor of a local newspaper, which expressed a heartfelt appreciation for Renee Gupp's hard work and dedication. When we go out of our way to connect and appreciate each others gifts and abilities, we teach our youth what it means to live a life of Torah.

Teaching our children is a core value of our congregation. We have been doing a great job of welcoming students and families from diverse backgrounds of Jewish knowledge. Now, it is important that we go beyond teaching concepts, incorporating and infusing our heritage into our daily life. Reform Judaism's special gift of individual autonomy empowers each of us the right and responsibility for searching and studying Jewish sources and texts, focusing on aspects of our religion that bring meaning to our lives. That said, we cannot discard those aspects of the religion that we are not practicing because in a later stage of life we may find the meaning. Something that does not speak to us today, may speak to us tomorrow. Learning occurs best when we wrestle with a concept until we incorporate it into our lives. We do not have the ability to make Judaism meaningful in someone else's life. Judaism survives only when each of us finds meaning and connects emotionally and spiritually with the subject matter. When our lives imbue Judaism, helping us to be *mensch*s, ideal people with purpose on this earth, then others, especially our children and loved ones, will be more interested in exploring and living by our faith.

As a synagogue we have a responsibility to develop educational programming that goes beyond the traditional classroom. This year, we will be exploring how to learn and celebrate Jewish life, as a family and as a community. For example, we will be celebrating *Simchat Torah* through a morning of singing, games, and activities for the whole family. We must remember, when Judaism becomes a chore, we will have lost the special gift of our heritage. Instead, when we live Judaism and share with each other the joys of our tradition, then Judaism will thrive and be secure for future generations. We

all must continue our Jewish development and accomplish this goal. For many Jews, learning stopped at the age of 13 because they lacked communal resources, did not participate in congregational life, or for the synagogue's failure to welcome and support their development to adulthood. We are never done learning. Please challenge yourself to learn, interact, and incorporate Judaism into all aspects of your life.

Judaism has survived for thousands of years; it is timeless and its teachings are current. If Judaism does not seem relevant to the issues you face, it is our congregation's responsibility to help you make it valid in your lives. For those who struggle with this, I would like to open the door to personal discussion with you, learning more about your life and offering Jewish resources.

It is our congregation's responsibility to offer tools and guidance on issues that are important to our members. Please tell me and the other leaders of our community what you need. Our home should offer literature, support groups, and communal resources for the issues with which our congregants are struggling. We could incorporate issues related to psychological and emotional illness within a Shabbat service. We may offer a time and space for congregants who are grieving and/or we can organize a team to participate in the Race for the Cure. A congregation is a community; let us know how we can support you. If you have an idea, help us develop it and make it a reality.

We must build a community that nurtures and supports modern Jewish families and their choices. Many of the issues our congregation faces are different from those faced by generations before us. You have opened my eyes to view issues and family situations differently. I am proud that this is a community of contemporary Jewish families! We have Jewish homes with more than one faith. There are single parents, grandparents raising children, and homes with multiple generations living together. Our congregation includes people of different nationalities, sexual orientations, and disabilities. It is Beth Chaverim's responsibility to acknowledge this diversity and respect the issues with which families are dealing. Many families in the congregation dealing with health issues are not just praying for loved ones, but actually taking care of them. We must be flexible in our interpretation of Judaism and Jewish law and our congregation must support families as they build Jewish homes, even though these homes have different faces than Jewish homes of previous generations. We should support

these families with their plans to get married, raise families, and explore the meaning of life.

We, Beth Chaverim, are a community that wants to help you explore and strengthen your life along your pathway towards God. Tonight, we accept the responsibility to help and nurture you as you develop and rebuild your covenant. We know that the community and the individual are entwined, making our lives holy. To build a community, we must be able to rely on one another. When those in our midst falter we all falter, for our lives are enmeshed. God and community are here with you as you struggle to find deeper and personal meaning in life. May this time of reflection help you to re-connect with yourself, community, and God, as together we say: Amen.