Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei 2004/5775

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Copngregation B’nai Jacob

Charleston, West Virginia

“Averting The Evil Decree”

On Rosh Hashana, I spoke to you about the future of our community and our synagogue. I talked to you about where we are today, the challenges every Jewish community in America faces demographically and how we should approach and frame the present.

And after my sermon last week, I am convinced from the comments I received that we all get it. You, like me, see where once sat so many dear friends and congregants who are no longer with us and there is no one to replace them. We see fewer younger families, more singles and couples with no children and we see long time families gone, families whose patriarchs and matriarchs built this congregation who have passed and whose descendants have either moved away or, due to the ravages of assimilation, no longer join us even tonight on this most sacred service. We all have seen with each decade a changing landscape, community, and like throughout all America, changing dynamics, needs, and demographics.

We see it in our community and we see it within our families.

We know where are.

But then we get stuck and are not sure what can we do about it. We become fatalists and don’t seem to know what to say or do next, other than talk about it and fear for the future of Judaism in America and Jewish life in West Virginia.

But I can’t just throw my hands up.

We have been together now for 29 High Holidays. While that is hard to believe, it is even harder to believe that assuming good health and a congregation that believes I have something to bring, we have less than 15 years together to get this community ready for the next rabbi and the next generation. I am not worried about the next 15 years for me personally because thanks to people who understood years ago that you pay forward, the next decade or so, assuming this wonderful relationship continues, I will continue to earn a very comfortable living, do rabbinic “stuff” and pretty much finish what I hope and pray will be considered a long and successful career in the rabbinate in what has been a fantastic community.

What I am afraid of is the next day.

When I pass on the duties of this role to the next rabbi, what will this community look like? I don’t just mean how will B’nai Jacob looks like; I mean the Jewish community. Will it even look like today or will it continue to erode to the point where Charleston will go the way of many Jewish communities that have vanished in West Virginia? Will it still be functioning like it is today or in 15 years, will it be a community with such a limited level of activity and membership that it will become, like almost every remaining Jewish community in West Virginia, small and struggling to survive? Ask yourself what will that mean to you emotionally knowing that this community, that goes back three even four generations for some of you, a community where your parents or grandparents lived and are now buried in our cemeteries, a place that you raised your family in, that you married in, that took you in and welcomed you long ago or just a few months ago, that possibly introduced you or your spouse to Judaism, going the way of many small communities in West Virginia and throughout America.

Instead of crying over what we know is happening here and around America, I think it is time to stop with the handwringing, recognize where we are today, embrace the reality of a changing community, roll up our sleeves, and get to work. Enough looking nostalgically at the past and what used to be, recognize as I said on Rosh Hashana where we are, accept the reality of the community as it is, and try to figure where we need to be to maintain a “traditional synagogue in a modern world” and get it ready for the next generation. We need to realize that it is our duty to get this community and this congregation ready for the next generation as it was for us and our children. We have an obligation to pay it forward.

Yet, if all do for these next few years is continue to say the same things year after year and do the same things that don’t reflect a changing community, we will have failed the next generation.

A “road map” has actually been staring us in the face every year during the High Holidays. There is a way to save American Jewry today in general and West Virginia Jewry is particular and that road map consists of the three words right behind me on our ark curtain.

One the most powerfully important prayer of the High Holidays is the Un’tane Tokef: “On Rosh Hashana, it is written and on Yom Kippur, it is sealed. Who will live and who will die?” The prayer emphasized that life and death, health and illness, prosperity and poverty, joy and pain are all in the hand of G-d. G-d knows our future and we are like sheep that pass before Him. He knows our fate. But then we declare the following words found on our ark curtain: “But Tshuva (Repentance), Tefillah (Prayer) and Tzedakah (Charity) will avert the Roah Gezara (The Evil Decree).”

Take that prayer out of the religious context for a moment and contemplate with me those words through a different prism. All the prayer is saying is that none of us know what the future will bring for us, individually and as a community. None of us do. But we do know that all of us potentially and inevitably face the “roah gezarah”, the evil decree. Hardship. Misfortune. Illness. Death. We don’t know when, we don’t know how soon, but that is life. We know not what the next year will bring. It could be a year of health or, G-d forbid, the year a doctor finds something that we all dread will never happen. It is the fate of us all.

The prayer reminds us that while we can’t know the future, we can do the kind of things that give meaning to the present and help us overcome the fatalism of life. We can perform tshuva, repentance. We can recognize, as Eli Wiesel said once, that in life we are not just given by G-d the gift to begin but to begin *again*; every year, we can begin again and decide to make the coming year meaningful. We can also involve ourselves in tefillah, prayer. We can learn to connect with G-d, engage in matters of the spirit, and realize that there is more to life than just the next ballgame, than just earning a living, or worrying about wealth; all that is fleeting. We can also learn of the power of tzedaka, charity. We can understand that when we reach out and are there for others, life is not measured by the years of life lived, but in the life of the years lived.

Similarly as a Jewish community, we know that there is a roah gezera, an evil decree, over our heads. And that is the fear every small Jewish community in America faces: a dwindling population, fewer adherents, less engaged and knowledgeable members, and a vanishing and unengaged youth.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

We, as a community, have three important things we can do to completely change the roah gezarah that hangs over us:

Tshuva. Tefillah. Tzedakah.

If we want to change the way this congregation and this Jewish community will look 15 years from now, here is what we need to do:

1. **Tshuva: Repentance.**

When we sit down together and think about it, do you know how many potential people we have out there that we are not reaching? Jews by birth. Jews by choice. Non-Jews who want to learn more about Judaism. Intermarried couples. Former members who have drifted away. Members in dues only. Members who live in other states but still call this community home and B’nai Jacob their shul. People in outlying communities who no longer have synagogues or temples but who could and would love to connect with us via the internet.

We speak of a vanishing community as if there has been some kind of alien abduction. There hasn’t been. Sure, the population in our state and the demographics in our city reflect a decline, something that we have little control over, but there are people out there. And they have one thing in common: we do virtually nothing to bring them home. We wait hoping they will reach out to us. It doesn’t work that way. Not today. Today, we need to reach out to people and invite them to either come back and re-engage or extend our hands and invite them for the very first time.

Jewish communities everywhere have forgotten the power of tshuva, of reaching out to people and inviting them to return.

We still think in the “old ways”. We still think people don’t need to be asked to come to shul; that they know we are here. We still live thinking all we need to do is have a synagogue or temple, send a flyer, mail a letter, shoot an email, and people will respond and come to us. That kind of thinking doesn’t understand where people are today and that kind of inaction will not avert the evil decree.

We are no longer living in the age when people immediately reach out to us when they come to a community; we need to actively reach out to them. We need to personally go to people who have either drifted away, become less engaged, may still be interested but don’t know whether they should, and have conversations with them and with great enthusiasm tell them it is okay to come home because we need them and that it is okay to be a part of the Jewish community.

We still think we don’t need to do intense outreach; that we somehow just need to put out a newsletter, maintain a webpage, or send a flyer. It doesn’t work that way. Those are just step one. We now have to pick up the phone, knock on doors, take people out for coffee or a drink, and explain to them why we need them – every chance we get.

I looked at our new Ladies Auxiliary yearbook/address book. And then I also thought about those who are not in it and are technically not members. Good news. It is what the last President of the Temple Phil Angel, of blessed memory, told me before he died. He said for our small community and especially for our synagogue, we are unbelievably active. There is nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to B’nai Jacob. He was right. If you look at the actual number of people who attend services regularly, who join us for our many classes and programs monthly, we are percentage-wise drawing much more than larger congregations could ever boast about. Our “turnstile” numbers (a term Marc Slotnick uses regarding how many people come through our doors each month) are incredibly impressive.

But there are so many more who could be here and yet, we are afraid to reach out and ask them to join us and make the case that we need them. We are so afraid to invite people to experience B’nai Jacob for the first time or to return after a long period of disengagement. We are so afraid to invite people to come or come back. We are like the guy afraid to ask the pretty girl to the dance because we are afraid she going laugh at us. We are afraid people will either say no, say they don’t care, say they stopped coming because they lost interest, say that they got mad at something Urecki did to them, that someone at services did to them years ago and that’s why they don’t and won’t come around.

Let me tell you: that could happen. But isn’t it equally possible that people are looking for a way in and a chance to do tshuva, to return? People who have simply drifted and need a gentle wake up call. Who have been thinking about coming back but just never got around to doing it. Who have been afraid because they thought we are mad at them or that we will look down at them.

Don’t you think those are conversations worth having?

If we want to avert the evil decree, we need to practice tshuva, bringing people back to our community.

One person at a time.

I have started having these conversations with people who have drifted. Here is what I have discovered: people are looking to reconnect. They are looking for a way in, an opportunity for tshuva, return. And just as we have been reluctant to ask, they have been reluctant to come forward.

People want to be a part of a community. It is the human condition. As much as I love Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram, and as much as I love and embrace the social media, we are social animals. We have a deep desire to be physically together and we need and want communities to be a part of. We don’t want to live alone, raise families alone, share joyous occasions alone, and we sure do not want to die alone. People need community and that is our greatest strength. We can change the evil decree, the future of our Jewish community if we learn to more than just open our doors but learn how to take people by the hand, accept people where they are, and bring them home to this community.

Tshuvah, return, will avert the roah gezarah.

2. **Tefillah: Prayer**

You want to know what the future will look like? I can tell you in 15 years what the community will look like by asking just one question. Are there still daily services at B’nai Jacob in the year 2029? If there are still daily services at our shul, this community’s evil decree will have been averted.

If reaching out and giving people a chance at tshuva, returning, is the single most important approach we have to avert the evil decree, then tefillah, regular and daily prayer services will be the single most important institution indicative of our ability to be a vibrant community. Our services are a remarkable twice daily reminder of a community that is alive; that at 7:30 AM every morning and 5:45 PM every evening, you know that there is a Jewish community in West Virginia and its door are wide open. Shacharit (morning prayers), mincha (afternoon prayers) and Maariv (evening prayers) in our chapel are the most critical acts every day that bring people together, that offer daily opportunities on any day to join us. Communal prayer is the life blood of what Jewish life is all about.

You want to avert the evil decree? If in the next 15 years, people commit and recruit others to continue be with us every week, we will avert the evil decree. If people bring friends, come as couples before dinner, come as families before a show, learn to open a prayer book and introduce themselves to the power and importance of regular communal Jewish worship, we will be around a long time.

Daily services will avert the evil decree because they are about two things. The obvious one is: prayer. It is a pretty important reason for why we are here today. The era of just coming to services because one has to say kaddish for a relative is over; we see fewer people who come for that now. Instead, more and more men and women are coming, not to say kaddish and not to “count” (to be the tenth person to create the public quorum called the minyan), but simply to connect with community and with G-d. That’s why I am there. I do not go simply to be the tenth man; I go because I know I need to have quiet moments to be with G-d. Others now find daily services as opportunities to have quiet moments throughout the week to just sit and lose themselves in thought; to think about the day and to think in a holy place about life.

We need to get more people to understand how that is what daily prayer services really are all about today. We have had classes the last two years on Jewish prayer but I will be reaching out to people one on one and having this discussion with you because if we want to avert the roah gezarah, this twice daily institution is a critical piece. And I want to talk to each of you about tefillah, men and women. And if you feel we are not reaching out enough to women in this area, come back tomorrow and listen to my sermon.

Yes, maintaining the minyan, the quorum, the daily number of ten is important but as I said to everyone five years ago when that was proving to be a daunting challenge, tefillah is not about just getting to “ten”; it is about praying as Jews.

Yet, while daily services are about prayer, they are also about keeping this community together, cohesive and active every day. When we have 8 or 9 men on a given morning or afternoon service, do you think we call off the service on account of rain, like a baseball game is called off? No. We still pray. We gather and pray. We may skip certain prayers which require a quorum but we still gather and pray. For this daily communal commitment to prayer also becomes a statement of a people that are alive, Jewishly.

More than anything else we do, these daily services and the people who are committed to them, either every day, a couple times a week or once a week, are the reason we continue to be as successful as we are. Throughout the year, travelers, people on business, non-Jews who are curious about Judaism, vacationers, all pop in to the daily service. We have Orthodox men in black hats and Progressive women who put on Talit and Tefillin. We have had people who are in for conventions and people travelling by motorcycle. We now have several who come annually to B’nai Jacob, make it a point to come in the morning to daven (pray) and then stay for our breakfast. They know there is a shul here and so they come through this way back from Florida; they have been coming for years. We have a reputation around the country as an incredible little community that still maintains daily services. And when people discover us and see we have daily services, and even more when we there is a minyan, they all tell us: that is the single and most strongest piece of evidence that we are alive.

I promise you: we maintain services every day here and 15 years from now, we will still be the jewel among communities and we will have averted the evil decree.

**3.Tzedaka: Charity.**

I don’t want to make anyone uncomfortable but, I have to. I am gonna talk about money. Your money.

And how to avert the evil decree.

Look, I cannot talk to you about shul budgets, financial investments, operating costs, etc. I can barely balance a checkbook. Nancy does it for my Pulpit Fund and Marilyn does it at home. I can’t even talk about dues and how much we need every year to avert the evil decree. I am not a money person but I do understand tzedaka and the importance of charitable giving to avert the evil decree. And at the risk of being looked at as an idealist, we really need to rethink what it is to be associated with a temple, a synagogue and with a community. We need to rethink this entire antiquated concept of membership and who is part of a Jewish community.

If we want to survive and avert the evil decree, we need to realize this synagogue can no longer be thought of as a club anymore. This is how it was back in the old days: You were a Jew. You were part of a club. You join. You pay dues. You attend when you can and use as needed. You were a member and dues were how you associated. A synagogue was like a country club, a gym, or a tennis club. You joined it because those are your social obligations as a Jew and you are part of that Jewish club.

That is not the way the next generation sees temples and synagogues today. Some of us still do, but not the new generation.

Today, you join a club if you use it regularly, but if you don’t use it, you quit. That includes synagogues and temples. I am not defending that but that is reality. Loyalty, tradition and guilt do not cut it anymore. When a person no longer feels committed to a place they haven’t attended for a while, the dues statements goes unopened. Letters are ignored. People eventually just fade away.

That is why I think if we want to avert the evil decree, synagogues need not only a financial plan, not only a budget based on investments, projections of money coming in and being spent, but we need to challenge people every year to commit to giving of tzedaka to our synagogue. Not dues. Tzedaka.

Going back to my first thought tonight, I think we need to reach out to people, not in letters or dues statement, but in person and over coffee. Those who give generously every year. Those who we hope will step up. Those who have never been asked. We need to go up to people, to you, and make the case every year not for why people need to be members, but why an annual charitable gift to B’nai Jacob matters. Why their annual gift of tzedaka is critical for averting the evil decree that looms 15 years from now. Why this tzedaka is the one of the most important gifts they can make. That pivot from dues to tzedaka is going to take time and effort but and I am committed to work at it because we have to keep Judaism, the Jewish people, a love of Israel and our tradition alive not just in the valley, but in this state and around this country. That is an easy case to make for me and we can reach people if we reimagine what it means to actually be associated with this community.

I would love to help the next generation re-think or re-understand what it means to be a part of a synagogue and how wonderful it feels to proudly say I am a part of B’nai Jacob and the Jewish community.

Want to avert the evil decree for our community? Approach people not about dues but explain to them why tzedaka, why giving time and money to this place is important. How it shouldn’t be done out of inertia, habit or guilt, but out of pride, excitement and because it matters. We need to literally go up to everyone, those who are already engaged and those who we need to be more engaged and remind them of who we are, what we do for the Jewish cultural, religious and spiritual well-being of this community, and the important role financially and physically they can play in the future.

You want to change the “roah gezarah”, the evil decree? Stop sending letters. Let us go out and invite people to give, to involve themselves in tzedaka, and give people the great opportunity to prepare this community for a brighter future.

I love this place. I love what we do every day, what we represent in West Virginia, what we give to this community, and what we preserve. The decline that everyone is afraid is going to happen to Jewish communities in America is not inevitable. The “roah gezarah” is not a “fait accompli”. It is written but it is not sealed. And a synagogue that understands tshuva, that welcomes everyone those who want to return and reaches out, that embraces tefillah and makes their congregation a place that is open daily as a vibrant place of worship and gathering every day and a congregation that values tzedaka, a place where people want to give, will survive and will be alive for decades to come.

Tshuva. Tefillah, Tzedaka.

That is how you avert the evil decree.

Amen