Rosh Hashana 5775

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Charleston, West Virginia

“The Three Words That Can Save American Jewry”

My wife thinks I am obsessive.

She’s right.

I will fixate on something and it will become my cause, my passion. And fortunately or unfortunately for you, one of these obsessions directly affects you and you will see how this will play itself out this year.

This is our 29th High Holiday together. That number is hard to believe. It seems as though we have gotten to this point together in a blink of an eye. And yet, looking out today at the sanctuary, it is obvious things have changed dramatically. I see where once sat so many dear friends and congregants who are no longer with us. I see entire families, some whose patriarchs and matriarchs have passed on and some whose descendants have either moved away or, due to assimilation, no longer join us on these most sacred occasions. I see, thankfully, new people but who have no family experiences here and whose knowledge of Hebrew may be limited, unlike those who were here when I first came. Many of those who could follow and understand the service today are slowly gone.

These nearly 30 years may seem like they have passed so quickly and maybe they have; but in these 30 years, we have also been witness to so much.

I have seen with each decade a changing landscape and community. Like throughout all America, changing dynamics, needs, and demographics. And if these almost 30 years have passed so quickly and seen such dramatic changes, I have begun obsessing over this question: what are the next 15 years going to look like?

I use fifteen years because blessed with good health and a congregation that still would find my services needed, fifteen years is probably going to be the years I have left to serve as rabbi in a significant capacity. Fifteen years from now, I will be 68 (G-d willing) and if not earlier, it will then be my turn to hand the “yad” (the pointer) to the next rabbi. And if these twenty-nine high holidays have gone by so fast, how quickly will the next fifteen years pass?

Doesn’t seem so far in the future.

After all we have seen together, and for those of you who have been with me throughout, that is not a lot of time; I look at what has happened and have been asking myself if this congregation is ready for the next generation, the next rabbi, the next chapter of Jewish experience in West Virginia.

I have asked myself that this past year and the answer I keep coming up with is no.

When we came here in 1986, this 24 years old and his 22 year old bride, both with limited experience but a desire to work hard, were able to hit the ground running. B’nai Jacob had so much in place for us, from human capital, “klei kodesh” (the holy men and women like Reverend Samuels who could help me lead and prepare traditional services), a number of lay leaders who understood tradition and could be called upon to assist in the daily services and prepare kosher kiddushes, parents who could help us create programs for our children, the beginning of an endowment fund and a solid financial plan for the future, a vision of where we came from, what we did, and what we plan on doing to remain a traditional synagogue. This was a golden opportunity for a young rabbi and his wife to begin a career and thanks to you, stay.

We have none of that in place at present. We have a very different and, like much of America, a very assimilated Jewish community. We have, like much of America, a much smaller group of people and while percentage wise we have a pretty well engaged congregation, the congregation also has a limited religiously skilled and well versed pool of lay leadership. We also do not have a strategy for how we can create greater engagement from a newer generation; we have no financial plan for the future nor a vision for how the synagogue and the community should look like in the years ahead.

And just as this shul and this community was ready for me, it seems only right that this congregation, this community be ready for the next rabbi and the next generation. And that day is not so distant when we consider how fast these twenty-nine High Holidays have come and gone.

With one of my daughters now back in Charleston, and two others who also seem to have an eye on possibly returning one day, I have a strong feeling that I will always feel committed to Charleston and B’nai Jacob. I will always want to remain close to B’nai Jacob, want to see it thrive and want to see it continue to play an important role in this community after I am gone. This is not about legacy but about making sure this community and congregation is there for the next generation as it was for me and for many of you.

And the time to prepare for those days ahead does not begin one or two years before retirement.

It has to begin now.

Rabbi Cohn and myself are using today as a time in our High Holidays to address something called “Lashon Hara”, which literally translates in Hebrew as “evil tongue” but it is a halachic (Jewish law) term for derogatory speech. In November, he and I will be doing a Sunday discussion on that topic. And he suggested we each include the idea of Lashon Hara in our address this day as a way of letting people know of our plans. How we choose to discuss it is totally up to us but it would be neat for the community to know that both rabbis are talking about the same concept but in different ways. Congregants of both places could then say “yeah, he used ‘Lashon Hara’ this way” and compare.

So I don’t know how Rabbi is using this theme, and I will be curious to find out what he does with Lashon Hara. But here is what I am doing with it.

Lashon Hara is a major sin in our tradition. It is slanderous talk about others. According to the rabbis, it is the sin of Lashon Hara that has caused numerous tragedies for the Jewish people and the world since the beginning of time. Slander of Jews by other Jews, the rabbis say in the Talmud, brought on the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Lashon Hara is not falsehood (that is Motzei Shem Ra and those are lies and false statements made about others). Lashon Hara is actually true statements that lower the status of the person about whom it is said. Even if true, it is forbidden to speak of people in such a negative way because it advances nothing and destroys any potentiality for advancement. Once you label a person “x”, even if true, you poison the ability of that person to be more than that in the eyes of others. Imagine if a teacher tells another teacher that the student he or she is getting is lazy and not a very good student. That teacher has now already pre-determined that the student is that without a single assignment given.

I say today that we, as a Jewish community, have been involved in Lashon Hara about our Charleston Jewry for way too long. I hear it each time we fail to get the necessary minyan (quorum of ten) for shacharit/morning services, each time we hear of a family who has moved away, each time we fail to get young people out to an event or service. Each high holiday that falls on a weekday and argues for us closing the wall for 2nd day services. That is when we hear: Charleston is not it used to be.

Lashon Hara. True statements about someone or something that does absolutely nothing to benefit you, the person, or the world. Nothing. And for our synagogue, for our community, for Judaism around the country, Lashon Hara is when we speak in ways that do nothing to benefit this Jewish community and does nothing to help craft the future for the next generation.

So today and next week, I am going to try to get us to stop speaking Lashon Hara regarding our community and, instead, focus on what we should be thinking, saying, and doing for our community. Instead of declaring what may be true about our community yet does nothing but destroy any potentiality and future, let us speak with much more saintly lips.

Let us see on Rosh Hashana: where we are today as a community and on Yom Kippur where we need to be, and how do we get there. Instead of saying this is the state of Judaism in Charleston or America, let us avoid lashon hara and instead, focus on what we can do to create the future we have an obligation to build for the next generation of American Jews.

This morning, let’s look at today’s Torah portion to understand where we are today and what how we should be thinking this Rosh Hashana about our future. In this morning’s section, we read how Sarah insists that Abraham casts out Hagar, her handmaiden, the mother of Ishmael and her son from their midst. Abraham is reluctant to do so because that is also his son but he wants to preserve the relationship with his wife Sarah and that of his other son, Isaac. Following G-d advice, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away with provisions into the wilderness. When the water is gone, the boy grows sick and his mother Hagar leaves him under one of the bushes to die, unable to witness his death. She sits off to a distance and cries. The Torah then says: “And G-d heard the cry of the boy.” There is more to the story but the words that I draw your attention to are the brief words that follow. The Torah continues with: “And an angel of G-d called to Hagar from Heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for G-d has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.”

The rabbis notice three extra words that stand out in that sentence. Did you notice them? Those extra words are: “where he is (‘ba-asher hu sham’)”. Those words are not needed. It should have simply ended with: “Fear not, for G-d has heeded the cry of the boy.”

So the rabbis teach us a critical lesson. They ask: Why does the Torah have to add those words? To which the rabbis answer by asking a question: why did G-d even save Ishmael here? Ishmael proved to be a vexing challenge for Sarah and Abraham while they tried to raise Isaac. His tribe (the Arab nations) would one day pose a tremendous challenge for the children of Israel. Why would G-d reach out to this lad?

Answer: Because G-d sees people as they are, not based on their past nor as He wishes them to be. G-d saw Ishmael… **where he is**. He saw Ishmael as a child reaching out, needing help and needing to be saved. G-d saved his life because G-d heard him where he is (ba-asher hu sham).

And thus, the rabbis teach a larger lesson: stop looking at people and at situations in the way you want them to be or wish they could be, but as they are. Stop judging or wishing it could be different but accept people as they are and move forward.

You know, we constantly speak Lashon Hara about this community because we look at the community as it used to be or as we wish it to be: “Boy, I wish we could go back to the time when Union Carbide was hiring” “Remember when Morris Harvey College had all those Jewish students and we had rows of seats for them during the High Holidays?” “So sad that we used to have several kosher meat markets here.” That is lashon hara, looking at things as they used to be and finding us lacking today. Or sometimes: “I wish we were in Chicago where they have a Jewish day school” “New York synagogues have two services today for the overflow crowd. We barely fill the main section.” “Boca Raton’s synagogue has a bar or bat mitzvah every weekend. Wish we had that”. That is looking at Charleston as you wish it could be but this community can never become. That is all Lashon Hara, looking at things as you want them to be and finding us lacking.

That is not looking at us where we are.

And if we could stop doing that, if we would, like G-d reach out and save the Jewish community as it is, I believe we could change the trajectory of our future and the future of American Jewry.

We have to learn to embrace the Jewish community of Charleston where it is.

We are not the same community of 30 years ago, nor 50 years ago, and we will never be. Different demographics, different needs, different priorities. And let me tell you, for the longest times we have either tried to figure out how to change our demographics which is terribly unproductive (because we can’t change that), or tried to tell people to simply stop assimilating and stop intermarrying which is equally unproductive. It isn’t going to happen. We need to see this community, this state for that matter and her people where they are, appreciate and harness our strengths, find opportunities where we can, and try to figure out how be the kind of traditional synagogue we can be for people as they are. How we can position ourselves as a traditional congregation that can still and must reach out to people, where they are.

Ba-asher hu sham.

That’s what I will be doing this year. That is my obsession that I hope you will want to be a part of. Reaching out to those who are here and those who are not, those who are engaged and those who are not yet engaged. And seeing where they are and what we can all do together with this community.

You see, a funny thing happens when we stop talking Lashon Hara about our community and about our shul; when I really have a chance to talk to people, one on one, about our synagogue and our community. It makes no differences whether they have been here for three or four generations or just a recent transplant, I always hear that this community means a lot to people. They may not be active as they would like because of work, children, and conflicts. But people love this community, revere this synagogue, and appreciate and value what Charleston Jewry means to this valley.

And want us to be there for the next generation of Jews.

It is time for us to stop speaking ill of the forces of assimilation, demographic changes, and simply reach out to people where they are, begin the conversations and remind people it is time to come home or rediscover this home.

That is the type of talk we should be having. Reaching out and engaging people. Seeing people where they are and where we can go together.

When we have these types of conversations, we realize what a tremendous community we have here. A synagogue bursting with activities, a shul that is always open, classes and services every day, a community with two congregations working in complete harmony, an actively engaged Zionist community. Simply put, a community so small yet so darn active.

And now we are at a point where we need to learn to speak to people about the future; not speak of realities that vex us but opportunities that challenge us. We have a community that can do remarkable things with people where they are. But we need to be unafraid to face the new opportunities ahead and reach out to people where they are and not where we want them to be.

I love B’nai Jacob Synagogue. I am not doing this for myself. I know financially and numerically, I will be able to remain in this synagogue until it is no longer my time here. But I am doing this because I owe it to the next rabbi. I came here and didn’t hear Lashon Hara about Charleston. I heard about pride and hopefulness and I saw with my own eyes this remarkable place, a Jewish community able to maintain and thrive despite what was an already changing landscape. We have an incredible synagogue and community, but we need to recognize where people are today, and build with them the next community. This is the latest chapter of Charleston Jewry; it is not a horror story but a page turning adventure. Where this will all take us in the next 15 years, I do not know but by listening to the words of the rabbis this morning and reaching out to people “ba-asher hu sham”, where they are, this is going to be an exciting year.

I cannot wait to get started.

Amen