

Sermon Part 1

Atem nitzavim hayom, you stand here today, all of you. Those who are with you here today and those who are not with you here today.

Even those who are not here with us today, stand before, live in the same space-time continuum we do. As individuals, our perceptions of reality vary as do our definitions of words like traditional, loyal, appropriate.

Reality, however, remains constant. Whether we are here today, Jews on Yom Kippur standing before our thoughts and words and deeds, allowing ourselves to be influenced by our shared vision of what makes us good and decent, kind and loving... Or not here today, oblivious to the rituals and inner work of our season of encountering the sacred beyond us and the sacred within us, reality remains a constant.

Standing up, as this morning's torah reading will call us to do, is choosing to be present in the here and now with the wisdom of past experience and faith that interactions, in good faith in the here and now will lead to a better tomorrow.

Ten days ago, on Erev Rosh Hashanah we explored the importance of weighing the privileges and blessings we've experienced in our life situations with dissatisfaction and disenfranchisement in ourselves, in others in our midst, and in the greater community. We challenged the convenience and ease of curating our lives so that we shut out what we don't like.....with a call to summon up the moral courage to listen to one another, to hold space together, even when we feel uncomfortable. Discomfort passes.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, we confronted the embarrassment of discovering we've been wrong in our thoughts, our words, and/or our deeds and I proposed that being wrong is really okay. Sure, we feel exposed, vulnerable for a fleeting moment. But then, we change course having learned from the mistake.

Last night, as we ushered in Yom Kippur, this our day of atonement, we shifted our attention from the past to setting ourselves up to succeed in the coming year:

Will I practice being more generous with my money or attention? Will I practice being more disciplined, following through on the promises I make? Will I practice loving my neighbor, honestly seeking first to understand and then to find shared values demonstrating a shared shred of humanity.

We mean well when we commit to living out our values. And, we fall into the familiarity of habits that sabotage our best intentions. We close ourselves off. We avoid conflict. We suck it up.

Sucking it up hurts us. It manifests in our bodies: compromised immune systems, digestive issues, addiction, headaches, and insomnia. It manifests in our mind-bodies: resistance, impulsivity and compulsivity, apathy, hopelessness, and existential angst.

Yom Kippur morning calls us to stand. Get up, stand up. Stand up for your rights...and values and reasoned principles. Stand up for yourself. Your truest, most noble self.

Yom Kippur, the day the gates of heaven open at the sound of Jews in prayer all over the planet, calls us to stand. Never mind how we may feel after all the *Al chet's*...reminders of our own pain and accountability, not to mention reminders of the pain we caused and seemingly escaped judgement. Stand up. Stand tall.

Yes, after all the *al Chet's*, we stand. Like Job, before the Almighty after losing everything – family, friends, wealth, personal comfort and health – and the Almighty says: Fasten your seatbelt, Job. OK, the Bible reads “Gird your loins...” It’s going to be quite a ride.

Sermon Part 2

This mitzvah (commandment, obligation, disciplined practice) is not difficult nor is it inaccessible. It is not up in heaven or beyond the sea. It is in your mouth and your heart.

The truth is that most of the time when we miss the mark, when we “sin,” we know. We do not need a witness or a judge or a divine sign. We know.

Job knew. He lost everything and continued to assert he had done nothing wrong. At the climax of Job’s story, God tells Job, *Gird your loins...this ride is going to get bumpy. Job...*

Justice and your pain and suffering may or may not be related. The universe and the life in it are not by their nature kumbaya, peaceful. There are animals who prey on others to survive. There are consequences of human doings and inherent fluidity in the natural order that produce disaster: hurricane, flood, wildfire, avalanche and mudslide.

Even with the best of intentions, people hurt each other. People who love each other hurt each other’s feelings and self-esteem.

Nitzavim, standing up as the Torah calls us to do, is putting all the ideals we hold to the test in the real world. Standing up is about demonstrating courage, withstanding discomfort...maybe others will stand with us, maybe not. Maybe we will misunderstand a situation and regret the stand we took in the moment and have to redirect.

Someone might sneer or laugh. Maybe we will listen to somebody who has not felt heard before and even though we disagree we might see that somebody as a somebody, as we like to think Abraham finally saw his son Isaac as somebody and turned to the ram instead.

Standing up means choosing our battles. We can’t do it all. But it all can get done if we trust that everybody has a role to play and others will rise to the occasion. The young Greta Thunberg has chosen the planet. She stood before the United Nations and gave the grown ups hell. “Do something!” “Start telling the truth!”

Shimon ben-Gamaliel [Avot 1:18] teaches: truth, justice and peace are the three things on which humanity stands or falls. Each of the three — truth, justice, peace — require opening our minds and hearts beyond our momentary desires. There is no truth if I am unwilling to

sometimes be wrong. There is no justice if I am willing to be unfair. There is no peace if I cannot concern myself with the needs of others.

At our best, Maimonides explains, we human beings naturally strive for intellectual and moral perfection (truth and peace), but these rely on the prior existence of a foundation of knowledge of right and wrong, fair and unfair (justice). Measuring our thoughts, feelings, and deeds requires standards.

The first we experience in our moral development is a continuum between making primary caregivers smile and cuddle and coo and making them put us down, raise the volume of voices or nonverbal communications.

As we begin to mature we can measure our reason, emotion, and behaviors on competing continua between getting what we want and not getting what we want AND what's ultimately good for us and what is not.

Finally, as we master abstract thought, we discover interdependence and shared values emerge and we connect with others to realize the lives we want to live. Our standards of measurement take into account what we know, the values we hold dear, and our commitment to act.

Failing to face the truth, tell the truth, or hear the truth, causes great pain and suffering. The lies we tell, the rancor we cause, and the injustices we engender are seen and heard. They leave a trail to be investigated, reported, and disseminated for discussion. Perhaps within the confines of a single family or more publicly in the greater community.

Failure to judge, in a given moment, seems to cause little pain and suffering. I can't know everything, therefore I am no position to judge. Unfortunately failing to make judgements leads ultimately to chaos. At some point one has to turn right or left, say yes or no, tango or leave the dance floor.

Failure to cultivate peace, recognize and acknowledge that we all need to work together to sustain the greater good, appears to cause loneliness, cynicism, and even hatred. We can be lonely in alone-ness or in crowded, over-scheduled lives. Cynicism ultimately compromises trust, good will, and faith in humanity.

Hard as it may be to speak truth, act justly, and seek peace, it is infinitely harder to go public against those who don't. The Talmud warns expressly that those who fail to protest against the sins of their household, city, people, and nation are punished for those sins, as if they had done them themselves [Talmud Shabbat 54b].

Yom Kippur calls us not only to stand for ourselves, but also for one another. Ecclesiastes says: *There is a time for everything under heaven. A time to speak and a time to refrain from speaking.*

It is not easy knowing when it is time to speak or refrain from speaking. There is no more telling illustration of that point than the current unfolding of the government whistleblower. There is no promise that doing the right thing won't hurt. Sometimes what is right is most painful.

Mi sheberach avotaynu veimotaynu, May the one who blessed our ancestors bless us and comfort us. The truth sometimes hurts. The misuse of justice wounds generations to come. Bless us with healing for our bodies and comfort for our souls.