

Rabbi David Baum, Congregation Shaarei Kodesh
Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Day 1 – 5770 (2009)
Building A Covenantal Community

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Rabbi David Baum

It is truly an honor to be back in South Florida after many years of experiences in many different places. When I left South Florida for college, I had just received my first email address on AOL. Before I left South Florida, I did not have a cell phone, although beepers were the craze back then. If someone wanted to get a hold of me, they would call my house phone, write me a paper letter, or come to my house. If I wanted to talk to a friend, I would actually meet them in person.

I return to South Florida with six email addresses from AOL, Google, Yahoo, and other providers, two Facebook pages, a Twitter account, two blogs, a cell phone with Internet where I can manage my email addresses and social networking pages, and a lap top.

I thought about my connectivity and how much it takes to maintain all these ways to connect, and I realized that something was getting lost. It reminded me of a quote from a movie I saw: He's Just Not That Into You.

“Mary: I had this guy leave me a voicemail at work, so I called him at home, and then he emailed me to my BlackBerry, and so I texted to his cell, and now you just have to go around checking all these different portals just to get rejected by seven different technologies. It's exhausting.”

What was so funny about this quote is that the whole movie centers around trying to build a meaningful relationship with the other, and yet, they are doing it through text messages and My Space pages. Technology was supposed to help us be connected to more people wasn't it? But it seems like our new technologies have done the opposite. Things are faster and more efficient aren't they? Do you want to give someone a voice message, but avoid conversation? Well there's an App for that! Really!

When I got an Iphone I was told something repeatedly: this thing will change your life. Well it has, but I will tell you something: I miss people.

When I entered the Rabbinate, I knew that the task ahead of me would be difficult. We are a people that values community over the individual, restrictions on our behaviors, from eating and drinking to sexual relations. Most of all, we are a people that values the depth of our relationships over the number of relationships.

We live in truly amazing times and I thank God everyday for being alive during these historic times. As Jews, we have been impacted by these times and our technologies.

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For example, the Western Wall has been a place of great pilgrimage for us as Jews. Many of us who have been there have had spiritual experiences in the place where our Holy Temple stood. But now, instead of going there, you can simply log on to a website and watch the Wall “live”, and you can email a prayer to be printed and put in the wall for you as well. For the first time in our history, people have asked the question, can we have a minyan over the Internet? In fact, many synagogues will be simulcasting their service online.

With each new technology that is invented, with each new App that we buy, we risk something: instead of our technologies freeing us to enjoy more relationships, whether they be with God or with other people; we are becoming slaves to our technologies, having relationships with devices instead of people. And when we do interact, it is for shorter and shorter time.

At some point, we lost the personal touch, and it is something that I want to bring back. Its time to get a hold of our technologies and get back to a basic idea: building meaningful relationships.

I have come to this congregation to fulfill a dream of mine, something that I must do as a Rabbi because it is God’s expectation of me: to build a covenantal community. And I would like to unveil what we will use as our tools for this project and why I want to do this. We are going to use the very thing that God used to create the universe; the building blocks of nature: the word.

Today is Rosh Hashanah and it has many names, one of them being, Yom Harat Olam, the day that the world was created and today we celebrate its anniversary. There is one planet Earth, but within this planet are billions of realities which I would like to call “worlds”. Every year, we have the opportunity to look into the “worlds” that we have created as human beings. There are many creation stories from the Ancient Near East, but ours is unique in a couple of ways. In our creation story, God existed as a pre-requisite, and His tools were His words. God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” It is from the creation story that we say the prayer, Baruch Sheamar, v’haya haolam, Praised is God whose word created the world. God’s tools were His words.

This fact gives us as Jews a basis for creation. We know that we create through words and ideas, and like any creation, once created, it is set free and the creator can lose control. There is a famous phrase in the book of Proverbs: “Life and death are in the power of the tongue.” Words create, but what we often overlook is that words can destroy worlds as well. It is why the Rabbis said that speech has been compared to an arrow: once the words are released, like an arrow, they cannot be recalled, the harm they do cannot be stopped, and the harm they do cannot always be predicted, for words like arrows often go astray.

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue.”

The other side of this quote is often overlooked: Life is in the power of the tongue.

And what is my evidence? I have been to synagogues and Jewish holy sites around the world, I have lived in Jerusalem, the holiest city in the world for two years, I have prayed at the Kotel, the Western Wall, numerous times, I have been to the closest place to the Kodesh HaKodashim during the tunnel tours, but the holiest place I have ever been to is the Beit Midrash, the house of study. Our tradition states, “If ten people sit together and occupy themselves with the Law, the divine presence rests among them.” I have spent years in Batei Midrash, houses of study, in Jerusalem and New York. I have truly felt God’s presence as we argued over Jewish law and learned new Jewish ideas. In Judaism, the preferable way to study is in pairs, one to one, called a hevrutah. There is a famous Talmudic phrase: “O Hevrutah O Mitutah” “Give me hevrutah, partnership, or give me death.” Many Jewish scholars cite this phrase to illustrate the centrality of study in hevrutah, studying with a learning partner. But this phrase has nothing to do with learning in pairs. Rather, the phrase means that the individual needs community and the respect of others, and without them life is not worth living.

As humans, we have a special responsibility. We alone have been given the gift of thought. During the Amidah, perhaps our central prayer that we recite three times a day, the first thing we thank God for is the gift of intellect, the gift of the human mind, Da’at, Binah, Haskel – knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

God has given us these gifts. We alone out of all of God’s creations can overcome the natural instincts that animals are bound to. We have a mind and our minds create thoughts, which create words.

God gave us this gift, the gift of words. We have the potential to create a world of limitless potential, but we have to get back to basics, one relationship at a time, one community at a time. Our words literally create worlds, and my question is: what will we do with this awesome power?

We will use them to create a covenantal community. The idea of a covenant is when free agents who respect each other’s freedom, bind themselves by a promise to work together, to be loyal to one another, and to achieve what cannot be achieved alone. We see this in the Torah with God and Noah, God and Avraham, and God and the Jewish people at Sinai. We see it among couples that marry each other.

Most Jewish prayer and ritual can be done alone, but for the optimal effect, Judaism has to be experienced in a covenantal community. We pray in minyanim, a quorum

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of 10 adults, we learn in chevrotot, learning pairs, most of our life cycle events must end with a seudat mitzvah, a festive meal with a community.

And what makes us so special? It is our covenant. But do we see it in our congregations? I believe that we can, and one of the ways it can be accomplished is through meaningful dialogue: a one to one meeting.

Why one to one? As James Madison once said, “Great things can only be accomplished in a narrow compass.” One to one meetings are not new to us as Jews. Perhaps the most memorable one to one conversation in history was between God, in the form of a burning bush, and Moshe. During this conversation, God learned about the core of Moshe, his fears, his motivations, and Moshe began to learn more about God. Moshe met God as a bush ablaze and yet was not consumed. It was a model to Moshe and to all of us of what God wants: the inner core of us that burns with passion, yet does not destroy us. This one to one meeting between Moshe and God was the beginning of a life long relationship.

Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote, “relationships lie not in power but in the bond of mutuality made possible by language.”

God gave us words to create, they are our tools.

We have been busy this summer at Shaarei Kodesh. Since July, there have been about 20 members of our congregation who have been trained to perform one to one relational meetings. I learned this skill as a community organizer in New York City with Jewish Funds for Justice. Two summers ago, my mentor, Jeannie Appleman, a community organizer with Jewish Funds for Justice, gave me a task: perform as many one to one’s with members of the Jewish Theological Seminary’s community as possible. It was a weird experience for me at first. I called people up, I emailed them, and I texted them to meet me for coffee. Some were apprehensive; they even asked me, “What are you trying to sell me?” I told them that I wasn’t trying to sell them anything, I just wanted to find out who they were, how they saw themselves in our community, what were their hopes and dreams, what were the greatest challenges that they saw? That summer, I performed over 50 one to one’s. When I went to a national training in Chicago through the Industrial Areas Foundation, a national community organizing network, I met with people who I was familiar with: Rabbinical students from other seminaries, but also with people from community’s I would never have visited: an African American Muslim woman from a mosque in Chicago, a youth coordinator from Brownsville, Brooklyn who made peace between gangs, a devout Christian housemother from El Paso who helped change her community by taking action on issues of poverty in her community. We were all different and yet so similar. We all looked at ourselves as agents of social justice. We listened to each other’s stories and through that, we had a stake in each other.

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After that summer, I learned a lot about people. I learned not to judge a book by its cover because people are complex. I learned about the gifts that each person could bring to our communities. In short, I learned to love my fellow human beings. And each person learned about me, who I was, what motivated me to be a Rabbi and a pursuer of social justice. We asked each other why questions. Why are things like this? Why do I do what I do? In short, we built relationships with each other.

Through these meetings with my own community members, I learned about my neighbor, a Cantorial student, who had to have his baby sleep in between him and his wife during the cold winter because of insufficient heat in our building. I learned about the drug dealer who was harassing my neighbors on the first floor. Alissa and I had our own problems of an apartment falling apart, but suddenly, our destinies were tied in with their destinies. During that summer, we developed a plan to speak up for each other, and we became a formidable force. We pressured our landlord to fix the heat in our buildings so no more babies had to freeze at night, we forced our land lord to help mothers with strollers and the elderly who had trouble walking up and down the stairs when the elevator was broken for five months, and we made them ensure that no one would buy and sell drugs in our buildings.

By using our words in the right way to build relationships, we created a new world. No Iphone, or computer, or social networking site could have affected change on this scale. It was people who made the changes, and it was people who built relationships with God's gift to us: our words. It was people who built a special community: a covenantal community.

"Give me havruta, partnership, or give me death." The individual needs community and the respect of others, and without them life is not worth living.

If you ask people: why are you members of a synagogue, most of you will answer: I am looking for a community. But it's more than that. We are searching for greater meaning in our lives, a purpose that is greater than ourselves. If you had to search for a missing item, would you do it alone or with a search party? Our synagogues have to be "search parties". This search party is different because we find our path as a result of the search. We will reach our goals only when we share in each other's stories. We have to be based on people, not issues.

We are searching for those who will help our people grow and flourish. It's not up to the Rabbi alone, but each person. Each one of you must have a stake in this community in order for our people to succeed.

The Chernobyl Rebbe commented on Rosh Hashanah saying that today the world is like a fetus about to be born. Through the shofar, that which is concealed is revealed. Like the nine months of pregnancy, Rosh Hashanah is a set time, one long day none as Yom Maarichta. At the end of this day, we will be born once again.

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What is the transformation that will happen today? How are we, like that fetus waiting for birth, changing? How are we contributing to the re-creation of our world today?

These are questions that we will think about over this long day and in the year to come. I hope that when you are called for a meeting, you will share of yourself with that person, and they with you. I hope that it is the first step in creating something truly special: a covenantal community. To open yourself up may seem risky. But as some of my wise teacher's in this room, the congregants of Shaarei Kodesh, taught me that sometimes, the riskiest thing to do is the status quo (the same old thing).

When something is destroyed, we know it because we remember what was, but how do we account for something that never was? How many of God's worlds are we losing because we refuse to create them?

We need you to be our partners in creation. We need you to put down your Iphone and pick up a cup of coffee with us. We need your words to create new realities. We need you to help us build a covenantal community.