

Sheep, Mountain Hikers and Soldiers

L'Shannah Tovah! Let me begin by giving you a very brief assignment. Take just a moment and think about which words of the Mahzor, from this morning's service, you remember most vividly, the ones that may have touched something deep inside you.... Great... How many of you recalled standing before the open ark, shortly after the beginning of the Musaf Amidah, and listening to Cantor Richmond chant the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer?

Speaking personally, I am as struck today as I was as a child by its rich language and imagery: its evocation of a Heavenly Court...the sound of both the Shofar, *and* of a still, small voice...the trembling angels who declare that "this very day is the day of Judgement....." and finally, the image of all of the earth's inhabitants passing before the Divine Judge for review, "*Kivnei Maron*," as a flock of sheep. That image, of each of us, passing before the Divine shepherd one by one, so vulnerable in our singularity, is for many of us, etched into our consciousness.

The author of this beautiful prayer drew that image from the Mishnah, our oldest written source of Rabbinic Law. There in Tractate Rosh Hashannah, we learn,

The world is judged at four seasons:

At Pesach- for grain

At Shavuot- for the fruit of trees

(on Sukkot- for water)

On Rosh Hashanah, all who enter the world pass before Him

Kivnei maron, as it is written (in psalm 13):

“He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their actions.”

Now, I hesitate to translate those two words, *Kivnei maron*, because *maron* is not originally a Hebrew word, and the Talmud isn't really sure what to make of it. Commenting on this Mishnah, the Rabbis suggest three equally plausible readings. The first suggestion of course, is that *Kivnei Maron* means “like a flock of sheep”, because, as the Talmud explains, *Maron* sounds like *imrana*, an Aramaic word which means sheep. The classic commentator, Rashi, explains that when sheep were being counted for the tithe, the shepherd would make them pass through a narrow opening, one at a time, in order to be individually counted.

However, Resh Lakish (one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud), disagrees. No, no no, he says. You're reading it all wrong. It doesn't say “*Kivnei Maron*” at

all. Rather, read it as, *Kivnei Mayron*-“like the people of the town of Meron.” Meron, you see, is a tall mountain in the Galilee, near Tzfat. In those days, apparently, in order to ascend to its peak, a person had to walk carefully, single file, along a narrow, treacherous path. Resh Lakish imagines that on Rosh Hashanah, each one of us is like those mountain climbers, slowly passing single file before God.

Finally, Rav Yehudah, in the name of his teacher Shmuel, says that *Kivnei Maron* means “like soldiers in the House of David.” He doesn’t explain how he gets to that. However, a scholar in the 19th century had the insight that Rav Yehudah was probably reading the text not as *Kivnei maron*, but as “*Kiv’numeron*”, like a “numeron”, which in both Greek and Latin means, “a company of soldiers,” who are counted individually. So according to Shmuel, a person stands before God on Rosh Hashanah like a soldier who is charged to carry out the orders of the King, and who is examined accordingly.

Now, whether the Mishnah means sheep, mountain hikers, or soldiers, they are all suggesting virtually the same thing- that on this day, we are counted one by one and judged on our individual merits. And each version reflects a similar, heightened awareness of the precariousness of our lives: The sheep passing through the counter whose fate is determined merely by the randomness of its number in

line; the climber who, with a single misstep, might fall to her death, or the soldier, determined to do what is expected of him, though it brings him in harm's way.

So who are we- sheep, mountain climbers or soldiers? Let me suggest that each image offers a different, and important, way of understanding ourselves and of thinking about the questions that we ask ourselves today.

Sheep are by nature, collective creatures. The word itself reflects this: "sheep" is a collective noun, with no separate singular or plural form. Even standing alone, a single sheep is never really distinct from the flock. Reading the *Unetetaneh tokef* prayer through this lens reminds us that building and living in community is part of our nature. Our interlocking web of relationships, norms, standards, and mutual goals gives us a place in the world, and helps us to define what give meaning to our lives. From this perspective, the questions I might ask are: *How can I contribute to this system that supports and holds me- how can I help to make my community a Kehilla Kedosha, a community of holiness? How can I join with others to be a part of something greater than myself?*

On the other hand, the image of the hiker ascending a path, unaccompanied by anyone by his side, reminds us that to a great extent we are the shapers of our own destiny, we decide which mountain tops we aspire to climb, and ultimately, only we can take responsibility for charting the course necessary to reach its peak.

From this perspective, the questions that I might pose today are: *What is my calling? What are the unique tasks in this life that are mine alone to fulfill?*

Judaism teaches us to live in the creative tension between these two perspectives- the individual and the communal. We hear in the Mishna Sanhedrin this teaching: *“If a person casts many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the Supreme Holy One, blessed be God, fashioned every person with the stamp of the first person, and yet no one of them resembles his fellow.”* What a wonderful paradox- it is because we are all created in the same image- God’s image- that each of us is different: unique in our desires, our talents and our preferences.

The Slonimer Rebbe, one of the great Hassidic teachers of the last century, goes further. He says, *“from the moment we are created each one of us has a unique role and purpose in repairing the world, a unique mission given to us from Heaven. No one can fulfill the mission of the other, to repair that which is required of another. Thus, even the least person has a unique mission that no one else is able to complete. Happy are they who, while in this world, discern their earthly mission and fulfill it properly....”*

And so we ask ourselves, what is our special role, what mountain is mine alone to climb? And yet, Abraham, the first Jew, though we sometimes think of him

as a loner, going against society's grain, was chosen ultimately to bring people together, to build a family and to build a nation. We are *Am Yisrael*, or *Knesset Yisrael*, the community of Israel, because of a covenant that we made, all of us, together, standing at Sinai. The truth is, in spite of the "the by one by one" imagery of the *unetaneh tokef*, virtually every other prayer we say today, and every day, is in the plural. Our destiny is as a community.

So who are we, the sheep or the mountain climber? I would have to suggest that we are both; that only through our belonging to the community are we able to learn which mountains we are meant to climb. We challenge each other to think and to act in new ways. We complement each other's talents and passions, and we support each other on our journeys. Our individuality is clarified and defined equally through our shared wisdom, experience, and dreams as well as by our diverse experiences, and our various aspirations. Our differences broaden us. Yes, we are a flock that moves together, and yet, no two of us experience life exactly the same way.

Which brings us finally to the third alternative reading: On Rosh Hashanah, God counts us *Kivnumeron- like soldiers*. To me this suggests the following questions: *Are there things in the world that I would fight passionately for? Are there principles for which I would have to take a stand, even go to the mat for?*

These are the questions I struggle with the most. Perhaps you too have wondered, as I do, how you would stack up compared to the true heroes, to the ordinary people who rise to do extraordinary things when circumstances demand it. Our lives in this country are, for the most part, thank God, so bountiful, so privileged. The violence, hunger and instability that characterize much of the world is something that we read about over our morning coffee.

And then I think of my children, Jonah and Sara, who chose a harder path by moving to Israel. Jonah made aliyah four years ago, because he told me at the time that he wanted to be a liberal Zionist in Israel, because Israel needs liberal Zionists. He chose to enlist in a combat unit, because he didn't want to shirk the responsibilities that other young Israelis must shoulder. Those are choices I don't think I could have made in my own life.

Sara moved to Israel two years ago, formally committing to making *aliyah* a year later, and finding her niche working for Israeli social justice organizations. These kids are my heroes. I am humbled by their choices, and find myself asking this Rosh Hashanah, *What are the principles I am ready to sacrifice for, to go to the mat for?*

My friends, this was a summer during which many American Jews took a stand, went to the mat, on an issue of great urgency for Israel, America, and the

world. But we found each other digging in to opposing positions, viewing the issue from very different perspectives. So yes, for the next few minutes I am going to talk about the nuclear disarmament deal, but not in order to try to convince you of any position, for or against. What needs to be said about that has already been said, and it wouldn't be very "*yuntifdic.*" But I do want to talk about what we risked losing along the way this summer, because that is very pertinent to *yuntif.*

The vitriol with which some Jews addressed each other, or refused to speak to each other, became part of the summer's news cycle. And that should concern us, even more than the outcome of the Iran deal itself. For if we cannot hear each other, and hold each others' differences, then the very basis of community is threatened.

At the beginning of the summer, Temple Israel's president, Stuart Alford and I sent a letter to the congregation expressing our view that this deal was neither good for the United States nor for Israel, and asking you, if you felt similarly, to express your view to your congressmen. Some of you felt supported by that letter, while others told me that you thought it was wrong for the congregation to express any position on a political issue.

On that point, I very much disagree. It would be absolutely wrong for a synagogue to advocate for a particular party or candidate. Raising social issues,

however, and even occasionally advocating a particular course of action, is at the core of a synagogue's responsibility to promote *tikkun olam*- the repairing of a broken world. I believe we have a responsibility to respond to a range of social issues, from the campaign to increase minimum wage to the world refugee crisis, from the perspective of Jewish values and teachings. All the more so, how can we keep silent on policies that affect the safety of the Jewish State, and of our own people?

I don't regret having sent that letter. But I do regret the chilling effect it may have had on members of our community who aligned with the other side. And for that, I am truly sorry. Because a true community must create the space, whatever the issue, for people to *be heard*, and for people to *feel safe* in their self expression. For, if we can't do that, then there is no way for us to learn from each other, no possibility for growth. And we fail in our aspiration to be a truly holy community.

Can you think of a time when you were in a discussion with someone with whom you disagreed, and found yourself talking at them instead of to them? Or, even when you agree with someone, do you sometimes find yourself preparing an answer in your head, even before the other person has finished expressing her thought? I know I have. We can't help it, both because of our egos and because

it is the nature of our minds to wander and to race ahead. But it doesn't have to be that way.

My friends, in both my prayer practice, and my meditation practice, the goal that I set for myself is to open my heart, through paying better attention to the truth of my experience, in order to be more present to other people. This takes work, but it is not impossible. We can learn to develop that muscle of open hearted attention, to develop a way of listening that becomes *holy listening*.

I'll tell you something ironic: I heard from congregants on **both** sides of the debate that they felt stifled; that it was the other side that took up the all space, the other group that made them feel marginalized at the Kiddush table. That's how constricted, how fearful, we felt this summer.

This summer, 1,000 Rabbis signed on to a letter condemning the nuclear arms deal with Iran as inadequate and dangerous. I was one of those Rabbis, and I haven't changed my mind. At the same time, however, approximately 400 other rabbis signed a letter unequivocally supporting the agreement as the best means at our disposal of containing the threat of an Iranian nuclear bomb in the near future. Entrenched in my opinions and beliefs, my first reaction to that letter was, *what are they thinking? What universe are they living in?* But you see, among those 400 Rabbis are included beloved colleagues and teachers! And, even if I disagree with

them, I hold them in respect and in love. We are a community of Rabbis, a subset of the greater community which encompasses all of us, *Am Yisrael*. And I know that for many of them, it took courage to sign that letter, and to take a principled decision which was at odds with many of their congregants, with the major organizations of the Jewish community, and with the majority of our brothers and sisters who live in the State of Israel.

To a great extent, the positions that we took on this issue reflect our world views. As Jews, we have a history that teaches us to believe our enemies when they say they want to kill us, and the Ayatollahs who rule Iran remain crystal clear and unrepentant in their desire to see the State of Israel disappear. There has been an Amalek in every generation, and sadly, ours is no different.

On the other hand, as Jews we are drawn, as we have always been, to the politics of hope, to the belief that people, and nations, can change and that the sword can eventually be turned into the ploughshare. We want to believe that a deal, any deal, can at least open the door to a new, normalized relationship between Iran and the west. And, the argument goes, walking away from even a very flawed deal would allow the Iranian nuclear program to proceed ahead completely unfettered, harm America's leadership position in the world, and thus ultimately harm Israel.

So who was right? Well, I will now tell you the truth. And the truth is... that we just don't know. No one can say with certainty what Iran or the world will look like next month let alone in 15 years. The truth is, the world is a dangerous place, and it may be becoming more so.

And the truth is, that we are afraid. There is so much fear, and so much uncertainty...that we cling to our illusion of certainty, to our utter conviction that we are right, as a talisman to soothe our fears. And the more we have to fear, the tighter we constrict, and cling to the illusion of certainty. We lose our freedom to hear, and to allow room for subtlety, nuance, and growth in our own thinking.

Do you remember Moses' inspirational words to the people as he began his final address to them on the verge of entering the Land of Israel? *Atem nitzavim kolchem hayom-You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord our God- your tribal heads, your elders and your official, all the men of Israel, your children your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchooper to waterdrawer- to enter into this covenant.* The rabbis comment: you stand this day all of you- those who are no longer alive, and those who are not yet born. And I would add: *All of us: those with whom we agree and those with whom we do not agree.* Because we share community, because we all stood together at Sinai, I will assume, even when it is painful for me, that we are all doing the best we can to seek

the truth. And from **that** perspective, I can say, *Eilu v'Eilu divrei elohim Haim*: Both my position, and its opposite, are both words of the living God.

Near the beginning of our Temple Israel Vision Statement, which was developed last year as part of our long range planning process, is a sentence that reads: “We strive to build a sacred community (*Kehillah Kedoshah*) that supports each member’s unique Jewish journey, providing multiple gateways for both mind and spirit along the way.” Vision Statements are intentionally aspirational- they give us a goal to reach for. So let us commit ourselves this year to making space for each other’s journeys to unfold, on a road that we travel individually, and yet together. We will all make mistakes and we will all learn from each other. That’s what it means to be a community.

You may know this well known teaching of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, who says, *Kol haolam Kulo Gesher Tzar Meod*: The whole world is like a narrow bridge. *V’HaIkar, Lo L’fached*.- and the essential thing, *the essential thing*, is no to be afraid! Rabi Nachman is telling us that if we tighten around our fear, we may well lose our balance and fall. But if we can find a way to loosen fear’s grip, to breathe into a place of equanimity, of balance and faith, even in the face of all of life’s unknowns, then we will make it to the other side. That’s faith. That’s trust. That’s knowing even when you don’t know for sure, that God knows who we are

and that we are not alone in this universe. Isn't **that** what this holiday is really all about? The Rabbis teach us that ELUL the month of introspection that leads us to this day stands for *Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.* We are loved. We are not abandoned in this world. We can weather any storm, come what may, because we are not alone. And we are able to glimpse the possibility of God's loving presence precisely because we know that presence as it is revealed through the loving, holy relationships and the sacred communities that we are able to build and to sustain.

Let's conclude today by returning to the Mishna in Tractate Rosh Hashanah with which we began. Can we ever know what those mysterious words, *Kivnei Maron*, were originally intended to mean? Is it, in the end, the metaphor of sheep, mountain climbers or soldiers? Well actually, we do know. Some riddles can be solved. According to a scholarly article by Rabbi David Golinkin, who, by the way, will be coming from Jerusalem to Natick later this year for a Scholar in residence Weekend, extensive evidence from early manuscripts prove that the original text, both in the Mishna and in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, was...any guesses.....? "*KiveNumeron.*" That's right. "Like Soldiers."

The Mishna was meant to be read this way: *On Rosh Hashanah, all who enter the world pass before Him Like a company of soldiers, as it is written (in psalm 13): "He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their actions."* So let me suggest this final interpretation. Perhaps we are like soldiers who are courageous in the face of uncertainty and danger, who can gird themselves

to meet the task at hand, precisely because they know that their general is not indifferent to their fate; that *He fashions their hearts and discerns their actions.*

May we feel held by the Loving Presence of the Universe, who knows our hearts and discerns our actions.

Dear friends, in the coming year, may you feel safe like the sheep in his flock, may you feel adventurous and bold like the experienced mountaineer, and may you feel courageous like the soldier, even in the face of the great unknown.

L'Shanah Tovah Tikateivu!