Learning, Thanking (some kvetching) and Doing
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Rosh Hashanah Day 5772

I am in awe of this place. *Ma norah ha makom hazeh* – how awesome is this place Oh God – how filled with wonder and potential and majesty. I am like Jacob this morning, it is as though I woke from my dream of the angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven and suddenly became aware of the beauty and wonder of my surroundings. *Ma norah ha makom hazeh!* It is awesome! It is magnificent!

And yet this place is not the most inspiring thing. The most magnificent, the most inspiring thing I see this morning is YOU! Our congregation, you the Jewish people of our community are here, in this place, sharing this special moment. The building I will admit was touch and go for a few weeks there, but I never doubted *you*. YOU I was counting on to be here when we opened the doors and turned on the lights.

But… ***Why are*** you here?

In the film Field of Dreams, there is a scene when Kevin Costner walks out onto his cornfield that is now a baseball field and sees a younger version of his father taking off his catcher's gear. Shoeless Joe Jackson – the famous old-time ball player says in a heavenly sounding voice, 'If you build it he will come.' And as father and son consecrate the field with a game of catch, the sun sets, the camera pans and we see a line of cars and headlights winding there way toward the farm and the field – they are all coming to this field of dreams.

Together we built ***this*** (hold arms wide) and you came – to ***our*** field of dreams. I know… you are Jews or married to Jews and it's Rosh Hashanah – "Rabbi where else would we be?" But there are plenty of Jews in this town who are not in shul this morning.

So, besides coming to see ***this***, (hold arms wide) and besides sharing this holy day…Why ***DO*** you come? Because there IS more, isn't there? There has to be more, a building grand as it is, is not reason enough.

You are here in part I think to learn something that will help you when you are ***not*** here. Some guidance, some insight, some inspiration, a perspective that will help you in the year ahead, in the day ahead, in the minutes ahead! So, you are here to learn, but there's still more, learning is only part of what you seek..

You are here **to give thanks** and… to complain (or *kvetch*). In the immortal words of Dickens, it has been 'the best of times and the worst of times'. It's been a tough year, your family, your circle of friends has experienced loss and sorrow, death and illness, woes and worries. You attended a funeral of someone who died much too

soon. Your adult children lost their job and maybe their home – and you are supporting them as best you can. Your retirement is put on hold, your college funds are not going to be enough It's such a struggle, and yet you find ways to make it work.

You have not given up – not on hope, not on each other, not on God or your faith. Though I know for some God and faith may waiver. And with all the struggles, there ha been blessing too – thank God for the blessings in our life. Children, Grandchildren, Bat/Bat Mitzvahs, engagements, weddings, new love, new friendships..

You are here in the midst of it all, in spite of it all, because of it all, to sing and rejoice and to give thanks for the blessings we enjoy every day, but that's still not all. Learning and thanking are not all that draws you to this place.

Your Judaism is not about a building it is about the unique community that exists inside this building. The foundation of this place is not the new parking garage but US gathered here in this sanctuary. We are a community that loves, cares and **does** for each other. Cooking meals, driving carpool, celebrating *simchas*, standing with us at shiva – we reach into each other's lives by doing for each other. Our lives have meaning and purpose. What sociologist Robert Putnam called Social Capital – that inherent need we have **to do for each other** and by extension allow others to do for us. We are not strangers – we are family.

Learning, **Thanking** (some kvetching) and **Doing**. Three substantial reasons you are here and three reasons according to our tradition that the world was created.

In the *Mishnah*, the great code of Jewish law that serves as a how-to manual for the commandments listed in the Torah a Rabbi named Shimon the Righteous (Mishnah rabbis have great nicknames) teaches that the world is based upon three principles, *al shosha divarim ha olam omed*. On Torah, on Prayer and on Deeds of Loving Kindness. **Learning, Thanking** and **Doing**. Our rabbis conclude that **learning, thanking** and **doing** are not only the foundation of the world they are the foundation of our spiritual lives – they are the essence of what it means to be a Jew. **Learning, thanking** and **doing** – its upon these three pillars that our spiritual lives and this building solidly stand. Like a three-legged stool, take one away and it will topple over.

LEARNING (Torah Study)

This past year a few of us in this room embarked on a our own version of plowing a cornfield into a field of dreams.

We began teaching Torah in Whole Foods here in Tarzana. Every Wednesday at 11:45am I sit in the back near the bulk nuts (rather appropriate setting I think) and study the bible with whoever takes me up on the invitation. About fifteen of you

come every week sometimes more sometimes less and for an entire year we have read and chewed over the weekly Torah portion along side our organic salads and sushi.

Every week I begin with the same question. "Has knowing a little Torah helped you know yourself a little better?" We don't read this ancient scroll simply out of obligation. Torah is a story that repeats itself every day in every way in our own lives. Every week Jews all over the world read the ***same*** stories and relate to them in deeply personal ways. It's the story of our people then AND now..

- Abraham and Sarah struggled with infertility, Abraham was a workaholic.
- Issac and Rebekah played favorites with their two sons.
- Jacob wasn't sure if he believed in God.
- His youngest son Joseph was a braggart and know-it-all and his brothers hated him.

And yet at other times our people were in awe and wonder of the miracles of the world around them and found meaning in all they experienced, childbirth, marriage, the bounty of a good harvest.

An example? Moses breaks the first set of the 10 commandments when he sees the Israelites dancing with the Golden Calf. The Torah explains that when Moses returns 40 days later with a second set he places the broken fragments of the first inside the ark and then places the second whole set on top of them. The teaching – and I just love this – is that our brokenness, our failings serve as a foundation for our new wholeness. We have to learn from our mistakes.

Study Torah – make it a regular part of your week, at Whole Foods, here in one of the numerous adult study spaces that ring our new campus, subscribe to a weekly email with a summary of the text- the link is on our website. You've come today to learn – maybe the lesson of today is that there is so much more that Judaism can teach you about yourself.

THANKING (The Veil)

"Rabbi how do I pray?" Praying, thanking and kvetching is not about the Hebrew, its not about the melodies, its certainly not about the place – praying is about expression, giving voice to our yearnings. The prophet Jeremiah declares, "God does not want empty rituals, rather it is the prayers of the heart that God desires most."

This sanctuary and every sacred space on our new campus is ringed with an aluminum veil of cutout Hebrew letters. There are many stories behind the origin of this veil and its design. Let me tell you mine. It comes from the Bal Shem Tov – that great Hassidic storyteller of the *shtel* and it is the answer to the question, "Rabbi how do I pray?"

It was Rosh Hashanah and like today everybody had come to synagogue to welcome the New Year and pray for the good things in the coming year. Suddenly there was some noise in the back of the sanctuary. In a small child's voice people could hear, "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey"

Everyone became very quiet, and then from the back of the room they heard it again, "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey".

One by one people began to turn and look to see who was interrupting the service. It was a young boy. He was standing with his prayerbook open saying over and over again, "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey"

People began to shoosh him, and now the Rabbi stopped his own prayers. He too was looking at the boy who said over and over again "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey". Suddenly the boy stopped looking at his machzor (prayerbook) and began to cry. The Rabbi held up his hands and people were silent and the rabbi came off the bima and went up to the boy.

The boy looking up at the rabbi said, "I can't read Hebrew, and even if I could I don't know what the sounds mean. All I know is how to say the first five letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so I keep saying them over and over hoping that God will turn them into a prayer."

The rabbi kissed the boy and said, "Today we learned the real meaning of prayer. Prayer is opening our hearts to God and saying things honestly. The rabbi announced, "Let us pray together." And everyone in the sanctuary joined in, "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey". (hopefully they will join me)

This veil behind our ark, which wraps our sanctuary and chapel is for me a reminder of this boy's prayer. The motif of those letters is on every mezuzah on every door throughout this magnificent campus. "Rabbi how do I pray?" Look around you, open up your heart and speak honestly with God in your own voice – let that be your prayer.

DOING

G'milut Hasadeem – or deeds of loving-kindness does not mean charity. The medieval commentator Rashi explained that acts of loving-kindness are more important than charity because charity is given with wealth while acts of loving kindness are given with wealth and deeds. Charity is given only to the poor, while acts of loving-kindness benefit rich and poor and everyone in between.

In order to be Jewish you have to do Jewish. It is not enough to learn, it is not enough to pray – learning and prayer must lead to doing – to actions informed by the other two. A three-legged stool, any two legs without the third is incomplete.

How do you ***do*** Jewish? During my sabbatical this past year I spent time traveling around the country visiting other synagogues and communities. One visit was a two-day friendship mission to Utah with two other Los Angeles Rabbis to meet the Mormons. The most impressive thing I learned was their version of commitment to doing.

We all know that young adult Mormons fulfill a mission to far away lands to do God's work as they understand it. But I was surprised to learn that their doing goes deeper. Every family is paired with at least one other family once a month for home bible study and conversation. Monday nights are set aside in the Mormon home as family night, where the media is turned off and the family has dinner, plays games and studies. At least once a year every member of the church makes a pilgrimage of sorts to Utah to work for a few days in a food processing plant that makes food for food pantries that serve the needy, and every member of the community from Bar Mitzvah age and above fulfills a service position in the congregation, doing something of value to insure the community is able to meet the needs of its members.

No I am not suggesting that any of us become Mormon, far from it. And I know some of you are thinking, that what the Mormons do is not all that unique, our community has Havuroth, Shabbat dinners, temple committees and SOVA the Jewish food pantry. But having and doing can be very different. Are ***you*** doing Jewish in this way? I'm not looking to add to the list of the things you ***have*** to do in your life. I want to add to the list of the things you ***want* to do**, the deeds that give your life meaning and purpose.

This morning we will hear the shofar calling us to account, calling us to action. Have you ever blown a shofar? Its not easy, you have to try really hard but the more air you put into the shofar the more sound you get out of it. The more you put into your Judaism, to this community, to your spiritual lives through learning, thanking and doing – the more you get out of it. – it's the only investment I can guarantee will pay off in this New Year.

- Learn some Torah on a regular basis,
- Thank God by making your prayer as pure as "Alef, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Hey."
- Remember that to be Jewish we have to do Jewish.

Three things that are the foundation of our world, the foundation our faith, the reason why you're here.