SELICHOT 5779 - Repentance, Prayer and Righteous Acts
Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
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The prayer of Unetaneh Tokef, which many of us recall with harrowing thoughts for its verses detailing the dichotomy of human beings at this time of year. "Who shall live and who shall dies, who by fire and who by water, who by hunger, who by thirst. For many we never hear past those ominous verses, but as the poem brings us down in despair it then lifts us with hope with the culminating verse, which we the congregation proclaim as one: "teshuvah , tefillah , tzedakah; Penitence, prayer, and righteous acts avert the severe decree."

In some of the older Mahzor s [holiday prayer books], there appear three other words, above "teshuvah , tefillah , tzedakah," [repentance, prayer and righteous acts] in a smaller print: "tzom, kol, mamon"– fasting, voice, money. These represent the means or methods whereby one can practice the three virtues of penitence, prayer, and righteousness.

- For the ordeal of fasting leads to repentance;
- the voice is the medium of soul-stirring prayer;
- and the contribution of money to a worthy cause represents an act of "tzedakah."

If we analyze "tzom, kol, mamon" even further, we discover, as many commentators point out, that the gematria or numerical equivalent of each of the three words is the same. The sum total in each case is equal to 136. This remarkable fact is one way of teaching us that "teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah" are all interrelated, that penitence, prayer, and righteous deeds are all aspects of the same ideal of living a good and Godly life. Also, it's interesting to note that 136 is twice 68, which happens to be the number value of the Hebrew word "chayim," life. This means that we are thus blessed with a "double life," both in the physical and spiritual sense. (based on a teaching by Dov Peretz Elkins)

To go one step further, repentance implies returning to the ways of Torah; prayer means turning to God through Avodah or divine worship; and tzedakah means the carrying out of deeds of loving kindness by gemilut chasadim benevolent acts. This is reminiscent of the familiar passage in the first chapter of Pirkei Avot: The world is based upon three principles: Torah, worship, and kindliness" (Simon the Just).

Tonight I have asked three members of our congregation to share their own stories of how teshuvah , tefillah , tzedakah have given them life. How these profoundly meaningful practices have in some cases restored their faith or at very least deepened and enriched it.

I want to thank Barbara, Evelyn and Mike in advance for what they will share tonight. I have asked them to be as reflective and honest as they are comfortable so that we can learn from their own experiences. After all three have shared their stories I'll invite them back up as a group to answer your questions, so please be thinking of them as you listen.

It's not an easy thing to share such personal thoughts in such a public forum. They are able to do it tonight because of the role models that they are, and because of the community that we are. Open, empathic, embracing and accepting; and for that we are blessed and tonight will be blessed with deep insight.

I have long believed and tried to teach that what makes a synagogue a community is not that the rabbis know each person's name and story. That's important but it's not enough. What makes us a community is when we know each other's story, when we are able to hold as sacred and special to us, that which is sacred and special to our fellow. When we see each other not as an other, separate and different from ourselves, but rather as a reflection of ourselves, when we can me in you, when we become as Martin Buber taught and I-Thou to each other.

Tonight, is not just about the content about the stories, its about the powerful example of sharing our stories. I truly hope that we will do more of this in the days and months ahead. To give the gift of time to each other and really listen and connect. I think there is no greater gift we can give another person than our attention and our listening heart.

And so lets begin

1. Barbara Halperin - Teffilah
2. Evelyn Lazare – Tzedakah
3. Mike Levitt – T'shuvah