"HOMECOMING"
Rosh Hashanah Day One 5773
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We Reconstructionist Jews take pride in our willingness to change traditional liturgy – even fundamental prayers like the Torah blessings, Kiddush, and Aleinu. We insist that the words we pray be consistent with contemporary values. Yet strangely, one of the prayers most of us find most dissonant remains unchanged in all Reconstructionist machzors:

> *On Rosh Hashanah it is decreed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who will live and who will die, who by water and who by fire, who by sword, who by beast, who by famine, who by thirst, who by storm, who by plague, who by strangulation, and who by stoning….*

The copywriters at Hallmark would be challenged to adapt this prayer for a Rosh Hashanah card. Here's one option: on the front of the card, "We wish you a sweet and happy New Year!" -- and on the inside, "A year free from strangulation, stoning, starvation and drowning. Shanah tovah!"

Despite our discomfort with its theology and imagery, we have retained this prayer as a central aspect of our High Holiday experience. And though we wince when we reach that page in the machzor, personally I'm glad we've left it in. I think the author of *unetaneh tokef* was trying to give us an intense reality check, reminding us in harsh language of an undeniable truth -- the reality that each of us will die one day. And just as terrifying, we neither know nor control the time or nature of our death. It could come at any moment.

We celebrate the renewal of all human life not when it seems logical, in the spring. Pesach marks the birth of the Jewish people – but Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the human race. The Jewish New Year begins precisely *now*, in the fall, as days grow shorter and darker, as the natural world decays towards death. By marking the New Year at this point in nature's cycle, we express a profound paradox: life and death are intertwined. Renewing our lives requires us to confront our demise. Each breath we take could be our last.

This may seem like bitter spiritual medicine. But it's only one aspect of what *unetaneh tokef* teaches. After the grisly litany of the forms of our death, we reach a critical counterpoint: "*u'teshuvah, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a ha-g'zeirah* – but repentence, prayer and tzedakah can soften the harshness of the decree."

In other words, we'll all die one day -- *and*, at the same time, three fundamental practices can infuse our days with transcendent meaning: *teshuvah, tefilah,* and *tzedakah*. We can't control when or how we will die, but we can choose how we live. Today, tomorrow, and on Kol Nidrei, I'd like to explore with you how we might integrate each of these three practices into our daily lives, and how we might, as a community, support each other in them.

Teshuvah usually is translated as repentance -- but its Hebrew root actually connotes *return*. *Teshuvah* is a **practice of *returning* to that from which we have become alienated**. *Teshuvah* is the **practice of transcending our existential loneliness by *reconnecting* with those from whom we've become estranged**.

Jewish tradition posits a fundamental hypothesis: that all of reality is interconnected. Behind life's apparent fragmentation, everything and everyone is related. The Shema, asserts that if we search deeper into life's multiplicity, we discover an underlying integration and wholeness.

We each experience this paradox internally. **Each of us feels separate and alone in the world -- yet we also intuit that at the same time we're linked to something beyond ourselves**. In our existential alone-ness, we experience a yearning to unite with others. **We need to connect. It's fundamental to our nature.**

In Jewish tradition, creating relationship is a holy matter. We believe that as part of a minyan, within a group, we can experience a dimension of the sacred we can't reach as individuals. We describe the ceremony by which two people bind their lives together as *kiddushin*, sanctification. **Fostering intimate relationship is one of our most sacred human activities.**

The primary **Jewish paradigm for human relationship is *mishpachah*, family**. Rabbinic tradition teaches that today, Rosh Hashanah, commemorates the climax of creation: the birth of Adam and Eve, the universal first human family. This mythic story of the human family **teaches that each human being is fundamentally related to every other human being.**

We often forget that **family's most significant dimension is vertical, intergenerational.** Many of us feel like orphans in history, emotionally distanced from our great-grandparents and our great-grandchildren. Whether they had their own children or not, our ancestors felt responsible to past and future generations. The concept of family transforms our individual lives into threads in a much larger fabric, from which our moral vision emerges. Of all people, we who sing *l'dor vador* every Shabbat need no reminder from Presidential candidates that ethics are inherently intergenerational.

We also know very well from experience that being *related* to each other doesn't guarantee that we'll actually *like* each other. Even Adam and Eve, whose anniversary we celebrate today, have major issues of communication, trust, and fidelity. Within just a few chapters in Genesis, their honeymoon is over, Adam is blaming Eve for the family's eviction, and couples therapy won't even be invented for thousands of years. Don't even ask about their kids, Cain and Abel. It's not pretty.

In revealing the tensions between Adam and Eve and the murderous rivalry between Cain and Abel, the Torah recognizes that family life is inherent messy. Family relations aren't like friendships, rooted in the soft soil of shared tastes or interests. Family relations are based upon constancy, responsibility, shared history. **Being family involves *sticking with* each other, more than *liking* each other.**

Rosh Hashanah also marks the launch of our own Jewish family. Today the Torah describes Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah feature more prominently in Torah as patriarch and matriarch of our clan, than as great spiritual teachers. But in tomorrow's reading, *akeidat Yitzhak* -- the binding of Isaac -- Abraham stands ready to sacrifice his family for the sake of a personal relationship with God. And Isaac isn't alone on that altar; he represents each of us, all future Jewish generations.

Some say that this story highlights the *faith* of Abraham. But I see it differently. To me, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son and irretrievably destroy his marriage is a disaster. Sarah dies just from hearing about Isaac's near-death. Abraham's relationship with Isaac is irreparably ruptured: they don't return home together, and they never speak again. Isaac is

traumatized and rendered a passive, ineffectual father to Jacob and Esau. I can only infer that the Torah considers Abraham's apparent willingness to sacrifice his son a terrible mistake.

So **today's Torah reading about the birth of Isaac teaches that to be a Jew is to remember the centrality of family. And tomorrow's reading about the *akeidah* reminds us that to be a Jew is to be mindful of and to protect the welfare of future generations**, to refuse to sacrifice them on the altar of self-interest and personal fulfillment.

For a text that emphasizes family as the paradigm for human relationship, Genesis doesn't paint a pretty picture of domestic life. Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael are engulfed by *tzuris* after the birth of Isaac. It's all downhill from there. Rebecca and Jacob deceive Isaac. Jacob and Esau are violently estranged. Rachel and Leah compete bitterly for Jacob's love. And Joseph and his brothers – you know how well *that* goes.

Family is complicated and hard. Family impinges upon our individuality. Family asks us to subordinate our desires. Family demands compromise. As siblings we must share our toys and parental affection. As parents, we must place our kids' needs ahead of our own. As spouses or partners, we must view the world through the eyes of another.

Families can be irritating -- and when they are abusive, we must set boundaries and go it alone. But even in these extreme cases we must, in some sense, come home to our family – even if that is by creating our own new families of choice, or through a homecoming that is metaphorical and internal.

Our model for *teshuvah* is our ancestor Jacob, whose childhood home is plagued by lies and favoritism. But Jacob's no innocent bystander. He repeatedly deceives his twin brother Esau and his father Isaac, and provokes Esau to a murderous rage. And so Jacob spends 20 years far from home, marrying Rachel and Leah, raising his own family. On the surface, he enjoys a comfortable life in exile. But eventually Jacob wakes up and realizes the great cost he has paid for distancing himself from family. Something within awakens him to alienation, and begins to call him home.

On the way back, Jacob is alone. He wrestles in the darkness with someone -- some say God, some say an angel, Esau, even Jacob himself – someone who injures and blesses Jacob, and changes his name to Israel. The next morning, when Jacob and Esau finally meet, they hug in tears. "To see your face," says Israel, "is like seeing the face of God."

Despite their embrace, Jacob and Esau never live together again. Perfect harmony never exists between the brothers. Their encounter doesn't achieve complete reconciliation; it provides only enough healing for them to coexist at a distance. Jacob and Esau meet again only once more, for a final act of filial duty -- to bury their father Isaac.

From Jacob's story, we learn that the pain of family disruption can linger long into adulthood. We learn that returning to our family often can take place only within ourselves, in honest examination of our role in our family. We learn that returning can be painful, but also a source of blessing. And we learn that returning doesn't imply perfection. The strains within our families may never disappear. Sometimes, at best we find enough healing to move forward, liberated from the worst of our familial legacies.

Finally, from Jacob's story we learn that there is a powerful connection between the state of our relationships and the condition of our soul. Our inner shalom, the spiritual wholeness

we seek today, ultimately depends on our ability to remember that relationships are primary, and our ability and our willingness to make peace in our primary relationships.

Our spiritual condition – our capacity to transform from Jacob to Israel -- is measured by our capacity to see the Divine in each other's face. So maybe the best definition of *teshuvah* is this: the ability to remember and the capacity to behave as if each person, with his/her imperfections, reflects the Image of God.

We practice teshuvah when we remember that our lives are not bound by the dates of our birth and death -- that we each live on the continuum history.

When practice teshuvah each time we remember and act as if we are trustees of the unfulfilled dreams of past and future generations.

We practice teshuvah each time we subordinate our personal views, needs or desires for the larger good.

And we practice teshuvah each time we try, despite faults and challenges, to heal our complicated relationships with our nuclear families, our extended families, and our Jewish families.

It may seem like a stretch to describe a synagogue as a family. After all, most of us are essentially strangers to each other; many of us are fairly new or even brand-new to West End Synagogue. Even those of us who've been around a while may feel unknown or even disliked. Some of us may feel like outsiders, or we may have major issues with each other.

But through a Jewish lens, a synagogue is simply a microcosm of the larger Jewish family which, in turn, represents the greater human family. A synagogue is a lab in which we get to practice relating our individual selves to a greater whole; a congregation is a gym for *teshuvah*, for exercising our capacity to reconnect.

The *middot* that we study -- the spiritual and moral qualities on which we focus each month — represent different stations in that gym. Each of us needs opportunities to exercise the spiritual muscles by which we reach beyond ourselves. Each of us needs to practice *nedivut*, generosity, *mechilah*, forgiveness of self and others, *anavah*, humility, *shmirat halshon*, mindful speech, and all the other qualities we've already learned or will study and practice this coming year.

These are not just "nice things to do." They're not steps towards individual self-realization. They are specific behaviors laying the foundation for meaningful human relationship. They are the house rules for our family life.

Last year I suggested that if together we devoted ourselves to becoming even a little more self-aware, a little more conscious of our own emotional defenses and reactivity -- and if we combined that awareness with a shared focus on specific middot - we might hope to improve our moral batting average by five per cent.

I'm not sure we've hit that goal. But I do know I've improved, and I believe we have as a community, as well. We relate a bit better. We're a bit more of a family. We see others, outside our inner circle, as people to whom we are responsible. And I believe that if we continue to wrestle with ourselves, like Jacob, recognizing our personal demons; if we catch ourselves before

defaulting to habitual, fear-based reactions; if we can sometimes substitute behavior matching the values we profess – then we might come a bit closer to realizing our collective sacred potential. Like Jacob, we might more often see the Divine in the faces of strangers, in the faces of our family, in the faces of people who challenge us, even in the faces of those from whom we've been estranged.

To extract blessing from this life, to experience real transformation as flawed human beings, we must take Jacob's journey. We must wrestle with ourselves and our relationships. Like Jacob, we may need time and distance; we may need solitude. In the end, the results may fall short of our ideal.

But we know this: to be Israel is to wrestle with beings divine and human, and to prevail. In this new year, despite our guilt and shame for our own faults, despite our lingering resentments, despite our fear of disappointment, may we be willing to come home -- one day at a time, one moment at a time, over and over again.

May we be Israel, willing to wrestle with ourselves and with our human relationships. May we keep turning to our families, to our fellow congregants, to our fellow New Yorkers, to our fellow Americans, to our brothers and sisters in Israel, to our human family in every corner of this planet. May we make ourselves and this world even a little more whole.

Unetaneh tokef today reminds us that the grave awaits us all. Yet in our Torah reading just two days ago on Shabbat, as Moses is about to die, he pleads with us to "choose life, that you and your descendents may live." Andy Dufresne, the protagonist in my favorite movie, The Shawshank Redemption, expresses the same teaching this way: "It comes down to a simple choice: get busy living, or get busy dying."

Unetaneh tokef inverts this message: get busy dying, it says -- or get busy living, by practicing *teshuvah,* by doing your best in each moment, over and over, to remember and act as if you are part of a larger whole. This is hard work, learning to live beyond ourselves, learning to get over ourselves -- but it's holy labor. I feel blessed and privileged to share that work with you.

Now we've all heard the blast of the shofar, the factory whistle calling. It's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work. As the Psalmist prayed, *uma'aseh yadeinu con'neihu:* may our actions this year endure, for good. May the work of our hands, as we shape this fresh new year, be a blessing for us, for our people, and for all humankind.