

Yom Kippur is about teshuvah and atonement, both personal and communal. I've talked about aspects of personal growth on Rosh Hashanah - happiness and integrity. This evening, my focus is about examining ourselves as a part of a religious community.

A number of years ago I heard Marchiene Reinstra, a pastor in the Reformed Church and a good friend of Rabbi Phillip Sigal z"l, speak about one of the beautiful things she learned from Rabbi Sigal. He taught her that there are two ways to approach religion -- One can be a religious Pilgrim, or one can be a religious Tourist.

The latter, the tourist, pays a travel agent to arrange for a vacation to some interesting and enjoyable place. The travel agent arranges for him to see all of the important and interesting sights. He enjoys the food, the beaches, the museums of cultural treasures, the shopping, and brings home a souvenir. If he has a good time, he might plan to return for a few days next year. The visit is enjoyable, but does not fundamentally change who he is.

The former, the pilgrim, journeys to a destination and stays there for weeks or months at a time. While there, she has a sense of living in accord with the rhythm of the locals. She has an emotional investment in the place. She's not just there to vacation, but to be a part of the local life. It's not so much the things that she can do there, but the community of other people who also spend time there that compels her to return again and again. Her time there fundamentally changes who she is -- no longer solely a resident of her home, but bi-national, as it were -- a resident of both home and pilgrimage site.

An old joke: A Rabbi, a cantor, and a synagogue president crashed on a remote backwater island, and found themselves held captive by a cannibal tribe.

"We will, of course, be eating you for lunch," the tribe's chieftain addressed the three, "but recognizing that you are distinguished men, we are prepared to grant each of you one last request."

"I request the chance to deliver my finest High Holiday sermon," declared the rabbi.

"I would want only to chant my famous Kol Nidre," announced the cantor.

The chieftain turned to the synagogue president: "And what is your request?"

"Eat me first."

We laugh at the Rabbi whose greatest accomplishment is to preach to the masses. We laugh at the Hazzan whose greatest desire is to perform. We empathize with the president whose job is to manage the rabbi's and hazzan's egos. My colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein notes that the truth behind this joke is how little many of us expect of our synagogues. We don't expect the rabbi's sermon to move or to teach us. We don't expect the cantor's melody to inspire and uplift us. We don't expect the synagogue leader to be effective in leading and guiding the institution. Some of us laugh because in our lives we are religious tourists, looking at the synagogue as outsiders peering in at a curious institution with no relationship at all to our lives. Others of us laugh because although we ourselves are authentic religious Pilgrims, we recognize and look down upon those tourists in our midst.

The Mission of Congregation Ahavas Israel is to create a vibrant egalitarian Conservative Jewish community helping each individual follow his or her spiritual path using traditional Jewish practice.

To achieve our mission, we strive to be to be a community which embodies Torah: To make every decision and every act reflect our commitment to Torah.

The role of the Conservative Synagogue is to act as a filter between the values of a secular society and the practices of traditional Judaism. When does Judaism embrace a secular practice and when does it reject modernity; when does it try to be culturally relevant, and when should it remain counter-cultural?

The answer, according to Conservative Judaism, is that we ought to remain counter-cultural unless there is a compelling reason to change. I know it seems like we as a congregation have done nothing but change for the last several years, with our decisions on a joint religious school, homosexuality, and mixed burial in our cemetery.

Consider -- When Richard Joel was hired to lead International Hillel as its director, one of his first observations was that Hillel needed to stop being about Judaism and start being about Jewishness. Judaism is a particular narrow path towards Jewishness; The Conservative Movement has always been about pluralism -- embracing more than one traditional path towards Jewish fulfillment. Towards that end, we as a congregation have changed. We want our synagogue to be inclusive of multiple paths as long as it builds community in a meaningful way.

We have not, however, changed our commitment to traditional Hebrew liturgy; our commitment to the mitzvah of kashrut; our commitment to building Shabbat community; our commitment to the diaspora calendar observance of holidays; our commitment to the traditional practices of the Jewish life cycle.

As a community, we believe that our expression of Jewishness is a mixture of personal and communal. We want a synagogue to support our Jewishness, but we don't want the synagogue to be a coercive agent of Judaism. We want the synagogue to teach the principles of the Conservative movement that a mitzvah represents a commanded obligation by God, but we also want the autonomy to explore that mitzvah at our own pace.

As a community, we reject the path of spiritual narcissism, that my personal spiritual practices are directed solely by what makes me feel good. We reject the path of religious synchronism, in which all religious paths are the same and can be combined. The Shema teaches that God is one, not that all paths to God are one. There can be multiple and distinct paths to God.

We reject the notion that anything pre-modern automatically lacks wisdom. Sometimes the ancient road more traveled is more challenging and more meaningful than the road less traveled.

We reject the notion that religious life means disengagement, separation, and condescension towards the non-Jewish or non-religious world.

We embrace a new synagogue model.

The old synagogue model was a kind of a country club. You pay dues for the privilege of claiming membership. Membership, as in the American Express commercials, has its privileges. The very act of writing a check bought you entrance into an organization that was, in an important way, an elite privilege. Not everyone could be a member. The Board had to review the membership application to make sure that the potential member was making an appropriate financial contribution. Many synagogues depended on the money from the religious tourists to support the core religious elite.

The new synagogue model focuses less on membership and more on participation. We need religious pilgrims more than religious tourists. Making a financial contribution is still important -- we wouldn't have lights, heat, a clean building, phone calls answered, or a rabbi unless you did

so. However, we recognize that the life of a congregation is found in those who engage in an active Jewish spiritual path; those who engage in a set of Jewish spiritual practices.

The old synagogue model was owned by the elite. Usually the elite were those who were Judaic experts and/or financially well off. In certain ways, they looked down on the less knowledgeable or those unable to give large sums of money.

The new synagogue model is owned by each person who is a voluntary participant, a religious pilgrim. The Sinai covenant encompassed all people past, present, and future. Each of us, generations before we were born, were standing at Mount Sinai [Deuteronomy 5:3]. Each of us has a responsibility to respond to the call of God within our community.

As individuals and as a community, let us embrace the new synagogue model by using the following four categories of kedushah to bring holiness into our lives:

Kedushat Ha-z'man, the holiness of time. We are religious pilgrims by embracing the sacred practice of marking sacred time; the practice of observing Shabbat and holidays differently than other days in the week and year. We live our lives in the rhythm of Jewish time.

Kedushat Ha-lev, holiness of our heart and mind. We are religious pilgrims by embracing the sacred practice of Talmud Torah, study of sacred texts, in shul, through Torah reading and divre Torah; and in other groups, formal and informal, private and public.

Kedushat Ha-makom, holiness of place. We are religious pilgrims by embracing the sacred practice of haknusat or^him, making a welcoming community to all who join us in prayer and study, by speaking gently to each other and caring lovingly for each other.

Kedushat Ha-guf, holiness of the body. We are religious pilgrims by embracing the sacred practice of Jewish eating, intimacy, and life cycle; we are born in holiness, take sustenance in holiness, age, perhaps marry and sometimes divorce in holiness, and die in holiness.

If we embrace these practices of kedusha, what might we hope to look like in 10 years:

- Of course, we'd like to see some growth -- but we need to consider growth not only through "immigration" of Jews to Grand Rapids, but also through those intentionally becoming Jewish through conversion.
- We'd like to see less reliance on annual pledges - just enough to cultivate a sense of ownership, but a much greater share of the operating budget funded from endowments, to move the focus from belonging through membership to belonging through participation.
- We want to see a congregational culture in which each household actively, at least once a month, participates in something happening at the Shabbat morning core or something outside the core to build the community.
- We want to see additional options for the Shabbat morning core. If you want us to do something, and you have one other person who also wants it -- that's enough to create a group for you to lead. For example: for those who don't like dovening: Study group, any topic; current events conversations; Israel awareness groups, all could meet on Shabbat morning. Within a set of halakhic constraints, how many options can we offer? Can we offer a different Shabbat experience? We are limited only by the Human Resource of volunteerism and leadership.
- We want to see additional volunteer opportunities, Gemilut Hasadim projects. If you think we ought to be doing something we are not doing, gather a couple other people, publicize it, and start doing it.

That which takes place in this building is not holy just because we've done it once, twice, or for the past 50 years. It is holy when it is enshrined in Torah and classic Jewish literature and connects us with God in a meaningful way. I am asking you to be a part of building the holy community of this congregation. I am asking you to commit to being religious pilgrims, to take part in the public life that sustains our community. I am asking you to take ownership of Congregation Ahavas Israel - not just be a member, but take part, on a monthly basis or more, in the life of the congregation. I am asking you to have high expectations of the congregation - not just of me, but of yourself and the holy practices which you can share with Ahavas Israel. May we grow together in our paths of Jewish practice.