Rosh Hashanah Sermon, 5776  
Society Hill Synagogue  
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Shanah Tovah, everyone.

So I’m going to talk about the election. Don’t worry, not this election. No Donald Trump references, no email scandals. I’m going to talk about 1992, the election between then President George H.W. Bush and then Governor Bill Clinton. That election, in a bizarre, circuitous way, gave me the question I want to face today.

It was the 1992 Vice Presidential Debate, consisting of then Senator Albert Arnold Gore Jr., then-Vice President Dan Quayle – yes there was a moment in our history where that was a thing -- and... Vice Admiral James Stockdale, the vice presidential candidate alongside Independent Candidate Ross Perot. Admiral stockdale was a highly decorated navy veteran -- a medal of honor recipient, who spent seven years as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam war.

The debate opened as debates do, Senator Gore making the case to the country that it was time for a change from the previous Bush administration (sounds familiar?), Vice President Quayle, laying out the policy differences between a candidate named Clinton and a candidate named Bush – wow history does repeat itself -- even questioning whether you could trust the candidate named Clinton. And then it was Admiral Stockdale’s turn for an opening statement, asking the question I want to ask:

“Why am I here?” he says.

His opening drew laughter from the crowd and derision from later pundits who said that he appeared lost, confused and in over his head.
But the question was intended as a means of introducing himself. Introducing an unfamiliar name, explaining the rationale for his being on the stage.

So, too, do I want to ask us today -- why are we here? Not, like, why are we here on earth, though that's an interesting question maybe for another d'var. But, like, why are we here? Here at Society Hill Synagogue, in a dusty old building, at one of the busiest times of the year. School’s starting, maybe things are heating up at work – and we’re taking time away from all that, having to explain to our colleagues, why we can’t be there -- not taking time away from work for much needed rest, or to catch up on our reading list or our Netflix queue, but to come here, for three long hours, to chant words we may not understand or believe in – why do we do it, year after year after year, why are we here?

This makes me think of a little anecdote I heard while I was a law student at UC Berkeley. I would go to the Hillel across the street, the old grad student amidst a sea of undergrads, and we used this flimsy but thoughtful little siddur that contained an anecdote perhaps many of you have heard that may help to answer our question.

A boy goes to services with his father every Shabbat even though his father is an avowed atheist. Sound familiar? So the young man asks his father. Dad? Why do we still go to services every Shabbat? You don’t believe in God. All these prayers, all these words are all about God. Honoring God, Thanking God. Being wowed by God. Why do you bother?

His father looks at him and says, “Son, people go to services for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle, he says, (yes, that’s the name of the friend in the story;
don’t ask), my friend Garfinkle goes to services to talk to God. I go to services to talk to my friend Garfinkle.”

For many of us, we come to services to talk to our proverbial Garfinkles, we come to talk to our friends, to our loved ones. We come to build community. It’s one of the most commonly-cited motivations for maintaining a strong connection to Judaism.

These are the people who will be there for our children’s b’nei mitzvah, who will perhaps attend our childrens’ weddings. Community is who shows up to a shivah after the passing of a loved one, food in hand, love and support in abundance.

I spent this summer at Camp JRF, a Jewish summer camp, in the Poconos. I was supervising the counselors for the 9th and 10th grade campers.

If there’s one thing you come away with after a summer at Jewish summer camp it’s the extent to which the friendships, the personal connections and relationships, are the central parts of the camp experience, for both the campers and the counselors.

Yes there’s swimming everyday, there’s ropes course, But the reason people keep coming back, year after year, is that they want to see their friends. They want that sense of community. They've established deep, meaningful relationships in this Jewish setting, in ways that impact their lives. Their pictures on their facebook profiles are not of the friends who they see year round – they’re of their camp friends, who they see, intensively for one or two months out of the year.

The camp’s tagline is “so many friendships made and strengthened.” It sounds generic but in some ways it’s exactly the point. If you would ask many of the
campers what Judaism means to them, what Camp means to them, it means community, it means friendship, it means mutual love and respect and support.

By the way, the notion of human connection being a central part of the Jewish experience is not some new, touchy-feely, innovation -- it’s part of the fabric of our tradition.

Philosopher Educator Martin Buber writes famously of an I-Thou relationship, an I-You relationship. What he was speaking to, I believe, was the centrality of human connections to the human experience. Human relationships are not merely fun and loving -- though they are certainly that -- but opportunities for holiness. Opportunities for living life as it should be lived.

We come together on Rosh Hashanah each year, or on Shabbat each week, to foster those relationships. Where we can fully hear the other person, be fully present for them, and where they can do the same for us. Camp fosters this experience. A good synagogue helps to foster this experience. It’s why many of us keep coming back.

OK, but why else? Community is sort of the low-hanging fruit. That’s like, the obvious answer. Why else keep coming back year after year?

Well, for some of us, the answer is in the question. We come because we were here last year. And the year before that. We come back to honor the notion of L’dor V’dor, from generation to generation. We come to embody the symbolic passing of the Torah we see at some bnei Mitzvah ceremonies, where the Torah is passed to the child becoming bar or bat mitzvah from his or her parents, who receive it from
their parents, who receive it from their parents. We come to honor that passing of the torch.

We come in the spirit of the words we sing each time we return the Torah to the ark. Hadesh Yameinu K’Kedem, Renew our days like the days of old.

This can mean, like the days of old from ancient generations. We come to be in conversation with our historical ancestors. To build on the learnings they’ve conducted, the wrestling they’ve engaged in, to almost smell the smells of ancient temple times, hear the clattering of the marketplace near the temple in Jerusalem.

Or, renew our days like the days of old can mean our own days of old.

From the innocence of our childhood, assuming we were blessed enough to have one, and the memories that fostered. We attend services, because we did when we were kids, when life was sweet.

Now, we don’t blindly honor tradition for the sake of tradition. I’m betting few of us would stand by the Confederate flag today as a tradition worth upholding. And there are probably notions of intolerance in our own tradition’s texts that many of us would distance ourselves from.

But to engage with tradition is in many ways a statement of profound humility. It’s a statement that, despite our modern setting, our generation may not have all the answers, and in fact may have much to learn from those who came before us.

And in fact, in some ways, perhaps, ancient generations and an ancient setting, with fewer distractions, fewer complications, even though those times held
their own challenges, perhaps these ancient settings were more conducive to meditating on questions that affect us in a profound ways.

As my teacher, Rabbi Jacob Staub has written “The words of religious teachers in each generation may reflect the cultural assumptions of their times, but they do not depend on those cultural assumptions, precisely because the subject of their teachings is that which transcends our limited abilities to express and comprehend.”

In other words, the nature of the questions our ancestors wrestled with – existential questions, God, the universe, questions about developing a social compact with one another, how to treat the earth, how to treat the poor in their midst – the nature of these questions is so fundamental, so transcendent, that the answers to them are not discredited, and perhaps even buttressed by a different historical context.

We are blessed with the opportunity to build off structures our ancestors created, the fabric they developed. By doing our cultural and spiritual exploration in the context of tradition, we can both link arms with each other, so we have fellow human beings to do that exploration with, and we have the fortune of having material to work with.

OK, so we’ve identified community and tradition as two of the most fundamental reasons for attending services year after year. But there are others.

How about because we’re commanded to?
I know, for a lot of us, this is a silly, antiquated notion – commandedness?
That’s not something I gave assent to – like we just said, that came from a different
cultural context, from human beings who have no ability to bind future generations.

For others, this notion of commandedness can provide a sense of order to
our lives, mapping order over tohu va’vahohu, over chaos– having something,
someone to serve, an anchor to moor us, in a life that can otherwise induce anxiety,
yield a sense of purposelessness, having that grounding sense of commandedness
can help provide meaning and comfort.

Commandedness does not work for all of us. I’m not sure it works for me. But
we are the children of Israel, that word which has come to mean wrestling.
Wrestling with this idea of commandedness, among other components of our
tradition, is fundamental to the Jewish experience, even if we ultimately deviate
from it.

If life is sometimes lived at that razor’s edge of uncertainty, not quite
knowing where we stand on every issue, that conscious engagement can sometimes
provide meaning in and of itself.

La’asok b’divrei torah, are the words of blessing we utter before we study
Jewish tradition. La’asok, to engage with. When we study torah, we say a blessing
acknowledging the holiness of even simply engaging in the words of Torah.

OK, so why else. We’ve got community, tradition, this distinct notion of
commandedness, why else are we here?

For the next answer, can I deviate from the rational for a minute? Does every
answer to questions like this have to make sense on paper?
I’m thinking about a friend of mine, who converted to Judaism as an adult. We were at a Shabbat retreat a few weeks ago, where we all spend Shabbat together as a community, and to close the event, we all go around and say some concluding thoughts, and hers struck me. She referenced the fact that being there, in that Jewish community, was the first time in her life she felt like she could be totally herself.

This is not a statement about the supremacy of Judaism. This is not a statement saying, ah she finally found the ultimate religion or the ultimate culture. It is a statement that, for some of us, it just feels right to be here. This is the way we express ourselves.

In the same way that one person can try on an outfit and say, no. This does not look good on me. And someone else can try on that same outfit and say, yes. I like myself in these clothes. This feels right.

For some, Judaism is the idiom that embodies our experience. It is the cultural-religious-spiritual-civilizational palate we feel comfortable with. For others it might not be. But some of us come to services because it just feels right. It just fits.

So community, tradition, wrestling with notions of being commanded. Because it just feels right. Why else?

I’ll tell you another reason.

Saturday night I got a Facebook message from someone I hadn’t heard from in a while. Last time I had seen this person was 2006, I was managing a community resource center in east Baltimore where we had people find jobs, shelter, things of that nature. This person was a high school kid at the time. He had been placed in this
office through a Baltimore youth summer jobs program. He helped out around our office with clerical work, helping out our clients, that sort of thing.

So he messages me, kind of out of the blue, hadn’t heard from him in years, and just kind of to check in. He says how you doing, I say fine, how bout you. He says good, just got out from being incarcerated.

Oh no, I think to myself. That’s terrible. I’m assuming this young kid I knew, who I last saw when he was about 15 helping out at a nonprofit organization, must have been stuck doing some 30 day stint in jail. Maybe a couple months.

So how long were you in there, I ask. Oh since 2011 he says. 2011. Almost four years. In that time, I’ve been out working as a lawyer, going to rabbinical school, having fun with my friends and loved ones. And there he was, locked in a cell. Now I don’t know what he did or didn't do. I didn’t ask. And you can call me naïve but knowing this kid as I knew him, it wasn’t just or useful to lock him in a cell for four years.

We come to services, because deep down we know that our souls need to be in tune with and aware of the sufferings of others.

We come because in 1982 the Supreme Court upheld the sentencing of someone who attempted to sell 9 ounces of marijuana to forty years in prison. We come because several years later they upheld a sentence of someone with no prior convictions for an attempt to sell 23 ounces of crack cocaine to life in prison. We come because blacks are incarcerated for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of whites despite the fact the rates of drug uses for the two groups are roughly the same.
We come to services because that’s not just. That’s not right. We come to make sure our souls are woken up to this.

We come to services because despite decades of sacrifices of blood, sweat, and tears by civil rights activists working to ensure that there were minimal obstacles to vote, to ensure that someone couldn’t be denied the right to vote on account of their skin color, to ensure that the laws passed in this country reflect the voices of all of our eligible citizens, that despite all these sacrifices, barriers are newly being erected around this country that will cut down on the number of citizens able to cast a vote.

We come because over the last couple of years more than 200,000 people have perished in the midst of violence in Syria; we come because thousands seek to escape war torn countries, there and in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, to find a better life; we come to services, because of a young boy who washed up onto the shores of the Mediterranean who never made it.

We don’t come because we think coming to services alone can solve these problems. We come because the shofar blast can wake up that dormant portion of our soul that has the ability to do so much. We come because we know that with the basis of community we have the ability to do even more. We come because of the insight from Pirkei Avot, the portions from our ancestors, that portion of our tradition which reminds that while we are not obligated to complete the work of tikkun olam of repairing the world, neither are we free to desist from it.

So we’ve listed a bevvy of reasons why we are here: we build community, we honor our tradition, we engage with this distinct notion of commandedness, we do it
because it just feels right, we come to awaken our souls to the plight of humanity and to pivot to a form of action. But if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to list just one more.

Let’s remember back to the little story that kicked this off. Not the Admiral Stockdale one, we’ll come back to that.

But the Garfinkle one. One character in the story comes to talk to Garfinkle, comes because his friends, his community is there. But what about Garfinkle himself? As we remember from the story, we learn that he comes to talk to God.

But what does that even mean, to talk to God?

I mean, yes, we have the words of our siddur, of our machzor, of our prayer book, and those words are addressed to God, but does that mean we actually feel like we are communicating with God? That we can ask questions and receive answers.

That’s a little strange sounding, isn’t it?

After all, didn’t we lambaste President George W. Bush in response to allegations that he said he was on a mission from God when embarking us upon wars in Afghanistan and Iraq?

Doesn’t the notion of talking to God sound a little bit discomforting? Does it not quite jive with our 21st century sensibilities?

When I got to RRC, to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College to start Rabbinical School, there, too, the notion of God acting in some direct, personal way was noted to be inconsistent with the theology of the Reconstructionist movement’s founder, Mordecai Kaplan.
That’s not to say the rabbinical school isn’t welcoming of a range of different theologies and relationships with the divine among its students. It indeed is so welcoming. It just was made clear, however, that that’s not where Kaplan’s theology stood, nor the theology of the movements other founding voices.

In hearing about this theology, which I was admittedly unfamiliar with, I asked my teacher about the following example.

I was listening to NPR, what one of my teachers likes to call his “Oral Torah”, I was listening to NPR and I heard the case of a football player, I believe at the Catholic University Notre Dame, who suffered a career ending injury, maybe a torn ACL something like that, and he said, it’s ok, it’s all part of God’s plan. That’s a sentiment we’re familiar with in contemporary society, we hear that a lot.

So I asked my professor, just to be clear, whether Kaplan’s approach to God made room for this student-athlete’s theology. She wished him well, but said that no this 19 year old linebacker from Notre Dame could not be considered to be a Kaplanian.

Kaplan liked to define God as “the power that makes for salvation.” By which I interpret him to mean that while God doesn’t suspend the laws of nature, or split the Red sea, or intervene in our lives directly, God’s essence permeates the universe and impels us to seek the good in the world.

That’s a compelling description and it has pieces that resonate for me.

But so does our Notre Dame quarterback’s story – quarterback, linebacker, who remembers. The notion that when difficult moments arise in our lives, that we
communicate with God, and God communicates with us, to help us find meaning and guidance.

As some of you may know, my father passed away when I was seven years old. He was 35, by most appearances healthy as can be. Married to my mother, who is here with us today, Hi Ima, three children, including a newborn. He had just graduated from the school I attend now, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and he was commuting from Philadelphia to his job at Mazon, the Jewish Response to Hunger, in Manhattan. At the North Philadelphia train station at the top of a flight of stairs, he collapsed. Cardiac arrest, we all assume. No autopsy was ever done.

So flash forward a bit. About 15 years. And I am teaching Hebrew School at a synagogue in Eugene Oregon where my family now lives. Apologies if you've heard this story before.

Thanks to my mother and father I had a strong Jewish education and it has, whether I intended for it to or not, informed much of my orientation to the world.

So I'm in Hebrew School, and we're learning the Amidah, the central Jewish prayer, and I come across a commentary on it in our prayer book. The commentary notes the words of the Amidah V'zocher Hasdei Avot v'imot. God is mindful of the loyalty of Israel's ancestors, this prayer book translates it.

The commentary says, however, that the words zocher hasdei avot v'imot can also be translated as God remembers the love of parents.

Intriguing, yes?

So I continue on reading.
“The legacy each generation gives to its children,” the author writes, “inevitably contains within pain and hurt, a sense of inadequacy and task unfulfilled.” The author continues: “Some children are hurt when parents are taken from them too early, others by parents who did not know how to show their love.” Wow. “We say that God remembers the love of parents, the author continues. God is the one who sees to that the love is remembered, even when parents are unable to transmit it.”

The words address my situation exactly. Powerful.

I note the author of the piece.

Daniel Kamesar. My father.

Somehow, this writing of his, which was probably done while he was a student at RRC, with no premonition that I know about that he was to pass away any time soon, must have been submitted by one of his teachers to the editors of the prayer book and ended up being included there.

I don’t remember whether this discovery preceded or conceived any intimate relationship I perceive to have with God, though it certainly helps to reinforce it.

I do know that the words of the prayer book, words like v’zocher hasdei avot, and many others, have helped me foster what I sometimes see as that two-way, and multi way relationship with. A relationship, an orientation that serves as a source of comfort for me. That helps calm wash over me when I feel distressed. That wakes me up when I may be straying from the things I need to do.
Not all of us can, or like to or choose to relate to the notion of the divine in this manner. And I have times when I vacillate in terms of how I conceive of what the notion of the Source of Life means.

But one reason we may come to services is to foster whatever that can look like for us. We open up the portal into our heart, into our soul through which that energy can flow. We dip our head in a pool of something divine, even if divine is never a word we’d attach to it, and even if language has no ability to articulate it.

And if we are skeptical of these metaphysical notions, that’s ok. You don’t need me to tell you that.

But being here allows whatever is out there to flow over us, flow through us, as we wrestle with what this whole notion means. It permeates our soul and allows us to move forward.

So there’s our list for why we come to services each year. Community. Tradition. Wrestling with our commandments. The notion that it just feels like us. A sense of service and duty and connectedness to the rest of the world, and the opportunity to foster some brush with the divine, whatever that means for us. Not an exhaustive list, but at least, I hope, illustrative.

In some sense I have been as close as it gets to literally preaching to the choir. You’re already in the pews and I’m positing reasons as to why you’re here. So what do you with this? What do I do with this? Well, maybe it’s self evident, but my thought is that if these are features in our lives that provide meaning, that fuel us – that we don’t neglect them during the year; rather we reinforce them – we find our own ways to nurture these qualities. Perhaps we take the built-in-new-years-
resolution-reinforcing-mechanism that Shabbat is, that the other Jewish holidays are, or we do what works for us, and we check in with ourselves as the year goes on:

am I reinforcing community the way I’d like to, am I satisfied with my relationship to my tradition, am I nurturing that part of my soul that needs to be connected to the parts of the world that I don’t usually see and am I acting on that; have I experimented with my relationship with the divine.

Lucky for us Shabbat builds in those opportunities. The other Jewish holidays build in those opportunities. Check in with us. We’ll be here. Check in here. Check in with other parts of the Jewish community. Check in with each other. Nurture those parts of the soul which bring you back here year after year.

So Admiral Stockdale, I hope we’ve taken a reasonable stab at the paraphrasing of your question, why are we here.

We thank you for the prompt, for the question. We’ll continue to question, continue to search, together, in love.

I wish all of you a sweet, happy, healthy New Year. Shanah Tovah.