

Yom Kippur Eve – Sept. 17, 2010

I was on my honeymoon in the summer of 1982 – a long, long time ago – in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Provincetown is the Rehoboth Beach of Cape Cod – a place where the affluent gay community of Massachusetts goes to vacation. My wife and I were walking through the quaint streets of Provincetown when a young woman noticed the yarmulke on my head. She dropped her girlfriend's hand and gave me a big hug, “Landsman!” she shouted with pride. At this moment, she had come out – come out as a Jew. For many of us, coming out as Jews is very difficult. But still, most Jews are willing to come on Kol Nidrei. Most Jews – no matter how far they are removed from Judaism – want to be in synagogue on this most sacred of Jewish nights. They want to be seen at services.

I have always been intrigued by the movie “The Jazz Singer”. It may be the only movie that has been re-made three times – the original with Al Joelson, the second with Larry Parks, and finally the third version with Neil Diamond. It is due for a fourth version. Have you seen “The Jazz Singer?” It is about an assimilated Jew who is a cantor's son. He wants to sing jazz and move in Hollywood circles He leaves the old world of Jewish music and the synagogue behind. However, finally, the jazz singer decides to come out as a Jew – to be present and to sing the Kol Nidrei. It is his father's illness that moves him to show up. Kol Nidrei is the night when Jews show up – no matter how alienated, no matter how distant, no matter how removed they feel from the Jewish tradition.

There was a tradition of quoting a powerful verse from Isaiah at the opening breakfast for rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Shalom, shalom larahok v'lakarov. Peace, peace, for those who are distant, and for those who are close. The verse was interpreted spiritually. Shalom – peace for those who are spiritually distant. We begin the new year by extending words of shalom to those of us who are spiritually distant from the synagogue. I know there are many of us who feel alienated from the synagogue and from Jewish life. Maybe the synagogue did something dumb like not send us a yahrzeit reminder of our mother's death. Or maybe the rabbi didn't visit us when we were sick in the hospital and wanted some words of comfort. Or maybe we weren't thanked for putting our blood, sweat and tears into a fund-raising event. Or maybe we just got tired of disorganized religious life – I never understood the term organized religion as nothing is so disorganized as religion - and wanted a break. So, we extend the words of Shalom of the prophet to all who feel rahok – all who feel distant – from the synagogue.

On the other hand, we extend the words of Shalom to those of us who are karov – who feel close to the synagogue. Those of us who are karov – who are close to the life of the Jewish community – also deserve the warmest welcome. Even those of us who are close to the synagogue need to be reaffirmed. We extend shalom to those of us who make the minyan at services every single Shabbat – in the heat of the summer and in the snow of the winter. This year, I know we are all praying for no snow on the Eastern Shore. We extend shalom to those of us who have served on so many synagogue committees and are tired of meetings without end. We especially extend words of shalom to those spouses who have been abandoned by their husbands or wives not for another partner – that we could understand – but who have been abandoned because of another meeting to attend. I am sure those of us who are sharing a spouse with the board of governors of this congregation think of the wisdom of that great phrase. “Murder, yes. Divorce, never.” Of course, those of us who work with our young

people – with our students in Hebrew school and our youth group programs deserve a special greeting of shalom.

Shalom – on a simple level means welcome. We welcome everyone here on this sacred night of Kol Nidrei whether we haven't been in the synagogue since last Kol Nidrei or whether we were here last Shabbat. However, on a deeper level, shalom means well-being. It derives from the Hebrew word “shalem” – which means “whole”. We hope that all of us feel that fullness of being, that sense of being spiritually at home tonight with our fellow worshippers in the congregation. Shalom is the first word we learn in Hebrew – it is also the most significant. All of us seek that inner sense of shalom, of being at peace with ourselves, with our loved ones, and with our community. This shalom is what we seek on this most sacred night of Kol Nidrei. We seek this shalom of the prophet Isaiah – whether we are rahok – spiritually alienated from the synagogue – or karov – spiritually at home. All of us hope and pray that the chanting of the Kol Nidrei will uplift us – just as it inspired the Jazz Singer to come home in the three versions of the film.

I always think of the story of Franz Rosenzweig, one of the great philosophers of twentieth century Jewish thought, on this night of Kol Nidrei. Franz Rosenzweig was part of that generation of twentieth century German Jews who felt much more German than Jewish. These German Jews had left Judaism behind as they felt it was medieval and irrelevant in modern Europe. I was in Berlin last December and was sightseeing at the Jewish Museum in the city. The Jewish Museum of Berlin is one of the great museums of the world. It documents every aspect of Jewish life in Germany prior to the Holocaust in meticulous detail. Anything that American Jews have done was already done by German Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The German Jews were the first Jews to have Christmas trees in their homes and call them Hanukkah bushes.

At any rate, Franz Rosenzweig was considering converting to Protestantism. His cousin had converted and wondered why Franz still stuck with Judaism since you could get a better job in Germany if you weren't Jewish. Franz said he would have to explore Judaism one last time. He went to a small, tiny shul of the ostjuden – of the Eastern European Jews in Germany. The Eastern European Jews had the little shul – they didn't have the majestic byzantine architecture of the great German temples. The Eastern European Jews still davened the prayers in a cacophony of sound. They didn't have the organ like the magnificent Reform temples. The Eastern European shuls didn't have the doctor rabbiner – the rabbi who had a PhD degree from the German university. Yet, it was a little shul, that Franz Rosenzweig found shalom, found that inner peace as a Jew that marked his return to Judaism. Franz Rosennzweig became one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century. He helped established the great center for Jewish learning in Berlin – the Lehrhaus – with his good friend Martin Buber. He developed the insightful difference between a law and a commandment. A law is something written on the books. A commandment is something that speaks to our heart. A commandment is a teaching that speaks to our spirit. A commandment is an imperative that must be listened to . Sadly, Franz Rosenzweig was struck down by ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease, as a young man. However, although he was physically infirm, he possessed that sense of shalom, that inner peace, which he first discovered on the night of Kol Nidrei.

How do we find that shalom – that sense of peace – that inner peace – which we seek this Kol Nidrei. We take one small step at a time. Maybe we will make a commitment to attend

Friday night services once a month. Maybe we will take a class and learn how to read Hebrew. Maybe we will volunteer for one project this year in the congregation. Those of us who feel alienated from the synagogue often think that the pillars of Jewish life were always firmly rooted. That ain't necessarily so. I remember when I first started as a rabbi in Portsmouth, New Hampshire – 30 years ago. We used to get a lot of tourists passing through – just like Beth Israel. One time, a woman came to visit. She kvelled with pride – do you know what the word “kvelled” means – when she told me, “My son has just been elected president of the Harvard Hillel.” “Oh,” I responded, “You should take credit for your son's achievement.” “No,” she replied. “I can't take any credit whatsoever. I raised my son in a totally assimilated home. I sent him to a boarding school in Connecticut. He was one of the only Jews there. He demanded that he have a bar mitzvah and then he started to explore Judaism. And now, he is the president of the Harvard Hillel.” So, sometimes those of us who are distant draw near if we hear that beautiful sound of the Kol Nidrei calling to us. We can be very far away – but if we are touched and moved in the right way, that can be the beginning of a re-birth in our lives as Jews. It is incumbent upon all of us to reach out to those who feel rahok – that who feel alienated – on this night of Kol Nidrei. We ask for forgiveness for the mistakes that we have made in our disorganized Jewish life – for the phone calls that were not returned, for the thank yous we didn't offer, or for the support we did not provide. However, for those of us who feel rahok – who feel distant from Jewish life – we must also make that first step as well to begin our return. Every journey begins with that first step.

People think you need an incredible motivation to return to Judaism. Sometimes, the motivations are really very down to earth. They are not very lofty, they are rooted in people and their every day lives. Once, I had started a bat mitzvah class in my congregation in Toledo. There were four women in the class. After a few sessions, three of the woman dropped out for various reasons. The only woman left had a twelve year old daughter. She said to me, “Rabbi, I can't drop out of your class. What kind of message would I be giving to my daughter – just when she is about to start her bat mitzvah training. I have to be a role model for her. I can't drop out of your class. Please study with me for her sake.” Well, this woman had an incredible voice and was a wonderful Hebrew student. She led the Shabbat service and chanted the haftarah beautifully. She inspired her daughter who had an equally beautiful bat mitzvah.

Another favorite congregant of mine was a first generation Italian-American. She was a school teacher in a small town in Michigan. She fell in love with the father of one of her students. He was a young widower. She made an appointment to see me. “Rabbi, I just have to convert to Judaism. He's just so Jewish. He's from Brooklyn, New York. He speaks like a Jew from New York. He's a cousin to Barbra Streisand. He wants to keep a kosher home. I must become a Jew.” Well, this incredible woman did become Jewish. She also celebrated her bat mitzvah. She also raised her husband's two children. A few years ago, a young woman contacted me in Indianapolis. She was traveling through and wanted to drop in and say hello. “Rabbi, do you remember me? I'm Angela's daughter. I've married a nice Jewish boy from Detroit.”

The greatest rabbi of the Talmudic period, Rabbi Akiva, was an ignorant shepherd who could not read Hebrew. His girlfriend Rachel said to him, “I will not marry a man who does not know how to read.” One day, Akiva noticed a water course eroding away a path through a rock. Akiva thought – just as the water can erode its way through a rock – so too, I can begin to study. Akiva mastered the letters of the alef-bet. Ultimately, he became the great

rabbi of Talmudic Judaism. Akiva taught us that the greatest principle of Judaism is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Our rabbis taught this story to teach us that our relationship to Judaism is not inherited – it is acquired through our personal commitment. Akiva is the great martyr of our tradition as well. He died as he recited the words of the Shema. He said, “I never knew what it meant to love G-d with all your soul. But now I do – as my soul is being taken from me.” He died with a full sense of shalom, of being at peace with himself and with G-d.

I hope all of us truly hear the call of the Kol Nidrei – calling us back to who we are, calling us back to where we belong, calling us back to our faith. We hope and pray that all of us – whether we are close or far – gain that sense of shalom, of inner peace, that we seek on this special night. Let us commit ourselves to making that first step towards our renewal.