

“A RABBI ON THE ROOF”

Kol Nidre sermon by Rabbi M. Thomas Heyn
delivered September 25, 2012 at Temple Israel of Greater Miami

There was once a crowded village nestled within the confines of a big wall. It was a *shtetl*, an enclosed, isolated village, packed with small houses. Every individual or family had its own little house, though many of these houses were not much more than huts. The poorest of these inhabitants toiled daily just to provide for their basic needs – food, clothing and shelter.

Some houses were a little sturdier, having been constructed with better materials; enough so that they could support two stories. Those who had a second story decorated it tastefully with furniture and artwork, enabling them to enjoy beauty and leisure and the pleasant company of family and friends. This all took place on the second floor of these houses.

Some houses were even sturdier and built with materials strong enough to support a third floor. In these homes, on the third level, inhabitants had libraries in which they hosted salons to discuss ideas and principles encompassing the physical and social sciences, philosophy, psychology, history and law. They engaged in all these wonderful and important things in the hours not spent toiling or enjoying themselves on the two lower floors. And while the windows from the second floor looked out over the street, the windows from this third floor looked out over the other houses within this walled village. From there, one could see just about everything within the walls of this village.

Now that you have in your mind's eye this little three-story building, there's one more thing I should tell you about it. If this house were sturdy enough and well-positioned within the village, its inhabitants could step out onto the roof and from there see over the wall surrounding their village. Sure, they could see all the people in the streets below rushing about, but they could also see other villages and cities far beyond their own. They could see the sky and fields and mountains and realize that their little homes and their village were remarkably small relative to the world around them.

So they painted pictures of the view and wrote poetry and songs that conveyed the beauty and expansiveness of what it was like being on the roof. And they brought these works down into their homes to remind them of how beautiful it was up there; the art, music, poetry and literature that so enrich our lives. And religious symbols, rituals and stories that somehow remind us of what the prophets, mystics and sages saw when they were on the roof. In fact, this crazy idea of a visionary on a roof might have been what inspired the image of a fiddler on the roof, painted in 1912 – a hundred years ago – by Jewish folk artist Marc Chagall. And it might have been what inspired playwright Joseph Stein, who fifty years ago wrote a play he entitled *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the Yiddish stories of Sholem Aleichem.

My story illustrates an idea many of you have heard from Mitch over the years – the idea of “The Four Worlds.” The idea was developed long ago within the core teachings of Jewish mysticism known as the *kabbalah*. The idea simply suggests that our experience of the world is comprised of four distinct levels: the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual. These four levels correspond to the different floors in these little village houses. The first floor is where we deal with our physical concerns; the second floor corresponds to our emotional and social concerns; the third floor corresponds to intellectual life and issues of equity, fairness and social justice. And the roof above them all corresponds to our spiritual life.

Now, I've spent time on this little story tonight because it is profoundly relevant on this eve of Yom Kippur. It illustrates, *in a way everyone can understand*, how each floor, each level, supports the one above it. You need a

sound and sturdy first floor if there is to be a second floor. And you need a sound and sturdy second floor if there is to be a third floor. And the third floor has to be good and solid if you want to stand above it on the roof. So you can see there's a logic and order here; a direction and functional flow which is very real and present even in our own lives. We need only to conduct a little self-assessment; a *cheshbon hanefesh* – an accounting of the soul, which is something we're encouraged to do on this holiest day of the year.

So, for example, how are we doing on the physical level? I know that someone over here did well. The rate of return on his investments this year was better than he expected. But the economy did take its toll because someone over here lost her job and hasn't been able to make ends meet. Someone else over there has been out of work for a couple of years now on disability and depends on food stamps. There are tremendous inequalities here and there's no easy fix. Another over here is struggling with her own health issues while seeing people all around her being stricken with cancer, heart disease and problems associated with aging. Beyond our own community, there are even more serious economic and political problems, especially in the Middle East. Israel's very existence is in jeopardy. Global climate change is another major concern. How are we doing on this physical plane? We've got some serious problem-solving to do here. Yet think about how we spend our time, energy and money when it comes to food, clothing and shelter. Do our habits and lifestyles reflect the upward flow we were talking about earlier? Are we shaping a physical world in a way that will support greater emotional, intellectual and spiritual development?

And how are we doing on an emotional level? There are many good and loving families and people here who bring healing and wholeness into our world. But there is someone over here who has never recovered from the emotional wounds inflicted on her by an abusive parent. And over here is someone who is struggling with depression; and another over here who is estranged from his family. And beyond this community, we have a new generation of children exposed to violence in such a way that shooting people in a packed movie theater isn't so different from what they do at home on their computers. If we're really so culturally advanced, don't you think we would have lower rates of poverty and unemployment?; and higher standards of emotional intelligence and social conscience? How are we doing on this level?

And how are we doing on the intellectual level? Someone over here has just finished a good book, but someone over here has been too busy to read anything lately. There are plenty of opportunities for intellectual and civic engagement. How many here are pursuing them? Meanwhile, the cost of a college education is skyrocketing while it seems like we're not any closer to figuring out how to deal with mounting environmental, social and economic problems. Somehow I think we could be doing better on this level, as well.

And how are we doing on the spiritual level? There was a movie that came out a couple years ago called *Cold Souls* in which a futuristic device could extract a person's soul. The protagonist, played by Paul Giamatti, is distressed to discover that his soul looks like a shriveled up chick pea. How is your soul doing these days? Is it any more robust? It's very easy for other concerns to demand all of our time and attention, crowding out the interest, much less the possibility, of transcendence. Anyone seriously interested in pursuing the spiritual life has to overcome the mesmerizing allure of these other worlds I've described; the pull of habitual behaviors, conditioning and social pressures, and the sheer demands of the other three worlds. How and when can we lead a more spiritual life?

Throughout our service tonight and tomorrow, we will recite the "*ashamnu-s*;" the confessions in our liturgy that take us through this assessment process in a similar way, bringing us to this painful realization that we *have* fallen short. How and when can we bring these four worlds into a better alignment? Where can we find a model, a way of living that can help us realign our priorities so that our physical development leads us to greater emotional development, and this leads us to greater intellectual and social development, and this leads

us to greater spiritual development? Where in our world can we find a model that supports us in this direction? Where is there an organization or institution that reflects this functional flow, this timeless pattern which urges us toward transcendence; that operates in such a way that every element, every person plays a role in advancing this higher purpose; a purpose that flows through that organization and is reflected in everything it does?

A supermarket has its function; a professional association of therapists has its function; a university has its function, as does every organization and institution. Ah, but a Temple. A Temple should be secure, safe, fully functional; its members should naturally be welcoming and inclusive, and it should offer opportunities for social, intellectual and civic engagement. Yet, it's primary purpose is not its physical plant, nor is it the fact that it's welcoming and inclusive, nor is it the fact that it has a proud history of excellence in intellectual and civic engagement. All these things are good and important, but as an institution, they all lend themselves to a common and transcendent purpose.

This transcendent purpose is a little like the wireless connectivity we all have with our cell phones. Without it, you might be able to use your phone as a calculator or to store music and addresses. Without the invisible and intangible connection, a cell phone doesn't serve its purpose very well, does it?

This is a perfect example of how our purpose as a Temple family can connect us and restore proper functionality to our lives. In other words, the spirit that infuses this institution, the message of transcendence which all of Judaism is pointing to, is invisible and intangible and indispensable. On this holiest day of the year, I'd like you to imagine that our wireless connectivity has just been reinstated.

Better yet, I'd like you to imagine that we are here together on this day standing on a rooftop, looking out over the walls that have kept us from bigger visions and broader vistas until now! And like all those other villagers and fiddlers who stood on this roof before us; looking out from this vantage point, we become aware that this building is more than just a building; that this community is more than just a community; that our classes, and programs and services are more than just classes, and programs and services. Instead, they are the means by which we have come to see that we are not alone; that there are other worlds waiting for us to encounter and explore; that the functional purpose of each of the four worlds eventually give way to yet a higher function and transcendent purpose.

This is the place we come to take note of our shortcomings. This is the place we come to look out over the horizon, and to reorient ourselves and our priorities; this is the place we come to take part in this process, this movement that leads us upward toward greater emotional, intellectual and spiritual awareness.

The founders and early supporters of Temple Israel were giants. They had tremendous foresight and dedication. There is no way we can adequately express our gratitude and appreciation for what they have established here. The facility they built has been kept up beautifully and we have a remarkable campus. Many of those here tonight have made enormous contributions to its renovation and maintenance. This campus and its chapel and this sanctuary are exquisite and solid so that they will last us for a good long time. And we have members who are ensuring that they remain current with new and greener standards.

On an emotional level, we have a dynamic and inclusive membership, with many longtime, devoted members who, in their generosity, have helped us stay afloat in troubled times amidst declining rates of synagogue affiliation. We also have young families who will ensure that our Temple remains viable in the coming decades amidst unforeseeable challenges that surely lie ahead. We have an active sisterhood, a *chavurah*, *Ruach* and other vital groups and committees. Our music is the best you could find anywhere in the world. There is good

energy here; love, warmth, good will and respect. Our clergy and our office staff and our committees are functioning well together. Things may not yet be perfect, but they're coming into alignment in a way that is moving us upward and blessing us along the way.

We have outstanding programs, classes and committees that provide opportunities for intellectual and civic engagement. And the ways we practice our spirituality here are rich and varied enough to nourish those who come for inspiration and renewal.

Being together in this way, at this time, in this place is like standing on a rooftop and seeing farther than we've ever seen before. Suddenly it becomes clearer how everything leading up to this moment helped to bring us to this awareness. Suddenly it becomes clearer how important it is to share these moments. Suddenly it becomes clearer how important it is to have a place where everything and everyone comes together in the spirit of this awesome connectivity. There are few other places as beautiful, as warm, as engaged, and as spiritually alive as this.

O God. Help us to sustain this feeling throughout the coming year. Help us to bring our priorities into greater alignment with the power that gently urges us to shift our attention from the physical to the emotional to the intellectual to the spiritual. Help me to become even more connected and engaged in this process with the support of this loving congregational family as we lift and support one another toward a higher and higher vision of who we are and what we can achieve. Bless those who have supported and those who continue to support this Temple. And help us all, God, to realize the transcendent purpose that infuses this sacred moment and this sacred space, bringing life and vitality and sustenance to this sacred congregation.