

**“PROMOTING AND STRENGTHENING
A MORE INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE VISION FOR OUR FUTURE”
A Kol Nidre Sermon by Rabbi Tom Heyn – Temple Israel of Greater Miami – 5776 / 2015**

I want to draw your attention to the two most important moments in this evening's service. The first was the recitation of *Kol Nidre*. Its enigmatic words and haunting melody touch the deepest recesses of our hearts. When we hear the *Kol Nidre* chanted, we can feel our superficial concerns dissolve like mist as the gates to our authentic self begin to open. This opening doesn't happen often or easily. In order to let down our defenses, we need a signal, a sign that we are safe; that we have come home.

Robert Frost once wrote that: "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to let you in." *Kol Nidre* is that invitation for us to come in, giving us the permission to stand unashamed, in the company of saints and sinners, and ask for forgiveness.

No matter how far we might have strayed from our heritage and the values we hold dear, we have returned to pray as one. We may not have fulfilled the commitments and promises we made over the past year, and so we have come to seek forgiveness, as we likewise forgive others and forgive ourselves. With a clean slate, we begin anew so that the commitments we make tonight and in the coming year reflect our most cherished values.

In the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer we heard on Rosh Hashanah morning and will hear again tomorrow morning, we are reminded that it is during these ten Days of Awe that our fate for the coming year will be written *and sealed* in the Book of Life. The prayer ends by reminding us that *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah*, and *Tzedakah* bring forgiveness, healing and wholeness.

And so it was with this in mind that I spoke on Erev Rosh Hashanah about *teshuvah*; how it means more than just repentance; how it means returning to our better and higher selves; returning to a place that feels like home.

I then spoke on Rosh Hashanah morning about *tefillah*; how it means more than just prayer; how it means any activity that helps to cultivate greater self-awareness. We invite you to join us weekly and throughout the year as we continue on that path.

And so this evening, we are ready to consider the value of *tzedakah*. We typically associate the word with charity, giving money to a worthy cause, but *tzedakah* means more than that because it's based on the word *tzedek*, which means "justice." It means doing the right thing; it means standing behind what you believe, in a very real way. It means making a commitment, and being willing to honor it, even at the expense of other things.

For example, we all made a commitment to be here tonight. There are other things we could have been doing yet this was important enough for us to make the effort to be here. But will our children and grandchildren make the same effort to stay connected to these traditions and to their Jewish identities?

A recent study found that millennials (those between the ages of 15-35) are the least religious generation of the past six decades, and possibly in our nation's history. The results conclude that

they are less likely to say that religion is important in their lives. More and more are abandoning it even before they reach adulthood, with an increasing number being raised without any religion at all.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is an increase in religious fundamentalism. We have folks like Kim Davis and other Bible-thumping Christians, and a corresponding growth of extremism in Muslim communities. The Orthodox Jewish community is growing in size and strength due to higher birthrates, and due to people who are attracted to a pre-modern worldview that simplifies the complexities of contemporary life.

Reform and other progressive Jews like ourselves have chosen a more difficult path. We need not retreat to an idealized vision of the past, but we do need to work on promoting and strengthening a more inclusive and sustainable vision for our future. This requires high levels of cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence. And it will take our sustained efforts and resources to maintain the structures and programs we need to keep us and our children from drifting away toward one extreme or another.

Our Temple is located in the center of our city, geographically and ideologically. We sit firmly between unbridled assimilation on the one hand, and the rising tide of fundamentalism on the other. What situates us between these two opposing forces is the recognition that our freedom, to choose how we want to live our lives, comes with a responsibility. We can be careless about our freedom, or surrender it to some authority outside ourselves, or we can choose to embrace the task that we are now called upon to fulfill. That brings us to the second most important moment of this evening.

You'll notice the pledge cards and pencils in the seat-backs in front of you or in your prayerbooks. Our President will soon ask you to make a financial commitment. Any Temple cannot exist without the generous support of its members and friends. We've tried to minimize the writing involved by providing tabs for you to fold over, but you'll have to use the pencil anyway. Fortunately, it's not the writing or thinking about money on a holy day that should cause anyone to exclude themselves from this opportunity. That's because what's most important is that we acknowledge the responsibility that each one of us has accepted in choosing to be here and to count ourselves as part of this sacred community.

In a few moments, we'll want everyone to pick up a card and fill out not only the front, with a pledge of financial support, but the blank side as well. Let us know how else you can help support our efforts by donating your time or expertise. Or you can just write, "Please contact me. I am ready to help."

We are called to give *tzedakah* but also to do *tzedakah*. This means doing the right thing and standing behind what you believe. It means making a commitment, and being willing to honor it, even at the expense of other things. As you think about what you'll write on your pledge card, on this "page from the Book of Life," I want to leave you with a story.

Sir Moses Montefiore was one of the great figures of Victorian Jewry. He was a wealthy man and devoted much of his long life to serving the Jewish people in Britain and worldwide. He was the one who built the windmill in Jerusalem, in the area just west of the Old City known as Yemin Moshe —

named after him. Someone once asked him how much he was worth. After a moment's reflection Sir Moses provided a figure that fell short of his questioner's expectations. Naturally it was met with objection as the questioner was certain Sir Moses was worth tens times as much. Sir Moses then replied: "Young man, you didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I'm worth. So I calculated how much I have given in *tzedakah* this year, and that is the number I gave you. You see, in life we are worth only what we are willing to share with others."

May you enjoy fulfillment and abundance in this New Year. By virtue of your generosity and good deeds, may you be inscribed in the Book of Life. May those who are fasting tomorrow have an easy fast, and when the Book of Life is sealed, may all of you – every single one of you – be counted and blessed with a sweet New Year.

G'mar chatimah tovah