

“REDEFINING JEWISH LIFE THROUGH OUR UNIQUELY PROGRESSIVE APPROACH”
A Rosh Hashanah Morning sermon by Rabbi M. Thomas Heyn
at Temple Israel of Greater Miami – 5776 – Sept 2015

There was once a rabbi who concluded a High Holy Day sermon by wishing his congregation a Happy New Year. “And,” he said, “since I’m not likely to see you until next year, I want to wish you a Happy Passover as well.”

I will conclude my sermons with a very different message, because I’m a very different kind of rabbi and this is a very different congregation.

Our congregation’s leadership recently revised and updated our shared vision: “We are a vibrant, caring, inclusive Reform congregation in Downtown Miami that is redefining Jewish life through our uniquely progressive approach to life-long learning, social justice and spirituality.”

This vision includes all the words you might expect to hear in a congregational vision statement: life-long learning, social justice. Spirituality is something we do particularly well here, and we are exceptionally vibrant, caring and inclusive. But there are two parts that really stand out in this statement and say a lot about who we are and what we are doing. Those two parts are “redefining Jewish life” and “uniquely progressive.” What does it mean to be “redefining” Jewish life? And what does it mean to be “uniquely” progressive?

I believe that if you understand what I’m about to share with you, you will want to come back for more well before next year. I believe that if you really *hear* what I have to say, you’ll want to be with us on a regular basis.

So let me tell you what it means to redefine Jewish life by giving you an example.

I spoke last night about the *Unetaneh tokef* prayer, and you heard it this morning. It’s the dramatic piece that says “on RH it is written and on YK it is sealed – who shall live and who shall die....” But at the end it says that “*teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah* can bring pardon, forgiveness and redemption.”

We talked about *teshuvah* last night in the context of returning home and what that feels like. Most of us know what *tzedakah* means. We’ll talk about it on Yom Kippur and how it means much more than “charity.”

This morning I’d like to talk about *tefillah*. Most of us would translate that as “prayer,” but that’s not entirely accurate. The English word “prayer” comes from the Latin *precare*, which means to “entreat, beg.” And so we often think of *tefillah* as reading a fixed liturgy in our prayerbooks and asking God for stuff or thanking God for our many blessings.

But *tefillah* means something different. It comes from the Hebrew root *pey-lamed-lamed*, which means “to judge or examine,” but, *tefillah* is a reflexive form of that root, which means “to judge/examine oneself.” I would expand that definition to include **any activity that helps to cultivate greater self-awareness, a greater sense of inner wholeness, integration and well-being.**

How many people try to eat healthy and exercise? Why? To cultivate, improve, maintain your physical health. This is not something you do just once a year, right? How many of you have some experience with yoga, meditation, mindfulness? Why are these so popular? Hundreds of people are probably going to see Jon Kabat Zinn talk about Mindfulness at the University of Miami in about two weeks. Why? Because they recognize that it is a technique that helps to cultivate their awareness, or what I might call their spiritual health or spiritual

intelligence. Besides, it helps us feel and function better, and there are other measurable benefits.

These are all examples of what I call *tefillah*: any activity that helps us become more self-aware; to cultivate, improve or strengthen our spiritual health or our spiritual intelligence.

For me and for us here at Temple Israel, *tefillah* includes more than just reading out of a prayerbook. It includes yoga, meditation, mindfulness, music, chanting, study, mussar practice and more. We include all of these modalities in our Shabbat morning practice because Shabbat is the time for us as Jews to set aside our other responsibilities and engage in consciousness-raising activities. It's actually something we should do on a daily basis, like eating a good meal, to nourish not only the body but the soul. Or it should be done at least on a weekly basis, like regular exercise or a yoga practice. Nourishing and giving attention to your inner life is not something you do only once or twice a year. We can do it once a year in a really big way, like an annual retreat or convocation like this, but the development of your spiritual health or spiritual intelligence requires and deserves more frequent and regular attention.

Taking care of the soul is just like taking care of the body. When we seek medical treatment, we no longer use outdated medical practices from a decade or two ago, much less from a century or two ago. Most of us no longer eat *shmaltz* and *gribbones*, and not as many people smoke cigarettes any more. Now we take better care of ourselves and eat in ways that we have learned are more conducive to good health. Clinging to old ways just because "that's the way we've always done it" is not good for the body or the soul.

A progressive approach to religion in general, and to *tefillah* in particular, learns from the past, but is more solidly rooted in the present and helps us to set our sights on where we want to be in the future. I'd say that Pope Francis is doing a pretty good job of this in the Catholic Church. Are we ready to redefine our doctrines, such as what we believe is the goal, if any, of religion?

What is the goal of religion in general, and Judaism in particular? As Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, Judaism's goal is not to make the world more Jewish, but rather more human. How are we doing?

As a Jewish community, the debate over the Iran deal was very contentious...

As a nation, politics are in a sad state of affairs and have been extremely divisive...

In Israel, is religion helping to bring us closer to peace, or is it driving us further from it?

And as a planet? If we were to examine ourselves collectively, we'd see that our spiritual health could be better. We see huge inequalities, the Syrian refugee crisis is front and center right now, and perhaps the most dangerous problem we face is religious extremism. Yet these are symptoms of a deeper dysfunction or pathology. Animosity, violence and war are the most serious pathologies. They are as pernicious as a cancer left to fester and spread, and the prognosis is not good. It needs to be treated right away.

But there is hope. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks said that "Wars are won by weapons, but peace is won by ideas."

I do not claim to be a prophet, and like Moshe Rabbeinu, whose image graces this sanctuary, I find myself to be slow of tongue, challenged when it comes to communicating the import of this idea, but it's an idea that will transform Temple Israel, our broader community and, ultimately, the world. In the next few years, educated people will *come to view religion in the context of health*. It's already happening in the world of mindfulness and yoga, in which Eastern religious ideas and practices have been adapted and enthusiastically embraced by a

predominantly secular mainstream. We need to begin this transition and transformation in the Jewish community and we are beginning to do that here at Temple Israel.

Let me conduct an informal poll. How many people here are interested in religion; in practicing religion; in becoming more religious? Now, how many people here are interested in health; in taking care of yourselves, in becoming healthier?

If what we are doing here at Temple Israel is to make us more religious, then once a year is probably fine. In that case, I'll see you next year. But if what we are doing here today is to improve our health and our overall wellness, then we should be engaging in this or other forms of spiritual practice every day, or at least every week.

Daniel Goleman made a huge contribution to society by bringing into the mainstream the concept of Emotional Intelligence or EQ. The next big idea that is now on the horizon is the concept of Spiritual Intelligence or SQ.

Just as Goleman identified EQ with a certain number of skills or competencies, the latest research on SQ identifies as many as 21 measurable skills or competencies. Hence the title of an outstanding book on the subject is SQ21. We will be working from this book over the coming year, beginning with our Tuesday lunch and learn class. You may want to order a copy of the book online when you get home. SQ21.

So, how can we apply this concept of SQ in a practical way? Let me tell you a story.

It's a story about the estrangement of Hagar and Ishmael that is traditional read on this first day of Rosh Hashanah...

That estrangement continues to this day in the relations between Jews and Arabs. I'd like to tell you about a documentary film "Promises" that we'll be showing here on Sunday morning, October 11th. Filmmaker BZ Goldberg interviews seven adorable kids between the ages of 9-13 in and around Jerusalem. Four are Israeli Jews and three are Arab Muslims....

In a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, BZ interviews Mahmoud, the son of a merchant in the Muslim quarter of the old city; a coffee store. He says, "The Jews say this is their land. How could it be their land? If it is their land, why does the Koran say that the prophet Mohammed flew from Mecca to the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem? In Jerusalem! So Jerusalem belongs to us, to the Arabs."

BZ then interviews a boy named Moishe, who lives in Beit El, one of the oldest and largest the settlements in the West Bank. "God promised us the land of Israel. The Arabs came and took it. When an Arab sees me, he thinks I'm one of those who took his land. They think it's their land and we think it's ours. We know it's ours."

Two very different worldviews that these children learn them from their parents and the cultures in which they were raised. They live no more than 20 minutes from each other but they are each growing up in very separate worlds.

They are both absolutely certain that their worldview is the correct worldview. They are both equally passionate about their beliefs, and willing to die for them. Rabbi David Wolpe once noted that there is no correlation between how passionate you feel about something and how right you are.

What is extraordinary about this film is what happens next. The filmmaker brings some of these Jewish and

Arab children together to meet one another for an afternoon. The high level of trust they had developed for him allowed them to overcome their fears and these children got to interact and know one another as regular children who shared similar interests in sports and computers. They played together, they ate and talked and got to know one another as friends.

It is just amazing to watch this encounter and I invite you to see it for yourselves. We'll be showing the film here next month on Sunday morning, Oct 11th.

When they set aside their worldviews, just for a day, we can see that we are just human beings who want more than anything to love and be loved.

Now, what can we learn from this? In SQ21, which describes the 21 skills associated with spiritual intelligence, the very first skill is the awareness of our own worldview; to be able to see it in relation to someone else's worldview. This self-awareness allows us to consider another person's worldview and to be able to stand in their shoes, whether for a moment or a day. How different our world would be if we could develop and model that skill.

At the end of the film "Promises," when the children realize that the project was drawing to a close and they would soon return to their separate worlds, there were tears. It was the most heart-rending scene and it makes me wonder about the title of the film "Promises." They might have promised one another to return and see each other again someday in that place of openness and friendship.

Israel's celebrated poet, Yehuda Amichai, once wrote a brief and touching poem about that place. It's called "The Place Where We Are Right."

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Were we are now is that place where the ruined house once stood, where we are no longer concerned about being "right." This is that place, where we are no longer anchored in the past. This is that place where we are courageous enough to admit that our worldview is our worldview, and that there are other possibilities that we hadn't really considered before. This is the place we can come, not necessarily to be more religious, but to promote our own health and the well-being of the communities in which we live. And the *tefillah* we practice here is that kind of self-examination that helps to refine and develop our spiritual intelligence – not only the first skill but all 21 skills, which we'll be exploring over the coming year.

We are a vibrant, caring, inclusive Reform congregation in Downtown Miami that is REDEFINING Jewish life through our UNIQUELY PROGRESSIVE approach to life-long learning, social justice and spirituality.

If you care about your health and overall wellness, I know I'll see you again soon and regularly. We cannot afford to neglect our well-being, globally, communally or personally. It requires and deserves more than an annual check-up. In the next ten days, I hope you will think about *tefillah* as any activity that increases your sense of inner wholeness and well-being, and helps you to cultivate your spiritual health and spiritual intelligence

This is worth investing your time, your energy, your expertise and whatever resources you are willing to share, to bring about wholeness on every level.

If you take this uniquely progressive message to heart, I know you will have a very meaningful High Holy Day season. And I know that I will see you again soon and regularly, so there's no need for an early Passover greeting. Let's promise one another to return and see each other again in this place of openness and friendship. And let me wish you a very happy and healthy and sweet New Year.