

Second sermon, Rosh haShanah, 5759/1998

--Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

=====
Shanah Tovah!

This morning, I would like to tell you about a Har - about a mountain.

Actually, it's a slight exaggeration to call it a mountain. It's really more of a hill. It's not even the largest hill in the region. But it's a hill that had a very special quality. Whenever people approached this hill, or stood on it, or walked around it, they would get a very powerful but intangible feeling that they were truly being seen.

There's a feeling that each of us gets when we come in contact with someone who profoundly and truly sees us and understands our needs, our goals and our desires. And that's the feeling that people would get when they stood on this mountain. And the mountain began to acquire a nickname that reflected its special qualities. It became known as Har Moriah -- Mount Moriah - which, according to some scholars, can be translated "the mountain of vision."

And people started to tell stories of some of the things that happened on this mountain.

One of the most famous stories takes place thousands and thousands of years ago, before people realized how special this mountain was. Back then, it was just part of a large wheat field that was owned by two brothers. One of the brothers had a wife and several children; the other brother lived alone. They would each farm and collect the grain from their respective sides of the field.

One night, the brother who lived alone thought to himself: The winter is coming, and my brother has so many more mouths to feed than I do. And he resolved that in the middle of the night he would take some of the grain from his storehouse and bring it over to his brother's storehouse -- to help his brother, but making sure that his brother would not realize it and be ashamed.

But at exactly the same time, the brother with children thought about his brother who was all alone. "My brother has to hire people to help him harvest the wheat from his half of the field, while I can rely on my wife and children to help me. I'm worried that my brother might not have enough wheat for the winter after he pays all his workers." And he resolved that in the middle of the night he would take some of the grain from his storehouse and bring it over to his brother's storehouse -- to help his brother, but making sure that his brother would not realize and be ashamed.

And the next morning, both of the brothers were surprised to see that they had exactly as much wheat as they did the previous evening.

And then the next night they each decided again to deliver wheat to each others' storehouses - but this time, they ran into each other in the middle of the night, each carrying a large sack of wheat. At that moment, they understood what their love and concern for each other had produced..... and they embraced.

And later generations realized that that's just the sort of thing that would happen when people came to this mountain - they would be able to SEE each other, to anticipate and appreciate each other's needs.

Later on, it was on this mountain - Har ha - Moriah - that our ancestor Abraham was commanded to bring his son Isaac, to bind him upon the altar, as we read in this morning's Torah reading. But at the last possible instant, an angel of God descended from heaven and told Abraham to release his son.

And Abraham was so relieved that he gave the place where he stood a new name. *eiwx` `axdm ym dnmwem dde` d' ix`d.* And Abraham called that place "adonai yireh" - adonai sees - because at that moment, Abraham felt that God had seen his anguish and answered his prayers.

Much later, the king of Israel - King Solomon - was invited to build a Temple as a focal point for the entire Israelite people - and it was no surprise to anyone that the decision was made to build the Temple on that special mountain.

And we read in the Talmud that when you wanted to go on a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, you wouldn't need to book a hotel room. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, you would encounter hundreds of total strangers who would invite you to come in to their homes and spend the night - people who would go out of their way to anticipate the needs of the traveler, because they all knew themselves what it's like to be a traveler. And that's another example of the power of this special mountain.

And the lesson of that mountain became one of the most important lessons of the Jewish people -- to train our eyes to see all people as they genuinely are; to behold them, to give them respect; to see ourselves reflected in them.

Yesterday morning I mentioned that my sermons over the High holidays would reflect what are in my opinion the three most important concepts in Jewish spirituality. Yesterday, I spoke about the first of these concepts -- that Judaism encourages us to try to interact with the world through the eyes of a child - to cultivate a sense of wonder and radical amazement. The second of these Jewish spiritual concepts is what I have been calling the message of the mountain -- it's a principle that relates to how we see each other -- and how we come in contact with each other.

There is a rabbi and author in the LA area named David Wolpe who wrote a wonderful little book a few years ago called "Why Be Jewish?" This book includes a chapter called "Judaism's central teaching." And in Rabbi Wolpe's opinion, what is Judaism's central teaching? -- that each human being is created in the image of God. "All of humanity is bound together. Judaism introduced the idea that all human beings are family, all children of the same eternal parent. Each soul bears a spark of the Divine." And if we are all created in God's image, then we are all created in the image of each other. And principles of ethics and lovingkindness flow naturally from this fact.

One of the scholars to help to articulate the mystery of the teaching of the mountain was the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Buber drew upon the teachings of Hasidism when he wrote that there are two ways in which a person can interact with his or her surroundings: Through an I-It relationship, or through an I-Thou relationship.

What's the difference between the two? An I-It relationship is a relationship with an object. For example: I'm standing at this table; it's performing a specific function for me - holding up my notes. Beyond that, I don't really care about its welfare.

But it's possible to have an I-It relationship with a person as well. Let's say I'm driving through a toll plaza. The toll collector will perform a specific function for me - collect my toll, maybe make change, permit me to drive through. I am concerned that the toll collector perform this function correctly for me, but beyond that, I may care very little about the collector's problems, crises, dreams and hopes. Under such circumstances, my relationship with the toll collector would fall under the paradigm of I-It.

The other kind of relationship is the I-Thou relationship. This is a relationship that is experienced with the entire being. This relationship comes when I look at another person and perceive that person's humanity. I'm concerned not merely with one aspect of that person, but with the entire person. I recognize that this person is a human being, just as I am; I recognize that this person has needs, crises, dreams and hopes. I even anticipate some of these. In Buber's thought, when we enter into an I-Thou relationship, we get a taste of how God sees us - and how we are seen by God.

And every time we encounter another person, that's a potential I-Thou relationship.

There was a famous European-born rabbi in the United States who was in ill health so he had one of his students drive him from place to place. Occasionally they would have to pay a toll, and sometimes they would have the choice between going to a toll booth staffed by a toll collector, and a tollbooth with one of those machines that counts the coins as you throw them in. And the rabbi would always insist that his student drive to one of the tollbooths staffed by a person. He would say, "How could you possibly pass up the opportunity to interact with someone who was created in the image of God?"

Whenever we interact with someone on a soul-to-soul level, we give them the greatest gift that can be imagined. And when we want to bestow this gift upon someone else, all we need is our presence and our undivided attention. That is truly all it takes. The rabbi who trained me in hospital chaplaincy used to say: "When you deal with someone in need, the most important principle is: Don't just do something! Stand there!"

The physician Dr. Rachel Remen tells the story of one of her colleagues, who directs the Department of Family Medicine at a prestigious medical school. One of his patients was a homeless woman, who toted all her possessions from place to place in two shopping carts. He would see her at his clinic the first Wednesday of every month. Now you may wonder how someone gets from place to place with all her possessions in two shopping carts. It's not easy. She would tie one of the shopping carts to a parking meter with a belt, and then wheel the other cart to the next meter and tie it with another belt, and then go back and get the first cart and bring it to the next meter and tie it with the belt, etc. etc. So the first Wednesday of every month, she and her two shopping carts would make it to the door of the clinic for her appointment. Her clothing was always filthy, and her speech was often rambling and incoherent. And every month, the doctor would welcome her into his clinic, listen to her accounts of the difficulties of her life, and do whatever he could to treat her and help her.

After seeing her for several months, the doctor became aware that sometimes this woman would come to the clinic on days when he was not there. At first, the nurses assumed that she had just gotten the days confused -- which, given her mental state, would have been a very logical assumption. But upon speaking with the woman, she seemed to know that it was not her day to see the doctor. She simply wanted to visit his consulting room. So the nurses would take her to the empty consulting room. And the woman would stand at the threshold of the consulting room and slowly and deliberately put her right foot inside the empty room and withdraw it again and again. After a while, she would be satisfied and go away again.

There were probably so few places where this woman felt seen and heard as she did in that consulting room. As a result, that place attained special significance for her. It became the place where she would go to derive strength and courage for the challenges of her life. That room became her sacred space.

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish people no longer had one focal point, one place from which the teachings of Judaism could emanate. And we no longer had access to that special mountain, the place where heaven and earth seemed to touch and embrace. We had lost that sacred place where we each felt that we were being seen and heard.

But after we were scattered around the globe, in each and every community of our dispersion we would create an institution which would try to fill the gap left by the destruction of the Temple. In each land, we would create a "little mountain" - a place in the community where the teaching of that mountain would be exemplified. A place where people would feel that they were being seen and heard. A place where people would go to learn how to see and hear other people, a place where they would go to learn how to anticipate the needs of others.

And this place was called the *nwcy nrh* - the "little sanctuary." Other names for it included *aiz kpqz* - House of the Community - the synagogue. When a synagogue works best, it's a true community, in the

sense that it's a place where people go to see and hear and support each other, to celebrate and to mourn with each other, because of a feeling of mutual responsibility.

And true communities are rare indeed. A community is more than a network of friends. A community is a group of people who feel duty bound and obligated to care for each other's needs WHETHER THEY KNOW EACH OTHER OR NOT -- whether they enjoy each other's company or not -- merely because there's something that binds them together.

Now, some might ask: Why is it necessary to be part of a community? Why can't the entire world be my community - why shouldn't I care for all people in the world equally?

There's a famous Jewish story that provides the beginnings of an answer to this question. It's a story about Haim Weizmann, the early Zionist leader who would go on to become the first president of the State of Israel. While he was in Great Britain, lobbying for the creation of a Jewish state, one of the members of the British House of Lords asked him: "Why are you so insistent on creating a Jewish state in Palestine, when there are so many other undeveloped countries to which you could move so much more easily?" And Weizmann responded, "That's like my asking you why you drove for 20 miles last Sunday to visit your mother when there are already so many old ladies living on your street."

Our overarching goal is to see the Divine image in each and every person - and to act upon this realization. But this kind of extraordinary universalism is very challenging for most of us. It can seem so daunting that we are likely to give up altogether. We are responsible for the welfare of EVERY person on this earth. But we have a special responsibility to care for our families - our neighbors - our local communities.

And after one year at the United Synagogue of Hoboken, I can tell you that this is an example of a true community. This is a place where people are eager to meet newcomers and make them feel welcome - And what's more, this is a place where people are eager to devote time and energy to offer support to each other in times of need. For such a small community, we have had a very difficult last few months, with the illness and death and bereavement of a number of people who are very beloved in our community. And in times of tragedy and stress, our community has done its best to galvanize and offer support for each other - to see and hear each other; to anticipate each other's needs. This is a community that has internalized the message of the mountain.

I would like to close with a quotation by the poet and tzedakah professional Danny Siegel --

If you will always assume the person sitting next to you is the messiah waiting for some human kindness, You will soon learn to weigh your words and watch your hands. And if he so chooses not to reveal himself in your time, It will not matter.

This year, may we each internalize and express the wisdom of the mountain.

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg
United Synagogue of Hoboken
2 Tishri 5759 / Sept. 22, 1998