

Kedoshim 5771 – Resounding Democracy  
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

I went to camp a few weeks ago.

Well, actually, I had the privilege of attending Temple Emunah's fourth through seventh grade retreat at camp. It was an incredible opportunity to spend a Shabbat with our Religious School and Day School students as they learned, ate, sang, played, and prayed together. It was a remarkable bonding experience, and I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of it. And, I think the students did as well!

In particular, I enjoyed the spiritual aspects, the *ruah*, the spirit and song. We thanked the Holy One with a resounding *birkat hamazon* at the meals and davened at Camp Ramah in New England's beautiful *Beit Knesset*, synagogue nestled in the woods, surrounded by soaring pine trees that lifted our eyes and souls to the skies.

On Shabbat afternoon before *Minḥah*, I taught about the mood of that moment. It is traditionally thought to be the time of the week when heaven and earth come a little bit closer together. Utilizing a vertical metaphor with God above us, this is the time of the week when somehow God's presence is felt more gently, where the heavenly and earthly realms softly move a bit closer, even kissing - to utilize the Kabbalistic metaphor.

Perhaps since we have been resting so thoroughly on Shabbat, experiencing the world on an entirely different plane, we are now ready to fully embrace God's presence in our lives, and, of course, the prayers reflect this.

I asked our students a little bit about God, knowing that we have many different beliefs. Some of us believe in a more traditional God; some of us in a less traditional God; and some of us in - not very much God at all.

The answers weren't forthcoming at first, so I decided to simply do word association. "If I say God, what do you say?" One student raised her hand and said, "Tranquility." Another one said, "Peacefulness," reflecting the end of the Shabbat and the feeling in the room.

Another participant raised his hand and pointed to me. When I asked him what he meant, he said, "Well, you're God." While it was clear that he was trying to be funny or get a laugh, I explained that in our tradition, while we have great respect for rabbis and teachers (rabbi means teacher), we do not see them as being any closer to God or having a more intense relationship with the Divine. Teachers are deserving of respect, as are our parents, as are older people, as are our peers, as are, on a certain level, almost everyone, but no one in our tradition has a different relationship with the Almighty.

While other civilizations and religions believe that laypersons need an intermediary, a priest or a functionary, to help translate a divine experience to everyone else, in Judaism, we don't believe that.

Think about *tefillin* – while some traditions allow certain individuals who have attained a special degree to come close to God, every Jew is commanded to put on *tefillin* (phylacteries), to come close to the Holy One.

The language of the *tefillin* is like a wedding – a smaller, non-Westminster Abbey wedding for those of you who saw that one – but a betrothal ceremony nonetheless, between ourselves and God. When we wrap the *tefillin* around our finger, it is like a wedding ring that every Jew can wear; it is not limited to some.

This notion is one of Judaism's great breakthroughs: we don't need intermediaries, that each one of us can have a unique relationship with God.

This idea is reflected in this week's Torah reading. *Parashat Kedoshim* opens with the words “*Vayidaber Adonai el Moshe Leymor: Daber el-kol-adat bnei yisrael v'amarta aleihem: 'Kedoshim tehiyu ki kadosh ani Adonai eloheikhem. Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.'”* (Leviticus 19: 1-2)

Rashi asks a question on this verse. Normally the Torah states, “God spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the *B'nei Yisrael*, the children of Israel, and say unto them – but here there is the addition of two words, *kol adat*, the entire assembly.” What is the significance of these additional words, *kol adat*?

Rashi answers that these words teach us – that this teaching of God and Moses was proclaimed in the full assembly of the Israelites because it contained most of the fundamental teachings of the Torah, and thus, the most valuable teachings of the Torah are dependent on it.

Let me build a little on Rashi. *Kol adat* serves to teach us of the importance of resounding democratization, meaning that everyone should hear, learn, understand and be counted!

Everyone is supposed to hear these teachings and participate in that. The Torah states that we are ALL supposed to be a *mamleket kohanim v'goy kadosh* - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. No one has a different level of access to the Almighty or to the tradition, for that matter. From this fundamental and unique idea, we see at this moment of gathering what is known as *hakhel*, when all the Israelites had to gather together, when all of them had to be as one to hear these words of holiness. They are all fundamentally equal.

The Talmud records the explanation of Rabbi Hiyya, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century rabbi, who explains the verse this way. He stresses that Moshe was told to present the

commandment, “*you must be holy, for I, Adonai, your God am holy*” to the whole Israelite community. Rabbi Hiyya continues: “The commandment was not given to a few pious priests or individuals, but rather to the entire community. Attaining this state of holiness, therefore, is not something done by one person or a small group of persons, but rather by the whole people.” Thus, it is not simply associated with the sanctuary and with one group of people who work there, but is, in fact, for everyone.

This is radical democratization – the idea that everyone is valued and equal. The Mishnah expands on this. It says that each person is created in God’s image and, consequently, is of ultimate value, which is why, if you save one life, the Mishnah states, it is as if you have saved the entire world. Each life is precious and priceless. And all are to be counted.

Similarly, today, we see democracy in general seemingly on the rise. Populations that have been oppressed by dictators in the Middle East are rising up, demanding their democratic rights.

Sadly, not all these democratic movements are bringing about positive change. The new leaders in Egypt, for example, seem to be moving their country away from its peace treaty with Israel by reaching out to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood and by allowing more weapons to reach Hamas and other dangerous elements.

The reconciliation of Hamas and Fatah is yet another dangerous sign of what may come in the future. As Shimon Peres, who is deeply committed to the peace process, noted this week about this reconciliation, democracy could lead to a “terror organization ruling both Gaza and Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and a triumph of Hamas’ policies.”

But our rabbis were sensitive to this danger. While they believed in democratic ideas and the notion that the majority rules, they did not intend just any majority. It was meant to be an EDUCATED majority. So, they valued learning above all else.

A resounding democracy means that everyone counts, but it also means that everyone is responsible for their learning. The rabbis made sure of that by guaranteeing that everyone could have access to the Torah.

In other ancient civilizations and religions, their holy books were locked at the base of the mountain where only a few could get the key and access them. But that has not been the way in our tradition. For thousands of years we have read the Torah publicly, making sure everyone can hear and learn Torah. It is no accident that Jews have never suffered from high rates of illiteracy. Learning has simply been part of our core experience. The Torah is read every market day, every Monday and Thursday morning when the farmers would come in to town as well as on Shabbat morning and Shabbat afternoon, in addition to holidays and other occasions so that most people could hear it. Teaching and learning are embedded in the core culture of our experience.

That is something that we do here in our community most successfully. We have created a culture of learning, from our youngest students in preschool to our religious school and day school students to our adult learners - we are a community of people who love to learn.

Almost every day there are opportunities for study. Weekday evenings, Sunday mornings, Wednesday mornings after minyan, Shabbat afternoons between *Minhah* and *Ma'ariv*, Shabbat morning, we are continually learning – every day.

But the key way that happens is not simply by having some of us learn, but by having more and more of us learn, by creating a community of learners – pun intended.

And don't get me wrong – there are challenges to that. Some of us know more, some less – some of us know Hebrew and some cannot tell an *aleph* from a *bet*. I am often asked – if I go to this class, will I be embarrassed?

God forbid.

All our learning opportunities are open to all different learners. Sometimes, we make assumptions that adult education classes are for those who are retired, who have more free time, for older members, for younger parents, or those who have been studying for years.

I cannot stress this enough: learning is for all ages, especially for parents who have school-aged students. This is a perfect time for you to learn alongside your children. When they come to religious school, you should pick up a book from our library, take a class, and study some Torah. That modeling is the MOST effective Jewish experience you can create for your children and will have the most impact on the future of their Jewish life. We hope to provide more and more opportunities in the years to come to do just that.

Let me return to our student who connected me to God. In retrospect, I could have responded somewhat differently. I might have said that not only are we all equal and none of us is closer to God, but also that he was right, there is spark of the Divine within me. And within him. And within all of us.

That essential spark of holiness within us makes us all equal and speaks to our democratic ideals. That, in turn, should inspire us to seek out sparks of the Divine in others and in the world, compelling us to devote ourselves to studying and living God's Torah.

Shabbat Shalom.