

Yom Kippur 5773/2012  
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 White Plains NY

## “Labyrinth and Maze”

### I.

Tonight I’m going to take you on a labyrinth walk. Explanation to follow. As we walk this walk, I will ask you to reflect on this passage from the Torah which is no doubt the inner message of Yom Kippur:

“You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God...I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity...life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you *and your offspring* would live.”

וּבְחִרְתָּ בֵּינָיִם לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְזַרְעֲךָ

### II.

A recent anecdote: My dear friend, colleague, and next door neighbor Rabbi Gordon Tucker walked into my house a month ago, plopped down on the couch, and began to relate his fantasy for a reconstructed Yom Kippur. He imagined paring down the liturgy to the bare bones, cutting anything not required by tradition. Then, congregants would spend the many hours of Yom Kippur day sitting in small discussion groups all around the campus of the synagogue. We would talk about life and death, and hopes and dreams fulfilled and unfulfilled, and the important things that make up a meaningful community.

We would talk about the path we have walked; how far along we've come; how little time might be left to us; how we feel about the lives we are leading, the labyrinth we are walking.

But most of all, we would talk about our collective Jewish failure to convey to our children the greatest values we inherited from the thousand generations that preceded us.

What would those be? You can make your own list, as indeed you must. My friend and I talked a bit that night about what our lists would look like.

Mine would include our failure to put the Torah's spirit above its letter; our failure to put the Torah's letter above its mere symbolism; and to put its symbolism above our careless willingness to displace the very idea of Torah from the center of our collective imagination.

I would rue our replacing our concern the State of Israel's Jewish democratic *raison d'être* with our anxiety for its mere survival; and our neglecting its survival because of our desire not to offend our fellow diasporites here at home and around the world; and our failure to model an idealistic Zionism for our children.

I would mourn our substituting of peoplehood for ethical community. I would mourn our diluting of peoplehood into mere association. I would feel sadness that our inability to associate fully with one another as Jews has led to our fraying into multiple Judaisms and Jewish communities, none of which has as its chief priority the betterment of the whole Jewish people.

I would wonder how our prophets' inspiring, anguished, poetic calls to turn our rotting societies around have now become the mere ritual recitations of our adolescents at their ceremonies of coming-of-age. I would shake my head at the devolution of those coming-of-age ceremonies into self-worshipping wastes of money, food, and other precious resources; celebrations wherein the very message of the Haftarah evaporates into an afterthought.

I would ask how it is that we let our Jewish day schools and seminaries struggle to stay in business for lack of funds, despite our people's unimaginable collective wealth; how it is that synagogues of very different complexions are forced to merge in order to survive, or forced to close down for lack of live Jews willing to sacrifice to pay dues and affiliate with congregations as their parents and grandparents did. I would wonder how we could have raised a new generation that looks for *a la carte* Jewish services rather than the total commitment that membership requires; Jews who look for what congregations can provide rather than what might be expected of them as members.

My list would continue. I would express my perplexity at the inability of Jews to quote our great Jewish sources, and to extrapolate from those sources a core message of citizenship, of communitarian purpose, and of a balanced life of mind and spirit, of body and soul, of ethical pragmatism and transcendent idealism.

I would question our propensity as American Jews to live uncritically in neighborhoods, towns, and communities that invest impressively in secular education and recreational facilities, but that

literally border districts with vastly inferior schools, inadequate housing, high unemployment and sub-par services to the poor and elderly.

### III.

Rabbi Tucker and I agreed that at some point before day's end, we would want to re-group our congregants and send them back to their discussion circles with the goal of recalling what IS good and right about our values, and with the purpose of considering how we might turn our shortcomings around. After all, the theme of our day is *teshuvah*, which can't only mean "repentance," but which must also mean "turnaround." Our theme must not only call for our brutally honest confessions of disappointment, even shame, but also for our joyous embrace of a new start and a new way upward.

What would your list of Jewish successes include? Mine would begin with the astounding fact that more and more Jews – more and more bright, worldly, secularly educated Jews – are shaping much of the daily experience of their *secular* lives with Jewish tools: Jewish intellectual tools, Jewish literary tools, Jewish calendric tools, Jewish religious and cultural tools, Jewish *spiritual* tools. Jews are finding new ways to embrace the customs and practices of Judaism, and to do so not out of nostalgia but out of deep attraction to Judaism's inner system of meaning.

Jews are preparing Shabbat and holy day dinners, and they are inviting one another to partake of these meals together. Jews are attending Torah circles, study groups, adult education classes in surging numbers. And the number of such offerings for these adults is surging as well. Jews are coming to understand the value – and the pleasure – of practicing Judaism as adults, and not

merely as custodians of religion for their children. I have long argued that this sort of adult “modeling” of grown-up Jewish-ing is as important to our children’s learning as any classroom lesson we put them through.

I would celebrate the resurgence of liturgical and artistic creativity in synagogues; the composing of new music; the writing of new prayers and new prayer books [like the one in your hands] that bring truly contemporary insights into the ancient act of public prayer.

I would applaud the emergence of projects that promote Jewish spiritual growth, insight, contemplation, centering, re-orienting of the mind, re-prioritizing of the ethical self.

I would cheer the flowering of organizations that invite our teens and young adults to apply their Jewish ideals of social justice to hands-on field work in Israel, here in America’s slums, and in developing countries around the world. Likewise I would give a yasher koach to my young colleagues who have gone outside the box and created minyanim, alternative synagogues, and “open yeshivas” in urban centers around the country, giving young Jews entirely new ways to work out their own answers to the puzzle of how to become serious Jewish adults.

I would marvel at the evolution of our Jewish federation from its days as the keeper of communal funds into a vibrant think tank for synagogue renewal and institutional strengthening – again, here at home, in Israel, and wherever Jews reside in the world.

I would sigh with relief that in Israel, more and more people are finding the courage to raise their voices for civil liberties, religious tolerance, minority equality, and cultural pluralism.

And here at home, at Bet Am Shalom, I don't need to tell you what a joy it is to see not what we have become, but what we are still becoming. Our president Joan Rosen gave you her profound personal view of that becoming in her address to you tonight. The fact that people like her, and like so many of you, are eager to serve the Jewish enterprise means that we are tipping the balance away from failure and toward success; away from the curse of choosing our collective Jewish death, and toward the blessing of choosing life and a future.; toward re-embracing for ourselves – and modeling for our *kinder* – the values of decency, honesty, community, charity, hope. In Hebrew or in mamaloshen: *koved, tzedakah, chevra, tzedek; emunah, tikvah; emes*. And of course, *mentschlichkeit*.

#### IV.

If you wish, spend the breaks – or even the hours of formal prayer – sitting in your circles and having this heart-to-heart discussion. But as I conclude, let me offer another prayerful, thoughtful exercise for this Yom Kippur. It is the exercise I hinted at as I began this talk.

I'll preface it by telling you that this lawn you're sitting on tends to take on the imprint of our chairs and aisles, so that for some months following these holy days, one can look out from the sanctuary windows above us and see the remnant of our having been here. Some people joke that it resembles the crop circles in certain sci-fi movies. I agree. But there's another pattern it calls to mind, that of the labyrinth. [Let me add my gratitude to Rabbi Pam Wax of the

Westchester Jewish Community Services for introducing us local rabbis to the labyrinth by guiding us through an annual pre-Rosh Hashanah walk.]

Have you ever walked a labyrinth? Not a maze, where you have numerous choices, many of them leading to confusion or dead ends, but a labyrinth: a roundabout meditation path with one entrance, one route to the center, one route out, one exit.

Of course, all of us have walked the labyrinth every day of our lives. Despite our myriad life choices, our “roads not taken,” we all walk a singular route from birth to death.

We sang it on Rosh Hashanah, and we will sing it again tomorrow:

*Adam y'sodo me-afar, v'sofu l'afar*

A person's origin is dust; a person's end is dust.

Dust to dust. No alternative. No “choice.”

But along that route back to dust, a daily choice: to notice, or not. To be a mensch, or not. To tell oneself the truth, or not. To reflect on our *yerushah*, our inheritance, and to pass it on intact, or not.

So here we sit, on what will be our collective labyrinth when the chairs are folded and tent is struck. In your heart, walk this labyrinth of Yom Kippur on this holy night and throughout

tomorrow. Stop here and there. Hear the question the Holy One asks Adam in the garden: *Ayeka*. Where are you? Try to answer truthfully. Continue walking. Keep listening. Keep answering.

Until, at day's end, the final Sh'ma; the final shofar; the final exit.

Until then, keep reflecting on that choice of all choices: to opt in, not out. To affirm, not to abstain. To be present, not to shirk. To be truthful, not to hide. To reject the curse. To reject evil. To embrace the good. To choose life, that we may live.

*U'vacharta b'chayim*. Choose life, that we – *and our children and our children's children* - may be truly alive.