

**RECAPTURING THE LINKS:
MAKING THE CHAIN OF OUR LIVES WHOLE AGAIN**

Erev Yom Kippur 5770 — Sunday, September 27, 2009

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

I am always misplacing things. I'll be ready to run out the door, fearing I'm late for a meeting, and as I reach for my keys sitting on top of my bedstand...they aren't there. Quickly, I scramble, looking in my suit pockets, on the kitchen table, perhaps on the shelf in the closet. I'll run into my study and rifle through the mess on my desk. And then, just as I've reached my point of frustration, I'll remember (GESTURE TO BRAIN) that I put them on the counter in the kitchen when I brought in the mail the night before. Grabbing the keys and rushing out the door for now I am truly late, I mentally kick myself, thinking, "Boy, how stupid can I be."

For better or worse, this scene gets played out regularly...and not just with keys. Add to the list glasses, tools, books, favorite pens, and who knows what else. Out there — somewhere — is a whole segment of my life, patiently waiting around to be found...someday.

I bet that most of you have had a similar experience. In fact, it happens to us all the time. We are constantly misplacing things we need.

Perhaps it behooves us, on this Yom Kippur, to renew our efforts to find some of the intangible essentials we have misplaced over the years. I call them the mish-ing links of our lives: mish-kan (tradition), mish-pat (justice), mish-pacha (family).

Three stories illustrate these links.

First, the link of tradition: A woman in her late 30's came to visit me. She said that she wanted to come home. In response to my puzzled look, she explained: she had been born of another faith, but raised with little religion. Her father was an alcoholic and,

while she was a young girl, she and her mother, had been abused by him. Eventually they left him. Times were tough but her mom had managed to keep them afloat. As the woman grew up, she experimented with many "isms": Buddhism, Hinduism, a bit of Christian fundamentalism. Added to that some not-so-legal drug activity, alcoholism, gambling, and the result was a not-so-wonderful life. After hitting bottom, as she was beginning to rebuild her world, she happened to be invited by a co-worker to join her for a Shabbat dinner and a Friday night service. She had known no Jews, nor had ever step foot into a synagogue. Intrigued, she accepted. She told me that the evening transformed her. In those few hours sharing for the first time in her life the Shabbat rituals of candles, kiddush, and motzi, and later experiencing the service, she felt this is what she had spent years searching for, and knew that somehow it had always been meant for her to be Jewish. And so, she said, she was here to come home. A search for life's meaning reveals itself in the celebration of Shabbat. The power of tradition! Mishkan!

Next, a story about the link of justice: During the Holocaust, in the concentration camp, Janowska, "there was a Jewish foreman [working for the Nazis] named Shnaidweiss who was dreaded by his fellow Jews. At the same camp, one of the inmates was a Hasidic rabbi. It was the eve of Yom Kippur...His followers approached their rebbe to ask if he would speak to Shnaidweiss to plead with him not to assign them [work] on Yom Kippur. The rabbi knew that Shnaidweiss had no respect for the Jewish religion...The rabbi took his life in his hands and he approached Shnaidweiss and he said...'You are a Jew like myself. Tonight is Kol Nidrei night. [We] do not want to

transgress the [holiday by performing] work...Can you help us?' The rabbi discerned the flicker of a human spark in Shnaidweiss' face. He replied to the rabbi, 'Tonight I can't do a thing. I have no jurisdiction. But tomorrow I will [see].' That night, the rabbi led his [followers] in Kol Nidrei. The next day, Shnaidweiss took them to the S.S. quarters, to a large wooden house [isolated and separate from the camp]. He told them, 'I heard about your Kol Nidrei. You risked death. I admire your courage. You men will shine the floor without using any polish or wax. And you, Rabbi, will clean the windows with dry rags. [That way] you will not transgress any [Yom Kippur prohibition]. The grateful [followers] and their rabbi cleaned and polished the room, at the same time chanting the Yom Kippur prayers [safe from prying eyes and ears]."¹ In the midst of degradation, Jewish integrity was preserved and hallowed through a simple and just act by one human being for others. The wonder of justice! Mishpat!

Finally, the link of family: Many years ago, Ann Landers wrote in her advice column calling for a reconciliation day. Being Jewish herself, my guess is that her model for such a time was Yom Kippur. A few weeks after that column appeared, the following response was printed: "Dear Ann Landers: Your column on reconciliation day changed my life...My brother and I were born only 20 months apart. Mom dressed us alike and many thought we were twins. Tommy was better at basketball but I was better at soccer...I was lousy in English and he did my homework. He wasn't so hot in math, so I helped him out. We were competitive but there were never any serious fights or arguments...It was always understood that my brother and I would go into the family business started by our grandfather... Tommy, being older, went in first. I decided to take a year off after college and travel [with my new wife]. While I was in South America, Dad died suddenly of a heart attack. When I came home for the funeral, I got the shock of my life...Mom inherited everything. She was fond of Tom's wife and didn't care much for mine. So the long and short of it was that I was out of luck. [No inheritance. No part in the family business.]

My wife and I decided to move out of town. We cut all family ties. Ten years passed. Mom died. We did not go to her funeral. I was angry and bitter, having felt that I had been cheated. Two weeks ago I received a copy of your column on reconciliation from Tommy. Across the top, he had written. 'I miss you. Please call me.' That very evening I called and we both cried. The following weekend, he came to see [me]. It was my birthday. That was the greatest gift that I have ever received in my life."² In a world of fluctuation, brothers rediscover the comforting steadfastness of family love. The spirit of family. Mishpacha!

Three stories. Three links. Tradition, justice, family, mishkan, mishpat, mishpacha. Three elements that when we look back at the year just past, we wonder: were Jewish traditions as much a part of our lives as they might have been; did we seek justice as diligently as possible; were we as attentive to family as we could have been?

When we had these links forming part of our daily chain of living, our lives were richer. Like a favorite pair of earrings or grandmother's old soup pot, we felt good when they were a part of our everyday existence. Clearly those involved in the stories I told were blessed through their attachment to these links of life. The woman who found Judaism, the non-believer who risked death to help another Jew, and the reconciled brothers all discovered something missing in their lives...and in the recapturing of those elements, enriched their quality of living a thousand-fold.

As we tend to do with so many of our everyday objects, many of us have misplaced these three links to our humanity. Dedication to our tradition, justice for fellow human beings, and family love have lost their binding powers. As we walked along the path of life, we set them aside but for a moment...and now we can't find them. Every so often, something will remind us of what we have lost – it might be a parent and child in tender embrace or listening to a friend describe the joy of some Jewish tradition or even in admiring the strength a stranger demonstrates in doing the right thing...at

those moments, our souls experience a perceptible ache that what we once cherished is absent from our beings.

Truth be told, what we have misplaced in life is really not lost. Rather it is hidden. Like keys, glasses, or wallets, that which is missing is not in some far off corner of the universe. No, the links to meaningful living have always been with us — and they can be found right inside of us, deep in our hearts.

According to a legend, when God decided to create human beings, the angels were jealous of us. They had heard that these beings were to be created through God's own breath and in God's own image and likeness. Envious, the angels conspired to hide the divine image, so that it would be concealed from our human ancestors. One of the angels suggested that the divine image be buried at the highest point of the mountains. The most cunning of all the angels proposed still a better place for concealment. He said, "Let us hide the divine image in the hearts of men and women. It is the last place that they will search for it."³

Our goal is to rediscover the divine image inside of us and to live according to the ideals of *mishkan*, *mishpat*, and *mishpacha*. And while growth in any of the three areas is positive, it is the unique combination of all

three that gives us divine quality. For to be created in the divine image is not simply to be a mensch to your family, nor is it simply a life of goodness, compassion and justice. Rather, it is as the biblical prophet, Micah, said: "O humanity, what is good, and what does God require of you? Only that you do justly, that you love with mercy, and that you walk humbly with your God."⁴

Justice and family love are without question at the heart of holiness. However, as Micah suggests, they are by themselves insufficient. They depend not only on each other, but also on walking with God. To paraphrase the modern Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, there is no humble walking before God unless it manifests itself in justice to neighbors and love for family. And there can be only fragmentary justice and love unless they culminate in a dialogue with God.⁵

The truth is that each of us has been drawn here, listening to an inner voice calling us to seek out something that has been hidden... that has been misplaced...we are searching for the divine within us. *Mishkan*, *mishpat*, *mishpacha*. May we rediscover these links to more meaningful living. And when we do, we write in the Book of Life what the year will hold for us and our families, for us and our world, for us and our God...a year and lives filled with blessings.

¹Ilya Afia, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

²Ann Landers, Advice Column (September, 1989)

³Hasidic tale as told by Rabbi Robert Katz, Founders Day Address, HUC-JIR, Cincinnati, OH

⁴Paraphrase of Rona Shapiro, "When Justice and Mercy Aren't Enough," Moment magazine, 11/84.

⁵Ibid.