

Treasured People (*Am Segula*)/Beloved Community
Yom Kippur Sermon 5780
Rabbi Brian Walt

Eleven years ago, Caryn forwarded an email to me. The email was from Rabbi David Nelson to Reform rabbis inquiring whether any of them knew a rabbi who may be available and interested in leading Days of Awe services at a small, unusual, quirky Reform congregation in Ithaca. Caryn's note to me read, "Are you interested?"

It was 2009. I had recently decided to leave Rabbis for Human Rights North America. I wasn't thinking of going back to the congregational rabbinate but leading Days of Awe services in Ithaca sounded like it could be interesting. After a lovely conversation with two women, named Diana and Patti, I came and led the services. Shortly after the holiday, you asked me to consider a multi-year part-time position travelling from Martha's Vineyard, one of the more isolated places in the United States, to Ithaca, an almost equally isolated spot!

This is the story of how I began serving this beautiful community as your rabbi ten years ago. As many of you know, I will be retiring in June of next year and this will be my last Days of Awe services with you. When I think back on that moment, eleven years ago, I am filled with gratitude for the miracle of that email that brought me here at a time when I thought I would never be a congregational rabbi again. It has been a wonderful 10 years - a privilege and joy to get to know all of you and to play a small part in helping this congregation follow its deepest spiritual values and vision.

From the beginning, I was struck by several inspiring characteristics of the congregation. I was impressed with the strong lay-led leadership, with lay-led services most *Shabbatot*. It reminded me of the small *minyanim/havurot* that I belonged to, before I was ordained as a rabbi. TVO also participated in projects of Rabbis for Human Rights, like our annual Human Rights Shabbat, and it was one of 50-100 congregations that had a Rabbis for Human Rights North America banner outside reading, "End U.S. sponsored Torture Now." It was a congregation that was courageous enough to put that banner on its building. It was a congregation that was active in anti-racist activism in Ithaca and in raising issues of justice in Israel/Palestine within the community and the Reform movement. It was filled with people who were looking for something different, a place that didn't follow "company policy." All these drew me to say yes when asked if I would consider doing the trip from Martha's Vineyard to Ithaca several times a year. I am so pleased I did. It has been a wonderful ride, although the ride to get here and back has not been my favorite part of the experience!

For me, this is a bittersweet moment. I love this congregation and will miss this work, and most importantly, I will definitely miss you. I want to treasure the time we have left together and look forward to my three last visits over the coming year - in December, March and June.

Today for my last Yom Kippur talk, in honor of you, the beloved members of this congregation, I want to talk about community, the third pillar of our statement of values: Spirit, Justice and Community. Specifically, I want to talk about the notion of **The Beloved Community**, a concept popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black-led southern Freedom movement.

I want to explore what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. meant by Beloved Community.

How is it similar and different from Jewish ideas about sacred community?
How have we at TVO defined our own beloved community?

Beloved Community

The term “The Beloved Community” was first used in the early twentieth century by philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith organization devoted to nonviolence. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. popularized the term.

Here is one description of what he meant by Beloved Community.

“Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.”¹

In 1956, in a victory rally following the announcement of a favorable U.S. Supreme Court Decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery’s busses, Dr. King said that the goal of nonviolent bus boycott “is **reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community**. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding and goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men (all people).”²

The “**miracle in the hearts of all people**” was that while Dr. King was totally committed to courageous and unrelenting nonviolent resistance to the injustice of segregation and segregated seats on buses, an action that increased the tension and conflict in the community, the ultimate goal was to end the injustice and to embrace those who were opposed to the struggle. It was uncompromising in its commitment to equality and justice

¹ <https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>

²

for all and to always acknowledging the humanity of their opponents. Their goal was victory in ending the injustice and reconciliation with their opponents.

In the 1960's Dr. King expanded the vision of the Black led southern freedom movement into a vision of a fundamental transformation of the United States. The movement was no longer just about racism but rather a movement to transform America and the world.

This vision of Beloved Community is rooted in what Dr. King called agape love, a universal love for all human beings "without discriminating between worthy and unworthy people...It begins by loving others for their sakes" and "makes no distinction between a friend and enemy; it is directed toward both"³

This kind of love is a reflection of God's love for all humankind and for the covenantal love that exists between human beings and God. For Dr. King, the goal of all the work to end injustice was to create greater love in the world, including between those who are activists and those who are their "enemies." Expanding love to the entire community, expanding the "Beloved Community" is the goal of the activism.

Dr. King said, "I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end of that objective is a truly brotherly (and sisterly) society, **the creation of the beloved community**"⁴

As a result of my work here in Ithaca and my connection with the Dorothy Cotton Institute, I had the undeserved blessing of meeting some of the people involved in implementing this vision, including Dorothy Cotton and Vincent Harding, who both were very close to Dr. King. Both of them dedicated their lives to building the Beloved Community.

During the freedom struggle in the south, Dorothy's amazing work in the Citizenship Education program was to empower people to assert their rights as citizens. It was to heal them from the injuries of racism and poverty and restore to them their inalienable rights as human beings. It was to transform them into people who knew they were beloved and part of a beloved community.

Vincent Harding and his wife, Rosemarie, co-founded Mennonite House, an interracial center and gathering place. Vincent and Dorothy told me how people would go out to the streets to participate in marches and demonstrations and they would return with their bruises - physical, emotional and spiritual - to the Mennonite House for healing. The purpose of Mennonite House was to provide a loving space for the activists. Loving these activists who so bravely went into the streets was yet another way of building Beloved community.

Song as instrument to build Beloved Community

³ <https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>

⁴ <https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>

And, as most of you know, both Dorothy and Vincent loved to sing - singing inspiring spiritual songs was another way they created Beloved community. I witnessed this at Tikkun v'Or when Dorothy would visit and witnessed them lead singing with nonviolent activists in Israel and with Palestinian nonviolent activists resisting the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Every minute of Vincent's day was spent building the "beloved community." Every time Vincent spoke, he asked everyone in the group to identify themselves by their name, their mama's name and where they are from. And he was deeply interested in hearing the stories. Every time I witnessed him do this in a speaking engagement, it was transformative. As people went around the circle sharing where they came from, there was a sense of beloved community right there at that moment. Everyone felt more loved, more known.

I am so attracted to the idea of Beloved Community for many reasons:

I love that it is a commitment to universal religious vision based on the idea that all human beings are the beloved children of God.

I love that it acknowledges that the path to creating a Beloved Community is bold spiritually based non-violent activism.

And I love that the ultimate goal is not to defeat one's enemies, but to include one's opponents in the Beloved Community.

The goal of Beloved Community is transformation - to change what is to what should be. In his Riverside address, *Beyond Vietnam*, Dr. King challenged many in the Civil Rights movement to expand the focus of the movement from civil rights to the transformation of America by addressing not only racism but also materialism and militarism.

He explained his commitment to speak about Vietnam with the following statement: "I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men (*people*) the calling to be a son (*child*) of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come tonight to speak for them."

The vision of Beloved Community centers speaking for the weak and giving voice to the voiceless as the central religious act.

Again in the words of Dr. King:

"This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers."

Beloved Community and Chosen-ness

The central ideas about the Beloved Community are all rooted in Judaism. All human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim* in the image of God. Each and every human being is entitled to dignity, equality and justice. We are called as Jews to stand with the oppressed, to speak out against injustice. Our God is the God of liberation, the God who insists that all slaves must be free, that all people must be treated as children of God. Our tradition has created a beautiful set of mitzvot by which we care for one another, for our communities and for the earth. The rabbis teach that these acts of love and justice are essentially what the entire Torah is about.

The one big difference between Dr. King's vision of the Beloved Community is that Dr. King's vision is universal but the universal commitments in our tradition are sometimes limited or superseded by commitment to Jewish peoplehood, to chosen-ness.

The idea of the Chosen People, by its very definition, separates us from others - we are the chosen ones and the others are not. Isaac is chosen not Ishmael, Jacob is chosen but not Esau. And chosen-ness also inevitably leads to exceptionalism, the notion that we are unlike other peoples.

The words in Exodus, right before the giving of the ten commandments describing the nature of the Jewish people is one of the most important articulations of the idea of chosen-ness.

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then **you will be my treasured possession among all the peoples.** Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:5-6)

Each of these verses separates the Jewish people from all humanity. If you keep my covenant out of all the nations, **you will be my treasured possession.** Although the whole earth is mine, **you will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**

I love the aspiration of our people to follow in God's way, to be in covenant with God, to be a treasured people (we are a treasured people just like other peoples) but I can't abide the explicit implication that others are not. Let us follow God's way, let us be a treasured people, let us be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation along with all other nations, along with all other people.

The deepest truth is that all people are loved, equally precious in the eyes of the Divine. No individual or community is chosen above or from others. No community is closer than any other to God.

Universalizing the idea of chosen-ness may be as simple as changing the *aliya* blessing (the blessing on being called to the Torah) from “Blessed is God who has chosen us **from** all people (*bachar banu mikol ha'amim*) to chosen us with all people (*im kol ha'amim*) with all

other people. Maybe we can universalize the idea of chosen-ness by this simple change of a preposition.

Personally, I don't believe it is that simple. What drew me to Reconstructionism was Mordechai Kaplan's explicit rejection of chosen-ness. I am pleased we make the prepositional change in our congregation, but I think we need a more explicit and clearer rejection of the idea of the chosen people.

Embracing a universal Judaism feels so important in our time because Jewish chosen-ness separates us from others and distracts us from the reality that the most important challenges we face are global. It is true we live in our particularity and our particular culture has great beauty and depth that we must celebrate and bring the table. And, today our beloved Jewish community must join people of all faiths and no faith, with the knowledge that if we don't act together, we will all perish.

Statement of Principles.

I was struck by the fact that King's Beloved Community starts with a clear articulation of a religious vision - a deep commitment to love every human being and to struggle nonviolently towards a Beloved Community that includes everyone. In my career as a congregational rabbi, I have encouraged the liberal Jewish congregations that I have served to be clear about what we believe, and to boldly work for those values and to find ways to live with the discomfort of difference of opinion.

I am so proud that we have created such a statement. So as we look at the values that are in front of us today on the *bima*, I want to end by reading that statement together. You will find it in your supplements on the last page. I hope as we read it you will notice the ways in which it strives to build a beloved community dedicated to justice, equality, love for all and to protect the earth.

The Statement of Core Values:

The core values of Congregation Tikkun v'Or (Ithaca Reform Temple) are best described by three words: Spirit, Community, and Justice.

Spirit:

At heart, our community embraces living with compassion (*rachamim*), love (*chesed*), awe (*yirah*), gratitude (*hakarat hatov*), joy (*simcha*) and generosity (*nedivut*) – Jewish spiritual values that nurture our congregation and each of us as individuals.

We treasure the richness and complexity of our community. Our wide diversity of beliefs and relationships to God are a source of strength and learning. Our congregation is a safe place to share our faith and our doubt as we support one another in our search for meaning and purpose in our lives.

We offer an array of member and rabbi-led religious services on Shabbat and holidays, and educational programs for children and adults.

Community:

A caring and loving community, we sanctify and celebrate significant moments in our lives within the framework of Jewish ritual and values.

We take to heart “my house is a house of prayer for all people” (Isaiah 56:7) and seek to include, rather than exclude. We welcome interfaith families, LGBTQ people, and others who have been denied full acceptance in the broader community. We treasure the members of our congregation who are not Jewish and celebrate the interfaith character of our community.

The final word of the Shema – *echad*, all one – resonates as we join hands with other faith communities, community organizations and activist groups to fulfill our shared values.

Justice:

Inspired by the Prophetic tradition and the historical experience of the Jewish People, we are dedicated to the pursuit of justice and peace, locally and globally. The Torah teaches that humankind was created in God’s image and we honor this inherent godliness in each person.

Toward that end our community actively seeks to promote racial and economic justice for all, resist Islamophobia, encourage education and dialogue about Israel and Palestine, support refugees in our community, feed the hungry, and protect the environment.

We are dedicated to justice, equality, human rights, and security for people all over the world, and specifically for all Israelis and Palestinians. We are committed to an open and respectful dialogue about these issues and welcome those who feel excluded or silenced by other Jewish communities because of their opinions. Our congregation is enriched by the multiplicity of views of our members.

“Spirit, Community and Justice” are integrated into all aspects of the life of our congregation.

May we be blessed to witness the day when “love and truth will meet, justice and peace will kiss.” (Psalms 85:11).

Within the framework of these values, this congregation has grown in size, in heart and in depth. You have built on the strengths of the history of this community. It has been a pleasure to help you on this path.

May God bless this community as you make a transition over the coming year. May you continue to love one another in small and big ways, we may you continue to think big, beyond the box, beyond company policy. This little congregation here in this little town has done some courageous and amazing work.

I want to share with a you a quote from a sermon that I gave a few years ago about our congregation as a sanctuary of love and justice for all.

“Let’s step up to the task by continuing to nurture a congregation that is a sanctuary of love and justice for all, a congregation that speaks up bravely in support our shared core values, a congregation that joins with other communities of faith and organizations in Ithaca and beyond to uphold our commitment to a multiracial, multiethnic and democratic America. An America that offers dignity, justice and freedom to every American and is truly a force for good, for peace and for dignity for all at home and in our world.

As the rabbis teach, “The time is short, the need is urgent and the Owner of the House is pressing.”

And, in closing I want to share the words of Dr. Meredith Barber, the leader of the Poor People’s Campaign, the continuation of the work that Dr. King was doing when he was assassinated in Memphis Tennessee supporting the strike of the sanitation workers.

“Throughout America’s history - from abolition to women’s suffrage, to labor and civil rights - real social change has come when impacted people have joined hands with allies of good will to stand together against injustice. These movements did not simply stand against partisan foes. They stood for the deep moral center of our Constitutional and faith traditions. Those deep wells sustained poor and impacted people **who knew in their bones both that power concedes nothing without a fight and that, in the end, love is the greatest power to sustain a fight for what is right.**”

May we be bold and courageous. May we love one another deeply and may we love all people.

May all be inscribed in the book of life, blessing and peace!

May all be inscribed in the book of love!

L’shana Tova tekateyvu v’teychateymu!