

Hadesh: Renewing Ourselves and Community

Rosh Hashanah 2019/5780

Rabbi Yael Ridberg

In the beginning. There was nothing. More precisely, there were many things, but nothing made sense. The absence of light and shadow, the swirling chaos that was *tohu vavohu* – nothingness with no formation – and yet, then there were sparks. Sound commanded light and suddenly darkness was visible, the firmament aligned with stars casting light. Water, earth, rocks and plants stumbled into place, one by one, finding their space amongst the growth.¹

The chaos then organized itself into purposeful rhythms, innovative ritual, festive gatherings, something new, and began to make sense of itself. The One and the many, each reflecting its sacred image, but basking in the diversity of a new generation.

And it was good. It was very good. It was evening and it was morning, it was Congregation Dor Hadash: a *renewed* generation.

That was 36 years ago, and if the action verb of the phrase *hadesh yameinu kekedem*, is *l'hadesh* – to make new and renew – then it is built into the DNA of our community to renew our energies and commitment as we each claim our own part in this cosmic process, and in the earthly process of weaving connections and making meaning.

This idea has transforming power – for who among us crosses the milestone of the turning of the year, fully satisfied with where we are? There are always unfinished agendas, unmet goals, unfulfilled hopes and dreams...and while we are called to gratefully reflect on what we have accomplished and to offer our thanks for all the good we have experienced and achieved, there are forever new horizons for which to strive.

Rosh Hashanah is, in fact, traditionally regarded as the anniversary of Creation, the “birthday of the world.” Judaism teaches that we are partners

¹ *Rabbi Rachel Weiss, Erev RH Sermon 2016. Several themes/motifs are adapted from that sermon: the use of the opening creation tale and the use of Rav Kook that appears later in the sermon.*

with God in the continuous unfolding of Creation, each with our unique role to play in bringing our lives and our world to their full potential. On this birthday of creation, we are called also to examine where we have been as a community and where are we going?

We ask the first question the Torah imagines God asked: *Ayekah – where are you?* And the first question the Torah imagines an angel asked of a woman: *Ay mi zeh vat, v'ana telchi? Where have you come from, and where are you going?*

With this morning's focus on *hadesh* – renewal – I wish to ask: Where have you been since we last met? Where have you traveled, explored? What place did you stumble across that brought you delight, what did you encounter that was painful? What has changed? Who used to be here, and who isn't, and who do you miss? Where is your mind, where is your heart? How did you get here? Where are you now – I mean *right now*? And where might you go from here?

Every year I dedicate this sermon time on Rosh Hashanah to some examination of communal life, because I believe that the beginning of a new year is an opportunity to call forth our highest aspirations for the community we call home.

36 years ago, this year, a core group of passionate San Diego Jews decided to create a Jewish community responsive to the needs of modern Jewish families. Close relationships, lifelong learning, and joyful celebration formed the core identity of CDH, and the decisive mission to Reconstruct Judaism - the lens through which everything was filtered.

It was the kind of simple but meaningful way to take *Torah, avodah, and gemilut chasadim* – the learning, service, and acts of kindness - to the level that would bring each person more deeply into communal life.

In speaking today about renewal of community, I want to reconnect with the kind of optimism and cooperation of the past, with renewed determination of the present to sustain a community where everyone feels their contribution is actually a kind of commitment to something bigger

than themselves, rather than an extraction of themselves or motivated by guilt.

What is it that brings us through these doors each year? What compels us out of our routines, to sit together, welcome one another and a new year with ritual – old & new? It has never ceased to amaze me the numbers of Jews who step out of their comfort zone and into the synagogue on these days.

And for the record, in addition to celebrating 36 years as a congregation, this morning is my 10th Rosh Hashanah with CDH. So, I count myself in this moment of reflection, as I too look backward and forward, and seek a renewal of self and community.

If a double chai anniversary of 36 means anything beyond the gematria of double 18 – perhaps it is at face value, a doubling down on the vibrancy of life in community. A doubling of one's presence, effort, and resources?

Do you remember the jingle for Doublemint Gum? As far back as 1962, Wrigley's called on identical twins to be the faces of the gum: "A double pleasure is waiting for you/Double your pleasure, double your fun."

Now CDH may have a few sets of twins in the congregation, but they aren't going to break out in matching outfits and song right now. But what *would it mean to double the pleasure of being a part of CDH?*

Where are we after 36 years?

Where have we come from and where are we going?

What double pleasure might be waiting for you this year?

It seems to me that each of us is likely in a different place than the person sitting next to us, and even if the intention for engagement and connection to community is there, it may not be clear how one can move from one place to the next, and what it looks like.

To be a Jew, to be part of the Jewish people, is to be a member of a covenantal community that has at its center certain value commitments and behavioral obligations.

Traditionally, covenant meant being in relationship with God, as well as with members of the Jewish community. But today, I believe the idea of covenant can also include entirely secular Jews whose ethical commitments are experienced as rooted in Jewish history and tradition.

On an experiential level, most Jews who are active in some way as Jews are not engaged in covenantal community with the entire Jewish people, but with a subset with whom we regularly interact and with whom we share values and commitments. Our congregations are covenantal communities; our denominations are covenantal communities. Youth movements and many Jewish organizations can function like covenantal communities as well.²

As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I was trained to understand that “Judaism” is not one monolithic thing, that Judaism is as varied as the diverse Jewish communities that have existed in every part of the world over the past two thousand years. To really celebrate that reality, and to affirm the new kinds of diversity that we are creating in 21st century American Judaism, is a wonderful challenge and invitation.

Over the years, I have been drawn to a teaching of Maimonides, and his differentiation of three friendship categories. I’ve taught this before, but I was drawn again to it this year as a way to underscore the *hiddush* – the renewal we seek this year.

The word in Hebrew for friend is *haver*. The Hebrew verb *l’haber* means to attach things together, so the noun form *haver* is used to indicate the people to whom we are attached.

² Rabbi Toba Spitzer, <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/peoplehood-reconsidered>

The word *havurah* – used to denote the smaller circles of connection that we have established in the Gesher School and that were part of the founding of CDH is also a derivative of *haver*.

Rambam's first category is *haver le'davar*, a utilitarian association that depends on reciprocal usefulness. Each partner knows what he or she is getting from the other – and it is fine. Basic needs are met in each direction and everyone is happy.

The second category is *haver le'daagah*: someone with whom to share worries, sorrows and also joys. We need this kind of relationship in order to lighten our load. Joys are multiplied and sorrows are divided when they are shared.

The third category is *haver le'deah*, a joint dedication to common goals. Both partners dream of realizing great ideals and are prepared to act with a readiness to sacrifice for their attainment. This kind of *haver* is someone with whom you share a vision of what is possible in the world.

Now you may be trying to decide what kind of *haver* you are. While Rambam might have seen them as increasing in value, I'd like to imagine that all three are important to the whole. People move or can move from one category to the next, and our ability to see the capacity for incorporating elements of each is important to the big picture. All of us can think of those categories of companions/ acquaintances in our lives, and they all have important roles.

But when we are talking about Jewish communal life, it is easy to see the attraction of the *haver le'davar* model as it relates to the synagogue community. "Membership" seems like it would be the same as joining a gym. In this case, you pay your dues to the synagogue, you get inspired. Don't we all feel good?

I'm not saying you don't deserve a killer sermon on the High Holy Days just like you "deserve" great circuit-training at the gym. But I am saying playing the numbers game isn't very satisfying. At some point in this model

You begin to wonder if you are getting your money's worth, or if your needs are getting met; and then the relationship becomes expendable, and maybe you go looking elsewhere, or you just get new sneakers and start running outside.

I think all of us want more than that.

And as responsible as a synagogue is to inspire and create a community you want to be a part of, each of us has a responsibility –maybe even a requirement - to make it that kind of community. We want to come together in study, in prayer, in acts of loving kindness, and feel our time together is rooted in joy, compassion and a prophetic sense of what is right and wrong.

So *Haver l'deaga* kicks it up a level. *Lid'og* in Hebrew means to be concerned about, or to worry. There's a reason for a *misheberach* list, in order so we can ask how someone is, visit them, remember them, and share the news that someone is in need of healing.

There's a reason we put out *shiva* information when someone has suffered a loss, so we can show up, show concern, show love.

There's a reason we invite the entire community to *b'nai mitzvah*, so we can show up, celebrate, and witness our children coming of age.

What makes that concern and care emerge at critical moments is a sense of deep connection to those around us. Celebrating our 36th anniversary is an invitation to each of you to find yourself anew in CDH. We can't wait to see all of the ways YOU will connect, engage, learn, celebrate, pray, play, and partner with/at CDH.

While CDH is open to all, if you consider yourself a partner - you have made an intentional commitment to grow and build personalized Jewish meaning in a community context. Individually and together, partners enjoy the privilege of actively shaping new, innovative approaches to Jewish life for themselves, for one another, and beyond.

That is a way to understand *haver l'dea*. As a community, we hold dear the idea that the acts of participating and showing up fully are the essence of building community and creating personal meaning and growth.

Our biblical ancestors, when called to a divine task, often responded with the Hebrew word *Hineni* – I am here, I am present. This year we hope that if you can see yourself as a partner of CDH you feel that same pull to respond with our full selves, to be fully present as an integral part of the community that we are continuously building together.

So here's what we are asking.

1. Be an integral part of CDH through self-engagement: Host a shabbat at home, help set up and break down for shabbat services, organize a special speaker or program.
2. Decide that this is the year you want to grow in your Jewish learning and/or spirituality. Our Soulful Sundays, Torah Study, and Lev Hadash contemplative and musical services are just a few good options
3. Commit to social justice engagement in community. As many people as there are at CDH there are issues of critical importance that inspire people to act on someone else's behalf as much as our own.
4. Make a financial commitment that is about sustaining our communal life, not just for yourself but for everyone else as well. The minyan of people who founded this congregation 36 years ago did so *with all of us in mind*. If you consider yourself part of CDH, what financial resources can you share to ensure the *next* 36 years?³

As your rabbi and as a Jew, I want more intimacy, more joy, and more spiritual highs to help manage the difficult lows. I am most optimistic about Jewish life when I hear of a community being built on sacred relationships, sharing a vision of what is believed to be possible.

³ *These ideas are based on a description of the mission of Ikar – LA as relayed by Rabbi Sharon Brous in <https://slate.com/business/2019/05/sharon-brous-the-senior-and-founding-rabbi-of-the-los-angeles-congregation-ikar-on-running-a-synagogue.html>*

All of us can contribute in ways that best suits their special talents and desires at whatever moment and age we are in their lives. Every one of us is on our own Jewish Journey and what will it take to make this the year to identify where you are in relationship to it and to the collective experience of Dor Hadash.

Jewish communal life can offer us a shelter against the perfect storm that is the intersection of hyper-individualism, political divisiveness, challenging economics, and the unknown of the future. We can bemoan what is broken or we can do something. We actually can have a vision of communal future that is inspiring and engaging.

Remember the first question of the Torah? God asks of Adam, *Ayeka?* Where are you? It's not a question of geography – It's a conversation starter. God knew exactly where Adam was after he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, but God was asking Adam to engage, and it's the question that Adam needed to hear so he could look around, take stock, and decide for himself exactly where he was.

And so, we also must ask, where are *we*?

When the angel finds Hagar in the wilderness after she was cast out, and Ishmael was ailing, the angel asks: *Where have you come from and where are you going?*

And so, I am asking all of us: *Where have we come from, and where are we going?*

We are here on the cusp of our 36th year – an opportunity to double our engagement, double the pleasure, the fun, the meaning, the uplift, and the connections.

As your rabbi, if I am honest with myself, I want people in my community to feel like the person sitting next to them is a *haver l'dea*, the companion on the journey who acts with kindness and compassion, to those they know and those they do not; the person who is challenged by the study of Jewish

texts, but wants to wrestle with them towards a blessing; the person who sings out loud in services because they love the melody and feel taken somewhere when they sing it; the person who sees the suffering of others in the world and wants to find ways to be more than a bystander.

They want to feel that from others because it inspires them to be a *haver l'dea* as well. What do you need to move from one category of involvement to another – from transactional to relational – if that is what you seek.

What are the kinds of experiences you need that would generate enough surprise and delight inside, to say **this is working for me!** This is not a rhetorical question. I, we, *really want to know*.

So I'm going to do something new and different right now – in service of *hadesh – hiddush* - Renewing ourselves right. Now.

I want to ask Laine Lipsky and Rebecca Lewison to come forward, they've got some pens and some Doublemint gum for you. The gum is a treat, the pens are for a special survey that you can find on the back of your supplement. Tear it off and fill it out. Now.

Eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, sh'tichadesh aleinu shanah tovah u'metukah

May the Source of All who called out to our ancestors, renew for us a sweet and good year, and may our efforts at renewing community this year be doubled and renewed with sweetness and goodness!