

THE NEW SHUL / Erev Rosh Hashanah 5765 (2004)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

TRIBALISM FOR THE POSTMODERN COMMUNITY

Shanah tovah to each and every one of you in this hall. Summers often provide us with powerful experiences, sometimes even with milestones. But before I mention a few of my own, and before I weave them into my rabbinic message for this new Jewish year, I'd like to note the milestone of new membership to all those present who have joined our community over these past several months. Please rise and be recognized so that we know who you are.

From my perspective, the barometer of success for a true spiritual community is its capacity to participate in the celebrations, as well as the sorrows, of its members. When we fail to be there for one another, we fail in our fundamental mission. and so I ask all of us here, in the days, weeks, and months ahead, to be both vocal and vigilant, to inform our friends and neighbors in The New Shul about the joys, as well as the challenges, in our lives. and I also ask all of us to be proactive, and not passive, in this effort, to seek out those individuals and those areas that are in most profound need of attention and help. To *do* less is to *be* less.

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Let me step off my invisible soapbox for a moment-- but just for a moment. I'd like to share with all of you 3 important milestones that have occurred in my life over the last few months-- and these, I must state for the public record, are **NOT** in ascending order of priority. First, I got engaged-- and to one of our own members, Michele Roseman, who sits among you now in mild discomfort. Go ahead, look around for Michele and embarrass her -- I can wait. Michele is *more* than a milestone to me -- she is a gift.

Second, after 14 long years of rented apartments, I purchased a co-op, becoming, like many of you, part of New York City's landed gentry -- a designation that, at certain times, seems like a curse rather than a blessing. and third, I traveled for two weeks, much of it on horseback, through northwestern Mongolia, a remote region of herdsmen and nomads. Though I've been fortunate to have explored and written about some of the world's more exotic locales, this arduous trip, which I took with my brother, ranks near the top, and in many ways feels especially relevant to the spiritual season we have entered tonight.

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One of the great nomads in the biblical tradition and a key figure during Rosh Hashanah is Abraham, a man who humbly refers to himself as "the son of a wandering Aramaean." Abraham is the central character in tomorrow morning's Torah reading-- his trials and actions are recalled through the blasts of the shofar we will hear-- and on Rosh Hashanah, viewed by Judaism as the Birthday of the World, we are reminded that Abraham was the very first Jew, a symbol and an embodiment of the creation and birth of our religious heritage.

There is a famous narrative in the book of Genesis that is often used to illustrate Abraham's morality and to serve as a model for how we ourselves should behave toward others. In this story, 3 strangers suddenly appear in the desert and approach the tent of Abraham and Sarah. The patriarch rushes out to greet them and invites them into his home for food and shelter. The medieval French commentator and vintner, Rashi, claims that Sarah offered the strangers a savory meal of tongues and mustard. How Rashi knew what was on the menu is an open question -- perhaps he was sampling his own vintage as he wrote this scene's commentary. Yet whatever was provided to the 3 wanderers, it is crystal clear that Abraham and his wife had an "open tent" policy-- a policy that, in a nomadic culture, was related not just to morality, but to survival.

What I saw in Mongolia just a few weeks ago afforded me an unforgettable glimpse into the world of Abraham and Sarah, the way of the nomad. While that way is not a perfect one -- none ever is -- it *does* inculcate a culture of the “open tent,” of hospitality and interdependence. What nomadic culture does, and does so effectively, is wash away the *illusion* of self-reliance, the *myth* of independence and individualism that so many of us Americans have bought into for so many years -- more now, arguably, than ever before. It shows us the *lunacy* of trying to go it alone, and the *truth* that we don't have to.

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Within the first several days of our journey through Mongolia, after passing herds of camels, yaks, and goats and traversing the mountainous habitat of ibex, wolves, and snow leopards, my brother and I came across a celebration. A young man was about to be married, and relatives and neighbors from the surrounding region had gathered in a collective effort to build him a ger -- a circular, transportable, tent-like structure that helped Genghis Khan conquer the East -- as a wedding present. When we arrived and were invited to participate in the construction of the ger (or “yurt” in the turkic languages), the ger itself was about half-finished -- its wooden frame and central posts stood bare, like a skeleton awaiting the flesh of felt that would envelop and protect this new home.

It all reminded me of a warm, humorous scene from the movie “Witness,” when an undercover Harrison Ford observes and then joins an Amish community engaged in a similar activity. In that Hollywood film, everyone had their well-defined roles in building the groom his house -- as they did in this Mongolian custom that we ourselves were witnessing. The men used hammers, saws, and sinews to build and affix the frame, while the women scraped the felt covering that would shelter the young family from the weather of the northern steppes.

We “gringos” tried our best to do our part, which consisted mostly of schmoozing through a translator with the groom's father and uncles, and taking photos of the children. Since we had to leave the event in order to move on with our own trip, our cultural experience concluded with a mid-afternoon feast of candy and homemade cheese curds, followed by celebratory toasts of vodka and fermented mare's milk.

Never before had I felt so welcomed, even as a total stranger, into somebody else's world -- *their* party had become *our* party. Though my brother and I would spend many nights sleeping in gers in the days ahead, and though we'd encounter similar warmth and hospitality from other locals, this initial brush with nomadic culture, with a true, *tribal* community, struck me like a thunderbolt, a *revelation*.

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This powerful communitarian sensibility -- expressed best in a nomadic setting -- is related as much to *necessity* as it is to morality. No one in that world, a mirror of the peripatetic world of our ancestors, could have survived without the *active* help of others. What I saw was a form of humanitarian aid that wasn't institutional or solicited, but commonplace and expected -- it was Abraham's open tent, made palpable and alive.

On another day, as the sun had started to set, two strangers and their horses, who seemed to have appeared out of thin air, approached our camp. They'd been riding for 3 days and nights, searching for their lost herd of 17 camels. As we spoke with them over dinner, we learned that they'd been traveling through the high desert without any food or supplies. To eat and sleep, they had been stopping at gers as they passed, and had always been invited in for a place to sleep on a rug, or for a meal-- just as they were now doing with us.

The acculturated Westerner in me thought, “How very Tennessee Williams of them -- these herdsmen are truly dependent on the kindness of strangers.” Yet, on further reflection, I came to realize that the provisions and shelter they received weren't really an expression of kindness, and the people who took them in weren't really strangers, even if they'd never met them before. In their context and culture, those ideas didn't *exist* as they do

for us. It was all a matter of survival, and a much-broadened sense of what constitutes genuine community. For them, what goes around will, and must, come around.

When we woke in the camp the next morning, the herdsmen and horses were gone -- no goodbyes, no thank yous, no anything. Eventually we caught sight of the men in the distance, with a trail of large animals in tow -- they had found their 17 lost camels and were headed home.

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Like the institutions of science, technology, and government, *tribalism* has both negative *and* positive dimensions. The tribal culture I bore witness to was one of selflessness and interdependence. It was one that held the values of *community* and *commitment* above all else. Yet ours is a culture of *narcissism*, one of extreme and excessive individualism, of the radical pursuit of our own needs and personal desires -- and, on the international level, of unilateralism.

So what is it that, during this season of renewal and repentance, we need to *atone* for? Not for having packed up our tents and moved into townhouses -- not for having traded in our camels and horses for cars and planes. But for having, in the process, *abandoned* our commitment to a culture of community.

With the external structures of tribalism gone, how can we regain its *internal* ones, its core values and virtues? This is not just the challenge of this year's Days of Awe, but of modernity *itself*. For if we fail to overcome, or even face, this existential struggle, then we will have failed in our *humanity* -- we will have taken the gift that is our birthright, the gift of Abraham and Sarah's open tent, and *sealed* its entrance shut. and when we seal the entrance to that holy tent we seal the entrance to our hearts.

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The narcissistic impulses so prevalent today are only the outer crust of our hidden worlds -- they are this society's *mask*. *Beneath* that mask, in those murky regions of our souls that we're too afraid to honestly confront, we are more *needy* than ever. We live in an era of disturbing violence and roiling hatreds, of color-coded terror alerts, of alienation from those around us as well as from our own families. We live during a dark period in time, and its evolution is uncertain and unsettling.

We Jews are, historically, a nation of nomads -- we are a *tribal* people with *tribal* roots. The answers to our current problems -- our fears, anxieties, and feelings of loneliness -- are not in self-help books or weekend getaways, but in our own ancient, and sometimes primal, religious heritage. Judaism offers us *correctives*, pathways and rituals that will allow us to regain the values our culture so desperately needs and the anchors of authentic community we so deeply crave.

Every single week, Shabbat affords us the opportunity to invite others to join *with* us in wine, food, and sacred song, to affirm life and to celebrate creation. Yet how many of us actually *do* this? How many of us, if we notice some visitor at services, some stranger we don't know, *proactively* approach that individual and his or her family and *welcome* them into our homes as honored guests? How many of us here have adopted the open tent philosophy of Abraham and Sarah, have done our part in helping to build a *true* culture of community?

We, too, were strangers in a strange land, and no holiday makes that clearer to us than that of Passover. We find echoes of our tribal culture in the Haggadah, where we read about our nomadic roots, about Abraham's wandering father, about the importance of inviting others -- especially strangers -- to sit and dine at the seder table *with* us. It is no accident that the *climax* of the Passover seder is when someone rises from their chair to open a door -- an *entrance* to our metaphorical tent -- for the prophet Elijah, the eternal and quintessential wanderer.

The holidays of Shabbat and Passover are just two examples of how our Jewish rites and rituals can help us to help ourselves -- to improve our moral characters and to cultivate a more harmonious, *truly* compassionate, community, society, and world. For this to happen, we must accept one of the first rules of tribal life-- that the motivation for our behavior is grounded, not in what we *want* to do, but in what we *ought* to do.

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If we really desire authentic community, we must *create* that community -- nobody's going to do it for us. The mere *existence* of a synagogue that offers services and a school does *not* constitute a congregation -- the prerequisite for that is the serious, mature commitment of its members. This is our challenge as well as our charge -- and I can think of little else as *imperative* at this dark period in our history as the creation of a safe, comforting, and holy place of meeting.

Toward that end, I propose an experiment for all of us during these 10 days of renewal, an experiment that will, I hope, make our own New Shul community even stronger and more sensitive than it has already become in 5 short years.

Starting from the moment this service ends, I ask each of you to do something, *anything*, between now and Yom Kippur that helps you to open your *own* tent, that helps us form a postmodern tribe of interconnected, interdependent souls. You could invite someone, *tonight*, back to your home for Rosh Hashanah dinner; you could approach a family and ask them to join you this Friday for a Shabbat meal; you could ask a stranger to have a cup of coffee with you next week, or to break the fast; you could go talk politics in the park -- the opportunities are endless, easy, and basic. As the sage Hillel said, "If not now, *when*?"

Consider this High Holy Day "homework". As we did last year, I will call on you on Yom Kippur morning to *report* on what you have done, and I am as interested in what the experience was like for the *recipient* of the invitation as I am for the person who did the inviting. Good luck.

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It should be obvious that none of this, really, involves much effort or time -- what it involves is *will*. But do we *have* that will, that strength of soul to transcend ourselves and to embrace others? We alone must answer that question as we gaze deep into our own souls during this sacred time of introspection. As we stand before the Throne of Glory, will we be inscribed in the book of life and love?

Abraham's tent was exposed to every direction -- it was welcoming, but it made him vulnerable. Yet that is precisely the point -- it is only through *vulnerability* that genuine community can emerge, that commitment and compassion become fused, intertwined and inseparable.

Whether we call it "religion" or "spirituality," both require a *risk*, both necessitate that we make a leap of faith. Yet that leap focuses only on the self -- the Days of Awe ask us to take the *next* step, to make a leap for *humanity*. As Rabbi Tarfon said two millennia ago, "The day is short, and our task is very great." May God help us face our task and challenge. May God grant us the gift of ultimate victory and the infinite blessing of one another.